

# 2021 Australian Church Digital Ministry Report

"COVID-19 has radically changed the face of the Church the world over. The extent to which this change is permanent or temporary is yet to be seen, the extent to which we view this as an opportunity or hindrance will be in our next steps, the extent to which we cement new practices and outreach, even when we no longer have to will determine the lessonthat we have learnt from it all.

I worry that the church is waiting for "this to be over" and thus to pick up where we left off. In my view, society has changed and we must change with it, permanently and completely. Some parishes should remain digital, some should be both a digital and physical presence and some should close permanently to help fund those that remain. I worry about the stress and pressure on clergy and parish teams in the duality of a significant digital and physical presence and I wonder at the readiness of our diocesan Vision and Directions strategy to react to this new environment, particularly where there has rightly been a strong emphasis on survival. This cannot be survival at the expense of relevance and/or at the expense of people."

Ken Spackman, former CEO, Anglican Diocese of Melbourne

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# INTRODUCTION

#### 2020, the year our world changed

Against the backdrop of a bushfire-laden Australian summer, our attention quickly turned to the new threat of the Coronavirus pandemic that was starting to grip the world. The fabric and freedoms of our social and economic structures, the cultural norms of community and relationship were being stretched further and further on a weekly basis. Our society was changing.

And what a time to change. The words 'unprecedented' and 'pivot' took on new meaning. The digital and communication revolution could not be delayed. Virtually any organisation that had not already transformed into the digital realm was forced to in order to connect with their community and service their clients.

Organisations have claimed moving forward ten years in the space of just a few months. The lockdown has forced schools, businesses, health care, community groups and churches to embrace video meetings. "Zoom fatigue" has been experienced by many and justified by health professionals

Australia has been able to rapidly shift online thanks to the National Broadband Network nearing its first round of completion after years of development. If the pandemic had hit ten or even five years earlier, the transition online would not have been easily accessible to the masses, both for organisations and the individuals that access them.

"We are seeing a profound shift. We've known about this and ignored it and now we're doing it." Bishop Stephen Hale, Locum, St Edward's Anglican Church, Blackburn South

#### 2020, the year the church changed

So if you are one of thousands of Australian churches that has moved to connecting and engaging online for the first time, well done! Look how far you've come and breathe a collective sigh of relief!

But is digital ministry the new normal or a temporary and necessary 'season'? Will we return to solely face-to-face ministry or will online gatherings persist?

Aside from the obvious technological upgrades, the disruption has also necessitated the Australian church to grapple with how it engages in our communities and society in the 21st century.

McCrindle Research released a comprehensive report on The Future of the Church in Australia. The report is based on interviews with thirty prominent Christian leaders from around Australia and provides important insights about the role of the church in our nation in the years to come. We endorse the McCrindle report and are thankful for this work that has been shared.

This digital ministry report complements McCrindle's work with a focus on smaller churches and the digital aspects of ministry.

### DIGITAL MINISTRY EXPERIENCE AND TRENDS

Lockdown has forced churches to conduct their services online. Several approaches include:

- One-to-many format has allowed for a more curated and higher production quality church experience, usually filmed and produced live inside the church building. This has typically suited larger churches with more resources.
- Many-to-many format increases interactivity and engagement. This has typically suited smaller churches with limited resources and low production requirements using Zoom.
- Hybrid style format to harness benefits of both formats, typically bookending a Youtube service with either a pre-service or post-service Zoom get-together to reflect typical face-to-face services, engaging with friends outside of a service.
- Piggyback format where a smaller church encourages their members to watch a live service from a like-minded larger church and then join together afterwards on Zoom to debrief and interact.

For many churches, this modal shift was not desired or anticipated. However, most churches have risen to the imposing challenges with a genuine desire to continue engaging with their members and the wider community.

Many people have enjoyed the benefits of the new church format, the convenience of watching

in the comfort of their homes, either live or at a time of their choice. This has been especially useful for lowering the barrier for unchurched people entering into the community for the first time. This trend was particularly noted during Easter 2020 as digital services were first being launched and will continue in the future for large Christian celebrations.

"The number of viewers has exceeded the number of attendees at a face-to-face service by more than 100% and the reach includes people from other parishes and also from other countries. This has surprised us... The more tech savvy have taken their devices to share the services with our (generally more elderly) less tech savvy members." Gwen Neylon (St Stephen's Anglican Church, Bayswater)

The digital gatherings, although not as relationally rich, have helped to maintain a sense of community. Some unexpected demographics who have benefited from digital church services are elderly people in nursing homes, those with health complications who have not been able to attend church face-to-face in a long time and others who are not geographically located near their home church.



One associate minister has noted, "Broadly, I think it has been great to force churches to finally consider the quality of their church services, remove cringe worthy content, and to get into the 21st century by engaging digitally."

Although online church has been generally well received, some parishioners are unable or unwilling to connect.

#### Digital church is challenging

The joys of online ministry have been equally met with the challenge of the inevitable technological learning curve. Investing time into understanding and learning to use new technology has been frustrating for many. The revolution to move online has driven monumental change in remote collaboration & community, online engagement, video and live streaming services, let alone all the extra pastoral and emotional support that has been required in this time.

Pivoting to online services has required a big effort in itself. Almost every church leader has cited being tired having to sustain this effort week in week out, especially in smaller churches with fewer resources and lower technical capability.

The dynamics of online church has been difficult to wrestle with eg. the lack of visible engagement and participation. Services that are not on Zoom have very low interaction and deny the preacher the opportunity for real-time feedback with the congregation in the absence of body language and vocal expression. The low interaction also perpetuates a consumer mentality and some church leaders have cited frustration with the critique of production from parishioners.

"The challenge of pitching to an online audience whilst maintaining the authenticity and integrity of what you are doing particularly if you have a congregation of 5, 10 or 20 present ... It has been tiring and it takes a lot of hard work to build and maintain an online community."

#### Will online services remain?

The convenience of attending church in casual attire at any time of day or night is appealing to some, but there is no doubt that many people want to return to in-person gatherings. The anticipation of hybrid services and the future of digital services has produced mixed responses from church leaders.

One senior minister of a church plant reflected, "Online services have felt like a stop-gap and the feeling is that everyone is waiting to 'go back' rather than establish a proper online ministry presence."

Another minister stated, "Whether a church makes it a priority or not, I think digital discipleship in many forms is a necessary part of the future church and has availed lots of easy ways to connect with new and old friendships. I think it would definitely be a front door into worship services, and a digital door for church members to connect while away eg. on holidays. I think it will be a front door for evangelistic courses. I think it will be an avenue for discipling people in short courses or mentoring settings, either in tandem with in-person or not."



"People have really appreciated it, at times they've said they've felt teary, but we all agree it's not as good as being in person." Peter Carolane (Senior Minister, Merri Creek Anglican)

#### Church digital engagement

Digital engagement provides opportunities for connection but the new methods and platforms do not suit everyone.

One music minister has witnessed "... a mixed response. Some people are loving online services others are struggling with them, others don't engage at all."

Another minister noted, "Attendance initially increased markedly, and although it has fallen off a little has held up well. Better than prior to Covid-19!"

Even though church attenders can now casually attend any online service around the world, the importance of the local church and its role in the life of members will not diminish.

"They like to view the big churches and cathedrals of the world, but love to see, engage and participate with their local church."

However, not everyone expects online church to be sustainable. Online church and the prolonged nature of lockdown, especially in Victoria, has lost its novelty and has become tiring for many.

"The initial excitement has faded to exhaustion and disengagement."

### DIGITAL MINISTRY TECHNOLOGY

#### New levels of reliance on technology

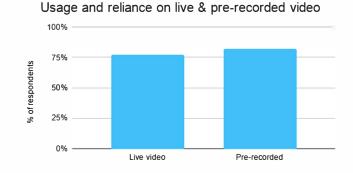
There has been a rapid shift towards using technology in almost every area of church life. Failure at any point in the connection can break the flow of engagement. This can happen at the source, on the receiving end or anywhere in between, via the Internet connection, the hardware connectivity, the setup and reliance on the software and those who operate all the technology.

In the initial weeks of moving into lockdown, there was extra grace and understanding shared by congregation members as online services were getting off the ground. After several months, a higher quality of production has become the norm and has been expected.

"Tech hiccups during streams can easily break trust with online attenders", noted one minister.

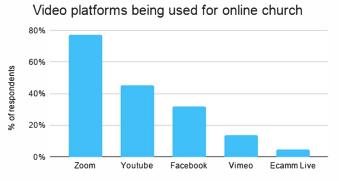
#### Video is king

Most churches have quickly embraced live and pre-recorded video as an essential tool for and maintaining connection with church members and initiating engagement with church seekers.



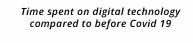
Some have opted to only use live video (eg. Zoom) for services for the sake of more natural interactions (14%). Other churches have opted to only pre-record services due to Internet issues, improving quality of production, and reducing interference from uninvited interactions (19%).

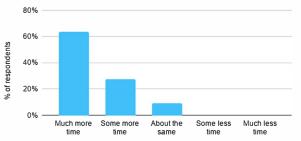
Zoom is the tool of choice (>75%) for remote collaboration, particularly for running church meetings, small groups, prayer services and online courses like Alpha Course and The Marriage Course. 32% of respondents indicated using FB Live (32%) and 40% indicated using Youtube Live.



#### Investment into technology

Church ministers have been spending much more time and money on digital technology compared to before Covid-19. Many have reported upskilling very quickly in technical understanding and abilities, particularly with video and online communication to connect with church members.





Budgets have also increased to implement new technology, some of this in part to technology grants, also alleviated by Jobkeeper keeping ministers employed. Although many churches have upgraded their audio and visual technology to support live streaming, there will still be a stronger reliance on technology into the future and budgets will need to support the usage with ongoing costs to maintain equipment, software usage, training and technical ministry support.

#### User stories of AV upgrades and proficiency Progress with gear, setup, production

Digital Church Technology Evolution Through Lockdown Rev. John Sanderson, St George's Anglican Church, Ivanhoe

https://digitalteamcoach.com/blog/digital-church-technology-evolution-through-lockdown/

**Our Live Streaming Journey** Tim Fisher, Essendon, Baptist Church

https://www.essendonbaptist.org.au/blog/our-live-streaming-journey

#### Communication beyond video

Although online video has become a primary method of communicating in 2020, other online technologies have not been utilised as strongly, generally due to a lack of resources to understand and implement. For example, some churches have the resources, experience and confidence to navigate social media, but many have reported not understanding or feeling comfortable with utilising these platforms properly.

With so many online channels of communication available and personal preferences (eg. website, social media, email, church app), it has been difficult for churches to know where to concentrate their communication efforts. Most issues about online communication fall under the categories of audience systems, content production.

#### Audience

- Having a wide demographic with many communication preferences
- Lacking understanding about their audience preferences
- Not educating their audience on where and how to access content consistently

#### Systems

- Not creating quality engaging content tailored for each communication channel
- Lacking the understanding about the communication channels and how to utilise them effectively

#### **Content production**

- Lacking a streamlined process for producing online content
- Taking too long to produce content
- Not repurposing content appropriately for each communication channel
- Adding or updating content inconsistently or in an ad-hoc manner

Most churches have had a website functioning for several years and the importance of a website has not diminished. For most church seekers, the website is still the virtual front door. Church visitors typically begin as website visitors and can be split into two main categories:

1. predominantly Christians who have relocated or are looking for a different church in a physical location

2. wider community members who have heard about a church via word of mouth or are looking for an online church to connect with and discovered through a third party website or backlink (eg The Alpha Course)

Approximately one third of churches have made significant updates to their website in 2020 for a more user-friendly design and to restructure content. There is an increased shift away from communicating to members through social media and helping redirect them to proactively find resources and information through the website or church app. This takes time to educate members where to go but reduces the reliance on duplicating as much content and time required to do this. It is therefore important to:

1.Make the website (or custom church app) easy to use

2. Structure information thoughtfully for website visitors to intuitively find what they need and keep uncluttered

3. Update content regularly and archive old content

#### Reliance on digital systems

With so many changes to collaboration and communication through 2020, other digital systems like the church database (Church Management Software) have taken a more prominent support role. These platforms have the ability to produce meaningful metrics and reporting to benefit decision makers and help save considerable time in planning. There are many Church Management Systems available that include features to draw meaningful reports, increase collaboration, communication, service planning and rostering, streamline processes and save time for system users.

However there are still many churches that have found it difficult to transition or maintain their database during Covid-19. Reasons for this include:

- Staff are too busy or lack of technical ability to transition to a new Church Management System
- Administrators are too busy to update data
- Compromised data integrity (overall accuracy, completeness and consistency of data)
- Lack of administration and staff training on how to use the platform and utilise the features effectively
- Lack of a clear workflow on who does what and how to do it efficiently and effectively
- Lack of understanding and clarity on how to draw meaningful metrics, reports and information from the platform
- Lack of confidence to roll out the platform and utilise features for more users (eg. service volunteers and members)
- Using a Church Management System that no longer suits the current needs of the church

#### First impressions count

Creating an effective church website homepage Evan Englezos, anglican focus There are several actions that can be taken to better utilise a Church Management System:

- Design a digital strategy and roadmap for implementing new features and rollout to new users
- Undertake training for administrators, staff and volunteers
- Develop accessible documentation (knowledge hub) for all users
- Develop and document workflows to ensure data integrity

Although there is the initial investment of time and money in setting up and training for new systems and features, the return on investment and long-term benefits for administrators and system users will be reaped in the months and years to come.

Rev. John Sanderson, St George's Anglican Church, Ivanhoe, shares how he reaps the benefit of the time invested in getting a new system. Evan Englezos, Digital team Coach https://digitalteamcoach.com/blog/church-systems-analysis-implementation#roi

How to transform your church systems and administration for your team and volunteers

https://digitalteamcoach.com/case-study-church-digital-strategy/



### DIGITAL MINISTRY THROUGH COVID-19

#### "We're tired"

From every account, pastors and ministers have had the busiest year in ministry; spending more time making drastic decisions, shifting to remote working, upskilling in technology, increasing pastoral callouts, onboarding new tech and AV operators as well as all their other day-to-day tasks. As the requirement for technical support has increased, other in-service ministries and volunteer roles have reduced.

The general consensus is that this heightened workload is not sustainable. Many clergy are worn out and tired from the greater responsibilities and massive trnasitions that have taken place in such a short time, particularly in Victoria with longer lockdown period and heaviest restrictions in Australia. It has been difficult to take any time off with the added demands and restrictions on numbers in building; some clergy have not taken a week off in almost a year. There is a great burden to continue to increase technical resources and support for sustainable ministry through volunteer recruitment and training. Churches with larger budgets are employing dedicated online pastors with specialised skills in digital systems to lead in this transition.

#### The joys of digital ministry

God has been ever-faithful through the pandemic and there have been wonderful stories of His grace and goodness. People are coming to church for the first time or returning for the first time in years. Many churches have been surprised to see their numbers Online groups and courses like The Alpha Course & The Marriage Course have been very successful in Australia and abroad. These resources have been tried and tested and have lowered the barriers for discovering more about Jesus and the church and are easily translated into local context. Online daily prayer services have brought people together where it was not previously possible.

Church members have been stepping up with pastoral support, prayer ministry and caring for their neighbours. Local initiatives such as St Tom's Hope have provided new opportunities to connect with and serve in their local communities.

Creatives and musical people have found new ways to use their gifts and talents to serve the church through online music and dance collaborations, kids ministry videos and testimony interviews. Global virtual choir worship videos such as Amazing Grace and The Blessing (Australian version) have gone viral to bear witness of Jesus' love and grace for the world. "You can't do it all yourself and expect to survive", noted one Anglican Vicar.

#### The learnings in digital ministry

Everyone has needed to adapt to find new ways of collaborating and communicating. Small groups have become even more central in building and maintaining personal connection and community. There are many needs and it is hard to provide engagement across broad demographics. Extra thought and care needs to be applied to youth engagement, especially with online safety and all the extra online learning and socialising that is already dominating their lives. Most churches have learnt that the attention span online is considerably less than in person, which applies to online services and youth engagement. Less is more!

Resourcing and caring for tech operators is essential in caring for and sustaining teams. The necessity for good management and communication systems, and clear and transparent processes is more necessary than ever. It is vital to set up systems well and allow these systems to carry the load where it is applicable to simplify or negate human operation.

"We are not allowing a crisis to go wasted! We are seeing people coming to faith in Christ, and we are still growing in number and depth in this time. Let's not take the foot off the pedal." Akhil Gardner, Senior Minister, Redemption Church Craigieburn There is no end to the amount of preparation and polish that can be applied into online ministry. The balance between participation from volunteers and the congregation and high production needs to be navigated sensitively.

"Keep things simple. Activating others for ministry is essential and makes all the difference." Rémy Chadwick, Creative Ministries Director, St Matt's Prahran

#### The frustrations of digital ministry

2020 has often felt like equal parts tiring, overcoming and frustration. New technology combined with community fears and restrictions have conjured a unique concoction of chaos and fatigue for everyone, especially for church leaders. The escalated workload for ministers to produce online content on a weekly basis is a constant struggle.

"I need someone else to produce and publish content. I need to be released from this task", mentioned one small church minister.

Church members in their own tiredness and struggle have often disassociated with engagement and participation. For example, some church members are not willing to appear on camera to participate. Some are resistant to change and new technology and have either disengaged or made it difficult for others to engage. This is further complicated when church leadership have not had the inability to 'think differently' about ministry.

"What I find frustrating is the amount of time it takes for many people over 60 to even use digital technology let alone become contributors to our use of it." Jeremy Watson (Senior Minister, All Souls, Sandringham) "Some people still think church is about them." Chris Bowditch, Rector, Lindisfarne Anglican Church

Naturally, many have yearned to return to face-to-face contact but there are those who cannot or will not engage with new technology. Ineffective communication with all the congregation contributes to further isolation beyond the physical restrictions.

"Evangelism is so hard. It is hard to fight complacency, feeling like there is no reward for your efforts. Physical hospitality is virtually gone." Rémy Chadwick, Creative Ministries Director, St Matt's Prahran "With restricted numbers onsite, the concentrated efforts and extra burden on technical operators, the normal breadth of volunteers who serve across a variety of service roles are heavily reduced. These ministries, such as music and creative arts, have not had the opportunity to grow and flourish and it is hard to keep these ministries fresh & engaging for people.", noted another Music & Creative Arts Minister.

> "When we are not able to meet with people face to face, it's really hard to plan... children's ministry is really hard." Peter Carolane (Senior Minister, Merri Creek Anglican)

### THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL MINISTRY AND ONLINE CHURCH

Many people wish we could return to a pre-pandemic world and the familiarity of church as we knew it, but the reality has set in that we will not return 'back to normal'. There are elements of pre-pandemic church that will remain and some that will not return. Similarly, some aspects of digital ministry will not remain but others have been beneficial and will become a fixed feature.

"We expect digital ministry to be a large part of connecting beyond our local area. We see church being the people nearest to you and the church equipping people to minister to those around them; perhaps the church being a resource rather than a place you attend in person."

#### Hybrid church model

At least half of the church leaders surveyed expect to retain some elements of digital church to supplement in-person ministries. Some churches will opt to deliver online services every week along with in-person services. Others expect to utilise online delivery for special occasions such as weddings, funerals and baptisms. "Online engagement will play an increasingly valuable role. Digital and online provides both an entry into the church as well as supplementing in-person ministries." Jeremy Watson (Senior Minister, All Souls, Sandringham)

"We began streaming for the first time with Covid and will continue to do so. Digital technology will need to stay relevant so we can quickly pivot with future restriction changes and rollbacks. We have entirely redeveloped our website over the last three months in anticipation of much heavier usage going forward." (Service Production & Communications Transition Leader)

The convenience of conducting video meetings and groups at home has been received positively by many participants. Evangelistic and training courses have proven to be popular and highly effective and can be supplemented with face-to-face highlight sessions. Church meetings will move more towards Zoom and Team meetings, helping to provide a more succinct and focussed session with higher efficiency and practical outcomes.



"Zoom is also really good for church council meetings. It means you get everything done quicker and not have to leave home... I imagine we'll move to getting the best out of both worlds." Peter Carolane (Senior Minister, Merri Creek Anglican)

#### "Online church presence will be an enabler for:

1. the seekers and searchers to make the first step to connect with a faith community without disclosing who they are, 'try before they buy.'

2. those within a faith community to participate in online groups and ministries.

3. those in a faith community, who for whatever reason are physically/ geographically dislocated from their home community (health, employment, study)

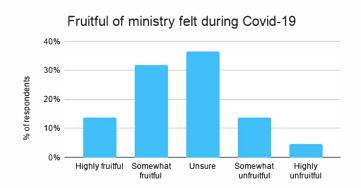
4. post-denominationalism, post-Christendom church shopping where seeker and searchers, or people seeking to reconnect with church or those moving suburbs, cities or countries seek to find the church of their ethos and style."

"I expect that there will be a whole pathway that a person can take from non-believer/no interest in church to committed disciple potentially without ever or hardly ever engaging with us in person.. That blows my mind and hurts my theology a little, but I think practically that's likely and in the end life change is what I'm after!" Chris Bowditch (Rector, Lindisfarne Anglican Church)

#### Interchurch partnerships

It is understandable that churches may have the sense of 'fending for oneself' in this communication revolution. We foresee that fruitful and sustainable digital ministry opportunities, particularly for smaller churches with fewer resources, will be made through partnerships with other like-minded 'hub' churches and para-church organisations, sharing resources and greater synergies in areas of content development, material and personnel resourcing and ministry opportunities (ie. youth and young adults, playgroups, mens and womens groups, online courses, etc.).

#### Shifting to online metrics



With the challenges that churches have faced in 2020, it has also been difficult to measure the real impact of moving into digital ministries. There are mixed feelings about the fruitfulness and effectiveness of online ministry. This is partly due to new metrics that are required and that some churches are yet to establish. The traditional metrics of service attendance, giving and offerings and number of people in face-to-face small groups and volunteer roles have limited value in measuring online engagement.

There are many online metrics that can be used to measure engagement. To provide further clarity about your online engagement strategy, it is a useful exercise to map the online engagement journey for your church members and church seekers. This will help to focus on how you structure your digital ministries, how you engage with people to connect online and offline, and which communication channels to utilise to support these ministries.



#### Strategy for digital ministry

As we look towards the future of digital ministry and hybrid services, there are several practical elements required to assist in moving forward and bringing people along the journey.

#### 1) Digital Strategy

#### "We're just kinda rolling with things and experimenting as much as we can right now."

Many churches do not currently have a plan on what they are trying to achieve with digital ministries and engagement or how to do it effectively. More intentional analysis and planning is required to understand online behaviour and outcomes and how to best utilise technology. An Online Engagement Journey report helps to deliberately design and articulate the process of connecting with people in the local context online and offline. Through this process, you may discover that some ministries that have been running for many years are no longer effective and do not serve the purpose they were originally intended. This self-discovery process may be difficult but help to advance your church to achieve its mission and purpose in today's context. To help release these ministries, give thanks to God for what He has done and the people who have invested into them.

A Digital Strategy report details the best practice for the church digital systems and roadmap to grow and sustain digital ministry moving forward. These strategies and tools practically support the overall mission of the church and the outward ministries in the local context.

Designing a digital strategy, outsourcing IT components and system upgrades will become an ongoing feature of developing strong and robust digital ministries for the years to come. This will not be a one-off cost but needs to be factored as a crucial ministry area in the church budget.

A major focus moving forward will be to simplify processes and setup systems that support church ministries and reduce the physical workload so that staff and volunteers can maximise their time to engage more meaningfully with their communities. Simplifying the technology and improving production will make online interactions more meaningful and establish stronger relationships online and offline.

#### 2) Personnel

One of the biggest needs is to continue to raise technology operators, digital content creators and system administrators. This is heavily dependent on finding willing and active volunteers who have time and some digital skills. Training younger people who typically tend to be digital natives is important but willing older members of the congregation must be encouraged and resourced to utilise their ministry experience, increase multi-generational ministry and unity.

Ongoing training will be required for AV operators, onboarding and upskilling staff and key leaders. Churches with larger budgets will be investing more time and money on employing digital ministers and transition leaders with oversight for digital ministry.

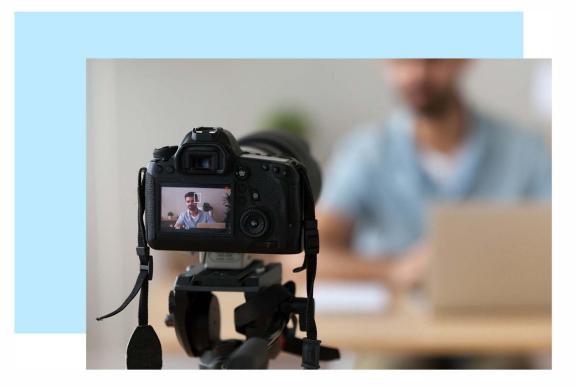
#### 3) Technology

Good technology assists to produce good outcomes. A driver for every church should be to use technology to your advantage within your context and capability to support their ministries.

Even with NBN available in most cities around Australia, the quality, reliability and cost of Internet connection across churches in Australia is still inconsistent. Alternatives such as 4G dongles or hotspotting may assist in the short-term and consider 5G if NBN is not accessible or too expensive to connect. Ensure that you always have a backup option should your primary Internet source become unavailable.

Some churches have upgraded their AV technology recently and others are budgeting for this in the coming months.

"Our next goal is to upgrade the equipment required to live stream... good quality cameras and lighting and integrating new hardware into existing AV architecture to enable high quality live streaming and broadcast of the full range of ministries of the church.



### THANK YOU

We wish to thank all the participants of this survey and for their contribution to this report.

We pray that your digital ministries, experiences and efforts will have eternal impact in God's kingdom.

If you have further questions or insights about digital ministry, we would love to hear from you.

To God be the glory Evan and the DTC team

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