Technology and Ministry During a Time of Pandemic: An Annotated Bibliography

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While the COVID-19 pandemic caused local churches and parachurch organizations to embrace new methods of digital discipleship, writing and reflection on the role of technology in ministry is not new. The following books and research reports represent recent thinking about the role of technology in disciple-making with some publications preceding the pandemic and others reflecting specifically on lessons learned through the pandemic.

Davis, W. F. (2021). Rebooting.church: Digitally transform your church with ‘bits & bytes of salt & light’ to help spiritually transform a 21st-century digital world. (n.p.).

In this self-published book, Davis casts a vision for the local church to fulfill the Great Commission by adding a digital church presence. In the first half of the book, he labors to defend the need for, and urgency of, engaging a digital generation in ways that are relevant to them. In the second half of the book, he leverages his technology expertise in software development and marketing to introduce practical ways in which the church can utilize technology for security, data-management, and outreach purposes. He explores the ways in which “virtual church architectures” can be built to serve one-on-one, one-to-many, many-to-many, many-to-one, and interactive purposes. He even discusses principles for gamification as they might apply to the church. In the final chapters, Davis provides a framework for building a digital church strategy.
Edington, M. D. W., Ed. (2020). *We shall be changed: Questions for the post-pandemic church*. New York: Church Publishing.

This book is a collection of thoughtful essays by leaders and ministry practitioners in the Episcopal and Anglican tradition, written in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The editor discerned five broad categories of questions that the pandemic raises for the church, and then he invited several colleagues to respond to each question set. The five “conversations” that resulted examine the following issues: (1) the potential contribution of enforced distancing to deeper spirituality, (2) new worship practices, (3) effects on financial structures, (4) exposure of unequal access to resources and appropriate responses, and (5) lessons learned about leadership and institutional structures. The overall consensus is that this crisis could catalyze unexpected new positive outcomes. As one contributor observed, “The pandemic is an invitation to reimagine the world and to insist that we cannot go back to normal” (p. 11).

Jones, N. (2020). *From social media to social ministry: A guide to digital discipleship*. Zondervan.

Jones argues that social technology should not be viewed primarily as a tool to recruit church attendees, but rather as a vital resource for discipleship that can be used to help people begin their faith journey and grow in it. After surveying a variety of social media platforms, Jones argues that Facebook is a key platform that uniquely facilitates multi-directional communication among users. The second part of her book is dedicated to providing tips for leading, staffing, and resourcing a Facebook campus. The final chapters include practical advice about launching and growing one’s Facebook campus.

McCants, N. W. (2021). *The digital pulpit: Pivoting from physical to virtual church*. (n.p.).

In this brief self-published book, Pastor Nolan McCants describes his vision for adaptive ministry that produces transformed disciples in our generation. He describes his own experience of being thrust into this adaptive work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although McCants frames this as a shift to a “digital pulpit,” his emphasis is a broader shift in the church to virtual discipleship that includes texting, emailing, social media, live streaming, video conferencing, etc. He emphasizes the need to refocus on transformational discipleship. In his own context, virtual ministry during the pandemic shifted to Sunday live stream services, daily virtual devotional livestreams, weekly small group video meetings, and an enhanced weekly electronic newsletter. During this season, he witnessed increased collaboration among churches and believers taking more ownership for their spiritual growth. He challenges the church to learn from the positive lessons of this pandemic to continue making disciples in our generation.

Panzer, R. M. (2020). *Grace and gigabytes: Being church in a tech-shaped culture*. Fortress Press.

Writing from the perspective of a seminary graduate and leadership development professional in the technology industry, Panzer argues that the contemporary church must engage deeply with the shared values of the digital culture in which we exist.
Because digital technology is changing the way our generation thinks, learns, believes, and connects, he suggests that churches must adapt for the sake of mission and transformational impact. His presentation highlights four main values of a digital culture that the church is called to engage: asking questions for learning, connecting with new people as whole persons, collaborating for learning and leadership, and creating in partnership with others. While Panzer offers digital tips and tactics at the end of each chapter, this book is primarily about understanding digital culture and exploring ways in which the church can align itself with those cultural values for transformational impact.

Pew Research Center (2020). *Americans oppose religious exemptions from coronavirus-related restrictions.* https://www.pewforum.org/2020/08/07/americans-oppose-religious-exemptions-from-coronavirus-related-restrictions/

In this research report, Pew surveyed 10,211 U.S. adults in July 2020 to understand congregant experiences during the COVID-19 quarantine and their perspectives on government restrictions related to worship gatherings during the pandemic. Seventy-nine percent of U.S. adults and 74% of Christians believed that congregations should be subject to same social distancing regulations as other organizations. The majority of respondents indicated that churches should be allowed to open with modifications such as social distancing, restricted attendance capacities, and mask requirements. During the pandemic, 72% of people who regularly attended a service in person reported attending virtually. Only 40% of those watching online services in the past month watched services offered only by their congregation, while 30% watched services from multiple congregations, and 29% exclusively watched services offered by congregations other than their own. The study also found that most respondents were satisfied with watching services online and that 19% of people will watch online services more often after the pandemic.

Pew Research Center (2021). *More Americans than people in other advanced economies say COVID-19 has strengthened religious faith.* https://www.pewforum.org/2021/01/27/more-americans-than-people-in-other-advanced-economies-say-covid-19-has-strengthened-religious-faith/

In this research report, Pew surveyed 14,276 adults in 14 advanced economies during the summer of 2020 to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their religious beliefs and family dynamics. Twenty-eight percent of Americans reported that the pandemic had strengthened their religious faith, which exceeded the second ranked country at 16%, and the fourteen-country median score of 10%. Sixty-eight percent of U.S. adults indicated that their faith had not changed much. Across all nations, people who already prioritized religion were more likely to say that the pandemic strengthened their faith. Those from lower incomes were also more likely to report strengthened faith during this time. White evangelicals were the most likely to view the pandemic as boosting faith. In those countries hard hit by COVID-19, many respondents also indicated that the pandemic had strengthened family bonds.

Pew Research Center (2021). *Life in U.S. religious congregations slowly edges back toward normal.* https://www.pewforum.org/2021/03/22/life-in-u-s-religious-congregations-slowly-edges-back-toward-normal/
In this research report, Pew surveyed 12,055 U.S. adults in March 2021 to understand how COVID-19 was impacting their religious life and practice. Although they found growing confidence that respondents could safely return to face-to-face worship services, 18% fewer evangelicals than normal indicated that they planned to attend Easter services. Seventeen percent of U.S. adults had returned to face-to-face worship in March 2021 as compared to only 13% in July 2020. Eighty-two percent of all respondents indicated that their congregations were still streaming or recording worship services. Interestingly, a disproportionate number of Black Americans indicated that their congregations should be closed because of COVID-19. They are also the most likely demographic group to suggest that their faith has grown during the pandemic.

Rainer, T. S. (2020). *The post-quarantine church: Six urgent challenges and opportunities that will determine the future of your congregation*. Tyndale.

The core premise of this highly-readable little book is that churches cannot expect to ever return to what constituted “normal” for them before the COVID-19 pandemic—and that is a good thing. The mandatory quarantine following the rapid rise of the disease forced congregations to make many changes very quickly, and the author urges church leaders to now conserve and build upon those innovations rather than trying to (unsuccessfully) revert to exactly the same circumstances that existed before the pandemic began. In summary, the six challenges are: (1) Gather differently and better, (2) Seize the opportunity to reach the digital world, (3) Reconnect with the community near your church, (4) Take prayer to a new and powerful level, (5) Rethink your facilities for emerging opportunities, and (6) Make lasting changes that will make a difference.

Thompson, D. A. (2016). *The virtual body of Christ in a suffering world*. Abingdon Press.

Based on her experience of receiving spiritual care through an online prayer tool during a time of physical suffering, Dr. Thompson expresses a newfound appreciation for the ways in which the broader expression of the body of Christ can minister to those in need through the Internet. She explains how online interactions can provide stable spaces for those who are suffering to provide careful and more detailed updates on their condition and prayer needs. Thompson also presents a theology of the virtual body of Christ as illustrated in Paul’s writing of letters to decentralized churches and his constant encouragement to remember those who may be suffering and marginalized. She concludes that a commitment to incarnational living calls believers to extend a healing presence to those who are suffering in both the physical and virtual worlds in which we live.

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