RESEARCH NOTES

Congregations, Pandemic, and the Digital Divide

The pandemic shined a bright light on the *digital divide* among congregations. Students of congregations specifically, or service organizations more broadly, already knew there were wide disparities in the adoption of technology, but as congregations made the rapid switch to virtual platforms in March 2020, the differences became glaring.

Religion and Urban Culture 2.0 was designed to describe and analyze congregational adaptation to many broad social changes, with communication technology as one very important change. But we could not have known how central this technology would become to our research. We have been observing virtual worship and conducting our interviews via Zoom, so even our own research methods became part of the digital story we need to tell.

The changes for congregations were noted far beyond religious practitioners and those who usually study them. The February 10 issue of *Wired*, a magazine for digital natives, contained a story called, "The Digital Divide is Giving Churches Hell" that briefly outlines the difference between technology "haves" and "have nots" in the world of congregations.

Differences among congregations fall into several broad categories of capacity: **video capacity** to stream services and meetings; **social media capacity** to manage engagement through digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter (or even Tik Tok); and **direct communications capacity** to manage personal connections through text, email, or chat. The differences are very broad indeed.

Video Capacity

Differences in *video capacity* are well-known and easily noticed. After governmental shut-down orders, some congregations simply expected a much larger audience because they had been streaming high-quality video of their services for years. Some congregations already showed their services on television. Nationally, and even locally, the largest congregations often have professional communications and a/v staff. A switch to streaming for everyone posed challenges for them, of course, but these were changes of scale, not changes of type.

Other congregations realized around Thursday, March 12th, that by Sunday, March 15, their services would need to be online. Some pastors streamed worship live directly through their iPhones. Some were in their pulpits alone, others streamed from home. Some made the decision to pre-record and then post on Saturday evening or Sunday morning.

The quick switch to streaming raised many questions about virtual worship: Would worship services contain music? Would the worship leaders or musicians be present in the sanctuary? What about the choir? Given the well-known examples of choir practices as super spreader events, if congregations used choirs, should their members wear masks? Our observations revealed that the variation was very wide.

Over time, congregations who were new to video became more comfortable with the technology, but they still had important decisions to make. Would they stream their services "live" even if no one were present in person? And when members returned, as some did during the summer, would they stream those services for those who were not present? We observed multiple congregations that held in-person services but still created pre-made videos for those not in attendance, not least because pre-recorded worship could be improved in editing.

These adaptations raised broader questions about what worship is and how the delivery of the worship service affected members and other viewers. Many large congregations have multiple styles of worship, most often "traditional" and "contemporary." But would "online" be a separate kind of service with pre-recorded messages and announcements? Would online services use video links in a way in-person services would not? Would the worship music be different (the audience participation surely would be)? How would these differences affect the nature of the congregational community in its other mission or educational activities?

More importantly, how did congregations and their leadership understand the nature and significance of the changes they were experiencing? The real question, in sum, is not so much what happened but what has been its effect on congregations? For some congregations, streaming was a revelatory experience, especially when they examined the web analytics for their services. One pastor noted that he and his parishioners realized that the audience for their services had grown exponentially, with people tuning in from around the world. If this was a common insight, it may have been short-lived. Another pastor noted that six months into the crisis, the numbers of internet viewers had returned to their pre-pandemic levels.

Social Media Capacity

Streaming worship leapt to the front of everyone's minds in March and April of 2020, pointing out just how critical the act of worship is to congregational identity. Whatever programs they may deliver, whatever partnerships they may collaborate in, congregations are worshipping communities above all else. One might

think that congregational members could temporarily get their "worship" elsewhere from other congregations with better a/v capacity, but the pandemic taught us that it just does not work that way most of the time.

However, worship was never the only problem congregations faced: They needed to maintain engagement. For many members, congregations are like extended families. The members' sense of what is real and what is ultimately important comes from a shared intimacy as parts of this body, their shared identity.

Social media provided a platform where congregations could engage their members and where members could engage one another, but anyone who has ever been on social media knows there are pitfalls and risks around every corner. For instance, some congregations allowed, even encouraged, ongoing chat during their streaming worship services. But such chat requires someone to moderate or else runs multiple risks for things to go awry.

For instance, we watched the service at St. Luke's UMC the first morning it was back "in person" during the summer of 2020. But as we watched, we realized the worship we were seeing was not the in-person worship, it was pre-recorded (but shown at the same time as the in-person). People were asking questions in the chat. And St. Luke's had provided a representative to answer questions. It worked, but it required a dedicated staff member to make it happen.

In some instances, the risks to live chat and live questions can be less benign. When a very large congregation hosted an event about getting vaccines, its streaming chat was hit with trolls questioning the value of vaccines. No doubt some congregations have experienced worse, so the practice raises several questions: Will congregations be forced to limit their online activities to known subscribers? Will they be able or willing to manage the problems of public, anonymous engagement when discussing contested issues? How do they screen for obscenities, vitriol, hate speech, or other material that disrupts or blunts the messages and engagement the congregation seeks to foster?

Digital technology also presents specific problems of its own. Many congregations experienced time lags or technical issues when streaming sermons on Facebook. Sound problems are common, as anyone who has ever used Zoom or Facebook Live can attest. Internet quality poses issues of its own. One of our congregations could not post their sermons online for two consecutive days during a week because, as it posted, "Due to an internet outage at the church this morning, we were unable to livestream our services this morning." Congregations have no special exemption, it seems, from the challenges of the digital world.

Communications Capacity

For many congregations, a serious concern is direct digital or virtual engagement with their members. Their experiences underline in boldface what they probably already knew: their members—now their viewership— are part of the digital world in markedly different ways, depending on age, socio-economic circumstances, education, and the like. One response has been to embrace this recognition. Larger congregations are trying to create new, digital ministries. One multicampus congregation told us that they now think of themselves as having 5 congregations in 5 locations: Their home campus has both a traditional and a contemporary congregation, they have a separate congregation in a nearby suburb, they have a downtown congregation, and now they have a virtual congregation. All five pay tithes and offerings as one— these are just five subsections of the same group. But for many congregations such an arrangement would pose significant challenges.

A large Greenwood congregation assigned an associate pastor to be Online Pastor. He became the point of connection for prayer requests, committee membership, and other things previously done in person. As the senior pastor said, "My ongoing prayer is that those of you who are local will eventually return to in-person worship. I miss you. But I trust you to determine the time that is right [safe] for your family."

The move toward digital engagement is especially interesting because we were already hearing from pastors that different kinds of digital engagement were changing their roles and their lives. Many clergy could remember a time when they got phone calls for assistance, but the calls came within normal working hours except in emergencies. But with text, email, WhatsApp, and similar chatting tools, they were in almost constant contact and had to make difficult decisions about when, and whom, to engage.

We have learned that Zoom and similar platforms offer more intimacy, in some situations, than anyone would have believe 12 months ago. For instance, a year ago many would have said Zoom funerals or memorial services were intrusive. Now we hear stories of family members in other states, or even other countries, feeling more included because of Zoom. But will these platforms provide sufficient contact and person-to-person engagement going forward? Older congregational members stand to benefit the most from them because in-person attendance is most difficult for them. However, they are also the least-likely to be familiar or comfortable with the technology. Will congregations be able to provide intimate experiences for digital and in-person participants side-by-side?

What's Next?

One clear indicator of the digital divide during the pandemic can be seen in the response to the Center for Congregations' "Connect Through Tech" grant program. The Center was receiving calls for help from many Indiana congregations, so they offered small grants—$5000—to help congregations improve, or in many cases create ways to provide worship and engagement using virtual means. They planned to give 500 such grants, about $2.5 million. They received 2700 applications and, in the end, distributed more than $13 million in tech aid.

Financial assistance is one response, but in some ways, it begs the question: How has technology reshaped congregational life? In this sense, the pandemic has been a catalyst, but perhaps it has only sped up what was inevitable. If so, what does it mean for congregations to live in a world so heavily influenced by digital tools and cultures? More importantly, what does it take for them to thrive?

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