

The Hybrid Congregation



**A Practical Theology of Worship
for an Online Era**

Michael Huerter



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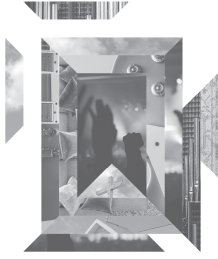
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Enter the Internet

SEVERAL PASTORS I HAVE WORKED with have remarked, with varying degrees of humor and exasperation, how rarely congregants seem to remember the content of their sermons. They have also named the felt struggle of inviting a community to the renewing of their minds in following Christ when this community is gathered for perhaps a few hours one day of the week, and the rest of the week is bombarded with constant messaging, advertising, and news stories apparently designed to fuel our demons, not summon our best selves: “How can a weekly church service compete with this environment inundated by greed, fear, anger, and injustice?”

These concerns are not limited to the age of the internet; they have been the challenge of ministry for a long, long time. It is worth recognizing that these forces are connected to economic models that seek to generate profit and power. The love of money is the root of each of these kinds of evil, and these voices clamor for our attention constantly. Directing our attention elsewhere and stepping outside the rushing current of the temptations Christ faced in the desert—toward consumption, influence, and possessions—is a central practice of discipleship and worship. This has remained true throughout the history of the church, but these age-old questions require fresh examination in our new media environment.

Just as previous communication technologies reshaped human relationships, institutions, and self-understanding, the internet has become a driving force in human society in recent decades. Our personal lives and our communities; the ways we communicate, share news, and do business; the challenges faced by institutions, governments, and nations; global economies and



sociological changes affecting billions of people—all have been affected profoundly by the internet. To understand what churches are facing in regard to their music ministry online, it is crucial to begin with an understanding of some of these powerful currents and events.

I will begin this chapter by describing broader cultural impacts of the internet. I will continue by bringing philosophical and theological scholarship to bear on the significance of these changes. Once that groundwork is laid, I will focus more specifically on church music and the changes and challenges brought about in that sphere by the internet. Here I will share insights from personal interviews with scholars and ministry practitioners. Finally, I will synthesize and propose a way forward for church music, based on the content of this chapter.

ATTENTION, PLEASE!

Picture this scene: A dark room is lit by a slowly turning array of green stars. A blue spotlight illuminates a man wearing a white T-shirt and sunglasses, seated at a keyboard. He begins to play and sing:

Welcome to the Internet
 Have a look around
 Anything that brain of yours can think of can be found . . .
 Could I interest you in everything?
 All of the time?¹

Bo Burnham's 2021 Netflix comedy special *Bo Burnham: Inside* is a curious glimpse into the mind of a White, male, Millennial comedian who is hyper-aware of and reflective on the oddities and perils of the internet. *Inside* was filmed by Burnham in his home, with no film crew or audience, over the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic and reflects on numerous aspects of Burnham's experience of lockdown. It has received numerous awards, and this musical number, "Welcome to the Internet," has over 143 million views on YouTube in addition to Netflix streams. "Welcome to the Internet" positions Burnham as a personification of the internet itself, or perhaps an amalgam of Silicon Valley tech moguls and media corporations with a generous pinch of dramatically animated Disney villain thrown in.

¹Bo Burnham, "Welcome to the Internet—Bo Burnham (from 'Inside'—ALBUM OUT NOW)," June 4, 2021, video, 4:40, www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1BneeJTDCU.

The song highlights many of the problems and concerns raised by the internet: the chaotic juxtaposition of bubbly, happy content with virtual front-row seats to worldwide tragedy and violence; the online pornography industry and other exploitative uses of the medium; the dizzying overwhelm of constant stimulation and access to more information than we will ever make sense of; and the impact on children's mental and social formation as they grow up in a world so different from what their parents experienced.

On January 9, 2019, Bo Burnham was part of a panel discussion hosted by the Child Mind Institute on the topic "Self-Esteem in the Age of Social Media." The conversation touched on the psychological well-being of children and adults but also grappled with the economic systems at play in a world defined by social media. Burnham remarked, "We used to colonize land. That was the thing you could expand into, and that's where money was to be made. We colonized the entire earth. There was no other place for the businesses and capitalism to expand into. And then they realized . . . human attention. . . . They are now trying to colonize every minute of your life."² Burnham is drawing attention to a profound shift in the way that global economies function in the age of the internet. This shift toward an economy that (in Burnham's words) colonizes human attention and time is a fundamental concern for thinking productively about the church's discipleship and musical practices in the twenty-first century.

The dynamics described by Burnham's comedy suggest a larger set of issues around the internet and its impact on our lives. While the internet has ushered in positive technological advancement, it has also corresponded with and contributed to cultural forces of distraction, alienation, and objectification. These dynamics are of huge importance to Christian formation and community, particularly worship. Christian worship (including music and a range of other rituals) is meant to positively direct human attention, to bring us into deeper connection with God, the world, and ourselves, and to remind us of the worth and goodness of creation. Worship invites us to seek righteousness, justice, beauty, and flourishing life for all God's creatures, and therefore runs counter to any influence toward disintegration, disconnection, or degradation.

²Child Mind Institute, "Self Esteem in the Age of Social Media," January 19, 2019, video, 55:35, www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmUm7oBqCVw.

HOW WE GOT HERE: THE INTERNET AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM

The 1990s saw the rise of a developing conversation about the internet's potentials and problems, as well as parallels with previous technologies. In 1998, Gray Young named the excitement and anxiety felt at the cusp of a new millennium. Excitement suggested great possibilities ahead: free exchange of information, greater freedoms, equality, and connection between individuals and communities around the world. Anxiety suggested a vision of "the Internet portending the downfall of civilized society" through rampant pornography, the decimation of privacy in the face of corporate and federal surveillance, the end of reliable journalism, the destruction of copyright, and violent criminals and terrorists taking advantage of the technology.³

These optimistic and pessimistic readings of the internet's potential have proven to accurately reflect our current reality; these are many of the same opportunities and pitfalls we encounter now. Young asked whether the internet could improve life, or whether we should perhaps be afraid it would ruin life, and how governments and businesses should and would regulate, restrict, or embrace it. Even as the internet has developed and become more inseparable from our daily lives than ever before, these questions remain salient and pressing.

The same concerns Young articulated in 1998 are crucial for us in the third decade of the twenty-first century. It is important to remember that new technologies may take decades, or even centuries, to become fully integrated into society; at the same time, new expressions of these technologies are being produced at dizzying rates. There is so much rapid change occurring, and we are far from fully understanding the revolution we are living through. Young compares the internet to a "precocious child," full of latent potential *and* capable of making foolish and dangerous choices, with political, academic, and economic leaders being analogous to young parents unsure how to encourage the former and curtail the latter. Young asks, "Will the child grow to be a Nobel Prize winner or an uncontrollably brilliant psychopath?"⁴ Like the printing press, radio, and television before it, the

³Gray Young, ed., *The Internet*, The Reference Shelf 70 (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1998), vii.

⁴Young, *Internet*, vii.

internet asks of us: What will it be? Will it become a force for good or for evil in the world? How will it interact with and transform existing technologies and economies?

On February 19, 1998, George Conrades gave an address to the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers that aimed to shed light on these questions. The event was the 1998 Network Operations and Management Symposium in New Orleans. Conrades was at the time president of GTE Internetworking, which would later be acquired by Bell Atlantic and go on to become Verizon. Conrades predicted that the internet, which was already indispensable to much of American society, would soon “disappear.” By this he meant that, like other technologies before it, its use and constant presence would become normalized. Conrades remarked, “All successful technologies ultimately disappear. They penetrate so deeply into our environment, they become indistinguishable from it.”⁵

Conrades’s statements here highlight an important concept. He confirms what can be anticipated from study of earlier technological revolutions; that is, that each new communication medium goes through a period of flux, after which it stabilizes into a simultaneously more predictable and more forgettable feature of the surrounding society. The printing press seemed to threaten existing conceptions of studiousness, wisdom, and the rights of authors and composers; now printing is assumed and practically invisible. In the same way, the radio raised questions about the viability of live music performances and the future of music education; now these practices coexist with the radio and its successor in online music streaming. Likewise, the television has gradually become both ubiquitous and unremarkable.

One helpful example of how these successive technologies have developed is through the ways societies have shared news with each. Conrades claimed in 1998 that the internet was gathering and incorporating aspects of previous communication technologies (newspapers, radio, television, computers, telephones) as it gained dominance in global information sharing. The internet would not only transform the landscape of news media but would change the people and communities using it.⁶

⁵George Conrades, “The Future of the Internet: Predicting the Unpredictable,” in Young, *Internet*, 179.

⁶Conrades, “Future of the Internet,” 181.

This process of integration and transformation involved overcoming the internet's technical constraints and practical problems of infrastructure (such as bandwidth, security, and quality). Conrades claimed it would be necessary for the internet to be supremely accessible: "We will have to make the Internet as easy to use as dialing a telephone or switching channels on a remote control." This ease of use is one of three primary criteria Conrades suggested would determine the internet's success: "To make the Internet disappear, in other words, to enable it to truly succeed," other goals would need to be achieved. In addition to ease of use, the internet would need to become ubiquitous and gain a high level of trust from users, governments, and businesses. Once these goals were reached, Conrades hypothesized that technical concerns would fade into secondary status, with "new economic, political, and social challenges" coming to the forefront.⁷

The economic concerns would prove to be highly formative to the internet's development. In "A Brief History of the Internet," field descriptor Walt Howe reflects on the internet's growth and the impact of that change on business. Howe points out both the exponential growth of the internet and the chaos of businesses attempting to make the internet profitable. While profit margins for online sales of goods were low, the potential market was huge. At the same time, free online services including advertisements to generate revenue were beginning to grow.⁸ How the internet was to be made profitable proved to be a question with wide-reaching implications for our society.

PAYING ATTENTION: THE ATTENTION ECONOMY

Writing in 2006, literary scholar Richard Lanham considered the economic implications of a world in which the internet had become ubiquitous. Lanham pushed back against popular conceptions of an economy driven by information. Lanham described economics as being concerned with the allocation of scarce resources to produce and distribute goods across society. Lanham argued the so-called information economy implied information was a scarce resource, and this was demonstrably not the case. Instead, the internet had brought on an overabundance of information: "We're drowning in it.

⁷Conrades, "Future of the Internet," 181.

⁸Walt Howe, "A Brief History of the Internet," in Young, *Internet*, 3-7.

There is too much information to make sense of it all. . . . What then is the new scarcity that economics seeks to describe? It can only be the human attention needed to make sense of information.”⁹

In Lanham’s description, the scarce resource being brokered in this new economy is attention, not information. What it means to be a thinking human being is changing once again in light of technological, social, and economic change. Information is overwhelmingly available, but deep understanding and application of that information is not.

Philosopher Justin E. H. Smith tackles this reality in his thought-provoking 2022 book *The Internet Is Not What You Think It Is*. Echoing Burnham’s words about the colonization of human attention, Smith writes:

The largest industry in the world now is quite literally the attention-seeking industry. Just as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the global economy was dominated by natural-resource extraction, today the world’s largest companies have grown as large as they have entirely on the promise of providing to their clients the attention, however fleeting, of their billions of users.¹⁰

This is the economy so many of us participate in every day: one of personal data being fed into an algorithm to produce targeted advertisements intended to entice internet users into clicking links and staying engaged with online media platforms. Smith goes on to describe how the new economic model interfaces with previous arrangements and constitutes a sea change in the ways our world operates. This economic system, where the primary driving force is not our labor but our attention and data about us, is “a revolution at least as massive as the agricultural and industrial revolutions that preceded it.” Smith concludes, “Whatever else happens, it is safe to say that for the rest of all of our lifetimes, we will only be living out the internal turbulence of this entry into a new historical epoch.”¹¹ Just as previous technological revolutions featured chaotic transformation for decades and even centuries, the introduction of both new communication technologies and

⁹Richard A. Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 6-7.

¹⁰Justin E. H. Smith, *The Internet Is Not What You Think It Is: A History, a Philosophy, a Warning* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 14.

¹¹Smith, *Internet Is Not What You Think*, 15.

new economic models will certainly result in major changes. The growing pains will be significant.¹²

Smith highlights that this larger pattern is not unique to the internet but has occurred at multiple times throughout history. However, he does point out aspects of our current experience that are unique. First, Smith proposes that the development of the internet and the attention economy constitute “a new sort of exploitation, in which human beings are not only exploited in the use of their labor for extraction of natural resources; rather, their lives are *themselves* the resource, and they are exploited in its extraction.” Second, he argues, “The emerging extractive economy threatens our ability to use our mental faculty of attention in a way that is conducive to human thriving.”¹³

Whenever we find ourselves aimlessly scrolling through websites, it is not an accident; it is by design, and our distraction is being monetized. Smith suggests that human attention has been diminished by dominant expressions of new internet technologies. Proper attention, in Smith’s view, involves a true openness to the object of one’s attention. It may take on new and different meanings as we consider it. We may experience radical transformation through sustained attention to a piece of art, a novel, a poem, or another person. Smith argues that this form of attention is directly undercut by current models of internet media. However, he suggests that it is not the technology itself that is to blame. It is not inevitable that an abundance of information should lead to a scarcity of attention. Instead, it is the economic model that “maximizes solicitations upon a user’s attention and ensures that the attention is never focused in one place for long” that is the cause of this degradation, perpetrated by “an engine that is explicitly designed to prod the would-be attender ever onward from one monetizable object to the next.” Smith suggests that this economy of attention extraction calls for “the cultivation of *individual* attention,” which “amounts to a form of hard-won resistance against this economy.”¹⁴

¹²Smith also notes that these revolutions are not experienced in the present as stark contrasts of new innovation against old ways of ignorance but rather always as in continuity with the past (*Internet Is Not What You Think*, 81).

¹³Smith, *Internet Is Not What You Think*, 15-16.

¹⁴Smith, *Internet Is Not What You Think*, 37.

In describing this more profound form of attention, one that resists the pressures of monetized distraction, Smith uses the term “transformative moral commitment.” This is a commitment to true attention, to the possibility of transformative encounter with the other. Smith suggests it is possible that the crisis of attention in our time is not an inevitable outcome of the interconnectivity and abundance of available information that characterizes the digital age. Rather, it is a result of economic forces and “the excessively narrow channeling of our cognitive and emotional investment down pathways that are structurally guaranteed to limit or prevent personal transformation.”¹⁵ This possibility raises the question of what potential there might be for positive transformation that occurs through the internet.

FROM ICLOUD TO I-THOU: RESISTING ALIENATION AND OBJECTIFICATION

As the invisibility of the internet developed, the attention economy gained momentum by burning the fuel of monetized distraction. We have accepted as normal the fragmentation of our minds by ever-present appeals for our focus and the diminishment of our mental and emotional resources. Smith proposes that shallow engagement—what he calls “bare observation without attention”—is incapable of effecting real change. Smith summarizes his concept of real attention by writing, “Attention opens up the attender to the object, so that it may as it were go to work on the individual, bringing that person into a changed state and thus exercising a power we ordinarily restrict to agent-others worthy of a second-person stance.”¹⁶ Smith’s philosophy of transformative moral commitment resonates with the work of an earlier thinker: Austrian-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber.

Buber’s best-known work, *I and Thou* (originally written in German in 1923 and translated to English in 1937), is built on the concept of two “primary words.” These are stances the human being takes toward the world, thereby silently speaking about their own identity and the object of their attention: *I-Thou* or *I-It*. The *I-Thou* denotes a deep engagement that summons the whole self into relationship. The *I-It* describes shallow experience that uses

¹⁵Smith, *Internet Is Not What You Think*, 37.

¹⁶Smith, *Internet Is Not What You Think*, 27.

the world rather than being transformed by it. In Buber's words, "The primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being. The primary word *I-It* can never be spoken with the whole being." The stance a human person takes toward the world, either *I-Thou* or *I-It*, reshapes the *I* that is the person's own identity while also profoundly changing their engagement with the world: "As experience, the world belongs to the primary word *I-It*. The primary word *I-Thou* establishes the world of relation."¹⁷

As the human person interacts with the world on the level of *I-It*, they experience and *use* the world for the purpose of "the sustaining, relieving, and equipping of human life." As the world of *It* grows, direct experience is increasingly replaced with the indirect; knowledge is acquired and mastery is developed; and the spiritual life is shrouded and blocked off by a stance of transforming the world while refusing to allow the self to be transformed: "It is the obstacle; for the development of the ability to experience comes about mostly through the decrease of man's power to enter into relation—the power in virtue of which alone man can live the life of the spirit."¹⁸ Shallow experience is found in the world of *It*; deep relation is encountered in the world of *Thou*.

We see how many of our experiences of the internet seem to turn the world into an object and alienate us from other people. We scroll through advertisements screaming for our attention, constantly repeating the refrains of materialism and consumerism. Even in our own social media profiles, we often self-objectify as we make use of ourselves for the sake of likes, shares, and comments. Here our self becomes the "It" in the *I-It* relationship, and we become disconnected both from ourselves and from others, who cannot be allowed to truly see us. We fall into spirals of dopamine-seeking performance and shame-induced comparison. I have experienced this many times, in subtle and overt ways. Our exploitation in the attention economy generates profit, but it does not generate holistic well-being or growth in Christian virtue.

But even on the internet, there is the potential for real connection. While I have experienced alienation online, I have also spent an hour with a mentor, a few friends, or a group of church members and felt genuine

¹⁷Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 12-13.

¹⁸Buber, *I and Thou*, 35-36.

connection, true relationship, and transformative encouragement. How can this be?

Buber suggests that the spiritual life is dependent on the primary word *I-Thou*. Spiritual depth is not found in the depths of the self but in relation. We can live “in the spirit,” in connection between I and Thou, by engaging with others and with the world with our whole being. While Buber writes of the necessity of the I-Thou stance, he also acknowledges that experience on the level of I-It is both inevitable and needed. Both are a part of the human condition. For Buber, the I-Thou is not a constant state of spiritual attunement with God, the world, or other people, but a capacity to enter into moments of profound meaning and relationship. Buber describes causality as the chain of events and experiences on the level of I-It. These experiences cannot be avoided, but the human person can move from I-It back into I-Thou and be transformed toward freedom. Buber describes a person who is “able to cross again and again the threshold of the holy place wherein he was not able to remain. . . . There, on the threshold, the response, the spirit, is kindled ever new within him; here, in an unholy and needy country, this spark is to be proved.”¹⁹

While Smith emphasizes the challenges to true attention (transformative moral commitment, which is analogous to Buber’s I-Thou) in the age of the internet, it is important to highlight that the challenge of shifting between shallow, disengaged experience that merely uses the world and deep, profound connection in relationship is not a new one. It has always been a part of the human condition.²⁰ The obstacles we face today are unprecedented and take novel forms, but the root problem has not changed. We all shift between I-Thou and I-It constantly through our lives, not only online.

Almost a century before Smith wrote his warning about the obstacles to true attention posed by the attention economy, Buber wrote of the impact of true relation. This posture creates “a world that is homely and houselike,” which makes it possible for humanity to build safety, meaning, and relationship, to build “dwellings for God and dwellings for [people],” to “fill

¹⁹Buber, *I and Thou*, 36, 45.

²⁰See Genesis 28:16, “Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!’” Spirituality writ large can be seen as the experience or pursuit of deep connection with reality that moves beyond distraction and shallow, transactional, or apathetic relation.

swaying time with new hymns and songs.” In contrast, Buber speaks of the risk of a culture spiraling down into disconnection—if it does not remain “centred in the living and continually renewed relational event, then it hardens into the world of *It*.”²¹

Human beings long for home. Humanity’s desire for genuine connection with the world, other people, and, within a Christian framework, God, is fundamental. But when a home changes to become something unfamiliar, that sense of rootedness leading to flourishing life can be disrupted. In the internet, something new has arrived in the world and introduced unanticipated transformations. The challenge that faces us today is how we are to continue attending to the presence of God, other people, and ourselves in a world that is changing.

Even after his dire warnings about the potential of the internet and the attention economy to obstruct genuine transformation, Smith has a hopeful word to say about the internet:

Although the Internet is the primary motor for the spread of this new system, it is very likely that whatever new sanctuaries we might yet hope to build, where the rapacious logic of this new system does not have any purchase, will *also* come through the Internet. . . . Remarkably, then, the Internet is simultaneously our greatest affliction and our greatest hope; the present situation is intolerable, but there is no going back. . . . The only solution to the problems the Internet has left us with is to shape the Internet, or at least certain corners of it, into something else.²²

Our habitual means and structures have been shaken, and the ground is moving under our feet. We do not yet know what will emerge, but we have the opportunity and responsibility to build these shifting stones into “a house where love can dwell.”²³

EXPERT WITNESS: SCHOLARLY AND PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET

The attention economy that arose with the internet and social media presents significant problems for Christian discipleship. It is crucial for worship

²¹Buber, *I and Thou*, 46.

²²Smith, *Internet Is Not What You Think*, 51.

²³Marty Haugen, “All Are Welcome” (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1994).

leaders and church music scholars to grapple with these cultural forces of distraction, alienation, and objectification. However, it is also necessary to acknowledge other practical ways that the technological revolution of the internet has affected and may continue to affect church music. Similar to the printing press, the radio, and the television, the internet has raised new questions and anxieties for the church, challenged social and theological norms, and collided with existing structures around church music. While scholarship around these questions is still forming, the experts interviewed for this research have valuable insights to offer from their work.

Heidi Campbell described in an interview how the shift to online worship resulting from the pandemic presented new challenges and questions for pastors and worship leaders, as well as various reactions within church cultures. Speaking of the difficulties faced by pastors, Campbell points out that pastors lacked the technical training to make informed decisions around online worship. Their education, in general, lacked both practical skills and the flexible, creative, problem-solving approach needed with new technologies and shifting environments. Campbell remarks that pastors had to “basically put aside the whole model [they were] used to and in many ways start over.”²⁴

Many leaders were thrust into an environment they were ill-equipped to navigate. This required quick adaptation and learning new skills, both of which cost a great deal of energy and time. Established systems and structures such as local churches and denominations do not easily adapt to massive change. Campbell highlights that, even given the difficulty, adapting to change is an essential question for religious organizations. One of the central questions for the church will be how it adapts to the transformations brought about by the internet. She notes that many churches resisted this change in the past but now are facing real questions about how a continuing decision to remain disengaged from online spaces might affect their potential reach and even the survival of their organizations and communities.²⁵

Along this line of thinking, Campbell offers an insightful historical analysis of our current technocultural moment in comparison to the early

²⁴Heidi A. Campbell, interview by author, Zoom, January 20, 2023.

²⁵Campbell, interview.

reactions to the printing press. She notes that the Catholic Church was initially in favor of the printing press as a means of standardizing religious training and proselytizing. This positive regard for the technology did not last, however. When the Protestant Reformation began, the media ceased being a lever for control and stability and became a tool for disruption and change. Campbell points out, “People are okay with technology as long as that allows them to keep doing what they’re doing. But the people who’ve been the most vocal, especially before the pandemic, against technology were the people that had a much more structure-based, system-based understanding of religion.” Campbell compares current organizations’ rejection of the internet with the way the Catholic Church for a time condemned the printing press (which was challenging the organization’s authority) but eventually had to accept and use the technology. This transformation was necessary but did result in a shift toward decreased control and stability. Campbell suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic represented a similar moment for many churches:

I think the pandemic was that moment when we’re saying, okay, we have to embrace the technology and we have to be willing to give up some of our control, realizing . . . we’re not experts in technology. It means it changes a little bit the shape of our service and whatnot. . . . So I think this is a great moment. . . . Are people going to roll with it or are they going to shrink back? . . . And I think we’re seeing [in] churches, especially in 2022, going into 2023, that those two reactions are very pronounced.²⁶

The internet is not an unalloyed good to be embraced wholeheartedly; however, we should also be aware that our structures of religious power and authority (regardless of denomination or tradition) will tend to bring their theological authority to bear in ways that defend their own interests and stability.

While church leaders generally struggled to adapt to the online environment, shifting worship online also raised difficult questions for worship leaders in particular. Campbell notes that this change brought up questions about the purpose of musical worship. She notes that many people described musical worship as a community event, to gather the people together.

²⁶Campbell, interview.

Thus, anxieties arose about whether an online mediation of musical worship could be a genuine expression of communal gathering: “And so the fear was, well, if we just put our people up on the screen, and there’s nobody in the congregation, it’s just a performance. . . . How do we place those people on a screen so it actually encourages community?”²⁷

Campbell also notes that these efforts to cultivate community through online music revealed for some churches that their musical practices were not as communal as they had assumed. She says, “A lot of churches . . . either didn’t want to realize . . . or they tried to ignore that we thought we were building communities through our worship . . . but actually, it’s just a performance.” The task of presenting services online highlighted these concerns and questions, inviting self-examination and critique of habitual approaches.²⁸

The sudden broad adoption of online worship, then, introduced new struggles for ministers due to a lack of skills using the new technologies, while also bringing into question the legitimacy of previously accepted patterns of practice. When a new variable changes our media ecology, we are likely to experience both responses: a difficulty adapting and an awareness of the imperfections of our existing and familiar methods.

One practical example of the challenge to adapt arose around issues of copyright. Just as the printing press presented new possibilities for sharing music, leading to the need for musicians to protect their work, the internet allows for widespread sharing of content, including that created by artists. Copyright is a much more developed system at the time of this writing, and many churches struggled to navigate that system while making the shift online. Campbell points out how churches needed to address questions of how to appropriately display licensing information for music on their streaming services, and whether portions of their videos on platforms such as YouTube would be flagged as copyright infringement or have the audio silenced. Campbell describes churches that felt blindsided by this shift: “This is something we’ve never had to think about when we’re now in multiple spaces. We know the rules *here* [in physical church], but what are the rules in the digital world? How might that change?”²⁹

²⁷Campbell, interview.

²⁸Campbell, interview.

²⁹Campbell, interview.

Understanding this set of issues was not a struggle only for individual congregations, however. Joe Iovino of United Methodist Communications was involved in denomination-level efforts to provide online worship resources for United Methodist churches and encountered similar barriers. Copyright was a major obstacle for the denomination, as it was not readily apparent what the organization could legally do to provide resources and connect with local congregations. United Methodist Communications hoped to broadcast services for the denomination, but copyright restricted their efforts to produce their own worship service or digitally host a local church's service. The communications agency was not equipped with the proper licenses for these kinds of projects because they had not been necessary in a prepandemic world.³⁰ Even an established denomination such as the United Methodist Church struggled to find ways to move forward in the new media environment.

Apart from copyright issues, congregations were also wrestling with what a meaningful online offering might look like. Taylor Burton-Edwards recounts the shortcomings of much of what occurred on early pandemic worship livestreams. Burton-Edwards remarks, "Just a documentation by video of what's going on in the room does not constitute effective online worship practice at this point." While many churches have been obtaining equipment and learning more about how to produce a more appealing visual offering, most online worship services still seem lacking in terms of genuine participation. Burton-Edwards recounts that a church where he served started by "literally taking somebody's cell phone camera, mounting it somewhere and streaming that to Facebook."³¹ A similar practice happened in my own previous church for a time. This is understandable, given the sudden and huge change brought about by the pandemic lockdown. However, the tendency to simply provide video feed of a typical Sunday service falls short of allowing for meaningful engagement and formation. Allison Norton draws on her research of congregations across the United States to comment on this dynamic:

One of the things that we see is many churches, especially smaller and mid-sized churches, are doing what could be called hybrid, but they're simply livestreaming what happens in a face-to-face setting. And that has a lot of

³⁰Joe Iovino, interview by author, Zoom, January 23, 2023.

³¹Taylor Burton-Edwards, interview by author, Zoom, January 25, 2023.

limitations, a lot of questions around . . . what involvement is happening? How are you facilitating a sense of belonging to the larger community in this group?³²

Norton's reflection raises the question of what would be required for online worship to facilitate meaningful involvement and belonging in community. It is possible to conceive of the answer in terms of high production-value streaming such as services produced by megachurches. However, this ideal (if it is indeed ideal) is not feasible for most churches. Burton-Edwards combines demographic knowledge with personal experience to make a compelling case. He emphasizes, "The vast majority of congregations are fewer than one hundred in average worship attendance. . . . Those congregations simply don't have the capacity to do this." Personnel, technology, and equipment are all major issues, leading Burton-Edwards to conclude, "Nothing about a church that size, which is the vast majority of American congregations [Burton-Edwards estimates over 72 percent], makes it a reasonable candidate for livestreaming." Burton-Edwards recounts his experience as a pastor during the pandemic:

Well, during the pandemic, everybody needed to do something like [online worship]. But I can tell you as a working pastor during the pandemic that for a small church, this was an impossible burden because I was the only person who could do it. And I had to do the whole thing myself. Zoom did not work for my people. And trying to do any other format did not work for my people. The only thing that began to work for my people was for me to produce a videotaped worship service every week, which was taking fourteen hours for twenty-eight minutes of a service, minus the sermon prep. This is unsustainable.³³

Burton-Edwards also highlights a demographic issue. A research group called Faith Communities Today began tracking congregational demographic trends in 2000 and published a report in 2020. According to this report, while 70 percent of congregations are smaller than 100, 70 percent of American Christians attend churches larger than 250 (these churches represent 4 percent of American congregations).³⁴ The online church streaming

³²Allison Norton, interview by author, Zoom, February 23, 2023.

³³Burton-Edwards, interview.

³⁴"FACT 2020 Survey Results," *Faith Communities Today*, October 25, 2019, <https://faithcommunities.today.org/fact-2020-survey/>.

space is dominated by large churches, which set the norms for what online worship “should” be. This connects back to Campbell’s remarks about new expectations being placed on church leaders. Pastors and ministers have not been trained to be video editors and online entrepreneurs. But as Burton-Edwards points out, the pandemic and surrounding technological changes and cultural expectations pressured churches to compete in a market dominated by atypical congregations. This raises a crucial question for churches in a postpandemic era: How can these communities be sustainable in this new landscape?³⁵

Sustainability for worshiping communities will be a major concern going forward. Campbell reflects somberly on the prognosis for many local congregations in the new environment:

I believe in the next twenty years we’re going to see a large portion of churches dying. And my fear is the churches that will die will be the kind of small, especially mainline denominations, the ones that kind of [say] . . . we have this tradition and we’re so grounded in the tradition. We’re not looking at how we might adapt. And a lot of times people say, “Oh, if we change the liturgy, then we’ve changed the culture, we’ve changed our faith.” You can innovate liturgy, you can innovate practices, and not throw out your theology, but it does mean some negotiation. So I believe the churches that will survive are the ones that are able to innovate and work within those kind of structures. The ones that are going to die are the ones that are not willing to, especially with older congregation members that are very resistant to—and I say it’s technology; it’s just one of the markers of that resistance rather than the main thing.³⁶

Campbell takes no delight in acknowledging the likely trajectory of these smaller congregations in America. Additionally, she acknowledges where she sees the trends in more digitally mediated worship moving, noting the likely outcome of more multisite church networks resourced by megachurches. Campbell expresses concern that “worship entertainment” will become more widespread and wonders, “What kind of a theology is going to be prevalent because it sells well? How will that affect Christian culture?”³⁷ It is possible that these expressions of worship will become more prevalent; however, it is

³⁵Burton-Edwards, interview.

³⁶Campbell, interview.

³⁷Campbell, interview.

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