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### Towards a Post-Pandemic Mission

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# TOWARDS A POST-PANDEMIC MISSION

*By*

*Boubakar Sanou, Josh Dietrich, and Tyler Kern*

The past three years have been challenging times both ministerially and missionally. The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the Church in many ways, from decline in church attendance to loss in church membership. However, the pandemic has also forced church leaders to rethink ways of fulfilling the Great Commission. This brief reflection focuses on lessons learned from Christian ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic and their implications for a post-pandemic theology of mission.

## **Issues Unveiled or Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic**

### **Disagreements on the Nature of the Church**

Within the first quarter of 2020, the worldwide fight against the coronavirus pushed church services online. Conducting services via Zoom became the most popular choice for church gatherings. The replacement of physical gatherings by digital ones for the sake

of mitigating a large-scale spread of the coronavirus had many Christians reflecting on the meaning of church. Those reflections centered mostly on whether the Church is still the Church if it is done digitally, not just in part but fully. Three prominent perspectives emerged out of those discussions: “no, not at all,” “yes, but,” and “yes, absolutely.”

The proponents of the “no, not at all” perspective argue that “one of Paul’s main metaphors for the Church is the temple of God. And, in keeping with the literal temple of the Old Testament, and the eschatological temple of the future, this is a place, in the usual meaning of the word. That place now is the local church, gathered physically.”<sup>1</sup> The proponents of the “yes, but” perspective are of the view that streaming church services during the coronavirus pandemic restrictions should be seen only as circumstantial. As such, this plan B of being and doing church should be discontinued as soon as possible. Finally, those who are of the opinion that the online church can be fully church argue that the New Testament church only

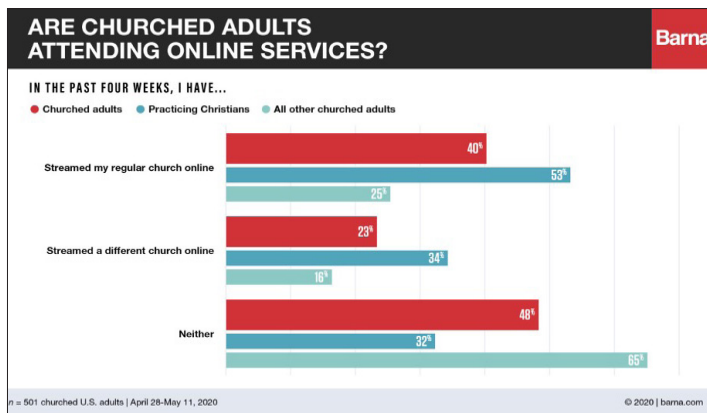
<sup>1</sup> Ronald L. Giese, “Is ‘Online Church’ Really Church? The Church as God’s Temple,” *Themelios: An International Journal for Students of Theological and Religious Studies* 45, no. 2 (2020): 347.

gathered physically because there was no other viable way of being together as believers. They also strongly believe that, just as the written Word of God, which was originally on scrolls of parchment, can also be in an electronic form, the cyberspace church can also be a substitute for physical church gatherings.<sup>2</sup>

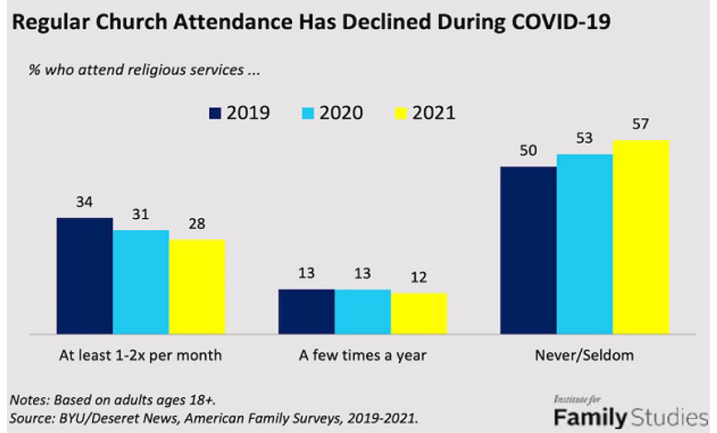
Because the COVID-19 pandemic is likely not the last pandemic in the history of humanity—the Bible talks about pestilences that will occur leading to the Second Coming (Matt. 24:7, NKJV)—the reflections on the nature of the church should not be put to rest once all the current pandemic-related restrictions to public gatherings are lifted. The discussion should be far more about biblical, historical, and missiological implications than about personal opinion or convenience. To some degree, the survival of the Church and its mission during the next pandemics depends on it.

## Declining Church Attendance and Bible Usage

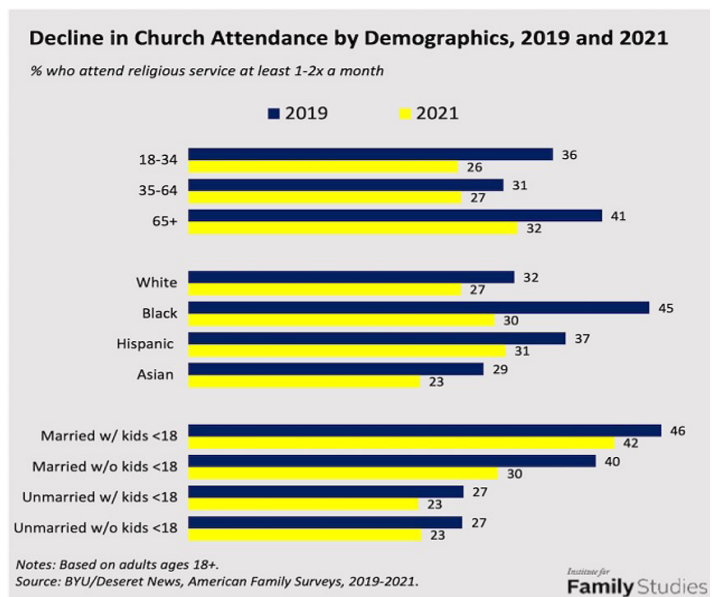
Church service attendance has been negatively impacted by various COVID-19 restrictions. According to a 2020 Barna research, a considerable number of practicing Christians have not streamed online church services during COVID-19 confinements.<sup>3</sup>



One might have expected that because of the death, fear, and isolation the pandemic has generated, more people would turn to religion as a sure refuge. Unfortunately, as we see moves toward a post-pandemic era, in-person church attendance continues to decline, according to a recent Institute for Family Studies poll.<sup>4</sup>



The same Institute for Family Studies poll indicates that the decline in religious attendance cuts across various population demographics.



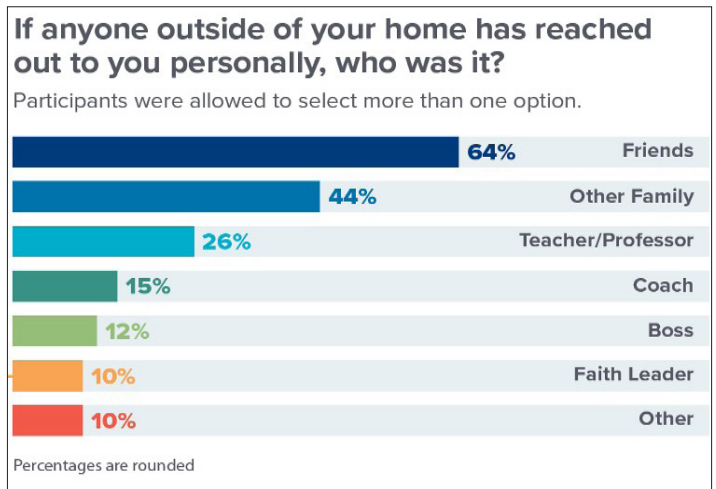
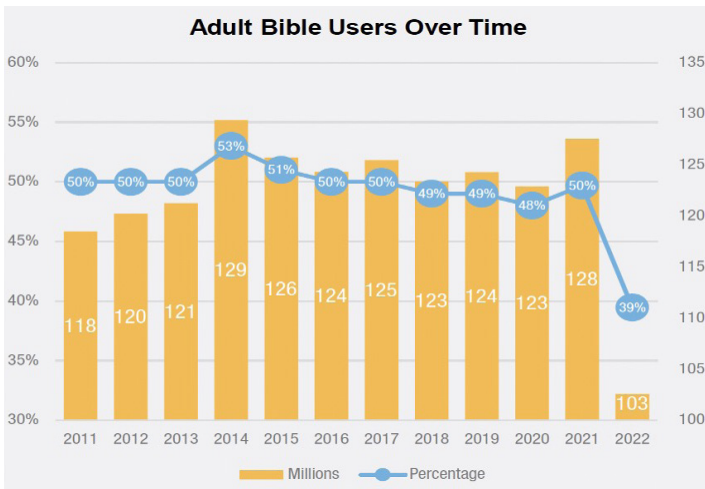
Another finding on the impact of the pandemic on the Church in America is a record drop in the percentage of adult Bible users. It is unprecedented that nearly 26 million Americans either reduced or stopped their personal interaction with Scripture outside of a church setting between 2021 and 2022.<sup>5</sup> This highlights the fact that meeting in a physical church building plays an important role in many Christians' faith development.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>3</sup> Barna Group, What Research Has Revealed About the New Sunday Morning, June 3, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning/>

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Wang, "The Decline in Church Attendance in COVID America," *Institute for Family Studies* January 20, 2022, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-decline-in-church-attendance-in-covid-america>

<sup>5</sup> Jeffery Fulks, Randy Petersen, and John Farquhar Plake, *State of the Bible USA 2022* (The American Bible Society, 2022), xii. Adult Bible users refers to "those who use the Bible at least 3–4 times each year on their own, outside of a church setting."

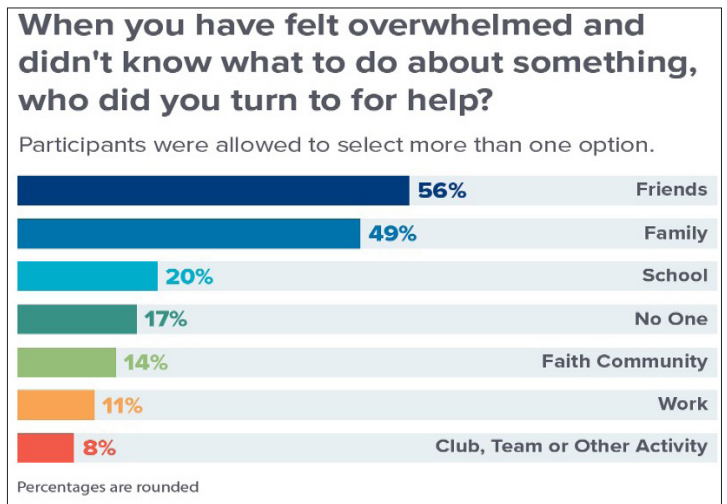
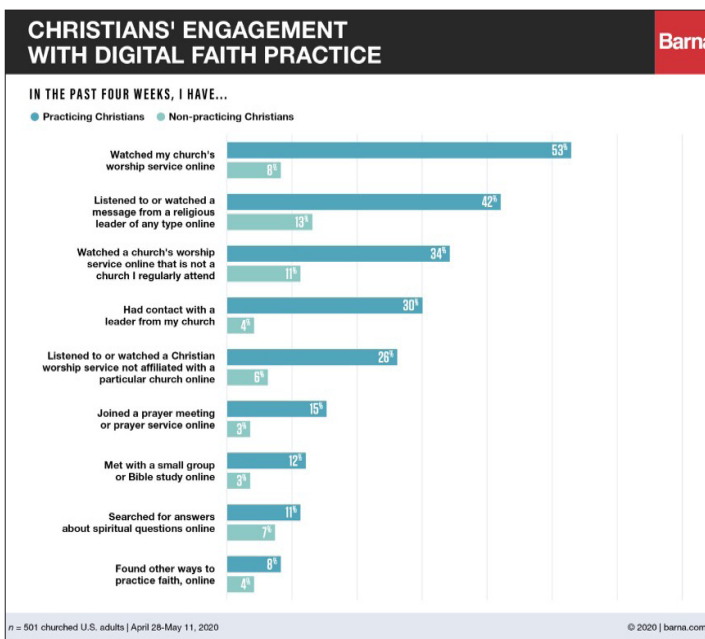


## Church Leaders Largely Lost Touch with Their Congregants

During pandemic restrictions, many church members, especially young people, did not have contact with leaders of their congregations, as highlighted below, respectively, by Barna Group and Springtide Research Institute studies. While 30% of all practicing Christians had contact with a leader from their congregation, just 10% of young people say a religious leader reached out to them personally since the beginning of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

## Disconnect between Young People and their Faith Communities and Religious Leaders

During the pandemic, young people were more likely to turn to family and friends rather than to faith communities for help and support, as indicated below.<sup>7</sup> This is a clear indication of the unique role of relationship in faith development.



When asked why they would not turn to religious communities when facing uncertainty and difficult times, 55% of young people surveyed, including religious and spiritual young people, said they do not feel like they can be their full selves in a religious organization; 54% said religious communities try to fix their problems instead of just being there for them; 49% said that religious communities would not welcome their

<sup>6</sup> Barna Group, What Research Has Revealed About the New Sunday Morning, June 3, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning/>; Springtide Research Institute, "The State of Religion and Young People Navigating Uncertainty," (2021): 22, <https://springtideresearch.org/the-state-of-religion-2021-digital-edition/?page=22>.

<sup>7</sup> Springtide Research Institute, "The State of Religion and Young People Navigating Uncertainty," 26.

uncertainties, doubt, and questions; 47% do not think religious leaders will care about the things they want to talk about during their times of uncertainty; 45% do not feel safe within religious or faith institutions; and 39% said they have been harmed by religion, faith, or a religious leader in the past.<sup>8</sup>

Beside decreased church attendance, the fear is that empty pews may also be signaling a public health crisis in the country.<sup>9</sup> Research has shown that religious service attendance has both “public health benefits, such as less depression, lower suicide rates, and less drug and alcohol overdoses” and the potential to affect family stability and population growth as “Americans who attend religious services frequently are more likely to be married and have children.”<sup>10</sup> Public health crises and lack of family stability both have a negative impact on the Church and its mission.

### Impact on Church Finances

Church finances, overall, have not been as drastically affected as many other areas were during the pandemic. Initially, giving may have decreased as people lost their jobs and other issues affected the members’ income. According to a September 2020 study by the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving, giving was down an average of 4.4% over the first four months of the pandemic. Researchers have found in the past that “giving to religious organizations often follows trends in participation.” Prior to the pandemic, 78% of individuals’ donations were given during a physical worship service. So when churches were unable to meet in person, giving naturally decreased in many of the churches. However, only 40% of the churches saw a decrease, while 28% saw an increase in giving.<sup>11</sup> Overall, however, “gifts to religious organizations grew by 1% in 2020.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>9</sup> Tyler J. Vanderweele and Brendan Case, “Empty Pews Are an American Public Health Crisis,” *Christianity Today*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/november/church-empty-pews-are-american-public-health-crisis.html>

<sup>10</sup> Wang, “The Decline in Church Attendance in COVID America.”

<sup>11</sup> Lake Institute on Faith and Giving, “COVID-19 Congregational Study,” September 2020, <https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/bitstream/handle/1805/23791/lake-covid-report2020-2.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> CBS News, “COVID depletes collection plates at churches nationwide,” January 17, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/covid-19-churches-financial-difficulty/>

<sup>13</sup> Aaron Earls, “Most Pastors Say 2021 Giving Is on Track,” *Christianity Today*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/november/giving-tuesday-rebound-church-finances-pandemic-lifeway.html>

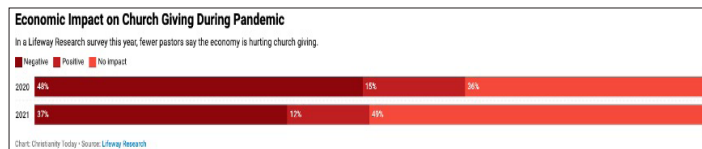
<sup>14</sup> Lake Institute on Faith and Giving, “COVID-19 Congregational Study,” September 2020, <https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/bitstream/handle/1805/23791/lake-covid-report2020-2.pdf>

### Participation and Giving During the Pandemic

Percentage of Congregations



Near the end of 2021, according to a Lifeway Research study, 49% of pastors say that the economy is not having any impact on church finances—up from 36% in 2020. “The 49 percent who say the economy is having no impact on their church marks the highest percentage since Lifeway Research began surveying pastors on this issue in 2009.”<sup>13</sup>



One of the important lessons that churches started to learn early on was how much the church depended on the physical offering plate for funds. In the U.S., 39% of churches had no option for online giving at the beginning of the pandemic.<sup>14</sup> Churches were quickly forced to find ways to enable electronic giving out of necessity. Many of them realized, as a result, that “electronic giving has the potential to reach younger generations, occasional attendees, and even people who don’t yet attend

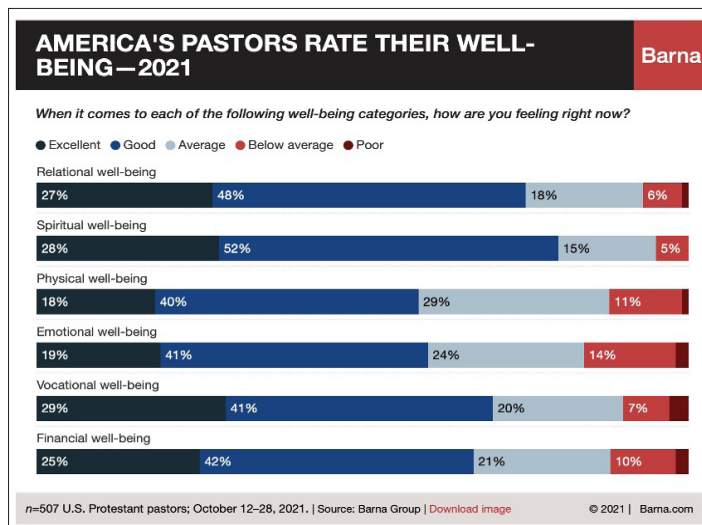
church by leapfrogging beyond our traditional reliance on the pledge and the offering plate.”<sup>15</sup> This was a major issue before the pandemic, but it took a widespread emergency to help many churches to see the need.

Many churches were not ready for a financial emergency when it came. Finances are often a struggle for churches, especially smaller ones, because of their reliance on donations. Churches often hang on the edge of a fiscal cliff, never far from disaster. But many of these difficulties would be mitigated if churches practiced wise financial planning and put safeguards in place to prepare for the next emergency, regardless of whether it is local or global. Because of what happened during the pandemic, many churches have realized the need for such financial tools as a reserve fund, increased giving options, especially including online tools, budgeting, and other financial planning. The size of the church does not affect the need for wise fiscal organization and foresight. “Many have said there will be no return to normalcy if by that we mean things will be just as they were before the pandemic. But there will be a temptation to repeat some of the past mistakes and oversights when it comes to responsible church fiscal management. In the coming years, let us develop our planning with wise fiscal approaches before us. With God’s help, we have an opportunity to regroup, take stock of what has happened, and look ahead to a new day.”<sup>16</sup>

### Impact on Church Leaders

Church leaders have not been exempt from the fallouts of the pandemic. It has been reported that in the last quarter of 2021, “along with intense congregational divisions and financial strain, an alarming percentage of pastors [38%] is experiencing significant burnout, driving them to seriously consider leaving ministry.”<sup>17</sup> Regarding their overall well-being (relational, spiritual, physical, emotional, vocational, and financial), a

significant number of pastors rate themselves as below average or poor.<sup>18</sup>



### Positive Impact of the Pandemic on the Church’s Ministry

It is important to point out that the COVID-19 pandemic did not only negatively impact the Church and its mission and ministry. To some extent, it positively spurred the church to expand its social ministry. *Christianity Today* reported that:

*Even as sanctuaries were closed to in-person worship and other meetings moved online, about a quarter of congregations expanded the use of their buildings for other activities, from helping homeless people to offering child care and tutoring. About a fifth of congregations were involved in ministries specifically tied to the pandemic, such as hosting vaccine clinics, making masks or holding celebrations for frontline workers. Twelve percent started or increased mental health ministries and 6 percent said they had new or expanded ministries related to social action, with some involving voter registration or anti-racism initiatives.*<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Lovett H. Weems and Ann A. Michel, “8 Financial Lessons for the Post-pandemic Church,” Lewis Center for Church Leadership, June 29, 2021, <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/8-financial-lessons-for-the-post-pandemic-church/>.

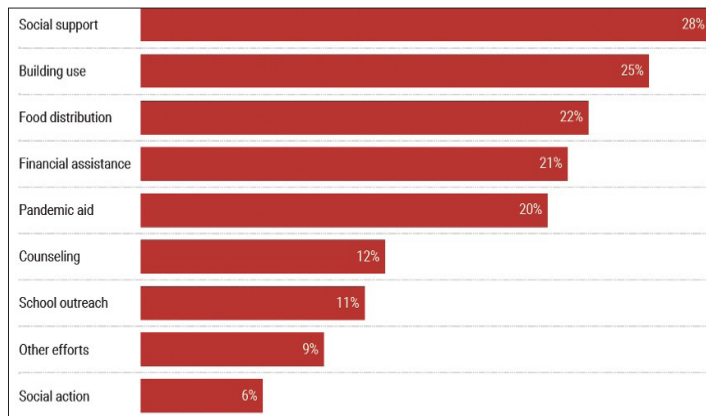
<sup>16</sup> Lovett H. Weems Jr., “COVID-19 Reminds Us of Crucial Church Finance Safeguards,” Lewis Center for Church Leadership, July 8, 2020, <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/covid-19-reminds-us-of-crucial-church-finance-safeguards/>

<sup>17</sup> Barna Group, “38% of U.S. Pastors Have Thought About Quitting Full-Time Ministry in the Past Year,” November 16, 2021, <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-well-being/#.YZQBbUxQy78.twitter>. The report further points out that: “A deeper analysis of these data show that some groups are faring worse than others. One of the more alarming findings is that 46 percent of pastors under the age of 45 say they are considering quitting full-time ministry, compared to 34% of pastors 45 and older. Keeping the right younger leaders encouraged and in their ministry roles will be crucial to the next decade of congregational vitality in the U.S. Another notable gap emerges based on denomination, with pastors from mainline denominations far more likely to consider quitting than those from non-mainline denominations (51% vs. 34%). Other significant differences arise among gender, with female pastors being far more likely than male pastors to have considered giving up full-time ministry, and ministry tenure. Specifically, roughly one-third of pastors who are considering resignation have been in ministry for about 20 years but have been at their current church for seven years.”

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Adelle M. Banks, “Study: Church Outreach Expands to Meet Pandemic Needs,” *Christianity Today* December 24, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/december/church-ministry-outreach-pandemic-covid-hartford-study.html>.

Below is the percentage of congregations who added or expanded their ministry efforts during the pandemic:<sup>20</sup>



## Mission in a Post-Pandemic Era

While the pandemic has presented the Church with many challenges, it has also opened new possibilities and opportunities for ministry and mission. What the Church makes of those opportunities will determine its impact in this post-pandemic era.

Because of the way COVID-19 significantly changed the world, the post-pandemic Church is different from the pre-pandemic Church. To be relevant, church cannot just resume old approaches to ministry. Going back exclusively to old methods, programs, and activities would be ministering to a world that no longer exists.<sup>21</sup> The in-person gatherings that have been at the core of church programs for centuries showed their limitations during the pandemic.

Rather than planning to “get back to normal,” church leaders and their congregations need to plan for a more robust hybrid way of being and doing church. On one hand, there will be members who will continue to strongly hold to the “no, not at all” perspective on the digital church. On the other, the digital world is here to stay as an integral part of the Church’s mission field. Churches that are fully committed to the Great Commission cannot afford to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach of being and doing church.

The way forward will likely look different, depending on where churches are located, the resources they have available to them, and the community they are a part of.

Implementing a robust in-person and online ministry will have its challenges. For many churches, providing live streamed services went from being a thing of the future to an immediate need. As churches scrambled to purchase the necessary equipment, build a digital ministry team, and integrate an online presence, the result was a consumerism approach to worship services. The reality is that you must begin with the same intensity in building your online presence that you put into launching your physical location.

When it comes to ministry moving forward, churches should look at developing a hybrid approach to worship services. While live streams of the service are great, the majority of the effort is placed on the in-person worship. This may indicate to your online attendees that they are less of a concern to you. Also, smaller churches with less resources will suffer as the larger churches with more resources provide higher quality “entertainment” live streams. Churches that continue to provide live streamed services only will likely see their online presence diminish. The reality is that many people will not want to return to in-person worship. A hybrid service can provide an interactive platform to keep online members engaged in worship. This allows the online members to have a worshipful experience and be included in the service itself, rather than being consumers of worship content. Rather than live streaming to Facebook or YouTube, using a platform such as Zoom allows for online members to be involved in the service. One example of this can be found at The Grace Place, a church plant in South Bend, Indiana. Those who want to worship with The Grace Place have two ways to do so. They can attend the in-person worship service located at 202 W. Western Ave in South Bend. They can also attend the Zoom worship experience, by logging in with their Zoom account. With an integrated audiovisual system, the members on Zoom are able to see and hear the praise team, speakers, videos, and other aspects of the service through the sound system as if they were there in person. The in-person worshippers are also able to see and hear the Zoom participants with a projector that shows them on the wall, connected to the sound system for a high-quality live incorporation into the service. The Grace Place also implemented a “family chat” discussion that allows for those in person and online to interact with the speaker after the sermon. This provides the ability to

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities that Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 37.

make those online feel a part of the service, have an opportunity to greet the speaker as they would in person, and also provide a sense of a digital home visit as they can check in on how those who are staying home and not accepting visitors. The results of the hybrid worship experience have been fruitful for The Grace Place. They have been able to reach people across the globe and made them actively involved members of their congregation.

A hybrid service may not work for everyone, but intentionally interacting with your online members is essential. One other element that can provide added involvement is the incorporation of the youth into the church's digital ministry. The youth and young adults speak the language of technology. A digital ministry provides a new way to keep the youth involved. Churches now have the opportunity to include and equip the youth in installing, implementing, and executing the online presence. This allows the youth to feel like they are a part of something within the Church. When a young member feels their opinions and ideas are valued, they are less likely to leave the Church when they reach adulthood. Therefore, the way forward looks bright with a Holy Spirit-filled media ministry.

## Conclusion

Change can be challenging, but if people are resistant to change, nothing will ever improve beyond maintaining the status quo. Sometimes change can be the response to good stimuli, while other times it takes a crisis to show us our strengths and our weaknesses. COVID-19 was a major global crisis that caused or accentuated many issues in the Church. As church shifted online, the challenges and benefits created many disagreements and opportunities. Many who may not have been fully committed in the first place used the opportunity to stop being part of a church community altogether, whether in person or online. While crisis often creates a drive to religion, for many this crisis has seemed to have the opposite effect. Church leaders have struggled to keep up with the changes and have experienced significant burnout. In addition, these challenges have unfortunately left many members out of touch with their church leaders and broader church family. Churches also realized that they were not financially prepared for an emergency and struggled to maintain or expand their ministry in a time when they were needed more than ever.

With every crisis, however, comes opportunity. The shift to online ministry has increased the potential reach of the Church to many people who would never walk through the doors of a physical church building. In addition, the growing needs of individuals suffering from the pandemic and its long-lasting effects created an opportunity for ministry like we've never seen before. The reality is that this pandemic has changed the world we live and minister in. Will we return to the status quo of how we have always done things before with limited and less and less effective results? Or will we press forward, seeking more effective ways to minister right now, while striving to be better prepared for the next crisis that will most certainly come our way? Will we shy away from seemingly insurmountable difficulties or will we pray fervently and work together toward a solution that will glorify God and reach more people than we otherwise could have? Let us seek the Lord's guidance as we work together to become more effective in the ever-changing and progressive reality of ministry.



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