

Five Questions Every Church Leader Should Ask About Digital Prayer



*A Barna Report Produced in
Partnership with Alpha*

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ISBN: 978-1-945269-85-1

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Funding for this research was made possible by the generous support of Alpha. Barna Group was solely responsible for data collection, analysis and writing of the report.





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Preface

Luke 5:1–11 is a familiar story, in which Jesus instructs Peter, an expert fisherman, to put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch. Peter replies, “We’ve worked hard all night and have not caught anything.”

Perhaps this is a fitting analogy for the U.S. Church right now. We, too, are experts—professional fishers of men. As church leaders, we’ve perfected our ways of “doing church” for decades. Yet, for all our prowess, there was still a significant decline in church attendance in 2020. We’ve worked hard ... and yet.

Thankfully, this story from scripture continues. Despite his knowledge and experience, Peter obeys Jesus’ request, yielding a catch of fish so great that the nets begin to break, and the boats start to sink. Unlike the night before when he came up empty-handed, Peter experiences something extraordinary in the presence of Jesus.

As you read this journal on prayer in the digital world, our hope at Alpha is you are inspired to pray and spend time in the presence of Jesus—whether that is in person or in a digital context. The

research from our partnership with Barna Group reveals that people who pray describe feeling peaceful, hopeful, connected, enlightened and restful. The world needs all these things in this moment—and a church that prays can impart, even become, these things. In 2020—in the midst of COVID-19 and all the ways it disrupted our culture, our lives and our churches—21 percent of churched adults said they helped lead someone into a relationship with Jesus through a digital context. Of that 21 percent, 79 percent prayed intentionally or expectantly for that person before their time with them! (You can read more in *Five Changing Contexts in Digital Evangelism*, another journal from Barna and Alpha.) People may be leaving the Church, but where people are entering, prayer is at work.

Digital church today feels like Jesus’ call to Peter: to leave the nets and boats and follow him. It means leaving behind what we know for the unknown. Yet, when we pray and follow Jesus, we will experience extraordinary things along the way. Prayer is not everything, *but everything is nothing without prayer.*



ALPHA equips and serves the Church in its mission to help people discover and develop a relationship with Jesus. For more than 30 years, Alpha has worked effectively across every major denomination, culture and context worldwide. Churches offer Alpha as an 8- to 11-week course that creates a friendly, judgment-free environment for people to hear the gospel, ask questions about faith and process their doubts. Millions of people experience the love of Jesus globally each year by participating in Alpha. In the U.S., an estimated 426,000 people attended an Alpha course through more than 7,400 churches and organizations in 2019 alone.

alpha.org

Introduction

During the nation's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, churches have taken to the internet like never before to conduct worship services, foster community and encourage spiritual growth from a distance. That means even churches with no experience with digital ministry have been faced with the challenge of figuring out how to pray online together. How have their efforts panned out? Could digital group prayer experiences be a feature of the post-COVID-19 “new normal?”

In this Barna study, conducted in partnership with Alpha, we find some clues about the U.S. Church's (strong) openness to and (moderate) uptake of digital prayer thus far. As this area of research is as new as this online practice, **here's some important context from our previous research on both prayer and digital church to help you navigate the findings.**

First, Barna has noticed that, with *any* digital church or faith experience, there are levels of engagement, both passive and active. For instance, it's possible to acknowledge having *watched* an online service without saying you have *attended* a service. 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” during the pandemic—still say they have “watched a church service online” during that same period. There is a grey area surrounding online church participation—and it extends to digital prayer. It seems a given that prayer is a featured part of online church services, yet even among Christians streaming church, many but not all say they pray along.



As people are “watching” digital church, **there is an opportunity to guide them from passive consumption into attentive engagement in this new worship space.**

Second, it's important to remember that **prayer itself is a widely practiced and highly subjective spiritual expression.** Barna has tracked the decline of



religious affiliation and church attendance over the decades—but prayer has comparatively remained steady and is practiced by the majority of U.S. adults. In this survey, about two-thirds (64%) say that they pray weekly or more often, and just 17 percent never pray at all. This trend is cross-religious: Three-quarters of those who self-identify as Christians (76%), as well as 71 percent who identify with other religions, keep up a weekly prayer habit. What’s more, one-fifth of those who indicate no faith at all (22%) also says they pray with this frequency; that’s a notable proportion of atheists, agnostics and “nones” who employ this spiritual discipline weekly. **Guiding prayer, in any setting, requires an understanding of the multiple, individualized, even unobservable forms that prayer typically takes.** Indeed, in 2017, the large majority of U.S. adults told Barna they usually pray alone and silently.

This research makes strides toward measuring prayer with greater clarity, especially in the COVID-19-shaped moment. In that effort, we’ll focus most on the reports of corporate or group prayer among Christians, with special attention to the development of digital options. Along the way, field guides and practitioner insights will provide opportunity for reflection, inspiration and application.

Ultimately, **the data reveal warmth toward prayer in general and promise in online group prayer.** And it challenges ministers to ask: *Does our church have a modern model that invites people past their hesitations and into the beauty of corporate prayer? If not, why not?* We hope this report enlightens faith leaders as they facilitate intentional prayer experiences and help Christians see prayer as a shared endeavor, in person and online.

Using Field Guides



▶ **Ask:**

Reflection questions to process individually or within a team



▶ **Learn:**

Insights from ministry leaders and practitioners



▶ **Do:**

Action items for you to engage with

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.

Non-practicing Christians are self-identified Christians who do not qualify as practicing.

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

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

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

Christians who have **attended digital group prayer** indicate that they have attended a digital corporate prayer gathering in the last year, that they pray with a small group of people digitally “with some frequency” or that they pray with a large group of people digitally at least “yearly or less often.”

Those who have **attended only in-person group prayer** do not qualify as having digital group prayer attendance and indicate that they have attended an in-person corporate prayer gathering in the last year, that they pray with a small group of people in person “with some frequency” or that they pray with a large group of people in person “with some frequency”

Introducing Measures of Digital Openness

Throughout Barna's series of journals on the state of digital church, we periodically look to a custom segmentation that identifies various levels of openness to digital church.

As churches consider digital prayer and take inventory of their analog, digital and hybrid ministry options, it's important to know where churchgoers' preferences fall on the spectrum.

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

- ▶ 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

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:

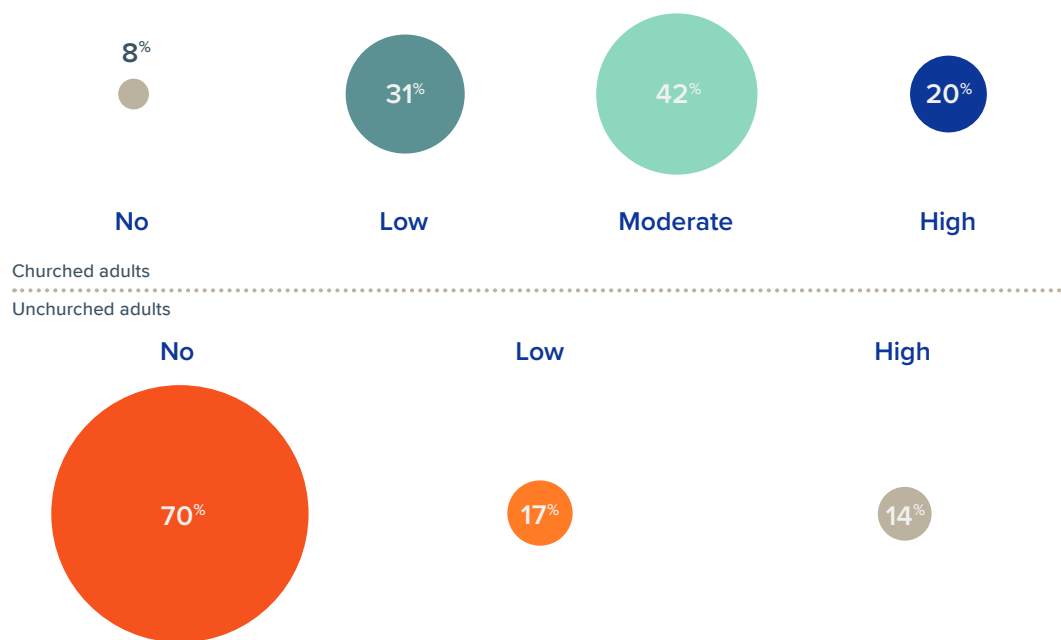
- ▶ Online church service, viewed by oneself
- ▶ Online church service, viewed with someone else
- ▶ Digital conversation group designed for spiritual conversations about the Christian faith
- ▶ Digital class designed to explore the Christian faith
- ▶ Digital, one-on-one spiritual conversation with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

Seven in 10 unchurched adults (70%) select none of the above, exhibiting no digital openness. One in five (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.

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.

Digital openness among churched adults

As you consider programming and prayer within 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. How can times of prayer address the apathy or resistance that unchurched adults may feel?

See glossary on page 7 for definitions.

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

Five Questions Every Church Leader Should Ask About Digital Prayer

The Research at a Glance

Reported openness to digital prayer is high, though it is still a new and rare addition to church life.

- ▶ Still, the majority of Christians does not typically participate in gatherings intended for group prayer, whether online or in person.
- ▶ Younger Christians have greater openness to digital group prayer—and group prayer—in general.
- ▶ About two-thirds of Christians (68%)—and even one-quarter of those with no faith (23%)—indicate they are at least somewhat open to participating in a time of prayer online.

Before Christians embrace digital group prayer, they'll need to embrace group prayer in general.

- ▶ The majority of Christians (85%) prefers to pray privately.
- ▶ The most appealing form of group prayer is praying silently together.
- ▶ Eighteen percent of Christians say they'd forgo online group prayer because they feel uncomfortable praying with others.

When people do participate in digital prayer, the experience described is overwhelmingly positive.

- ▶ Half of Christians who have participated in digital prayer (49%) say they “often” feel God’s presence in the process.
- ▶ Peace, hope, connection and rest are feelings that accompany prayer time.
- ▶ Intercession, or prayer on behalf of others, is a common purpose of Christians’ prayers.

Church leaders have a chance to satisfy openness to digital prayer, but will need to be mindful of points of disconnection.

- ▶ Technological difficulty is a primary reason Christians would opt out of digital prayer (22%), and 17 percent worry about distractions in general.
- ▶ 32 percent of Christians with recent digital prayer experience don’t feel they can talk about their struggles more vulnerably during online rather than in-person group prayer.



- ▶ More than one-third of non-Christians (36%) wouldn't participate in digital prayer because they just aren't interested—though 17 percent are completely open to such experiences.

Those who engage in digital group prayer are enthusiastic and persistent.

- ▶ Christians who participate in digital group prayer are no more likely than others to report praying regularly on their own, but, across multiple measures, they express more passion in their prayer lives.

- ▶ Christians who have only engaged in in-person group prayer are less likely than their more digitally open peers to report a number of other meaningful prayer activities.
- ▶ Those who are experienced with digital prayer are both aware of and not dissuaded by online limitations; though 3 in 10 worry about tech difficulties, many continue to report weekly participation in group prayer.

What expectations do Christians bring to online prayer experiences?

There are plenty of logistical, ecclesial, technological and social considerations for churches hoping to build a bridge between in-person and digital prayer. Though that journey will be unique to every church, this study helps define the starting point: the qualities and emotions of U.S. Christians' existing prayer lives. These general experiences are instructive in pointing to the expectations that Christians may bring to future prayer gatherings, digital or in-person.

Types & Topics of Christians' Prayers

As shared on page 6, past Barna research indicates **most prayers are silent**. Indeed, in this survey, seven in 10 Christians (70%) say they have prayed silently at some point in the last year, by far the top choice from a series of possible prayer scenarios that Barna presented. This prayer type is especially popular for Christian Boomers (83%). Meanwhile, a distant four in 10 Christians (39%) say they have voiced private prayers aloud while by themselves. Although silent prayers are certainly popular, only one in 10 Christians (9%) says they have *only* prayed silently this year without engaging in other kinds of prayer.

Intercessory prayer, or prayer on behalf of others, is another fairly common trait of Christians' prayers. Overall, one-third or more Christians reports that, in the past year, they've prayed intentionally for someone who

wasn't present (40%), for their community (40%), for the government (32%), even for miracles (35%).

A fair amount of prayer involves a sense of **encountering God**. More than one-quarter of Christians (28%) says they have felt God's presence during prayer at some point in the past year.

According to 13 percent, God has spoken to them in prayer.

Intercessory prayer, or prayer on behalf of others, is a fairly common trait of Christians' prayers

Some prayers are **evangelistic**, extended toward non-Christians in their community and around the world (26%). Prayer seems to be a step in the faith-sharing

process as well: Of churchgoers who helped lead someone into a relationship with Jesus through a digital context within the past year, 79 percent say they had been intentionally and expectantly praying for that person beforehand.

Prayer resources, such as books or other devotional materials,

Select the items that you have done within the past year. Select all that apply.

Base: Self-identified Christians



n=932 U.S. Christian adults, September 1–15, 2020.



aren't used often. Christians rarely report following prayers guided by books, literature or curriculum (10%) or prayer journals (8%). Praying through Bible passages, however, is somewhat more popular (19%). In total, 27 percent of Christians have used prayer resources in the past year.

Some Christians engage in intimate prayer **in pairs or small groups**. One in four (23%) says they have prayed aloud with their household this year, a percentage that climbs to one-third among those with kids in the home. Twelve percent have received one-on-one prayer from someone when they were going through a personal hardship.

Other less common characteristics of Christians' prayer lives lean toward **charismatic expression**, such as waiting silently to listen to the Holy Spirit (14%), praying in tongues (4%) or laying hands on someone (11%). These items are more popular among the younger generations; 24 percent of Gen Z Christians say they have laid hands on someone and 12 percent say they have prayed in tongues in the last year.

What Prayer Feels Like

Though prayer is about much more than emotions, understanding the feelings experienced during prayer can help churches cultivate prayerful environments in online settings and better understand Christians' expectations when they enter into times of prayer.

Among Christians who report having personally prayed before (nearly all, at 95%), prayer stirs a number of positive emotions. Two-thirds feel "peaceful" (67%) or "hopeful" (62%). Forty-three percent feel "connected"—no small thing during the pandemic-era season of social distancing. About one-quarter feels "enlightened" (28%), "rested" (27%) or "holy" (23%) during prayer. Negative

Emotions Prompted by Prayer



How do you feel when you pray? Select all that apply.

Base: Christians who have prayed previously

	All Christians	Christian Gen Z	Christian Millennials	Christian Gen X	Christian Boomers	White Christians	Black Christians	Hispanic Christians	Asian Christians
Peaceful	67%	67%	59%	70%	72%	69%	63%	68%	67%
Hopeful	62%	67%	56%	62%	66%	66%	61%	52%	50%
Connected	43%	54%	44%	44%	38%	40%	53%	45%	46%
Enlightened	28%	36%	33%	32%	19%	26%	31%	32%	32%
Rested	27%	25%	27%	26%	27%	28%	29%	23%	21%
Holy	23%	43%	28%	26%	14%	21%	38%	22%	19%
Excited	19%	27%	27%	19%	10%	16%	31%	21%	13%
Energetic	14%	19%	18%	13%	10%	11%	23%	15%	11%
Convicted	8%	6%	8%	10%	6%	8%	6%	6%	8%
Nervous	6%	18%	9%	6%	1%	4%	16%	5%	5%
Weary	6%	4%	7%	7%	4%	5%	8%	7%	4%
Distracted	4%	7%	4%	4%	4%	4%	8%	2%	0%
Confused	3%	9%	4%	2%	3%	3%	3%	5%	0%
Discouraged	3%	5%	4%	4%	2%	3%	6%	1%	1%
Disinterested	2%	2%	3%	3%	0%	1%	3%	4%	0%
Bored	2%	3%	2%	1%	1%	2%	2%	0%	0%
None of these	5%	2%	3%	6%	6%	6%	0%	4%	5%

n=890 U.S. Christian adults who have prayed previously, September 1–15, 2020.

emotions—weariness, boredom, distraction and so on—are rarely related to prayer.

Although the positive emotions mentioned above frequently emerge across demographics, some other emotions are telling of generational or cultural worship styles and preferences.

There are different emphases across the age groups of Christians who have prayed in recent months. While Boomers favor words like “peaceful” and “hopeful” even more so, younger generations are prone to pick words like “excited,” “enlightened” or “holy.” This fervor tracks with other Barna findings, like the fact that Millennials are more likely than their elders to favor charismatic worship styles and prayer expressions. In some cases, their heightened emotions around prayer lean toward unease; one in five Gen Z (18%) indicates they feel “nervous” when they pray (compared to 9% Millennials, 6% Gen X and 1% Boomers).

Excitement is also a hallmark of the Black prayer experience (31%), while Christians of other races less often have this response (21% Hispanic, 16% white, 13% Asian). Black Christians indicate a greater sense of connection (53% vs. 45% Hispanic, 46% Asian, 40% white), holiness (38% vs. 22% Hispanic, 21% white, 19% Asian,) and nervousness (16% vs. 5% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 4% white) as well during prayer.

In summary, it is clear in the data that Christians generally associate times of prayer with a slew of positive emotions. And, as we’ll soon explore together, there are fruitful experiences to be mediated in digital prayer as well.



About **2** in **3**
Christians who pray
say it makes them feel
“peaceful” or “hopeful”

Understanding the Needs

Emotional Experiences

- ▶ Practitioners tell Barna they have mixed feelings about the impact that online platforms have on the emotional climate of prayer experiences. Think about some of the unique factors that may stir or prohibit emotional connection during digital prayer.

Bringing Space & Grace into Gatherings

- ▶ While digital platforms can encourage polished productions and seamless transitions, look for ways to build intentional, unfilled space where organic, authentic, prayerful worship can occur.

Taking Next Steps



Ask:

- ▶ What emotions do your congregants feel when they pray? How can you shepherd them through both positive and negative reactions as you digitally lead your church in group prayer?
- ▶ Are you leaving unstructured space in your church services and prayer gatherings? In online worship, are you creating margin to sit, wait, connect, read, breathe, listen to the Spirit or adjust?
- ▶ If you're from a liturgical background, what does unstructured space look like for your church? What are the challenges or the gifts of guided prayer mediated by technology?
- ▶ How are you creating models for cross-generational prayer that acknowledge different emotional climates across age groups?
- ▶ How are you encouraging some of the most prayerful and participatory members of your church to model their prayer practices for others?



Learn:

We asked ministry leaders how the emotional climate of prayer experiences has been affected online. Here are some trends from their responses.

- ▶ **Something's missing:** "My feeling is that the emotional aspects of prayer have been somewhat muted or tamped down in the on-line environment. Sadly, it all seems so much more of a sterile environment."
— Mark Liebenow, Alpha Director, Point of Grace Church
- ▶ **Mixed reactions:** "Some are more passionate than ever before and praying constantly for God to move, while others have become disconnected and pulled away. This is just the ongoing fatigue people are experiencing during COVID-19 restrictions."
— Darren Rouanzoin, Lead Pastor, Garden Church
- ▶ **Strengthened vulnerability:** "It seems more fervent / desperate in a good way."
— Jason Morris, Global Innovation Pastor, Westside Family Church
- ▶ **A pleasant surprise:** "People enter with less expectation in many instances but then when time is created for the Holy Spirit to meet them, he does. Most leave feeling or saying, 'Wow, I guess God isn't limited by Zoom or online prayers.'"
— Christian Downs, Regional Director Alpha WA, Alpha USA

Ministry leaders shared with us how they make room for authentic experiences in online prayer.

- ▶ "When feeling led by the Spirit, time is paused, or prayers may be allowed to extend, or moments to lift up a prayer are given."
— Alexis Gwin-Miller, Pastor, Doctoral Candidate, New Direction Christian Church
- ▶ "We generally leave time for unstructured spaces at the beginning of services and the end at our online campus. Oftentimes, we just listen to what the Spirit is saying, or we take a moment to personally reflect on what God is speaking to us."
— Kiersten Telzerow, Small Group Director (Capitol Hill), National Community Church
- ▶ "I think people fear praying out loud thinking they are not good enough at it. In the digital space, with editing software and worship teams that create beautiful content online, sometimes it is healthy to show the ways worship—and people—can screw up and make mistakes."
— Jennifer Altobello-Deschanel, Alpha Director, Christ Church

Are people drawn to digital prayer?

Steady, positive engagement in prayer in general has given way to openness to new digital forums for prayer. More than two-thirds of Christians (68%) say they are at least somewhat open to actively participating in a time of prayer during an online church service gathering. This more than doubles the percentage of non-Christians who express such openness. Still, that means one in three adults outside Christianity (32%)—and even one-quarter of those with no faith at all (23%)—would still consider participation in digital times of prayer with a church.

Does professed interest translate to activity? To answer this, we must also acknowledge that there are still few opportunities to satisfy this curiosity. Many churches are new to hosting online services, let alone other digital or hybrid gatherings that emphasize group prayer.

Most adults who have attended churches providing online services through the pandemic (60%) say this is the *only* digital activity through their church.

Additionally, we know that, among those who have actually watched church online during the pandemic, not all (just 53%) actually follow along with prayer times while viewing anyway. In other words: During the pandemic, many churches have had only one door to corporate prayer—and not all churchgoers choose to enter.

Where engagement with digital prayer or other aspects of COVID-era church life lag, we're likely observing a lack of church options, a lack of congregant participation or both.

2 in 3

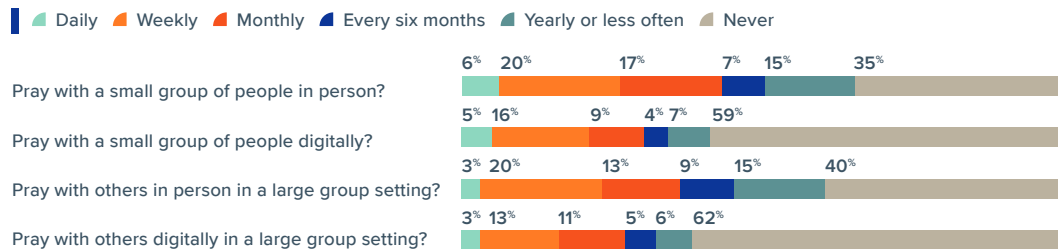
Christians—and one-quarter of adults with no faith—are open to participating in prayer during an online church service

Overall Engagement in Corporate Prayer

As we examine various opportunities for digital corporate prayer, we'll set a baseline for expectations by looking at participation in in-person corporate prayer. When asked if they had attended an in-person corporate prayer gathering within the past year (that is, both before and during the COVID-19 response which periodically closed most church buildings), one-third of Christians (32%) says yes. A similar percentage (28%) reports attending a digital prayer gathering

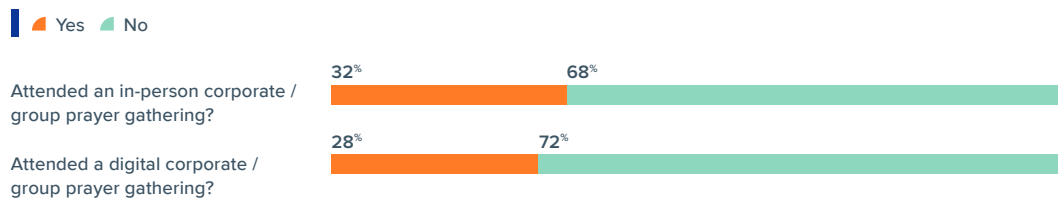
Frequency of Group Prayer Among All Christians

How often do you usually...



Within the past year, have you...

Base: Self-identified Christians



n=932 U.S. Christian adults, September 1–15, 2020.

during that time. Overall, the majority of Christians does not typically participate in gatherings intended for group prayer (68% in-person, 72% digital).

Prayer in more defined groups leans toward an in-person format; 43 percent of Christians say they usually participate in small group prayer in person at least monthly, as opposed to 30 percent who do so digitally. Prayer in large group settings is, likewise, more often an in-person (36%) rather than online exercise for Christians (27%). In gain, this could speak to preference but also to availability, as Barna's research during the pandemic shows digital and hybrid ministry approaches rarely reach beyond the standard service and sermon. As it stands, six in 10 Christians participate in neither large

(62% "never") nor small (59%) group prayer digitally; in person, far fewer have "never" engaged (35% small group prayer, 40% large group prayer).

Group Trends in Group Prayer

Group prayer of any size sees greater attendance from younger Christians. Community-minded Gen Z and Millennials may generally be more interested in and engaged with corporate prayer, and,

as “digital natives,” their familiarity with technology has likely served them in the shift to online gatherings during COVID-19. Similarly, prayer gatherings seem more popular among students, perhaps a reflection of these trends and of age-specific prayer ministry aimed toward the college crowd, largely made up of Gen Z. *See data tables on page 7 for a broader picture of frequency of participation in group prayer.*

Individuals with children under 18 in the household are more likely than those with no kids in the home to say they have participated in group prayer (43% vs. 22% have done so digitally), aligning with past research that speaks to heightened faith practice during child-rearing years as well as a greater number of ministry offerings for families. Though parents and guardians also tell Barna they struggle to focus during online church, they seem more inclined to at least try new worship and prayer formats.

By race, there is great enthusiasm for corporate prayer among Black Christians (50% have done so digitally), while Hispanic, Asian and white Christians are much less likely to have attended such gatherings or groups in the past year (39%, 37% and 19% respectively).

Committed, Open, Prayerful: A Pattern of Participation

Group prayer participation is just one component of a Christian’s faith experience. Analysts have found that devotion to faith, commitment to church and engagement in prayer hang together. So, naturally, corporate prayer participation goes up among those who are church-ed adults and practicing Christians (see glossary on page 7 for definitions); 36 percent of practicing Christians say they have attended a digital group prayer gathering within the last year, compared to 24 percent of non-practicing Christians.

One in four non-practicing Christians says no barrier would keep them from considering participating in a digital group prayer experience

Additionally, attending prayer groups and gatherings online has a natural correlation to openness to using online platforms for church. Church-ed adults with what Barna considers a strong digital openness (see infographic on page 8 for definitions) are more likely than those with moderate or low digital openness to engage in corporate digital prayer (48% have done so in the past year vs. 38% of moderate, 33% of low). The first step on the path toward effective digital prayer is strengthening digital engagement offerings overall. Note, however, that digital openness does not always translate to actual participation in digital church activities—for example, even among those with strong digital openness, 13 percent have “never” attended a service during the pandemic, and one in 10 (9%) has not watched a

service online. In digital prayer, too, we see some outliers with high digital openness who still say they have “never” been present in digital prayer groups (28% small groups, 31% large groups).

On the flip side, it is striking that those who practice their faith less often, like non-practicing Christians or the unchurched, still will, on occasion, attend prayer groups or gatherings. One in five non-practicing Christians says they pray digitally with a small group (20%) or a large group (19%) of people at least monthly. Furthermore, the data suggest that many of these non-practicing Christians, who by definition are less active in a church, have a notable interest in digital group prayer. When asked about barriers to engagement, one in four (24%) goes so far as to say that no barrier would keep them from considering participating in a digital group prayer experience. This underscores the accessibility of prayer as a faith practice. As more churches add to or strengthen digital formats for prayer, can they also provide an onramp toward deeper engagement with church life at large? *See data tables on page 7 for more statistics about group prayer participation across demographic and church engagement categories.*



Who Are the Early Adopters of Digital Group Prayer?

Across the board, in-person corporate prayer is still more common than digital corporate prayer. But some people are more open to and present in online group prayer. These may be churchgoers who already attend or prioritize the kinds of church environments that are likely to be cultivating a digital prayer culture. These adaptable attendees could also be helpful in welcoming fellow congregants who find digital church options inaccessible or uninteresting. Whether your church leans digital or analog in its approach to prayer, there is much to learn from these eager attendees.

Younger generations of Christians

- ▶ Among Millennial and Gen Z Christians, about **two in five** report at least monthly participation in small or large digital prayer groups.
- ▶ Though Gen Z, Millennials and Gen X all report similar levels of openness to times of online prayer, Gen Z Christians stand out in actual participation; **53 percent** have taken part in a digital prayer gathering this year.



Practicing Christians

- ▶ Nearly **half** of practicing Christians (46%) call themselves “very open” to prayer in online church services, roughly the same percentage who report praying in online groups with some frequency (55% in small groups, 49% in large groups).
- ▶ More than **one in three** (36%) has taken part in a digital prayer gathering this year.



Non-white Christians

- ▶ Black Christians are exceptionally open to digital group prayer; 44 percent are “very open” to participating in times of prayer in an online church service. **Half** (50%) have attended a digital prayer gathering this year.
- ▶ About **half** of Christians in racial and ethnic minorities participate in digital group prayer with some frequency; among white Christians, meanwhile, two-thirds “never” have (65% in small groups, 68% in large groups).



Churchgoers with high digital openness

- ▶ **Seven in 10** churched adults with high digital openness report praying in online groups with some frequency, and many do so at least weekly (47% in small groups, 32% in large groups).
- ▶ Nearly **six in 10** (58%) say they are “very open” to participating in times of prayer in an online church service—and, indeed, 48 percent of Christians in this group have attended a digital prayer gathering in the past year.



Field Guide **2**

Understanding the Needs

From Consumers to Contributors

- ▶ One of the struggles we have seen throughout our State of the Digital Church publications is the difficulty of moving people from passive consumers to active participants in digital spaces, a problem that extends to trends in digital prayer. Additionally, churches still adjusting to basics of digital ministry might not be able to satiate congregants' notable curiosity about online prayer options.

Integrating Prayer & Media

- ▶ Church leaders in our practitioner panel are finding many creative ways to integrate different media platforms into their digital prayer experiences. Consider the ways that younger generations in particular may be well-equipped to help your community integrate these different forms of media into prayer experiences

Prayer as a Family Affair

- ▶ The transition to hybrid / digital models of prayer is impacting households and families in unique ways. There is an urgent opportunity for ministry leaders to consider how to best support children and parents' engagement with digital prayer in a way that acknowledges their different needs while also fostering opportunities for bridging generational gaps.

Taking Next Steps



Ask:

- ▶ How are you defining engagement vs. attendance for prayer gatherings in a digital era?
- ▶ What incentive, charge or trajectory is there to invite people deeper into a church prayer life, from openness to attendance to engagement?



- ▶ Do you have ways of following up with people who might be joining you for digital prayer—asking how their experience is going, learning about the things they are praying for and seeing prayer as one part of their holistic spiritual growth?
- ▶ Are you establishing opportunities for digital prayer within your church context that create a daily, weekly or monthly rhythm for individuals?
- ▶ How is your church / ministry building a sense of comfort and agency for younger generations to engage in forms of digital prayer?
- ▶ How have you strategically connected different demographics within your church in digital prayer (families with children and single adults, older and younger generations, etc.)?
- ▶ How are you equipping and encouraging parents and guardians to live as invitational models of a healthy prayer life (personally and corporately) within their own homes?
- ▶ How does your church cultivate learning environments where cross-generational prayer efforts can be practiced?
- ▶ How might audiences with low digital openness be struggling with a transition to digital prayer, and how are you still supporting these individuals within your church, either in person or online?
- ▶ What opportunities for conversation and training could occur between individuals with high digital openness and those with low digital openness?
- ▶ For those who express an openness to trying prayer digitally, how are you moving them toward opportunities to engage?



Learn:

We asked ministry leaders how they were integrating different forms of media into prayer experiences and gathering prayer requests. Here are some of their thoughts:

- ▶ “One form of our intentional daily discipleship is a podcast called NCC Daily with prayers, spoken word and the reading of the Word through a devotional thought every day.”
- ▶ “We have started Instagram Live prayer, Facebook prayers and prayer nights over Zoom.”

— Kiersten Telzerow, Small Group Director (Capitol Hill),
National Community Church

— Darren Rouanzoin, Lead Pastor, Garden Church



- ▶ “I noticed that engagement in the chat while praying on Facebook Live yields a connected experience. We have a Facebook host who monitors the chat and talks with people during prayer online. They can share requests or repeat the statements prayed. This engagement while one leader is praying seems to increase the connection for others during prayer. Also, early morning prayer times are attended more regularly than expected.”

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

- ▶ “Encourage prayer in all digital formats—text social media posts, email, chat.”

— Jennifer Altobello-Deschanel, Alpha Director,
Christ Church

- ▶ “The youth have been successful with using Instagram to stay engaged, and I have ideas about ways to add in prayer and youth activities with invitations for them to slide up and ‘share a prayer, give a prayer.’”

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

- ▶ “We make series kits with family activities that include prayer.”

— Jason Morris, Global Innovation Pastor,
Westside Family Church

- ▶ “At our pre-service prayers, we regularly have multiple generations participating in the prayer. Kids participate along with family members.”

— Darren Rouanzoin, Lead Pastor, Garden Church



Do:

- ▶ Find creative ways to engage kids in prayer opportunities, whether through family kits, prayer guides, online prayer groups or social media engagement.
- ▶ The home provides a natural space for cross-generational conversations and prayer experiences to take place. Encourage parents and older generations to model and invite children into digital prayer when watching or participating in online church from home.

How can churches create a compelling digital group prayer experience?

She has been praying for a long time; I wonder if I can slip out ...

What page of the prayer book are we reading from?

Wait, whose turn is it to pray? It's been silent for a while.

Is it OK that I don't want to hold hands during this prayer?

Inevitably, there are tricky, even awkward, aspects of hosting any group prayer experience. Churches will need to consider how these factors might be mitigated or agitated in trying to translate prayer to an online environment. Likewise, depending on the type of prayer being led, its purpose or impact might be affected in the pivot to digital.

In this section, we'll first look at the format and substance of group prayer that Christians are already drawn to, which could be prime for inclusion and exploration within an online setting. Then, we'll examine the (largely encouraging) accounts of those who have already participated in group prayer experiences.

Where Two or More Are Gathered: Hopes for Group Prayer

Perhaps the starting point of an effective digital prayer strategy is to discern how to best support—and expand—a private prayer practice: By and large, Christians tell Barna they prefer to pray privately (85%).

There are some types of prayer that Christians say they are open to experiencing in a group format—and the most popular form of group prayer could be seen as

private prayer en masse; 57 percent of Christians say they would consider participating in **silent prayer** alongside others, making this the most frequently chosen of the suggested group options.

The most popular form of group prayer could be seen as private prayer en masse; 57 percent of Christians are open to silent prayer alongside others

Guided prayer may also lend itself well to groups. Nearly half of Christians (44%) are open to praying the Lord's Prayer together, and one-third (32%) welcomes a pastor or priest to lead group prayers. Three in 10 (29%) are open to praying through song.

Other more **liturgical structures**—such as meditative or contemplative prayer (18%), confessional

prayer (17%), prayer books (15%) or call and response (12%)—aren't quite as popular.

Likewise, on the other end of the worship spectrum, there doesn't seem to be much interest in collective participation in **spontaneous or charismatic prayer**: Christians report little openness to giving or receiving prophecy (8%) or speaking in tongues (8%) in groups. These sets of responses, however, could speak to personal or denominational beliefs about these forms of prayer, and shouldn't be interpreted only as aversions to the group environment.

What about the substance of group prayers? Just as intercession is a common trait of Christians' general prayer lives, praying on behalf of others (37%) is something they would be open to specifically in a group. Similar proportions are inclined to see these gatherings as opportunities to pray for blessings (38%) or miracles (32%). One in five (18%) considers group prayer as a context for spiritual warfare.

With these varying levels of openness in mind, how can churches strategically create corporate prayer environments that are inviting, reverent and transformative?

Where Two or More Are Logged On: Accounts of Digital Prayer

In general, Christians are torn on whether group prayer experiences are less impactful when led digitally. Similar percentages agree (37%) or disagree (36%) with this statement, while more than one-quarter (28%) says they don't know.

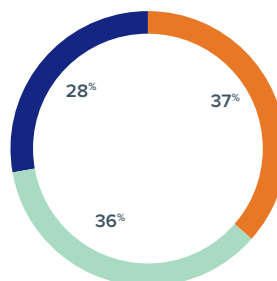
Barna singled out those who would know—meaning, Christians who report having engaged in collective digital prayer in the last six months—to learn more about how they connect to God and to others in digital prayer.

Among this group of engaged Christians, intercession seems an important part of the online group

“Group prayer experiences aren't as impactful when done digitally / online”

Base: Self-identified Christians

Agree Disagree Don't know



n=941 U.S. self-identified Christian adults, September 1–15, 2020.

experience. During online prayer, the large majority prays for other people and situations (54% “often,” 35% “sometimes”) or for others’ needs (58% “often,” 31% “sometimes”). All generations are equally likely to say intercession is central to their experience.

Though they might be focused on others during digital prayer, these Christians aren't necessarily connecting with them. Unity is a common, though not guaranteed, outcome of digital prayer moments. One-third of Christians who have prayed digitally in a group setting in the last six months (33%) says they “often” feel unified in this context;

a plurality, 44 percent, says they “sometimes” feel this way. This indicates a growth area for digital prayer: One in four Christians who are already engaged enough with their faith and church to have participated in online corporate prayer (23%) still rarely or never feels unified as a group in these moments.

On a related note, opportunities for candor seem to lag in these environments. When asked if they talk about their struggles more vulnerably during online rather than in-person group prayer, two-thirds of Christians who’ve recently participated in corporate digital prayer say this is “often” (34%) or “sometimes” (34%) the case. Still, that leaves one-third (32%) for whom this option for openness is either unavailable or uncomfortable.

Connections with God, however, are more reliably facilitated in online prayer (49% “often” and 34% “sometimes” feel God’s presence). Similar proportions of Christians engaged in these prayer contexts say they

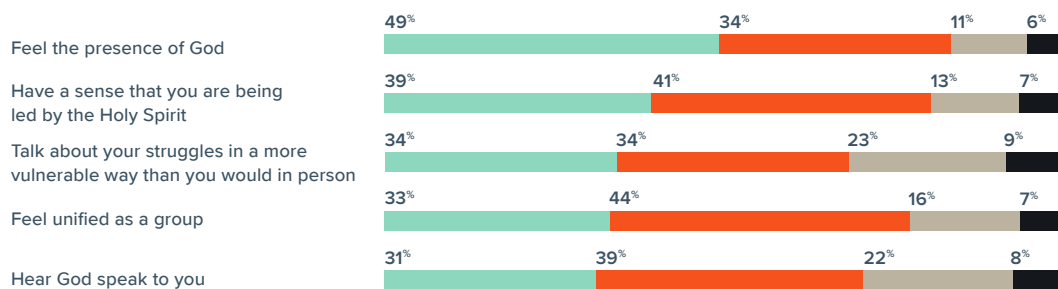
“often” (39%) or “sometimes” (41%) also feel led by the Holy Spirit. Many Christians go so far as to say they hear God speak to them while participating in digital prayer (31% “often,” 39% “sometimes”).

49%
Half of Christians
“often” feel God’s
presence in digital
prayer

When you participate in group prayer digitally / online with other people, do you experience or do the following?

Base: Self-identified Christians who have prayed digitally in a group setting within the past 6 months

■ Often ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely ■ Never



n=460 U.S. Christians who have prayed digitally in a group setting within the past 6 months, September 1–15, 2020.

Understanding the Needs

What to Try, What to Keep

- ▶ While few leaders had a choice in turning to digital options when COVID-19 hit, hybrid and in-person ministry will continue or resume as restrictions lift. Some practitioners see this as a period of trial and error, when leaders have chances to test technological boundaries of worship and prayer while also learning what works best long term.

Vulnerability & Unity

- ▶ One of the takeaways from this study was that some Christians say they do not feel unified or struggle to be vulnerable in prayer experiences. As the individualization of prayer remains the dominant experience, churches need new tools to harness enthusiasm and encourage togetherness in the digital space.

Taking Next Steps



Ask:

- ▶ What forms of prayer are most commonly practiced within your tradition or context?
- ▶ How can you use guided prayer as a tool to develop the prayer lives of your congregants?
- ▶ Are you able or open to trying different types of prayer that might feel less familiar to you and your congregation?
- ▶ What practical training tools or models could help expand your church's prayer options online?
- ▶ What aspects of prayer do you feel are universal and translate to any form or format?
- ▶ Will your church community continue to use some form of digital prayer in the long term?
- ▶ Which forms of prayer do you most enjoy or find fruitful online? In person?
- ▶ After a season of digital or hybrid ministry, are there any ways in which you hope your church does not return to normal?



- ▶ With intercession being a popular and powerful form of group prayer, how are you incorporating this prayer style into your digital prayer strategy?
- ▶ How can digital prayer forums help foster a sense of interconnectedness?
- ▶ How can digital prayer environments, or any group prayer experience, account for and include various personalities and comfort levels with corporate prayer?
- ▶ What do you believe the unique value of praying together is? How can you preach on or articulate this?



Learn:

We tapped our panel of ministry leaders and practitioners to help brainstorm new ways to gather in prayer online.

- ▶ “We have experimented with a lot. For strategic intercessory prayer, we send out lists of things to pray for every month. We have a Tuesday night Zoom intercessor prayer night. We have a prayer wall where people write requests and answer prayers to share with others. We’ve also done 24 / 7 prayer signups through the month. The most successful prayer gatherings have been done over Zoom.”
— *Darren Rouanzoin, Lead Pastor, Garden Church*
- ▶ “Most of our prayers have taken the form of intercession. We considered some more interactive forms by using Zoom, etc., but felt there was a burnout factor involved in those types of calls, so we decided to stick with the Facebook group. There are some limitations there as it loses the interactive aspect. Also, some of our most ardent pray-ers do not use Facebook.”
— *Mark Liebenow, Alpha Director, Point of Grace Church*
- ▶ “We have adapted the following digitally: praying the rosary, intercession, healing prayer, praying for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, prayer through song, praying in tongues and prayer journaling. Praying through music has proven to be the most difficult digitally. It is hard for people to join in without disrupting the experience for others. The other things we have tried have been surprisingly effective online. The Holy Spirit is not confined to just meeting in person, thankfully.”
— *Brad Hubbard, Alpha Coordinator, St. Ann Catholic Church*



Do:

Here are some types of prayer that ministry leaders tell Barna they have tried online.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Facebook prayer meeting room | ☐ Intercession |
| ☐ Prayer via chat | ☐ Guided prayer |
| ☐ Virtual prayer vigils | ☐ The Lord's Prayer |
| ☐ "Popcorn style" communal prayer | ☐ Silent prayer |
| ☐ Prayers for healing | ☐ The Daily Office |
-
- | | |
|---|---|
| ▶ Put a check next to any of the forms of prayer in the list above that you have tried with your church / community online. | ▶ Plan a time of prayer with your team about this moment in your church's ministry of prayer. |
| ▶ Put a star next to any forms of prayer that you might want to try with your community online. | |

What are the common barriers to engaging in digital prayer?

People welcome digital prayer during church services.

As mentioned on page 19, significant percentages of both Christians and non-Christians indicate they are at least somewhat open to participating in a time of prayer during an online church service. From another angle, one-on-one prayer (27%) ranks second only to sermons as a digital option churched adults would be interested in experiencing (communal group prayer comes in lower, at 14%).

Yet, just as with online church attendance, openness and participation (not to mention meaningful engagement) don't always go hand in hand. Only about three in 10 Christians report participating in the various types of digital corporate prayer Barna asked about (28% in digital prayer gatherings in the past year, 34% in small-group digital prayer every 6 months, 32% in large-group digital prayer every 6 months). During the months of the pandemic response in particular, 16 percent of churched adults noted their whole household had been a part of digital prayer experiences.

There are many prohibitive factors to consider when trying to figure out why some people may be interested in attending a digital gathering yet have not actually done so.

As covered already in this report, a church's suite of digital options (at this point, still largely built around transplanting the standard service and sermon to the internet) is the most fundamental factor, and might not be enough to satisfy some Christians' openness to digital prayer.

Surely, resources and access to technology can prove to be a hurdle for some. With any online survey

methodology, like the one used for this study, there is difficulty in capturing the responses of individuals without reliable access to computers, cell phones or other technologies that would allow them to participate at all in digital church. Similarly, churches need to consider who may be at the margins of the digital church and prayer experience due to technological access or ability.

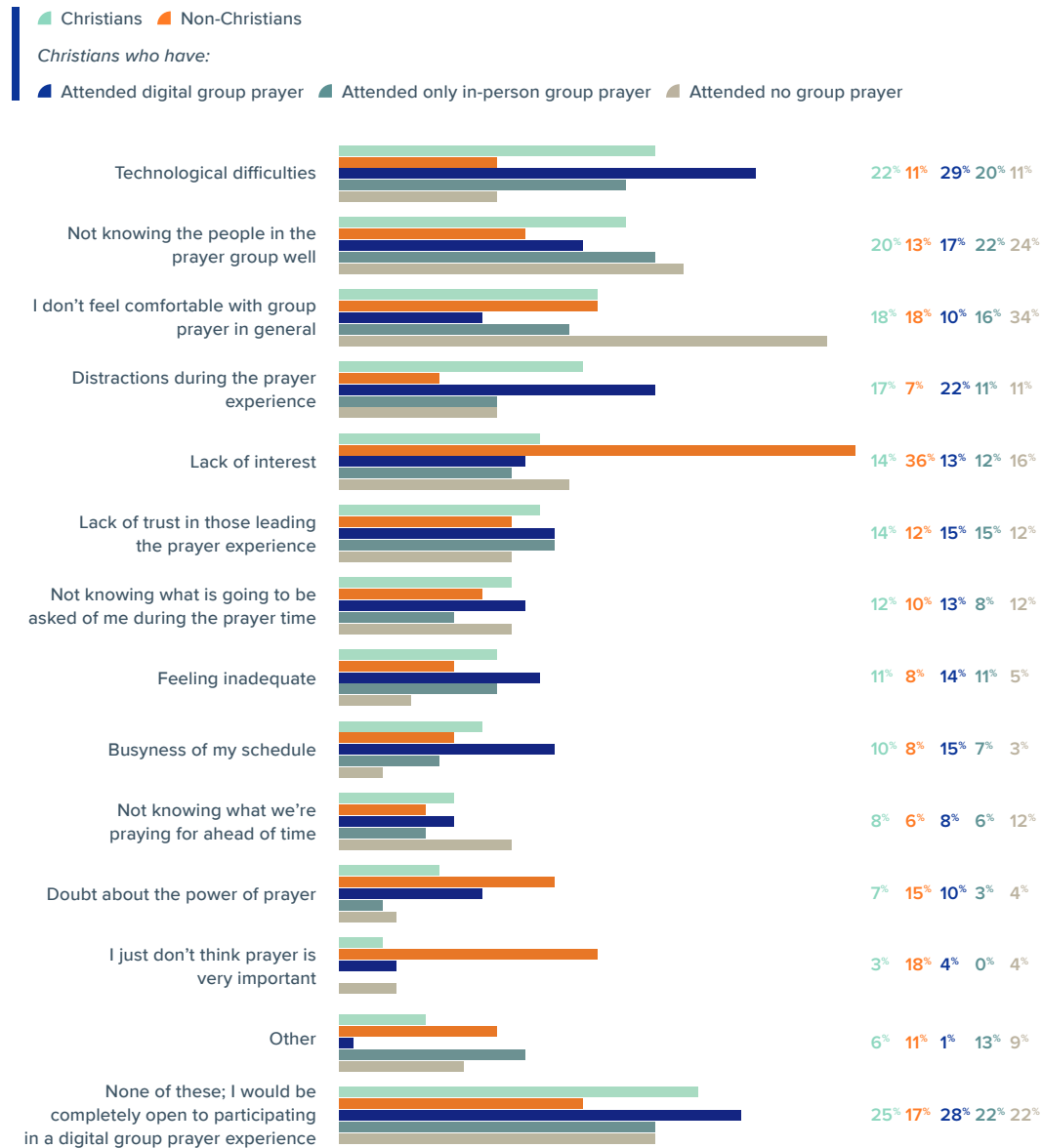
However, in the course of this study, we learned about some of the other practical and personal reasons for not attending digital prayer gatherings.

“I’m worried about distractions and technical difficulties”

We know that more than one-third of those who have attended and watched an online service during the pandemic (36%) struggles to focus during digital church. So it's not surprising that potential distractions surface as a barrier to digital prayer as well. Fourteen percent of U.S. adults note that distractions

Which of the following things would likely stop you from participating in an online group prayer experience?

Select all that apply.



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

during a prayer experience would keep them from participation. Technological difficulty is a primary reason Christians would opt out of digital prayer (22%), and 17 percent worry about distractions in general.

Churches need to consider who may be at the margins of the digital church and prayer experience due to technological access or ability

Christians who have had some experience with digital prayer groups or gatherings in the past year are more likely to note these distractions (22% vs. 11% who've only engaged with in-person prayer and 11% who've not participated in any group prayer) or technological difficulties (29% vs. 20% and 11%), suggesting these may be problems they've actually experienced during a prayer gathering. Likewise, churched adults with a greater digital openness are wary of the potential for technological difficulties during digital prayer (42% vs. 27% moderate digital openness, 19% low digital openness).

“I feel uncomfortable or inadequate”

Social discomfort plagues prayer experiences enough that it is among the reasons one-fifth of Christians avoids digital prayer—or group prayer in general. Eighteen percent of Christians say they'd forego online group prayer because they feel uncomfortable praying with others.

Another one in five (20%) wouldn't engage if they don't know people in the group well. This fear is more common among Christians who haven't participated in any form of group prayer (24%), suggesting they may feel like

they're on the outside looking in. Others select more direct expressions of inadequacy (11%) or worry about not knowing what to expect (12%) or what is being prayed for (8%) ahead of time. 11 of the above likely factor into Christians' preference for private or silent prayer.

Boomer Christians are more prone than younger generations to share this aversion to group prayer (24% don't feel comfortable with group prayer in general vs. 16% Gen Z, 10% Millennials, 18% Gen X), which aligns with the numbers for reported participation in prayer gatherings, both in-person and digital (see page 47).

These worries, though not rampant, are significant. Fostering a digital prayer gathering environment that allows for being friendly and informal and doesn't put people on the spot could potentially help with these concerns.

“I can't (or won't) find the time”

One in 10 Christians (10%) notes the busyness of their schedule as something that would stop them from participating in an online group prayer experience. This is more common among younger generations (16% Gen Z, 13%

Millennials, 11% Gen X), while Boomers (5%), now bearing less professional, familial and social responsibility, are rarely held back from prayer by busyness.

Still, for others, it's simply not a priority. Fourteen percent of Christians report a lack of interest—and among those with no faith, notably, a much higher 43 percent—express this sentiment about digital prayer. This is a persistent theme in Barna's research about interest in digital or hybrid worship outside the Church: 78 percent of atheists, agnostics and “nones” say they would be open to attending none of the in-person or digital church activities included in the survey.

“I don't believe it matters”

Doubts about the power of prayer itself rarely present among Christians' reasons for avoiding digital prayer—or, at least, rarely prevent them from being open to this form of group prayer. Just 7 percent select this potential barrier. However, non-Christians are more inclined to say such doubt would keep them from engaging (15%).

Additionally, one-fifth of non-Christians (18%) says they just don't think prayer is very important (vs. 3% of Christians).

Interestingly, there is no statistically significant difference in the percentages of Christians (14%) and non-Christians (12%) who point to a lack of trust in those leading digital prayer experiences as something that might stop them from participating in digital prayer. Prayer leaders may need to concentrate on fostering authentic, personable and transparent experiences in on-line climates.

For leaders who see digital ministry and prayer as an opportunity to open doors for outreach and evangelism, resistance may have more to do with the concept than the context of worship gatherings. Doubt and disinterest are

prominent issues for those outside of the faith. Still, these same leaders should take heart that 17 percent of non-Christians—including 15 percent of adults with no faith—select none of the possible obstacles to digital group prayer and indicate they are completely open to such an experience. *Learn more in Barna and Alpha's Five Changing Contexts for Digital Evangelism report about online opportunities for the Church to extend its reach.*

17%

**of non-Christians
and 15% of adults
with no faith say
they are completely
open to digital group
prayer**

Understanding the Needs

One Prayer Experience Does Not Fit All

- ▶ No matter its potential, there are pitfalls to facilitating online prayer. Now you know some of the hurdles that keep churchgoers from embracing online prayer—many legitimate, some seemingly insurmountable. To overcome the rest of these barriers, church leaders may need some creative problem-solving. Consider these questions and recommendations as starting points.

Taking Next Steps



Ask:

- ▶ How are you specifically addressing the top digital group prayer concerns of Christians: technological difficulties and social discomfort?
- ▶ How have you seen different barriers to digital prayer play out within your own community context?
- ▶ Who in your church context might be experiencing some of these barriers (or ones that weren't listed in this field guide or covered in this research)?



Learn:

We talked to ministry leaders about where they see barriers to prayerful experiences and routines in their church contexts.

- ▶ “People are too busy for their faith, so the main obstacle is time. Teaching people to slow down is key.”
— *Darren Rouanzoin, Lead Pastor, Garden Church*



- ▶ “Some people need more of a unique space (as in, not their house) to settle into a prayer time. Others may have too many distractions with kids or other activities going on. The best thing I have seen is to give people permission—to move around, to take a different posture than they maybe would in person and then to also offer these types of experiences at varying times.”

— Christian Downs, Regional Director Alpha WA, Alpha USA

- ▶ “People generally are unwilling to take a risk and take next steps unless they are encouraged and guided on a personal level. We have tried in multiple different contexts to break into smaller groups to help foster growth.”
- Brad Hubbard, Alpha Coordinator, St. Ann Catholic Church

- ▶ “Schedules and the lack of time management are common [barriers to digital prayer]. I encourage people to put the prayer moments in their calendars like every other daily event. I have offered an outlook of prioritizing prayer as a concrete event in the day that must be acknowledged to get done.”

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

- ▶ “Get in the habit of asking what people need prayer for and then letting them know they can send those requests in multiple ways. Then, lead by example. ... Just sending a response that is a pair of praying hands is not a true response.”

— Jennifer Altobello-Deschanel, Alpha Director, Christ Church



Do:

- ▶ **Pray what you mean:** Using heady, dense or jargon-y prayer language can sometimes turn prayer into a performance made for one. As your community looks to cultivate spaces of honest, corporate prayer online, encourage individuals to speak candidly and from the heart. This can also work to create an inclusive space where people of various backgrounds can feel trusting and included instead of being afraid of appearing out of place or inadequate.
- ▶ **Break into smaller groups:** Individuals may be more hesitant to take a risk if they do not feel that they have relational support. Smaller groups allow relational connections to form more easily and leave space for group leaders to encourage individuals who may be more hesitant to participate.



► **Provide technical training:** Consider which individuals or groups within your church might lack access to technology or at least have a harder time learning new platforms where digital prayer experiences are being hosted. Equipping leaders and prayer facilitators for simple technical training, like how to join Zoom breakout rooms, can be a way to decrease stress around tech failures or awkwardness. This might also be a great chance for younger generations to help share their knowledge with older generations, creating opportunities for cross-generational connections.

► **Check the time:** While you might want your digital prayer gathering to have some room to breathe, it's also wise to consider the decreased attention spans associated with screens or busy households. Schedule and lead prayer in a way that makes the time spent together feel intentional and not a contributor to "Zoom fatigue."

How does digital prayer fit within a broader prayer life?

During the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been plenty of discussion around whether digital ministry options should be treated as temporary solutions or new fixtures of church life. Digital methods of facilitating group prayer have potential to meet unique needs during times of distance, but should also be seen as catalysts for or extensions of a holistic prayer life. Our pandemic-era research points to ways digital group prayer not only correlates with meaningful experiences but also fits alongside other expressions in a broader posture of prayer.

To understand *how* digital group prayer can fit, let's zoom in on the Christians who have already made it a part of their prayer practices (see glossary on page 7 for details). First, a notable *non*-difference: Christians who participate in digital group prayer are no more likely than others to report praying regularly on their own; they track with other Christians, with 67 percent engaged in daily personal prayer. This group is also mostly made up of Millennials, a generation less likely to have a daily prayer habit.

However, major patterns of difference occur when it comes to enthusiasm for and experiences around prayer.

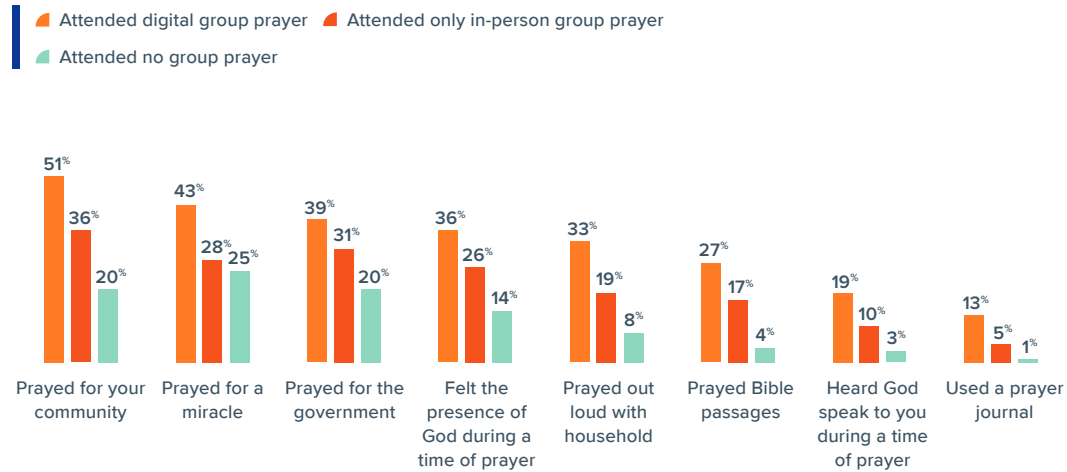
Those who are experienced with digital prayer are actually quite attuned to the ways technology can underdeliver—yet, encouragingly, they persist

Indeed, we see emotions like connection, energy, excitement and enlightenment being closely tied to prayer activity for Christians who have some proclivity for digital corporate prayer, more so than for those who only engage in in-person group prayer. Between the numbers are glimpses of effusive spirituality, reaching upward and outward, through various modes and moods—intercessory, experiential, vulnerable, communal and expectant.

On the flip side, Christians who have only experienced in-person group prayer this year—primarily Boomers—are less likely to report a number of other meaningful prayer activities, in terms of what they pray for, who they pray with, how they feel during prayer and what happens as they pray. As you might expect from this digitally disconnected group, these are Christians who are more likely to have dropped out of church attendance in general during the pandemic. Granted that a lack of program options or access can

Digital Group Prayer & Other Prayer Activity

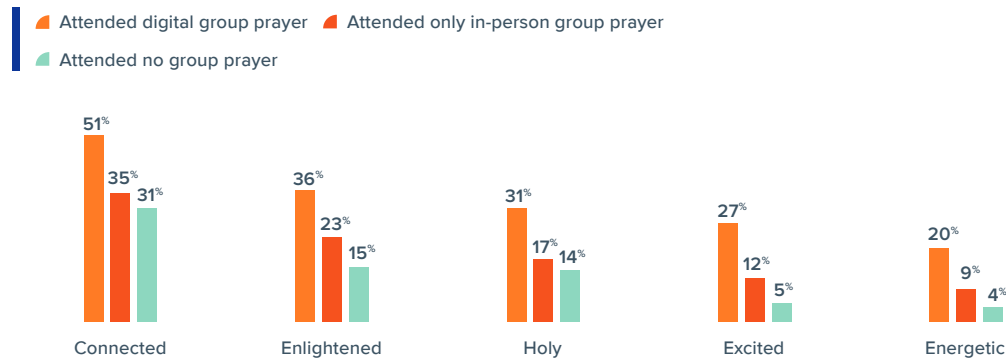
Select the items that you have done within the past year. Select all that apply.
Base: Self-identified Christians



n=932 U.S. Christian adults, September 1–15, 2020.

Digital Group Prayer & Positive Emotions Related to Prayer

How do you feel when you pray?
Base: Self-identified Christians who have previously prayed



n=890 U.S. Christian adults who have previously prayed, September 1–15, 2020.

pose hurdles beyond a Christian's control, this insular segment seems to need an argument for or a pathway to stronger church community and spiritual vigor—before and beyond any specific engagement with digital prayer gatherings.

Interestingly, those who have attended digital group prayer this year are actually *more* likely to agree that prayer online isn't as impactful as in-person prayer (40% vs. 32% who've only engaged with in-person prayer and 34% who've not participated in any group prayer). It's telling that those who are experienced with digital prayer are actually quite attuned to the ways technology can underdeliver—yet, encouragingly, they persist in their openness and engagement, with many reporting weekly participation in group prayer online (two in five in small groups, one-third in large groups).

Fitting It All Together

Barna data reveal that digital prayer is merely one piece of the puzzle in a vibrant prayer life. Those who practice prayer in a digital group setting see the fruits not only of this experience but also of choosing to practice group prayer at all. Barna studies have seen such a pattern across a number of spiritual disciplines and positive behaviors: Intentionality begets intentionality, generosity begets generosity—and prayerfulness begets prayerfulness. During a year of turmoil, some Christians have continued to prioritize praying alongside others—and that means, where resources are in place, they've ended up on the leading edge of a digital prayer movement.

The goal of digital prayer strategy isn't building an audience or effectively utilizing an online platform, but cultivating a love of prayer, a connection to God and a desire for community. For church leaders, then, the answers to questions about digital prayer in this present moment

ultimately resemble the answers to other timeless questions of ministry: *How do I nurture hearts and habits that value prayer—in the people I've been entrusted to lead, with the tools and resources I have, for the moment we are facing?*

Understanding the Needs

The Connection Between Personal & Corporate Prayer

Those who have tapped into the positive aspects of digital group prayer following the pandemic-era shifts in ministry demonstrate an enthusiasm for their prayer lives that overcame a season of disruption. Helping individuals grow in their individual prayer lives can strengthen corporate expressions of prayer, and vice versa. Let's explore some practical ways to cultivate prayer habits in any format.

Taking Next Steps



Ask:

- ▶ How do you see your own personal prayer life influencing your corporate expression of prayer?
- ▶ How does your team keep each other motivated and accountable in your private prayer practices?
- ▶ What qualities and disciplines of a healthy private prayer life flow into corporate expressions? What about the opposite: How can a healthy corporate prayer life nurture individuals in meaningful personal prayer?



Learn:

We invited ministry leaders and practitioners to reflect on healthy personal prayer lives and healthy group prayer environments go hand in hand, including in a digital / hybrid church context.

- ▶ “The more a person has a personal prayer life, it may help them jump in quicker; however, when you give some easy framework and make it accessible, then others are also willing to join and engage.”

— Christian Downs, Regional Director Alpha WA, Alpha USA



- ▶ “The corporate and group prayer often helps set patterns for people that they can later have in place to support the personal disciplines they aim to set up and keep. For a digital or hybrid platform, this also extends and builds community but keeps people accountable to each other and personal goals with prayer.”
— Alexis Gwin-Miller, Pastor, Doctoral Candidate, New Direction Christian Church
- ▶ “We’ve seen a tremendous amount of growth in their commitment to prayer and people overcoming their fears of praying out loud. It is hard to do in person, let alone online with more in attendance, so this has been a great extension we’ve seen people step into and practice in their daily walk, even inviting family members from different states and countries.”
— Kiersten Telzerow, Small Group Director (Capitol Hill), National Community Church
- ▶ “Corporate prayer takes stepping out of one’s comfort zone. The step in doing so begins with being comfortable with private prayer and then having the support of other brothers and sisters in Christ to branch out to praying in a group context. 2020 has given many people opportunity to become comfortable in a digital space. I’ve seen people previously hesitant to pray at in-person groups willing to pray for people via a Zoom meeting, which is a step in the right direction.”
— Jennifer Altobello-Deschanel, Alpha Director, Christ Church
- ▶ “Encourage people to explore all types of prayer: praying in tongues, journaling, creative prayer such as praying in color (doodling while praying), breath prayers, body movement prayers, meditation and laying-on-of-hands. This way people can discover what prayer language works best for them and once their confidence is built in understanding their natural prayer language, you can encourage them to share that experience with others in a group setting.”
— Jennifer Altobello-Deschanel, Alpha Director, Christ Church
- ▶ “One way is through the help of a reading plan or a short devotional plan that either has a scripted prayer or prompts one to pray. I have found that if we continue to help provide tools for people, they are so hungry right now that they step into greater experiences to cultivate their own prayer habits or join a community already growing in prayer habits.”
— Kiersten Telzerow, Small Group Director (Capitol Hill), National Community Church
- ▶ “Encourage people to pray for specific things, themes or ideas and then having group opportunities to pray about them later. This may help engagement and excitement to participate so that it could turn into a pattern.”
— Christian Downs, Regional Director Alpha WA, Alpha USA



A Parting Prayer

We hope these findings, questions, actions and insights have been helpful as you process the state of prayer within your current context. Here are a few concluding remarks and words of encouragement from some of the ministry practitioners who shared with Barna about their experience with digital prayer.

**“You can have powerful God-encounters online over Zoom.
Don’t diminish the power of prayer.”**

— Darren Rouanzoin, Lead Pastor, Garden Church

**“Prayer is a community catalyst, taking what would be a
passive, cold online experience and making it human and transcendent.
The presence of God in prayer overcomes proximity.”**

— Jason Morris, Global Innovation Pastor, Westside Family Church

**“Be intentional, be persistent. Trying it once or twice isn’t enough;
make it a part of online church culture.”**

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

**“Just get out and invite people. Send the link out.
Create the space and let the Spirit move.”**

— Christian Downs, Regional Director Alpha WA, Alpha USA

**“We have seen the Lord move in incredible ways through
digital prayer, and we are going to continue to
leverage the platforms he has given us.”**

— Kiersten Telzerow, Small Group Director (Capitol Hill), National Community Church

Group Prayer Participation: Data Tables

How often do you usually pray with a **SMALL GROUP** of people **IN PERSON**?

	Never	Yearly or less	Every 6 months	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
Generations (% among Christians)						
Gen Z	24%	10%	11%	23%	22%	9%
Millennials	24%	11%	10%	22%	22%	11%
Gen X	35%	18%	6%	16%	21%	4%
Boomers	46%	17%	4%	11%	19%	4%
Race / Ethnicity (% among Christians)						
White	38%	16%	7%	15%	18%	6%
Black	23%	12%	8%	20%	26%	10%
Hispanic	35%	14%	7%	19%	22%	3%
Asian	40%	12%	3%	21%	17%	8%
Faith & Church Engagement						
Churched	22%	10%	7%	22%	32%	9%
Unchurched	68%	16%	5%	7%	3%	2%
Practicing Christians	16%	7%	4%	20%	41%	12%
Non-practicing Christians	46%	20%	9%	14%	8%	3%

*n=1,302 U.S. adults, September 1–15, 2020.
See glossary on page 7 for definitions.*

Group Prayer Participation: Data Tables

How often do you usually pray with a **SMALL GROUP** of people **DIGITALLY**?

Never	Yearly or less	Every 6 months	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
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Generations (% among Christians)

Gen Z	45%	5%	4%	15%	22%	8%
Millennials	44%	8%	8%	15%	18%	8%
Gen X	59%	8%	2%	7%	22%	3%
Boomers	74%	7%	3%	6%	8%	2%

Race / Ethnicity (% among Christians)

White	65%	7%	3%	8%	12%	5%
Black	48%	6%	5%	8%	28%	4%
Hispanic	47%	9%	5%	15%	20%	4%
Asian	52%	6%	5%	11%	24%	2%

Faith & Church Engagement

Churched	48%	6%	4%	12%	23%	7%
Unchurched	84%	7%	2%	4%	2%	1%
Practicing Christians	45%	4%	4%	8%	31%	8%
Non-practicing Christians	67%	9%	4%	10%	7%	3%

*n=1,302 U.S. adults, September 1–15, 2020.
See glossary on page 7 for definitions.*

Group Prayer Participation: Data Tables

How often do you usually pray with others **IN PERSON** in a **LARGE GROUP** setting?

	Never	Yearly or less	Every 6 months	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
Generations (% among Christians)						
Gen Z	28%	10%	15%	20%	19%	8%
Millennials	31%	18%	9%	18%	19%	5%
Gen X	42%	14%	9%	13%	20%	2%
Boomers	50%	13%	7%	9%	20%	1%
Race / Ethnicity (% among Christians)						
White	42%	13%	9%	12%	22%	3%
Black	40%	13%	10%	19%	17%	1%
Hispanic	38%	23%	8%	14%	13%	4%
Asian	43%	14%	7%	14%	21%	2%
Faith & Church Engagement						
Churched	27%	10%	9%	20%	29%	4%
Unchurched	73%	16%	5%	3%	2%	1%
Practicing Christians	24%	8%	6%	19%	38%	4%
Non-practicing Christians	50%	19%	10%	10%	9%	2%

*n=1,302 U.S. adults, September 1–15, 2020.
See glossary on page 7 for definitions.*

Group Prayer Participation: Data Tables

How often do you pray with others **DIGITALLY** in a **LARGE GROUP** setting?

Never	Yearly or less	Every 6 months	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
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Generations (% among Christians)

Gen Z	43%	7%	11%	18%	17%	5%
Millennials	45%	7%	9%	15%	17%	7%
Gen X	61%	8%	4%	12%	14%	1%
Boomers	79%	5%	1%	7%	7%	1%

Race / Ethnicity (% among Christians)

White	68%	5%	3%	10%	11%	3%
Black	50%	8%	7%	12%	19%	4%
Hispanic	50%	9%	9%	14%	15%	3%
Asian	53%	7%	7%	17%	14%	1%

Faith & Church Engagement

Churched	51%	6%	5%	14%	18%	5%
Unchurched	86%	5%	3%	4%	2%	1%
Practicing Christians	51%	4%	3%	13%	23%	5%
Non-practicing Christians	68%	8%	6%	10%	7%	2%

n=1,302 U.S. adults, September 1–15, 2020.
See glossary on page 7 for definitions.

Group Prayer Participation: Data Tables

Within the past year, have you attended:

	a digital corporate / group prayer gathering? % says "yes"	an in-person corporate / group prayer gathering? % says "yes"
Generations (% among Christians)		
Gen Z	53%	56%
Millennials	44%	45%
Gen X	26%	31%
Boomers	13%	18%
Race / Ethnicity (% among Christians)		
White	19%	24%
Black	50%	55%
Hispanic	39%	39%
Asian	37%	33%
Faith & Church Engagement (% among Christians)		
Churched	37%	44%
Unchurched	16%	14%
Practicing Christians	36%	48%
Non-practicing Christians	24%	23%

*n=941 self-identified Christian adults, September 1–15, 2020.
See glossary on page 7 for definitions.*

Group Prayer Participation: Data Tables

How often do you usually pray with a **SMALL GROUP** of people **DIGITALLY**?



Churched Adults: Digital Openness

High	28%	8%	3%	16%	37%	10%
Moderate	41%	4%	5%	12%	28%	10%
Low	62%	7%	3%	9%	14%	4%

Unchurched Adults: Digital Openness

High	59%	20%	3%	6%	9%	3%
Moderate	70%	8%	7%	10%	2%	3%
Low	92%	4%	1%	1%	1%	1%

How often do you pray with others **DIGITALLY** in a **LARGE GROUP** setting?



Churched Adults: Digital Openness

High	31%	10%	5%	22%	26%	6%
Moderate	47%	5%	4%	14%	23%	7%
Low	60%	5%	7%	13%	12%	4%

Unchurched Adults: Digital Openness

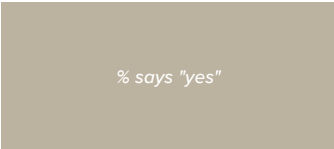
High	65%	12%	6%	7%	5%	5%
Moderate	72%	10%	4%	9%	3%	2%
Low	93%	3%	2%	2%	1%	0%

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

See glossary on page 7 for definitions.

Group Prayer Participation: Data Tables

Within the past year, have you attended a **DIGITAL CORPORATE / GROUP PRAYER** gathering?



Churched Adults: Digital Openness (*% among Christians*)

High	48%
Moderate	38%
Low	33%

Unchurched Adults: Digital Openness (*% among Christians*)

High	19%
Moderate	31%
Low	10%

n=941 self-identified Christian adults, September 1–15, 2020.
See glossary on page 7 for definitions.

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 (general population and church adults) 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 ministry to share about their experiences and best practices. This particular panel is not intended to be representative of the Church at large, but of the experiences of practitioners in the emerging space of digital prayer; as such, it features multiple voices affiliated with our research partners at Alpha. This group includes the following names, and other leaders.

Jennifer Altobello-Deschanel, *Alpha Director, Christ Church*

Christian Downs, *Regional Director Alpha WA, Alpha USA*

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

Brad Hubbard, *Alpha Coordinator, St. Ann Catholic Church*

Mark Liebenow, *Alpha Director, Point of Grace Church*

Jason Morris, *Global Innovation Pastor, Westside Family Church*

Darren Rouanzoin, *Lead Pastor, Garden Church*

Kiersten Telzerow, *Small Group Director (Capitol Hill), National Community Church*

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

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 for more information.



Acknowledgments

The Barna team is deeply grateful for our partners at Alpha and Gloo.

Alpha would like to thank all of their amazing team members who invested much time and energy into making this publication a success. Alpha would also like to personally thank the church leaders who contributed thoughts and insights to this journal: *At Alpha, our mission is to serve and equip the Church in its mission to help people discover and develop a relationship with Jesus. These findings would not be possible without the partnership and contributions of key church leaders across the nation who are on the pioneering frontlines of digital prayer. We are grateful for their practical insights, courageous innovation and passionate commitment to helping people find hope in Christ in these changing and challenging times.*

Many thanks to Gloo, and especially Scott Beck, Nancy Smith, Matt Smay, Peter Larson, Sam Shew, Rachel Finley and Cheyanne Patterson, for their contributions throughout this project.

The researchers for this study were David Kinnaman, Savannah Kimberlin, Traci Stark and Daniel

Copeland. Lyce Youngblood and Lisa Cooper wrote the journal. Lauren Petersen developed the field guides, drawing on our panel of digital ministry experts and practitioners, whose insights greatly enhanced this report. Doug Brown edited the manuscript. Kymberly Allen designed the report. OX Creative designed the cover elements, while Joe Jensen created the cover design layout. Brenda Usery managed production with project management assistance from Elissa Clouse. The project team thanks our Barna colleagues Jeni Cohen, Aidan Dunn, Brooke Hempell, Pam Jacob, Steve McBeth, Matt Randerson, Matt Smith, Verónica Thames and Todd White.