

While having been through two excruciating years, what can you expect as a church leader in 2022? As you can see, by the sheer number of trends, it's the most I've ever covered in an annual church trend series, and I've done them every year for years, 2022 is shaping up to be, I think a pivotal year. While we won't know until we get there, only God knows the future, I want to share some trends that I have been tracking and that I think are really going to emerge into their own next year in 2022. To that end, a new reality will emerge and I think it'll be a little bit different than we think. The last few years have been necessarily characterized by a very narrow focus.

The questions that church members and leaders, and this is true in the business community too if you're in the business community, have been preoccupied with include, "Can we reopen, and if so, how? Who's coming, who's not coming? Online or digital? Is hybrid church the future or not? Masks or no masks? Vaccines or no vaccines?"

"Democrat or Republican? Right-leaning or progressive?" All of those issues have dominated the agenda. There will surely be some urgent issues that are impossible to predict for 2022, but there are a few larger shifts that are happening. Two in particular.

First, some of the pressing matters that have characterized the last two years are now morphing into the culture as a whole. The hybrid church, for example, is emerging as a normal form of church, and I'll talk about that in a little bit, as is leading in a polarized culture. We thought that it was temporary, but people seem to be very polarized, and some of the battle lines that have been drawn over the last few years are emerging as semi-permanent cultural fixtures. Now, in the absence of another emerging global crisis though, 2022 will be a year where the new normalized world will emerge. It won't be exactly what we used to know as normal, nor will it be entirely stable, but the year will likely give us a chance to see where the dust is settling and to move on.

Although, last year didn't exactly usher in the post-pandemic era, it is more likely that 2022 will, so while no one can say exactly what the future holds, here are 12 trends I'm watching and I would encourage you and your team to consider and process as well. Trend number one, the demise of the old model of church. Every church and every leader has a model of church, and those who claim they don't have a model have a model. In fact, their anti-model is the model. A model is simply this, it's an approach.

It's a strategy. It's a way of doing things, and you have a way of doing things. The old model of church, the way most churches have approached church has been proving less and less effective by the year for decades. In 2021, Gallup shared that for the first time ever in the United States, church membership dropped below 50%. Among millennials, only 36% identify with a church.

Similarly, a decade ago, only 22% of millennials said that they have no religious affiliation. Today, that number is 31%. That's almost a 10-point jump in a decade, and for Gen Z, 33% now say they have no religious affiliations, so you can see that things are changing rapidly. Now, at the same time, attendance keeps dropping across the board. A survey by FACT of over 15,000 churches, conducted just before COVID hit, shows that between 2000 and 2020, average church attendance dropped from 137 people down to 65, so 2022 should start to yield data on where things stand now, and as you already suspect, the new data is likely to show further decline.

What does this mean? Well, the current approach to church not only isn't effective, it hasn't been effective for decades. Yet, leaders keep moving forward as though somehow things are going to turn around. Optimism is one thing, delusion is another, but please hear what I'm saying. The death of an approach to church doesn't equal the death of the church.

Changing the approach is the best way to see new growth. Wise leaders will become students of what's happening, and they'll seek to find a new approach that's biblically faithful and culturally effective. As Mark Sayers pointed out in his Rebuilders podcast, the model of church, the new one that is emerging is

actually being rebuilt now as we speak. Maybe the leaders aren't really carving it out, and you can see the church attendance chart as evidence of that, but the people are doing it. Rightly or wrongly, the people that you're trying to reach and the people that you have reached are deciding how and when to engage with church, and they're voting with their feet and they're voting with their wallets. Adept leaders will figure out where the culture is going and figure out how to meet people where they're at, and then they will lead them to where they need to be, so you got to figure out where people are going, meet them where they're at, and lead them to where they need to be.

When it comes to church model, what was is gone, and what will be hasn't yet emerged, so the key is to experiment. Stay faithful to biblical principles, experiment with the practice, study your people, learn the culture and lead people to where they need to go. The task, in other words, is to devise a faithful approach to church that will reach and disciple the next generation. In the future church, leaders who are willing to change their methods will amplify their mission, leaders who don't won't. That leads us to trend number two, growing churches will innovate beyond weekend services.

As leaders rethink the model of church, more and more church leaders will start rethinking the role of weekend services. Don't get me wrong, I love weekend services, and they're extremely important for a host of theological reasons and probably some practical ones as well, but for many churches, they have become either all the church does or the main focal point for what the church does. Focusing all your efforts on one hour on Sunday ignores the other 167 hours in a week, and that leaves a lot of churches functioning like restaurants that decide that, "Hey, if you want to eat here, it can only happen in a one-hour window and only in this particular building, and if you miss it, you miss it." Think about it, what future would there be for a restaurant whose mantra is, "You can only eat food in our building, we're only open one hour a week, and we don't do much in between"? Now, naturally, church is a lot more than one hour of performance or participation on a Sunday morning.

I know that sounds a little harsh, but that's what it has become in some cases. A lot of the innovation that has to happen in the church needs to take place outside of Sunday and outside the building. After all, people don't live in your church building. You don't live in your church building, right? They live in the community, where they interact with non-Christians all day long, every day.

Churches that equip people where they live and work will start to grow, and yes, that requires innovation. Trend number three, the vision for the future will become clearer. Not all churches will find a new vision, but those who do will have a brighter future. Ironically, as you know, the vision for the future church has been here all along because the vision of the church doesn't change that much. The core of the church's vision is always evangelism and discipleship.

It's just that with all the noise, the panic, the confusion and the hardship for the past two years, it's been exceedingly difficult to focus on anything else. In 2022, at least among a small group of church leaders, the vision for the future church will become louder than the lethargy of the present or the anger of the dissenters, and those churches will start growing. They're going to start to experiment. They'll find a new approach that's resonating and they'll begin to reach new people. Some of them will be bold experimenters, and they'll receive a lot of criticism for their experimentation as they create a new approach, a new model for church.

Many of the ideas you'll see in church in 2022 will be criticized and dismissed until they're not, but of course, that's how innovation works. The leaders we criticize today will be the leaders who coach us tomorrow. Trend number four, attendance will normalize, and you'll have a new church. 2021 had many leaders clinging to the idea that the next season, Easter, or the new school year, or Christmas would bring attendance back to 2019 levels. Now, that was a bad idea in the first place as the pandemic wore on, because for most churches, that never materialized.

In 2022, the constant cycle of hope, followed by disappointment when it comes to church attendance, will give way to the new reality that this is your church. Whoever is there, in this moment you're watching this video, that's your church. It'll become obvious that some of the people who said they're coming back later clearly aren't coming back ever, but it's not all bad news. When you look around, you'll see a lot of new people have joined you because they found you online or a friend brought them. You'll get to know your online audience like they're real people because they are, and potentially, you'll start to notice small pockets of momentum and hope, and your job as a leader is to build on those.

Regardless, you'll settle into the reality that for better or worse, this is your church. These are the people you'll build the future with, which is just in time. You can't build the future of your church while you're living in the past as a leader. Trend number five, hybrid church will simply become church. The debate between in-person church versus online church has always been somewhat of a false one, but 2022 is a year where the hybrid church model will simply become church.

In other words, hosting church online and in-person is just how you do church to reach the next generation. People have lived, after all, in the slipstream of digital and in real-life for well over a decade now, and church leaders will realize that church online is both a necessity and an opportunity. It's good that the debate over online church will fade into the background because when leaders can get on with the key task, reaching people however they come to you, in-person or online, the church will start to grow. Trend number six, in-person will become more personal. The future is both deeply digital and deeply personal.

Increasingly though, as people show up for in-person events, they're expecting more personal experiences. A look at culture before the pandemic shows a rise in bespoke, custom, private, and even VIP services at everything from concerts to clothing stores to vacations, and that will accelerate in the post-pandemic world. To figure out how to care for people personally, to know their names when they show up, to care about them as people is really important, and for ministry, that's always been important, but for larger churches in particular, dehumanizing systems that make people feel unnoticed will be tolerated less and less. No one wants to be a number, and in the future, treating people like numbers will get you more declining numbers and not much else. Now, that said, even in small churches, it's easy to ignore people.

You might say, "Well, we're not a big church. Everybody knows everybody," and you think your church is friendly because you know the names of six people, but if you really push down, even in a lot of small churches, a lot of people, let's say you have an average attendance of 40, a lot of people know six people, but they can't name the other 34 people in the room. The goal is not though, to have a church where everybody knows everybody. That doesn't scale. The point is to have a church where everyone is known.

This also gives us a great opportunity. The Washington Post coined a phrase called shrinkflation, and you probably noticed this trend in the wider culture. Because of COVID, everybody's cut back on their services, so you go to hotel. It's like, "Thanks to COVID, we're not doing ..." This is even in open states. "We're not doing any towel exchanges or housekeeping."

Restaurants have gotten rid of menus, and now, you have to scan a QR code. What they've done to maximize profits is cut back service, and people don't like it. What you get the opportunity to do is make your personal stuff more personal, and that will set you ... First of all, the church should do that, and secondly, that will set you apart from one of the other trends that's happening in the corporate world, and if you're a business, that's an opportunity for you to be known and loved by your clients because you have the opportunity then to be more personal in a world that is becoming much less personal and much more scaled back. Okay, trend number seven, information will move online and transformation will move to in-person.

Let me explain. For a few years, in this church trend series, I flagged down the longing that people have for non-downloadable experiences when they show up for church in person. In 2022, it's likely that many church leaders will realize that the best lane for information is online, while more transformational, transcendent experiences are better suited to in-person, and so they'll design their online ministry and in-person experiences accordingly. It's not that people can't come to faith online, they definitely can and they do, it's just that there's a difference between the kind of experience you can have on a device versus what you can experience when you're gathered corporately in the room. Both the digital explosion and the cynicism of our age have left people hungering for a transcendent touch.

Think about the explosive rise of porn. People are looking for intimacy, but of course, in porn, you get just the opposite. People are looking for what's real, and they're hungering for true community, for deeper experiences, for authentic transcendence, which is why churches that are growing are focusing more and more on creating experiences that engage more than just the head when you're gathered in person on a Sunday morning. They want to engage the heart, and also the relationships of people in the room. In short, people don't just want to know what's true, they want to know what's real, and what's real is deeper than just an idea, an intellectual thing you can download.

It's an experience. They've come looking for something bigger than themselves and something, frankly, bigger than us. In fact, when people show up to your church, they come looking for God. It's a shame when people come to church looking for God, and only find us. Now, a little bit more on this when you think about your online versus your in-person experience.

God is in His nature, both imminent and transcendent. A few decades ago, as the culture slipped away from church, focusing on the imminence of God brought many back. In other words, God is here, God is real, let me explain this to you, but the cultural shifts of the last decade and a half have left people, especially younger people, longing for the transcendent. This should be no surprise because, of course, the heart naturally longs for God. Sometimes we just long for God a bit differently than our parents, and I think the best future churches will have content that leans toward the imminent, it's practical, helpful and digestible, and online is great for that.

Again, being completely obtuse and incomprehensible or insider-focused helps nobody. The future church will also offer experiences that feel transcendent, a sense that you had to be there to experience what happened in the room. The best churches will offer both, because that reflects the character and the nature of God and the character of the Christian Church at its best. It's like the difference between listening to an album on Spotify and being in person at a concert by the same band. One leans more toward that transcendent experience than simply listening to a studio recording does.

Online might become more transcendent as virtual reality even becomes more widespread, but we're a few years away and iterations from that, but think about that. What belongs online, what belongs in person? That leads us to trend number eight, location independent church members will increase. The last few years have seen a mass migration of people out of cities, out of jobs they once held, and into new frontiers. With that, those who remained in church have discovered church online.

While a lot of digital growth is likely consolidation growth, in other words, Christians finding a new church online, and not just conversion growth, the physical relocations, combined with the growth of digital church will find many people identifying with a church that has no physical presence in their area. This will lead, perhaps in the future, to micro, even home-based gatherings, and the need for church leaders to focus on connecting people, not just erecting buildings to put them in. Location independence is part of the fluid world we now live in, and you will probably have some members who don't live anywhere near you and you've got to figure out how to adapt, and leaders who adapt more quickly will reach more people. Trend number nine, pastors will sense a diminished authority. We've seen

significant shifts in authority over the last few years, and as the world has become more connected, power has shifted from institutions to network, so think about this.

Denominations and seminaries have lost much of the clout they used to have, and grassroots networks have sprung up in their place. This has happened in politics, it's happened in business, it's happened in the church. Some of which have come and gone, while new ones spring up. In the same way, it's no longer denominations and seminaries that have lost authority. To some extent, over the last few years, so have pastors.

As any church leader knows, any illusion of control that remains seems to have vanished during the pandemic. You really can't control people, and any attempts to do so have mostly failed, so that leaves us here. No matter how loudly or softly you speak, people won't listen to you because of the position, the title, or the office you hold. The good news is this is never where real authority resided anyway. One of the things that defined Jesus' ministry was that His authority never sprung from an earthly title He held, nor did He cling to power.

In fact, He gave it up at the cost of His life, which of course, changed everything, especially human history in your salvation. Real authority never sprung from an office. It never came from a title, it never came from a position you hold. You know what it springs from? From humility, from love, and from increasingly a clear sense of how the kingdom of God is advancing in the world.

Leaders who show those kinds of characteristics will have a bright future. Trend number 10, the brain drain will become more acute. Sadly, the last few years have seen many pastors step back, not just from their current church, but from vocational ministry all together. Whether the great resignation has more legs or not in the wider culture, the church has struggled through a more chronic gifting shortage for years now, and the pandemic only intensified that. Not only is this creating a staffing shortage, more churches vying for fewer leaders, but the quality of candidates is also proving a bit of a challenge.

Perhaps with renewal and revival will come an increased intensity in the sense of calling this next generation has. The future of the church will require not just leaders with great hearts, but also leaders with great minds. The challenge is ahead in a fractured world, facing numerous existential threats, not to mention the philosophical and theological questions AI raises will require some very sharp minds, and I pray this is a year where we stop seeing the drain out of the church and the entry into the church of young leaders who are sharp and ready for the task ahead. Trend 11, the exit of uninvested investors, a drop in giving. One of the strange phenomena that happened in many churches in 2020 and 2021 is that attendance declined, while giving remained steady or actually grew, and my guess is that this might be a temporary trend.

Historically, declining churches tend to have a lot of money, think an endowment fund with millions, but very few people, while growing churches have the opposite challenge. They tend to have a lot of people, but they're tied on money. Their numerical growth, in other words, outpaced their stewardship growth. Some of the recent change in that historic pattern can be explained by donors who did financially well during the pandemic, who decided to contribute extra, and people who are still committed financially, but hesitant to attend in person, they've still given as well during the pandemic, but ultimately, long-term, it is rare to have uninvested investors. If someone stops attending, stops serving, and cuts off connection with a church, will their giving continue?

Rarely. How is that an actual model for discipleship moving forward? What you might see in 2022 is a ramping up of new people who start to give, while uninvested investors disappear entirely. Second, church leaders will have to find something to do with the surplus they've accumulated to further their mission, otherwise, why would people keep giving? Money with no purpose is a sign of decline.

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Regardless, it's unlikely the current pattern will hold. Then finally, you've hung in there, trend number 12, less predictability. As much as we all long for a return to a more stable, predictable future, that's not likely happening. As much as we can plot out a few likely trends, it's still uncertain of what's actually ahead. As COVID-19 fades, we're in a new era of instability and unpredictability, most of us have never really known in our lifetime.

Global supply chain issues, the surge in the gig economy, a shortage in blue-collar and service sector workers, surging stocks, the rise of cryptocurrencies, the exit and entry of people in and out of the church and rapid numbers, growing inflation, and the widespread drop in confidence in institutions and authority structures makes it exceedingly difficult to trace out a predictable path into the future. Once again, the approach they got many leaders through the pandemic, flexibility and agility, will be required for years to come. The set it and forget it approach that leaders took in a stable era won't work anymore. Agile leaders and organizations that love to experiment and innovate though, can thrive in an unstable world. Are you ready? Now, it's time where we hand things over to you, and it's time to discuss what you've just heard and develop some action steps.