

7 NEW DISRUPTIVE CHURCH TRENDS EVERY CHURCH LEADER SHOULD WATCH

(For the new COVID-19 reality of 2020)

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So, in light of everything that's changed and been disrupted so far in 2020, what future church trends should you be watching as a leader?

I usually do a church trends post every January, but with the almost surreal events of 2020 unfolding as they have, it's time to rethink what's ahead again. Hence, a fresh post outlining 7 trends to watch.

Crisis, after all, is not just a disruptor, it's an accelerator.

Some of the changes that were likely arriving in 5-10 years (like the normalization of remote work) arrived in days.

The shift from facility centered ministry to home-based ministry happened in hours.

And while there will be a return to some version of normal, normal as we knew is likely gone, at least for a while. It's hard to go back to normal when normal disappeared.

And because the future is unkind to the unprepared, the best thing a leader can do is prepare.

Disruption is hard because disruption is inconvenient. It's far easier to keep doing what you're doing, hoping for better results, or going back to normal as quickly as possible to regain what you've lost.

The good news is that leaders who embrace change, who find the energy, passion and time to keep pivoting, will likely end up *advancing* their mission in the future.

So what are the new 2020 church trends you should watch in what is shaping up to be a very pivotal year?

Here are 7.

Let me just say I hope I'm wrong on some of them, but I'm including them because I think they're happening.

As I've had to remind myself as a leader and Christ-follower for decades, just because you don't like something doesn't mean it isn't true.

I don't like all these trends either, but that doesn't mean they're not happening.

The best question to ask in a time of disruption is, "What does this make possible?"

There's a lot that's possible for the future church.

1. THE CHURCH WILL FURTHER CONSOLIDATE AS IT EXPANDS

This is a tough trend to handle, so let's just start here.

Despite a reported initial surge in online attendance and subsequent slump, new polling by the Barna Group shows a rather surprising reality.

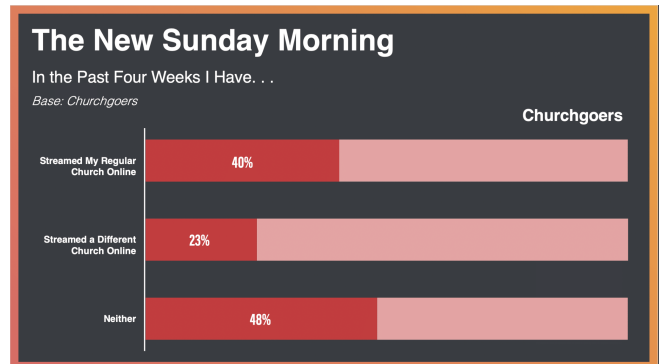
48% of churchgoers say they have not watched any church online in the last 4 weeks.

Let that sink in for a minute.

Almost half of all churchgoers haven't done any online or in-person church in a month.

Double clicking on that information yields another insight.

Only 40% of churchgoers report watching their *regular* home church online. A rather surprising 23% said they streamed a *different* church (either in place of their regular church or in addition to their regular church).



What does this mean?

Well, as hard it is to hear, the data suggests that even regular attenders are either not connecting with their church right now or starting to experiment with different options.

Don't be quick to blame online church.

Crisis is an accelerator, and for decades the trend has been for even committed Christians to attend less often. The chaos and dislocation of the crisis may simply be amplifying that long-standing trend.

Stay with me though for a minute more.

We also know that as of late May 2020, 29% of churches are still reporting an attendance *jump* over previous levels.

So...the fact that 29% of churches are seeing an attendance spike and 23% of Christians say they are watching a church other than their home church might mean further consolidation is happening.

What exactly does 'consolidation' mean?

It means the churches that *are* growing and picking up people from churches that *aren't* growing.

This has been happening for decades with the disappearance and decline of small and mid-sized churches and the growth of large churches and mega-churches. And while growing churches are definitely reaching unchurched people, they have also been picking up Christians from other churches.

That trend might well be accelerating during the disruption.

Consolidation of the book market happened in the 1990s as independent bookstores went out of business as major chains like Barnes and Noble, Borders and even Walmart, Costco and Target took chunks out of their market share. Then, of course, Amazon emerged and took a chunk out of all the big box stores.

Similarly, General Motors consolidated after the Great Recession as it got rid of Pontiac, Saturn, Saab and Hummer to focus on fewer products.

In the future, *the* Church will prevail, but not every church will prevail. The crisis may be accelerating a trend that's already happening.

So where's the hope in this?

First, smaller and mid-sized churches will have to find their niche.

As I wrote about in my original church trends post for 2020, the middle is disappearing from culture as it is, so being focused on your community and the people you love and want to reach is a great place to start.

As large churches become larger, no one should be able to out-local the local church.

Second, digital isn't only the purview of large churches. You don't have to have a big budget to have a big impact online.

Everyone you want to reach in your region is online. When you behave like that's true, you stand a much better chance of reaching them.

2. THE RETURN TO CHURCH MIGHT NOT BE THE RUSH LEADERS HOPE FOR

As tempting as it will be to reopen the doors and believe everyone is coming back, the data (right now) shows that's probably not the case.

To begin, social distancing makes full rooms impossible and, until it's safe to do mass gatherings, unwise.

Full rooms are months away, if not longer.

Second, a recent related poll of thousands of church leaders facilitated by Gloop, showed people have little consensus around when they feel 'safe' to gather again in public.

Asked which other type of activity BEST signals to you that it is time to open in-person worship at the church, the most common answer was a *low community level of COVID cases (21.5%)*.

Other responses included when:

- Social distancing and stay home guidelines are lifted: 17%
- Local businesses are open: 14%
- Local restaurant seating areas are open: 8%
- Testing is widely available and utilized: 6%
- Schools are open: 4%
- Vaccine available: 3%

But the following results also speak volumes:

- 15% said they would only return when all the conditions are met (low cases, businesses open, restrictions lifted, vaccine available).
- 10% admitted they just weren't sure.

Essentially, 25% either aren't sure or aren't coming back for a long time.

An additional 30% of respondents said they'd rather worship at home and only return when they can be mask-free at church.

Combine that with trend #1 (48% aren't doing anything right now and 23% are connecting with other churches), and the picture is very different than most leaders would hope for.

I know, that's not encouraging, but it's both real and understandable.

So what do you do?

First, you can poll *your* congregations on these exact questions (for free) and add a few questions of your own, by creating your own (free) Return to Church Checkin (available here <https://resources.gloo.us/carey/>). Then you won't have to guess.

Second, prepare yourself for the emotional let down of a staggered and less than optimal return. I know what it feels like to be hoping for a full room in normal conditions and seeing empty seats.

That may be the reality for a while to come. My guess is a lot of leaders are struggling with the lack of 'normal' more deeply than they realize.

Get counselling, talk to a friend, pray and prepare yourself for a longer period of disruption that you want. That's what leadership requires sometimes.

Finally, focus on your mission and rethink your methods.

You're not 'locked' into what you're doing now.

Innovate. Experiment.

Make your mission more important than your methods.

Crisis may be an accelerator, but it's also the cradle for innovations and breakthroughs.

3. CHURCHES WILL BECOME DIGITAL ORGANIZATIONS WITH PHYSICAL LOCATIONS

I never win popularity contests when I write about this, but I'm going to keep going. It's just too important to ignore.

Growing churches in the future will become digital organizations with physical expressions, not physical organizations with a digital presence.

The difference in this trend is as stark as JC Penny and Amazon.

JC Penny (which recently filed for Chapter 11), like Sears and ToysRUs, were physical retailers that slowly adapted an online presence, behaving like most people still wanted an in-person experience.

Amazon, of course, started as a digital retailer that gradually moved into physical stores.

In the future, growing churches will be digital organizations with physical locations.

What's surprising is that sometimes the digital connections have been as or more meaningful than the in-person connections.

I realize there will be many who push back against this, but it's foolish to ignore the fact that people connect more easily online and often admit the truth more readily online than they do in-person (that might not be right, but, as this Stanford research shows, it is often true).

To put digital church back on the shelf in the new normal is to ignore the greatest opportunity the church today has to reach people.

Seeing digital as optional really does mean your church will end up like malls in the age of Amazon, just hoping for people to show up again.

And it also ignores the fact that many will want digital to be at least an option, if not a preferred method of engagement where geography and other barriers prevent access.

Forget the fact that for the moment, everyone is Zoomed out and longing for human connection, and think about the past and the future.

Digital isn't going away. It will continue to grow and advance.

Further, digital scales in a way that analog doesn't.

Online church transcends geographic, physical and time barriers in a way that analog doesn't.

Will we still have in-person, physical gatherings and services? Absolutely. But in the future church, if you care about people, you'll care about digital church.

4. AGILITY WILL BECOME ONE OF YOUR MOST VALUABLE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

I realize trends like these can feel exhausting.

Of all the qualities leaders will need in the future, agility is near the top of the list.

The fact that you are still leading months into the pandemic is evidence you have this quality, which is amazing. But like a muscle, you have to hone and develop it.

If there's one prediction about the future that seems to be accurate, it's that the dislocation and uncertainty we're seeing now will continue. The new normal, whatever that is, is always off.

In an uncertain climate, flexibility is ability and agility is a super power.

Agility will matter more in the future because the 'innovation' that happened in the first few months of lockdown wasn't really innovation. It was adaptation.

Quick pivots, regular experimentation and the ability to respond to a rapidly changing culture will be critical.

While your mission will never change, your methods will have to.

Agility is a key quality for future leaders, because, as they say, if you don't like change, you'll like irrelevance even less.

5. VIRTUAL AND FLEXIBLE STAFF TEAMS WILL BE THE NEW NORMAL

In the same way church went digital overnight, staff teams for churches and corporations did too.

I talked to a number of CEOs over the last week (who tend to be far more bottom-line driven than church leaders) who said as hard as the adjustment was for their teams to become virtual overnight, they're not going back to the way it was before.

Some may close their offices and become entirely remote. Others will simply scale back things like square footage and travel along with the instance that everyone come in every day.

Twitter and Facebook both recently announced that employees can work from home indefinitely regardless of when the lockdown or social distancing ends.

Gallup has discovered many workers have a growing appetite for working from home as much as possible.

It's the beginning of a new era for work.

Translate that for church leaders.

As inefficient as working from home might seem now (kids hanging off you, everyone signing into Slack for the first time and not quite sure how Asana works), one day the kids will be back in school and novel tools will be normal tools, and then the real efficiency of flexible and remote work will start to kick in.

Prior to the disruption, there was already an emerging trend that saw your most talented young employees asking for the most flexibility: To work from home, coffee shops or to flex their hours. That will only accelerate.

The future workplace for churches and businesses will be flexible workplaces: With an array of in-person and remote teams.

Again, move ahead five months, and begin to think about hiring the ideal Exec Pastor you've been wanting to hire for a long time who doesn't want to move. Bringing him or her on board as staff and flying them in a few times a year suddenly looks far more feasible than it did even a month ago. And with Zoom and video calls normalized now, you won't feel nearly as distant as you would have earlier in having team members join meetings remotely.

On future teams, insisting that everyone show up in person will become a competitive *disadvantage*.

8-4 stopped working years ago. Now it's broken beyond repair. The future workplace is the flexible workplace.

6. SPIRITUAL FORMATION WILL SHIFT FROM FACILITY-BASED TO HOME-BASED

One of the most exciting trends to emerge so far is to see churches focus on everyday ministry, not just Sunday ministry.

With a slow return to church and the shift to digital church as the default, many church leaders will realize their focus in ministry will have to shift from their facilities to people's homes.

In many ways, this is a solid theological move, as well.

To have people assume responsibility for their own spiritual growth, for evangelism, discipleship and even leadership of their own families can only be a good thing.

An unspoken assumption of the old model of church was that to 'grow,' you had to come to a facility and participate in a program or service.

In the future, church leaders will see themselves more as equippers, helping people bring their faith more deeply into the homes, neighbourhoods and workplaces.

In some strange way, this is what many church leaders have longed to see but not really seen, and in part it might be because the focus has been on getting people to come to a building to grow, not on equipping them where they are. Mark Sayers has a lot of thoughtful things to say about this trend on his Rebuilders Podcast.

Think of it as an application of something you've been trying to do for years through social media, online live events and even email marketing: Those forums have allowed you to show up in people's lives every day, not just on Sundays.

When it comes to discipleship and evangelism, every day is more important than Sunday.

That trend will only accelerate in the future.

If people live every day in need of hope and resources to live out their faith (or to find faith) every day, church leaders have to start coming alongside people every day.

In the future, churches will shift their focus from Sunday to every day, because people need to find faith and live out their faith every day.

7. ON-DEMAND ACCESS WILL ECLIPSE LIVE EVENTS

In many ways, this trend has already happened. It's just few people are talking about it.

In the 80s and 90s, TV shifted from live-viewing (you had to watch your fave show Thursday night at 9 or you missed it), to on-demand viewing, at first through VCRs, then TiVo and finally, through streaming services like Netflix, Hulu and Disney+.

We've been an on-demand culture for a while.

Except, most churches don't behave that way. We push everything toward a live event, assuming that most people who access an experience will do so exactly when it happens.

As Mike Todd of Transformation Church—which is reaching hundreds of thousands of people online each month—says, the live experience represents a fraction of their total audience.

So what should you do?

Well, you probably have an archive.

Some of you have an audio archive of MP3 messages. Some of you have a podcast. Others have years of YouTube videos or services captured in HD that sit on some website nobody visits.

Leverage those.

Just because your content isn't brand new doesn't mean it won't be new to your audience. Especially a new audience. (And don't flatter yourself...most of your church has no idea what you said last year, or last month. Neither does mine.)

Preachers, just because your content isn't brand new doesn't mean it won't be new to your audience. Especially a new audience you're reaching for the first time.

Here's what's true: You may have done your last family series two years ago, but I promise you families haven't stopped having issues in the last 24 months (quarantine might make that series *way* more relevant).

Your last money series may be exactly what someone needs to hear right now.

That message you did on hope from the Psalms is exactly what someone feeling at the bottom needs right now.

The amazing thing about email, social media and other online channels you have is you can repurpose and reuse content to meet people where they're at and reach new people who have never met you.

Not sure how to run campaigns like that of have a budget to hire staff to do it?

Great older content *works*. If you're having trouble communicating with your kids, do you care that Gary Chapman's *Five Love Languages* was written in the 90s? Nope. You don't. You read it. It changes things.

The key is to share these on weekdays and on other channels throughout the week while you're still directing people to what's next and new on the weekend.

People don't care if a message is new nearly as much as they care if a message is great.

Don't believe this? How many times have you rewatched *The Office* or *Friends*?

POSITION YOURSELF TO THRIVE IN THE NEW NORMAL

Some organizations and churches will thrive in the new normal.

Others won't.

While the future is uncertain, yours doesn't have to be.