

5 WAYS THE CURRENT CRISIS IS ACCELERATING THE ARRIVAL OF THE FUTURE CHURCH

By Carey Nieuwhof | 36



Crisis is an accelerator.

Nobody knows that better than you right now. The disruption has hit church leaders especially hard.

Crisis forces you to do things you previously thought about doing and delayed.

It moves you to do things you'd never thought you'd do (like move to video teaching in some cases).

And it pushes you into massive change you never signed up for.

What's making it more complicated is that as much as you wish things would just go back to normal, they won't. At least not exactly as they were.

Here are 5 ways the current crisis is accelerating the arrival of the future church.

1. SUNDAY-FOCUSED CHURCHES WILL BECOME EVERY DAY-FOCUSED CHURCHES

I love Sundays. I believe in public worship.

And I still think Sundays will have a role in the future. I can't wait to gather again with people I love and miss, and it's only been a few months.

Trust me, in-person gathering is going to come back. It just won't be the *only* thing or *main* thing you do anymore.

As much as most church leaders say that the most important ministry happens *outside* the walls of the church, we behave like that's not true.

Until now, most churches have been analog organizations in a digital world.

The closing of church facilities has already spurred thousands of church leaders to show up online on every imaginable social media platform almost daily.

Not all that digital spaghetti will stick to the wall.

Some leaders are already tiring of daily messaging.

Others realize daily content is proving to be challenging (you have to have a lot to say).

And the initial enthusiasm of viewers will wane as the internet settles down into some new rhythm.

BUT...and this is big...the idea that we can go back to Sunday worship with a few midweek (group) meetings and the odd inspiring quote on Instagram is already a thing of the past.

The future church (at least future churches that actually reach unchurched people) will no longer be in-person gathering with a smidge of online thrown in.

If people live every day in need of hope and resources to live out their faith (or to find faith) every day, church leaders have to start coming alongside people every day. Like many are doing right now.

That won't go away when things go back to 'normal'. There will be a new normal, and it will be a seamless interweaving of the digital and analog, just like life is these days.

Starting now, Sunday-focused churches will become everyday-focused churches, because people need to live out their faith every day.

2. CHURCHES WILL STAFF ONLINE LIKE IT'S REAL, BECAUSE IT IS

For years in this space, we've debated and discussed whether online church 'counts' because so many argue that online isn't real.

And for years, I've suggested that church leaders asking if online counts is like Sears asking if Amazon counts.

Suddenly that conversation seems more real than ever.

Of course online counts. To be clear: just because real-life counts doesn't mean online doesn't, and just because online counts doesn't mean real-life doesn't. They BOTH matter.

Here's the problem: most churches spend somewhere between 90-100% of their staff dollars on in-person experiences: Sunday gatherings, groups, events, community service.

With only a few exceptions, even in large churches, the paucity of resources given to online resources is staggering.

What usually happens is the senior leader gives the website, streaming and social media to a teenage volunteer or to some 20-something staffer who 'understands that stuff', tacking it on to his or her already full-time job description. Alternatively, the senior pastor outsources it as a line item in the budget to some third-party service he doesn't even know the name of ("who does that again for us???").

Just being real.

Future churches will spend up to 50% of their staffing budget on online ministry because...well, everyone you want to reach and influence is online.

The digital and in-person will flow seamlessly together in the same way that (in a more stable economy and world) you did your:

Vacation planning online and showed up to experience it in real life.

Car shopping online and showed up in real life to test drive and take delivery.

Dating online and showed up in real life to meet the person.

Right now, churches are scrambling to redeploy their staff because 'the guy' or small team who does online is crushed under the weight of it all.

Now is the time to rethink how to redistribute staffing for when things go back to ‘normal’, because normal won’t be the way it was. It will be a new normal.

Churches that reach people in the future will staff online as though it’s real, because it is.

3. CHURCH LEADERS WILL REALIZE THAT DIGITAL SCALES IN A WAY ANALOG DOESN’T

Once the dust settles a bit in this crisis, the churches who are leaning into digital rather than just using it as a Band-Aid until things get back to normal will discover an amazing truth: digital scales in a way analog doesn’t.

This comes from the very simple fact that reaching people digitally is far easier than in real life. Yes, it leads to real-life connections, but it’s easier to start a connection online than in real life.

Not sure digital scales? Well, Instagram had 40 million users when it was purchased by Facebook for \$1 billion in 2012. That’s impressive. Even more impressive: they did that with 13 employees.

YouVersion, which launched as an idea a decade ago, has over 400 million installs and is run by a team at a local *church*.

In a similar way, the leadership content we produce here gets accessed 1.3 million times a month. I work from my home and we have a virtual team of 7 including me.

The point is simply this: you can make a much bigger impact online than you can using analog methods.

Digital scales in a way that analog doesn’t.

And if you’re serious about reaching people, taking digital seriously simply makes sense.

Digital transcends geographic, physical and time barriers in a way that analog doesn’t.

And, if you do it well, digital can point people to real-life experiences: groups, weekend gatherings, personal connections—all of which are necessary and vital to life.

Digital just helps you reach more people more quickly.

4. THE CHURCH WILL FINALLY SEE THE INTERNET AS A FRONT DOOR, NOT A BACK DOOR

What’s kept a lot of church leaders from truly embracing online services or an expanded online ministry?

One main thing: Worry about a drop in physical attendance. Until now, too many pastors have worried about the internet as a back door.

That's because until now, most church leaders have kept score by how many people *physically* attend their church.

I realize numbers matter because people matter, but it's strange that we value the people we can see physically more than we value the people we can see digitally. That's doubly strange if people actually matter to God.

Pastors have resisted online ministry, argued video teaching doesn't work, and failed to invest seriously in anything digital because they've been worried it will become a back door through which people walk away.

Well, surprise! Long before the crisis hit, that already happened.

Christians who wanted to check out left years ago because they found online options with other churches, or they just disengaged.

In the *early* days of online church, the internet functioned as a back door.

Consumer-oriented, disengaged or lazy Christians headed for the back door and traded the drive and the traffic for the comfort of a warm bed or the convenience of a treadmill or commute. If your primary disposition toward church was to consume content, online just gave you a far easier way.

But those Christians are an endangered species.

We're a decade+ into church online and they've drifted off into the background, and honestly for the most part, into Kingdom-irrelevance. You can't change the world if your only connection with the Kingdom is through your earbuds.

That group has become consumers, not contributors. And you can't build the future of the church on them. Mission requires engagement and movement. So the back door people are already history.

Ditto with the casual observers who consume and never contribute. There's no future there, so move along, people.

The future of church online is not with the internet as a back door. The future of the church is the internet as a *front* door and *side* door.

Church online will continue to grow as a front door for the curious, the skeptic and the interested. It will be the first stop for almost everyone, and a temporary resting place for people who are a little too afraid to jump in until they muster the courage to jump in through physical attendance.

Your online ministry is also a side door to Christians who, when travel resumes, won't be there on a given Sunday. Ironically, it will help them stay engaged because you're equipping them every day, not just on Sundays (see point #1).

If you continue to behave like the world doesn't live online, you'll miss the very people you're trying to reach.

The internet is your new front door—not a back door—and it's a big one.

5. DIGITAL GIVING WILL BECOME THE NEW DEFAULT

Finally, the crisis is accelerating digital giving.

I realize in a time of global economic collapse and uncertainty, talking about giving will probably worry some people.

But two things.

First, Christians should be the most generous people in a time of crisis.

And second, we should be the first to help people with their finances during a crisis.

About a decade ago now, we started moving our church toward digital giving because the culture moved that way. Now, 85% of the giving that comes in at our church comes in online.

The reason this matters is because that's simply how our culture behaves. I rarely carry cash anymore, and neither do most of the people you lead. In our culture, cash is used for a minority of purchases and consumer checks have all but disappeared. Yet, in many churches, that's still how we ask people to give.

Often people want to be generous and want to give, but when you don't offer digital options you make it almost impossible for them to do so.

If you want to learn more about talking about money in a healthy way in church—in a way that does something *for* people rather than simply asks for something *from* people.

Digital giving fuels generosity. This is a time for the church and for Christians to lead with generosity.