

EXCERPT



## *The Hybrid Congregation* *A Practical Theology of Worship for an Online Era*

June 10, 2025 | \$25.99, 192 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1142-3

*The Hybrid Congregation* is a groundbreaking exploration of how church worship practices are evolving in our digital age. Written by seasoned church musician and scholar Michael Huerter, *The Hybrid Congregation* guides you through a detailed account of how congregations are adapting to digital mediatization, enriched by interviews with leading scholars and practitioners. Discover vibrant online communities that thrive through digital life together, challenging traditional notions of participation and embodiment.

# Constructing a Theology of Hybrid Worship

The COVID-19 pandemic caught many churches flatfooted. As the world reeled to respond to a new reality we did not understand, church leaders had to find new ways to do ministry. The early weeks of lockdown and quarantine in my church included canceled services, changing plans, and emergency meetings. We were ill-equipped to facilitate an immediate, complete shift to online modalities; we had neither the practical resources nor the experience we would have liked. Like many other churches, we managed the best we could—gathering church staff in an empty sanctuary in front of a small tablet on a camera stand, sending a video stream to our community sheltered in their homes.

As time went on, our approach continued to adapt and change. We gained new capacities and resources, learned new skills, and began to internalize patterns and practices of ministry that included a greater online presence. This ongoing transition took place in the midst of continuing conversations in church and culture at large about how our society was being reshaped. Working from home became a far more common practice than before. Zoom became a ubiquitous presence seemingly overnight. Popular-level theological conversations about the significance of online media and its role in our lives and our worship populated Christian newsletters and my own social media feed.

From early 2020 to mid-2024, these conversations have coalesced into conferences, journal articles, and books both scholarly and practical. More faith leaders are engaging in questions around online media than ever before. As our society at large has grappled with the realization that life is not going to return to exactly what it was before the pandemic, church leaders likewise have recognized that we are experiencing an inflection point in many of our practices and approaches. Church online is here to stay. But, while our theologies of ministry online have developed, in-depth reflection on specifically musical aspects of online ministry is lagging behind. In terms of theological and practical perspectives on music and new media, we may still be using a metaphorical tablet on a camera stand and making do with minimal resources. Disciplines such as church music studies, ethnomusicology, music philosophy, and practical theology have further to go in the area of digital media and music. This book hopes to synthesize perspectives and offer appropriate tools for our new hybrid digital environment.

This book focuses on the intersection of church music and online communication. The central question is this: What does the church need to understand about digitally mediated interactions—their history, embodied impact, and effective use—in order for individual communities and ministers to make well-informed, effective, and contextually appropriate decisions in their ministry? Ultimately, responsible engagement with online worship and digital religious rituals necessitates being aware of historical patterns of how churches have responded to technological innovation, reframing four important concepts (participation, embodiment, mediation, and virtuality), and reimagining community by attending to the specific affordances of online media. These issues will be essential to the development of music ministry in the 2020s and beyond.

I will address this question through assessing academic sources on topics of online communities and religious practices, as well as the history of communication technologies and the church's engagement with them. This research will include both prepandemic sources and those written since the advent of COVID-19. I will also engage with other musicological, ethnomusicological, philosophical, and theological sources on topics with implications relevant to digitally mediated faith practices and musical experiences. Primary sources include digital ethnography of online communities and interactions, and a series of interviews with leaders and participants involved in online communities.

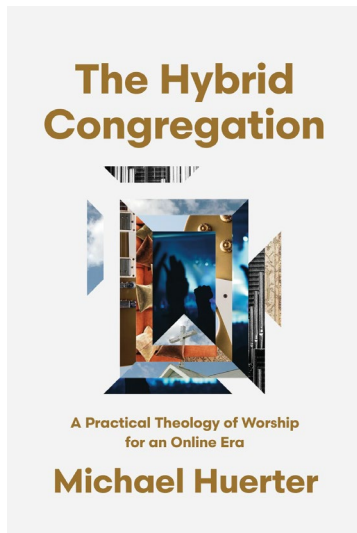


---

Karin DeHaven, senior publicist  
kdehaven@ivpress.com or ivpress.com/media



ivpress.com/media



EXCERPT



## ***The Hybrid Congregation*** *A Practical Theology of Worship for an Online Era*

June 10, 2025 | \$25.99, 192 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1142-3

*The Hybrid Congregation* is a groundbreaking exploration of how church worship practices are evolving in our digital age. Written by seasoned church musician and scholar Michael Huerter, *The Hybrid Congregation* guides you through a detailed account of how congregations are adapting to digital mediatization, enriched by interviews with leading scholars and practitioners. Discover vibrant online communities that thrive through digital life together, challenging traditional notions of participation and embodiment.

This research has potential significance for the field of church music studies, as well as practical utility for ministry practitioners. To the extent that we do not engage thoughtfully and intentionally with online and hybrid practices, we may miss opportunities for meaningful ministry or engage in practices that are ineffective or have negative impact. In a world that operates on networks of digitally mediated relationships that begin online and then find expression in physical space, a local church without an online presence appropriate to its surrounding community may find it impossible to connect with that community in a mutually positive relationship. Conversely, a church that excels in online ministry and digital spaces but does so without grounding those practices theologically may gain the world but lose its soul.

This book takes a two-pronged approach, talking about hybrid congregations *and* music, not just one or the other. Worship is broader than just music, and music is one of numerous practices and rituals we value in our communities. Portions of this book will focus heavily on music, and other portions will address issues around technology, communal practices, and relationships, all of which are part of the fabric of our congregations.

A theology of hybrid worship is needed because it draws on resources not yet engaged within the literature on church music and online worship. For instance, the category of interpassivity is absent from significant works that address online worship. Robert Pfaller describes interpassivity as, rather than a delegation of *work*, a delegation of *consumption* or *enjoyment*: “a pleasant consuming attitude . . . a ‘passivity’ . . . The *enjoyment* of something is—partly or even totally—delegated to other people or to a technical device” (*Interpassivity*). I recently experienced interpassivity when I used my iPhone to take a photo of a projected slide during a sermon; I delegated the responsibility of remembering and internalizing the content to my device. While the relief I felt in the moment was real, I have yet to revisit that picture and reflect more deeply on its contents. Similar dynamics can arise with video recordings, written notes, or even the ways we imagine other people are thinking and feeling.

Another aspect largely absent from church music scholarship is the history of the church’s engagement with technological revolutions. We are experiencing the early stages of a major revolution in the ways our society functions due to the invention and explosive evolution of the internet and online platforms. We will not fully grasp the implications of this revolution for some decades, but we can be better informed and more able to make sense of the maelstrom of accelerating change if we learn from history.

This book will also engage questions about embodiment, accessibility, and inclusion. The need for serious reflection on embodiment takes new form because of the advent of technology and resulting shifts in how human beings interact, build and maintain relationships, and engage with the world. The goal of this book is to highlight theological and practical tools that can aid ministers and churches as they make informed decisions about hybrid and online ministry efforts.

We need to think more carefully and critically about the interactions of online worship and spiritual formation because this combination is a relatively new development. Both the church and society at large are still grappling with the changes brought about by digital technology. It is not enough for churches to simply broadcast the way we have always done things online and expect this to be effective ministry in a mediated age. Instead, the church needs to develop new skills and understandings to connect effectively with people’s life experiences. This theology of hybrid worship will equip and empower church music scholars and practitioners to think through questions of mediation, embodiment, participation, and online connections in informed ways, interface those with their own philosophy of church music and worship, and find new contextual insights to apply in their ministries.

—Taken from the introduction



Karin DeHaven, senior publicist  
kdehaven@ivpress.com or ivpress.com/media



ivpress.com/media



Q & A



## ***The Hybrid Congregation*** *A Practical Theology of Worship for an Online Era*

June 10, 2025 | \$25.99, 192 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1142-3

**Michael Huerter** (PhD, Baylor University) is associate pastor at Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Missouri, where he leads worship and works to build community and connection. As a lifelong church musician and digital native, he is interested in engaging with and contributing to scholarship that bridges the gap between research and practical ministry.

# Worship in a Digital Age

## What led to your interest in and now writing about worship in a digital age?

**Michael Huerter:** The significant changes brought about by online media and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Churches had to make sudden adjustments to their practices without much experience, expertise, or reflection. Popular level conversations around online worship can benefit from more nuance and perspective. We are living through a technological revolution, and there will continue to be important conversations around the future of the church in the decades to come.

## What is your main thesis in *The Hybrid Congregation*?

**Huerter:** Online interactions, communities, and worship are here to stay; the internet and online media present new problems and opportunities that are nonetheless in continuity with prior shifts in technology and culture. By understanding important aspects of the internet and surrounding cultural/economic forces; revisiting discussions of participation, embodiment, mediation, and virtuality; accepting the hybrid online/offline future of the church while discerning values in music and worship; and learning from communities that effectively use online media, churches can be better equipped to move forward in this new landscape. My approach is distinctive in the combination of interdisciplinary research with interviews and digital ethnographies, and the shared emphasis on congregations/communities and music as one aspect of liturgy.

## Who did you have in mind as you were writing this book?

**Huerter:** This book is intended for practitioners: music ministers, pastors, and lay leaders in churches who have an interest in theological and scholarly topics. It is a work of practical theology aimed toward providing a toolkit of interdisciplinary concepts and synthesis to empower church leaders to make informed contextual decisions about their own ministries.

## What do you hope your book contributes to the study of worship?

**Huerter:**

1. An interdisciplinary approach to practical theology around the internet and Christian formation.
2. Inviting reflection on dichotomies common to conversations around digital technology: passive/active participation; embodied/disembodied experience; the real/the virtual; and mediated/unmediated encounters. Moving beyond knee-jerk reactions to new technology and calling for more nuance.
3. Interviews with leaders and experts in research and practice around online worship, and digital ethnographies of online communities.



---

Karin DeHaven, senior publicist  
kdehaven@ivpress.com or ivpress.com/media



ivpress.com/media