

Christian formation engagement  
online: impact of the COVID-19  
pandemic on congregations,  
theological reflection, and new  
opportunities.

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## Introduction

On Jan. 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the United States reported its first cases of a deadly new virus, SARS-CoV-2<sup>1</sup> in a traveler who returned from Wuhan, China. Unlike its predecessor, SARS-CoV, it was far more transmissible, spreading rapidly and the world faced its first major deadly pandemic in a century. With no medical tools such as vaccination or treatment to mitigate this pandemic, the US and other countries instituted public health measures, shutting down schools, churches, gyms, and most public spaces. When meeting in-person, masks and social distancing were required. In response to the threat, churches like other institutions turned to digital content delivery to continue serving parishioners. A study done by the Barna Group in late March 2020 indicated that only 3% of churches remained open to in-person gatherings at that time while 73% were completely closed.<sup>2</sup> Relatively few churches offered virtual services before the pandemic, most had to pivot quickly to the virtual world. For example, in the Washington DC area, only very large churches such as the National Cathedral offered live-streaming and recorded worship prior to the pandemic.

The context for this study is the digital church during the pandemic, the way in which churches adapted to virtual worship and formation both generally and with several in-depth cases. The pervasiveness of digital technology challenges our theology of community and communion. How we view the church as the body of Christ, and how we celebrate sacrament, requires our reflection. Finally, as we learn to live with the virus and move to the next normal, many churches are planning to continue with some digital offerings. The case study of a short class studying the pandemic theologically for parishioners reflects the use of best practices and

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<sup>1</sup>Centers for Disease Control  
<https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html#:~:text=January%2020%2C%202020%20CDC,18%20in%20Washington%20state.>

<sup>2</sup> Barna Group, *Six questions about the future of the hybrid church experience*. Barna 2022. pg. 8

new virtual tools. When the Barna Group asked their participants about the future of digital resources, “63 percent of churched adults believe churches should use digital resources for purposes of spiritual formation and discipleship.”<sup>3</sup> The online environment will be part of the church for the foreseeable future.

## **Context**

To understand the present and future of digital Christian formation it is important to understand the situation which led to the rapid increase in digital tools, which tools were used generally by churches and specifically by several churches. Christian formation for the purposes of this study include worship, gathering for prayer and religious education which includes Bible Study. Sacrament is also an important part of Christian formation which will be addressed in Part 2 of this paper. On March 13, 2020, President Trump’s declared a nationwide emergency<sup>4</sup> and soon after state and local governments instituted shutdown of much of society to stop the spread of the virus. At the peak of closures nearly 55 million students in 124,000 schools were affected.<sup>5</sup> Many workers began working remotely from home when possible and many others lost their jobs. Churches shut their doors, canceled onsite programming, and shifted to virtual worship and programming. For some churches it meant not offering worship services at all, but for many it meant offering worship online using online tools such as Zoom, Facebook live or YouTube. Congregations became two dimensional.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid page 7

<sup>4</sup>Centers for Disease Control

<https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html#:~:text=January%2020%2C%202020%20CDC,18%20in%20Washington%20state> accessed 4/4/2022

<sup>5</sup>Education Week, *The Coronavirus Spring: The Historic Closing of US schools* July 1, 2020

<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-coronavirus-spring-the-historic-closing-of-u-s-schools-a-timeline/2020/07>

The virus had a devastating impact particularly on the elderly. In New York City, one of the epicenters of the epidemic, in spring 2020, the death rate among persons 75 and older who were hospitalized with COVID was 38%.<sup>6</sup> The Hartford Institute reported in 2021 that nearly 83% of the churches in their study reported at least one member of the congregation becoming COVID positive prior to the Omicron outbreak.<sup>7</sup>

Creating Christian community and continuing church activities, key elements in Christian formation, presented challenges and opportunities for the church. Prior to the pandemic, most church activities took place in-person, at face-to-face gatherings. Whether it was worship, or formation classes or prayer, the community gathered together as a physical body. There were some instances of digital gathering prior to the pandemic. With the advent of television, religious organizations realized the value of using electronic media for worship. Since the early 1950's some church services were available on television. Rex Humbard, who offered services on the radio moved to television in 1952.<sup>8</sup> Others followed. The pandemic brought the reality of both delivering content virtually and creating community at distance to each individual congregation as never before. The new technology allows for the intermingling of broadcast and social media in a way not experienced before. While there was some general experience with digital worship for parishioners, creating community, having other forms of Christian formation such as religious education or prayer groups and having fellowship together, even celebrating the Lord's Supper, was new territory for everyone. The entire church has become a "shut-in" overnight, requiring adaptation to technology to happen rapidly and on a massive scale.

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<sup>6</sup> Thompson CN, Baumgartner J, Pichardo C, et al. COVID-19 Outbreak — New York City, February 29–June 1, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:1725–1729. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6946a2>

<sup>7</sup> The Hartford Institute, Navigating the Pandemic: First Look at Congregational Responses. Nov 2021

<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia. *Televangelism* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Televangelism> accessed 4/14/2022

## **Adapting to the online environment**

Churches adapted to the pandemic by offering virtual worship and opportunities for Christian formation. For congregants, it meant engaging as a community in a new way. According to the Barna Group, “60% of people reported that worship was the only digital offering of their church.<sup>9</sup> According to the Barna Group respondents in the study the most frequent use of online offerings was prayer experiences (16%), digital spiritual formation on my own (14%), digital discipleship classes with others (11%) and volunteering online (10%). Participation in digital offerings, mirrors non-worship-based programming offerings. The Hartford Institute reported that in November 2021, of the churches surveyed, approximately 27% offered online prayer, 32% both online and onsite religious education for children 22% offered online only for children while 26% offered both online and onsite religious education for children. For adult religious education, 26% offered online only and 39% both online and onsite classes.<sup>10</sup> While most churches were able to pivot to virtual worship, other Christian formation activities such as prayer, religious education classes, and in-person fellowship opportunities were most often canceled.

Age demographics has played a significant role in digital participation and comfort. When the Barna Group asked in 2020 which delivery method (online or onsite) would be most beneficial for church goers, 71% of Baby boomers (1946 – 64) reported that in-person would be most helpful, while more than half of Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X said they would prefer

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<sup>10</sup> The Hartford Institute, *Navigating the Pandemic: A First Look at Congregational Responses* Nov. 2021 <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/> pg. 6

hybrid and exclusively digital participation<sup>11</sup>. As the pandemic progressed many people became more comfortable with digital tools so that they could stay connected with family and friends.

One of the impacts of the pandemic was an increase in the use of online tools across all demographic groups. In the Pew Research study of the general population completed in 2021, YouTube saw a significant increase in usage, with 81% of people surveyed using YouTube, while Facebook still remains one of the most used online platforms with 69% of respondents using it.<sup>12</sup> Age cohorts also engage at different levels with digital technology. In a study done in 2019, Statista reported that while 90% of 18 – 29-year-olds used social media, only 40% of 65+ used social media<sup>13</sup>. The type of social media used also varied by age demographic. While older adults prefer Facebook, younger generations other different tools more frequently. The Pew Research study found that “In fact, a majority of 18- to 29-year-olds say they use Instagram (71%) or Snapchat (65%), while roughly half say the same for TikTok”<sup>14</sup>. Churches tended to use Facebook, YouTube and Zoom for their online offerings. This sets up a disconnect particularly for the younger parishioners who tend not use Facebook.

### **Specific Experience - Three churches**

As examples of the specific situations on the ground I interviewed several classmates in seminary<sup>15</sup> about the experiences of their churches during the pandemic and their plans for the future. The churches responses to the pandemic reflected the response of the larger community.

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<sup>11</sup> Barna Group, *Six questions about the future of the hybrid church experience*, Barna 2020

<sup>12</sup> Pew Research Center. Social Media Use in 2021 <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/> accessed 3/24/2022

<sup>13</sup> Statista. *Percentage of adults who use social media networks as of 2021 by age group* <https://www.statista.com/statistics/471370/us-adults-who-use-social-networks-age/> accessed 3/24/2022

<sup>14</sup> Pew Research Center. *Social Media Use in 2021* <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/> accessed 3/24/2022

<sup>15</sup> Interviews took place 3/22/2022 and 3/23/2022

Churches B and C average between 80 and 100 members, which is the typical church size reported by Hartford Institute<sup>16</sup> and Church A is slightly larger with 300 members. None of the churches had online worship or formation before the pandemic and thus had to make some decisions about what to do. Church A and B pivoted rather quickly to live-streaming online worship using Zoom while Church C had a more circuitous path to online worship. Church C initially did not hold services at all, but as the pandemic progressed, they tried some online worship. When nature dealt them a blow, and their sanctuary was severely damaged by a major storm, the church began offering to online (streaming worship. In the midst of this, the church went through several staff changes, complicating worship and programming. The waves of COVID variants which increased infections also created challenges. With a new pastor as of summer 2021, Church C now stream Sunday services on Facebook live<sup>17</sup>. Churches A and B continue to use Zoom for worship. All three churches are continuing with hybrid worship by live-streaming and recording in-person worship even with the relaxation of all COVID restrictions. This is in line with personal observations of other churches in the Washington DC area.

during the pandemic was difficult for these churches. Church C, which suffered damage from a catastrophic storm stopped all formation activities initially except to cook lunch for all children in the town, which was delivered by the fire department, while the schools were closed. Church A, the 300-member church conducted confirmation class on Zoom. The pastor at Church C has a weekly prayer service online that is available live and is recorded for later viewing.

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<sup>16</sup> Hartford Institute

<sup>17</sup> In the early days of the pandemic, many churches recorded their services prior to Sunday worship and had them available at normal church time. No congregation was present on Sunday morning so there was no need to have a live service. Once churches went back to their sanctuaries, many pivoted to live-streamed services.

Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church uses Zoom for synchronous Lenten prayer services which allows for face-to face contact and sharing of the joys and concerns of the community.

The type of tool used impacts the type of community that can be cultivated. Tools that are live streamed and allow for synchronous chat have been used and are easy to create the community, which is central to being the body of Christ. Tools like Zoom, YouTube, and Facebook live have chat functions which foster interactivity and are similar to meeting in person. Conversations can occur in real time and in Zoom participants can see each other and communicate both verbally and by text.

Although reported above are attempts to create community, and continue other formation activities such as prayer, Bible Study and the like, most churches did not. According to the study done by the Hartford Institute, “Most striking from these findings, however, was that throughout a pandemic when people around the country were experiencing severe isolation, over half of the churches (54%) reported completely discontinuing fellowship events, rather than moving this community-building practice online”.<sup>18</sup> Many churches did not use the vast resources available online to continue to gather in multiple ways as community and continue with Christian formation. Whether the limitations were financial or online knowledge or simply time, churches failed to embrace the technology. The digital revolution is as earth-shattering as the Guttenberg Press. One of the conditions that led to the Reformations of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the availability of this new media technology. Similarly, the digital technology is changing us and our world.

### **Theology – Community and Communion**

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<sup>18</sup> The Hartford Institute. *Navigating the Pandemic: A First Look at Congregational Responses* Nov. 2021 pg. 6



Christian formation in the digital environment presents challenges in content delivery, development of community and celebration of the sacraments. Theologically, two questions arise. First, how can the church be the body of Christ when everyone is separated? Second, partaking of the sacraments, particularly Eucharist, is an important part of sustaining the Christian life and therefore critical to continued Christian formation. For years, the church has rejected the notion that communion can be celebrated outside of the sanctuary. With churches shut and the risk of gathering great, denominations had to address the theology of Eucharist and if it could be celebrated outside of the sanctuary.

The church has always gathered for worship and Christian formation. Community is an essential part of being a Christian. We sing together, confess together, have fellowship, pray together and celebrate the sacraments together. The pandemic completely disrupted our way of being church, of being the body of Christ. The impact of physical separation, however, is not new, and the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church of Rome says, “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—<sup>12</sup> that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.” (Romans 1:11-12). Paul used his letter to instruct the church of Rome, to form them in the faith and participate with them as the body of Christ. Paul used the new Roman road system, new technology in his day, to spread the gospel. During the pandemic, the church learned to use the latest technology to “mutually encourage one another’s faith”.

The television which introduced the digital age transformed the way we interacted with words and images. The apostle Paul communicated via the written word, but television and its offspring, allowed for visual and audio communication. Communication is key to community and to the church. The Latin root *communis* is translated as fellowship, to make common to

many, to share. Sharing is basic for our life of faith. Marshall McLuhan, the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher commenting on the digital age impact on the church said, “As long as there is means of communion, social and divine...there is an indefinite number of forms in which it can be achieved”.<sup>19</sup> According to McLuhan there is no limit to the ways in which we can form community and the digital age provides a new avenue. How the digital world forms us differently, how we interact with it and how it can expand our faith are questions that impact of faith formation.

The value of television as a mode of Christian formation was recognized early as a tool of evangelism. From Billy Graham<sup>20</sup> to Pope Pius XII<sup>21</sup> the value of reaching people via this form of communication was appreciated and used. Pope Pius recognized that television in the 1960’s was a family activity, and that community would be formed in the family unit.<sup>22</sup> Anecdotal reports from church members during the pandemic is that families gathered to watch streaming worship either via Zoom, YouTube or Facebook Live.<sup>23</sup> Community, the body of Christ occurred in every home and perhaps with an intimacy that most families don’t experience sitting in a church pew.

The experience though, is much larger as we are gathered simultaneously with the larger church family or the term coined by McLuhan, “the global village”.<sup>24</sup> According to Nick Ripatrozone in his recent book about McLuhan, “Each of us transfigured in our homes and yet

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<sup>19</sup> Ripatrozone, Nicholas. *Digital Communion: Marshall McLuhan's Spiritual Vision for a Virtual Age*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2022. Pg. 18

<sup>20</sup> Wikipedia, *Billy Graham* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy\\_Graham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Graham) accessed 4/1/2022

<sup>21</sup> Ripatrozone, Nicholas. *Digital Communion: Marshall McLuhan's Spiritual Vision for a Virtual Age*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2022. Pg. 63

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pg. 63

<sup>23</sup> Personal communication

<sup>24</sup> Ripatrozone pg. 69

connected”.<sup>25</sup> We are the body of Christ in way that is different than the Pauline experience of letter writing over time, as our connections are experienced in real time. Father Culkin a contemporary of Marshall McLuhan said, “McLuhan maintains that the electronic environment has provided many of the unifying elements proper to the concept of the people of God as Christ’s body...On a technological level the world is almost literally becoming one body laced with an electronic nervous system.”<sup>26</sup> Culkin’s view of the electronic environment was mostly limited to television, but the connection via the internet fits with McLuhan’s view.

What are those unifying elements that are part concept of God’s people as Christ’s body? The electronic environment, first and foremost provides connection, whether in real time or in an asynchronous environment. Second is a spiritual connection. We are connected through our shared worship experience, through our prayers, and our singing. While Zoom provides a stronger connection because we can see each other’s faces in real time, and some churches allow the virtual audience to unmute during the Lord’s prayer, all forms of digital media allow for participation in our shared faith experience. Finally, the digital world allows for fellowship, the Greek *Koinonia* that is so prevalent in Paul’s letters. While synchronous forms allow for fellowship in real time, other forms such as email, and asynchronous chats, provide the interaction that fellowship demands.

## **Communion/Sacraments**

One of the biggest challenges for churches during the pandemic was celebration of the sacraments. Sacraments according to Augustine are “visible signs of an invisible grace”.<sup>27</sup> In

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. pg. 69

<sup>26</sup> Ripatrazzone, Nicholas. *Digital Communion: Marshall McLuhan's Spiritual Vision for a Virtual Age*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2022 pg. 85

<sup>27</sup> Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding : An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Third ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014 pg. 291

this area, church doctrine on eucharist and baptism guided the virtual practice of these sacraments. While learning about sacraments can occur virtually, the actual act of the sacrament is a more difficult subject. For most churches, baptism still need to be performed in person, even if the congregation was gathered virtually. Practices associate with Eucharist/communion varied widely and, in this paper, I will limit discussion to the Presbyterian and Roman Catholic practices.

In sacraments, regardless of denomination, “God comes to human beings personally by the power of the Holy Spirit in the concrete, worldly media of spoken word and enacted sacrament”<sup>28</sup>. In baptism, we enter into the Christian life and the Lord’s supper is what sustains us by God’s grace. While the sacrament has an element of remembrance,

for the community of faith, Christ is no mere memory, he makes himself present here and now in the power of the Spirit through the breaking and eating of the bread and the pouring and drinking of the wine and those who partake of this meal are made one body, one people in him (the body of Christ).<sup>29</sup>

The sacrament of communion requires partaking of the bread and the wine or juice, together physically. When a pandemic interrupted the usual practice, the Church was forced to adapt or forego central practices. If and how to adapt for the Lord’s Supper were questions of theological interpretation and discernment.

While there are areas of agreement about the Lord’s Supper among denominations, there are areas of disagreement. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the sacrament centers on transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine. During the consecration of the elements, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. The accidents (the actual bread and

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<sup>28</sup> Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding : An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Third ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014. Pg.293

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

wine) do not change in their outward appearance, consecration changes the inward characteristics or essence<sup>30</sup> so that the host become the real presence of Christ, in a process called transubstantiation. The priest must consecrate the host for the real presence of Christ to be present as a corporeal presence. This means that unless an individual can attend mass in person, or a consecrated host is brought to them (e.g., in the hospital) they cannot partake of the sacrament. There is no substitute or digital version. During a shut-down that for some churches lasted more than a year, this was an impossible situation for the faithful. Participating in the Eucharistic feast is both theologically and psychologically imperative for Catholic formation and faith.

Of course, the pandemic is not the first time Catholics have been unable to receive the sacrament. ...One answer proposed by several bishops was for virtual masses to include the prayer of an 18<sup>th</sup> C theologian St. Alphonsus Liguori:

My Jesus,  
I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament.  
I love You above all things,  
and I desire to receive You into my soul.  
Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally,  
come at least spiritually into my heart.  
I embrace You as if You were already there  
and unite myself wholly to You.  
Never permit me to be separated from You.

Amen.<sup>31</sup>

In Presbyterian/Calvin doctrine that “Christ is present [in the sacrament] by the uniting power of the Holy Spirit and is received by faith. When Calvin says that Christ is present not

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid pg. 301

<sup>31</sup>EWTN, *Acts of spiritual communion* <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/devotions/act-of-spiritual-communion-339> accessed 4/10/2022

corporeally but “spiritually” he means that Christ is really present to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit”<sup>32</sup>. For Presbyterians, then, in a time of pandemic, a modification to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper was less problematic. As long as the pastor led the virtual congregation in the words of the institution, then common household elements could be used and considered valid. Common to the service were the words:

*“By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ is present to us in this meal, and that presence comes through whatever elements we use. Please take the elements you have at home, and eat whatever kind of bread you have, and drink whatever cup you have prepared. The bread is the body of Christ, the bread of heaven, and the cup is the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation. Take and eat. Take and drink.” (Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church)*

Churches in the Reformed tradition utilized and reinterpreted their theology to recognize Christ as present in whatever elements are used as long as body of Christ—the people of the church—is gathered (even digitally) for the Eucharistic prayer and words of the institution.

### **Christian formation post-pandemic: best practices and new methods**

In March of 2020, churches shut their doors and pivoted to a new way of worshiping and carrying out other Christian formation activities. The churches focused on providing worship online and if possible other formation activities, although far fewer churches engaged in activities beyond worship. Some progress was made in building community and addressing the issue of celebrating the Lord’s Supper in the digital world had churches and denominations revisiting long held views about online communion and how in the new digital world, sacrament could be celebrated. As the world learns to live the virus, the church has opportunities to build on the foundations of digital worship, and new theology and to expand its Christian formation offerings. For the majority of congregations online/hybrid worship will continue. As one

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<sup>32</sup> Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Third ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014. Pg. 302

interviewee asserted, “churches that do not embrace online will die”.<sup>33</sup> Among the participants polled by the Barna Group, 63% wanted to see other offerings by their churches in addition to worship.<sup>34</sup> The seminary students interviewed expressed desire to increase online offerings at their churches but also expressed several concerns.<sup>35</sup> In meeting the challenges of the digital world, the students suggested that churches will need to address infrastructure, and training. Based on the studies previously described, churches will need to pay much closer attention to tools used for certain demographics. Challenges to make content accessible to all was not addressed in any of the studies and is an important issue for the church to address in the digital environment. In this section, challenges to the digital environment and best practices will be discussed. Finally, a case study of a three-class course reflecting on the pandemic will be used to demonstrate the use of asynchronous tools for Christian formation.

## **Challenges/Best Practices**

### **Hardware investment**

For success in the digital space, the church needs good equipment and technologically savvy individuals to run the equipment. With the pandemic most churches used the equipment they had at hand. Like many churches, church C relied on the pastor’s laptop and personal equipment.<sup>36</sup> For many that meant live streaming using an iPhone. With the new construction of the sanctuary, church C will invest in new equipment that will allow them to improve their

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<sup>33</sup> Interview 3/23/2022

<sup>34</sup> Barna group, *Six questions about the future of the church*, 2020 ISBN: 978-1-945269-81-3 pg. 38

<sup>35</sup> Interviews 3/22/2022 and 3/23/2022

<sup>36</sup> Interview 3/22/2022

digital delivery and to attract younger members. As one interviewee said, “if we are going to do this, we must do it well”<sup>37</sup> and that includes investment in proper equipment.

## **Training**

Most pastors or even laity were not trained in how to produce a live-stream worship service in any platform much less be an expert in production. People used what they knew, not what technology or platform was best for the job. While many churches have a person or a team to help them live stream worship services, any other online forum such as prayer, classes, other formation is dependent on the skill of the person offering the event<sup>38</sup>. Most pastors and laity do not have the time to find training online for a new tool, and thus may be missing out on optimal options. While UDTs did offer a course in digital formation, it was undersubscribed. Students need to be aware of the importance of training to meet the new challengers. It is imperative that training in the use of online tools is added to the curriculum and required so that new pastors have all the tools they need to be successful. There are many online tools and resources that churches have not accessed, particularly those used in educational settings, which might be of value. Most pastors and church staff don't know they exist.

## **Importance of Target Audience**

Using the right tool for the right demographic is key for success in the online environment. As seen above in the context section, there is a significant difference in tools used by different age groups. Identifying and using the right tool for the right demographic and application can significantly impact the reception of the programming. From the interviews and personal experience, most churches use email, Zoom, Facebook and perhaps YouTube but are

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<sup>37</sup> Interview 3/23/2022

<sup>38</sup> Interviews 3/22/2022



less likely to use other tools<sup>39</sup>. The most popular social media/content tools, as National data confirms, are Facebook and YouTube but there are demographic differences. These tools tend to skew toward an older age range and are used far less frequently by younger age groups. Gen Z for example is less likely to use Facebook, but more likely to use social media platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat or Instagram. Understanding which tool is best for each application takes training and time but the investment would enhance a church's online presence.

### **Accessibility**

One of the strengths of the digital world is the ability to access programming from anywhere. No longer are shut-ins or their caretakers, or the vacationers or "snow-birds" (people that live in colder regions in the summer and in the south during the winter)<sup>40</sup> left out of participation in the congregation. The area that was not mentioned in any survey was accessibility for those with disabilities. Those who are deaf can take advantage of voice to text translators, and those who are visually impaired can take advantage of software that reads pictures to them. However, best use of this software requires training. It is important that all of God's children can access to worship and formation activities.

### **Case Study: New digital methods for post-pandemic Christian formation classes**

The use of asynchronous tools for Christian formation has not been embraced by most churches. In this section of the paper, I will introduce a three-week class reflecting on the pandemic, to be offered using asynchronous methods of formation and tools that are easy to use,

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<sup>39</sup> Interviews 3.22.2022 and 3/23/2022

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*

but not necessarily in the pastor's or others toolbox. Each week a different tool will be used to deliver content and foster discussion as a model for future use.

### **Reflecting on the Pandemic: Wisdom from the Old Testament and Creating Community**

Course Description: In this three-week course, we will reflect on three areas of faith that were impacted by the pandemic; finitude, prayer and presence. We'll start with finitude, by exploring what Qohelet has to say about the subject of finitude and joy in Ecclesiastes. For prayer, we'll travel to the time of Solomon and examine the prayer in 1 Kings to discuss the role of prayer in disasters. Finally, during a time when we couldn't gather in person, we'll discuss the importance of presence, or the gathering of the body of Christ and how that may have changed our view of community. Each week there will be a video introduction/description of the topic, a link to some reading and then an opportunity to discuss in an online format.

#### Learning Objectives

- Be able to discuss Biblical references that inform our reflection
- Reflect on what the pandemic means to us

#### **Week 1 Finitude and Joy | Brent Strawn: *Ecclesiastes has some things to say about COVID-19***

Introduction: Almost everyone is familiar with the Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8, the scripture that Pete Seeger made famous, by singing "To everything, Turn, Turn, Turn There is a season Turn, Turn, Turn" etc. This passage is read at weddings at funerals and services in between. But Strawn points out that seldom are the next verses read. They are:

What do workers gain from their toil? <sup>10</sup> I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.

<sup>11</sup> He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet<sup>[a]</sup>

no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

The author of Ecclesiastes isn't done being negative. In vs 19 he says "everything is meaningless! Strawn<sup>41</sup> says that Qohelet, the author of Ecclesiastes is crabby. So how can a book by a crabby guy written around 500 BCE help us reflect on the pandemic and our crisis?

Qohelet is fond of the word *hevel* which can be translated from the Hebrew as breath or puff of air<sup>42</sup>. We are in the midst of a pandemic that steals breath away from the virus's victims. For him all things are as fleeting as breath. For Qohelet the most frustrating part of life is its finitude. A perfect example of his frustration in Ecclesiastes 9:11-12

<sup>11</sup> I have seen something else under the sun:

The race is not to the swift  
or the battle to the strong,  
nor does food come to the wise  
or wealth to the brilliant  
or favor to the learned;  
but time and chance happen to them all.

<sup>12</sup> Moreover, no one knows when their hour will come:

As fish are caught in a cruel net,  
or birds are taken in a snare,  
so people are trapped by evil times  
that fall unexpectedly upon them.

Qohelet is not a happy camper and as victims of virus that we didn't know was coming we can appreciate his feelings that "time and chance happen to them all".

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<sup>41</sup> Strawn, Brent. *Ecclesiastes has something to say about COVID-19*. Christian Century Jan 5, 2021

<sup>42</sup> Schlimm, Matthew Lectures in the Old Testament Fall semester 2020, UDTS

Given this rather depressing state of affairs, does Qohelet give us any hope? The answer is yes! Strawn put it this way “But there is something else, something more Qoheleth wants us to know about this finitude that marks human [life].... It is simply this: there is something precious and extraordinarily beautiful about these temporary glories”.<sup>43</sup> In seven places Qohelet commends us to joy. For example, vs 8:15 “So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun”. In spite of the finitude of life, in spite of the crisis there is reason for joy.

According to Qohelet, we should accept the finitude of life, and sometimes the crisis we cannot change (can we stop breathing?) but find joy in the moment. During the pandemic all of experienced times of joy. For me it was not driving all the time and the chance to enjoy the beauty of each day. For others it was more time with family. We’ll discuss during our discussion time.

Reading:

Ecclesiastes 3 – the whole chapter, Commended to Joy verses: (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:7–10; see also 7:14)

Discussion questions:

- Do you agree with Qohelet’s view that time and chance happen to all? How does that relate to the pandemic? Did life feel like hevel?

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<sup>43</sup> Strawn, Brent. *Ecclesiastes has something to say about COVID-19*. Christian Century Jan 5, 2021

- Qohelet tells us to enjoy life, the simple things even in the midst of crisis? What were the things that you did during the pandemic that brought joy? Are there any things you did that you will bring forward as we get out of the pandemic?

Proof of Concept: Voice Thread

For Week one, the online tool, Voice Thread will be highlighted (<https://voicethread.com/>). It is an asynchronous tool used primarily by educators for presentation of material and discussion. Presentations can be video or powerpoint, can be narrated either audio alone or with video and then participants can respond either using audio, video or written options. Example of Voice Thread for this week found here:

<https://voicethread.com/share/19944268/>

**Week 2 Prayer in the time of a pandemic** –Walter Brueggemann *Virus as a Summons to Faith*  
Chapter 4

As the pandemic hit and churches were closed, people were on their own to seek spiritual growth from prayer. Some returned to the spiritual practice of prayer, others increased their prayers, and for most the prayer was mostly, “please make this virus go away”. This situation is no different than that faced by our forebearers for millennia.

One of the seminal prayers in the Old Testament is offered by King Solomon at the dedication of the temple (1Kgs 8:23 – 53). After the usual petition there are “seven cases of urgent need”<sup>44</sup> with plague, blight and mildew as the fourth. It is clear that plague is a recurring concern for God’s people. In this passage, Brueggemann asserts that “It is affirmed that prayer is

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<sup>44</sup>Brueggemann, Walter, and Nahum Ward-Lev. *Virus As a Summons to Faith : Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020. Pg. 36

the effective antidote for every form of disaster”<sup>45</sup>. But that affirmation should not be an expectation that God will change the situation but only that covenantal people should voice their concerns and trust in God.

Brueggemann suggests that in Israel some “had a simple-minded notion of prayer as an act of magic whereby the right utterance would deliver the right outcome.”<sup>46</sup> This text could be read as a transactional prayer. For many of us, during the pandemic, our prayers were a bit of magical thinking. “If we just prayed hard enough, or often enough, God would magically cure the pandemic,” we might think.

A more sophisticated reading of the texts suggests they are about “faithfulness in uttering the prayer, and readiness to trust that it will be heard.”<sup>47</sup> For those in the ancient world that were surrounded by difficulties (war, pestilence, famine), the main goal of the petition was not the magic of fixing the situation but reestablishing a relationship with God. While the people of Israel could have hope for a better situation, their first response, and responsibility was to their covenantal life with God.<sup>48</sup>

How can a prayer written by King Solomon for an ancient people help in our time of struggle? The first is to remember that prayer is not transactional. If I behave in a certain way, I’ll be rewarded, or God will punish people if I ask God. Brueggemann puts it this way, “these texts decisively change the subject from disaster to the rule of YHWH. Such a changed subject revises how we live in the neighborhood when it comes under threat”.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid pg. 37

<sup>46</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, and Nahum Ward-Lev. *Virus As a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020. pg. 41

<sup>47</sup> Ibid pg. 42

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. pg. 43

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, pg. 43

Reading:

Chap 4 Brueggemann, 1 Kings 8: 23-53

Questions:

- Do you agree with Brueggemann that prayer is really about reestablishing that relationship with God and not about our daily needs? Why or why not?
- How does Brueggemann's ideas change the way you think about prayer? How might it help during times of crisis?

Proof of Concept: This week, an introductory YouTube video will be produced and embedded into Facebook private group where the discussion can take place. Web link:

<https://youtu.be/nT4m2DLRP20>

**Week 3 Presence in the Digital World** : Goatly, David E., *The 'tie that binds': Fellowship is disrupted and distanced but not destroyed*, April 22, 2020 Baptist News Global

Mid-March 2020 brought an almost complete shut-down of all activities where two or three may be gathered in-person. For Christians who are rooted in fellowship, in the communal Body of Christ, this was an abrupt change. Two years later we have adapted to online, and hybrid modes of gathering, but what has that meant for fellowship, for practicing the ministry of presence? Early in the pandemic Rev. Goatly addressed the issue. Reminding us of the old hymn "Blessed be the ties that bind, our hearts in Christian love" he considers how fellowship changed during this pandemic. COVID forced us to change our habits, visitation by the pastors or others was too dangerous, even touching another person was considered too dangerous and yet, the importance of human interaction, a high-five, a handshake, a hug are all physical ways that we

express Christian love and are important to community. Social distancing became the norm, and still is for many, as now another variant is circulating.

Seeing each other in person became impossible, how did we adapt and how did that change the fellowship? Goatly says that being the Body of Christ at a distance is not new as he quotes the apostle Paul in his letter to the church of Rome “For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Romans 1:11-12, NRSV).<sup>50</sup> The apostle Paul reached out to the church of Rome by letter.

Reading – Romans 1

Goatly, David E., *The ‘tie that binds’: fellowship is disrupted and distanced but not destroyed*, April 22, 2020 Baptist News Global

Questions:

- Churches adapted and adopted different strategies during the pandemic to be church. As we consider moving forward from the pandemic, when did you feel most that you were most connected as the body of Christ and when did you feel least connected? What tools are strategies worked? Should the church continue to be virtual and together? We will discuss in the forum.

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<sup>50</sup> Goatly, David E., *The ‘tie that binds’: Fellowship is disrupted and distanced but not destroyed*, April 22, 2020 Baptist News Global <https://baptistnews.com/article/the-tie-that-binds-fellowship-is-disrupted-and-distanced-but-not-destroyed/#.Yhv6hJZOk2x>



Proof of Concept: This week there will be a podcast (at the suggestion of an interviewee<sup>51</sup>). The interviewee suggested that many people listen to podcasts in their cars. The discussion can take place in a GroupMe chat. All participants in the chat would have to sign up for the group, but it fairly easy to access on one's phone. Weblink for podcast:

<https://kobommaldarelli.podbean.com/e/presence-in-the-digital-world/>

### **Conclusion:**

In March of 2020, churches shut their doors and pivoted to a new way of worshiping and carrying out other Christian formation activities. Most churches focused all of their resources on providing worship online but for some it was possible to engage in formation activities such as prayer, Bible study and religious education classes beyond worship. In the effort to move quickly into the digital environment, the needs and tools used by younger demographic groups were missed. During this time, progress was made in learning how to build community online. For most churches addressing the issue of celebrating the Lord's Supper in the digital world had churches and denominations revisiting long held views about online communion and how in the new digital world, sacrament could be celebrated. As the world learns to live the virus, the church has opportunities to build on the foundations of digital worship, and new theology and to expand its Christian formation digital footprint. Building on the foundation, churches should invest in digital infrastructure and training for pastors and others who engage in any type of Christian formation. Moving forward in the digital environment, all involved in Christian formation should take into account the online tools most likely used for their particular age demographic and making their online activities accessible for all. Finally, there are many other

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<sup>51</sup> Interview 3/23/2022

tools available to all involved in Christian formation that can make for vibrant and fulfilling formation activities for all parishioners.

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