

The Digital Divide Is Giving American Churches Hell

Covid-19 has upended churchgoing in the US. Like so much else with the pandemic, the impacts are not felt equally.



Digital tithing platforms and other tools can help churches stay afloat while pews are empty, but some congregations are struggling. PHOTOGRAPH: DOUG HENDRICKS/GETTY IMAGES

FOR CLAY SCROGGINS, preaching on Zoom was never part of the plan. As lead pastor at Buckhead Church in Atlanta, he was accustomed to services in a 3,000-seat auditorium, with live music and a jumbotron for people in the back. But God's plan is often mysterious, so when the [city of Atlanta](#) forced him to shut the church's doors last spring, Scroggins faithfully moved his ministry online. "Ultimately, we were really informed by Jesus' calling for us to love our neighbors," he says, "and the most loving thing we could do was to continue to meet virtually."

And continue to meet virtually they have. Sunday sermons are broadcast live and posted to the church's YouTube channel for congregants to watch anytime. Bible study and small group meetings have moved to Zoom. Buckhead has even managed to replicate spontaneous church lobby "bump-ins" with video chat breakout rooms for some events. Donations, which provide all of the church's operating income, remain the same, they just come via a digital collection plate. At Buckhead Church, virtual worship is going so well that some parts of it might be here for good. But not every congregation has been so blessed.

For places of worship, Covid-19 has upended traditions and emptied sacred spaces. About 45 percent of Americans attend religious services regularly, most of them in Christian churches, like Buckhead Church. Or they did, until last spring. Then shutdowns and stay-at-home orders sent congregations scrambling to move their services online, similar to schools and workplaces. Some, like Buckhead, found themselves well prepared, with the resources and technical savvy to keep attendance and alms steady throughout the year. Other churches found themselves in trouble, struggling to reach worshippers virtually while facing budget cuts, layoffs, and the threat of bankruptcy or even permanent closure. Nearly one year into the pandemic, its effects on religious life, like other aspects of American society, appears unevenly distributed, with large, successful churches continuing to do well and struggling churches falling further behind.

"The digital divide in churches reflects the digital divide in American society more generally," says Mark Chaves, a theologian at Duke University and director of the National Congregation Study, which has surveyed religious groups in the US since 1998. Churches with less of a digital presence tend to be located in rural areas. Their congregations are more likely to be older, lower-income, and Black. Those demographic groups are also less likely to have access to broadband, and they have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, both in health and economic outcomes. Those realities have factored into church outcomes too. A survey from LifeWay Research, which focuses on Christian ministries, found that white pastors were the most likely to report offerings that were higher than expected in the past year. Black pastors, by contrast, were most likely to report that the pandemic economy was impacting their churches "very negatively." Churches often run on tight margins, and those impacts can have long-term effects: LifeWay Research found that a small percentage of churches have had to cut down on outreach, suspend Sunday School or small group programs, or lay off staff members. Black pastors were more likely to say they cut staff pay or deleted a church position.

Chaves says that churches that have been slow to adopt technology usually have fewer resources, so they're more reluctant to spend on things like a livestreaming setup. But the resistance can also be cultural. "Sometimes there's a tension with institutions that are based on tradition," says Walle Mafolasire, founder and CEO at Givelify, a digital tithing startup. "It's like, what do you mean, 'tap, tap, give,' when it's right there in the Bible that you should bring your gifts to the altar?" The pandemic, he adds, has changed the equation: "Well, right now, I'm on Zoom. Zoom is my altar."

At the start of 2020, about half of American churches used a digital tithing service like Givelify. Platforms like these uncouple giving from church attendance and allow people to set up recurring donations, which can make it easier for a church to predict its income. The pandemic greatly accelerated the pace of adoption: By April, one-third of churches that weren't using a digital tithing platform had signed up for one, according to LifeWay Research. Givelify says that it has seen an explosion of new users, and that the gross amount of donations to churches on its service has remained steady in the pandemic (although, in recent months, the number of donors has slightly decreased). The company also found that one-third of faith-based organizations reported an *increase* in donations during the 2020 pandemic—specifically, ones

with more of a digital presence. Churches with YouTube channels, Instagram pages, and prominent websites saw 533 percent more donations than those without.

Technology like this can help churches of all kinds, but it has been a lifeline for some smaller and more rural churches, which have been more vulnerable in the pandemic. The First Baptist Church Reeltown, in rural Notasulga, Alabama, has a bare-bones digital presence—a website and a Facebook page—and operates its ministry in an “antiquated way,” says Sarah Jones, the church’s secretary. Last year, it broadcast sermons more regularly on Facebook Live while it was unsafe for its 200 members to meet in person. The church also happened to sign up for another digital tithing service called Pushpay at the end of 2019—a decision that quickly paid off. Despite several months when no one attended First Baptist Church Reeltown in person, giving to the church remained consistent. “Most churches our size experienced decreased giving and really felt the weight of that,” says Jones. “That was not our story this year.”

Pushpay says churches have seen as much as \$500,000 in new giving a year after signing up for the service. “This means that half a million dollars was sitting there latent, but people started giving because they can now do it from their phone,” says Troy Pollock, Pushpay’s chief ambassador. The company sees its payments platform as an entry-level product that can introduce churches to its other technological solutions.

That’s what happened at First Baptist Church Reeltown. Although the church is still mostly run on “paper and pen,” Jones says, it’s now looking into new ways to incorporate technology into its services. Last year the church used Pushpay’s additional features to upload sermon notes and prayer cards for members. For churches with larger congregations and more complex needs, Pushpay also offers a “church management system”—modeled after Salesforce software—that keeps data on parishioners. The service can help churches to gently nudge their members to be more active, from attending services on Sundays to volunteering and teaching Bible study classes.

For the faith sector, the acceleration of new technologies could lead to massive changes. Other industries, like media and retail, have been transformed as they progressively moved online; money, influence, and attention now converge in a small pool of winners, often at the expense of smaller outfits. Some believe churches might experience something similar. “You’re going to have the top 40 preachers that everyone listens to, and the regular everyday preacher is not going to be able to compete,” says William Vanderbloemen, a former pastor and founder of the Vanderbloemen Search Group, an executive search firm for churches. That’s not to say more niche markets couldn’t also emerge. “People will still show up to hear a message from a pastor who knows their specific community on a micro-contextual level. Like, here’s what happened in our zip code this week, and here’s how it relates to how we think of our God.”

Mafolasire, the founder of Givelify, calls this the “Amazon-like way of experiencing faith.” People might still be practicing with their local parish, but they’re also looking around more at other churches, and in many cases giving money to them too. In the past year, about 20 percent of Givelify’s donors have given money to multiple faith-based organizations. To Mafolasire, this suggests that churches that get ahead will be the ones that can magnify their online presence, drawing in new people from the internet. Givelify’s data from this year backs that up too. “For those churches who saw their giving increase,” says Mafolasire, “it was coming from their ability to reach a wider audience.”

Chaves, who runs the National Congregation Study, says it’s too soon to know whether this year will have a lasting impact on worship practices, and what that impact would be. “Church attendance has been declining slowly for decades,” he says. “Will we see a shift if online participation stays ubiquitous? Or will it mean that more people are participating?”

Some [early research](#) suggests that churchgoers are eager to get back to in-person services and worshipping together with their community. While some smaller congregations are unlikely to continue broadcasting their sermons on Facebook Live, other churches may find value in a hybrid model, where some people come into Sunday services and others watch from their computers.

At Buckhead Church, the Sunday services will continue to be online until the congregation can safely reunite en masse. Pastor Scroggins doesn't love preaching over Zoom, but it reminds him of a Bible verse—2 John, 1:12. "I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete." For Scroggins, it captures the essence of pandemic preaching. "I think what John is saying is that the most complete form of communication is face to face," he says. "But that's not always possible."

Updated 2-10-2021, 7:07 pm EST: This story has been updated to clarify that the pandemic was not First Baptist Church Reeltown's first time using Facebook Live.

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