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Disrupted Devotion and Virtual Altars: Liturgical Dynamics in Full Gospel Church During COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 epidemic significantly altered religious traditions globally, compelling churches to swiftly transition from conventional in-person assemblies to digital platforms. The Full Gospel Church (FGC) congregants and leaders in Thohoyandou, South Africa, grounded in Pentecostal traditions that prioritise embodied worship, communal fellowship, and the theology of presence, encountered spiritual, technological, and theological obstacles throughout the shift to virtual worship. The research employed a qualitative case study design, collecting data via semi-structured interviews with twenty participants, comprising church leaders and members. The data indicates a dual response: although virtual liturgy maintained spiritual continuity throughout the lockdown, it concurrently led to a notable decrease in spiritual intimacy, particularly among rural and elderly individuals with restricted technological access. The theological ramifications, especially the cessation of sacraments like holy communion and baptism, prompted essential enquiries into the legitimacy and manifestation of digital worship. Church leaders utilised digital literacy and pastoral agility to maintain connections with members. The research ultimately contributes to ongoing theological

discussions over the future of worship in a post-pandemic society, especially within African Pentecostal congregations. It emphasises the significance of contextual theology in addressing the convergence of faith, technology, and crises.

Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic disturbed global religious practices, compelling faith communities to rethink their methods of gathering, worshipping, and sustaining spiritual unity. In South Africa, churches were not immune to these transformations. The government implemented public health laws, including limitations on big gatherings, physical distance, and lockdowns, to mitigate the virus's transmission (Adichie 2021; Arasa et al. 2022). The policies significantly affected the Full Gospel Church (FGC) in the Thohoyandou District, a Pentecostal community recognised for its focus on physical presence, spontaneous spiritual expression, and communal worship traditions.

Terminology such as 'virtual worship', 'digital transformation', 'Pentecostal ecclesiology', and 'theology of presence' gained prominence as churches sought innovative methods to maintain spiritual connectivity during physical separation. *Virtual worship* denotes the execution of religious services through digital platforms, enabling remote participation by members (Arthur 2021:35). Pentecostal congregations, which prioritise the bodily experience of worship through singing, dancing, prophecy, and physical sacraments, faced intricate theological and practical challenges with the shift to digital platforms (Anderson 2020:58; Smith 2021). This research enhances the expanding domain of digital theology by offering a substantive, empirical examination of how a rural South African Pentecostal congregation adjusted to pandemic-related limitations on in-person worship (Arthur 2021:39; Smith 2021:103). These disturbances established both tangible and spiritual impediments that influenced the continuity and vigour of worship within the community. The study investigates the adaptation of church leaders and congregants to virtual worship, the maintenance or disruption of spiritual engagement, and the implications of these changes for the future of Pentecostal worship in rural settings.

Discussion of Critical Factors

The primary, crucial component shaping our study pertains to the significant technological infrastructure challenges encountered by rural South African congregations. Rural populations in Thohoyandou frequently experience limited access to high-speed internet and affordable digital equipment, resulting in significant obstacles to virtual worship engagement. In contrast to urban churches that rapidly adapted to livestreaming platforms, rural congregations faced challenges such as unreliable or absent internet connectivity, costly data rates, and a general lack of mobile phones or laptops among economically disadvantaged members. The infrastructural restrictions rendered virtual worship not generally accessible, profoundly compromising the inclusive community ethos vital to Pentecostal ecclesiology. The digital gap established a scenario in which geographical location and economic status dictated individuals' ability to sustain a spiritual connection during lockdown.

The second problem pertains to the age disparity in computer literacy, resulting in significantly unequal access to worship experiences. Individuals aged 18 to 40 exhibited proficiency and ease with social media platforms, mobile applications, and streaming technology. They swiftly acclimated to utilising Zoom for prayer sessions, WhatsApp groups for fellowship, and Facebook Live for Sunday services, preserving their spiritual connections through these digital platforms while individually addressing technical challenges. Elderly individuals aged 60 and above exhibited minimal or no familiarity with smartphones and internet applications, frequently necessitating assistance from family members to access religious services. Numerous senior members articulated feelings of technological alienation and spiritual neglect, with some conveying a sense of being 'forgotten' as the church transitioned to inaccessible digital platforms. This age-related inequality in internet engagement undermined the biblical tenet that all Christians should possess equal access to communal worship, and, instead of alleviating societal divides, the digital shift exacerbated pre-existing inequities across generational boundaries.

The third essential aspect pertains to the erosion of embodied Pentecostal rituals that are integral to this worship style. Pentecostal spirituality is fundamentally physical and sensory, depending significantly on tactile

demonstrations of faith that cannot be duplicated in digital media. Fundamental rites like anointing with oil, which symbolises healing, and consecration via physical contact proved unfeasible to execute remotely. The imposition of hands, perceived as a method for imparting blessings, healing, and transferring the power of the Holy Spirit, cannot transpire via screens. The community aspect of collective prayer, characterised by Christians physically gathering, touching, and kneeling together in supplication, diminished as participants were confined to their houses. Altar calls, wherein attendees physically come forward to receive prayer, deliverance, or salvation, could not be performed remotely. Furthermore, the communal worship experience, defined by coordinated singing, dancing, clapping, and physical expression, was diminished to mere passive screen observation. For Pentecostals, these rituals are not simply symbolic actions but are perceived as conduits of spiritual grace and the means through which believers experience God's presence. The virtual format eliminated the physical engagement crucial to Pentecostal spiritual formation, resulting in numerous worshippers feeling spiritually alienated and incapable of fully engaging in worship.

The fourth and last factor pertains to the significant ecclesiological and sacramental challenges that arose with the transition of worship to digital platforms. The transition compelled churches to confront essential theological enquiries including the essence of the church, sacraments, and spiritual validity. Pastors and theologians deliberated on the validity of administering holy communion when believers were dispersed in their homes rather than convened at a single table, the legitimacy of baptism without physical immersion observed by the congregation, and whether digital participation genuinely represented a 'gathering' of the church body in a significant theological context. These enquiries exposed profound ecclesiological difficulties stemming from the perception that the church is essentially a congregated community, or *ekklesia*, rather than merely a compilation of individuals linked by technology. Pentecostal theology notably highlights communal presence, asserting that God's Spirit operates most effectively among physically gathered believers who can collectively perceive and react to the Spirit's activities. Virtual worship contested this fundamental doctrine by proposing that spiritual interactions could transpire through mediated digital experiences. Moreover, enquiries emerged over spiritual authenticity. Can livestreamed services genuinely elicit the same spiritual fervour, intensity,

and experience of divine presence as in-person worship filled with the Spirit? Does virtual participation influence and develop believers in the same manner as physical participation? Should internet worshippers be regarded as complete members of the congregation with equal status, or are they only spectators witnessing from afar? These significant enquiries compelled leaders and members of the Full Gospel Church to reevaluate essential beliefs on the nature of authentic worship, legitimate sacramental administration, and true Christian community in an increasingly digital era.

Practical Theological Insights into Virtual Worship

Churches of all denominations worldwide contended with digital adaption. In North America and Europe, substantial congregations rapidly adopted livestreaming, social media, and Zoom-based services (Campbell 2020:267–284). Numerous African churches have adopted innovations such as WhatsApp, radio, and YouTube to engage their congregants regionally (Afolaranmi 2020; Eagle and Proeschold-Bell 2022). Nevertheless, the theological considerations surrounding these advances were frequently insufficiently developed, particularly within Pentecostal traditions.

In the South African environment, particularly in Limpopo’s Thohoyandou District, these digital adaptations faced greater complications. A multitude of congregants perceived digital worship as a provisional compromise rather than a sustainable long-term plan. The Full Gospel Church, comprising twenty active congregations in the region, confronted the problem of maintaining continuity in spiritual care while upholding its fundamental theological principles and community framework (Full Gospel Church of God 2018:12).

Conceptual Framework

This study’s conceptual framework is based on the convergence of digital transformation and spiritual formation. Digital transformation, characterised as the incorporation of digital technology into fundamental operations, has been extensively examined in business and education (Westerman, Bonnet, and McAfee 2014:34), although it remains comparatively underexplored within religious contexts. In Pentecostal communities, spiritual formation includes profound individual and collective involvement through prayer,

prophecy, sacraments, and charismatic expression (Anderson 2014:45). The conceptual contradiction emerges when this formation is mediated through screens, chat boxes, and pre-recorded sermon materials that may lack the vibrancy and unpredictability of Spirit-led worship. This study defines virtual worship not only as a technological shift but also as a spiritual upheaval and realignment. It enquires if digital platforms may genuinely reflect the theology and communal spirit of Pentecostalism, and under what circumstances they may thrive or falter in this endeavour.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the theoretical framework of the practical theology of worship, conceptualising worship as an embodied, communal, and spiritually formative experience (Smith 2016:55). James K. A. Smith (2016:62) asserts that worship transcends mere intellectual agreement with concepts; it is a ritual that ‘shapes our loves and desires’, aligning our identities with the kingdom of God. This theological perspective contests solely intellectual approaches to digital worship, emphasising the indispensable significance of physical presence, gesture, sound, and community in religious development. The theology of presence posits that God’s immanence is most profoundly encountered within the assembled community (Snyder 2012:77). In Pentecostal settings, this presence is conveyed through prophecy, healing, communal singing, and the ritual of laying on of hands, which are rendered challenging, if not unfeasible, by virtual forms (Cartledge 2016:72; Vondey 2010:31). This theoretical framework offers a critical perspective for analysing the resistance or adaptability of Pentecostal congregations to digital worship environments. Ultimately, ecclesiology, the examination of the church, has a crucial theoretical position in assessing the transition to virtuality. The embodied assembly has historically been regarded as essential to church identity (Smith 2021:103). Consequently, some churches questioned whether digital involvement could genuinely meet the theological role of *ekklesia* (assembly of the saints).

Review of Literature

Liturgical Shifts and Digital Transformation in Religious Communities

The COVID-19 pandemic instigated an unparalleled global experiment in digital religion, compelling faith organisations to swiftly reconfigure age-old rituals of assembly, worship, and spiritual development. Empirical studies highlighting this change have emerged, demonstrating both the innovative potential and doctrinal conflicts within religious institutions. Campbell (2020) did a seminal study on digital ecclesiology, investigating how churches from many faiths swiftly adopted livestreaming, Zoom-based worship services, and social media platforms to preserve congregational unity during lockdowns. His extensive research uncovers a paradox: although churches exhibited significant technological innovation and adaptability, they concurrently faced substantial theological confusion while attempting to traverse unfamiliar digital landscapes without sufficient theological frameworks to inform their practices (Campbell 2020:15). Campbell's research indicates that numerous churches implemented digital tools pragmatically, addressing immediate needs rather than undertaking profound theological contemplation over the potential impact of these tools on ecclesial identity, liturgical practices, and spiritual development. The disparity between technology execution and religious thought signifies a significant deficiency in the initial pandemic reaction that this study aims to rectify.

Expanding upon Campbell's global viewpoint, regional studies have identified specific patterns of digital adaption in African contexts, where infrastructural deficiencies, economic limitations, and cultural influences provide particular hurdles. Eagle and Proeschold-Bell (2022) executed a comprehensive empirical investigation of the psychological and social effects of COVID-19 on South African congregations, utilising a mixed-methods approach that included surveys, interviews, and mental health evaluations. Their research uncovered concerning levels of spiritual isolation, emotional turmoil, and digital disparity, especially among elderly and rural demographics who were deficient in both technology resources and digital literacy necessary for engaging in virtual worship. Their research revealed that the psychological impact of isolation due to the epidemic was exacerbated by religious exclusion, as congregants lacking access to internet platforms faced both physical separation and spiritual estrangement. This discovery highlights the necessity of investigating how

digital transitions may unintentionally exacerbate existing socioeconomic inequities instead of alleviating them, especially in environments characterised by elevated poverty levels and inadequate technology infrastructure.

Afolaranmi's (2020) ethnographic research of Nigerian churches catalogued several techniques for sustaining worship continuity, illustrating how African churches innovatively utilised accessible technology like Facebook, WhatsApp, and radio broadcasts to engage their congregants. Afolaranmi's research revealed considerable differences in access and involvement, indicating that participation fluctuated significantly based on congregants' digital literacy, economic levels, urban or rural residence, and generational demographics (Afolaranmi 2020). Afolaranmi noted that, while churches celebrated their transition to digital platforms, they seldom recognised or addressed the significant segment of their membership that remained unengaged by their efforts. This critique corresponds with overarching apprehensions regarding digital religion study, which has been condemned for excessively emphasising successful digital adopters while overlooking the experiences of those disadvantaged or excluded by technological transitions.

Theological and Experiential Dimensions of Virtual Worship

Recent studies have progressed beyond mere descriptions of technological adoption to critically assess the theological sufficiency and experiential richness of virtual worship, especially in traditions that prioritise embodied spirituality. Cain's (2023) post-pandemic analysis examined changing attitudes towards digital worship, using longitudinal interviews to monitor the evolution of attendees' perceptions over time. His research uncovered a divided response: some congregants welcomed the flexibility and accessibility of digital worship, perceiving it as a valid enhancement of ministry opportunities, while others increasingly considered online worship a 'spiritually diluted substitute' incapable of fully replicating the depth of in-person gatherings (Cain 2023:19). Cain's research is notably significant in chronicling how initial fervour for digital innovation frequently transitioned into disillusionment and existential fatigue, indicating that crisis-driven emergency measures may not be viable or preferable in the long run. His findings pose essential queries on whether digital worship signifies a true evolution in Christian practice or is simply a transient adaptation prompted by exceptional circumstances.

Herring (2021) validated these apprehensions with empirical research that recorded pervasive digital tiredness and diminishing internet engagement rates following the opening months of pandemic restrictions. His longitudinal study monitored engagement measures across several churches, demonstrating that, although virtual attendance initially increased, it later plummeted significantly, especially when spiritual experiences could not properly transfer across screens. Herring's investigation indicates that the initial appeal of digital worship rapidly declined, leading attendees to voice growing discontent with the restricted interactivity, decreased sensory involvement, and weakened sense of social presence inherent in virtual services. Herring noted that the decline in engagement was not uniform across all demographic categories; it was particularly significant among traditions and individuals for whom physical presence, tactile ritual, and communal participation were theologically essential. This discovery holds significant importance for Pentecostal groups, whose worship traditions are fundamentally based on physical expressiveness and sensory experience.

These empirical studies collectively confirm that the digital transition, although essential and somewhat effective in preserving institutional continuity, failed to sufficiently engage the deep theological and experiential aspects of worship, especially in traditions such as Pentecostalism that do not easily adapt to virtual formats. The literature indicates a consistent trend: digital worship may fill practical roles like information dissemination and pastoral communication, yet it fails to maintain the spiritual vitality, emotional depth, sacramental effectiveness, and communal closeness that define vigorous Christian worship. This limitation is not only a technical issue to be addressed through improved technology but rather signifies profound theological conflicts between embodied and mediated religious experiences.

Critical Gaps and Contextual Limitations in Existing Research

An extensive examination of the existing literature identifies numerous significant deficiencies that this work seeks to rectify. Firstly, a significant geographical and contextual bias exists in the studies of digital religion. The predominant body of empirical study on pandemic worship has concentrated on Western contexts, notably North America and Europe, or on substantial metropolitan churches in the global south. Research conducted by Smith (2021) and Arthur (2021) offers significant theological insights into the

inadequacy of virtual platforms to replicate the spiritual weight of in-person services, particularly within traditions that prioritise embodiment, emotion, and spontaneity (Arthur 2021:35; Smith 2021:102–103). Nonetheless, their analyses predominantly originate from Western Pentecostal and evangelical contexts, prompting enquiries into the manifestation of similar processes within African Pentecostal communities, which exhibit unique theological emphases, cultural practices, and material limitations. The contextual deficiency is especially concerning as African Pentecostalism constitutes one of the most rapidly expanding and dynamic manifestations of global Christianity, yet is insufficiently examined in the realm of digital religion research.

The digital gap in rural areas is still insufficiently theorised and practically substantiated. Although scholars recognise that rural congregations have technical obstacles, limited research rigorously investigates how these impediments interact with religious principles, cultural traditions, and social disparities to influence the digital worship experience. Campbell and Osteen observe that digital access is restricted in rural regions and that technology literacy varies among demographic groups; nonetheless, their analysis is predominantly descriptive rather than critically analytical (2023:52). This study fills the gap by highlighting the perspectives and experiences of rural South African Pentecostal congregants, analysing the available technologies and how technological limitations intersected with theological beliefs, generational disparities, and economic constraints to influence worship experiences and spiritual outcomes.

Third, the current literature often adopts a functionalist or neutral perspective on technology, regarding digital platforms just as instruments that may be assessed based on their efficacy in fulfilling predetermined ministry objectives. This method, however practically beneficial, neglects to address profound theological and ethical enquiries regarding how digital mediation may profoundly alter religious subjectivity, spiritual practice, and ecclesial identity. The literature infrequently enquires whether virtual participation fosters the same qualities, dispositions, and spiritual sensibility as physical participation; is it possible to maintain sacramental life online without trivialising or commodifying sacred rituals; and in what ways do digital platforms include specific values, logic, and power dynamics that may contradict Christian

theological principles. This paper asserts that theology must rigorously examine both the practical outcomes and the moral and spiritual ramifications of digital worship, regarding technology not as a neutral medium but as a value-laden practice that influences the identity of worshipping communities.

The literature demonstrates a lack of focus on denominational and theological specificity. Numerous studies categorise ‘churches’ as a uniform entity, neglecting to acknowledge that various Christian traditions embody significantly distinct theologies of worship, sacrament, presence, and community, which influence their adaptability to digital translation. Pentecostal churches, characterised by their focus on spontaneity, emotional expression, physical healing, prophetic utterance, and Spirit-led worship, have unique obstacles in virtual settings that may not affect more liturgically structured or cognitively centred traditions. This study primarily examines Pentecostal ecclesiology and spirituality, evaluating how the theological convictions and worship practices of the Full Gospel Church influenced their experience and response to digital worship.

Theoretical Contributions and Empirical Positioning

This research tackles the highlighted deficiencies by exploring three interconnected contributions. Initially, it engages contextual theology in a meaningful dialogue with digital transformation, illustrating how African Pentecostal theological principles, cultural values, and material conditions must shape any evaluation of digital worship activities. This study formulates a contextually grounded theological analysis that rigorously considers the unique characteristics of African Pentecostalism, such as its focus on divine immanence, spiritual warfare, prophetic ministry, and communal solidarity, rather than merely applying Western theoretical frameworks to an African context.

The study examines the translation or lack thereof of theoretical frameworks from the theology of worship, namely James K. A. Smith’s embodied liturgical theology and Howard Snyder’s theology of presence, into virtual media. This research experimentally examines the applicability of theological ideas within these frameworks in digital contexts, contributing to current discussions regarding the sufficiency of virtual worship and the essential characteristics of

Christian assembly. This empirical-theological debate constitutes a methodological contribution, illustrating how practical theology can connect abstract theological reflection with lived religious experience.

Third, the research provides substantial empirical insights into the lived experience of digital worship in African Pentecostalism, a context that is notably under-represented in digital religion scholarship. This study enhances ethnographic depth and contextual specificity to broader discussions on religion, technology, and crises by focusing on the voices, experiences, and theological insights of congregations and leaders in the Thohoyandou District. The findings reveal that digital worship was perceived not just as a technological transition but also as a spiritual crisis that prompted essential enquiries regarding ecclesial identity, sacramental legitimacy, pastoral authority, and the essence of Christian community. This study presents a methodologically rigorous and theologically informed paradigm that integrates global theoretical literature with localised experiences, demonstrating how future research might be anchored in Christian tradition while addressing contemporary practical demands. It additionally asserts that any substantial digital theological involvement must be contextually aware, spiritually reflective, and pastorally guided, rejecting both naïve technical zeal and reactionary opposition to technology in favour of discerning theological insight.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, informed by the ontological perspective that reality is socially produced and influenced by lived experiences. The research is based on interpretivism, which seeks to comprehend social phenomena from the viewpoints of those who experience them (Denzin and Lincoln 2018:23). This is particularly appropriate for theological and pastoral research, where subjective interpretation and spiritual significance are paramount. The research employs a case study methodology, concentrating on the Full Gospel Church (FGC) congregations within the Thohoyandou District. A case study facilitates a comprehensive examination of real-life experiences within a defined context, providing detailed descriptions of the phenomena being studied (Yin 2018:16). This methodology was optimally adapted to examine how congregations

experienced and reacted to the transition to virtual worship during the COVID-19 epidemic, given that worship rituals are intrinsically contextual and embodied.

The research design corresponds with narrative inquiry, which prioritises lived experiences, personal significance, and spiritual interpretation. This method facilitates the gathering of profound theological insights from both ecclesiastical leaders and worshippers (Creswell 2014:48). The study's population consisted of Full Gospel Church members and leaders from ten congregations in the Thohoyandou District. The churches were chosen for their active participation in Sunday worship and their accessibility through digital or in-person communication. The sample comprised twenty-two participants: twenty worshippers (two from each church) and two senior pastors. The sample size was considered adequate to achieve data saturation, the stage at which more interviews produce no substantially different information (Bryman 2016:123). Purposive sampling was employed to choose participants who had engaged in both real and virtual worship services throughout the lockdown period. The objective was to collect varied viewpoints considering age, gender, digital literacy, and ecclesiastical position. A stratified purposive method guaranteed representation of both older and younger persons, considering their varying degrees of internet participation (Creswell 2014:158).

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, performed in person when safe or via telephone and WhatsApp calls where required. Interview questions were prepared in accordance with the primary study objectives and consistent with the theoretical framework.

The interviews focused on five key areas:

- Experience of worship prior to and during the lockdown
- Access to and participation in virtual services
- Theological contemplations on virtual worship
- Obstacles encountered during digital transformation
- Suggestions for forthcoming worship practices

Each interview lasted roughly 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. Observations were recorded to document non-verbal signals and emotional reactions.

Furthermore, ecclesiastical records including attendance logs and digital engagement measures, and sermon archives were examined to augment the interviews with documentary corroboration (Creswell 2014:198). Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and evaluated through thematic analysis. This procedure entailed categorising the data sequentially to discern repeating concepts and patterns, thereafter categorised into overarching themes (Bryman 2016:370). The analysis proceeded via the following steps:

1. Acquaintance with data via iterative reading
2. Creation of preliminary codes
3. Identifying themes
4. Evaluating and enhancing themes
5. Establishing and designating themes

Research Instruments

The principal data collection tool was a semi-structured interview guide, created in accordance with the study's aims and existing research. It comprised open-ended enquiries such as:

- 'Elucidate your experience of Sunday services during the lockdown.'
- 'In what manner did you experience spiritual connection or disconnection via virtual platforms?'
- 'In what manner did the lack of physical rituals such as communion or altar calls influence your faith?'
- 'What modifications would you suggest for next worship services?'

The supplementary instruments comprised observational notes and content records from digital church platforms. These tools corroborated interview data and offered a triangulated viewpoint on the digital transition.

Observations concentrated on the technical quality of services, leadership style during online preaching, and degree of interaction (e.g., greetings, sharing of testimonies).

Ethical Considerations

The research complied with the ethical criteria established by the University of Venda. All participants provided informed consent via a standardised form detailing the study's objective, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any point (Kumar 2011:120). Participants were guaranteed secrecy, and pseudonyms were employed in all transcripts and reports. Due to the digital format of many interviews, particular emphasis was placed on data security. All recordings and documentation were saved on encrypted discs, accessible solely to the researcher and supervisor (Smith 2020:52). Virtual interview settings were selected to guarantee confidentiality and ease.

The research acknowledged theological sensitivities, ensuring that enquiries regarding spiritual experience were conducted with sensitivity and pastoral consideration. Participants were urged to contemplate openly and were never compelled to respond to enquiries they deemed overly personal or emotionally challenging. Approval was secured from the University of Venda ethics review board, and COVID-19 health procedures were adhered to during in-person interactions.

Presentation of Data

Themes

The identified themes were 'digital exclusion and frustration', 'loss of embodied spirituality', 'adaptive leadership', 'community through technology', and 'the yearning for return'. This approach facilitated the integration of theological, emotional, and practical aspects of the digital worship experience. The study notably retained the spiritual lexicon and symbolic allusions employed by participants, including mentions of 'the presence of the Holy Spirit' and 'feeling disconnected from the altar'. Supplementary data from church social media platforms and WhatsApp groups were evaluated through content analysis to ascertain levels of

involvement (likes, comments, attendance) and recurring expressions of spiritual mood.

Theme 1: Digital Disconnection and the Theology of Presence

A salient topic that arose from the interviews was the sense of detachment from God's presence and the church community as worship transitioned to an online format. This was particularly pronounced among older congregations, rural members, and individuals with limited digital skills. Participants characterised virtual worship as 'viewing a performance' rather than 'engaging in the Spirit'. Numerous individuals expressed sorrow about the lack of physical rituals such as the laying on of hands, communal prayer, and altar calls, which they deemed essential to their perception of God's presence.

'When we convene physically, the Spirit descends like a conflagration. However, while watching online, I felt a sense of emptiness,' remarked a congregant from FGC Tshifulanani.

This perspective corresponds with theological literature that underscores the physical, participatory essence of Pentecostal worship, which is significantly dependent on sensory and communal experiences (Smith 2016:55). The theology of presence, fundamental to Pentecostal ecclesiology, asserts that God's presence is most profoundly revealed in the assembled congregation (Snyder 2012:77). Participants indicated a reduced sense of spiritual intensity when physically removed from the sanctuary.

The Disruption of Liturgical Embodiment

Liturgical rites such as holy communion and baptism, which are tactile and communal in nature, cannot be conducted online. A number of ecclesiastical leaders articulated theological unease regarding the administration of sacraments via digital channels.

'Baptism is not merely a symbol; it is an act that necessitates water, physical contact, and the presence of the church community,' elucidated one pastor.

This discovery substantiates the apprehensions articulated by Smith, who contends that the virtual environment diminishes sacramental worship by eliminating its tangible and communal aspects (Smith 2021:102–103).

Anderson contends that Pentecostalism flourishes on immediacy, spontaneity, and sensory involvement, elements that are diminished in a digital format (2020:58). A number of congregants lamented the absence of the tangible aspects of communal worship: singing collectively, weeping at the altar, and receiving prayers. These rituals are not merely expressive; they are perceived as conduits of grace and healing. Virtual alternatives, including taped sermons and WhatsApp prayer chains, were frequently regarded as inadequate.

Feelings of Isolation and Spiritual Decline

The lack of physical worship resulted in emotions of isolation and spiritual stagnation. Older participants particularly indicated difficulties in accessing services or comprehending the use of platforms such as Zoom and Facebook Live.

‘I experienced a sense of neglect,’ an older member from FGC Sibasa expressed. ‘It felt as though the church had relocated to a place I could not access.’

This exemplifies the digital divide, a persistent concern in pandemic-era religion research. Rural populations frequently lack access to affordable data, reliable internet, or gadgets, rendering digital participation practically unattainable (Campbell and Osteen 2023:45). The technological transition, however beneficial for certain individuals, marginalised others, thereby compromising the Pentecostal focus on inclusivity and communal assistance (Adamo 2021:8). Campbell cautions against lauding the digital revolution without acknowledging its disparate impacts on various communities (2020:267). This was apparent in the Thohoyandou context: while younger, technologically-adept individuals maintained connectivity, the elderly and low-income demographics were disproportionately excluded from worship.

Implications for Ecclesiology

The disconnection encountered during virtual services prompted ecclesiological apprehensions. Congregants and leaders enquired about the implications of ‘being the church’ in a dispersed context. One pastor remarked:

We proclaim that the church constitutes the body, rather than the edifice. However, in the absence of the structure, we encountered difficulties in maintaining cohesion as a group.

This phrase highlights the conflict between spiritual and physical ecclesiology. Pentecostal ecclesiology encompasses the concept of the church as both spiritually unified and physically assembled. The pandemic necessitated a division of these components, prompting enquiries on the capacity of digital worship to maintain theological identity and foster spiritual development. Arthur posits that although virtual places may function as transient refuges, they are devoid of the permanency and embodied community that define authentic ecclesial existence (2021:39). This observation was reiterated by worshippers who yearned for a resumption of in-person gatherings, not solely for social purposes but due to their conviction that spiritual experiences were less frequent or less potent online.

Counter-Narratives: Limited Spiritual Connection

Notwithstanding these limitations, several participants indicated experiencing a sense of God's presence during virtual worship, especially when sermons were conducted live and interactively. Some reported experiencing spiritual elevation during Zoom prayers or when pastors communicated directly over WhatsApp.

'Although it differed from traditional church, I still felt God's presence during those online services,' stated a youth leader from FGC Makwarela.

This indicates that, although digital platforms cannot completely emulate the embodied nature of Pentecostal worship, they can nonetheless serve as legitimate conduits for spiritual support, especially when utilised with intention and pastoral care (Campbell 2020:284).

Smith asserts that technology, when employed judiciously, can expand the church's ministry beyond its physical confines without compromising its spiritual goal, contingent upon intentionality and theological contemplation in its application (Smith 2021:103–104).

Theme 2: Adaptive Leadership and Pastoral Innovation

The COVID-19 epidemic exerted significant pressure on church leadership, compelling pastors and elders to reevaluate their duties, pastoral approaches, and technical proficiency almost instantaneously. Leaders at the Full Gospel Church in Thohoyandou addressed these issues through a combination of improvisation, theological fortitude, and digital innovation. This section analyses how church leadership adjusted to the pandemic by preserving spiritual care via technology, restructuring community frameworks, and upholding pastoral presence despite the lack of physical assemblies.

Digital Readiness and Theological Flexibility

Although certain pastors possessed limited expertise with digital technologies before the pandemic, the majority swiftly used social media channels like Facebook Live, WhatsApp, and YouTube to connect with their congregations. Interviews indicated that younger pastors or those with recent theological education adeptly manoeuvred internet platforms and engaged with congregations remotely.

‘We were required to assume the roles of both technicians and theologians simultaneously,’ stated one clergyman. ‘I had to adapt to delivering sermons to a screen while envisioning the presence of the congregation.’

This assertion embodies what Campbell and Osteen describe as ‘technological-pastoral hybridity’ the integration of digital proficiency with theological contemplation to sustain spiritual guidance in virtual ministry (2023:54). It illustrates the expansion of the pastor’s function beyond traditional pulpit ministry to encompass responsibilities in digital content development, virtual therapy, and real-time online participation. Furthermore, pastors exhibited theological adaptability, acknowledging the transient character of virtual media while maintaining fundamental Pentecostal principles. They organised prayer chains over WhatsApp, conducted midweek devotionals on Zoom, and promoted home-based communion for families willing to administer sacraments locally. This adaptability corresponds with Arthur’s concept of crisis ecclesiology, wherein leadership must reconcile doctrinal consistency with responsive pastoral care in times of stress (2021:36).

Innovation in Pastoral Care

In addition to Sunday services, Full Gospel pastors employed innovative strategies to maintain pastoral care. For instance, some churches established digital ‘care cells’ where small groups convened weekly through WhatsApp or Zoom to pray, exchange testimony, and monitor each other’s well-being. These groups were often directed by elders or deacons and operated as a decentralised style of pastoral supervision.

‘Although we were unable to meet, I anticipated that my group leader would call to enquire about my well-being,’ stated a female congregant.

This small-group strategy cultivated a sense of community and guaranteed that vulnerable individuals, especially the elderly, unemployed, and infirm, were not neglected. It demonstrates the adaptation of pastoral care from large assemblies to small communities, thereby strengthening the communal essence of Pentecostal spirituality (Anderson 2004:56). These advancements resonate with Cain’s assertion that well-coordinated, decentralised pastoral models can enhance participation and theological contemplation, particularly in rural and resource-limited settings (2023:20).

Challenges in Leadership Adaptation

Notwithstanding these achievements, other problems arose. Firstly, digital tiredness emerged during six months of uninterrupted virtual ministering. Both pastors and congregations indicated that screen-based worship grew tedious and spiritually burdensome. Secondly, the expense of data and the unavailability of devices produced disparities in participation. Leaders needed to continually modify content distribution to accommodate members unable to attend live streams. Third, certain leaders encountered difficulties in sustaining authority and presence in digital environments. The absence of the conventional pulpit and church structure hindered the expression of pastoral charisma. A pastor remarked, ‘When I deliver a sermon in church, I sense the Spirit’s presence. I am uncertain whether the message is being interpreted consistently online.’

This conflict aligns with Smith’s observations, which indicate that spiritual authority in Pentecostal contexts is frequently conveyed through physical presence, gestures, vocal modulation, and communal feedback, all of which

are constrained in virtual environments (Smith 2021:104). Additionally, several members challenged the spiritual validity of internet sessions. Theological doubt existed regarding whether God could ‘move’ through a screen as he does in a Spirit-filled assembly. This underscores a notable conflict between religion traditions and technical mediation, necessitating profound theological involvement from leadership.

Leadership Lessons for Post-Pandemic Ministry

Although numerous pastors regarded virtual worship as a provisional measure, the pandemic generated enduring considerations regarding hybrid ministry models. Numerous leaders indicated a desire to maintain specific digital activities, including weekly devotionals, digital counselling, and online youth involvement, even following the resumption of physical services. This indicates a possible paradigm change in pastoral ministry, wherein digital presence evolves into an extension of pastoral identity rather than a disruption of it. The experience prompted theological institutes and church boards to include media training, cyber-ethics, and digital theology in leadership development (Campbell 2020:284). These transitions establish church leaders as intermediaries in both physical and digital realms, in accordance with Vondey’s advocacy for flexible Pentecostal leadership that addresses the spiritual requirements of congregants in evolving cultural environments (2010:18).

Theme 3: Reimagining Pentecostal Worship for a Digital Future

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled congregations and church leaders to address essential enquiries regarding the nature of true worship and the formation and maintenance of spiritual community. With the easing of physical constraints, numerous members of the Full Gospel Church in Thohoyandou experienced a conflict between their desire for the traditional, corporeal experience of Pentecostal worship and the acknowledgement of the convenience and accessibility offered by digital alternatives. This part examines how the epidemic accelerated a redesign of worship that integrates technology accessibility with spiritual purity.

Negotiating the Sacred and the Digital

Pentecostal spirituality is founded on what Cartledge characterises as ‘narrative theology’ a spirituality influenced by personal experience, divine encounters, and tangible manifestations of the Holy Spirit (2016:72).

Throughout the pandemic, numerous participants grappled with the dichotomy between the hallowed ambiance of the sanctuary and the comparative casualness of digital worship environments.

‘Distractions were present at home’: children, commotion, culinary activities. A youth worship leader remarked, ‘I was unable to attain that sacred state as I do in church.’

This illustrates the difficulty of space sanctification in virtual worship. Without stained glass, altars, and musical ambiance, worship needed to be reimagined as an experience that could take place in kitchens, bedrooms, and automobiles. This was unsettling for many. However, others recounted experiencing profound moments of connection with God while kneeling near a phone or laptop. This duality corroborates Campbell’s results, which indicate that digital worship can dismantle conventional concepts of sacred space and demonstrate that God’s presence is not limited to physical edifices (2020:267). Nonetheless, it demonstrates that contextual factors like music, posture, and environment continue to significantly influence the manner in which Pentecostals experience spiritual transcendence.

Access, Inclusion, and Generational Shifts

One of the unforeseen advantages of digital worship was its capacity to engage unserved and underserved demographics. Numerous pastors indicated that internet services were viewed by former members residing in distant regions, along with inquisitive individuals from various denominations or lacking any church affiliation.

‘One family in Gauteng began to follow our weekly livestreams,’ a pastor from FGC Muledane stated. ‘They subsequently submitted tithes and prayer requests.’

This outreach potential indicates that digital platforms can enhance the missional capabilities of local churches, especially in rural areas with constrained physical infrastructure. The effectiveness of such outreach was frequently contingent upon the digital literacy of the audience. Junior individuals acclimated more readily, though senior adults frequently relied on relatives for assistance in establishing connections. This corroborates Smith’s

research, indicating that digital competency is inequitably allocated based on age and socioeconomic level (2015:1066). Churches aiming to sustain digital outreach after the pandemic must invest in digital discipleship training and provide support for people to confidently navigate the online faith environment.

The Future: Hybrid Models of Worship

With the relaxation of constraints, churches commenced the implementation of hybrid models, integrating in-person services with online streaming. Leaders observed that hybrid services

- ensured continuity for ill or touring members,
- enabled homebound seniors to maintain connectivity,
- developed digital repositories of sermons and lessons,
- facilitated international fellowship and witness exchange.

‘Currently, some individuals attend church in person, while others participate through Facebook,’ a preacher from FGC Shayandima stated. ‘We have learnt to appreciate both.’

Nonetheless, hybridisation introduced novel theological and logistical enquiries. Should communion be administered online or just in person? Should digital viewers be regarded as full participants in the congregation? Who directs and facilitates online environments? Arthur (2021:38) warns that churches should not merely duplicate physical services on digital platforms; rather, they must contextualise worship for each media with theological purpose. This encompasses the creation of liturgies that are attuned to digital interaction, including virtual altar calls, digital testimonies, and live-stream chat ministry.

Findings and Discussion

Digital Disconnection and the Theology of Presence

Participants articulated a significant sense of spiritual dislocation stemming not only from physical absence but also from the disruption of what Smith (2016:33) refers to as ‘liturgical embodiment’, the formative activities that inscribe Pentecostal identity onto the body and soul. The research indicated

that sacraments, collective prayer, and altar ministry – crucial components of Pentecostal life – were not merely lowered but radically transformed in their spiritual potency when conveyed through screens. Congregants consistently employed terminology related to absence, emptiness, and observation instead of engagement, indicating that digital forms could not elicit the sensory completeness and communal immediacy inherent in Spirit-filled worship. This discovery transcends mere technological annoyance to reveal a profound theological dilemma: if God’s presence is most profoundly realised in the congregated assembly, as Snyder (2012) contends, then virtual dispersion jeopardises the fundamental nature of Pentecostal worship. The suspension of sacraments notably highlighted this issue, as pastors declined to administer baptism or communion online, citing religious beliefs regarding the tangible, witnessing, and communal essence of these rites. This choice, albeit theologically justified, caused spiritual distress among attendees who were deprived of grace during a period of significant need. The results affirm that, for Pentecostals, worship transcends mere informational material suitable for digital dissemination; it is a participatory experience necessitating physical presence, multisensory involvement, and direct spiritual interaction (Anderson 2020:58; Smith 2016:55; Snyder 2012:77).

Adaptive Leadership and Pastoral Innovation

In spite of considerable theological and practical obstacles, church leaders exhibited notable tenacity, ingenuity, and pastoral sensitivity in preserving spiritual care during lockdown. The study illustrates how pastors swiftly developed digital skills, evolving into what Campbell and Osteen (2023:52) refer to as ‘technological-pastoral hybrids, adept at manoeuvring between both theological heritage and digital advancement. This adaptation extended beyond mere livestreaming of Sunday services; it included the establishment of digital care cells, WhatsApp prayer chains, Zoom counselling sessions, and individualised pastoral communication via phone calls and voice messages. These innovations demonstrate that successful digital ministry necessitates a deliberate reconfiguration of pastoral practices instead of just replicating physical offerings through technology. The results emphasised the significance of decentralised, small-group arrangements in which digital ‘care cells’, directed by elders and deacons, provided close pastoral supervision notwithstanding the impossibility of large assemblies. This micro-community strategy maintained the relational fabric of Pentecostal spirituality,

guaranteeing that vulnerable individuals, especially the aged, unemployed, and unwell, were not spiritually forsaken (Arthur 2021:36). Nonetheless, the studies revealed considerable difficulties in pastoral authority and spiritual validity. Numerous pastors expressed concerns that their preaching diminished in spiritual potency and immediacy when delivered via screens, prompting enquiries into the dynamics of charismatic authority in digital contexts where conventional indicators of presence, vocal modulation, and physical gestures are diminished. Furthermore, digital fatigue became a significant issue after many months, with both pastors and congregations indicating that screen-based worship had become tedious and spiritually exhausting. The findings indicate that although adaptive leadership can alleviate certain issues of digital worship, it cannot entirely address the fundamental theological conflicts between embodied spiritual authority and mediated religious experience. The epidemic prompted a critical re-evaluation of pastoral development, indicating that future ministerial education should incorporate digital theology, media literacy, and cyber-pastoral care in conjunction with conventional homiletics and sacramental theology (Campbell 2020:284; Vondey 2010:18).

Reimagining Pentecostal Worship for a Digital Future

The pandemic spurred not only a temporary adaptation but a fundamental reassessment of what constitutes real worship, sacred space, and spiritual community in an increasingly digital world. The results indicated an intricate debate between maintaining Pentecostal doctrinal distinctiveness and adopting the missional opportunities presented by digital media. Congregants indicated significant unease over the informality and domestic nature of home-based worship, observing that distractions, the absence of a sacred ambiance, and the inability to physically segregate the worship area from daily life compromised their ability to achieve spiritual transcendence. This discovery highlights the dependence of Pentecostal spirituality on environmental stimuli – such as music, architecture, social dynamics, and physical posture – to facilitate encounters with the Holy Spirit (Cartledge 2016:72). The research revealed unforeseen advantages of digital worship, such as an extended missional outreach to geographically remote former members, enhanced accessibility for homebound and ill individuals, and the establishment of digital sermon archives available for repeated reflection and instruction. The aforementioned advantages indicate that digital platforms,

when employed purposefully, can enhance rather than substitute physical ministry, operating as what Arthur (2021:23) refers to as ‘digital parishes’ that augment rather than displace tangible ecclesial existence. The advent of hybrid worship models combining in-person services with simultaneous internet broadcasting offers a pragmatic compromise that respects both the limitations and opportunities of digital mediation. However, hybridisation presents new theological concerns that necessitate careful discernment. Should communion be administered to online participants? Are digital viewers considered complete members of the congregation? How can churches reconcile investment in technical infrastructure with their need to serve digitally excluded members? The results demonstrate that churches cannot merely embrace technical solutionism, which presumes digital platforms are impartial instruments; instead, they must undertake critical theological contemplation regarding the influence of digital mediation on spiritual development, communal affiliation, and sacramental involvement. This necessitates building what can be called a ‘contextual digital theology’ that is anchored in African Pentecostal commitments to divine immanence, communal solidarity, and embodied spirituality while being responsive to the technological realities of contemporary life (Campbell 2020:267). The pandemic demonstrated that the future of Pentecostal worship will likely be a theologically informed hybrid, integrating both physical and digital elements, utilising digital tools to augment rather than supplant the embodied, communal, and sacramental aspects of Christian worship.

Synthesising the Findings: Toward a Pentecostal Digital Ecclesiology

Collectively, these three elements reveal a fundamental tension in modern Pentecostalism: the conflict between a theology of bodily presence and the practical requirement for digital mediation. The findings indicate that virtual worship effectively preserved institutional continuity and pastoral connection throughout crises, although it did not uphold the spiritual intensity, sacramental depth, and social closeness characteristic of vibrant Pentecostal spirituality. This paradox indicates that digital platforms are most efficacious when utilised as adjuncts rather than replacements for physical assembly, fulfilling evangelistic, pastoral, and educational roles while reserving the most sacred rites – sacraments, healing prayer, and ordination – for physical contexts. This research enhances practical theology by illustrating that successful ministry in the digital era necessitates not only technological

proficiency but also theological acumen to identify which elements of Christian practice can be digitally mediated and which are essential to embodied ecclesial existence. In African Pentecostal groups, this discernment must consider the contextual reality of infrastructural limitations, economic constraints, age variety, and cultural beliefs of communal belonging. The study advocates for a dual approach: churches should concurrently enhance their digital capabilities and reinforce their dedication to embodied worship, developing adaptable, hybrid models that respect Pentecostal theological principles while addressing current pastoral needs.

Recommendations

The Full Gospel Church requires a hybrid worship infrastructure that intentionally integrates digital accessibility with physical liturgical practices to ensure theological purity and congregational inclusivity. This necessitates the installation of permanent livestreaming apparatus in each church with reliable internet access and the formation of a 'Digital Ministry Team' including technologically proficient adolescents to oversee broadcasts, resolve technical difficulties, and supervise online interactions during services. Churches ought to establish a 'Digital Discipleship Programme' that provides elderly and low-income members with complimentary or subsidised smartphones and data packages, alongside monthly training sessions wherein younger members instruct senior members on utilising Facebook Live, WhatsApp, and YouTube. To maintain the theology of presence while engaging in digital outreach, churches should implement a 'Sacramental Reservation Policy' that restricts core sacraments – baptism, holy communion, ordination, and healing prayer with the laying on of hands – to in-person gatherings, designating digital platforms for preaching, teaching, testimony sharing, midweek devotionals, and pastoral counselling. Theological boundaries protect the physical, observable, and communal dimensions of sacraments while allowing digital tools to enhance worship. Pastors might develop 'Phyigital Care Cells', small groups that convene in person monthly and online weekly to ensure all members, irrespective of technological proficiency, remain engaged by pastoral care. Digital worship leaders could use interactive elements in virtual sessions to enhance spiritual engagement: live chat, prayer requests, virtual altar calls for viewers to submit commitments, congregational testimonial videos, and post-service Zoom breakout rooms for fellowship. These strategies

transform passive observation into active participation, addressing the spiritual disconnection.

The Full Gospel Church ought to establish a 'Digital Inclusion Fund' financed by tithes and denominational grants to acquire devices, subsidise data expenses, and provide digital literacy training, with a focus on rural congregations, elderly members, and economically disadvantaged families to overcome infrastructural and generational obstacles. Churches should collaborate with local telecommunications providers to secure discounted data packages for worship streaming and partner with community libraries or schools to establish 'Digital Worship Hubs' where members lacking home internet can securely participate in services in small groups. Leaders should develop and instruct a 'Pentecostal Digital Theology Curriculum' in Bible studies and leadership training to facilitate congregants' comprehension of how God's Spirit can operate through technology without supplanting physical assembly. Indigenous principles such as *Ubuntu* should be employed to conceptualise digital communities as an extension of physical camaraderie. Pastors must clearly articulate the theology of presence, delineating the rationale behind reserving specific practices for in-person worship while acknowledging that digital participation is legitimate for certain ministry functions, to mitigate feelings of guilt or spiritual inferiority among congregants accessing services remotely due to illness, distance, or disability. 'Hybrid Liturgical Rhythms' must encompass in-person Sunday worship (with livestream), Tuesday evening digital prayer gatherings, Wednesday WhatsApp text-based devotionals, Thursday Zoom discipleship sessions, and Friday group fasting accompanied by voice note check-ins to sustain spiritual health. Denominational leadership must mandate that all theological training institutions incorporate digital theology, cyber-pastoral care, and media ethics into their curricula. This will equip the next generation of pastors to adeptly manage hybrid ministry contexts with both theological assurance and technological proficiency, thereby ensuring that African Pentecostalism remains theologically anchored and pastorally attuned to modern digital existence.

Conclusion

This study employed a qualitative-case-study methodology to examine the impact of COVID-19 on Sunday services at the Full Gospel Church in

Thohoyandou District, emphasising the shift to virtual worship. The study determined that African Pentecostal theology must fundamentally reassess the conceptualisation of divine presence and spiritual engagement in digital contexts. The results advocate the establishment of a 'Digital-Indigenous Theology of Presence' that preserves the importance of embodied worship while recognising that God's Spirit can operate through technological mediation, utilising indigenous concepts like the *Ubuntu* philosophy to perceive digital community as an extension rather than a substitute for physical assembly.

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