Online Church and Worship

A Review of the Literature

The pandemic has accelerated moves onto online spaces. This has impacted the church in terms of worship, liturgy, and community gathering. This report considers the literature around online church with specific reference to technology, community, theology, leadership and authority, and liturgy. It also explores critiques of online church and outlines topics that are not addressed in the current literature.
Three case studies explore how different communities have adapted to online worship and gathering: Benedictines online, the Sonder Collective and Tri-Modal Church.

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Review of the Literature

"When there was no other way to be present to their congregations,
these leaders entered a strange land and discovered they could still sing the Lord's song
(Psalm 137).[1]

The pandemic has given many churches who were previously unable or unwilling to go online incentive to move into digital worship spaces. In response, there has been an avalanche of reflections addressing a variety of issues regarding online worship. There has been a broad range of responses and feelings to moving online, which run the gamut from full and enthusiastic acceptance through partial acknowledgment of the benefits and clear delineation of the limits, to those who reject online ministry and are waiting out the pandemic in order to return to 'normal' worship practices.

It is worth noting that the move to online worship began for many prior to the pandemic, for a range of reasons. Cheong notes that mega church ministers have been using technology for a number of years in order to facilitate multi-campus worship and to appeal to a media savvy younger audience.[2] Other scholars, such as Campbell, have been researching religious communities' use and negotiation of digital media for many years.[3] Campbell was able to use the contacts she has developed through this research to draw reflections from thirty different faith leaders, many of which have informed this research, brought together in the e-book *The Distanced Church: Reflections On Doing Church Online*.[4] The writers of these reflections were asked to focus on three key ideas: the biggest challenges for churches going online; the most important issues for church online; the influence of the pandemic to their perspective. In these questions, 'church' means both online worship and drawing together the faith community through technology in online spaces.

Recently, Campbell has released a follow up work, *Re-visiting the Distanced Church*, which considers how perspectives regarding digital engagement for churches has changed over the previous twelve months.[5] She notes that the first e-book has been downloaded over 220,000 times and is the "single largest public impact of any publication I have written to date."[6] This reflects that churches all over the world are grappling at the same time with moves into online spaces due to the pandemic.

While the pandemic has been a key driver in the adoption of technologically-mediated church, it is not the only impetus for conversion. Many churches have been transitioning to online spaces for

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[1] Stacy Williams-Duncan and Kyle Matthew Oliver, "Reassessing Embodiment and Its Role in Developing Digital Literacies for Ministry," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online* ed. Heidi Campbell (Digital Religion Publications, 2020), 89.
[2] Pauline Hope Cheong, "Tweet the message? Religious authority and social media innovation," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 3, no. 3 (2014): 1-19.
[3] For some of Campbell's previous work see: Heidi A Campbell, "Introduction: The rise of the study of digital religion: Heidi A. Campbell," in *Digital Religion* (Routledge, 2012), 11-31; Heidi A Campbell, "Understanding the relationship between religion online and offline in a networked society," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 64-93; and, Heidi A Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Routledge, 2012).
[4] Heidi Campbell, *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online,* Digital Religion Publications (2020). Accessed: https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/187891
[5] Heidi Campbell, *Revisiting The Distanced Church Online*, Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, (2021). Accessed: www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu
[6] Campbell, "Introduction: Returning the Distanced Church and Considering the Technological Road Taken" in *Revisiting the Distanced Church*, 7.

years to extend their reach to people in their communities. Religious Professor Deanna Thompson tells her 'conversion' story from digital sceptic to virtual evangelist via a stage four cancer diagnosis.[7] Her incapacity to attend church in person and the support she received virtually caused her to reconsider her perspective of online community, and the way it reflects the body of Christ. While Thompson did not become a whole-hearted evangelist for online church, her experience was cause for reflection regarding thoughtful uses of technology and the way it enables inclusion of people who may otherwise be socially isolated.

This report addresses a number of the themes that consistently emerge in discussions of digital forms of church, including: technological pragmatics, community, embodiment, theological implications, ritual and liturgy, leadership and authority, and criticisms of online church. There is also a consideration of topics that have not been covered, and how this reflects the discussions that are and are not taking place within wider church communities. The report is accompanied by three case studies – The Sonder Collective, Benedictines Online and Tri-Modal Church – that help flesh out the ways innovative forms of church are flourishing online.

Throughout this report, the term 'church' will be used broadly to include all aspects of church community, including worship, bible study or small groups and other community activities.[8] Similarly, 'online' will also be used to indicate any form of church that is mediated through technology. In this way, online worship may refer either to a streamed service or a synchronous meeting, such as via Zoom. The term communities will be used to encompass the ideas of congregation, church members and other gathered faith groups that are Christ-centered.

The aim is not to provide a comprehensive coverage of all the possibilities that online church provides - that is beyond the scope of this report. Rather, the intention is to provide insight into the different approaches to worship, church and community that technology affords, and the way that online church may be understood through theological, ecclesial and pragmatic frames. The report in essence provides a summary of the key issues identified in the literature and discussions about online church to date, while further identifying gaps and providing references to key discussants and publications.

Technological Pragmatics

There is a temptation when considering online church to dive directly into the technological pragmatics. This may include the advantages and disadvantages of different platforms, the technical capacity required to engage, as well as the legal issues such as copyright for songs, music and images.[9] However, as Williams-Duncan and Oliver suggest digital literacy is "more about social

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[7] Deanna A Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016).
[8] Helland argues for a distinction between online religion, where religious activity occurs in the online environment and religion online, where the internet is used to facilitate religious activity in the offline world. The term church online is used throughout this essay to refer to all activities occurring within a given faith community. See: Christopher Helland, "Online-religion/religion-online and virtual communitas." in D. E. Cowan & J. K. Hadden (Eds.), *Religion on the internet: Research prospects and promises* (New York: JAI, 2000), 205-223.
[9] Some examples of the way the pragmatics of worship have been addressed are: printing and distribution of resources, "How to create a printed worship aid," Oregon Catholic Press, 2020, accessed 5 May, 2021, https://www.ocp.org/en-us/blog/entry/music/how-to-create-a-printed-worship-aid; the way camera angles impact the reception of streamed services, Josh Clemence, "7 Types of Camera Shots to Consider When Filming Church Services," *BoxCast*, 2019; and the impact of limited internet services on online church, Nandra Perry, "The Charism of Zoom Church," in *The Distanced Church,* 29-30.

practice than technical instrumentalism."[10] In fact, it is more useful to use the term *digital literacies* to communicate that there are as many skills and capabilities as there are platforms, services and approaches to online church.

Hoover and Echchaibi[11] argue that the relationship between religion and digital spaces is one of the creative affordances of contemporary life. They argue that online church is "not defined by those technologies and networks so much as they are negotiated." The specifics of the negotiation process enable the development of 'third spaces' which are "generative positions from which important personal, social and cultural work can be done."[12] This position suggests that communities do well to consider the desired outcomes of online church, which are then used to develop and negotiate the technological pragmatics. Indeed, Campbell argues that "it is better to avoid advancing technologically if it means receding theologically and ecclesiologically due to a lack of discernment."[13]

Similarly, Dyer talks about moving from technological to ecclesiological "how."[14] The process of discerning specific community encourages engagement with both broader theological thinking and contextualised approaches that are situated, for example geographically, culturally, and denominationally. Lambert notes that in his community one element lacking in early online church was the capacity for mission and service to the community.[15] This recognition led to a brainstorming of ways to use their hands to serve their community including setting up a "Give Help/Get Help" website, financial support of those who were struggling, collection drives for identified needs and sharing their studio space with those who did not have the technical capacity to record digital content. In terms of Lutheran communities, there will be theological parameters that guide the development of online content, however this will be mediated through the particularities of each faith community.

One example of the contextualised approach is the development of online Benedictine communities (Case Study 1). Wybourne, of *Benedictines Online*, notes the way their community used a disciplined approach to develop a "specifically Benedictine presence online" while maintaining control over interactions with guests.[16] She argues that engagement is more than just broadcasting, and that hospitality means being able to care for each guest, which fundamentally limits the number of guests that can be welcomed into the community at any one time. Wynbourne notes that the decision to go online contained a commitment of time and energy to deal with the increased notice the community may receive, as well as an awareness of the danger which the allure of fame may bring. In this way, the offering of online community has been intentionally shaped through a consideration of the Benedictine ethos, as well as the practical requirements of supporting the online faith community.

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[10] Williams-Duncan and Oliver, "Reassessing Embodiment," in the *Distanced Church*, 88.

[11] Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi, "Media Theory and the "third spaces of digital religion"," in *Finding Religion in the Media: Work in Progress on the Third Spaces of Digital Religion,* eds. Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi, (Boulder: University of Colorado, 2014). Accessed at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Stewart_Hoover/publication/287644204_The_Third_Spaces_of_Digital_Religion/links/567825d108aebcdda0ebcb9f/The-Third-Spaces-of-Digital-Religion

[12] Hoover and Echchaibi, "Media Theory and Third Spaces."

[13] Heidi Campbell, "A Distanced Church in a Time of Pandemic: An Introduction," in *The Distanced Church*, 76.

[14] John Dyer, "The Biggest Challenge for Churches at this Time," in *The Distanced Church,* 53.

[15] Zach W Lambert, "A Church that serves together, Stays together" in *Revisiting the Distanced Church*, 31.

[16] Catherine Wybourne, "Being Benedictine Online," in *The Distanced Church,* 46.

Chow and Kurlberg[17] similarly outline the ways different churches have expressed their own intrinsic identity online. They note that "digitality is but another context for Christians to hold in tensions the 'indigenising' and 'pilgrim' principles."[18] This encourages a consideration of the core elements of Lutheran community and worship, and how they can be translated or contextualised, into online spaces.

While digital domains are often considered the province of the young, Chow and Kurlberg reported that Durham Cathedral had received feedback showing that senior congregants who had been forced by the pandemic to use digital technology were both growing in confidence and enjoying using their new skills. Similarly, community members of all ages in Singapore were able to overcome technological barriers especially when given actively assistance to engage.[19] This suggests age is not an insurmountable barrier for the digital pilgrim, although older members may need additional assistance to access community offerings online.

There are a diversity of digital platforms, with new programs being developed every day. At a basic level communities choose to upload video recordings of services, devotions or meditations to sites such as Vimeo and YouTube. These are recorded in churches, homes and gardens; sometimes by just one person, and other times using a small team. The videos can be streamed at any time providing an asynchronous form of engagement. A key benefit is that individuals can access the video at a time and place that suits them.

Worship services are also often streamed on Facebook, which has the capacity to either live stream or post a recorded service. A benefit of Facebook is that people can engage by leaving comments throughout the video, which can provide an encouragement to others who are watching. Facebook also provides excellent analytics for those wishing to engage with audience data. Facebook pages provide a space to distribute community notices and news, and Facebook groups allow private conversations where community can develop. However, not all people feel comfortable engaging on Facebook, and therefore this should not be the only platform used.

Zoom and Microsoft Teams offers the capacity for synchronous services, where many people can contribute, chat messages can be shared privately or with the whole group and a sense of community is developed through watching others participate. Philips notes that this capacity to see others in worship led to the suggestion to rearrange the physical worship space in order to facilitate community during the service. Zoom also has the ability to foster community by utilising break-out rooms for conversations in small groups.

In terms of community building, many groups with younger, more technically savvy participants use Discord or Twitch, which have the capacity for voice channels and video chats, as well as message board features. The Sonder Collective (Case Study 2) is an example of the way a variety of platforms, specifically chosen to connect with youth and younger audiences, can be employed together to encourage engagement, theological discussion and community building.

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[17] Alexander Chow and Jonas Kurlberg, "Two or Three Gathered Online: Asian and European Responses to COVID-19 and the Digital Church," *Studies in World Christianity* 26, no. 3 (2020), 298-318.

[18] Chow and Kurlberg, "Two or Three Gathered Online," 7.

[19] Chow and Kurlberg note that the recent memory of the SARS outbreak had primed Singaporeans for a quick response to COVID in order to slow this virus. Chow and Kurlberg, "Two or Three Gathered Online," 4.

Whichever platform is used, Zsupan-Jerome offers the useful reminder that the capacity of technology is that it enables a community to "say loud and proud that the church is still here, even if the building is closed."[20]

Community

The most common theme across the literature was community: building and growing, supporting members, nurturing connection and the unique attributes of specific groups. The importance of community was summarised quite pithily by Neel who observed, "I do not know. I say that a lot these days. I do not know….. I do know we were not meant to live this way, in isolation."[21] While the pandemic caused many to be restricted to physical isolation, it was noted frequently that online community was not just a poor substitute but a real place where people could meet and support one another. Sbardelotto encapsulates this well, "in this time when many 'stone churches' will be closed, the main objective of a ministry in the digital environment is precisely to strengthen relations with flesh-and-blood people connected in a digital network."[22] As discussed in the section on embodiment, a key theme was that relationships were no less real for being mediated through technology.

For most people, there is a mix of online and offline communication and participation in everyday life. This has led to the proposal that the third millennium in which we live is a fundamentally digital space. The move to digital forms of church can be seen as a reflection of this "– that religious people move fluidly between online and offline environments throughout the week, and they move between different networks or relationships, many of which are outside their local congregation."[23] The move away from local congregations, which has been evident for many years, is exacerbated by online offerings that transcend physical distances. Community is no longer defined by proximity, but rather by the way groups and communities serve the needs of their constituents. For Lewis, the move to digital spaces means there is an opportunity to "think how the whole community can support each other 24/7 through a blend of digital and physical interactions."[24] This blend is often conceptualised as a hybrid or hybridity, where individuals participate and contribute as they are willing and able.

Based on her extensive experience of online religious experience, Campbell says the six traits people value most about their online communities are: relationship, care, value, connection, intimate communication and fellowship.[25] In this framework relationship refers to a network of social relations and friendships, and care means the capacity to both give and receive support and encouragement. Fellowship is related to sharing faith, beliefs and a sense of purpose, while intimate connection communicates a safe place where individuals are free to be themselves and communicate openly with others. A successful online church community will be attentive to the way these traits are prioritised, in the same way as within physical spaces and church community.

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[20] Danielle Zsupan-Jerome, "Is it Real? Mystagogizing the Livestreamed Service," in *The Distanced Church,* 91.
[21] Beth Merrill Neel, "The Grief, All of It," *Hold Fast to What is Good: A Blog and Some Art and Some Liturgy*, October 15, 2020. Accessed: https://holdfasttowhatisgood.com/
[22] Moises Sbardelotto, "The (Re)Discovery of the Digital Environment for Living and Communicating the Faith," in *The Distanced Church,* 77.
[23] Dyer, "Biggest Challenge for Churches," 54.
[24] Bex Lewis, "An Inclusive Church Community in a Digital Age," in *The Distanced Church,* 66.
[25] Heidi Campbell, "What Religious Groups Need to Consider When Trying to do Church Online," in *The Distanced Church,* 50.

The trait of connection in the literature was revealed through observations such as "our content is important, but our connection is imperative"[26] and "in the end, it comes down to relationships and connections."[27] These observations were often explicitly related to Christian community and the benefits that it confers. For example, Lambert noted that

> the need for deep friendship isn't any greater than it's ever been, but most
> people's lack of it has been exposed like never before. Right now the church is
> uniquely positioned to step into that gap digitally and then carry the torch
> forward long after social distancing is behind us.[28]

In this way, the church is able to provide connection and belonging rooted in the greatest two commandments: to love God and love our neighbours. Bogle highlights the way this move is inherently Christ-like, noting that "[t]he interesting truth is, if we do it in the manner of Jesus' example, we will find many who come to the well of Jacob thirsty and longing for acceptance."[29] While many individuals live a supposedly hyper-connected life, the desire for loving and grace-filled communities is no less relevant today than it was in biblical times.

In terms of faith communities, the need for meaningful connection is a recurring theme. Shepherd suggests that this revolves around weekly services because "it is the one time in the week when church members gather together, connect socially, share a common experience, serve one another and exercise their faithful practice of spiritual worship."[30] However they also note that church as usual is not sufficient. People "still long for meaningful connection and spiritual input as active church participants."[31]

One observation from the Online Benedictine community was the importance of "engagement with people, dialoguing, not just broadcasting to them," acknowledging that this has required a greater commitment of time and energy which the community must be willing to invest.[32] Sbardeletto frames this as churches

> must consider the 'face' of the person with whom they communicate, his/her joys
> and hopes, sadness and anguishes, in order to establish a *humanized and*
> *humanizing relationship with human persons*.[33]

The community needs to focus on more than transmission, to value the interaction with each person rather than "gather 'people to listen' or 'people to see'."[34] These levels of engagement encourage the use of different digital platforms which serve a range of needs of the online community. YouTube may be used to broadcast a service, while Zoom may facilitate bible studies, and Facebook a place for community announcements. Further, different people may have the skills to facilitate each platform,

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[26] Zach W Lambert, "Facilitating Deep Friendships Digitally when Analog Acquaintances Are Gone, " in *The Distanced Church,* 21.
[27] Lambert, "Facilitating Deep Friendship," 14.
[28] Lambert, "Facilitating Deep Friendship," 21.
[29] Albert Bogle, "Turning Flavor of the Month into Staple Diet," in *The Distanced Church,* 8.
[30] Troy Shepherd, "Is Your Church Ready for Social Distancing," in *The Distanced Church,* 37.
[31] Shepherd, "Is Your Church Ready?," 39.
[32] Wybourne, "Being Benedictine Online," 46.
[33] Sbardelotto, "(Re)Discovery of the Digital Environment," 76.
[34] Sbardelotto, "(Re)Discovery of the Digital Environment," 76.

requiring leadership to bring the disparate elements of online community together in one vision and mission.

As noted, the move to online church began before the pandemic for some communities. However, the world-wide effects of restrictions, social-distancing and closure of public facilities was a new experience for many people. One of the benefits that Johnson observed is that the experience of COVID-19 has promoted "greater understanding and empathy for those who regularly experience social isolation."[35] Those in nursing homes who are unable to attend their home church, people who are disabled or sick, and those with mental illness that prevent attendance have been isolated from church communities over many years. This is particularly true in terms of sacramental celebrations that cannot be replicated on one's own or in isolation. Johnson further notes that "online communion reveals that who gathers and the way communities gather, are incomplete at every celebration of communion."[36] When we notice the faces that are missing from the celebration, we are reminded that the host of saints from all ages and in all places is not limited to our local celebration, and that the feast of the Eucharist is always a virtual celebration along with those who are partaking world-wide. Going forward the remembrance of those who are missing is a call to consider the barriers to physical gathering that many individuals face.

In order to research online church, Johnson attended local services from a range of traditions during the Easter season of 2020.[37] She notes that "[w]hether and how community occurs online is a frequent theme in discussions about online worship."[38] However, the better question is not whether it does because research demonstrates that community happens through a diversity of forms, but rather in what ways does community develop. This conversation should not be limited to the platform (Facebook, Zoom, Twitch etc) because none of these forms guarantee community but rather the intentional ways community is developed for the benefit of all members. Johnson expressed a preference for services where other congregants were visible because "[b]eing able to see others participate and knowing others can see me, encourages me to join in more fully in singing and responding than I have during the livestreamed services"[39] The specific elements of online church that members of a community value may vary between contexts, and therefore a survey of the needs of members is a worthwhile process in the development of online church offerings.

Bateman, Gray and Butler give insight into online community from the perspective of organisational commitment research.[40] They suggest that online groups are "dynamic conversation spaces" which means that the discussion regarding needs, interests and programs will be ongoing.[41] They propose a three-part conceptualization of commitment: affective, continuance, and normative. Affective commitment refers to the emotional attachment and identification with the organisation. This may refer to the idea that one is a Lutheran and therefore the individual remains within the Lutheran church and its auspices. Continuance commitment is an awareness of the high cost of leaving; that is,

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[35] Sarah Kathleen Johnson, "Online Communion, Christian Community, and Receptive Ecumenism: A Holy Week Ethnography during COVID-19," *Studia Liturgica* 50, no. 2 (2020): 209.

[36] Johnson, "Online Communion," 209.

[37] Johnson participated in services connected to the Free Church, Hillsong Toronto, Toronto United Mennonite Church and La Iglesia Menonita Neuva Vida, a Roman Catholic and an Anglican service.

[38] Johnson, "Online Communion," 190.

[39] Johnson, "Online Communion," 199.

[40] Patrick J Bateman, Peter H Gray, and Brian S Butler, "The impact of community commitment on participation in online communities," *Information Systems Research* 22, no. 4 (2011): 841-54.

[41] Bateman, Gray, and Butler, "The Impact of Community commitment," 841.

when one has been a member of the same church for many years an individual's whole community may be found within the church. Leaving the church may result in losing highly valued friendship and support networks.

Normative commitment is driven by a feeling of obligation. This may be seen in the idea that one ought to belong to the local church, and it is this feeling that drives continued attendance rather than an appreciation for the community in and of itself. The authors note that normative commitment often leads to members trying to control negative behaviours. In online spaces this often looks like ensuring discussions remain positive. This behaviour inhibits people from expressing their emotions of sadness, anger and regret, which may in fact be counter-productive especially in times such as a pandemic.[42] It ignores the biblical cries of lament such as is found in Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and the Psalms. In this way, normative commitment often results in unhelpful behaviours and contributions to the community.

These understandings of commitment and the way it influences individuals' choice to leave must be held in balance with the understanding that there may be positive reasons why people choose to stay. It does however, add a nuance to understanding people who stay within congregations where they are not happy or where their needs are not being met, resulting in a lack of enthusiasm at best, and at worst behaviours that negatively impact the whole community.

In a related conceptualisation, Schneider notes the importance of the capacity to depart – termed exit, and the capacity to make change from within – termed voice.[43] In this frame, voice-based logic is more democratic and connected to a greater commitment and stability, while exit-based organisations produce variety choice and innovation. Schneider warns that when leaders and designers are not intentional about the power structures within digital platforms, an 'implicit feudalism' may develop which "reflects, expresses, and promulgates certain kinds of political habits" that are not conducive to building strong communities. Unbalanced power dynamics within online communities are as powerful as they are in offline spaces, and therefore the capacity of members to contribute through using their voices needs to be explicitly encouraged. If it is not, members may elect to use their exit power to seek out healthier communities and digital spaces elsewhere.

There is a range of research regarding successful online communities, particularly within secular discourse, which can assist with the development of faith-based digital initiatives. As in the sacred sector, there are various criteria for successful communities. Like faith communities, secular online communities are often rated according to the number of participants, generally the bigger the better. However, alternate measures of success are: growth of members, retention of members, long term survival of the community, and the volume of online activity.[44] These measures are not necessarily connected or mutually supportive. Cunha et al observed that a small number of committed members who maintain activity early in the life of the community while it reaches a

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[42] Campbell notes that we are living in 'hard times' and "it would be remiss to not consider the impact that COVID-19 has played on the mental and physical health of both pastors and church leaders." Heidi Campbell, "Conclusion: Lessons from Revisiting *the Distanced Church*," in *Revisiting the Distanced Church*, 126.

[43] Nathan Schneider, "Admins, mods, and benevolent dictators for life: The implicit feudalism of online communities," *New Media & Society* (2021). Accessed: https://mediarxiv.org/sf432/download?format=pdf

[44] Tiago Cunha et al., "Are all successful communities alike? Characterizing and predicting the success of online communities" (paper presented at the The World Wide Web Conference, 2019). Tiago Cunha, David Jurgens, Chenhao Tan, and Daniel Romero. "Are all successful communities alike? Characterizing and predicting the success of online communities." In *The World Wide Web Conference*, (2019), 318-328.

critical mass, predicts success.[45] A critical mass is the number of members required to keep the community going or become self-sustaining without intensive input from a single leader.

Cunha et al noted that if large numbers of active members is desired, it is important to attract individuals quickly to the group.[46] However, if the goal is to retain members, getting the right type – those who are committed and willing to participate in the goals of the group – may initially take longer, but is more important in the long run. They suggest that having a close-knit set of members who bond well is important for retention but not growth. The strong relationships that are developed in this type of group are the result of frequent and deep interaction and engagement, which is developed through spending time together. In this way, a small committed group may be preferable over a large less-connected community. This understanding is reflected in the development of worship 'hubs' being developed at St John's, Diamond Creek (Case Study 3). In terms of church groups, the small committed group which supports each other's faith journey may be part of a larger community that is intentionally missional. The tension between retention and growth reflects a similar issue in churches between serving current members' needs and actively encouraging new members into the church community.

One way of balancing these two needs is through the appointment and training of skilled online moderators. A moderator is a person with the responsibility for monitoring comments and keeping online spaces safe for all participants. This can be understood as performing the emotional labour of keeping the community together. Moderators are key in promoting pro-social behaviour and limiting anti-social behaviour in order to support the development of a collective and inclusive identity. Dosono and Semaan note that social support is more important than informational and instrumental support, and that "inconsistent moderation limits the ability of community members to understand the bounds of acceptable behaviour and does little to guide individual actions."[47] In this way, clear, consistent and fair rules which are applied evenly to all members and are based in the core values of the group are important to creating a supportive and safe space for all members of the community.

The guidelines for moderators, leadership and authority in digital Christian community need to be considered in terms of goals and impact, and the way they help or hinder the formation of community. Wybourne notes that a truly participatory culture, marked by "focusing on cultivating a Christian learning community that invites people into meaningful action and reflection, dialogue, creation, mentoring relationships and meaningful conversation" is more important than a group of "hand-selected people disseminat[ing] information" or designing worship services in a top-down manner.[48] Similarly, Sbardeletto suggests that communication and community online are experienced in innovative ways, and therefore these elements need to be thought about, enunciated and problematized in order to achieve best practice.[49] The leadership provided by online moderation will potentially not come from clergy, but from specifically trained leaders with technical capability, suitable availability, and the ability to maturely guide the community in loving one another.

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[45] Cunha et al, "Are all successful communities alike?," 319.
[46] Cunha et al, "Are all successful communities alike?," 327.
[47] Bryan Dosono and Bryan Semaan, "Moderation practices as emotional labor in sustaining online communities: The case of AAPI identity work on Reddit." In *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in ComputingSsystems*, (2019): 1-13.
[48]Wybourne, "Being Benedictine Online," 59.
[49] Sbardelotto, "(Re)Discovery of the Digital Environment," 75.

Embodiment

One criticism of online worship is that it is not real. Chow and Kurlberg suggest that this is linked to embodiment, although this is not often explicitly stated.[50] Floberg notes that Anglican theology – like Lutheran theology - is fundamentally incarnational, and that the incarnation is not limited to the individual but is a communal identity. He suggests that "going online is something that at first feels like being disembodied."[51] When one begins to consider that each interaction online happens between people, mediated by technology – much like a phone call, or a letter – the notion of disembodiment is reduced. Indeed, Phillips argues that "the internet itself is a thoroughly embodied environment" because enfleshed humans "explore/experience/engage" with other humans.[52] He suggests that online church is a form of contextual mission that takes seriously Lamin Sanneh's call to translate the Gospel to every new culture. Similarly, Thomson notes that even when we are online, we are still in the real world.[53] Silverkors suggests the terminology AFK (away from keyboard) might be more useful that IRL (in real life). This encourages us to be conscious of language which suggests some encounters are more 'real' than others, particularly given that some people are only able to participate in digitally mediated settings.

Gresham also rejects the idea that physical proximity is essential to incarnationality, however he limits this to situations of theological education because the students' faith can be lived out in an embodied way within their physical community. In contrast, Gresham claims that in worship "embodiment is essential to an incarnational faith." [54] His justification that "virtual instruction can be incarnational if it points students toward response to the gospel in their daily lives"[55] is no less valid for worship which ideally points participants toward faithful gospel living in their everyday lives regardless of whether it is in person or online. This kind of theological justification for or against digital worship and community needs to be further considered.

Theological Implications

The most common comment about theology within the readings is that there has been no deep theology constructed around church online. There is a lot of talk about technical and community pragmatics, and a large conversation about the limitations of digital forms of church, but very little imaginative thinking about the ecclesiology, Christology, eschatology or other theological implications of online spaces.

Critics suggest that this lack is because online spaces have not been considered on their own terms. For example, Schmidt states that "categorizing the internet as entertainment encourages us to see it as optional or additional to ecclesial life at best, and as an obstacle to holiness at worst…….The Church needs to think as carefully about digital culture as it does about church history, sacramental

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[50] Chow and Kurlberg, "Two or Three Gathered Online," 3.

[51] Floberg seems to assume that online is equivalent to streaming, which may exacerbate the feeling of a disembodied worshipping community. John Floberg, "Challenges of Online in Indian County and Rural America," in *The Distanced Church,* 17-18.

[52] Pmphilips, "The Church (has gone) Online." Accessed: https://medium.com/@pmphillips/the-church-has-gone-online-2eb560fc335

[53] Thompson, *The Virtual Body*, 24.

[54] John Gresham, "The divine pedagogy as a model for online education," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 9, no. 1 (2006): 24-28.

[55] Gresham, "Divine Pedagogy," 27.

theology, and moral theology."[56] This may mean that the church needs to invest in research and respectful conversations that bring together those with knowledge of theology, and those who are proficient in online spaces to allow generative projects which take both areas of expertise seriously.

It would be easy for the church to take a traditionalist stance in these conversations, insisting that in-person worship and church is superior. However, much can be learned from individuals such as Tan's reflection on how the pandemic revealed a blind spot in his thinking about online church. Tan notes that his previous thinking was reactionary rather than a thoughtful critique.[57] Tan says that what he did "was collapse the presence of Christ into the embodied communion and made that link the sole criterion of faith and the presence of God."[58] This gives pause to consider the way God's work through digital platforms is limited by one's own understanding. Tan further notes that

> our connection may be limited….but that does not void our connection to the
> presence of Christ, for the Eucharistic presence is what anchors the presence of
> the Divine Word in the textures and sinews of creation……….But what that does is
> stretch the presence of the Body of Christ, not negate it.[59]

The experience of living through the pandemic - when so much of life happened online - has created the potential for conversations around theology, worship, church and community. Bogle notes that "[t]he COVID-19 virus has simply accelerated the need for livestreaming services. The real prize is to go further and allow the theology of imagination to begin to create new networked church communities on-and-offline."[60] This is a creative endeavour that challenges the church to explore new ways of worshipping, serving and creating community accessible to all.

Leadership and Authority

Online church has the potential to disrupt traditional forms of leadership and authority, particularly when clergy do not have the skills or knowledge to proficiently navigate online spaces. One of the additional burdens on leaders during the pandemic was learning to negotiate digital spaces, while simultaneously leading others in this endeavour. As with many other aspects of online church, this is an area where there is a lack of scholarship and theological reflection.

Mega churches (those with more than 2000 worshipers per week) have been using online technology within their everyday practice for a number of years. Cheong notes that this involves being guides and mediators of knowledge both on and offline and states "clergy are appropriating new patterns of interactions including social media communication to relegitimize and construct new practices of authority."[61] Cheong notes that rather than debating their authority, clergy have acted as authorities by guiding the way their church uses Scripture online and through creating 'norms of credibility' in social media spaces. The ability to be models of authority may reflect their capacity to employ technicians who reproduce this vision via digital platforms. Clergy who are based in smaller churches may not have the resources to reproduce these digital feats.

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[56] Katherine G Schmidt, "404 Error," in *The Distanced Church,* 78-80.
[57] Matthew John Paul Tan, "Communion in the Digital Body of Christ " in *The Distanced Church,* 81-82.
[58] Tan, "Communion in the Digital Body," 81.
[59] Tan, "Communion in the Digital Body," 82.
[60] Bogle, "Flavor of the Month," 8.
[61] Cheong, "Tweet the Message?," 3.

Alternatively, Williams-Duncan and Oliver suggest that online leadership that "demonstrated a high degree of authenticity," regardless of their technical proficiency was the most impressive.[62] They noted that presenting authentically and pastorally, regardless of one's skill level, was an genuine way of being embodied online. Further, they note that success in small online endeavours created the motivation for increasing their own digital literacy. Once again, this suggests that thoughtful engagement with what can be achieved using the resources available is the key to successful online church.

Liturgical Questions/Ritual

Worship is always shaped by the communities in which it is practised, and similarly the practicalities of online worship services reflect the different denominational understandings of liturgy, sacrament and ritual. While some churches prioritise musical offerings, others have eschewed this in favour of short, accessible teaching and meditation. Dyer notes that "the elements of a worship service conducted by professional clergy are the least challenging to move online"[63] and that while people may be initially attracted by excellent preaching or music, they will often stay because of their connection to the community.

Hutchings, in a review of five different online church models, noted that the online campus of Life Church led to a focus on preaching and music, rather than close community which was evident in *St Pixels*, a specially developed online community.[64] This draws attention to the way different approaches will foster different outcomes. However, it doesn't suggest that offerings of excellent preaching and music are in opposition to close community. Rather there are different ways to encourage each aspect of church life.

The Liturgy website likens online church to busking, noting that a crowd is drawn together, a routine is performed, the audience gives a donation, and they are sent on their way.[65] In a similar way Danielsson suggests that online worship, like its offline counterpart is more successful if you: know your audience, know your medium or 'space', know your message, and are able to engage and empower your audience in order to nurture a connection.[66] These conceptualisations of online worship focus on liturgy as a performance. Although, like a good busking show, performance does not assume a passive audience and the audience is not a homogenous group. Harris notes that there is a distinction between the engaged and disengaged spectator, and that "realising that spectators can be valuable members of the community can lead us to a clearer understanding of the community."[67] A powerful message may touch the heart of a seemingly passive participant, and the rowdiest individual may only engage on a surface level.

Reimann claims that lowered inhibitions and the capacity to post personal prayers online means "when it comes to digital services, it seems that the people are much more active and open."[68] Alternatively, Chow and Kurlberg note digitally-mediated services can be seen to limit participation,

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[62] Williams-Duncan and Oliver, "Reassessing Embodiment," 89.
[63] Dyer, "Biggest Challenge for Churches," 53.
[64] Tim Hutchings, *Creating church online: Ritual, Community and New Media* (Taylor & Francis, 2017), 236-7.
[65] Bosco Peters, "How Busking is Like Worship," Liturgy: Spiritual Practices for a Digital World (Blog), 2018. https://liturgy.co.nz/how-worship-is-like-busking
[66] Arni Savnur Danielsson, "Connection Trumps Technology," in *The Distanced Church,* 11.
[67] Howard Harris, "Spectators are not always passive" *Australian Journal of Liturgy* 17, no. 3 (2021), 166.
[68] Ralf Peter Reimann, "Digital is the New Normal," in *The Distanced Church*, 33.

however they observe that worship, prayer and liturgy are always mediated and the new element is the lack of gathering in the same physical space.[69] This suggests that explicit feedback should consistently be sought to gauge the way online services, messages and formats are being received by participants beyond the individuals who loudly make their perspective known.

Brush suggests that liturgy is enacted in its "deepest sense" when a priest speaks "in *persona Christi*" and is audibly responded to by at least one member acting in "*persona populi*."[70] Nord and Luthe argue that churches need to "clearly encourage interaction" and this is achieved by inviting clergy, musicians, and volunteers to visibly work together in order to demonstrate the faith community working together.[71] This range of views reflects different perceptions of the ideal roles for both leader(s) and participants within worship and liturgy.

Outside a weekly service, Garner notes that the pandemic has encouraged churches to intentionally resource members beyond the liturgical worship routines in order to nurture "healthy rhythms of everyday life that attend to spiritual, physical, emotional and mental needs shaped by a common life during isolation."[72] This can be seen as a form of catechesis or discipleship that is not often considered in much of the online church literature outside of resources for teaching children. A focus on domestic faith rituals may highlight how contemporary church culture has prioritised public communal meeting and worship over individual daily and domestic devotions and liturgy. Domestic devotional practice can also be missional when members of the family who do not regularly worship are invited to participate. In this way, the disruption of regular church worship by the pandemic invites faith communities to consider the interplay between private and public worship, domestic and communal devotions and ritual, as well as the role of worship as devotional, catechetical, and missional. It also provokes a consideration of the worshiping family or household as a distinct faith community who would benefit from encouragement, support and consideration.

Celebration of the Eucharist is one of the most contested elements of online worship. Herring argues that "a worship life without the practice of sacraments in their traditional form is incomplete, and that if worship online is to reflect the fullness of human experience then we have to confront the need for sacraments in cyberspace, and wrestle with the issues this presents."[73] The claim that there is a specific 'traditional form' is perhaps an oversimplification, not the least between different denominations. However, it is noted that the theological approach to communion influences a group's relative acceptance of online Eucharist.

Some churches have likened COVID to the time of Lent, encouraging the discipline of fasting from Eucharistic celebrations until face to face meetings are resumed.[74] Alternatively, within Catholic

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[69] Chow and Kurlberg, "Two or Three Gathered Online," 10.

[70] Brush, "Zoom for Every Season Under Heaven: Responding to Nandra Perry's *Charism of Zoom Church*" in Revsiting the Distanced Church, 48.

[71] Ilona Nord and Swantje Luthe, "Hope-Storytelling in the Age of Corona," in *The Distanced Church,* 68.

[72] Stephen Garner, "The Distanced Church," in *The Distanced Church,* 57.

[73] Debbie Herring, "Towards Sacrament in Hyperspace," *Epworth Review* 35 (2008), 36.

[74] This blog post from the Presbyterian Pittsburgh Theological Seminary notes that both Lutheran and Episcopalian churches have encouraged fasting from the Eucharist, as the writer of the blog also encourages. "Eucharistic Fasting: The Lord's Supper in the time of COVID-19," 2020. Accessed: https://www.pts.edu/blog/online-communion/

communities there has been encouragement of the pandemic as a time for 'spiritual communion.'[75] In practice, this has meant that that the clergy celebrate communion with bread and wine, while the congregation is encouraged through seeing and remembering this act. Philips criticises this, stating "

> the particular form of Spiritual Communion promulgated during the pandemic locks the Eucharist back into physicality rather than expands it into the cross-dimensional ritual space of the Eucharistic moment.[76]

That is, the Eucharistic celebration is limited to the priestly performance rather than being shared equally within the faith community. Johnson notes that within the Free Church there "is a theological emphasis on communion as a memorial in which Christ is present in the community and the meal."[77] This understanding allows the online celebration of Eucharist because God is in every place the bread and cup is being received.

The online celebration of communion also "concretizes the concept of a local celebration of communion including Christians in all places."[78] That is, in the online space the idea that the body of Christ applies to all Christians around the world is conceptually closer because the community is aware that the oneness is not just limited to a physical, solitary building. In a similar vein, Johnson notes that "celebrating communion online is not a new question, although it is a question perceived to have greater urgency and importance when it is an issue for everyone, not only for those who are continually socially isolated – people who are homebound or disabled, geographically remote or without local clergy."[79] That is, online communion makes this sacrament also available for those without access to the 'physical, solitary building.'

While the current understanding within the LCANZ has been that Holy Communion cannot be digitally mediated, the pandemic gives pause to reconsider the theological impetus behind the current practice, and new social and cultural developments which may inform practice in the future. The Commission on Worship (COW) Statement 4[80] recognises that anxieties related to the AIDS epidemic provoked changes from distribution via a communal cup to the offering of individual cups, while Statement 33[81] outlines changes to guidelines for distribution. Statement 22[82] also outlines a change in frequency in response to demand from congregants, noting that "[s]uch participation directly affects all aspects of education in the faith, and promotes the fruits of faith in daily living." Further, it argues that

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[75] Catholic Diocese of Sale, "Access to online Masses and other resources during COVID-19," (2020). Accessed: https://www.cdsale.org.au/coronavirus

[76] Philips, "Enabling, Extending, Disrupting – The Shift to Online Church," in Revisiting the Distanced Church, 112.

[77] Johnson, "Online Communion," 200.

[78] Johnson, "Online Communion," 200.

[79] Johnson, "Online Communion," 189.

[80] Lutheran Church of Australia: Commission on Worship, "Statement 4: The Common Cup and the Possibility of Infection through AIDS," Revised 1 May, 1998. Accessed: https://lca.box.net/shared/static/lpqdcaa5xu401jam0nmk.pdf

[81] The given reasons for this change are "frequency of communion, the desire for lay leadership in worship, the demand for shorter services, and a shortage of pastors in the office of the public ministry have led to the use of lay assistants as servers for the distribution of the sacrament." Lutheran Church of Australia: Commission on Worship, "Statement 33. The distribution of the Sacrament of the Altar," revised: 8 May, 1998. Accessed: https://lca.box.net/shared/static/zgdpke0nk32ji4c4ygt1.pdf

[82] Lutheran Church of Australia: Commission on Worship, "Statement 22. Frequency of communion," revised 2008. Accessed: https://lca.box.net/shared/static/9s10abjg5fbmvo84qfim.pdf

The promises connected with God's means of grace are not empty or unsure. God makes them effective. Therefore, wherever these means or instruments are faithfully used, we can confidently expect spiritual growth and divine gifts, in both individuals and congregations. In this way God creates and sustains his holy church on its pilgrimage through time.[83]

While we can be sure that the writers of these statements did not anticipate the digital revolution in which we live today, we can be assured that God is working in our contemporary context today, no less than at the time the statement was written.

John W Kleinig offers the useful reminder "rituals integrate people with each other" and therefore there is a need to be "witting" and thoughtful about the ways they are enacted.[84] He notes that inability to participate in the rituals of the community leads to alienation and that "[r}itual caters for all sorts and conditions of people at all stages of maturity and levels of sophistication."[85] This accords with COW Statement 30 which commends the church to "try to include all people as far as possible."[86] In this way, the repeated idea that online church is more accessible – particularly for those who face barriers such as mental or physical health, or geographical location – promotes a discussion about the way to involve such people in the rituals of the church, in order not to alienate them or reduce them to mere onlookers.

Kleinig also suggests that the Lord's Supper must be connected to "the whole of our lives" in order to avoid limiting teaching and preaching to only the issues addressed in Luther's *Small Catechism*.[87] The fact that many people live much of their lives online, and move fluidly between online and offline states proves problematic when access to worship and sacrament is provided only offline for those that are able to participate in person. In a prescient statement that rings true for the current context, Kleinig states

We need to develop our teaching on the Lord's Supper in positive terms and draw out its full pastoral significance for our people so that they will able to appropriate the riches of Christ that is available to them in it.[88]

This is also a missional activity, because as he notes "we are surrounded by unchurched people who hanker for mystery and long for solid spiritual realities rather than mere religious rhetoric."[89] Online rituals that are steeped in Lutheran tradition and express the breadth and depth of Lutheran faith have the capacity to provide an invitation to all those who are ready to come.

Criticisms

One consistent critique was that online formats allow worship to become more convenient, which repeats a recent theme connected to falling church attendance that worship is often too consumeristic.[90] Within the online space, this seems to be connected to a fear that people will not

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[83] LCA: COW, "Statement 22," 2.

[84] John W Kleinig, "Witting or Unwitting Ritualists," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 22/1 (1988), 4.

[85] Kleinig, "Witting or Unwitting," 5.

[86] Lutheran Church of Australia: Commission on Worship, "Statement 30: Preparing the service with holy communion," Revised 8 May, 1998, 1. Accessed: https://lca.box.net/shared/static/ix9sihjbsevsr8ilh6zf.pdf

[87] John W Kleinig, "The Lord's Supper as a Sacrificial Banquet," Logia 12/1 (2003), 8.

[88] Kleinig, "Lord's Supper," 2.

[89] Kleinig, "Lord's Supper," 8.

[90] Nick Wagner, "How Madison Ave is Sabotaging Our Worship," *Liturgy.Life: Bring Liturgy to Life and Life to Liturgy*, 2019. Accessed: https://liturgy.life/2019/11/how-madison-avenue-is-sabotaging-our-worship/

return to church once the pandemic ends, or they will choose to attend a church which better meets their needs thereby exacerbating the issues of low membership and lack of church growth. This issue is always couched in the rhetoric of a problem of the individual, rather than considering how churches are catering to the needs of their community.

Similarly, Bosco laments that in terms of online communion being a spiritual event "one's experience cannot be sufficient to either confirm or deny the validity of the reality."[91] That is, it is not enough for one to feel blessed or fed at a Eucharistic celebration, the value of the sacrament and the act of consecration must be evaluated on a presumably objective measure which he concedes is elusive even to himself.

In contrast to these critiques, participants note that online worship reduces the barriers to participation for a range of people. Taylor notes that online spaces offer anonymity which fosters a capacity to engage in faith and faith traditions "without the fear of ridicule or the barrier of walking through a church door."[92] Zsupan-Jerome noted that "there is no risk of infection, but if I am honest, there is also no anxiety to get out of the house on time, no slinking into church late, no embarrassment while corralling a wiggly child."[93] The one constant positive of online worship and church is that it allows a range of people to participate and hear the word preached who might otherwise be excluded. Further, Zsupan-Jerome notes that livestreaming services and online devotions are a form of public witness that allows people to see Christianity lived out. That is, online church not only reduces barriers for those already in church communities, but also to those who may be interested in joining in future.

Zsupan-Jerome argues that the experience of the pandemic is a call to examine and clarify our understandings of worship, those things that are deemed essential and those that we are willing to change. Given that change is always difficult, the conversations and decisions around moving to online expressions of church will need to be soaked in grace, in order to consider the needs of a wide variety of people.

It is acknowledged that the move to online formats has received mixed responses. Rieimann notes that "some cheer that the church has finally become digital, while others see digital church as an emergency solution and long for the status quo ante."[94] The desire to return to 'normal' is understandable, even for those who concede the pandemic has changed the world for good. Koon is less sympathetic, suggesting "the people who were unhappy were those who have been mourning the loss of church for the last 25 years. For them they saw this as the death knell for the church as we know it."[95] While many people have rushed back to physical gatherings, Brush says that she "felt God nudge me that some people who could return to church buildings should stay with those on Zoom, in order that they didn't feel like some kind of remnant."[96] The future of church and community will

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[91] Bosco Peters, "Lockdown Liturgy Lessons 10," *Liturgy: Spiritual Practices for a Digital World*, 2020. Accessed: https://liturgy.co.nz/lockdown-liturgy-lessons-10.
[92] Bryony Taylor, "Grief, Awareness and Blessing," in *The Distanced Church,* 44.
[93] Zsupan-Jerome, "Is It Real?," 92.
[94] Ralf Peter Rieimann, "There Is No going Back to Normal - Churches in Germany Dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic," Revisiting *the Distanced Church*, 39.
[95] Cheri Kroon, "Responding to Some Reflections on Doing Church Online in a Time of Pandemic," *Revisiting the Distanced Church*, 55.
[96] Brush, "Zoom for Every Season," 50.

need to grapple with how to provide support for all, so that neither those participating online nor in-person feel like they are only a secondary consideration.

What's Missing?

The pandemic has provoked an increase in conversations about online church, however, there are some aspects that have not been covered. For example, most of the conversation is focussed from the perspective of leadership and clergy, rather than exploring how online church has been received by the breadth of the laity. The reflections that do come from the laity are often those who are comfortable with online experiences, and not those who have been forced online by the pandemic.

This distinction may be seen as those who are resident online, rather than visitors, where "online [is] a country with it's own language."[97] Those who are fluent in digital languages can switch between online and offline modes with relative ease, and often traverse different platforms intuitively. Lewis names this as a #digidisciple, "someone who seeks to live out their biblically-informed Christian faith online, whether dipping their toes in, or fully immersing themselves in the increasingly mobile and interactive nature of the digital space." Similarly to offline spaces, for some this will mean focussing their energies on one community, while others will be involved in a range of activities across different groups and churches.

This understanding encourages the observation that online church is not "a single reality, but a network of practices analogous to the range of practices associated with physical communion and local church communities, with a similar range of pitfalls and possibilities."[98] No one community will be able to serve the needs of every participant and this observation can be the impetus for prayerful discernment on how to best utilize each community's strengths and resources.

A second area that has had barely any coverage is discipleship. Resources for children and young people often focus explicitly on discipleship but for adults the language often focuses on fellowship. In terms of the LCANZ, it is worth considering the essence of Lutheran faith and identity that will shape the online experience of church, and how this will be communicated in any online offerings. This discussion might prompt a range of responses able to be contextualised for each congregation, district and community.

A third area that is rarely discussed is how an online church can effectively care for its neighbours. This is especially important if that community is distributed and its members are not geographically co-located. Here studies of digital collective action may prove useful.[99]Studies of this kind help those forming online churches to also understand the emotional-social risks involved in digital communities and their communication.[100] Similarly, the relationship between online and offline pastoral care for members of faith communities is rarely discussed, and needs to be considered in terms of counselling, the aged, and people in hospital or other care situations.[101]

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[97] Taylor also states "I am a resident online, rather than a visitor. I prefer this terminology to that of digital native and digital immigrant." Taylor, "Grief, Awareness, Blessing," 44.

[98] Johnson, "Online Communion," 209.

[99] See as an example Salla-Maaria Laaksonen and Merja Porttikivi, "Governing With Conversation Culture – Conditioning Organizational Interaction in a Digital Social Movement," *Information, Communication & Society* 21 Jan 2021. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1873401

[100] Group identity boundaries, for instance, are magnified by digital engagement. See William J Brady et al, "The MAD Model of Moral Contagion: The Role of Motivation, Attention, and Design in the Spread of Moralized Content Online", *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 15.4 (2020) 978-1010.

[101] This meta-analysis found no difference in counselling by mode (Hongryun Woo, Na Mi Bang, Jungin Lee, and Kate Berghuis. "A meta-analysis of the counseling literature on technology-assisted distance supervision." *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling* 42, no. 4 (2020): 424-438). However, there is no comparable analysis of pastoral care within Christian contexts and faith communities.

Another neglected area is financial models that support the movement to online church. Briggs suggests that models such as Patreon provide a transparent funding model based on payment for content that is already being created within the faith community.[102] Alternately, Church Starter is a crowdfunding platform specifically targeted at church plants.[103] The Sonder Collective does not receive money per se, however members support the initiative by paying access fees to specific platforms in order to subsidise ministry costs.

The cost of running churches is not an issue for online church only, but is a concerning issue across individual congregations and whole denominations. Schaper suggests that

> [t]he stresses of deferred maintenance of buildings, along with trends towards membership loss have meant many mainline congregations are out of business already. Now under Queen Corona, the pace of congregational dissolution and property abandonment or sale will only accelerate.[104]

Online church models have the capacity to be run on a much lower budget, because there is no costly maintenance of buildings and facilities. The energy previously spent on building committees and the like, can also be redirected into alternate ministries and mission activities. In a related manner, Schaper notes that another benefit of online worship, and therefore a reason it will prevail beyond the pandemic, is because of "how green it is."[105] That is, an online church is not required to heat a building that is only used for one day a week, or maintain facilities that are not regularly used. In this way, the costs – both economic and personal – of online models of church is greatly reduced, making this an attractive way forward for many faith communities.

Whatever decisions are made, Bessey provides a reminder that

> sometimes I can forget that there is still power for now, too. Wonder-working power even, power here in these imperfect gatherings with imperfect people with imperfect theology who dare to believe that God's heart is for us, God's dream for us is wholeness and shalom and redemption. Maybe the power of God is most made manifest in our 'Not Yet' moments simply because we're not alone, not anymore, God has come to us then and now and always. And even then, we are together.[106]

Conclusion

While the pandemic has focussed and accelerated discussions of online church, it will be fairly easy for the church to reject the lessons learned in a desire to return to 'normal' living. As Thumma notes "[a]cceptance in a crisis is not the same as willing adoption in settled times."[107] As the acute phase of the pandemic recedes the need for online services may seem less urgent. However Piaxxa notes that "if we insist on 'returning to normal,' our extinction will be greatly accelerated."[108] He suggests that "the church and it's leadership are among the most change-resistant creatures God ever made," and

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[102] Alex Briggs, "What Churches Can Learn From Patreon," 2019. Accessed: https://blog.kindrid.com/blog/what-churches-can-learn-from-patreon
[103] Church Starter, "Crowdfunding Basics," 2021. Accessed: https://www.churchstarter.com.au/content/faqs/gjhh88
[104] Donna Schaper, "The Distanced Church," in *The Distanced Church*, 35.
[105] Schaper, "The Distanced Church," 35.
[106] Sarah Bessey,"Longing for Eucharist" 27 April, 2021. Accessed: https://sarahbessey.substack.com/p/longing-for-eucharist
[107] Scott Thumma, "Virtual Now, But For How Long?" in *Distanced Church*, 85.
[108] Michael Piazza, "Getting Back to Normal," in *Distanced Church*, 30.

that the reluctance to embrace online church may prove 'fatal.'[109] While this may be an overly dramatic claim, the change involved in moving forward will no doubt see the end of some churches and ministries and the birth of new ones. This is the reality of life, and these transitions can be eased by thoughtful change-management processes.

Rather than approach the move to online church as an all-or-nothing, it is worth considering how digital platforms will play a complementary or a supplementary role.[110] Will online church be an equal counter-part to offline services, or will it be another option when no other services are available? Secondly, will communities focus on growing numbers, or developing close connections that foster spiritual growth? Or, alternatively, how will these two need be balanced.

As a final thought, Perry suggests that "[i]f even traditional communities like ours can adapt to sudden change, then the church is healthier and more resilient than we have believed. Now that we know this, perhaps we can stop wringing our hands about the declining numbers of people in our pews and simply get on with the business of becoming salt and light in the 21st century."[111]

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[109] Piazza, "Getting Back to Normal," 30.
[110] One of the conclusions drawn from a recent survey of Australian church leaders ("online church will be an addition, not a replacement"): Mark McCrindle and Shannon Wherrett, *The Future of the Church in Australia* IMcCrindle Research, 2020), 30.
[111] Perry, "Charism of Zoom Church," 28.

Case Studies

The three case studies outlined here are fresh expressions of church found in online spaces within Australia. The Sonder Collective and Tri-Modal church models are both situated principally in Melbourne, while the examples of online Benedictine practice are based in Australia, the UK and the USA. This is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of online approaches. Rather, it is a taster of innovative communities who are intentionally shaping their online content for both members and seekers.

Case Study 1: Benedictines Online

St Benedict of Nursia (480-547CE) lived as a hermit for much of his life renowned for his wisdom and holiness.[112] In the last years of his life he wrote the Rule of Benedict (RB) which informs the practices of Benedictine communities around the world today.[113] This case study will explore four Benedictine communities that have a significant online expression: Jamberoo Abby, NSW; Monasteries of the Heart, Erie Pennsylvania; Yankton Benedictines, South Dakota; and the Benedictine Nuns of Holy Trinity Monastery, Hertfordshire. Benedictine communities have been chosen for this case study because of the contribution to Campbell by Digitalnun highlighted in the literature review.[114]

Jamberoo Abbey[115]
The sisters at Jamberoo Abbey trace their founding to land purchased by the first Archbishop of Sydney, John Bede Polding in 1849. The Monastery built there was named Subiaco, for the cave in Italy where St Benedict retreated to live as a hermit. In 1957 a new monastery was built in Pennant Hills and in 1988 the nuns moved to their current location on Jamberoo Mountain. This rural setting supports the nuns' desire to live a quiet, reflective life away from the bustle of modernity.

At Jamberoo Abbey, the sisters live an enclosed, contemplative life centered around prayer which is enacted through personal prayer, study of the Scriptures in *Lectio Divina*, and worship. The sisters create candles, cards and other art works to support the monastery financially. Jamberoo Abbey also has nine hermitage rooms and two cottages on the property that serve as a retreat space.
In terms of online presence, the nuns at Jamberoo Abbey offer online retreats which can be completed at one's own pace. These retreats emerged as a response to the COVID lockdown which closed the retreat cottages and stopped visitors joining the nuns for worship and prayer. They also sell their cards and candles online and keep in touch with their oblates around the world. Oblates are individuals affiliated with, and committed to supporting the Abbey while living in the general community. Jamberoo Abbey's website notes they have 400 oblates across five countries.

Yankton Benedictines[116]
Similarly to the nuns at Jamberoo Abbey, the Yankton Benedictines are a group of sisters who live an enclosed life at the Sacred Heart Monastery, in South Dakota. They have oblate chapters which

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112 Roberta Werner, *Reaching for God : the Benedictine Oblate way of life* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013), 14.
113 There are no extant original manuscripts for the Rule of Benedict. The Codex San Gallensis created in the early 9th century and the writings of St Gregory the Great inform the practice today. See: "St Benedict and his Rule." Accessed: http://www.benedictinenuns.org.uk/Community/Community/Rule.html
114 Catherine Wybourne, "Being Benedictine Online," in *The Distanced Church,* 46-7.
115 See: https://www.jamberooabbey.org.au/retreats/online-retreats/
116 See: https://yanktonbenedictines.org/

include both women and men in Yankton, Sioux Falls, Mount Marty as well as three chapters in Nebraska. The Yankton Benedictines also have an online chapter – the Benedictine Online Oblate Chapter (BOOC) for people who are not able to attend in-person meetings. They list time constraints, work and family demands, geographic distances, and health and disability as factors that may prevent an individual joining an in-person meeting.

Oblates in the BOOC make promises (as opposed to vows) to follow the Gospel according to the guidance of the Rule of Benedict. They commit to spending time daily to reflect on Scripture, integrate their ministry into their chosen profession and cultivate an attitude of prayer in both their work and leisure time. The development of BOOC is noted as a creative and elastic response to the contemporary culture, which is valued within Benedictine tradition. For those who wish to join, there is an online form included on the website.

Monasteries of the Heart[117]
Monasteries of the Heart (MotH) is also based in the USA and boasts connection to over 18,000 seekers world-wide. The community is open to anyone "regardless, or even in the absence of a faith tradition – who desires to seek God through a Benedictine way of life." The MotH community is based on the work of Joan Chichester, creator and animator of the site and author of the foundational text, *The Monastery of the Heart: An Invitation to a Meaningful Life*.[118]

MotH is located in Erie, Pennsylvania, where Chichester lives, although it is principally an online iteration of Benedictine community. The site offers a forum for members, courses in Benedictine spirituality, as well as weekly blog posts and advice about practices to develop a monastic spirituality. The MotH website notes that the membership requirements are: a desire for God to be part of one's daily rhythm; preference for thoughtful questions over dogmatic answers; respect for the dignity of people regardless of gender, sexual orientation and religious tradition; a yearning for community; and belief in the wisdom of ancient traditions which provide an alternative to alienation, violence, injustice, oppression and ecological devastation.

Holy Trinity Monastery[119]
The sisters at Howton Grove Priory in Hertfordshire are the Benedictines Online referred to in the literature review. They are the first community of contemplative nuns established in England for over fifty years, having been granted monastery status in 2004. D. Catherine, known as Digitalnun has been the prioress at the monastery since 2004. Similar to the nuns at Jamberoo Abbey, the sisters at the Holy Trinity Monastery live simply in accordance with the Benedictine Rule. They note that Benedict's "calmness, his gift for organization and his occasional touches of human" are very English, and being British themselves a part of their practices is to take time for a cup of tea each day around 4.00pm. This adaption to culture is included within the discretionary powers that exist within the Rule of St Benedict.

The community has no endowment or historical funds to finance their venture, so they rely on money made through their business: Veilpress, a design agency; Veilnet, web design; and Veilhosts,

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[117] See: https://www.monasteriesoftheheart.org/
[118] Joan Chittister, *The Monastery of the Heart: An invitation to the meaningful life* (SPCK, 2011).
[119] See: http://www.benedictinenuns.org.uk/

web hosting. They also run a free audio book lending service for the visually impaired named Veilaudio.[120]

Like the other online Benedictine communities, the Holy Trinity Monastery community provides online retreats, and has an online chapter with oblates across the world. They use web-conferencing programs in order to facilitate meetings with the chapter and deal with enquiries regarding formation and monastic profession.

As noted, the Rule of Benedict allows for changes to be made in order to provide a contextualized ministry. Historically, this might mean that the clothes and habits an order wore might be lighter or heavier dependent on the local weather. In the twenty-first century, this means moving into online spaces in order to allow a diversity of people to join a specific community. Each of these Benedictine communities has developed an online presence that suits their particular community's focus and priorities. The MotH value inclusion and social justice, while the Holy Trinity Monastery notes the "desire to live in a more human and humane way." The Jamberoo Abbey is a small group of women, while the Yankton Benedictines have multiple chapters across a number of US states. What they all have in common is a commitment to prayer, to reading the scriptures and to living in an authentic way that honors God and follows the Benedictine tradition.

Oblate meetings are designed to encourage participants in living a contemplative life, and to assist supporters to connect with their chosen Benedictine community. The provision of online chapter meetings allows participants to integrate meetings into busy lives and also facilitates access for members who may live in any part of the world.

Besides the communities outlined here are other online Benedictine communities, as well as other monastic communities and orders that have an online presence. The distinctiveness of online monastic communities is that the groups are first and foremost shaped by the rule of life connected to the particular monastic tradition, and seekers join in order to follow the pattern of community life. This is different from the Sonder Collective, in case study two or the trimodal ministry approach in case study three, because these are communities exploring contemporary forms of faith sharing and worship, as opposed to traditional forms of prayer and worship that are facilitated online.

Case Study 2: The Sonder Collective[121]

Sonder, a word created by *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows,* means "the realization that each random passer-by is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness."[122] It was chosen to reflect that the Sonder Collective is a group of diverse individuals who all contribute to the group dynamics.

Currently The Sonder Collective is made up of four regions – Bayside, Murrumbeena, Yonder, and Cloud, which provide a range of opportunities for youth and young adults to gather. Sonder started in 2015 as a voluntary initiative of Kelly Skilton, and in 2018 it became part of her work as the Youth

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[120] The 'Veil' in the titles is a reference to the Vale of White Horse where the nuns previously lived.
[121] See: https://www.murrumbeenauniting.org.au/sonder-collective
[122] John Koenig, Sonder, The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows. Accessed: https://www.dictionaryofobscuresorrows.com/post/23536922667/sonder

and Young Adults Worker at the Murrumbeena Uniting Church.[123] It has been online since mid-2019. This case study will focus on the Sonder Cloud, which is the online expression of The Sonder Collective.

Sonder Cloud uses a range of platforms to enable participants to engage in their own way and in their own time. They use Discord as an online meeting place where the group can gather online. Discord[124] is a digital distribution program which allows for chat rooms, voice discussions, and video chat and sharing. Discord has the capacity to set up specific 'rooms' for a range of purposes. For example, one room might be for frequently asked questions, while another might be for sharing memes.

The Sonder Cloud leaders have set up alerts so that one of the leadership team is alerted whenever anyone enters a room on the server. This allows leaders to respond promptly and provide oversight to any conversations happening on the platform. It also maintains a record of all conversations which provides a digital record, if required.[125] The Discord model setup by the Sonder team has been used to establish discord servers for churches across the Uniting, Anglican, Churches of Christ and Hillsong communities.

Throughout the week, Sonder Cloud provides regular programs that provide a focus for discussion, fun and spiritual conversations. On Monday nights they produce the Odd Sonder Podcast which is live-streamed, as well as capturing the audio for distribution. Listeners can provide comments via chat, which are relayed to the presenters via a producer in order to maintain the flow of discussion. This is broadcast at 7pm, is loosely connected to the lectionary readings, and includes an 'after party' where participants can discuss the topics raised throughout the show.

Tuesday Twitch[126] takes place in the online game Animal Crossing: New Horizons[127] where Skilton tends to her virtual island and people can observe the game play. Those who have their own game avatar – an online persona – can visit Skilton's island and assist with tasks that need to be done. Wednesday night is a similar game-based gathering called Zombie Church where region coordinators of Sonder Cloud, Will Nicholas and Adin Brauer, tend to their zombie-riddled survival game, 7 Days to Die.[128] This platform can handle up to 16 people, and Nicholas and Brauer are leading a team in game who work together to rejuvenate an old abandoned church.

There is no intentional 'God talk' in these sessions or missional intention, rather as individuals work together to build the community infrastructure discussions about spirituality, God, and church emerge. Skilton calls this a backward outreach model, where people are drawn into the community and it is within community that they can broach faith questions. In this way it is similar to the story of Phillip and the eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). The main intention is to build relationships often through playing games side by side, for those who want to interact online. There are no online activities on

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[123] To hear Skilton talk about her work, see: http://www.embody.org.au/resource/blog/mission-unplugged-episode-1-kelly-skilton

[124] See: https://discord.com/

[125] This record requires at least two of the leadership team to provide authority for deletion, providing an extra level of safety and accountability for participants and leaders.

[126] See: https://apps.apple.com/us/app/twitch-live-game-streaming/id460177396

[127] See: https://www.animal-crossing.com/new-horizons/

[128] See: https://store.steampowered.com/app/251570/7_Days_to_Die/

Friday night so as not to compete with youth groups or other in person activities in the participant's home churches.

Individual groups within Sonder have their own rhythms of gathering in person which supplement and support the Sonder Cloud group. On the first and third Sunday evenings of each month, Sonder Murrumbeena host Sonderfy, where a group of people gather for intentional discipleship, interactive learning, dinner, conversation and in person game play. Sonder Bayside has a monthly young adults brunch while the Yonder region is for geographically dispersed youths and is focused on camps that draw these people together.

Skilton was originally employed part time at Murrumbeena, but when the church saw the efficacy of her work with Sonder they increased her hours to full time. This role is split almost evenly between her work as director of the Sonder Collective, and her specific work with the youth and young adults at Murrumbeena, as well as her chaplaincy at Monash. Although, as Skilton notes, because of the high number of young people at Murrumbeena involved in Sonder, there is a large overlap between the two roles.

She is supported by Will Nicholas, minister at St David's Uniting Church, Geelong. Nicholas says that he feels more at home in the digital space and is a visitor in the 'real' world. He suggests that this is because there is an illusion of control, some escapism, and the ability to play in online spaces. Nicholas contributes 10-15 hours each week to Sonder, as part of his work at St David's. While Skilton and Nicholas are both affiliated with the Uniting Church, the collective is intentionally ecumenical and uses the Uniting Church logo to add institutional legitimacy to the initiative.

The membership of the Sonder Collective is approximately 170 people who are connected to 35 different faith communities. The online connection means that people who move – for school, university or other personal reasons – can stay connected to Sonder. Sonder also encourages participants to be involved and receive peer to peer pastoral support in their local, home church. This interconnection means that participants have multiple spaces of support in their developing faith journey. As participants get older they are encouraged to take up leadership roles within Sonder and their own churches. Skilton notes that they have an excess of volunteers for the leadership opportunities available, but this allows them to be more expansive in the ways they reach local community.

One of the benefits of Sonder is that it is low maintenance, low cost, but high impact. It allows both synchronous and asynchronous connection, and an authentic space where members can be disciples together. Skilton likens this to the moment John jumps in Elizabeth's womb (Luke 1:41-44), suggesting that in this narrative John is recognising the unknown possibility of the moment. Sonder recognises possibility by remaining fluid in their activities. Each time they meet it is possible things will change and grow into something new.

Sonder prioritises relationships and connection. It offers a space where participants come together, acknowledge differences and honour each other's lives. Nicholas suggests that offerings such as Odd Sonder, and his own pod cast Neveroddoreven (Never Odd or Even), allows listeners to build a relationship with the speaker so that when they are ready they will come with their faith

questions.[129] It is for this reason, he argues, that the first 6 months feels like 'shouting into the void' while listeners are getting to know the presenters and become comfortable with the message. In this way, Nicholas suggests that this work is 'daring to listen to faith in spaces where God could not or should not be.' The work of the Sonder Collective challenges the idea that community, worship and discipleship is not possible on online, and continues to challenge the notion that online relationships are less real, effective or embodied than any other type of relationship.

One concern raised by church leaders prior to the development of this initiative was the safety of online church, particularly given this group's focus on vulnerable populations such as youth and young adults. Skilton and Nicholas used the Uniting Church's social media policy and online code of ethics as a minimum standard for developing their processes to ensure best practice and a safe online experience.

They have lockable channels on the Discord server for people who are under 18. All new participants must provide identity details to leaders, who verify them through their existing contacts. The perceived online risks mean that leaders enforce a higher level of care than they might in an in-person youth group. Leaders are particularly careful about what is said and not said, because they are aware that it is recorded. For all these reasons, digital ministry in this form allows deep conversations because participants are able to connect from their safest spaces, enter on their own level and comfort, and opt in and out as suits them. These safe guards are particularly important because of a knowledge of the way the church and church leaders have historically been dangerous and damaging for many vulnerable people.

The Sonder Cloud receives no direct financial support, aside from the wages paid to Skilton and Nicholas, although some participants provide contributions to cover charges for upgrades to the online platforms, giving leaders greater access to bonus digital features. Nicholas notes that the church is often unwilling to fund or prioritise online ministry and therefore it becomes necessary to use coded language which appeals to traditionally-minded people in order to convince individuals who are on finance and synodical committees. Further, Nicholas states youth and young adults have limited personal income which means that churches must make intentional choices to support this ministry because it is often not financially self-sustainable. He notes that online ministry is an intangible form of community, and therefore most at risk in a crisis.

Skilton and Nicholas' passion for the gospel means that their online offerings are likely to continue in one form or another, regardless of the way it is funded. They note their primary ministry is living a life of faith, and online ministry allows this to be prioritised because of the hybrid online/offline nature of contemporary life. Church is a secondary ministry, designed to serve the primary ministry. They both advertise their work with Sonder in their different communities and have seen Sonder become a hub of interconnected communities. It is hoped in the future that Sonder Cloud will have the capacity to engage 'field reporting' for a range of in-person activities demonstrating the gospel in action.

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[129] See: https://oddrev.com/2019/12/14/never-odd-or-even-2/

Case Study 3: Tri-Modal Church[130]

Before COVID hit, St John's Diamond Creek had four services each Sunday: morning, evening, and two external campuses. Post-COVID - barring snap lockdowns - they have returned to in person services in the morning and evening as well as offering online worship. Their tri-modal model refers to the fact that St John's has three forms of church: in-person, online and within community hubs. The community hubs use digital content from the church in a mix and match style in order to curate worship that suits the needs, talents and context of the hub.

In terms of their digital service, St John's was able to create a recording studio that is customizable for a range of digital content. This was possible through a bequest that covered the major costs of buying equipment. The equipment was installed in a studio created by the conversion of an underused space within the church building. Digital minister, Andy Barras, notes that setting up a studio means that digital ministry can have high set up costs, however, this is offset by low ongoing costs. Further, in terms of space, he argues that even relatively small spaces can be converted to provide a suitable space for recording. At St John's, this was the former crèche space.

Setting up a dedicated studio allows the team at St John's to control the space, aesthetic, lighting, and sound qualities that may be problematic in the ordinary worship space. Creating a hybrid online and in-person worship experience often results in a less professional product, and favoring of one mode over the other. For example, the in-person congregation is the focus of the activities and the service is run with them in mind, while online participants get a 'second best experience.'

Alternatively, the worship space is set up as a studio with cameras and recording equipment given priority over developing a sacred worship space. Part of the decision to move to a dedicated studio was due to St John's auditorium being not aesthetically pleasing on camera, and lighting within the church that was inadequate for filming. This meant it was easier and did not take significantly more resources to set up the studio. This also led to a reduction in volunteer costs as one person can curate and run a worship service by themselves, if required.

The community hubs are a form of church planting that removes the high overheads and associated costs of a traditional church plant. The hubs are extremely flexible, able to customize the church experience according to the needs of the group. The group may be a home church, with one or two families gathering or it could be a group meeting in a retirement home or community center. This is a micro level of planting which only requires 3-4 people to begin. The members and leaders of each hub are able to shape their group according to their context, talents and needs.

Hub leaders have access to all the individual elements that make up a service and are able to curate the worship to suit their own context. A hub which involves some musicians may choose to have live music, or hubs may choose to do their own bible readings and prayers. The leaders can also choose to watch the whole service live via youtube or other streaming services and focus their energy on discussion and morning tea. All hubs are encouraged to use the same sermon or preaching so that across the network there is a unity in teaching. This also ensures that all members are receiving high quality teaching and biblical instruction.

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[130] See: https://stjohnsdc.org.au/

In order to facilitate this style of service St John's have employed a 'digital minister,' who oversees the production and coordination of the digital services. Andy Barras is a long term member of St John's who was previously employed in a part-time role as Communications Director. The demands of COVID provoked a change in his position to full time digital minister. Barras notes that COVID hasn't created a paradigm shift as such, rather it has accelerated trends that were already underway. Online platforms such as youtube and facebook livestreams have created a personal broadcasting revolution that changes the way digital content is both produced and consumed, and this underpins the change to online worship services.

Barras notes that it can be difficult to get people to engage with digitally broadcast worship services, and that this has been addressed in the evening service with a streamed pre-worship chat. Prior to the service, there is also a slideshow advertising events and programs that might be of interest to both members and first-time visitors to St John's. In order to experience the worship presented by St John's, I watched the two services for June 6, 2021.[131] The services for this weekend were all online because of the snap lockdown in Melbourne. Each service contained the same sermon, bible reading, and children's address, but had different hosts, music and pre-service discussions. Watching the two services gives an insight into the way the liturgical elements can be combined for different audiences.

Barras suggests that there are five types of people watching the online services: a) those who prefer in-person who are isolating at home, b) those who prefer in-person but are sick or away that week, c) those with a digital preference who live nearby, d) those with a digital preference who live elsewhere, and e) church-hoppers and visitors. Each of these different groups will have different needs that should be considered when designing online church offerings, however, Barras notes that those whose preference is digital may be the key demographic stylistically.

Barras argues that we can't copy and paste church onto video, and that watching someone stand at a lectern for an hour is often not satisfactory for the viewer. He suggests that digital attenders expect worship more in line with the format of secular content on youtube, which is more conversational and open to interaction. Barras notes there is a generational difference between how people interact with the digital services, with younger people more likely to engage in dialogue and chats. It was noted that the dialogue tends to spike at the start of the service, with some extra engagement after the sermon.

Barras notes that this is still an experimental phase for St John's Diamond Creek, where they are trying to discern who is watching and why, as well as aiming to understanding the elements that motivate people to connect and build community. He says that there will come a decision point in the future, where the question will be asked – is this service still bearing fruit? Although he notes that this should be an ongoing question for all church programs.

Another path of enquiry is how to get to know the audience and connect them to small groups or other church programs. Barras notes that having worship online means people can get to know the staff and the style of the church before taking the risk of entering further in. However, the most effective referrals are the invitations to watch by someone who is already known and trusted. There

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[131] 10am service: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZQgBVyxA60
5pm service: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ygg0YOW4KM

is also a need to develop digital pastoral care strategies, to make sure those who would like to become more closely involved are cared for and included.

Barras suggests that it is important churches don't abandon their digital presence when the threat of COVID is over. He notes that the pandemic was an excellent reminder that the church is not just a building, but rather the community that gathers together. In the future, there is potential for the resources developed for St John's to be used to support nearby suburbs that are under-churched or facing staffing difficulties, and for the skills and lessons learned at St John's to inform other churches wishing to branch out into digital community and hubs.

Case Study Links

- Jamberoo Abbey: https://www.jamberooabbey.org.au/retreats/online-retreats/
- Yankton Benedictines: https://yanktonbenedictines.org/
- Monasteries of the Heart: https://www.monasteriesoftheheart.org/
- Holy Trinity Monastery: http://www.benedictinenuns.org.uk/
- Sonder Collective: https://www.murrumbeenauniting.org.au/sonder-collective
  - Mission Unplugged Podcast with Kelly Skilton: http://www.embody.org.au/resource/blog/mission-unplugged-episode-1-kelly-skilton
  - Never Odd or Even: https://oddrev.com/2019/12/14/never-odd-or-even-2/
- St John's Diamond Creek: https://stjohnsdc.org.au/
  - 10am service: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZQgBVyxA60
  - 5pm service: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ygg0YOW4KM
- Discord: https://discord.com/
- Twitch: https://apps.apple.com/us/app/twitch-live-game-streaming/id460177396
- Animal Crossing: https://www.animal-crossing.com/new-horizons/
- 7 Days to Die: https://store.steampowered.com/app/251570/7_Days_to_Die/

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