# Technology won't resurrect dead churches

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WACO—Congregations that pin all their hopes for institutional salvation on the latest technology are trusting in the wrong savior, a communications expert from Calvin College told a gathering at [Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary](#).

"Salvific rhetoric always accompanies the emergence of new communications technologies," said [Quentin Schultze](#), chair of the DeVos Communication Center at Calvin College. But the latest technology alone cannot resurrect a dead church or heal deep problems in a congregation, he noted.

Schultze addressed a symposium on "iFaith? The Church in the Digital Age," sponsored by Baylor's Center for Ministry Effectiveness and Educational Leadership and by Truett's [Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching](#).



Churches that wonder when and how to use emerging technology in worship should focus on "what fits" and "what is fitting," he said.

They should fit technology to worship rather than worship to technology—and realize one size does not fit all congregations.

"New media and communication technologies don't fully replace older ones," Schultze said. "Newer ones change how humans view and use older ones."

Every emerging form of technology has its roots in important cultural precedents, he observed. For instance, churches that wage war over video screens and PowerPoint presentations in worship should realize the use of text as an aid to singing or reciting has been around a long time, and projected video images differ only in degree from stained-glass windows and statues in sanctuaries.

Ironically, he noted, congregations that adopt projection technology in sanctuaries because they believe it will attract younger worshippers—even if older members object—often discover they miss the mark.

**Too cheesy?**

"After a while, the older members most appreciate the user-friendly technology, and the youth see it as cheesy," he said.

Schultze encouraged churches to consider three dimensions of the current digital cultural context:

• "It's increasingly easy to communicate across geographic space and increasingly difficult to communication across generations." Social media may link people across the globe, while at the same time segmenting them generationally and segregating them from the wisdom of the ages, he asserted.

• "Practically everyone feels over-messaged, swamped by the everyday need to keep up with the bits and bytes of digital communication." Communication overload can create "cultural ADD" and shallow understanding—including understanding of other people. "Biblical friendship requires time and proximity even in a digital age."

• "Easy access via digital media to alternative viewpoints and contrary ways of life tends to create intellectual skepticism and cultural agnosticism." When media present multiple versions of "truth," people tend to withhold judgment on propositional claims and trust more in feelings and personal experience, he observed.

## A fourfold focus

In light of that context, Schultze urged church leaders to focus on four timeless practices:

• Listening. "Listening means attending to reality. … It is the ground for all good, loving communication," he said.

• Authenticity. In a digital culture where many assume artificial personas and concentrate on creating an image for themselves, young people particularly are attracted to adults who are real and who admit their own faults and doubts.

• Hospitality. "Make room in our hearts and minds for those who are different." Digital-based communities generally develop around what people have in common. In contrast, churches can model intergenerational life together with people who have varied perspectives and come from all walks of life.

• Leisure. In a digital age of almost-omnipresent mobile devices, people need Sabbath rest and a respite from incessant messaging.

Panelists who responded to Schultze emphasized the pitfalls and windfalls of digital technology.

## Move beyond personal preference

[Terry York](), professor of Christian ministry and church music at Truett Seminary, acknowledged a need to move beyond personal preferences and

prejudices and discover ways to provide real-time, real-life, real presence among natives in the digital culture.

"If real death can be launched from cyber-savvy drones, surely real life can be launched from cyber-savvy Christ-followers," he said.

**Questions to ask**

Churches should ask whether any form of technology in worship helps contribute to "joyful, contemplative and shared adoration of the Triune God," said [Doug Henry](), professor in the Great Texts program at Baylor University.

He particularly emphasized the shared aspect of corporate worship, pointing out the tendency of mobile technology to divide, distract and cause people to focus on self. "They aren't called iPhones, iPads and iPods for nothing," he said.

Chris Seay, pastor of [Ecclesia]() in Houston, an emergent church that incorporates ancient liturgy and modern media into worship, noted nearly any technology can be an effective tool, but no church should become enthralled by it.

"If it's about being cool or uncool, the line for cool keeps moving," he quipped.

A key question churches should ask is whether any technological tool enhances or inhibits its ability to touch lives.

"A potential pitfall is the belief you can relate to people without having to touch them," Seay said.

While technology can create distance, it also can draw people closer, he noted. For example, his church shows video from mission projects around the world the congregation helps support. Video can help members who

may never travel abroad feel more closely connected to global ministries and the people whose lives are touched by them.

**Let form match function**

Technology should serve a purpose, not call attention to itself, he insisted.

"When you use technology well, it becomes invisible," Seay said.

Henry echoed that theme, suggesting that as churches evaluate the use of any type of technology in worship, they should ask whether it serves as an icon that draws attention to the divine or a spectacle that draws attention to itself.

"An icon is translucent to the light of God. A spectacle is opaque to the light of God," he explained.