



8 DISRUPTIVE CHURCH TRENDS THAT WILL RULE 2021 (THE RISE OF THE POST-PANDEMIC CHURCH)

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Having been through a year like no other, what can you expect as a church leader in 2021?

In all likelihood, this year will lead the church into the post-pandemic world. It won't be the light switch you hope for (and suddenly, we're all back!). Instead, it will be a gradual emergence into whatever our normalized future looks like. But at some point in 2021 you'll look back and realize most of the pandemic is behind you and the future is ahead of you.

The question is, what kind of new reality will emerge?

For church leaders, it will be a different world for sure.

While no one can say exactly what the future holds, here are 8 trends I'm watching and would encourage you and your team to consider and process as well.

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1. The Majority Of Attenders May No Longer Be In The Room

Physical church attendance has been in decline for decades and COVID in all likelihood accelerated the decline even further.

The average church has seen their re-opened attendance come in around [36% of previous levels](#). Almost no leader I've interviewed expects church attendance to jump back to pre-COVID levels for a while.

For years, most pastors didn't know how to handle anyone who engaged the message or mission outside of their facility.

[Moving forward, many church leaders will realize that people who are engaging from home or other places will count just as much as those who are attending in a facility.](#)

Over the last year, so many things have shifted home: work, shopping, food, fitness, school and (at least for a season) church.

People have realized they don't have to go to a building to engage. And as a result, some won't do that nearly as much in the future.

As 2021 rolls on, many growing churches will see off-facility attendance (home participation, micro-gatherings and distributed gatherings) eclipse facility-based attendance: the number of people participating in the mission who are not in the building on a Sunday will surpass the number of people participating in the mission inside the building.

More and more growing churches will embrace online viewing from home, micro-gatherings and micro-campus as normal.

What pastors have to understand quickly is that this trend isn't about people who are dropping out. It's about people who are leaning in.

In the future, the number of people participating in the mission who are not in the building on a Sunday will surpass the number of people participating in the mission inside the building.

[If you can be good with the fact that micro-gatherings, distributed gatherings and people watching from home count, then you can mobilize those people in the same way you would people who are in your building.](#)

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In the same way retailers have come to understand that an online purchaser is still a client, and restaurant owners have embraced the fact that drive-thru, take out and delivery can still be fulfill their mission around food, so church leaders have to get good with the fact that people who aren't in the main room count.

Your church is still around. The church is still around. It's just left the building.

In the post-pandemic church, it's possible that the majority of attenders as well as your most engaged people may not be in the room.

2. Growing Churches Will Shift Their Focus From Gathering To Connecting

This leads us to the second trend. Historically, the church has wagered almost everything on gathering people in a building.

This year, however, growing churches will focus less on gathering and much more on connecting. (Thanks to Tony Morgan for this language.)

Connecting people who are engaging from home both with the church and with one another will become an essential skill for all church leaders.

In 2021, if coming to Christ means coming to your church in a set location and a set hour, you need a new strategy. Growing churches will focus less on gathering and much more on connecting

The easiest way to think about this is the same way church leaders have thought about small groups for the last 25 years.

Almost no church leader today feels threatened by the idea that hundreds or thousands of people will be meeting in their homes to connect with other people. The church facilitates groups but doesn't host them in a centralized facility.

Instead, leaders simply connect people who want to be connected and engage them in the mission.

This is where the potential for Sunday morning starts to move it to the new direction.

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Small groups by nature tend to be closed and intimate. Gathering in people's homes and outside the building on Sunday morning (or off-Sunday) would consist of micro-churches that are outward focused. Think of groups, but with an evangelism thrust.

The good news is that this scales in a way that gathered worship doesn't. It costs less and produces for more.

Gathering people on Sunday mornings will be as important as ever. It just won't all happen in a building owned by the church.

3. Some Pastors Will Try To Fill Auditoriums While Others Focus On Fulfilling The Mission

The first two trends are disorienting and it's easy to see why they would seem discouraging to many leaders. It's a whole new paradigm the church is emerging into.

Just search the comments on this blog or social media and you'll see church leaders who are having a really hard time coming to terms with what's happening. I get it—it's hard.

As a result, the natural tendency will be to ignore Trends 1 and 2 and focus on filling up auditoriums again once everything is fully open.

That might create a short term win but result in a longer term loss and missed opportunity. After all, for most leaders filling rooms was getting harder long before the pandemic.

So what's underneath the obsession about filling auditoriums?

Often arguments include things like "Christians can't forsake getting together" or "we have to gather in community." That's deeply true.

What's not true (or biblical) is that the gathering has to happen in a building owned by the church (see the first two trends).

As someone who's led a church for two decades, I promise you I like full rooms too. A little too much to be honest.

As much as they make for great pics on Instagram and make you feel better about yourself, full rooms do not guarantee a fulfilled mission.

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What's under all this? Let me quote from a text a friend sent to me recently:

It would be interesting to know whether pastors value in-person attendance more than distributed attendance (micro-gatherings) or online attendance.

My feed had a lot of pastors quoting the [stat](#) that showed only people who attend in person saw improved mental health in 2020.

Personally, I saw that as very self-serving and bit dangerous as in “see...you need to come back to the building like I said you should...”

I've seen that in my feed too. (I also haven't seen any pastor mention that in the same poll, low income earners, young adults and single people fared better than others. No one wrote about the political findings either.)

At stake here is a full room versus a fulfilled mission.

In the future, leaders who only focus on filling a room will miss the biggest opportunity they have to fulfill their mission.

If the size of your vision shrinks to the size of a room you can fill, you've missed the church's mission.

4. Growing Churches Will See The Internet And Their Buildings Differently

So, what do you do with your building?

Great question.

You use it to equip people, not just gather them. Yes, people will gather in your building. And that's awesome.

For too many years, pastors have been focused on one thing: Getting the greatest number of people in the room at the same time.

Sometimes that's about ministry. Sometimes (honestly) it's about ego. I'll confess to both.

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The church facilities of the future will be places where people assemble to be equipped to do ministry during the week. I realize that, theoretically, we've always believed that, but we often haven't behaved that way. What we believe and how we behave are often two very different things.

The difference is that most of the people you're equipping won't be in the room. You may be speaking to them from the room, but they'll be in their homes, in their cars, at work and in the community.

Right now, most pastors are using church online to get people into the building. In the future, most pastors will use the building to reach people online.

Just because they're not attending doesn't mean they aren't engaged or in community. They can and will gather outside a church building.

In the future, churches that equip Christians will eclipse churches that gather them.

5. Content Alone Won't Cut It. Community And Connection Will.

The rush in 2020 was to get content online. Which was completely natural and appropriate.

Heading into 2021, the mood around content is shifting.

Pastors are complaining that views are down because people are 'Zoomed out' or "Screened out."

Sure, the spike in screen time has been a shock to all our systems, mine included.

But just because you personally feel screened out doesn't mean the culture is.

If you think people are screened out, run your theory by TikTok or Instagram. Apparently, people aren't nearly as done with screens as church leaders think.

Which leads us into the fourth trend. Yes, content matters because sharing the Word of God matters...immensely.

However, many Christians now realize they they can watch or listen to their favorite preachers, content creators and voices in the world today any time for free. So they do.

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One approach is to try to equal or match the exceptionally gifted and skilled communicators out there. But for most of leaders, that's not a winning strategy. You won't be able to compete.

Growing churches (and yes, that includes small and mid-sized churches too) will realize that connection and community will win out over content in the end, and they'll focus their resources there.

Nobody should be able to out-local or out-community the local the church.

Absolutely produce the best content you can, but make the goal connecting with people.

When you provide connection (getting to know people, moving them into community, caring for them), it will provide a loyalty and sense of tribe that people can't get elsewhere.

Therefore, make the goal of digital content connection, not consumption.

6. Generational Differences Will Become Clearer Than Ever

Shifting gears a little, one of the creeping trends in the last few years is that generational differences are becoming sharper than ever.

While according to [one survey](#), 71% of Boomers preferred physical worship as opposed to digital or hybrid church, only 41% of Gen Z preferred physical worship. Everyone other than Boomers had a preference for hybrid (a combination of in-person and digital gathering) or digital gatherings.

Many studies these days show stark differences between younger adults and older adults.

And while leaders love to pick part data, try a simpler approach. If you think attitudes about worship, racial justice, sexuality, economics, and even things like climate change aren't morphing where you live (i.e. folks around here are pretty traditional), talk to a youth pastor.

Youth pastors more than almost anyone else sense where trends are heading.

If you want to get more personal, talk to some churched and unchurched teens and young adults.

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While this doesn't change core Christian theology, it does mean wise leaders will think about their tone and approach.

If you want to get a sense of how the dialogue is changing, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyon's *UnChristian* is still remarkably relevant even fourteen years after its first publication while *Faith For Exiles* offers an updated perspective.

As Gen Z emerges into the workforce, attitudes and beliefs most leaders were thinking were aberrations and exceptions will become mainstream.

Leaders who understand the emerging culture, its language and its values will have the best chance of reaching it.

7. The Political And Ideological Churches Will Lose Influence With The Unchurched

If 2020 surfaced anything, it's how political and ideological some kinds of churches have become.

It's easy in a tribalized culture to become tribal. And while that might score some short term points with like-minded people who are angry and self-righteous (both are characteristics of the political left and the right), in the long run it will diminish your influence with most of the people you're trying to reach.

Unchurched people aren't looking for an echo of the culture, they're seeking an alternative to it.

Moving ahead a few years, the future church will consist of Christians who look, live and sound much more like Jesus than the political candidate of their choice.

What many church leaders are about to face is this truth: Unchurched people aren't looking for politics or ideology. They're looking for Christ.

I pray they find him in our churches.

8. Spiritual Entrepreneurs Will Thrive

These are hard times for all leaders, but as the dust settles and we emerge into the post-pandemic world, leaders who see opportunities instead of obstacles will thrive.

The missing gift set in the church is spiritual entrepreneurship—something the New Testament calls apostleship. It's the kind of radical determination, innovation and fierceness the Apostle Paul showed.

As I wrote about [here](#), the church today is filled with shepherds, to the point where shepherds are perhaps over-represented in church leadership. What we need most as we navigate new waters in a post-Christian culture is not more shepherds, but spiritual entrepreneurs.

Whether you call it spiritual entrepreneurship or the gift of apostleship, what we need is a new generation of Apostle Pauls who forge out in new directions.

Who experiment boldly. Who dare greatly.

Spiritual entrepreneurs are the kind of leaders who will find tomorrow's solutions when most leaders can only see today's problem.

In a marketplace that's in love with start-ups and new ventures, we need some leaders who are inclined to spend their lives in the marketplace who will take their God-given talents and energy and throw them full time behind the mission of the church.

Some of the ideas that will become widely embraced five years in the future are being birthed right now.

New ways of gathering people, mobilizing and equipping people and moving the mission forward are being developed as you read this.

Micro-churches, the distributed church, community focused churches, the location independent church, and many other new forms of expression are leading the way into the future.

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Right now, most of those approaches will get more criticism than praise.

In the same way few people thought private citizens renting out their homes and vehicles to others was a good idea (Airbnb and Uber), so a lot of the ideas for church you'll see in 2021 will be denounced and dismissed...until they're not.

As is often in culture, the leaders you criticize today will be the leaders who coach you tomorrow.

So be open. A lot of good, messy, untested, might-not-work initiatives are going to launch. It's out of that the future is always born.

Carey Nieuwhof is a best-selling leadership author, speaker, podcaster, former attorney, and church planter. His content is accessed by leaders over 1.5 million times a month. He speaks to leaders around the world about leadership, change and personal growth.



8 Disruptive Church Trends 2021 Team Application Guide

Team Discussion Questions

1. Of all eight trends, which can you readily identify with most? Where are you already seeing it play out at your church?
2. Trends 1-4 deal with attendance. What have your attendance patterns been like pre-COVID? How do you think the current crisis might affect those trends?
3. What bothers you about distributed attendance? What excites you about it?
4. What would you say the current purpose of your online content is? What would it take for you to make it lead to connection and community rather than to consumption?
5. What are you seeing among younger adults when it comes to Trends 6 and 7?
6. Who are the spiritual entrepreneurs on your team? How could they be positioned to help lead your church through 2021?

8 Disruptive Church Trends

2021 Team Application Guide (cont'd)

Team Action Steps

1. What can you do in the next 30 days to help position you to better capitalize on digital and distributed attendance opportunities?
2. What can you do in the next 30 days to help you position your content to lead to connection and community instead of just consumption?
3. What other changes will you make in the next 60 days to help your church seize the opportunities and avoid the obstacles?

How do you implement change quickly and effectively?

To learn more about how to lead your team through change quickly, [download the free 30 Day Pivot Cheat Sheet here.](#)