

## Trends to watch and digital ministry forecasting

- **Video content reigns supreme.** Video isn't going anywhere, and there's a lot of opportunity for growth in using it outside worship services especially; in the same way strong video content kept people engaged in church during Covid-19, it can keep them engaged during the weekdays when faith isn't always top of mind.
- **Future visitors to your church will likely have at least 2-3 online experiences with your church before an in-person visit, in many cases more.** A visit to your website was likely before an in-person experience even before Covid. And now that so many churches make their worship available in some form online, a majority of visitors will probably watch at least one service that way before they commit to coming in person. They may also interact with your social media accounts before a visit in many cases. So at the earliest, an in-person visit will likely be someone's third impression of your church.
- **Outreach is becoming more decentralized; producing digital spiritual and educational content about Christian faith may be increasingly important for evangelism.** Distrust in all major institutions is on the rise, and affiliation with a church is on the decline. People in younger generations are less likely to trust the church or see it as an authentic, loving presence in their lives. They are also more wary of making new in-person connections. Consequently, when they feel spiritually curious or struggle with faith, they're more likely to seek perspectives and resources online. This allows them to explore faith with less commitment, less risk, less interaction with institutions they distrust, and greater anonymity. Right now, this means cultural figures loosely affiliated with faith often hold a lot more power than formally trained church leaders and the institutional church. We need to think about what it looks like to produce content that meaningfully connects and nurtures seeds of faith among those who aren't prepared to seek out a traditional church.

## Specific Platforms

### Church Websites

Your church website will probably be your first impression for visitors. Think about how you can convey who your church is and how you do ministry through your website.

*First page people see=homepage. And the most important part of that page is what you put right below your menu; it's the first place most people's eyes will go. Think of this like a billboard for your church. Imagine someone is driving 70 mph down a highway, and your billboard is on the side of the road. What's the message you want to send them about your church? And what is the absolute quickest way you can convey it?*

*Might feel overwhelming at first, but remember that you don't have to capture everything important about your church on the homepage. The goal of this billboard section should be to tell people enough about you to persuade them to dive deeper into your ministry; it's the trailer, not the movie.*

The design of your website is an important part of this, but the message of your website is equally important, if not more so. How is your homepage conveying a sense of belonging to young families and young adults?

## Key messaging for church websites

- Love, welcoming, and belonging: people seek out community to feel belonging and love, and these messages are particularly important for Millennials and Gen Z
- Your beliefs and how you embody them in ministry: you can't fit your whole belief system on your website's homepage, but they do deserve a dedicated section.
- Hospitality and accessibility: how does your church ensure people who have disabilities can participate fully? What options are available for young children in your church? Do you have gluten-free bread available during Communion? Even though only some people will be asking these questions, for those who are asking, seeing that your website addresses what they need in order to be welcomed speaks volumes.

## Key design needs for church websites:

- Mobile-first/mobile-friendly design: your website MUST look good and function well on a phone
- Easy access to digital worship: ultimately, you probably hope people will visit you in person, but many people will likely prefer to watch online before making the commitment to an in-person visit, even in a post-Covid world
- Good photos and video of your church's ministry in action
  - Don't rely on text to do all the heavy lifting in communicating who you are
  - Video in particular can be a great way to simulate the experience of your church online
- Colors and design elements that reflect and evoke the feelings you want people to have about your church and the priorities of your ministry--for example, the color blue conveys that you're serene, trustworthy, and inviting
  - Resource:  
<https://www.creativeblog.com/web-design/12-colours-and-emotions-they-evoke-61515112>

## Examples:

- <https://www.adoptalovestory.com/>: strong visual storytelling, succinct and powerful messaging that gets to the heart of the mission, simple menu with clear options, responsive design:
- <https://invisiblechildren.com/>: lots of "white space" helps the message stand out, good use of headings, spacing, and graphics to say a lot without overwhelming people with text
- <https://www.charitywater.org/>: video storytelling, supportive graphics, single call to action (step the webpage wants you to take--in this case, giving)
- <https://go2cornerstone.com/>: video background shows you what worship is like at the church, and the buttons in the center of the homepage make it easy to get to visitor information or request prayer; use of yellow in design evokes hope and adds interest without being too bright in a way that might create a sense of stress or overwhelm.

## Social Media

### YouTube

YouTube is now the most popular social media platform, [used by more U.S. adults than even Facebook](#) (81% report using YouTube). It is very popular with younger generations and is one of the

only social media websites to report significant growth in 2020. If your church does not yet have a YouTube account or use YouTube to post/stream your worship services, this is definitely something you should consider.

### **Best uses of YouTube in 2021:**

- Livestreaming worship services: I believe YouTube is the all-around best platform to livestream your worship services. You don't need an account to easily watch YouTube, which is a big advantage over Facebook Live. Livestreams are easy for people to watch as regular videos if they can't make it live. Most people, especially younger generations, already watch YouTube regularly. And importantly, YouTube videos are easy to embed on your church website and share across other platforms.
- Sharing live events beyond worship: for example, my church has had a monthly Supper and Stories event for a few years now, in which people gathered for a meal and to share faith stories. We adapted this concept (dropping the food piece and going digital) to share several stories via livestream on YouTube. It worked super well.
- Testimonies, special music, spiritual messages, and educational video content: consider sharing shorter videos on your YouTube channel, perhaps drawn from what you're already putting together for worship, that are less than 15 minutes long and invite people to have a spiritual experience or learn something about Christian faith. These may be a way to reach people who are spiritually curious but not ready to attend a church yet.

### **Facebook**

Facebook is still one of the most popular social media platforms in the world ([#2 among U.S. adults in 2021](#)), and the one your church is most likely to use regularly. It still makes sense for many churches to maintain a presence on Facebook. It is also true that younger users are using Facebook less than in the past. So you can't depend on Facebook as a way to connect with them. Because you're at the mercy of Facebook's algorithm, you also shouldn't depend on Facebook as your primary method for connecting digitally with members of any age. It needs to be one piece of your digital strategy, supported by communication on other platforms.

### **Best uses of Facebook in 2021:**

- Facebook Live events/worship--Facebook favors live video content and will show it to more of your audience than other posts. It's also a way to use Facebook to increase the reach of gatherings and events you're already doing.
- Supplemental video content: low-tech messages and reflections from pastors during weekdays shared as Facebook video (either live or pre-recorded) can be a great way to nurture faith outside Sunday morning. If you have a lot of people in your church who are active on Facebook, this is a way to meet people where they are.
- Event promotion/communication: Many Millennials still use Facebook for event planning and RSVPs, so you may want to consider creating Facebook events for your church and inviting people to events through Facebook.

### **Instagram**

Instagram is very popular among Millennials and Gen Z. 71% of 18-29 year olds use Instagram in the U.S. So if your goal is to connect with that group, you should take Instagram into consideration. However, creating an Instagram account for your church isn't always the best way to use this

platform. Instagram users are more likely by far to follow people than brands and organizations. So you may have more success by using a pastor's personal account to connect with people about your church than you would with a church account.

#### **Best uses of Instagram in 2021:**

- Sharing video and photo highlights of your church's life together
- Sharing personal spiritual reflections and testimony, either in video form or paired with compelling personal photos
- Building personal connection and trust with church leaders
- Sharing less polished but authentic snippets of church life in Stories
- Connecting personally with church members and potential visitors you have a relationship with by commenting on their posts

#### **TikTok**

No social media platform has a younger audience or more buzz right now than TikTok. So people who want to reach Gen Z naturally wonder about whether they should be doing something on TikTok. There's an opportunity here for creative youth pastors or young pastors who are digital natives/have some on-camera skills. But there's also a lot of potential for churches to flame out. So I wouldn't recommend becoming a TikTok creator to most church leaders right now. But I do think there's value in downloading the app and watching others on it.

#### **Best uses of TikTok in 2021:**

- Shifting perceptions about pastors and Christianity among Gen Z (having fun and challenging stereotypes about people of faith)
- Watching and listening to Gen Z and young Millennials, either in your church or in general, to better understand them
- Youth groups could create TikTok content together in some cases

#### **Twitter**

Most popular among urban Millennials and Gen Xers. This is a more niche platform than some of the others, and most churches probably don't need to be active on Twitter. But some pastors should consider it. There are Christian sub-cultures active on Twitter, and engaging in the conversation there can be valuable both on a personal level and as a form of thought leadership.

#### **Best uses of Twitter in 2021:**

- Exposure to the insights, experiences, and ideas of people different than you and from beyond your context
- Theological thought leadership and participation in the broader conversation about church for leaders

### **Member Engagement**

- **If you don't have an email newsletter for members, consider starting one.** Having an email list you can communicate with regularly (weekly or monthly) is far more reliable and effective than depending on social media alone to get the word out about what your church is doing among your members.

- Recommended tool: MailChimp (free for up to 200 subscribers!)
- **Set up online giving if you haven't already done so.** Tithe.ly is an excellent option for facilitating online giving that specializes in churches.
- **Continue providing worship services online.** This allows both members and visitors to access worship more easily and could be particularly beneficial for members who have illnesses or disabilities that prevent them from being with you in person.
- **Consider setting up a system for text notifications to communicate with your congregation, especially if they are younger.** Here's a list of free and inexpensive tools you can use to send texts to all your members or multiple members at once: <https://www.wholewhale.com/tips/free-cheap-mass-texting-nonprofits/>.. Here's what's being recommended in the business world: <https://zapier.com/blog/best-sms-app/>. These systems may also allow you to set up reminders for things like nursery duty and worship team practices.
- **Use your personal social media account to interact with members.** Show them that you care about them and their major life events. Take an interest in what they are doing. This is simple and may seem obvious, but can be very meaningful.
- **Make information about what is going on in your church and how to be involved easy to access digitally.** If you rely only on printed and in-person communications, you will miss a significant segment of your younger members and potential members.
- **Celebrate church life and share church images and videos on social media.** Make your church accounts feel personal and communal--a reflection of your whole church body, not just the people on your payroll.