

## Conference Paper

# Post-COVID-19 American Religion: Congregational Crisis, Opportunity, and Innovation

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### Abstract.

This paper explores the changing nature of congregations in the United States in a post-pandemic era, presenting a sociological analysis of crisis and opportunity. Drawing on insights from the expansive, five-year study – Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) – the author focuses on the relationship between technology, innovation, optimism, and congregational life. The study asks how congregations can adapt and advance in the rapidly changing (digital) world, with its embrace of new internet technologies that have profoundly disrupted the “normal” ways of doing religion. The framework for understanding change draws on Scott Galloway’s twin theses that the pandemic has (1) acted as an accelerant to existing trends, both positive and negative, and (2) that the more disruptive the crisis, the greater the potential opportunity. Implications from the research not only for religious communities, but also educators, administrators, and leaders from various industries are discussed.

**Keywords:** America religion, COVID-19, congregational crisis

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## 1. Introduction

Globalization, the rapid increased in digital technology, and developments in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) have presented a dizzying array of questions for religious leaders, educators, healthcare practitioners, and businesses around the world. Amidst this landscape of adaptive change and the rise of Society 5.0, the COVID-19 pandemic has created further disruption, creating situations of liminality and a rising “new normal” that have further required adaptation, innovation, and creativity.

In this paper, I present a sociological analysis of crisis and opportunity in (post) Covid-19 American religion. Drawing on insights from the expansive, 5-year study *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC)*, I focus on the relationship between technology, innovation, optimism, and congregational life. I ask how congregations can adapt and advance in the rapidly changing (digital) world, with its embrace of new internet technologies that are profoundly disrupted the “normal” ways of doing religion.

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The framework for understanding change draws on Scott Galloway's twin theses that the pandemic has 1) acted as an accelerant to existing trends, both positive and negative, and 2) that the more disruptive the crisis, the greater the potential opportunity (1). Implications from the research not only for religious communities, but also for educators, administrators, and leaders from various industries are discussed. Although the analysis in this study is rooted in the US experience, I hope that these insights will also hold value for readers in other contexts.

## 2. Research Method

I focus on the relationship between technology, innovation, optimism, and congregational life. I ask how congregations can adapt and advance in the rapidly changing (digital) world, with its embrace of new internet technologies that are profoundly disrupted the "normal" ways of doing religion. The framework for understanding change draws on Scott Galloway's twin theses that the pandemic has 1) acted as an accelerant to existing trends, both positive and negative, and 2) that the more disruptive the crisis, the greater the potential opportunity (1).

## 3. Results And Discussion

### 3.1. Innovation and Change in Response to COVID-19

As major industries, the educational sector, and religious communities have responded to the pandemic, we have witnessed the rise of innovation. Innovation has become a buzz word with an alluring promise: innovate and all will be well. However, while the focus on innovation as invention, the adoption of breakthrough technology, or the creation of new idea and practices may support conditions of adaptive change, there is nothing inherently good about innovation itself. Rather, drawing on the Latin root word of innovate (to alter, to renew, to restore), innovation invites an approach that centers the process itself. In this sense, innovation is a continual process renewal and restoration that has the potential to nurture hope in response to crisis. As the world faces challenges on a global scale related to climate change, growing economic disparity, and a host of other complex issues, processes of change are needed. In response, many sectors of societies around the globe are adopting and leveraging internet communication technology, and digital technologies such as the Internet of Things and artificial intelligence in an attempt to promote human quality of life and earth well-being, with Japan's vision of a Society 5.0

and the All Tech is Human network as key examples of this highly optimistic approach (2).

In his book “Post Corona: From Crisis to Opportunity,” Scott Galloway presents a framework for approaching the challenges of the pandemic with a lens toward innovation and optimism (Galloway 2020). First, he argues that the most enduring impact of the pandemic will be its role as an accelerant of existing trends in our societies. Not all of these trends are positive, in the United States we witnessed deepening economic inequity. However, one of the major examples of acceleration brought by the pandemic was the rapid and widespread adoption of tech tools across industries. Classrooms moved into virtual spaces, employees used internet communication technologies to work from home, and social gatherings moved online. This adaptation has led to new possibilities, as the rise of telemedicine and the embrace of remote learning has catalyzed a revolution in the normal ways of doing things. This leads Galloway to his second thesis: that in every crisis there is opportunity, or as he states, “the pandemic has a silver lining that could rival the cloud.” (xx) In this presentation, I will demonstrate how congregational life in the United States, in this era of disruption, has encountered Covid as an accelerant toward the adoption of virtual technologies and explore the role of optimism – or the embrace of the silver lining – in relation to congregational vitality. I use research from the study *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond the Pandemic*. This multi-faceted and expansive 5-year study utilizes national surveys, nearly 100 congregational case studies, and a longitudinal panel to seek to understand how congregations have responded to the pandemic and the long-term consequences on congregational life.

### **3.2. US Congregations: Disruption, Accelerated Trends, and Digital Technology**

Prior to the lockdown period of COVID-19 in March 2020, congregations in the United States had been facing a number of challenges. The *Faith Communities Today* surveys show a decline in worship attendance: from a median attendance of 137 in 2000 to a median attendance of only 65 in early, pre-pandemic 2020. One of the key trends resulting is that 44% of congregations have fewer than 50 regular attendees. Similarly, congregations in the US are growing older, with an age profile that is significantly older than the national average. Although congregational vitality can exist in churches of any size, smaller churches face a unique set of challenges related to sustainability and

are more likely to be facing a decline in attendance, have a part-time leader, fewer resources, older members, and diminished ministry efforts (3).

In this landscape, COVID-19 brought further disruption. The engagement of religion with digital technology is not necessarily new. However, religion in the United States is undergoing transformative change, accelerated by the pandemic. As Heidi Campbell, who has been studying how religious communities have responded and adapted to the internet since the mid-1990s states, “one of the most interesting adaptations to observe...has been how religious groups in America have embraced digital technology to continue what they see as their core functions as religious communities” (4). Hardly any congregations are thinking about worship and faith with a Society 5.0 perspective, yet technological innovations that connect the “real” world of congregations in virtual spaces through interactions of physical and digital realms has become an everyday occurrence for many congregations.

This was a rapid change. EPIC survey results from summer 2021 indicate that nearly 75% of respondents considered the adoption of some form of virtual worship as the most significant adaptation they made in response to the pandemic. At that time, the vast majority of churches reported having suspended in-person worship at some point in time (88%) and were using both in-person and virtual forms of worship (85%). It appeared that the landscape of worship in the United States was vastly different than it had been pre-pandemic, but the question remained about the lasting impact. Would the pandemic push religious congregations toward greater adoption of technological innovation beyond the health crisis itself?

Comparing with the survey results from Spring 2023, there is evidence that the pandemic has served as a lasting accelerant toward the adoption of virtual technology for many congregations. Although the immediate and frightening health crisis has abated, 73% of congregations continue to offer hybrid worship services. Participants participate virtually through social media (38.3%, via video conferencing (27.1%) and by video hosting (34.6%). Furthermore, 80% of congregations indicate that they plan to continue to offer virtual worship 5 years into the future.

How has this innovation impacted attendance and involvement? A complex picture emerges from the data. Overall, attendance is down about 8% from pre-pandemic levels. But this varies based on modality: if comparing in-person only figures, the median attendance declined from 65 to 60. However, including online attenders shows that, on average, there has been an increase above pre-pandemic levels. Looking at the change in attendance compared to pre-pandemic figures shows that the hybrid churches with

more virtual over in-person have grown incredibly well compared to those with fewer virtual attendees compared to their in person congregation.

However, the picture is complicated when assessing involvement. Many congregational leaders are wrestling with questions around virtual and hybrid participation, as they explore new ways to be and do religious life in this post-pandemic era. What does it mean to create pathways of engagement and opportunity for involvement for a primarily online constituency? Why do people prefer online participation and engagement? Recent findings from the Pew Research Center show that virtual participants are much less likely to feel connected to other worshippers and 32% feel as if they are watching without truly being an active participant (5). Although congregations offering hybrid worship forms end up being larger than in-person or online congregations, comparing “hybrid” congregations along a ratio of more to less in-person, differences in involvement become apparent. Congregations with higher virtual than in-person participants had a larger number of total attendees compared to those with equal virtual/ in-person. However, the hybrid congregations with a higher ratio of in-person attendees had a higher total attendance overall and a greater percentage of regular, active participants. Similarly, comparing giving rates, another marker of involvement and commitment, it is clear that the greater the in-person over virtual ratio, the larger the per capita giving. What emerges from this complicated picture is the reality that innovation alone – or the embrace of new uses of internet technology to engage worship attendees – is not enough. Rather, embracing innovation as a process that continues to respond to new challenges with an embrace of renewal and restoration is needed.

Clergy, like other leaders who have been faced with the disruptive nature of the pandemic, are facing burn out and exhaustion. However, an important insight from the EPIC project is the importance of optimism. Our findings show that optimism and views of the pandemic as a potential opportunity, have a significant difference on congregational vitality. In other words, disruptive crisis can lead to new opportunities. Using an optimism scale that combined responses related to a congregation’s willingness to change, view that they would emerge from the pandemic stronger, and were thinking in new ways and identifying new opportunities, the EPIC study showed that congregations with high levels of optimism were significantly more vital. In terms of attendance, giving, sustainability and viability, spiritual vitality, and orientation toward the future, these optimistic congregations are faring better than their pessimistic counterparts. This attitudinal difference enhances the life of the congregation.

### 3.3. Responding to Challenges in an Era of Society 5.0 and a (post) Pandemic Reality

Prior Related to the theme of this conference, what do these insights from US congregations reveal about responding to challenges in an era of Society 5.0 within this (post) pandemic reality? First, it reveals the ways in which the pandemic has served as an accelerant to existing trends and realities. While the congregational growth in the US has stayed about the same when comparing 2023 with pre-pandemic levels, the use of virtual technology has accelerated. In looking across the educational sector and the healthcare industry, it is clear that the pandemic has served as a similar accelerate to changes both positive and negative that have created new questions and challenges for leaders.

Based on this research and the twin theses that the pandemic has 1) acted as an accelerant to existing trends, both positive and negative, and 2) that the more disruptive the crisis, the greater the potential opportunity, I suggest that adopting innovation as a process and embracing a realistic, yet optimistic, view of the future will serve leaders well in responding to the challenges of our times. While leaders face adaptive challenges that have no simple answers or solutions, innovation and creativity are necessary. Alongside this, a hopeful embrace of optimism that is rooted in the realities and challenges faced, can provide the drive to consider how, across various disciplines, fields, and industries, disruption can serve as an impetus toward new solutions, new perspectives, and new opportunities.

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