The Digital Way of the Future?

Given the response to my previous article on etiquette for zoom, I thought it would be helpful to provide some further comments on relevant research.
In June 2024 the Australian Association for the Study of Religions and the Christian Research Association co-hosted a lecture at CTU in Melbourne by Dr Heidi Campbell, Professor of Communications at Texas A & M University.
The topic was a very contemporary and relevant to our mostly changed circumstances;
Digital Congregations in a Post Christian Future: Understanding the Impact of Technology During the Pandemic.

(Note, the first 27 minutes of the lecture focus on Christian congregations and the final 19 minutes on Jewish synagogues, and my comments below relate to the research on Christian congregations)

Professor Campbell's area of expertise is religion and digital communication and her latest research has been considering the impact of the pandemic.
A brief overview of the lecture is below and a link to the video.
In setting the scene Professor Campbell provides background to the Pew Religious Project (2019) that has received wider attention, particularly in the USA for its thesis that Christianity will no longer be the majority religion by 2050.

The Pew project was completed before the pandemic and it had two main themes highlighting the change in religious affiliation and connection.
Firstly, the increase of the 'nones'. These are people with no interest spiritually and or no denominational connection.
Secondly, and a very interesting new group was profiled, the 'dones'.
These are people who still identify as Christian but are done with a denomination.
Another interesting factor in the USA was the report that church attendance post pandemic (particularly in their mainline denominations) had experienced a 20-40% fall in 2023 compared to pre-pandemic. Anecdotally, I have heard similar statistics for Australia among our mainstream congregations.

It is evident that a combination of factors have contributed to declining church attendance overall in the last few decades, but the pandemic has had a significant impact, and accelerated the decline for some congregations.

For Professor Campbell and other researchers, the pandemic provided a unique opportunity to study religious congregations and digital connection as a focussed project . One area in the USA (Indianna, Indianapolis) became the study base due to the availability of funding for religious groups in 2020 in this area from the Center for Congregations through the Lilly Endowment. Congregations were provided resources to enable digital connection during the pandemic and became part of a study examining the impact of digital technology. Research included talks with feedback, focus groups, reviews of the application information and material provided by local congregations, and a survey review about the future of the church and where the congregations were up to in the digital context. Interested readers can find out more about this study on the website About - Tech in Churches.

Basic findings from the lecture presentation about the impact of digital communication during this pandemic time included:

- For most the connection was because it was simply the "only option".
- The reach and contact of their congregation increased.
- There was an opportunity and impetus to be creative and innovative.
- There was a steep learning curve.

Report One
When Pastors put on the "Tech Hat": How Churches Digitized during Covid-19.

A key theme here was that "Congregational leaders were not prepared for the technology challenge". There were many practical challenges in the pandemic time, but technology seemed to be at the top.
I found the term 'forced digital experience' a good description for the time, as many churches were forced to engage digitally. And furthermore, and in particular, pastors and leaders became "forced entrepreneurs". Many of the skills needed were not immediately available, and most leaders were "wildly unacquainted" with technology and dealing with issues of connected sound, recording and basic technical issues in streaming and how best to connect. Interestingly, most leaders had little experience with social media and consideration of what was the best platform to use or at least the best platform for their purpose.

Often new 'technical' service teams had to be created. These teams had a strong impetus and involvement focus, but examples of burnout out or declining interest by the end of 2020 were provided. I am also aware that older volunteers and some staff who had specific tasks or job areas based around the physical church location became disconnected and less involved due to the digital focus. One did not need ushers, or collection stewards, and some congregations do not have any physical collections anymore, only offering electronic giving options. Different tensions arose, no longer with the organist and song leader, but with the 'video director' and the computer operator and streaming liaison.
This initial stage tested the limits of altering religious rituals and practices, and began the longer debate about the legitimacy of non-placed based worship and meetings.

Report 2
Mission to Serve Tech: Churches "Lock Down" Technology During The Global Pandemic.

A key theme here was navigating tech hesitancy within congregations and the overall digital divide and digital 'resistance' and 'reluctance'. Interestingly it was found that digital resistance was more a pastor or leader based phenomenon, while technological hesitancy was more member based. I did wonder if digital reluctance was related to the point of who would be doing the work and whether pastors and leaders thought it was something that was not part of their ministry?
One practical example of helping with digital reluctance that I found illuminating was a church that bought a number of tablets, loaded up the recorded service, and then had members of the church take the tablets each week to members to show the service. This also raises the matter of 'digital divide', a factor that was accentuated in congregations that were less economically established.

Report 3: *'We're Still Here' Reflections of the Post-Pandemic Digital Church*

This report considers the continuing role of technology in the church and some of the questions and issues arising, particularly looking at the future of the developed model of 'hybrid church'.

It is worth highlighting the traits deemed to be necessary for success in online church leadership arrangements and also the understanding in the report that these are not normally associated with pastoral ministry:

- Experimentation
- Adaptability
- Creative Thinking
- Tenacity in trial and error
- Strategic Resourcefulness

The research has thus raised implications for ministry training, but more importantly many questions about what it means to be a church in the 21st century when the physical boundaries have been removed.

There appeared to be considerable differences of opinion in the reports as to whether an online service was 'real' church or 'unreal' church and a continuing debate about the nature of a 'true' Christian community.

The lecture presentation can be viewed here.

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