

Online vs On-Site: Navigating the Tension Between Curating Content and Cultivating
Connections for Children in the Post-Pandemic Church

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Abstract

The common Christian cliché “church is not a place, but rather a people” was challenged by the Coronavirus pandemic of early 2020. With the traditional means of assembling in physical spaces unavailable, congregations worldwide resigned themselves to adapting their in-person programs into internet assemblies. As churches step into the post-pandemic era, it is important to consider the implications of this forced shift, especially as it relates to children’s ministry. A consideration of traditional messages and trending methods is necessary. Twenty-first century children’s ministries must seek a healthy balance between curating content and cultivating connections for the children in their churches.

The Trigger: The COVID-19 Pandemic and The Twenty-First Century Church

It is without a doubt that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic served as a catalyst in propelling an already technology-driven society into further reliance on internet systems as a source for professional employment, educational achievement, social engagement, and even religious expression. Due to COVID-19 gathering guidelines meant to stop or slow the spread of the virus, church communities worldwide resigned to quickly redesign their in-person assemblies to be accessed via the internet. Church leaders and researchers Oh and Hong (2021) recount that “churches that had offered live streaming services prior to COVID-19 utilized their existing information technology infrastructures and resources” to provide these online gatherings; “however, some churches struggled to transition into online services due to the lack of equipment, infrastructure, and personnel” (p. 474). In addition to these technical competency issues, local church leaders and members alike grappled with the ecclesiological implications of the quickly forced shift from on-site to online meeting.

While these individuals would be among the first to affirm that church is more a people than it is a place, their pushback to local stay at home policies prompted by the pandemic bring to question this cliché understanding of the local church’s identity. In considering how people perceive the church, theologian Hans Kung (1968) pens that “every age has its own image of the church, arising out of a particular historical situation” (p. 4). While a range of notable historical events have taken place within the first few decades of the twenty-first century, the Coronavirus pandemic stands out as the instance that will undoubtedly mark this age’s impression of the church. The external events of history are bound to have a natural effect on the way individuals perceive the institutions around them. Regardless of this reality, pastor Andy Stanley (2012) reminds Jesus followers that ultimately, they “are the stewards of the church for [their]

generation” (p. 54). This statement invokes a sense of responsibility as Stanley asserts that it is up to Christians today to “determine what comes to mind for the next generation when they hear the term church.” (p. 54). Kung affirms this call to action as he concludes that “in every age a particular view of the church is expressed by the church in practice and given conceptual form by the theologians of the age” (p. 4). In seeking to understand the development of ecclesiology in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, people should simply look to what the church is doing and what its leaders are saying.

“I just didn’t sign up for online ministry” (Barna, 2021, para. 2). The honest heartbeat of renowned pastor Jon Tyson sheds light on the staggering statistics regarding church leadership through the Coronavirus pandemic. One study of U.S. pastors found that thirty-eight percent of these leaders considered quitting full-time ministry in 2021 (Barna). In an interview with researchers Carey Nieuwhof and David Kinnaman, Tyson goes on to share that he and the Christian leaders around him seem to lack the “theological and philosophical framework” to minister effectively through digital means and methods. This is not to say that digital discipleship is an impossibility, rather that the abruptness and abnormality of the pandemic revealed a gap between the predictable programmatic assembly of local bodies and the capacity to replicate these gatherings online. Thus, Tyson’s claim that pastors have been rapidly “forced into positions where they either have theological reservation or a lack of practical skill” (2021, para. 3). The term unprecedented, which became a cultural cliché during the Coronavirus pandemic, explains the space many pastors like Tyson felt they were leading their churches through in 2020.

Some Christian leaders, on the other hand, found themselves in territory that their churches had already begun exploring prior to the pandemic. A trend of online gatherings,

livestreamed services, and hybrid church models emerged with the rise of the internet. For instance, Judah and Chelsea Smith's Churchhome movement has been reimagining "spaces for face-to-face connections" as not to be "limited by borders, buildings, or parking lots" since 2009 (Churchhome, para. 1). In contrast to the hesitant expressions of some church leaders, pastor Judah Smith responded optimistically when asked about churches adapting to the social distancing guidelines necessitated by COVID-19. "I think we have an opportunity, actually, to engage at a deeper level," Smith confidently told Fox News. "We're finding that actually being home, engaging face to face is going to lead us to an interesting place in faith and I think will change how we worship going forward" (Parke, 2020, para. 3). The polarization between Smith's comments here and the previously considered Jon Tyson reply reveals the range of responses that church leaders fell among as they sought to preserve, refine, and revitalize the identity of the local church amid a global crisis.

No matter which response they instinctively lean towards, when pondering the proposition of digital church services, many individuals fail to consider the elements of church gathering that aren't seen on stage. While many congregations may have begun to implement the trending concept of internet live streams prior to the pandemic, few churches had online structures representing all their ministry programs in place. Among such previously neglected experiences were children's ministries. In late July of 2020, Barna researchers "asked U.S. Protestant pastors to list the biggest challenges they [were] currently facing" (Barna Group, 2020, para. 1) The survey showed that, around half of pastors (47%) agreed that their ministry to the next generation was the largest challenge to their church amid the pandemic (Barna Group, 2020). Further post-pandemic research affirms these assertions, concluding that "as children's ministry leaders quickly pivoted to try and provide online discipleship and ministry

opportunities, the pandemic exposed how reliant families are on the church for a child's faith formation" (Larson, 2020, p. 443). The challenges caused by COVID-19 within the context of children's ministry lay the foundation on which a changing church will reach and disciple the next generation.

Some obstacles caused by the Coronavirus require more creative innovation to overcome than others. Within the context of the local church, adapting next generation ministries fell among such complications. In their *Reflections on Ministry amongst Children during the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Holmes, Sandsmark, and Weber (2021) conclude that the "challenge is that children's ministry programmers seek to enable a religious experience, rather than simply knowledge transfer" (para. 17). While sermons can be communicated via video and worship songs can be played online, much of a kid's experience in ministry programming involves aspects that are less digitally replicable. From discipleship relationships with leaders to meaningful connections with peers, this experiential element is of essence. Reggie Joiner (2014) is the Founder and CEO of Orange, a nonprofit company devoted to coming alongside the church to "influence those who influence the next generation" (p. 18). He explains the role of relationships as integral to the way churches "invest strategically" to "build an authentic faith" within the next generation (p. 19). With the in person local church experience being so valuable to the faith of kids, it seems an impossibility to create meaningful religious experiences for children online.

Yet, in the year 2020 these internet experiences were necessitated. In the years to come, they will be as well. In his recent report *Digital Church in a Lonely World*, Benjamin Windle (2022) contends that if church leaders resist digital means they will "continue to lose [the] two youngest generations (and the next generation of church leadership)" (para. 2). The researcher suggests that instead these individuals "first map out biblical convictions and clearly define

biblical community, and then innovate radically with digital tools to support that” (Windle, 2022, para. 5). This approach invokes a synthesis of both the traditional theological understanding of the local church’s identity and the trending pattern of digital innovation as an asset to all arenas of life. Rob Hoskins, the president of the global youth organization One Hope, asseverates that “even though the world and technology will continue to change, the biblical mandate to shepherd children will not.” (para. 2). Hoskins (2020) calls Jesus followers to “recommit” to “using whatever means necessary to develop spiritual formation and faith development tools to feed kids from the richness of God’s Word” (para. 2). Andy Stanley (2013) echoes this “whatever means necessary” language as he maintains that “the church needs leaders who are willing to do whatever is necessary to ensure that [they] hand it off to the next generation in better shape than [they] found it” (p. 54). These statements should inspire the way in which the kid’s ministry leaders of the post-pandemic church approach the uncharted space ahead of them. The weight of these approaches is palpable, as these current decisions will affect not only the faith of generations to come but also the identity of the Church these young people step into and ultimately end up leading.

In the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, it is essential to understand that effective ministry to the kids of an ever-changing world and church will require what Benjamin Windle (2022) understands to be a synthesis of in person community and bold digital innovation. No extreme implementation of either traditional means or trending methods will work. Church leaders and members alike must wrestle with the questions forced onto them by the Coronavirus pandemic as they seek to keep the next generation involved in the purposes of the local church. What is it about physical gathering that positively impacts a child’s faith? Can this model be mimicked online? Or, will the replacement of church attendance with content consumption

hinder the faith of the next generation? In the post-pandemic world, what should children's ministry leaders do differently? How can these church leaders best cater their programming to the children and families of the twenty-first century church? Is connecting the next generation to the local church essential? If so, how can those using trending methods draw children and families in to experience traditional church community? Likewise, how can those using traditional means harness the trend of technology to better reach the next generation?

The Tradition: On-Site Church Campus Communities

In understanding how the tradition of church communities gathering on campuses for fellowship, worship, and teaching developed, it is necessary to consider the historical patterns that led to this precedent. Before exploring the assembly structures that emerged throughout the history of the Church, one should first look to the examples of early gathering recorded in Scripture. Two commonly referenced passages on this topic of church gathering include Acts 2:42-47 and Hebrews 10:23-25. This first passage has long shed light on the identity and purpose of the Church. In describing the habits of early Christ followers, Luke records that:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47, *English Standard Version*).

Considering this passage within the context of physical church community, verse forty-six's clear description that "every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts" is highlighted. In his commentary on Acts, pastor and theologian Matthew Henry draws that "we often speak of the primitive church, and appeal to it, and to the history of it; in these verses we have the history of the truly primitive church, of the first days of it, its state of infancy indeed, but, like that, the state of its greatest innocence" (p. 18r). Henry goes on to list that these early followers of Jesus "not only had a mutual affection to each other, but a great deal of mutual conversation with each other; were much together; were diligent and constant in their attendance; and did not turn hermits, but were very intimate with one another, and took all occasions to meet" (p. 18r). This depiction emphasizes a diligence and commitment to the local body. Consistent fellowship with one another appears to be a defining characteristic of early church communities.

In the study of the Scriptures, a pattern of physical gathering for the early church is evident. This consistency set the precedent that the people of God in the proceeding days looked to as they developed church meeting methods. In charging the church concerning the matter, the writer of Hebrews proclaims:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:23-25, *English Standard Version*)

The exhortation here is cited often by those advocating in person gathering, especially in days affected by global crisis. While a plain reading of the text seems to indicate its implications for

such situations, contextual considerations reveal that “the following context and the verb used here identify a deliberate ‘abandoning, leaving the assembly exposed to peril in the conflict’” (Peterson, 2020, p. 243). The writer of Hebrews seems to speak here of falling away from the faith more than of those choosing not to gather. This consideration is not to negate the advocacy this and other passages have for on-site assembly, but rather to aid in understanding the historical context in which it was written. While it might not specifically or prescriptively speak to the argument for in person ministry programs, the Bible descriptively paints a picture of an early church that consistently assembled in local bodies.

The question, then, is not if church meeting is mandatory, but rather if the type of assembly detailed in Scripture is necessitated for Christian communities today. The Biblical framework points to some place of gathering; yet it is possible that this place could mean more than merely church building. Kara Powell’s *Growing Young* (2016) quotes a parent from a set-up tear down church congregation as asserting that “the church doesn’t just put resources into a building but into people.” The parent went on to express that his or her family had “been to churches with better facilities, but [had] never been in a healthier environment” (p. 218). This testimony brings light to the idea that perhaps the Church is not so much the place of gathering, but rather the environment created by the people within the assembly. A recent study seeking to identify if “Church building’s still matter” examined the interactions of U.S. adults with “transcendent spaces.” The group defines these spaces as “a physical place that brings you closer to experiencing connection with something beyond the physical world” (Barna, 2022). The survey results indicated that over half (62%) of the surveyed adults and over three quarters (89%) of practicing Christians indicated church buildings to be transcendent spaces where they felt “peaceful, safe, welcomed, and connected to God.” This research reveals a psychological

connection to physical spaces that has direct implications when it comes to spirituality, the local church, and connecting people with God.

It is no secret that children need a consistent environment in order to thrive. Even more so than these surveyed adults, kids find comfort in consistency both in the individuals and the places they encounter. In discussing the impacts of the Coronavirus on students, Sarah Holmes recalls that “pandemic-related school closures are thought to have affected the education of 80% of children worldwide” (2021, para. 7). This research emphasizes the repercussions that come from a lack of consistency in children’s lives. The traditional church model provides supportive structures for kids by offering environments in which they can connect with their peers, leaders, and God. In “an exploratory qualitative content analysis of interview transcripts from 20 children between the age of 6 and 13,” Crosby, Smith, and Fredrick (2015) “investigated the ways in which children experience social support at church” finding that “children were much more likely to name a children’s ministry worker than they were to name a friend of their parents or a family friend as someone with whom they share their feelings” (p. 98). These results affirm author and Orange CEO Reggie Joiner’s claim that “if you want to get serious about influencing the hearts of this generation, you have to think about creating an actual, visible, consistent place where [kids] know they belong” (2019, pp. 19-20). The environment in which children experience Christ is integral to their understanding of Him and His body: the local church.

A proper understanding of and connection to their local body has tremendous implications when it comes to the long-term faith of kids. In attempting to identify the lasting impacts of Sunday morning experiences on the spirituality of children, Minor (2012) “found a positive relationship between children’s spiritual well-being and the length of time since ending participation in Sunday school” (para. 9). This is not to say that kids’ faith was not fostered in

these weekly programs, but rather to recognize the lasting implications consistent community has on the faith of an individual. Minor (2012) went on to suggest “that participation in Sunday school as a child mitigates repression of spirituality which typically occurs in adolescence and therefore positive results won’t surface until later” (para. 9). It is important to note that these recorded results are not immediate, but rather that the compounding consistency of church attendance reveals itself as impactful in perpetual growth that has a permanent impact.

Further studies go deeper to reveal that beyond just attendance of children’s ministry programming, personal connections within these programs are what fosters a faith that sticks in the next generation. In exploring children’s relationships within their local church, Ingersoll (2019) found that “perceived relatedness in church was a significant predictor of children’s relationship with God” (para. 14). These findings were consistent with similar “research on the value of relationships in church for children’s religiosity and spirituality” (Crosby, Smith, & Frederick, 2015, para 1.). In their work entitled “The Kid Friendly Church” these three researchers looked into what makes kids feel connected to church communities, exploring the “value of relationships for helping individuals make meaning from religious experiences” (2015, para. 6). Christianity is a religion based on relationship, as Christ followers seek first a relationship with Him and then to develop connections with those around them. Countless studies emphasize the proven benefits of “receiving love and support from non-family adults and peers at church.” These networks “allow children to better identify the connection between church and a loving God who cares for them, supporting their felt and lived relationship with God” (Ingersoll, 2019, para. 9). From consistent weekly gatherings, the in-person church tradition provides supportive structures in which the next generation can connect with God and others.

How are children's ministry leaders to respond, then, when these structures are scattered by unavoidable circumstances? The global reactions of church leaders evicted by the Coronavirus pandemic reveal an effort to preserve the consistency and community typically offered within their local bodies. Church leadership worldwide sought to protect what they knew to be essential to Spirituality for their congregants amid a crisis that seemed to threaten these faith foundations. These responses also signified a shift in the history of the church. The pre virtual era, beginning with the Biblically discussed assemblies, marked most of church history to this point. Yet, early virtual gatherings began to emerge with the rise of the internet before the pandemic necessitated the widespread totally virtual means of assembly. As this shift initially started, many church bodies simply ignored the trending virtual methods. However, when COVID-19 forced the shift out of traditional spaces to totally virtual assemblies, the reactions of children's ministry leaders reveal how these individuals will continue to shape the narrative surrounding the traditions and trends of the local church.

Churches are typically instinctively resistant to change. While this natural wiring may help preserve religious traditions, it causes issues as it relates to ministry to the next generation. A study in which church leaders were surveyed on congregations' greatest challenges in reaching young people shows "their own congregation" as largest impeding factor (37%). The study listed multiple factors affecting this mindset, including "generation gap, inconsistent or nonexistent volunteers, lack of effective church strategy, lack of material resources, and lack of willingness to change" (Powell, 2016, p. 152). This pattern of response helps explain the draw to tradition seen in spirituality today. Yet, recent events leave questions about traditions and trends resonating. How will church leaders navigate new methods when these trends move beyond naturally arising to being necessitated by external circumstances? Interpersonal relationships

appear as integral in fostering a genuine faith in the lives of the next generation. The framework cultivating these connections has traditionally been found within the context of church buildings. As history progresses, it is important to retain the truth backing these traditional methods and their impact on the identity of the local church.

The Trend: Online Church Content Consumption

Almost an entire decade before the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the mainstream production of online church content, movements including Judah and Chelsea Smith's ChurchHome and Craig Groeschel's Life Church Online Platform paved the way for the trend of online church media consumption. As 2020 approached, many churches worldwide were already exploring the idea of broadcasting their services online not only for their own congregations, but also as an outreach strategy to connect outsiders to the local church and its message of hope. The restrictions of the pandemic propelled this trend to a new level as on-site church attendance was completely supplemented with online church content consumption. While some livestream methods already existed prior to this forced shift, almost no churches had internet experiences representing all their ministry programs in place. As the world and church steps into the days following the pandemic, it is essential to ask if the total substitution of on-site communities with online ones is sustainable? In *The Digital Invasion*, Dr. Archibald Hart (2013) concludes that "God has created us for authentic connection and meaningful attachments – the kind of connection that has the power to secure, grow, free, and transform us" (para. 9). In the midst of a twenty first century culture, Dr. Hart raises the question: "can all the connecting done through [the] digital world provide us with the lasting connections we need to be secure?" (p. 92). The validity of Hart's question rings directly applicable to the ministry programs of the local church. As churches attempt to use content creation methods to extend the reach of their ministries, it is

important to consider if these online trends can truly cultivate the same connectivity that on-site church assemblies produce.

While it is less explicit than the passages promoting the traditional means of meeting together, a Biblical basis for gathering while scattered also exists. Just as examining the Scriptural support for traditional on-site means laid the groundwork in considering that argument, before jumping into the plethora of information pertaining to trending livestream concepts, it is important to consider the Biblical background that serves as a framework for the scattered assembly of the local church. The story of the early church recorded in Acts takes a dramatic shift as the first martyr, Stephen, is stoned. Luke records that:

There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city. (Acts 8:1-8, *English Standard Version*)

The following few chapters of Acts are compiled of Luke's detailed depictions of members of the early church performing similar actions to Phillip's seen in this passage. Despite the abrupt scattering forced upon them by persecution, the early church leaders managed to carry out the same ministry activities that characterized the church while gathered.

The continued ministry activities and effectiveness displayed by the early church in Acts provides a powerful precedent for church community amid abrupt change. This emphasis is repeated in the epistle of 1 Peter as Peter writes “to those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1, *English Standard Version*). This group is experiencing a similar situation to the apostles described earlier by Luke. In encouraging these scattered believers, Peter consistently points to Christ as the centering point for their identity. In exhorting a body whose stability had been shaken, he writes that they once “were straying like sheep but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of [their] souls” (1 Peter 2:25, *English Standard Version*). The unity that comes from knowing and following the good Shepherd provides a collective identity for the scattered congregation. Peter’s pointing to hope in a secure identity continues as he asserts that “after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (1 Peter 5:10, *English Standard Version*). This promise of restoration, establishment, and “the image of being founded” seen here is discussed by Craig Keener (2021) in his commentary as being “relevant to the image of the church as a building” (p. 98). The imagery surrounding physical places used to describe the body of Christ suggests the possibility that these spaces could span beyond what is typically assumed of characteristic church gathering.

What if places of gathering were more metaphorical than physical? Emerging technological innovations make this question more than just a philosophical inquiry, as the increasing internet interconnectivity across a variety of platforms becomes a prevalent reality. In a study entitled “The Reconfiguration of Social, Digital, and Physical Presence,” researchers considered the nuanced shift “from online church to church online” (Cooper, 2021, para. 8). This

slight swapping of word order indicates the difference between simply broadcasting already on-site services and strategically gathering in online spaces. Cooper and his colleagues contribute that “one can consider place as a subjectively expressed space, with a meaning” (p. 6). This definition of places as metaphorical lends itself to supporting structures for church gathering that span beyond the material and geographical locations. When paired with the early church’s precedent of unity while scattered, the paradigm presented by Cooper here helps conceptualize the trend of online Church gathering that emerged with the internet.

It is without a doubt that today’s technology drives, influences, and holds an integral role in virtually everybody’s everyday life. In her *Networked Theology*, Heidi Campbell (2013) draws conclusions about what it looks like for church leaders to navigate faith in this digital culture. The author details the history of digital church trends, recording that “beginning in the early 1980s, religious computer enthusiasts brought their faith online in newsgroups and formed online communities, such as the net:” a “religion group formed circa 1984, via email and Usenet” (p. 58). The pattern of online gathering only increased as internet accessibility and usability grew worldwide. Amid this exponential evolution came the Coronavirus and with the pandemic much change. However, in the midst of all this change, “the need to provide spiritual care remained” (Holmes, 2021, para. 7). Because of the physical limitations caused by COVID-19, places of gathering worldwide were quick to turn to the trending technological structures that had emerged over the course of the past few decades. Digital means became the way in which the Church stayed connected throughout the pandemic. In the midst of these days, theologian and the director of Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community, Deanna Thompson writes that “if we take seriously that our bodies are involved and engaged in worship streamed through our computers, [she] think it’s possible to affirm that we are “assembled” in an embodied way”

(Edington, p. 37). Many take Thompson's side, agreeing that the assembly of the Body of Christ can span beyond material spaces. As church leaders move forward into this trending territory, it is important to handle this shift healthily.

Leading in uncharted territory requires not only the competency and capacity to preserve the current purpose, vision, and identity, but also the foresight to maintain these in the future. As Church leaders shepherded their congregations through the Coronavirus, this principle rang true. In the years to come, some leaders' intentional anticipation of the pandemic's future effects on the identity of the local church will become increasingly evident. Among such visionaries are those who work at the Trytank Experimental Lab, where Reverend Lorenzo Lebrija avows his team is "focused on seeking out where the Holy Spirit might be leading God's people" (Edington, 2020, p. 13). Lebrija goes on to explain that "this means that [they] are generally looking at the current context to try to discern where the trends point, and where the church's role is in that future" (p. 13). In considering the events of recent years, these church researchers "believe there are three emergent trends that are likely to endure beyond the pandemic and shape the post-pandemic world." (p. 13). These three trends include digital church, digital giving, and younger people. If the third of these trend predictions rings true, then the implications of properly discipling "younger people," the next generation, are more pressing than ever. It is essential that post-pandemic churches have structures in place to foster the faith of the next generation.

The key to kid's ministry programs has always been out of family discipleship relationships in which kids are encouraged to grow in their knowledge of and relationship with God. As history has progressed, the shifts in Children's ministry departments have mimicked those in the church as a whole. In researching the trends in kid's ministry over the past forty

years, Mimi Larson (2020) wonders if recent ministry “methods—those of direct instruction focused on content, or the intentional positive experiences designed for a child’s enjoyment, or a journey approach to discipleship—aid or hinder the faith of the younger generations?” (p. 441). It is important to take Larson’s comments into consideration in creating digital frameworks for discipleship to take place. While worldwide thinkers affirm that more than ever, the church is “now more attractive to [the next generation] because it became available on their own schedule and in a format with which they are very accustomed,” it is essential to recognize that the digital discipleship structures that emphasize connection over content will be the ones that work well (Edington, 2020, p. 14). In seeking to navigate the tension that comes with leading the children of the post-pandemic church, Christ followers will have to employ a synthesis of traditional principals and trending methods.

The Tension: How Can Churches Create a Healthy Balance for their Children?

The online vs on-site church ministry debate will not be solved by a definitive defense of either position, but rather by an integrative approach to both curating internet content and cultivating interpersonal connections for children. Scriptural support for church fellowship both while physically gathered and geographically scattered exists. The emphasis of these passages is the cooperate unity Christ followers have in Him. Relationship, both with Jesus and his local body, is integral in the Christian life. This emphasis on consistent collective community is especially important when of comes to the faith of the children of the next generation. In recent research that seeks the balance between online and on-site ministry methods as it relates to kid’s ministry, Holmes (2021) notes that “it is widely accepted that relationships are of key importance in a child’s learning experience,” going on to propose that “connection and collaboration with others are therefore fundamental ingredients of learning, even when learning is online” (p.175).

Holmes' assertions promote the position of capitalizing on community for children using whatever means necessary. As Cooper (2021) affirms, "interactions are at the heart of the experience, whether in person (in a physical space) or online (in a digital space)" (para. 2). Digital spaces can be recognized as merely another means to inspire interactions. When unprecedented situations arise, the commitment to Church community can serve as the guide for navigating new spaces in a way that preserves ecclesiological identity.

The Coronavirus pandemic was undoubtedly unexpected. As this unique era fades from reality into history, the irreversible impact COVID-19 had on the world, its people, and its organizations will remain. For this reason, in his collection *We Shall Be Changed*, Mark Edington (2020) ascertains that "while many may wish to return to the way things were before the crisis, that is a wish to live in the past." The author goes on to draw that "how we embrace the present determines whether the church continues its demise... or if she enters into what can be an unanticipated renaissance, arising out of the pandemical ashes." (p. 3). The hopeful picture Edington paints here highlights the possibility for a fresh narrative to describe the local Church in the coming years. In considering the post-pandemic Church, it is important to note that this institution's security and stability are never threatened by earthly affairs. In establishing his body, Jesus proclaims: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18, *English Standard Version*). This declaration accentuates Jesus' ownership of and sovereignty over the Church. While transformation, adaptation, and revisions are all elements of any institution's progression throughout time, Jesus' Body stands steadfast on His promise.

In considering how churches should traverse the territory ahead, leaders who take Jesus' words to heart can have an optimistic outlook about the possibilities presented by the digital age.

Instead of looking to the restrictions COVID-19 imposed, these visionaries will focus on the opportunities for fresh innovation and creativity when it comes to writing the narrative of the future church. In “looking toward the horizon,” author Pal-Gordon Chandler (2020) believes that “the church’s new world will require a creative embrace of technology and new media – not as substitutes, but as inspired and strategic vehicles of ministry and mission” (p. 4). The strategical nature of this embrace is essential. Intentional investment into the lives of others through technology is more than possible; it’s already happening. In exploring *The reconfiguration of social, digital and physical presence*, Cooper (2021) pens that:

The ability to more readily access church services and activities which very closely resemble offline services and activities has the potential to greatly increase accessibility of church to individuals who might otherwise, for reasons such as reduced mobility or geographical isolation, not have had the opportunity to regularly partake in the activities of church community. (p. 7)

Technology is making a way for previously impossible outreach opportunities. In his recent report, Benjamin Windle (2022) concludes, “so, let’s embrace digital, but let’s not capitulate to digital” (para. 4). The researcher goes on to explain that while his claim “seems like a contradiction,” it actually explains the “tension that will save us from the dangers of both extremes” (para. 4). As with any issue, the answer is almost never found at either polarized end, but rather where these opposing viewpoints align.

In studying the synthesis of traditional and trending ministry methods, it is important for churches to cultivate a healthy balance between internet content and interpersonal connections. This synthesis is what will set church content apart from the already existing online noise that fights for the attention of the next generation. In “analyzing online opportunities prior to the

pandemic,” Hunt (2019) highlights that “despite young people engaging a great deal with technology, they often feel emotionally and spiritually disconnected” (p. 95). The online world is tainted with messages of anything but hope. It is for this reason that Hoskins (2020) declares “it’s up to us,” as Jesus followers, “to reclaim the digital space. Technology is merely a tool to be harnessed and used for good. It has no purpose or power on its own, only what we assign it” (para. 5). When the Church assigns its identity to and aligns its mission with the digital tools available, immeasurable opportunity exists. A twofold framework for the understanding the purpose of the church includes the activities of making disciples (Matthew 28:19) and making God’s wisdom known (Ephesians 3:10). The Scriptural support for these two undertakings sets up the theological structure for digital discipleship.

The post-pandemic Church has the capacity to harness the tool of technology to better make disciples and make God’s wisdom known. In doing so, existing ministry programs will be enhanced. In *Networked Theology*, Campbell (2016) discusses these methods of navigating faith in a digital culture, asserting that:

From a theological perspective, this approach to technology allows the values and practices embedded within these relationships, as well as their effects upon people and the world they exist in, to be engaged through contextual theology. This occurs when the experiences of the technological environment in the present are in constant, faithful dialogue with the experience and contexts of the past found in sources such as Scripture and tradition and mediated through the material reality of the everyday world. (p. 38)

Campbell advocates for a form of digital discipleship that does not simply replace earlier on-site methods, but rather is considered in coexistence with the former. Further researchers promote this position, affirming that “the ontological basis” for this theological stance “can help to make

creative use of technology to extend a church towards a digitally extended community that opens a particular place by digitally enriched communication” (Cooper, 2021, p. 8). These frameworks for the future of church community raise the question: can the creative use of technology create spaces for children to encounter God and grow in their relationship with Him?

In pioneering digital discipleship methods, it is essential for kid’s ministry leaders to recognize the significance of families in these efforts. Childhood development expert Marlies Hartkamp (2021) asserts that “when we look at faith formation, the Bible, as well as theological traditions, teach us that nurturing faith is in the first place the responsibility of parents” (para. 7). Churches, then, “can and should support parents in faith formation” (p. 73). Considering this reality, another specialist proposes “a change from a programmatic approach in ministry where children and families are recipients of ministry efforts to a perspective where the family is central and involved in doing actual ministry together” (Larson, 2020, p. 443). When the family is the focus of next-generation ministry, the previously polarized concepts of content consumption and church communities can be harmonized as dual assets in ministering to the children of the post-pandemic church.

A unique element of children’s ministry programs is the dependance of kids on adults to arrange their church attendance. All kids who show up at places of programming have at least one adult who cares about them and their relationship with God enough to bring them to church. These adults may include those outside of a kid’s immediate family unit such as grandparents, neighbors, friends’ parents, aunts, & uncles. The most common occurrence, though, remains at least one of a child’s parent prioritizing their presence at church. A 2022 study shows that at least seventy-three percent of parents are concerned about their child’s spiritual development. This statistic includes both claiming Christians and not, exhibiting that “the majority of both groups is

at least somewhat interested in ensuring their children have a healthy relationship with spirituality” (Barna, 2022, para. 2). Considering this concern, it is becoming increasingly evident that parents and caregivers see the value of the local church in the lives of their children. It is without a doubt that “churches can be a place where meaningful relationships are formed among children.” For this reason, “Christian parents who hope for a healthy, enduring spiritual foundation for their children need the support of a church that recognizes their concerns and addresses them in community” (Barna, 2022, para. 4). The combined compound investment of both churches and families helps foster the foundation for faith in the lives of the kids.

The partnership between faithful adults and local churches to raise up the next generation of Jesus followers has always been prevalent. Yet, with the rise of the technological age and digitally accessible church content, the question of opportunity for new discipleship methods also rises. What if it were possible to reach the kids who don’t have the advantage of adults backing their faith? With the rise of “digital technology” that “is increasingly invading the physical world through new affordances,” this possibility is more than probable (Cooper, 2021, p. 2). The children’s ministry leaders of the post-pandemic church have a unprecedented opportunity to reach kids with functionally no other connection to spirituality or to adults who value faith. By utilizing digital ministry methods, these leaders can create content that extends to the TVs, computers, and tablets of children who may never otherwise encounter the good news that the God of the universe invites them into a forever lasting relationship with Him. This relational element is what will set church content apart from its cultural counterparts. In looking to the future, the kids’ ministries that find a way to cultivate meaningful faith-based connections with children via online means will be the ones to reach this new demographic of potential Jesus followers. The reality of these realizations is that if the church does nothing to influence these

individuals, culture will. An array of agendas fight for the attention of the next generation; a generation more arguably connected to people they have never physically met than any before. Instead of shying away from this sobering reality, the church has the chance to revolutionize and reach kids like never before.

The digital age has created more opportunity for carrying out Jesus' great commission's to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 5:19-20, *English Standard Version*). The dreamers of the Church have historically looked to innovative methods to present this unchanging gospel message to the world. In the post-pandemic era, technology is undoubtedly the new mode that pioneers will harness the power and potential of to continue in this tradition. In dreaming about this possibility, Cooper (2021) concludes that "a functional church online [will provide] its community with a 24/7 connection." The author goes on to affirm that "this is very different from the experience of having access to a physical church, say, on Sunday mornings" (2021, p. 3). The boundless accessibility to church community has already proven an effective means of discipling kids. In a study reflecting on next generational ministry methods throughout the Coronavirus pandemic, Holmes (2021) "observed that through the social opportunities during Zoom sessions, the children who had attended regularly online had developed and deepened their relational connection within the church family" (para. 10). Digital discipleship is a possibility that, when standardized into the structure of kid's ministries worldwide, had potential to transform the way the Church interacts with the next generation.

Effective post-pandemic children's ministries can leverage online resources to reinforce on-site relationships as well as leveraging on-site resources to reach online relationships. This

cohesion of ministry methods emphasizes the importance of a collaborative approach to navigating the tension between curating content and cultivating connections for the children of the post-pandemic church.

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