The Digital Reformation began Friday, March 13, 2020, when the President declared a national emergency due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Church leaders quickly cobbled together virtual worship services, assuming faith communities would be apart for only a few weeks. As weeks stretched into months, however, leaders began to acknowledge that there was no going back to a previous normal, to a time of mostly in-person faith communities.

In *The Holy and the Hybrid: Navigating the Church’s Digital Reformation*, Ryan M. Panzer helps church leaders develop hybrid ministries through aligning the shared mission of the church with the collective values of our tech-shaped culture. The goal of this book is to help build communities that serve as the hands and feet of Christ simultaneously online and offline. With Panzer’s guidance, church leaders will feel confident coaching their communities through this time of great change.

Praise for *The Holy and the Hybrid*:

"The Holy and the Hybrid advances an essential conversation for church leaders and communities responding to the ministry needs of the digitally integrated world. An important exploration."

—Elizabeth Drescher, author of *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America’s Nones*

"The Holy and the Hybrid is a book every pastor and church leader needs to read. It invites us to reflect on the ways we were all thrown into the digital deep end during the pandemic, and most importantly, it offers a way forward for churches to develop sustainable hybrid ministries that will be essential for the future of the church."

—Jim Keat, digital minister, The Riverside Church

"The Holy and the Hybrid offers a feast of insights that will be beneficial to a wide range of church leaders navigating monumental cultural changes."

—Michael J. Chan, Concordia College, Moorhead, MN

RYAN M. PANZER is a learning and leadership development professional in the technology industry and a speaker and consultant on technology for ministry. He often writes and speaks about the intersection of faith and technology. He is the author of *Grace and Gigabytes: Being Church in a Tech-Shaped Culture* (Fortress Press, 2020). For more of his writings and resources, visit ryanpanzer.com.
PRAISE FOR THE HOLY AND THE HYBRID

“Two decades and one pandemic into a religious reality dramatically changed by digital technologies, social media, and the new modes of communications they have prompted, Ryan Panzer’s The Holy and the Hybrid advances an essential conversation for church leaders and communities responding to the ministry needs of the digitally integrated world. Not only an important exploration of communication practices required for meaningful ministry engagement today, but also a guide to innovative structural changes that will encourage and support revitalized ministries, The Holy and the Hybrid should be on every pastor’s, priest’s, and lay minister’s digital or old-school wooden desktop.”

—Elizabeth Drescher, adjunct associate professor of religious studies, Santa Clara University; author of Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America’s Nones

“The Holy and the Hybrid is a book every pastor and church leader needs to read. It invites us to reflect on the ways we were all thrown into the digital deep end during the pandemic, and most importantly, it offers a way forward for churches to develop sustainable hybrid ministries that will be essential for the future of the church.”

—Jim Keat, digital minister, The Riverside Church
In this timely book, Panzer skillfully identifies and interprets the moment we are in. With one foot in the church and one in the tech industry, he speaks with a hybridized authority that few of us can muster. The Holy and the Hybrid offers a feast of insights that will be beneficial to a wide range of church leaders navigating monumental cultural changes.”

—Michael J. Chan, executive director for Faith and Learning, Concordia College, Moorhead, MN

“Part memoir, part manual, this readable book will help readers make sense of their own journeys into hybrid ministry—the places where the physical and the digital offer both old and new ways of doing ministry. Panzer is both committed to digital ministry and aware of its limits, which makes this book an honest and helpful guide for readers reflecting on how God is calling them to design the next chapter of ministry in their own settings.”

—Dave Daubert, pastor, Zion Lutheran Church, Elgin, IL; lead consultant, Day 8 Strategies; and co-author of Becoming a Hybrid Church

“The coronavirus pandemic required us all to examine our way of life. What was essential? What could be modified? While we all scrambled with that in some way, churches and ministry organizations had the challenge of sharing the gospel and cultivating faithful community when most of the traditional communal practices of church were considered unsafe. In The Holy and the Hybrid, Ryan Panzer analyzes the emotions that came with the pandemic but also helps us learn and grow from the ways in which we had to adjust. Covid-19 forced us to examine the ‘that’s the way we’ve always done it’
mentality in our churches and to look at how technology and digital practices can help our churches in their mission of sharing the gospel and cultivating faithful community. This book is not a ‘how to do’ but a ‘how to think about’ our ministry, allowing the logistics of tech-enhanced ministry to meet the culture and context of each congregation. *The Holy and the Hybrid* is a roadmap, or perhaps a GPS, pointing us to where the church can go in this next era of our ministry lives together.”

—Ross Murray, deacon, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; vice president, GLAAD Media Institute; founding director, The Naming Project; producer, Yass, Jesus! podcast; and author of *Made, Known, Loved: Developing LGBTQ-Inclusive Youth Ministry*

“Panzer reminds those of us who advocate for hybrid ministry what can be lost if we invest only in digital communities, and he challenges people who want to remove all cameras from church to consider what can be gained by offering everyone a front-row seat. If you are discerning to what extent digital ministry might, or might not, be a part of your congregation’s future, this book won’t provide easy answers. It will help you reflect on how your theological beliefs, understanding of community, and willingness to engage ethical uncertainty are important components of how, or if, you embrace a hybrid approach to ministry.”

—Stacy Williams-Duncan, founder and CEO, Learning Forte
“Ryan Panzer is one of the most accessible and thoughtful Christians writing about digital tech in ministry today. Following upon his excellent first book, *Grace and Gigabytes*, he offers a resource-rich path through the uncertain spaces we are navigating as we move into the next chapters of church in and beyond a pandemic. He goes straight to the heart of the challenges when he writes, ‘Digital Reformation is not a specific response to an event, but an effort to achieve a level of inclusivity that will benefit the church well after the worst of the pandemic has passed.’”

—Mary E. Hess, professor of educational leadership; chair, leadership division, Luther Seminary

“Ryan Panzer is one for such a time as this, discipled in the theology and traditions of the church, yet also immersed in twenty-first-century tech culture. From this unique position, he offers a bold path forward for pastors and church leaders weary from the struggles of the Covid-19 pandemic, yet still faithfully seeking wisdom and direction to navigate the road ahead for their churches.”

—Loren Richmond, pastor, podcaster, and social entrepreneur

“With a wealth of wisdom and experience in both the church and the tech industry, Panzer is exactly the voice we need to guide us into the Digital Reformation. His first book, *Grace and Gigabytes*, laid the conceptual foundation for the church’s understanding of its place in our tech-shaped culture. *The Holy and the Hybrid* takes us deeper, asking what it means to be the church both online and offline. This book shines a light into the unseeable future, offering church leaders hope and instilling confidence that God is with us as we step into the hybrid adventure that awaits us.”

—Jimmy Bero, youth pastor, Blackhawk Church, Madison, WI
“This is not another book on how to improve your church livestream or a quick-fix guide to building social media numbers. Panzer’s invitation in The Holy and the Hybrid isn’t even primarily about technology. He has written a winsome, clear-eyed, and hopeful invitation to the church to meet people wherever they are right now with the good news of Jesus. I’m deeply grateful for his thoughtful work and the way he continually points to the ‘why’ behind hybrid ministry.”

—Eric Holmer, director of media,
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Madison, WI
For my son, Thomas.
May you always know the joy that comes with deep connection and uplifting community.
The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

—Ephesians 4:11–13 (emphasis mine)
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When I became interested in the topic of technology in the church, it seemed at times like a fringe or even futuristic topic. Some seminary courses, including those taught by Mary Hess at Luther Seminary, addressed the question of what it means to be church in a digital age. A few books, including *Click-2Save* by Keith Anderson and Elizabeth Drescher, offered insights for church leaders on social media and content creation. But the conversation on technology always seemed to have an experimental edge to it, as if digital expressions of Christian community were perhaps peripheral to the idea of church, the unique work of specialists as opposed to a church-wide vocation.

I wrote *Grace and Gigabytes* within this context. Among my motivations for writing the book was to persuade church leaders to think critically about technology. I hoped that readers would come to think about digital technology not just as a ministry tactic, but also as a cultural force that influences the way we think, know, and believe.

I submitted the final manuscript for the book on Wednesday, February 12, 2020. When I pressed “send,” I never could have imagined how the pandemic would push church
leaders to reinvent Christian community just four and a half weeks later. I never could have recognized that the book would come to be less about persuading leaders to think about digital ministry and more about accompanying them on what Tod Bolsinger, the author of *Canoeing the Mountains*, describes as a process of “leading off the map in charted territory.”

As I spoke with church leaders throughout an extended time of physical distancing and digital-only forms of church community, I gradually recognized that digital ministry was here to stay. As vaccines rolled out and buildings started to reopen, church leaders were no longer asking whether to gather as church in digital spaces. Their questions started to ask how best to put digital and analog together. How might we become a hybrid ministry that blends the best of online and offline? How might we build seamless connections in physical space and cyberspace? These were the questions I sought to answer as I started writing *The Holy and the Hybrid*.

In this book, I seek to define hybrid ministry as a blend of digital and analog that invites individuals to follow Christ and equips communities for faithful discipleship. I argue that hybrid ministry is the method best suited to proclaim the gospel to a digital age. And I suggest that its implementation represents a change-management challenge of historical magnitude.

I wrote this book to help church leaders navigate what Elizabeth Drescher first described as the “Digital Reformation.” In her book, “Tweet If You Heart Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation” Drescher defines the Digital Reformation as:
“A revitalization of the Church driven by the often ad hoc spiritualities of ordinary believers as they integrate practices of access, connection, participation, creativity, and collaboration, encouraged by the widespread use of new digital social media into all aspects of daily life, including the life of faith.”

Building on Drescher’s pioneering work, this book seeks to accompany church leaders in this vocation of revitalization. This book is the product of countless conversations with thoughtful church leaders and technology enthusiasts who continue to courageously convene conversations on the church’s hybrid future. Thank you to Luther Seminary’s Faith Lead team—especially Dawn Alitz, Katie Langston, Emily McQuillan, Lara Moll, and Ben McDonald Coltvet, who led the way in hosting so many crucial conversations on this topic. The Faith Lead platform created a digital laboratory for church leaders eager for new models and methods, and many of the insights I present in this book emerged through their classes and discussions. Thank you to Michael Chan, with whom I prototyped and tested many of the ideas set forth in this book.

Thank you to the pastors and church leaders who have been so important in my faith life: Dennis Ellisen, Cindy Meyer, Kurt Hoffman, Sue Sprowls, Dave Hendricks, Sarah Iverson, Chris Enstad, Sheryl Erickson, Joe Brosious, Dara Schuller-Hanson, and of course, the late Brent Christianson.

Thank you to The Gentlemen’s Book Club: Jim, Pete, Ray, Tim, Luke, Matt, and Mike. Our conversations on *Grace and Gigabytes* first inspired me to think about writing another book!
Thank you to the team at Fortress Press, especially Beth Gaede, who so thoughtfully edited this book as well as *Grace and Gigabytes*.

Finally, thank you to my wife, Annie, for providing essential everyday encouragement. And thank you to my kids, Alice and Thomas, who so delightfully remind me of the boundless joy in our life together!
It wasn’t the building that I missed the most. It wasn’t the sound of organ music echoing through the sanctuary. It wasn’t preaching from a pulpit, children’s sermons at the altar railing, or the cool touch of the offering plates passed across the rows.

What I missed the most on Sunday, March 15, 2020, were the doughnuts. And I don’t mean eating the doughnuts, which were often stale, rather flavorless, and not worth the numbers they added to my jeans size. I mean the conversations that surrounded the doughnuts, the pleasant chatter that filled the lobby every Sunday morning at approximately 11:02 a.m. I missed the small talk with close friends, especially the cross-generational friends who were in many cases even older than my grandparents. I missed the banter with the coffee hosts, the repeatable yet irrepressible jokes about the volunteer baristas doing the real “Lord’s work.”
I missed the sign-up sheets for book discussions and donation boxes for homeless ministries, the volunteer sign-up tables, and the calendar displays, all consistently busy locations amid the caffeinated conversation hour. I missed shaking hands with visitors my age, visitors I hoped would come again yet who were statistically unlikely to return. I missed walking out the side door, a refilled cup of coffee in my hands and doughnut crumbs on my shirt, the sun glinting off the snowbanks. When I look back to that first Sunday of church online, I missed the moments of connection—simple, sometimes awkward, yet ever-uplifting moments where we shared our stories and felt heard.

Those conversations over coffee and doughnuts renewed our commitments to close friends, new acquaintances, and fellow members. The church we were prior to the Covid-19 pandemic was a place of life-giving encounters, a place where we went to discover and live into the idea that we are all human beings looking for connection and purpose. It was a place where we belonged. That sense of togetherness helped us see that our acts of faithful service for the good of the neighbor made a real difference to them.

I also realized on March 15, 2020, as I recognize today, that not every connection is friendly, fulfilling, and faith-filled. Churches are places for imperfect people, simultaneously saint and sinner, keen to bring their full selves but not always their best selves to church. Anyone who has ever preached a sermon and been subjected to immediate postservice feedback knows that congregants can pivot from friendly to fractious, from constructive to critical.

Yet when I think about the disagreements over politics and polity and the nit-picking over the smallest changes to
worship styles or liturgy, I am reminded that face-to-face connections in the church form us for service to a real world, an actual place of friendship and resentment, agreement and discord. I am reminded that the bonds of church membership and participation—the good and the bad of it all—rapidly form us for a relational depth that no social media page or group chat could offer.

We always left by 11:15, or by 11:30 if Annie and I were serving our quarterly coffee host assignment. Coffee and doughnuts lasted no more than thirteen minutes for me. Yet those minutes filled up my prayer lists and my Christmas card list. Those brief moments each Sunday established deep, cross-generational trust with people I hardly knew, with people I often disagreed with, and with people for whom I would do anything. At 11:15 a.m. on March 15, 2020, we had no place from which to depart, nobody to wave to, no parking lot to cross, no car to start. We had watched an online service with preaching and prayer, Scripture and singing, and plenty of announcements about what would become the church’s new normal. But we were missing our sense of connection with our church community. We were missing togetherness.

I wish I had known on Sunday, March 8, 2020, as I walked out of the last coffee hour, how much the world would change. I don’t remember much about that specific morning, aside from the fact that I was preaching and that there had been some nervous chatter and anxious conversation about the virus’s increasing spread within the United States. I do remember that we decided on fist bumps instead of handshakes for the passing of the peace, that someone had placed a large jug of hand sanitizer next to the doughnuts, and that the coffee-hour hosts were filling up paper cups instead of letting
each congregant fill their own mugs. I wish I would have known on that last Sunday of “ordinary time” how much I would miss these connections. I wish I would have paused to take it all in and express some gratitude and appreciation for the togetherness that was so foundational to the church we were.

**CONNECTION IN THE ANALOG CHURCH**

Before the pandemic, two markers of the church stood out to me as a thirtysomething with an interest in technology. The first marker was its analog quality. Before the pandemic, walking into most church buildings felt like a trip through a time machine. While some churches had computers and Wi-Fi connections, church staff and lay leaders typically viewed the web as a communications tool rather than a mission field or a ministry site. Cell phones were often viewed more as nuisances than as tools for inviting or equipping, their apps and notifications a source of distraction and encumberment.

As a former camp counselor and youth ministry worker, I now recognize that I spent far too much time and energy trying to keep kids unplugged from technology for a Sunday morning, a Wednesday evening, or a week at camp. I mastered an extensive set of techniques for removing digital distractions, from “Cell Phone Jails” to voluntary device drop boxes. At the time, I believed it was worth my time to constantly ask kids to disconnect from screens. I may have thought that it was more important to remove digital distractions than to talk to the youth about what it means to be a Christian in their busy world. I and many other church leaders were determined to pivot youths’ energy and attention away
from the digital, which we viewed as a source of interruption, and toward the analog, which we assumed to be the authentic location of Christian community. I now wish that instead of blocking access to devices, we had found ways to convene Christian community and conversation online. While moments of digital Sabbath are always important to the life of faith, I should have sought not just to eliminate tech usage in the church but to integrate it into the life of the community.

Yes, the analog, nondigital church has some clear limitations, including difficulty connecting with the surrounding community. On the other hand, it also provides a buffer from the demands of the outside world. The analog church offers a level of spiritual insulation that strengthens the connections that develop through the church. In the prepandemic church, I always appreciated the opportunity to temporarily unplug from email, communication apps, and social media. Without social pressures to constantly check in with work or log on to my ever-increasing array of messaging applications, I saw the congregation as a place where I could be fully present.

The other marker of the analog church is its ties to a fixed time and location. Prior to the pandemic, everything about the church took place at specific times and, most importantly, in specific places. Particularly in urban mainline Protestant congregations, some of which occupy historic downtown buildings, institutional and family loyalty inspires congregants to commute from the suburbs or exurbs, sometimes great distances, to worship together.

Some aspects of a fixed locale and synchronous practice are problematic, though. For example, many churchgoers pay little attention to a congregation’s mission and ministry outside the church walls. It’s true that most churchgoers travel less than
ten minutes to arrive at a church building. But increasingly, churches are destinations for members traveling past the surrounding neighborhood—one where, outside of the building, they have few if any meaningful connections. Facilities also require a major financial investment. Recent studies of church finances have revealed that as much as twenty-five cents of every dollar donated to the church goes toward facility costs and upkeep. Having volunteered with fundraising and other campaigns for several different churches and church-affiliated ministries, I’ve seen how the costs of physical structures captivate both our balance sheets and our imagination of what ministry could and should be.

Still, there are advantages to fixed locations. In addition to the practical benefits of shelter and safety, buildings provide a consistent physical presence in a neighborhood that creates a tangible symbol of communal life, which can in turn inspire a sense of shared ownership or stewardship. Having a building binds the abstract concepts of community and discipleship to the congregation’s identity and commitments. More concretely, the site provides a consistent setting for acts of service and volunteerism, for putting one’s faith in action for the good of the neighbor. I have at times criticized church leaders’ tendencies to invest too many resources and too much energy in facilities, a commitment I believe can isolate Christian communities from their surrounding neighborhoods while inhibiting innovation in digital spaces. Nevertheless, it is difficult to fathom how faith communities would be as efficient or as effective in equipping members and neighbors for lives of faithful service without investing in local settings for hearing and telling one another’s stories.
How Connections Form Us

The church’s nondigital, localized, and synchronous qualities contribute to a shared sense of togetherness. But these connections are not the exclusive domain of faith communities. Coffee shops and happy hours create connection and togetherness, as do book clubs and shopping malls. What is distinctive about togetherness in the church is not that it exists but that it catalyzes concrete acts of service at a pace unmatched in other institutions. Togetherness in a faith community is unique because the congregation provides opportunities to enact shared spiritual values and faith commitments, to make a difference in a community. Sociologists have thoroughly chronicled how participating in a faith-based community significantly increases the likelihood that people will be civically engaged and active in social and political causes and that they will freely volunteer in the community.3

Social capital is an abstract concept that may not be familiar outside of academic circles, but it is important for understanding the strengths of the church we were. Social capital refers to a web of relationships that can be activated in working together toward a common purpose.4 In a religious context, social capital refers to “social resources available to individuals and groups through their social connections within a religious community.”5 As political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart concluded in their study “Religious Organizations and Social Capital,” “Mainline Protestant churches play a vital role in drawing together diverse groups of Americans within local communities, encouraging face-to-face contact, social ties and organizational networks that, in turn, generate interpersonal trust and collaboration over public affairs.
The theory suggests that people who pray together often also stay together to work on local matters, thereby strengthening communities.” When we belong to a church community, we serve more, we speak up more, and we listen more. There’s even evidence that our physical health improves!

Sociologist Robert Putnam has studied the many ways that active participation with a faith community inclines us toward generosity and equips us for service. His book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* details how religious individuals are more inclined to be generous, to volunteer in secular and religious causes, to advocate for social change, and to exhibit higher levels of social trust. According to Putnam’s research, frequent churchgoers are even more likely to donate blood. Putnam’s findings appear to indicate that something about involvement within a church community activates prosocial tendencies.

Many of these altruistic behaviors correlate not just with membership or belief but with the frequency of attendance at religious services. Putnam reports that those who attend church services weekly, or even occasionally, are significantly more likely to be trusting and generous than those who never attend worship. This finding seems to suggest that it’s not just claiming Christian identity but participating in a network of Christian social connections that forms individuals for altruism. In other words, when we show up and connect with others, we develop a service-oriented mindset. It is participation within the community, and not just affiliation, that inspires an individual toward service and generosity.

As a sociologist, Putnam is quick to remind his readers that correlation does not imply causation and that despite the statistical rigor of his analysis, there is always a chance that the
high levels of altruism and generosity within faith communities may simply be a product of altruistic individuals naturally gravitating toward church membership. In fact, he contends, this tendency toward altruism is not the result of our beliefs or personal practices but instead a direct result of the connections created within congregations. As Putnam concludes, “Theology and piety have very little to do with this religious edge in neighborliness and happiness. Instead, it is religion’s network of morally freighted personal connections, coupled with an inclination towards altruism, that explains both the good neighborliness and the life satisfaction of religious Americans.”

What’s remarkable is that this correlation is catalyzed by relatively small investments of time. In 2014, only one in three members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the largest Lutheran denomination in the United States (also the denomination in which I was raised), attended worship services on a weekly basis. One out of three members attend several times throughout the year, and one out of three never attend. This means that if you select a member of the ELCA, or any Christian denomination at random, and ask how much time they spend at church or with their church in a given week, more likely than not, their answer would be less than one hour. In fact, on average, Americans spend only 8.4 minutes per day on religious or spiritual activities. By contrast, the average American watches 168 minutes of television each day. Even though we don’t spend many hours at church or with religious activities, the social capital correlations remain. In the fleeting moments one might spend at church, connections form, which in turn form the individual for service and altruism. Why are churches so efficient, then,
at equipping for acts of service with comparatively few time resources?

From Connections to Service

The theological foundation of the church is the grace of God encountered first through Word and sacrament. Service to the neighbor is our response to God’s redeeming action; it turns us outward to love and serve the neighbor. As church leaders, our primary vocation is to ensure consistent access to Word and sacrament. While equipping individuals for service may not itself be the theological foundation of Christian community, nevertheless, the ability of churches to equip individuals for service is a distinctive aspect of congregational life. According to a 2016 Pew study, access to service opportunities is among the top factors contributing to one’s choice of a faith community.¹⁴

Churches are effective at equipping for service for many reasons, some of them having to do with traditional aspects of Christian life together. The call to service is in the DNA of the church community. When gathering on Sunday mornings, we see and hear exhortations to care for the neighbor. We hear sermons that articulate how the Scriptures set us free for good works toward our neighbor. We see sign-up sheets and bulletin boards describing how we might get involved. If we come back to the building during the week, we participate in concrete acts of service: sorting donations for the clothes closet, preparing food for a community Thanksgiving meal, or making Christmas decorations for the local nursing home.

Even as America’s religious landscape secularizes and diversifies, and even as churches evolve from an analog model, we
can still expect faith communities to be accelerators of social capital, equipping individuals to live out the teachings of their faith. Preaching, proclamation, and spiritual practices provide a framework that inspires us to service, but it is still through our connections that we receive concrete and specific opportunities to practice our faith. The synchronous, in-person church, the only experience most of us knew prior to March 2020, was particularly competent at forming and sustaining weak ties, a type of connection that can convert ideas into action.

We might define a weak tie as a connection with a person whose primary social, professional, and religious circles occasionally intersect with our own. These acquaintances or casual connections occur within a nonfamilial network, such as membership within the same church. Weak ties serve as a “social lubricant” that facilitates the exchange of ideas and the sharing of resources, along with mutually uplifting contributions.\textsuperscript{15} By contrast, a strong tie is a deep friendship or significant familial bond. When I think about my connections, my strong ties are the individuals on my Christmas card list, the friends and family who attended my wedding. I consider my relationships with most of the people I work, attend church, and serve with to be weak ties. The localized church easily creates networks of weak ties, which inspire us to love and serve the neighbor.

Some might suggest that it is diminishing or disrespectful to categorize a relationship, especially a relationship formed in Christian community, as a weak tie. The word \textit{weak} connotes insignificance, implying that weak ties are not important. This might be why we don’t use it much in church circles. Robert Putnam, author of \textit{Bowling Alone}, argues, however,
that weak ties create bridges between individuals, sustaining a norm of “generalized reciprocity.”\textsuperscript{16} For Putnam and other researchers of social capital, the “weakness” of these ties is their great strength. According to his surveys, our acquaintances and casual friends are the primary reasons we remain in a faith community and are even more important than the quality and style of worship and music.\textsuperscript{17} Weak ties open the door to collaboration and service because they provide abundant opportunities through which to practice our faith. They both alert us to needs and connect us to the settings where our service will benefit others. They also often provide tools and resources needed for enacting one’s faith.

In addition, sociologists point out the remarkable resiliency of weak ties. They have a unique ability to remain dormant for an extended duration, only to immediately activate in times of need. When we need help, when we need a problem solved, we will likely find a solution from a dormant tie, from someone we haven’t spoken with in months or even years. And our dormant ties tend to readily agree to help, even if it’s been years since we last spoke.

A recent experience illustrates the relationship between weak ties and good works. A few years ago, I was visiting a rural Wisconsin congregation. During the announcements after the sermon, the priest shared that one of the elderly members of the parish, who was not a regular churchgoer, had lost their husband and needed help moving into a smaller home. Without family in the area, the woman had no one else to turn to. A visitor raised his hand and volunteered the use of his pickup truck. Another congregation member offered to help move furniture. The priest offered to pack boxes. The voices rose from across the pews as people with weak ties in
the community committed to serving their neighbor that very afternoon.

Beginning on Sunday, March 15, 2020, and every subsequent Sunday until the reopening of our sanctuary, it wasn’t the people with whom I had strong ties that I missed seeing. For the most part, I stayed in contact with that handful of people in my church through texting, Facebook Messenger, and the occasional video call. What I now know I was missing were the weak ties, the casual acquaintances I would greet during the passing of the peace and converse with over coffee and doughnuts. I missed the connections with whom I would largely lose contact Monday through Saturday but whom I would inevitably see again at worship, where together, we could respond to the liturgy’s work of sending the community to shoulder one another’s burdens.

Exclusively or predominantly online forms of church community might involve a lot of connections. They might reach a lot of people who are eager to serve. They likely include familiar exhortations and attempts at equipping for service, calling us to respond to the divine calling we hear when we worship together in person. What online forms of church tend to lack are the mundane moments that facilitate encounters, the occasions when connections are formed, stories are shared, and bridges are built. A church that is digitized, which might involve little more than passive viewership and scrolling, is limited in its ability to establish connections that lead to service. This is the reason we cannot relinquish face-to-face forms of Christian community in a late-pandemic or postpandemic church. Amid all of the changes in the church’s Digital Reformation, we must find a way to maintain connections and networks.
WHY CHURCHES NEED DIGITAL COMMUNITY

Some readers will inevitably ask, If face-to-face faith communities are so effective at creating social capital, and thus equipping members for lives of faithful service, why do anything differently? With the strengths of in-person Christianity well established in both academic research and the anecdotal experience of countless church leaders, why is the Digital Reformation worth navigating?

To answer this question, we have to consider the importance of accompaniment in the missional church. Members of a localized church are limited in their ability to walk alongside communities in a digital and secular age. We thus seek to augment the face-to-face faith community through digital experiences of church so we can accompany our neighbor, hearing and attending to their experiences in the virtual spaces where they share stories.

Some will look at recent well-documented declines in church attendance and membership as evidence that the analog church is not effectively extending the broadest possible invitation to an encounter with God’s grace, as experienced within the institutional church. The size of America’s church-going population shrank by thirteen percentage points from 2007 through 2019, dropping from 78 percent to 65 percent of American adults.18 Similarly, in that same span, the size of America’s religiously unaffiliated population increased by nine percentage points, from 17 percent to 26 percent.19 Others will point to declining donations as a clear sign of the limits of face-to-face faith communities. The percentage of Americans who donated to a religious charity has fallen at a similar rate as religious affiliation, with a 12 percent decline from 2005,
when 64 percent of American adults donated to a church or church charity, to 2017, when the figure was 52 percent.\textsuperscript{20}

Yet while these indicators are interesting, they are merely signs, not root causes, of a deeper cultural shift. They are only symptoms of a broader challenge confronting the digital age church. And if church leaders want to preserve the proclamation of the church within the digital age, they would do well to focus their efforts on the root causes of these downward trends.

We could study the effect of secularization on church membership or lament about families prioritizing other activities over worship attendance. But maybe our energy is best directed toward a manageable opportunity: how might we encounter people where they are? The localized character of the prepandemic church has inhibited our presence in digital spaces. We can’t extend a broad invitation to collaborate in God’s work, the work of the church, if we don’t put ourselves in contexts where communities congregate—namely, the web.

Church social media and website usage increased steadily prior to 2020, although estimates vary on church engagement in digital spaces. Some surveys have identified that approximately eight out of ten churches used websites and social media prior to the pandemic.\textsuperscript{21} Other studies have identified a number closer to five out of ten.\textsuperscript{22} Many of these surveys poll churches in a specific denomination, and the surveys that draw more responses from evangelical respondents tend to report higher levels of digital media usage, consistent with the tendency of evangelical churches to be early adopters of emerging technology.

While it’s difficult to pinpoint the extent of digital media usage, we can make some observations about the quality of
church presence in digital spaces. In the analog church, most of the digital tactics were developed to promote synchronous, in-person experiences. Church social media postings resembled a calendar or bulletin boards. They shared dates, times, and locations of in-person events but did not convene conversations, establish relationships, or extend an invitation to involvement or service. Social media were deployed as an extension of church communications, akin to a weekly newsletter or a worship bulletin. Social media tasks were typically assigned to the same individual responsible for curating the calendar and sending out congregational mailings.

In the analog church, the information we broadcasted through the web included dates and times, addresses and staff contacts, all attempting to convince community members to show up at a particular time and location. As church leaders, we used the web to announce that ministry was taking place somewhere else. We viewed the internet as a mechanism for sharing that the life of the church was happening and that one could participate, if only one were willing to sign off the web and sign up for something happening elsewhere. Seldom did we use the web for dialogue and deep connection.

If you want to see the extent to which churches used digital tools prepandemic simply for broadcasting, announcing, and scheduling, look at their social media posts prior to March 2020. I recently looked back at the Facebook page from a church I occasionally visited while growing up in northern Wisconsin. In February 2020, they posted to Facebook exactly two times. One post shared a PDF of the church newsletter; the other listed the worship start time for Ash Wednesday. Typical of most churches, these posts were intended to convince web users to go somewhere
else, to engage with the exclusively offline life of a faith community.

Still, churches are getting better at using the web to build relationships and conversation. We’re learning quickly. In February 2021, eleven months after the start of the pandemic, that same church posted to social media nearly twenty times. Their posts included collaborative conversations: polls, questions, devotional discussions, and prompts for sermon reflections. Several members of the community, both rostered leaders and church attendees, contributed content, sharing, listening to, and commenting on stories and perspectives from the now digitally distributed faith community. There were graphics, quotes, memes, and prayers. There were attempts to listen to the community on how it felt to navigate month twelve of the pandemic. Changes in that church’s Facebook page revealed that this community has developed hybrid ministry practices of accompanying and equipping. Similar improvements in other church digital media platforms show that we may in fact be closer to being the church we must become. In the church we must become, we will not just announce and inform. We will actually do ministry in digital spaces, inviting communities into lived experiences of collaborative ministry that happen both online and offline.

With the ongoing growth in digital technology usage throughout society, the church’s consistent inviting and collaborative presence in digital environments will be particularly important. Tech-shaped culture was deeply invested in the web prior to March 2020. Then in the first months of the pandemic, Facebook saw a 27 percent increase in usage.23 Netflix viewing rose by 16 percent. Zoom, which became a
key platform for Christian worship and faith formation, saw its usage jump from ten million users in December 2019 to three hundred million users in April 2020—only four months. The pandemic elevated usage of digital tools, accelerating our movement into a culture that is deeply formed and shaped by technology. As these trends continue, we’ll need to discover not just how to communicate on social media but how to connect and collaborate. We’ll need to learn to be together and to serve together online. With the average American now spending over two hours per day on social media, we’ll need to discover what it means to be invitational online, even as we remain committed to traditional forms of in-person connection that catalyze service and generosity.

But there’s a second, more practical reason we must move beyond the exclusively analog church. The synchronous, building-based form of church was a “one size fits most” approach to faith community. Since most of our community was available on Sunday morning and reliably lived within a short trip of our building, in-person church was both practical and sustainable. But in the digital age, an analog form of church fits fewer people with each passing year. Sunday mornings are no longer insulated from the demands of the outside world. While we could and arguably should lament this trend as the encroachment of secularization on the sacred, we’re unlikely to reverse the advance of the broader culture into Sunday morning. As of 2015, one in three of us work on Sunday mornings, while half of those who work more than one job are occupied on Sunday.²⁴

If our work activities are not encroaching on Sunday morning, social activities and sports are. One in four kids plays basketball, hockey, or volleyball, youth sports that regularly schedule tournaments on weekends, including Sunday
THE LAST COFFEE HOUR

mornings. These challenges are not new to church leaders, who have long seen kids leaving summer camp early for a Little League game, who have observed parents pulling their youth out of the confirmation retreat for a karate class. Even Sunday nights aren’t safe from encroachments on time and energy. Seventy-six percent of us report feeling the “Sunday Scaries” or “Sunday Night Blues,” a feeling of anticipatory stress that leads to the constant checking of email, messages, and calendars in an often-futile attempt to alleviate the pressures of the coming workday.

Organizers of work, sports, and social activities once avoided scheduling events on Sunday mornings. Today, these demands are unrelenting. And if we find ourselves with a “free” Sunday, many of us now view it as an occasion to accomplish the items on our to-do lists that we couldn’t complete earlier in the week. This trend has made it difficult for churches to continue to operate with a “one size fits most” mentality. Flexibility in dates, times, and location will be critical to the viability of the church in a digital age.

But it’s not just the collapse of sacred Sunday schedules that challenges the analog church. It’s people’s physical distance from our church communities. In a trend accelerated by the growth of Airbnb, Vrbo, and other digital travel sites, which connect travelers to customized and often elaborate travel opportunities, many are spending more of the weekend on the road. This trend accelerated and perhaps solidified during the pandemic, when travelers traded lengthy air travel vacations for nearby weekend road trips. With Americans taking fewer and fewer vacation days from their place of employment, it’s likely that two-hundred-mile weekend road trips will become the de facto standard for the American vacation experience.
As travel habits evolve, millennials and, to some extent, Generation Z are taking advantage of the “gig economy” in a quasi-nomadic lifestyle involving frequent travel and regular remote work. Supported by gig economy hubs like Upwork and Fiverr, young Americans are less committed to a permanent mailing address and more committed to flexible living. One in three Americans now works as a remote employee (without an office) or a freelancer (without a day-to-day employer), a percentage that is expected to accelerate in a postpandemic landscape. Not every young adult will opt for a consistently transient lifestyle, but impermanence will redefine neighborhoods of the digital age.

In the era of the analog church, the office-based structure of workplaces and schools tethered workers—churches’ members—to a specific geographic community. These individuals put down roots and became stable members in established faith communities. In the digital age, mobility will make us less inclined to become members of a church for the long term. In turn, these trends will make us more inclined to participate in the collaborative work of hybrid faith communities, where mission and ministry are available online and offline, synchronously and asynchronously. In the digital age, we may join a church in our temporary geographic neighborhood. Whether we stay with that church will depend on our ability to connect with the congregation asynchronously and digitally, to remain connected to the community whenever our circumstances change.

THE CHURCH WE WERE

The analog church embraced a form of community that was defined by predictable schedules, well-maintained facilities,
and face-to-face forms of togetherness. Largely disconnected from the digital world, our previous way of being church saw the web as a high-tech bulletin board, a place with information about community gatherings that were happening offline.

As we will see in the coming chapter, the digitally distributed church we became in the Covid-19 pandemic was better at accompanying individuals in digital spaces, but it saw an erosion of the social ties that were so crucial to—and the strength of—the analog church. And because it struggled to create and strengthen social ties, the church that we became was less capable at forming individuals and communities for faithful service.

As it turns out, that last coffee hour before the Covid-19 pandemic was about far more than doughnuts. On March 15, 2020, I couldn’t have imagined that over a year and a half would pass before I could once again enjoy a cup of coffee with church friends, before I could check in with other new parents in the congregation, before I could bounce around ideas for technology in the church with the church media team. I couldn’t have imagined that we’d wait so long before we could once again casually chat about the sermon with pastors who knew everyone in the congregation on a first-name basis.

That last coffee hour continues to remind me that we must never relinquish the strong social fabric experienced through the pre-pandemic, analog church. The Digital Reformation will change much about Christian community, but we must find a way to preserve the ties that bind us together in Christian love, to keep the connections that form us to serve our neighbor.
Notes

Preface

1 Tod Bolsinger, Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 15.

Chapter 1: The Last Coffee Hour

NOTES

9 Putnam, Campbell, and Garrett, 451.
10 Putnam, Campbell, and Garrett, 469.
11 Putnam, Campbell, and Garrett, 492.
17 Putnam, 174.
19 “In U.S., Decline.”
text=But%20a%20New%20York%20Times,for%20work%2C%20play%20and%20connecting.


Books


Drescher’s book coined the term “Digital Reformation.” The book is a thought-provoking exploration of the ways social media is changing the nature of relationships.


Anderson and Drescher’s updated work is the definitive guide to building digital Christian community. Featuring diverse examples of online communities, the book offers a broad exploration of the social and digital media landscapes.


The authors explore how digital spaces have become the new third space and thus a missional frontier.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

In one of the first books on hybrid ministry, Daubert and Jorgensen explore the tactics and transitions involved with hybrid church. Their book includes a useful discussion guide for church boards and other planning groups.


Kim provides a thoughtful critique of digital ministry, identifying the limits of online church community and questioning whether digital technology is capable of forming disciples.


A digital skeptic finds strength and support through digital community while undergoing cancer treatment. Thompson’s story is a nuanced exploration of technology in Christian communities and a useful companion for change-averse congregations.

Podcasts

*Be Still and Go* with Jim Keat

A leading example of a congregation podcast, created by the Riverside Church in New York City. With over eleven seasons, *Be Still and Go* effectively integrates Scripture, story, and practice in a brief and accessible format. https://www.trcnyct.org/bsag.

*Gospel Beautiful* with Michael Chan

**RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

*How We Do Digital Ministry* with Christopher Harris


**Digital Communities**

*How We Do Digital Ministry* Facebook Group

A companion to Christopher Harris’s podcast, the group includes conversations on the tactics of hybrid ministry. Join the conversation at [https://www.facebook.com/groups/712956465502081](https://www.facebook.com/groups/712956465502081).

*Luther Seminary Faith + Lead*

A hub for courses and coaching on ministry trends and innovations. Since 2020, I have offered regular courses on ministry in a digital age, hybrid ministry, and the theology and ethics of online church. Sign up for a course or connect with a coach at [https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/](https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/).

*The Ministry in a Digital Age* Newsletter


*Virginia Theological Seminary Lifelong Learning*

Home to the eFormation conference, digital ministry office hours, and other learning experiences that focus on trends in digital ministry. Join the VTS mailing list for the latest information. For more, visit [https://vts.edu/lifelong-learning/](https://vts.edu/lifelong-learning/).
Thank you for your interest in *The Holy and the Hybrid* by Ryan M. Panzer!

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