

# Six Questions About the Future of the Hybrid Church Experience



A Barna Report Produced in  
Partnership with Stadia

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# Preface

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, questions abounded. Traditional expressions of church community were interrupted, and people sought new ways to grow in their relationship with Jesus and with others—and in their capacity to reach new people with the gospel.

Pastors also had new and emerging concerns. What does it mean to thrive as a church in a post-pandemic culture? In an age when many churches are already

closing their doors, is it possible for churches to grow in a new, seemingly harsher environment? Is multiplication still possible?

We at Stadia believe that the answer to these questions is “yes”—with a hybrid ministry model that uses physical and digital expressions of ministry to complement the Church’s mission, vision and strategy. We call this blend of digital and physical “phygital.” It doesn’t replace existing community. Rather, it is an enhancement of community by reimagining the tools that the body of Christ can use to reach people with the hope of Jesus. Phygital ministry uses technology as a tool to support the mission of the Church in both the physical and digital realms—to grow across multiple contexts and to multiply everywhere that people gather, online or in person.

In partnering with Barna and examining their data, we can verify what many pastors have already felt to be true: that the pandemic has significantly impacted the sense of connectedness people have with their churches. These disconnected people have, in turn, backed away from church. However, there is still good news. The opportunity to integrate in-person efforts with digital efforts has never been more welcome. More than ever, people feel online expressions of church, especially combined in a hybrid church model, are valuable for spiritual growth.

We are committed to seeing churches thrive, grow and multiply physically, digitally and phygitaly. Stadia Church Planting believes discussing and developing your hybrid model is an exciting and vital step on the journey to fulfilling Jesus’s charge to his disciples—to go, make, baptize and teach disciples, everywhere.



**STADIA CHURCH PLANTING**  
provides the tools and tribe that leaders need to start and lead thriving churches for the next generation, so that the life-changing hope of Jesus can impact every person, everywhere. We believe the world is in desperate need of the hope that only Jesus can bring, and the Church is God’s plan A for introducing people to that hope.

[stadiachurchplanting.org](http://stadiachurchplanting.org)

# Introduction

Think of this Barna journal as a time capsule: statistical mementoes from one of the most unique periods in human history, and in the Church in the U.S. We'll spend the following pages exploring six questions about hybrid ministry—that is, both in-person and digital approaches to church—as prompted by a nationally representative survey conducted six months into the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

You might be wondering: *What cues should we take from research specific to a season of tremendous disruption? What can a church leader learn from data collected during a global pandemic (not to mention an election year, a racial justice movement and an economic downturn)? How can these exceptional moments teach us about the norms?*

At this stage, Barna research suggests that, as in other sectors of life, it will be some time before the Church in the U.S. is back to normal—and even then it will be that “new normal” we, as yet, have only an inkling of. Financial giving to churches has seen a drastic drop, alongside the physical distance, mass layoffs and economic uncertainty of the COVID-19 response. Some ministries have made or will make the difficult decision to downsize their teams or shut their doors permanently. And younger adult generations such as Millennials and Gen Z—already in a tenuous relationship with religious institutions—have become even less predictable in their church engagement.

This snapshot of the COVID-era Church in the U.S. allows us to understand both the digital and analog experiences of pastors and congregants in a new way. The stakes of physical, digital and hybrid ministry (or, as



our partners at Stadia refer to it, “phygital” ministry) are thrown into sharp relief in this moment, as screens and devices have become—yes, somehow—even *more* principal in our daily lives and routines, including our faith communities. We believe this journal provides crucial information, instruction and hope for the Church’s future.

# Glossary

For analysis in this 2020 study, conducted during the national response to COVID-19, faith segments were defined based on respondents' estimates of their average pre-pandemic attendance.

**Practicing Christians** are self-identified Christians who say their faith is very important in their lives and have attended a worship service within the past month.

**Churched adults** have attended church at least once in the past six months.

**Unchurched adults** have not attended church in the past six months.

**Dropouts**, in this study, are churched adults who say they have never attended, digitally or in person, during the pandemic.

**Gen Z:** born between 1999 and 2015

**Millennials:** born between 1984 and 1998

**Gen X:** born between 1965 and 1983

**Boomers:** born between 1946 and 1964

## Digital openness among churched adults:

*High digital openness:* meet all of the following

*Moderate digital openness:* meet three or four of the following

*Low digital openness:* meet one or two of the following

- ▶ See the value of attending an online church service
- ▶ Think churches should use digital resources for spiritual formation / discipleship purposes after the pandemic

- ▶ Think churches should use digital resources for gathering their people together after the pandemic
- ▶ Say either hybrid (both digital and physical) or primarily digital gatherings for church will best fit their lifestyle after the pandemic
- ▶ Are open to attending new kinds of online gatherings that are unfamiliar

## Digital openness among unchurched adults:

*High digital openness:* would consider participating in two or more of the following

*Low digital openness:* would consider participating in one of the following

*No digital openness:* would consider participating in none of the following

- ▶ Online church service, viewed by oneself
- ▶ Online church service, viewed with someone else
- ▶ Digital conversation group designed for spiritual conversations about the Christian faith
- ▶ Digital class designed to explore the Christian faith
- ▶ Digital, one-on-one spiritual conversation with a friend

# Key Findings

## *There seems to be warmth to digital and hybrid ministry*

- ▶ One in five churched adults has what Barna calls “high digital openness”
- ▶ Looking ahead, Millennial churchgoers say hybrid church, just as much as physical church, will be a good fit for them

## *... but a preference for physical worship gatherings remains.*

- ▶ 81 percent of churched adults say it’s very important to them to worship God in person and alongside others
- ▶ More than half of churched adults say that, post-pandemic, primarily physical services will best suit their life

## *Distractions and dropouts are challenges to online church.*

- ▶ One-fifth of those who would normally be defined as churchgoers says they have “never” attended a service—digitally or in person—during the pandemic
- ▶ 67 percent of those who’ve only attended once or twice during the pandemic admit their attention wanes in online services

## *Pastors developing hybrid ministry approaches need to extend beyond streamed services.*

- ▶ 60 percent of those participating in a church that offers online services during the pandemic say this is the only digital offering the church makes available
- ▶ 63 percent of churched adults believe churches should use digital resources for purposes of spiritual formation and discipleship

# Understanding the New Reality



## 1. What Has Changed?

In the spring of 2020, as much of the United States began enforcing social distancing measures to prevent the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the overwhelming majority of churches accordingly closed their doors; Barna polling in late March showed just 3 percent of churches remained open for normal use, while 73 percent were completely shuttered at that time.

Ministries shifted quickly to digital services, and, as of September 2020, three-quarters of church U.S. adults (74% of Americans who typically attend church at least once in six months)—including 82 percent of practicing Christians (a subset of church U.S. adults made up of Christians who typically attend church at least monthly and say their faith is very important in their life today)—tell Barna they have watched a church service during this pandemic period.

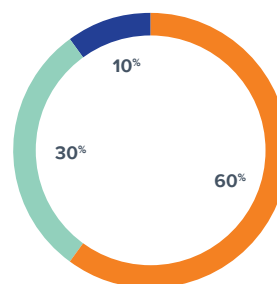
Faith leaders and congregants have encouraged each other with the reminder **“Church is more than a building”—but can digital ministry become more than a sermon?**

Most adults who have attended churches that provide online services through the pandemic (60%) say this is the *only* digital activity their church offers. From another angle, when presented with a range of digital and in-person ministry options they might have engaged with during these months, 43 percent of church U.S. adults (including 38% of practicing Christians) indicate they’ve participated in none of these ways. Where streamed services are available, it’s usually either the only online

*Are online / streamed services the only online activity your church has offered during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Base: Church U.S. adults who have participated in a church that offered online services during COVID-19

Yes No Don't know



n=429 U.S. church U.S. adults, September 1-15, 2020.

innovation churches have embraced or the only one people are participating in.

Perhaps some churches—most of which did not offer online services before the pandemic, according to attendees (see page 13)—are still catching up, financially or technologically, and settling into the transition to online. Perhaps

Continued on page 10

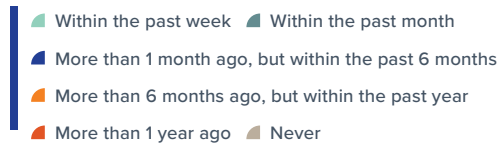


## Church Attendance & Engagement, Then & Now

For analysis in this 2020 study, faith segments such as churched adults or practicing Christians were defined based on respondents' estimates of their average pre-pandemic attendance. For reporting on actual pre-pandemic attendance, the data shown represent December 2019.

### Pre-pandemic attendance

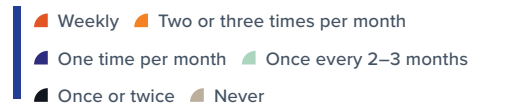
When was the last time you attended a Christian church service, other than for a holiday service, such as Christmas or Easter, or for special events such as a wedding or funeral?



n=1,003 U.S. adults, December 5–18, 2019.

### Pandemic attendance

During the COVID-19 pandemic, on average, how often have you attended a church worship service, either in person or digitally?



n=1,302 U.S. adults, September 1–15, 2020.

### Over the course of the pandemic, have you or your household been engaged with church in any of the following ways?

Select all that apply. Base: Churched adults



n=661 U.S. churched adults, September 1–15, 2020.

some ministries are hoping that simply streaming their usual service will be enough to hold attendees' attention and nurture spiritual growth. Our data collected during the 2020 tumult, however, suggest that viewing, attending and engaging are not the same, and a more holistic strategy for digital or hybrid ministry is needed for the long term.

## The New Dropouts

Barna has tracked a gradual movement away from regular church attendance over the years, particularly among younger adult generations in the U.S. But during COVID-19, a more obvious and abrupt decline occurred—even among groups who are typically faithful.

Keep in mind, in this survey, Barna sorted respondents into our theologicraphic categories based on their *reported average* pre-pandemic church attendance. So, a respondent's recall does affect these groupings, and when reporting on *actual* pre-pandemic attendance, Barna referred to a December 2019 study (see previous page).

Still, it's striking to learn that, as of September 2020, about one in five of those who would normally be defined as churchgoers (22% churchd adults, 19% practicing Christians) says they have “never” attended a service during the pandemic, either in person or digitally. Though half of practicing Christians (51%) keep up

with online or in-person church on a weekly basis (compared to 37% of churchd adults), the reported pandemic attendance of this usually committed group otherwise resembles churchd adults at large.

Overall, reported attendance

rates seem to have edged up a bit since earlier in the pandemic, when half of churchd adults (48%) and one in three practicing Christians (32%) indicated they had not yet streamed any service, even during the height of strict social distancing measures. It's possible that some who might have first treated digital services as a stop-gap not worth engaging eventually

accepted being part of an online congregation as the pandemic progressed. Further, as some churches have resumed meeting in person, Christians who were less enthusiastic about streaming services may have returned to frequent physical attendance.

1 in 5

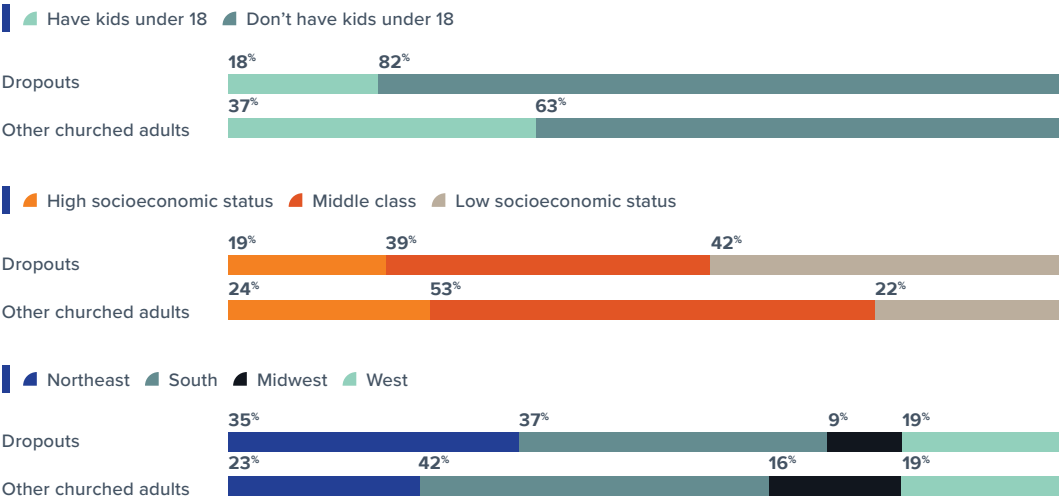
**of those who would normally be defined as churchgoers has “never” attended a service—digitally or in person—during the pandemic**

There are multiple factors that might create “dropouts” during this time—including, importantly, health concerns or lack of access to technology. Even so, the fact that one-fifth of practicing Christians who were able and willing to participate in an online survey says they haven’t been present in either a sanctuary *or* an online service during a six-month period speaks to a large-scale interruption of religious routines—or, as we’ll soon explore, the vocabulary that accompanies it.

### Who Is More Likely to Be Disconnecting?

By gender, generation and ethnicity, there are no significant differences between churchgoers who are or aren’t presently attending services, in person or digitally.

Dropouts are more likely to be in households *without* children, aligning with other Barna research that shows the presence of kids correlates with increased spiritual activity. Socioeconomic patterns also surface among dropouts, with upper-class churchgoers remaining regular attendees. Dropouts are more likely than average to be from the Northeast, home to several cities that past Barna studies have ranked among the most “post-Christian.”



n=661 U.S. churchgoers, September 1-15, 2020.



## Attending or Viewing? Churchgoers May See a Difference

During the early weeks of the pandemic, pastors initially reported *increases* in attendance compared to their typical in-person service. Considering pastors' optimistic attendance reports from the same period in which churchgoers tell us they were foregoing services, there seems to be a general disconnection between churches and congregants—in terms of both expectations for ministry and how to rightly measure engagement, especially in a digital or hybrid context.

This blurry picture of pandemic church attendance could be a byproduct of the fact that, for most churches, online services—and metrics for success, in turn—are a new frontier. Just over one-third of churched adults (36%) remembers their church offering digital services before COVID-19, while the majority (57%) says they were not available.

Researchers also observed that survey participants respond differently depending on the terminology used for church participation. For instance, almost half of churched adults who are currently dropouts (47%)—that is, those who report they have not “attended church worship services, either in person or digitally”—still say they have “watched a church service online” during that same period. Likewise, one-quarter of those who say they’ve recently watched an online service (24%) reports that they have “never” attended digitally or physically during that same period.

Could some respondents have given a conflicting or confused account of their present relationship to

their church? Possibly. But given the specificity of how Barna asked about attendance of any kind during the pandemic, it's likely these seemingly contradictory stats speak more to a sense of a hierarchy of engagement. Specifically, it's possible to acknowledge having watched a service—as fully half of all U.S. adults (49%) have—without counting yourself as an attendee.

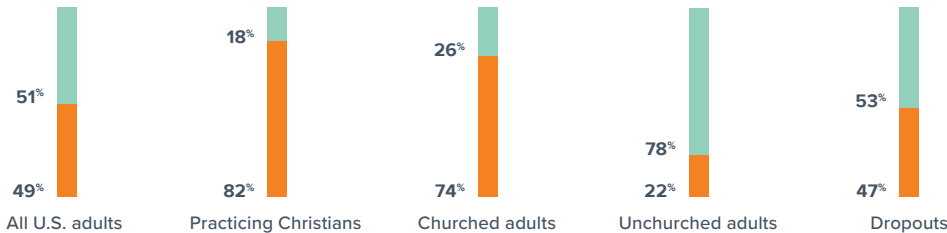
With overly optimistic or unclear ideas of how churchgoers are engaged in online services—typically the *only* digital option churches provide—pandemic-era pastoring may be largely devoid of meaningful touchpoints with congregants. This grey area surrounding online attendance is an urgent challenge of digital and hybrid ministry and underscores the need for more than streamed services.

**It's possible to acknowledge having watched a service—as fully half of all U.S. adults have—without counting yourself as an attendee**

# Churches & Congregants Are Digital Worship Newbies

*At some point during the pandemic, have you watched a church service online?*

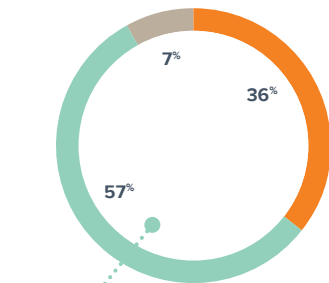
■ Yes ■ No



*Before the COVID-19 pandemic, did your church offer an online service?*

Base: Churched adults

■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know



**67%**

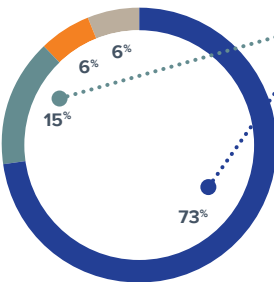
of churched adults whose churches previously didn't have digital services say there is now an online option

## As Online Options Grow, Church-Hopping Is Still Rare

*How many churches have you attended during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Base: Churched adults who have participated in church during the pandemic

■ Only one ■ Primarily one, sampling others  
■ Many churches ■ Other



**90%**

primarily engage with the same church they were committed to before the pandemic

*n*=1,302 U.S. adults; *n*=661 U.S. churched adults, September 1-15, 2020.



## 2. What Is Working (or Not)?

Most typical churchgoers—including current dropouts—feel that online services are a meaningful form of church engagement. The majority (71% churched adults, 67% dropouts) disagrees with the statement “I don’t see the value of attending an online church service.”

That being the case, why would some churchgoers still be hesitant to embrace digital church, or to even count it as attendance?

For one, whatever value online participation provides, in-person services are still beloved by the majority. Eighty-one percent of churched adults (including 71% of dropouts) say it’s very important to them to experience God alongside others at a physical church gathering.

Accordingly, more than half of churched adults (56%)—including a very large share of pandemic-era dropouts (78%)—aim to return to services when services themselves return to “normal.” There are multiple reasons this view could be prominent during a pandemic, related to both physical and spiritual health—but this question ultimately reveals that, for most, the online approach to ministry has been seen as not only new but perhaps

also untested or inferior. And, in the meantime, churchgoers are seeking other avenues to spiritual growth: During COVID-19, seven in 10 (70% churched, 67% dropouts) report finding opportunities for spiritual development outside of church attendance.

For a minority, present tendencies to disengage speak less to the pandemic response or digital church strategy and more to broader faith declines Barna has tracked for decades. Some of the political and religious polarization occurring during an election year may also have some bearing on this point. Fourteen percent of churched adults and 13 percent of dropouts say they are rethinking or drifting from their faith practice. Among younger churched adults, one in five (22% Gen Z and 20% Millennials vs. 10% Gen X and Boomers, respectively) feels this way.

**81%**  
**of churched adults  
say it’s very  
important to them  
to experience God  
alongside others  
at a physical  
church gathering**

# Potential Barriers to Pandemic-Era Digital Services

Churchgoers still attending services during the pandemic haven't let their preference for in-person worship keep them from engaging. Even church dropouts acknowledge value in online services—but are less interested in committing to a “new normal.”

Agree Disagree Not applicable

Base: Churched adults

*“Experiencing God in a church service alongside others, in person, is very important to me.”*



*“I don’t see the value of attending an online church service.”*



*“I am waiting for church services to go back to normal before I return.”*



*“I am spiritually growing during this pandemic in ways other than church attendance.”*



*“I am not interested in church engagement because I’ve been rethinking or drifting from my faith practice.”*



n=661 U.S. churched adults, September 1-15, 2020.

## Streaming & Drifting: Do People Focus Online?

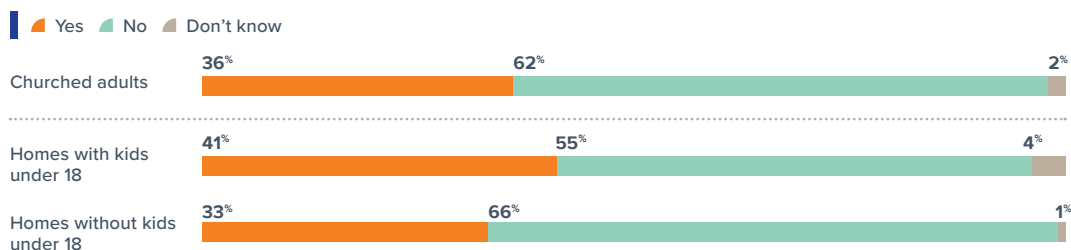
More than one-third of adults who've attended church and engaged with online services during the pandemic (36%) says they have trouble focusing during said services. This is especially true for those with children in the home (41% vs. 33% of attendees without kids in the home say they struggle to focus), hinting at some of the difficulty guardians may face as they try to simultaneously facilitate their household's church attendance, occupy children and youth and still engage in worship themselves.

Similarly, about two-thirds (67% of those who've engaged with online services during COVID-19) say

**About two-thirds of those who've engaged with online services during COVID-19 say they are learning just as much from a streamed sermon as from an in-person sermon**

### *Do you struggle to focus during online church?*

Base: have attended church during the pandemic and at some point have watched a church service online



### *In online church services, do you learn as much from the sermon as you would in person?*

Base: have attended church during the pandemic and at some point have watched a church service online



*n*=528 U.S. adults, September 1-15, 2020.



they are learning just as much from a streamed sermon as from an in-person sermon. After all, it's nothing new for churchgoers to face some distraction or tendency to multitask during services.

By definition, dropouts are unable to weigh in on the effectiveness of online services—but among adults who've only attended church once or twice during the pandemic, we see a heightened struggle to focus and learn. The data can't show the direction of this relationship—whether churchgoers attend infrequently because they have trouble engaging with services, or if they have trouble receiving from services because they already feel disengaged. Either way, we know that not even half of those who've barely participated in a church during COVID-19 (48%) feel they glean from sermons in the same way they would in a physical gathering. And when it comes to maintaining focus, their experience is the reverse of the average online service participant: Just one-third (32%) says it isn't a struggle to focus, while two-thirds (67%) admit their attention wanes in online services.



67%

**of those who've  
only attended once  
or twice during the  
pandemic admit  
their attention  
wanes in online  
services**

## The Shift Toward “Worship Shifting”

Pre-pandemic, Barna began using the term “worship shifting” to refer to a transition from live, communal participation in church to alternatives that could be engaged on one’s own time. We’ve been tracking this subject well before it was a trend; in 2001, less than 1 percent of all adults used the internet as a substitute for a physical church, 3 percent used it as a faith supplement, and an overwhelming 94 percent said they didn’t use the internet for faith purposes at all. As of December 2019, half of practicing Christians who use faith-related media—whether traditional forms such as radio and

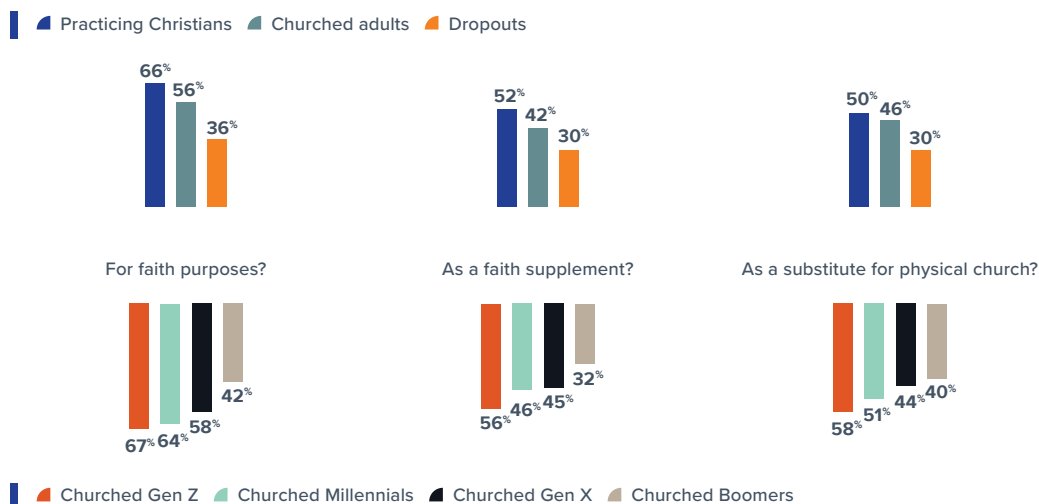
books, or digital options such as podcasts and social networking—said that, at least occasionally, they “rely on Christian resources such as these instead of attending a church.” This was especially the case with Millennial practicing Christians, one-third of whom said this was “often” their practice.

Following the social distancing prompted by COVID-19, as

## Faith Expression During the Pandemic

### *Do you use the internet ...*

% who answer “yes”



*n*=661 U.S. churched adults, September 1-15, 2020.

spirituality has been confined even more to the digital realm, is worship shifting on the rise?

Since the pandemic, about half of churchgoers (46% churchd adults, 50% practicing Christians) say they use the internet as a substitute for physical church. More generally, it's not unusual that churchgoers see the internet as useful for faith purposes (56%, 66%) or as a supplement to their faith (42%, 52%). Here, Gen Z and Millennials lead in their embrace of digital faith engagement, well ahead of their Boomer peers in particular.

Interestingly, pandemic-era dropouts aren't embracing church alternatives, underscoring the possibility that this is indeed a group who has checked out of church life. Dropouts are much *less* likely than other churchgoers to see the internet as a substitute for church (30% dropouts vs. 51% other churchd adults) or as a benefit to their faith (30% vs. 46% use the internet as a faith supplement, 36% vs. 61% use it for faith purposes).





### 3. What Is Possible?

Some big-picture perspective for leaders stressing about the specifics of online engagement: Many churchgoers are likely to share your curiosity about the future of digital and hybrid church.

Half of churched adults with some online church engagement during the pandemic (53%) say they are open to more experiences like this. That doesn't mean they would like an *exclusively* digital experience; half of churched adults (52%) say physical gatherings will best suit their lifestyle once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. Dropouts are especially likely to feel this way (55%). Solely digital church experiences appeal to just 9 percent of churched adults in the long run.

However, more than one-third (35%) says some combination of both physical and digital gatherings would

suit them well. To Millennials, this approach seems particularly promising; in fact, they are just as likely to choose hybrid church (40%) as they are to choose physical gatherings (42%) as their preference

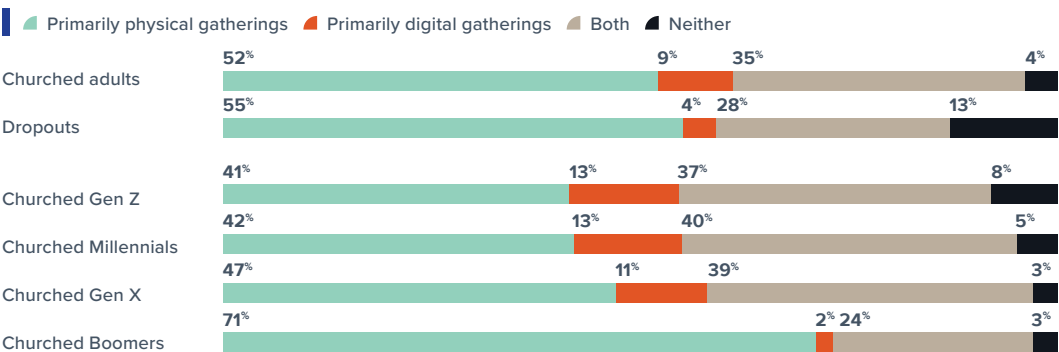
moving forward. Boomers are the generational hold-out on this point, overwhelmingly preferring physical gatherings (71%) to digital (2%) or hybrid ministry (24%).

For the most part, in churches exploring and defining new ministry formats, pastors may find parishioners interested in joining that journey.

**For Millennial churchgoers, physical church and hybrid church approaches are just as likely to suit their life**

#### After the COVID-19 pandemic, what kind of church service gathering will fit your life best?

Base: Churched adults



n=661 U.S. churched adults, September 1-15, 2020.

## Measures of Digital Openness

As churches take inventory of their analog, digital and hybrid ministry options, it's important to know where churchgoers' preferences fall on the spectrum. To that end, Barna used this study to build a custom segmentation, identifying various levels of openness to digital church.

Churched adults defined as having **high digital openness**:

1. See the value of attending an online church service
2. Think churches should use digital resources for spiritual formation / discipleship purposes after the pandemic
3. Think churches should use digital resources for gathering their people together after the pandemic
4. Say either hybrid (both digital and physical) or primarily digital gatherings for church will best fit their lifestyle after the pandemic
5. Are open to attending new kinds of online gatherings that are unfamiliar

Churched adults who meet one or two of these requirements have **low digital openness**, while those who meet three or four have **moderate digital openness**. Most fall into this middle category (42%), while one-fifth (20%) has high openness, and almost one-third of churched adults (31%) has low openness. *(A minority of churched adults—8 percent—fits none of the above statements and thus is defined as having no openness to digital church.)*

Barna likewise developed a metric for gauging digital openness among *unchurched* adults, based on how many of the following activities respondents would consider attending:

- ▶ Online church service, viewed by oneself
- ▶ Online church service, viewed with someone else

- ▶ Digital conversation group designed for spiritual conversations about the Christian faith
- ▶ Digital class designed to explore the Christian faith
- ▶ Digital, one-on-one spiritual conversation with a friend

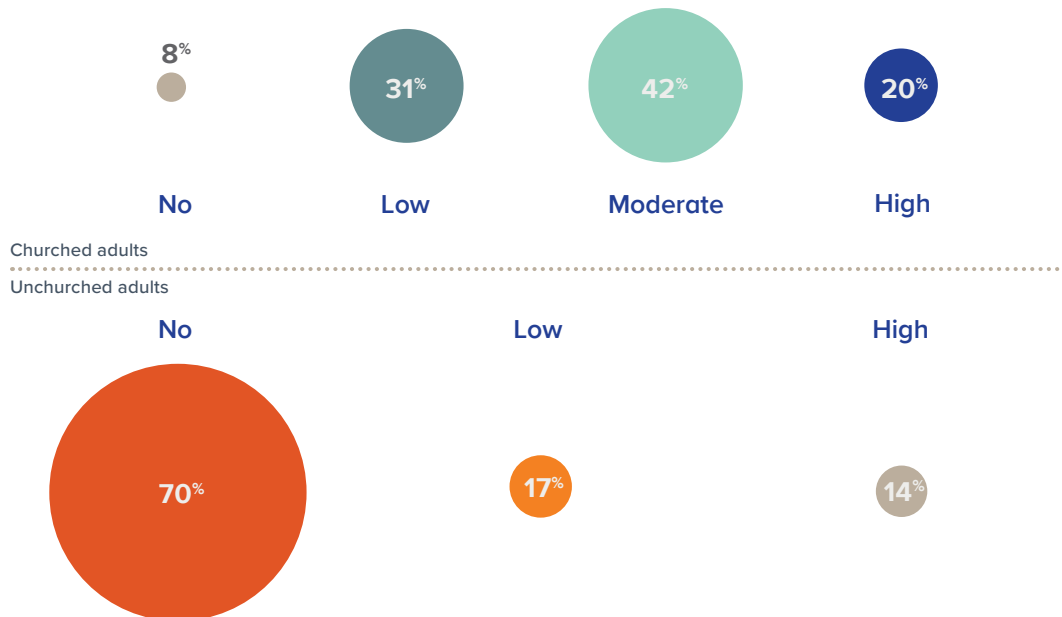
Seven in 10 unchurched adults (70%) select none of the above, exhibiting no digital openness. One in six (17%) has low openness, selecting only one of these options (a solo viewing of an online service is the top choice for this group, suggesting they're not looking for a communal experience). Just 14 percent of the unchurched population has high digital openness, saying they'd consider participating in two or more of these digital forums.

For now, let's take a closer look at the digital opportunity among those who are already consistent and committed. Churched adults of all digital openness levels do appear content with a church home: They are equally likely to have stayed committed to one church through COVID-19 (72% high, 74% moderate, 73% low)—usually their pre-pandemic church (96%, 92%, 85%)—rather than sampling via streamed services.

## The Digital Openness Spectrum—Inside & Outside the Church

### Digital openness among churched adults

As you consider programming for digital or hybrid ministry, keep these categories of digital openness in mind. Who is all in? These might be churchgoers to get engaged in volunteering, developing community or providing quality feedback in your online strategy. Who is hanging back—and why? Are their barriers theological, practical, social or technological?



### Digital openness among unchurched adults

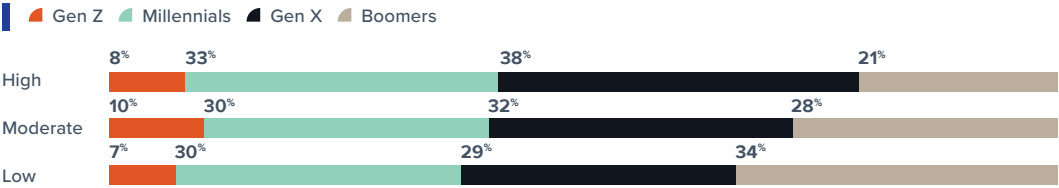
The accessibility of online services hasn't necessarily swung open the (digital) doors to those outside the Church. Outreach efforts in digital or hybrid ministry may encounter apathy or resistance.

See glossary on page 6 for definitions.

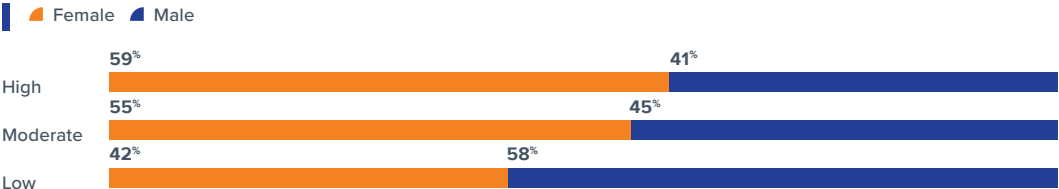
n=1,302 U.S. adults, September 1-15, 2020.

# Churched Adults with Greater Digital Openness Tend to Be:

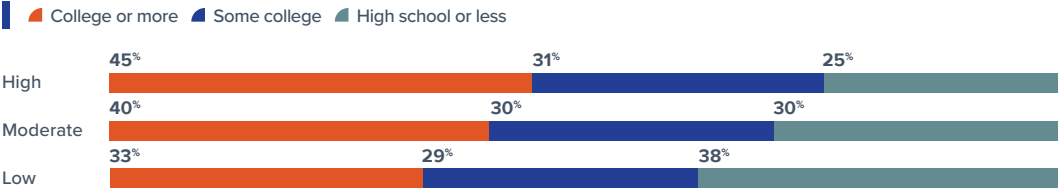
## ... Younger



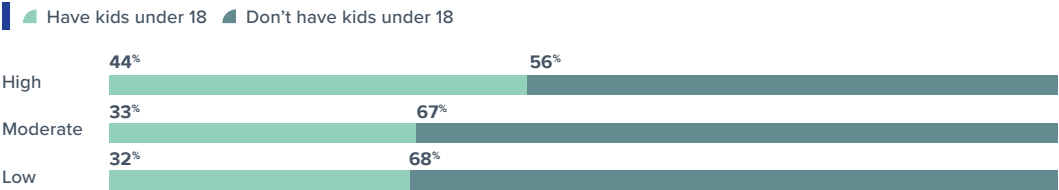
## ... Female



## ... Educated



## ... Raising Children



n=661 U.S. churched adults, September 1-15, 2020.

## Enthusiasm Does Not Guarantee Engagement

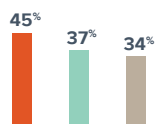
Some of this perceived openness to digital ministry may, at this point, still be aspirational. Thirteen percent of those with high digital openness still qualify as pandemic-era dropouts—meaning they’ve “never” attended church, either in person or digitally, during this period.

## They Might Already Be Part of Churches That Embraced Digital Ministry

■ High ■ Moderate ■ Low

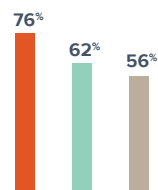
*“Before COVID-19, my church offered an online service”*

% yes



*“Before COVID-19, my church did a good job engaging congregants both digitally and physically”*

% agree



*n*=661 U.S. churched adults, September 1-15, 2020.



For many pastors, adapting to the challenge of moving (at least some of) their church activities online can feel like an overwhelming task. What can we learn from church leaders who have been utilizing an online or hybrid model for church, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic? Barna gathered feedback from a variety of church leaders and pulled together some of the best practices and advice from ministries that are learning from the difficulties and leaning into the possibilities.

## Embrace Creative New Opportunities

An effective hybrid church model requires more than mirroring the original service in a digital format. Here are some of the common ways ministries are experimenting with the hybrid approach.

- **Appointing an Online Pastor:** The digital space requires a unique level of intentionality to engage users and still cultivate personal connections. In an attempt to continue to lay relational groundwork in the digital sphere and to reorient churchgoers from being consumers of content to being active participants, some churches report appointing (whether hiring or re-deploying) specific pastors to focus on engaging digital users.
- **Sharing New Media Beyond Sunday:** As ministry moves beyond the church walls, some view media as an integral part of their congregation's everyday life. Alexis Gwin-Miller, a pastor at New Direction Christian Church, shares, "Our senior pastor added a weekly podcast for listeners,

*Are there aspects of pastoring or leading during an online service that you personally prefer, compared to an in-person service?*

**"Usually it's quicker and more scalable. You can engage all sorts of people in different time zones and seasons of life and provide next steps that can fit their timeframe. It's kind of like choose-your-own-adventure."**

—Jay Kranda, Online Pastor, Saddleback Church

**"There has been a shift in how people engage with us as a church. They are sitting in their homes, in their living rooms or bedrooms, and this creates an atmosphere where they feel more comfortable to be more open and share more. I love connecting with people who don't have their walls up and allow you to be vulnerable with them."**

—Justin Woelk, Online Campus Pastor, North Metro Church.

**"The main advantage to an online service is its on-demand nature, provided you've grown beyond emulating a live event. I believe there is greater opportunity to reach more people in a streaming world than a specific time-bound event that someone needs to opt into."**

—Anonymous, Director of Online Communities

and we incorporated special broadcasting from our leader's home to encourage people to bring their entire family to Bible study." Other churches have been experimenting with broadcasting on-demand content.

- **Auditing & Redesigning Services:** With online worship and preaching, pastors compete for viewers' attention. While someone may be hesitant to walk out of in-person services, they may find it easier to close a live stream tab if something else catches their interest or the household demands their focus. One pastor mentions that their service is no longer a recording of the main location's sermon but rather is "specifically engineered for the online experience." Pastors should carefully consider and prioritize what is most important—the length, purpose and order of various service elements—to maintain congregants' engagement.

## Seek Out Those Who Might Miss Out

The digital era allows pastors and leaders to extend their reach farther than in previous eras—but hybrid church isn't one-size-fits-all. Changes may leave certain groups at a higher risk of disengagement. In thinking about your audience for either in-person or digital offerings, take careful consideration of these groups:

- **Older Generations:** While physical services have their own limitations for accessibility to elderly populations, mobilizing church life via a digital platform takes a toll on older attendees. Look for opportunities to provide training and technical support for those struggling with

**"The need to be more intentional about the movement and space I am using while leading and the care and attention I now give to making each moment count has increased the density of the quality of the online experience compared to the in-person."**

—Mark Liebenow, Alpha Director,  
Point of Grace Church

**"The scope and production value we now experience has created a higher bar for the online viewer, and that is wonderful. However, from a pastoring and leading perspective, I would say it has just made connecting and leading different and maybe even more challenging."**

—Melissa Johnson-Matthews, Alpha Minister,  
Lutheran Church of Hope

**"I enjoy the fact that our services and moments are evergreen. I receive some connection cards and prayer requests throughout the week that you otherwise wouldn't get on Sunday."**

—Tyler Volkers, Online Campus Pastor,  
The Ridge Community Church

**"Preaching one time instead of many is certainly helpful. What could be tried and tested over four fully preached services can be corrected in the moment instead."**

—Anonymous, Volunteer Leader

these quick advancements so as not to cut out a portion of your congregation.

- ▶ **Households with Children:** Instead of dropping children off at childcare during the service, families are often all together in the same room for online services—and, during COVID-19, this might look exhaustingly similar to their options for remote work and learning throughout the week. Jason Morris, Global Innovation Pastor and leader at Westside Family Church, proposes that, during social distancing, “The home is the new church, and the parents are the new pastors.” As churches increase content and programs for children and youth at home, leaders can support guardians who may be daunted and busy—while

reminding them of the valuable role they play in children’s spiritual lives.

- ▶ **Dropouts:** Leaders have noticed a significant number of people who have been missing from services since the beginning of COVID-19. Pastors have a two-fold opportunity: to understand the variety of reasons that some members have stopped attending, and to learn from or emphasize the parts of church that these dropouts say they still desire.

## Questions for Reflection:

Use these questions as a guide to consider specific needs you are seeing within your current church context.

1. Just as a new church plant should have a deep understanding of its community and neighbors, are you approaching online services by studying and considering the digital environment? Are you making changes to your services, or just transplanting them to a virtual platform?
2. What forms of media have you tried offering *outside* of the traditional Sunday service structure?
3. Who in your church context is most affected by the shift to an online or hybrid environment? In what ways are you adapting to increase accessibility to these particular

audiences (such as older generations, households with children, dropouts)?

4. How have you been defining success as a church while doing hybrid ministry? What metrics are you tracking, and are those metrics the best indicators of church health in this season?
5. How will you make changes within your current church structure to best engage people across the scale of digital openness (high, moderate, low)?

## Developing a Digital or Hybrid Approach



### 4. How Do We Reimagine Traditions?

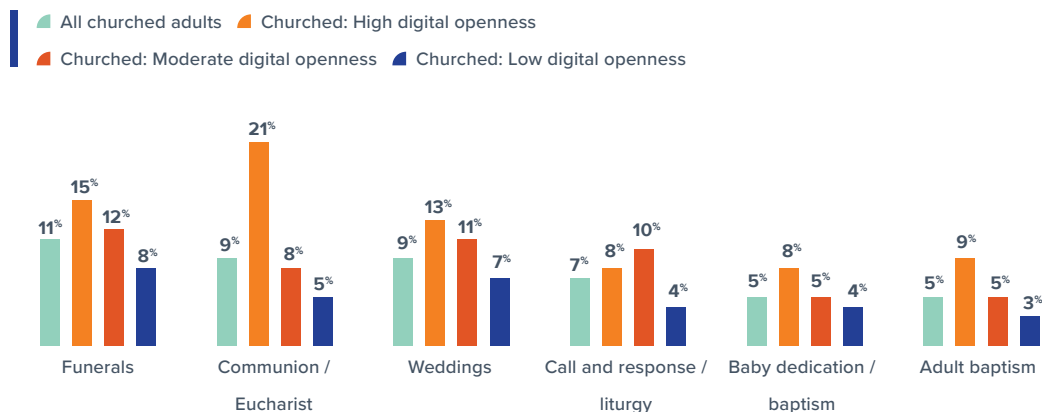
Three-quarters of churched adults who've watched an online church service during the pandemic (76%) say that, when they attend digitally, they are able to participate in all of the traditions that are important to their faith experience. A strong majority of those with high digital openness (88%) feels this is true. There are some expected denominational differences here: Catholics are more likely than Protestants (29% vs. 19%) and mainline churchgoers are more likely than non-mainliners (28% vs. 16%) to disagree that all of their treasured traditions are just as accessible online.

Dropouts are just as likely as other churchgoers to agree that online church allows them to adequately participate in faith traditions, so we cannot assume that many have opted out of church during the pandemic because they missed the more ceremonial aspects of in-person services.

Interestingly, however, there is consensus across denominations

#### *Which of these items are you open to experiencing digitally / online?*

Select all that apply. Base: Churched adults



n=661 U.S. churched adults, September 1-15, 2020.

in churchgoers' openness—or rather, lack thereof—to digital forms of more corporeal traditions or sacraments, such as communion or Eucharist, call-and-response liturgies, weddings, funerals and baptisms. Those with more digital openness are somewhat less deterred, but formal group expressions clearly pose challenges,

whether technological or theological, for most churches when it comes to developing authentic and desirable digital alternatives.

## How Church Leaders Are Reconsidering Contexts for Sacraments

Are some faith practices beyond innovation? We asked church leaders to share how they're thinking about some of these traditions in light of their digital or hybrid church strategy during COVID-19.

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**Communion:** Churches continue to keep communion as a central part of their weekly service. Some are practicing various forms of “digital communion” where they invite attendees to get their own elements and partake during a guided portion of the online service. Some leave elements on congregants' porches or have a drop-by station at the church for pick-up prior to the service. Others are trying a drive-thru to receive the elements.

**“Communion is directed by our chat hosts as a ‘DIY Communion’ at home, with whatever elements they see fit.”**

—Andy Mage, Digital Pastor, Bay Hope Church

### Greeting Neighbors / Passing the Peace:

The chat bar has become the new location for this moment of connection during service. Sometimes church staff serve as hosts, or everyone is encouraged to send a greeting message. Another approach is for leaders to encourage people to turn to a person next to them (if they are watching with family or friends in their home or somewhere else) and greet them in person.

**Baptism:** Churches continue to successfully practice baptisms, albeit in modified forms. Some churches broadcast baptisms held in person, limiting the attendance and ensuring that all present follow safety precautions. Other pastors have moved baptisms outside of buildings in order to allow more people to witness.

**“In our TV stream, we also have a chat function that has breakout rooms. Those breakout rooms are for people who need immediate prayer or connection before the service. We have staff on those chats 20 minutes prior to each service.”**

—Melissa Johnson-Matthews, Alpha Minister, Lutheran Church of Hope

**“We walk them through our baptism process online and ensure that there is a baptized follower of Jesus doing the baptizing. We have those being baptized pre-register online, and then we do an orientation and set up an event through Zoom where the person can get baptized, and friends and family can cheer them on either onsite or online as baptism is happening in real-time.”**

—Tyler Volkers, Online Campus Pastor, The Ridge Community Church

**“Our services are currently open for baptism, and we have almost done a few Zoom baptisms, where the baptized person is in a different state, but each time we’ve been close, they have found a church near them who can help (which is great).”**

—Anonymous, Pastor



## 5. How Do We Cultivate Community?

Greeting your neighbor mid-service. Pausing for prayer with a leader while you catch up in the lobby. Chatting with another parent while you pick up your kids from children's ministry. Attending a Sunday school class or a weeknight small group. There are many ways people meet and develop relationships through their church.

In a digital or hybrid church strategy, can opportunities for connection be relocated to an online context *and* remain meaningful?

Even before the recent influx of online options, there were positive relational correlations with digital and hybrid approaches. Eighty-three percent of churched adults whose church offered digital services pre-pandemic agree that congregants were engaged well. Among those in churches that didn't yet offer streaming services, just half (50%) say this was the case.

We at least know that churched adults are willing to explore some online options for interaction and group engagement. Their digital imagination easily extends to activities like prayer (one-on-one or communal), worship and groups or classes. Ministries to particular demographics—children, youth, married couples or senior adults, for instance—prompt less interest, though

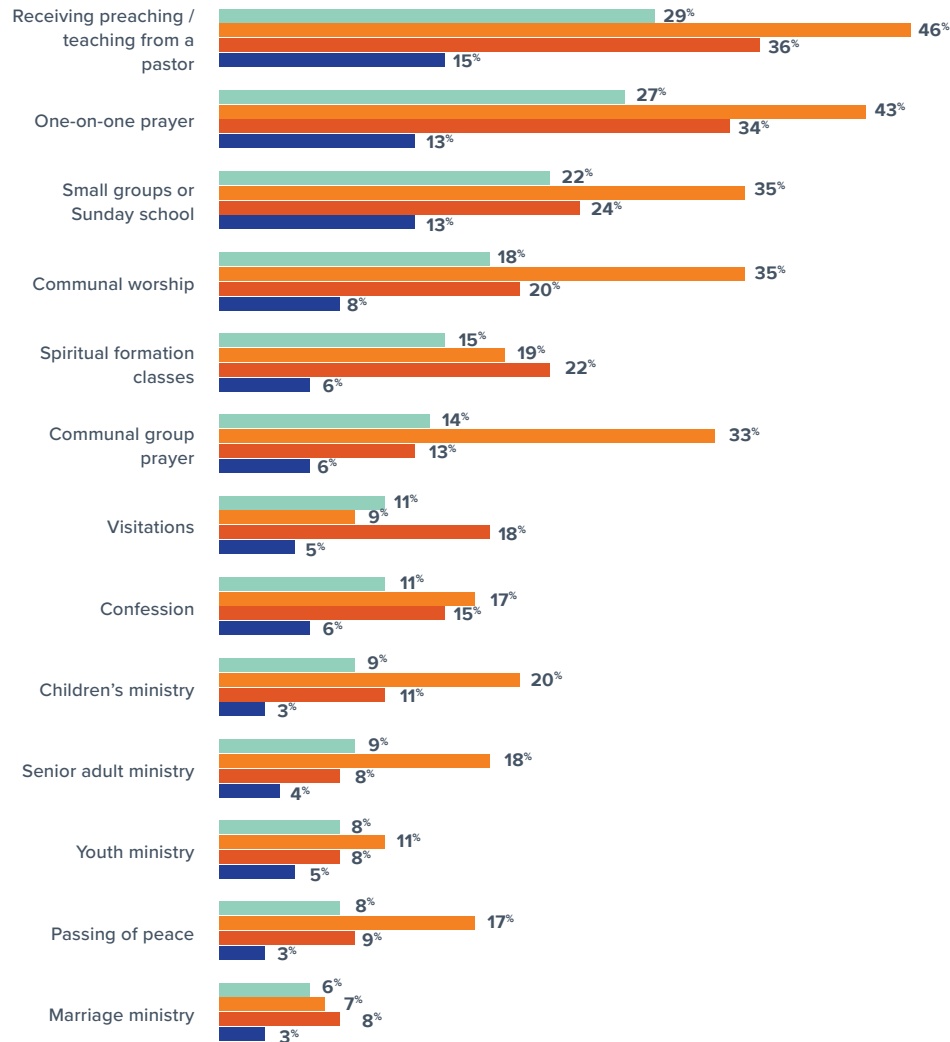
those with high digital openness are more willing to consider online options for youth and children, perhaps because this group is more likely to include parents of minors to begin with.

Beyond watching a sermon or teaching, online interaction with pastors or priests is less attractive for churched adults. Zooming in on denominations, Protestants and Catholics naturally differ here; the former expresses more interest in online options for receiving preaching (42% vs. 18% Catholics), and the latter places value on transferring confession to a digital context (18% vs. 8% Protestants). The groups are similarly but only marginally curious about digital forms of pastoral visitation (9% Catholics, 15% Protestants).

## Which of these items are you open to experiencing digitally / online?

Select all that apply. Base: Churched adults

■ All churched adults 
 ■ Churched: High digital openness 
 ■ Churched: Moderate digital openness 
 ■ Churched: Low digital openness



n=661 U.S. churched adults, September 1-15, 2020.



## Connection Issues

Among those *outside* the Church, there is limited openness to communal or social opportunities, though responses reveal some opportunities for relationship or outreach. When considering going to an in-person church service, unchurched adults are more drawn toward attending with someone else than by themselves. For an online service, that preference flips. A structured in-person service is the faith environment they'd be most comfortable in. Other opportunities centered on conversation—whether one-on-one with a friend or with a group for the express purpose of discussing Christianity—are less appealing, regardless of being in-person or online.

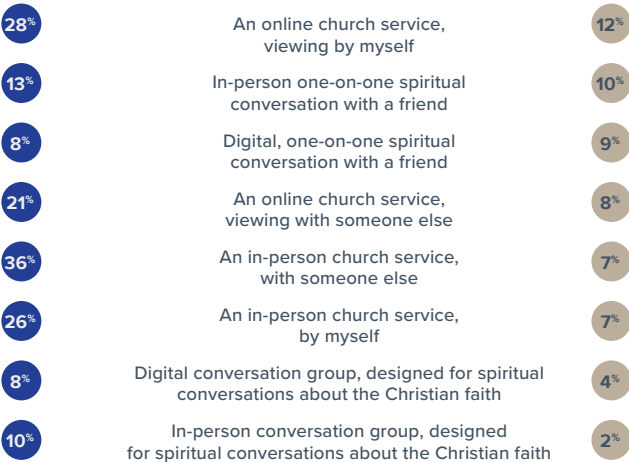
1 in 5

of all unchurched adults (21%) is open to watching an online service alone. Among unchurched adults with high digital openness, that percentage climbs drastically to 87%.

*Please select which environments you would be open to attending or participating in.*

Select all that apply. Base: Unchurched adults

■ Christian ■ Non-Christian



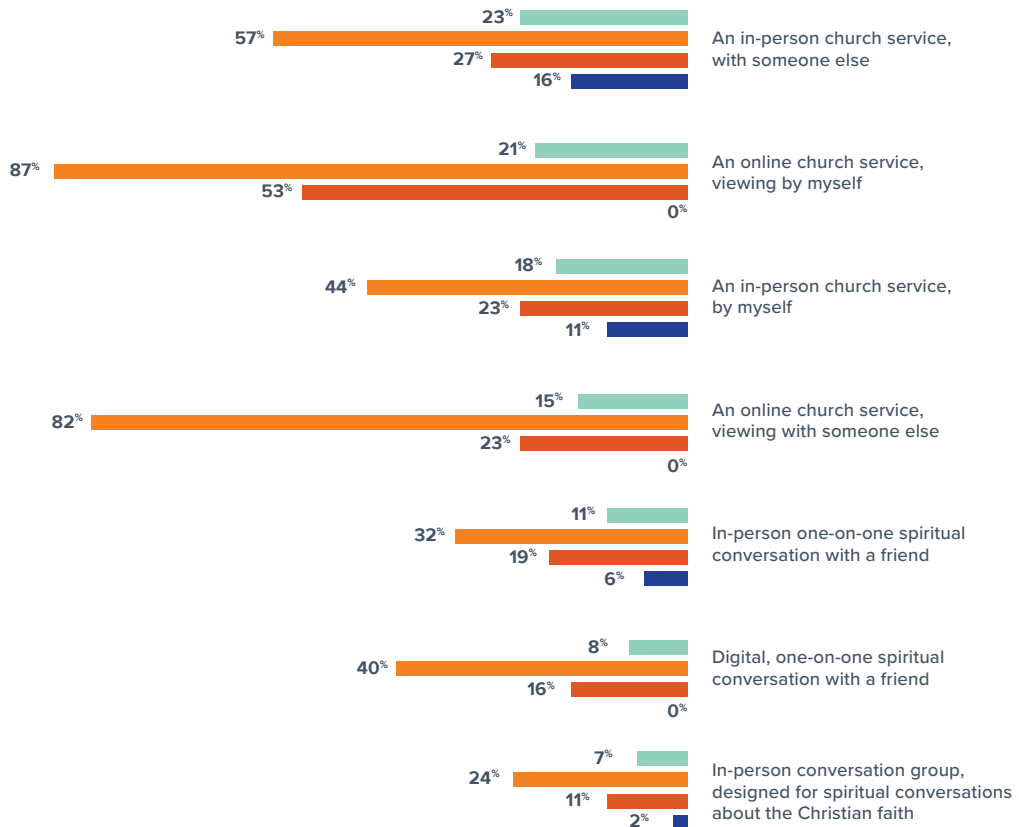
n=641 U.S. unchurched adults, September 1-15, 2020.

# Openness to Digital Ministry Among the Unchurched

Please select which environments you would be open to attending or participating in.

Select all that apply. Base: Unchurched adults

■ All unchurched adults 
 ■ Unchurched: High digital openness 
 ■ Unchurched: Low digital openness 
 ■ Unchurched: No digital openness



n=641 U.S. unchurched adults, September 1-15, 2020.

By definition, those with no digital openness could not select any of the digital/online items from the above list.

## The Other Kind of Service: Volunteering & Digital Church

More than four in 10 churched adults (42%) say their church provides ways to volunteer digitally. Those who say they were active church volunteers before the pandemic are even more likely to be aware of such digital options (54%).

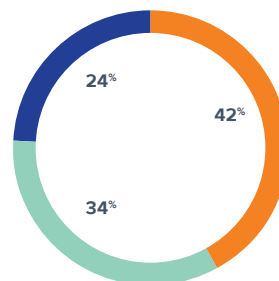
The survey pressed respondents to learn more about what volunteering activities look like during the pandemic, either online or in person. Many mention taking on a more involved role in hosting online services, from providing IT support to moderating chat conversations to keep discussions orderly or to make sure late arrivals feel welcomed. Some continue to take part in specific aspects of the service, such as greetings and announcements or worship songs and readings. Others indicate they are carrying out more typical volunteer tasks, such as feeding the homeless or leading various study groups for adults and children. For some, raising or giving money is considered a form of volunteering with the local church.

Collectively, perhaps these activities are why, even in a digital context, more than three-quarters of churched adults who have participated in online services (77%) feel they are making a meaningful contribution in their church community. Interestingly, this is a point on which dropouts who've watched an online service diverge (64%), underscoring some of their digital apathy compared to other churched adults.

Most churchgoers hope a sense of digital goodwill continues onward and outward. Seven in 10 churched adults (70%) agree that, post-pandemic, churches should use digital resources to reach and engage their neighborhoods. Among those with high digital openness, this is practically a given (94%).

***“There are ways for me to volunteer digitally at my church”***

Base: Churched adults



n=661 U.S. churched adults,  
September 1-15, 2020.

**7 in 10**  
churched adults (70%)  
agree that, post-pandemic, churches  
should use digital  
resources to reach  
and engage their  
neighborhoods.

## Zoom in on Online Community

Some affirmation for pastors worried that digital or hybrid ministry might leave congregants feeling isolated: Even during the pandemic response, churched adults who have participated with online services by and large feel connected to their church communities (81%)—and even feel cared for by their pastors (77%)!

Six in 10 churched adults (60%) hope that, even post-COVID-19, churches will keep using digital means of gathering people together. As such, they're keen to play a role in inviting friends, family or acquaintances to participate in online services (38%). However, in-person gatherings are still the more appealing invitational environment.

6 in 10

churched adults  
hope that, even post-  
COVID-19, churches  
will keep using digital  
means of gathering  
people together

### *“When I attend church digitally ...”*

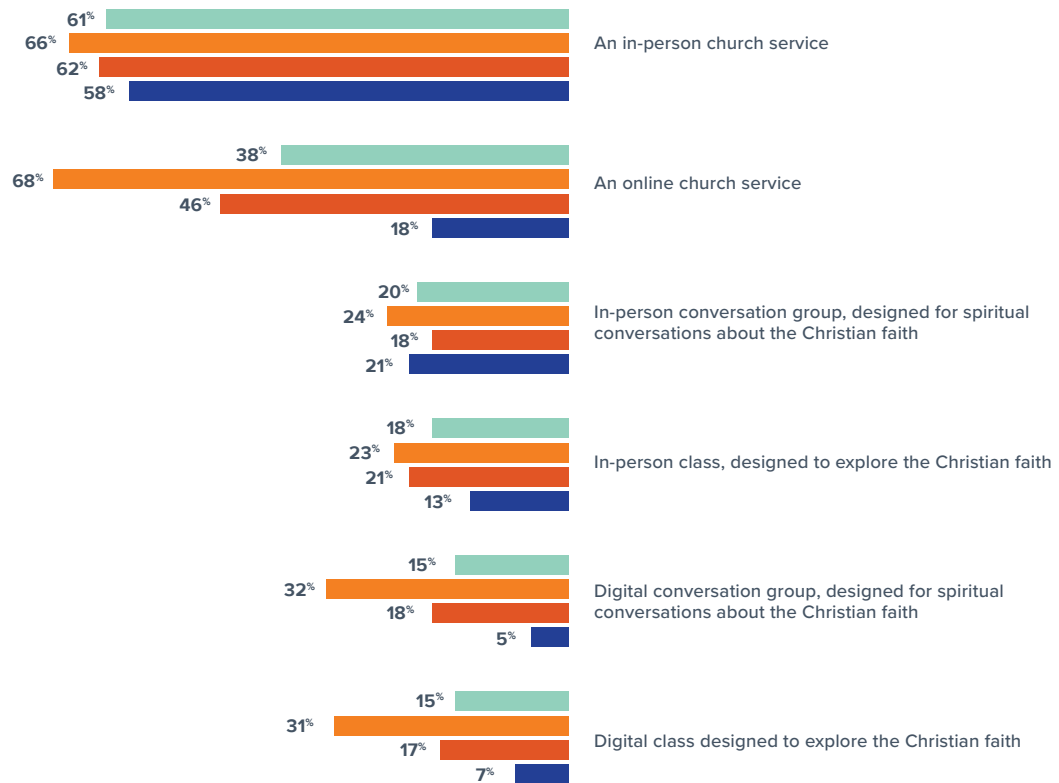
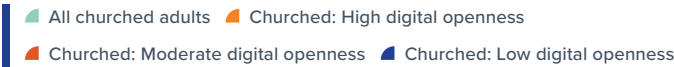
Base: Churched adults who've participated in an online church service at some point during COVID-19



n=499 U.S. churched adults, September 1-15, 2020.

# Which environment would you be open to inviting friends, acquaintances and family members to?

Select all that apply. Base: Churched adults



n=661 U.S. churched adults, September 1-15, 2020.



# 6. How Do We Disciple?

Beyond simply consuming online sermons, are churchgoers growing spiritually?

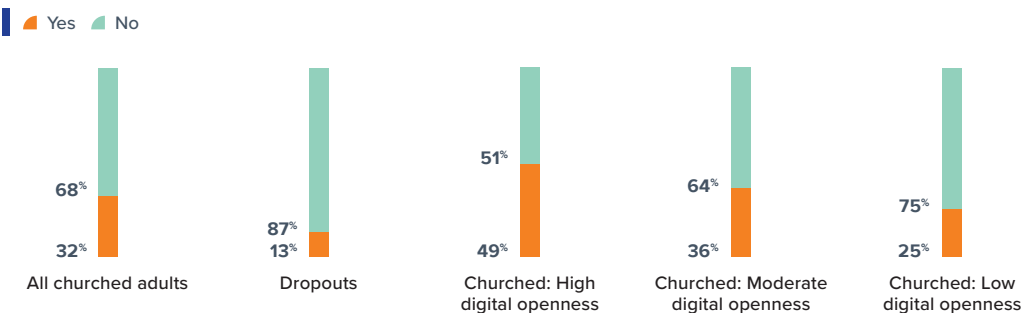
Barna offered a few suggestions of what that might look like—mentorship, small groups, online courses and so on. One in three churched adults (32%) reports that, in the past year, they’ve participated in some form of digital discipleship. About half of those with high digital openness (49%) say the same.

One in four churched adults (24%) says they’ve experienced spiritual decline during the pandemic. Similarly one in five (19%) disagrees that they are spiritually growing during this pandemic in ways other than church attendance. Though there may be myriad causes for such a decline in this period, faith leaders should rightly be concerned by this proportion with a fading faith. Still, while correlation is not causation, among those who have engaged in digital discipleship this year, the percentage of those who don’t see themselves spiritually growing declines to 14 percent.

In this regard, digital methods might provide inroads: Unchurched adults with high digital openness are much more likely to consider online classes designed to explore the Christian faith (40%) than in-person classes with this aim (23%), as shown on page 33.

Overall, online discipleship seems a promising ministry program for the future: After the pandemic, 63 percent of churched adults believe churches should use digital resources for purposes of spiritual formation and discipleship.

*In the past year, have you participated in some kind of discipleship digitally?*



*n*=661 U.S. churched adults, September 1-15, 2020.

## Digital Discipleship & Relationships

Three out of four churched adults who participate in digital forms of discipleship share some positive relational outcomes—that they believe relationships grow as much as they would in an in-person group (74%), and even that they have been able to disciple and help *others* grow spiritually (76%). One reason for these connections may be that, overwhelmingly, churched participants feel that digital forums for discipleship provide a safe space to speak openly (87%).

Even so, there's a 50/50 chance attendees will show up: More than half of these churched adults who've gone as far as engaging in online discipleship programs admit it is more tempting to skip a session because they feel there is less accountability to attend.

# 87%

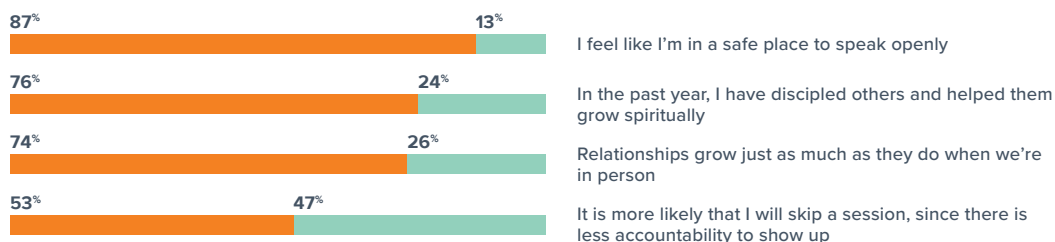
of churched participants of digital discipleship feel that digital forums for discipleship provide a safe space to speak openly

## Open Forums

### *"When participating in discipleship digitally ..."*

Base: Churched adults who've participated in some form of digital discipleship in the past year

Agree Disagree



n=258 U.S. churched adults, September 1-15, 2020.

## Field Guide 2

In our interviews with a panel of church leaders with digital ministry expertise, we see pastors taking stock of the physical elements of the Church and wrestling with how—if at all—each of them could be adapted to fit a new digital context. In this section, we get specific about translating various ministry functions—from small groups to pastoral visitations—into a digital or hybrid model, particularly in the COVID-19 context.

- **Hospitality:** Online services have a new front door: the chat box. Leaders and volunteers serve as online hosts to welcome visitors, either through a virtual lobby or by greeting individuals by name in the chat bar. These same hosts encourage guests to fill out digital connect cards, follow along with scripture, promote welcome calls and respond to text, email or social media questions. The priority is on finding online means of achieving the traditional goals of hospitality: helping visitors feel seen, welcomed and provided with opportunities to plug deeper into the church.
- **Volunteering:** With limits on congregational gatherings, leaders share that members are finding original ways to rally around needs in their local neighborhoods, helping with crisis care teams, serving at homeless shelters or preparing food for frontline workers and patients. Pastors see parents, grandparents and neighbors volunteering to keep children's ministry and Vacation Bible Schools running digitally. There is a rise in church members who are filling technical support roles. Volunteers are being mobilized to check on or pray for individuals over video calls, allowing churches to keep up contact

*What does the invitation to give an offering or tithe look like during an online service for your church? How does the response compare to an in person service?*

**"A pastor gives a short message about the importance of giving and then explains the ways to do so. For our online viewers, they can easily click the giving link in their window or give via text message. The response has increased, but I would say a good bit of our giving was already through digital means before the pandemic. It's mainly the older generation that gives in person. However, even throughout lockdown, they continued to mail checks."**

*—Anonymous, Creative Arts Pastor*

**"Very much the same, but we do a better job showing how we are using tithes to help those impacted by COVID. That mobilizes those blessed with resources to give to us because they could trust us to help people in our community. Our food banks are a big help."**

*—Jay Kranda, Online Pastor, Saddleback Church*

**"We already offered online giving and that has only increased. We did create a text-to-give method, which helped younger people give rather than sending them to the website."**

*—Justin Woelk, Online Campus Pastor, North Metro Church*



with many individuals they no longer see in person. Other positions, such as 24 / 7 support chat moderators and video call hosts, allow volunteers from many different geographic regions to be involved with supporting the work of the church.

- ▶ **Pastoral Care:** While in-person conversations and check-ins have become increasingly difficult, pastors have been reliant on video calls as a form of personalized connection (as one church leader notes, “Zoom is the new phone call”). For some church leaders, this digital platform may free them to be more consistent and responsive than if all meetings were expected to be in-person. At the same time, pastors report feeling the significant loss of quality touchpoints with elder congregants. Strict social distancing measures and a lack of technical fluency have made connections difficult with older generations.
- ▶ **Fellowship:** During COVID-19, many pastors have found creative ways to integrate distanced in-person meetings with virtual social activities. Some churches have hosted outdoor worship nights in parking lots as a way to connect, while others have designed exercise sessions that people can do while social distancing. Additionally, small-group Zoom calls have been a staple as many churchgoers seek to continue to build community while growing spiritually.
- ▶ **Unstructured Space:** Doing church in person allows a natural level of authenticity. There’s no space to edit out transitions, a flat note or a misspoken word. While pastors may feel increasing pressure to create flawless, seamless content for online services, they should also

**“The vast majority of our giving has been digital for many years now, so a digital service’s call to action is very similar to in-person, just with no offering trays. We have not experienced a significant drop in giving.”**

*—Anonymous, Director of Online Communities*

**“We call these moments our vision moments, and most weeks they happen in the middle of the service, bridging our music and message. Our online host invites people to bring an offering digitally, and we have links that we point our guests to. We then have a 30-second offering video with music that encourages our guests to bring the offering together. Like an in-person service, it is an intentional part of our service online.”**

*—Tyler Volkers, Online Campus Pastor, The Ridge Community Church*

**“We have established four ways to give and have added Cash App. We have text-to-give, online giving and the traditional mail-in options. We found an overwhelming increase in offerings that we did not expect from the Cash App addition. This surprised us. Where in-person giving usually varies in the summer, we encountered a steady flow from this audience, even in the pandemic.”**

*—Alexis Gwin-Miller, Pastor, Doctoral Candidate, New Direction Christian Church*

consider that the in-between moments or even small mistakes of a gathering are invisible elements that make services organic and embodied. Leaving room for unstructured space in online ministry can be key to

building trust and vulnerability with viewers and participants on the other side of the screen.

## Make a Plan:

Reflect on these questions in conversation with a peer, your team or another church leader.

- ▶ What do you value and what would you reimagine about your present approach to:
  - Hospitality?
  - Volunteering and service?
  - Pastoral care?
  - Fellowship?
- ▶ In what ways is your church utilizing live, prerecorded and in-person elements? How will you create a sense of authenticity within online church options? How do you hope to find a balance between revealing the less polished moments and providing clean, engaging content for your church to enjoy?
- ▶ What new staff or volunteer positions might be available for different skillsets within your church during this time (technological experts, elder support, chat facilitators, etc.)? How can members with high digital openness be invited to actively shape your digital or hybrid options? How can they partner with churchgoers of moderate or low openness to strengthen digital options and improve engagement?
- ▶ If social media or a chat bar is the primary form of communication, how does that shape (for better or worse) how your congregants feel heard and known? What other tools are needed to best meet the specific needs of your congregation?
- ▶ Moving forward, how is your church planning to incorporate what you have learned during the pandemic as some in-person activities become available once again?
- ▶ What elements of gathering and worshiping with your church do you feel you'll always and only do in person? Why is this an experience you value—theologically, logistically, personally?



# Methodology

The research for this study consisted of one online study conducted September 1–15, 2020 with 1,302 U.S. adults ages 18–75. The margin of error for this sample is plus or minus 2.5 percent at the 95-percent confidence level.

Researchers set quotas to obtain a minimum readable sample by a variety of demographic factors and weighted the two samples by gender, ethnicity, region, age, education, household income, faith and church attendance history to reflect their natural presence in the population (using U.S. Census Bureau data and historical Barna data for comparison). Partly by nature of using an online panel, these respondents are slightly more educated than the average American, but Barna researchers adjusted the representation of college-aged individuals in the weighting scheme accordingly.

Barna engaged a panel of leaders in digital and hybrid ministry to share about their experiences and best practices. This group includes the following names, and many other leaders.

**Alexis Gwin-Miller**, *Pastor, Doctoral Candidate, New Direction Christian Church*

**Jon Hughes**, *Adult Ministry Catalyst*

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If you'd like to be considered for Barna's practitioner panel and provide applications and insights that bring the data to life, email [barnagroup@barna.org](mailto:barnagroup@barna.org) for more information.



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