Being a Digital Church in the Transition to post Covid-19 pandemic era

Ezekiel Baloyi (PhD)
Faculty of Theology and Religion
Department of Practical Theology and Missional Theology
University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa
https://Orcid.org/0000-0001-9166-7625
Email: revbaloyi@gmail.com

Joseph Khamadi Pali (PhD)
Faculty of Theology and Religion
Department of Practical Theology and Missional Theology
University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa
https://Orcid.org/0000-0001-5105-2650
Email: palikj@ufs.ac.za

Abstract

This article has two objectives. The first objective is to analyse the literature on being a digital church as expressed from the pessimistic and optimistic use of digital platforms for the ministry of the church. The second and last objective is to motivate and recommend actions that can be conducted towards doing digital church. The research issue of this article is that Sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing growth in internet usage and mobile phone availability. Various African governments have realised the benefits of advanced technological development hence they made plans to develop relevant infrastructures. This move towards embracing advanced technological development in Africa should be an inspiration for the churches in Africa to grasp the opportunity to do digital church and use technology to enhance the church ministry. This article discusses the future of advanced technological development in Africa, the challenges and significance of doing digital church, and the role of the pastors towards doing digital church and concludes with recommendations for doing digital church. The researchers used a literature review methodology and the main guiding theory is the hermeneutical theory of research.

Keywords: Digital Church, Covid-19, pandemic. Digitalization, online, electronic gadgets, ecclesiology.

Introduction

Digital church refers to the establishment of online platforms like websites, you tube channels or social media for the Christian communities to do the normal church proceedings online or using digital gadgets such as phones and computers usually in the presence of internet facilities (Sheree et al, 2020). The literature indicates that the Pentecostal-Charismatic churches are ahead of traditional churches like the mainline churches and the African Independent Churches (AIC) in adopting the use of technology and doing digital church (Mujinga, 2021). This implies that many of the AICs and the mainline churches are lagging in terms of using technology to

enhance their ministry and doing digital church, despite the prediction that Sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing exponential growth in internet usage and mobile availability (Van Rensburg, Strydom, Viviers & Kühn, 2021).

This article focuses on two countries in the Southern African geographical region, namely Zimbabwe and South Africa. The countries share a lot of social, economic, political, and technological environments (Bisong, 2020). In terms of population, Kemp (2023) says Zimbabwe has 16.49 million population, more than half of the population is female, and most importantly, more than three-quarters of the population is youth. In contrast, South Africa has a population of 60.1 million, with more than half of the population as female and two-thirds are youths. Furthermore, Kemp (2023) states that Zimbabwe has more than one-third of its population in urban areas and two-thirds in rural areas. In South Africa, more than two-thirds of its population is in urban areas and one-third in rural areas. In summary, the similarity between the two countries is that both have more females and youths in their populations. The difference, between the two countries is Zimbabwe has more population in the rural areas whilst South Africa has more population in the urban areas.

This article has two objectives: The first one is to analyse the literature on being a digital church as expressed from the pessimistic and optimistic use of digital platforms for the ministry of the church. The second and last objective is to motivate and recommend actions that can be carried out towards doing digital church. This article used a literature review methodology and the main guiding theory is the hermeneutical theory of research. Accordingly, this article will commence by discussing the methodology and theory of the research in this article, the future of advanced technological development in Africa, defining what digital church is, and proceeding to focus on the significance and benefits of doing digital church. The challenges of doing digital church and the roles of pastors in doing digital ecclesiology will also be expounded. Some recommendations and concluding remarks will follow on the value of being a digital church in the transition to post Covid-19 pandemic era.

Methodology and theory of research

The methodology followed in this article is an in-depth literature study of the current and previous literature on digital churches. Data collection in this study was obtained through observation and analyses of the documents such as journal articles, scholarly books, websites, dissertations, and general articles.

The main theory of this study is the hermeneutical theory which is about understanding and interpreting God's acts of salvation and the implication of salvation within the church and the world through history and trying to make sense to human beings through faith. Its purpose is to develop an appropriate and relevant church that discerns God's will and can engage in a given situation by interacting with the text, context, community and action (Van Gelder, 2007:105). First, in the hermeneutic activity, the scripture is essential, together with theology and historical confessions because they shape the life, choices, and practices of the congregation. Second, and more significant is the social context of the congregations which could usually be clarified and analysed through social science research. The social context of this research is Africa, in particular congregations in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Third in importance, is the community as Christian believers that has to discern God's will, confess and practice their faith. In this study, the community is the Christian community in both South Africa and Zimbabwe. Fourth and lastly, are the strategic actions of the believers in a given context that reflect their normative understanding of the scripture, insight into the context, wisdom from the shared practices within

the community of believers, and in the end transformation of the context. Strategic actions will be in the form of recommendations given towards the end of the article.

The future of digitalization in Africa

Before the Covid 19 crisis the advanced technological development that was brought about by the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) encountered reluctance and criticism that it will bring about job losses when automation will replace human beings and immorality when technology is used for genetic editing, brain, and neuroenhancement (Van Rensburg, Viviers & Parry 2021; Mpofu & Nicolaides, 2019). But the sudden outbreak of Covid 19 virus forced many countries, businesses, and civil organisations to shift to online services and communication. The shift to online services and communication was made possible by embracing the products of advanced technological development. How did African countries react to this shift to online services and communication?

Van Rensburg, Viviers, and Parry (2021) state that a few years before the Covid 19 pandemic Africa experienced a dramatic increase in internet usage, mobile phone availability, and mobile money sector. Van Rensburg *et al* (2021) report that at the end of 2019, almost 40% of Africa's population had access to the Internet and Sub-Saharan Africa was one of the fastest-growing regions for mobile phone subscriptions, with possible annual growth rate of 4.6% in the period 2018–2025. If this growth is maintained more than half of the population in Africa will have access to mobile phones by 2025.

Many African governments acknowledged the essential and enabling role that digital technologies can play in enhancing the economic growth and development of the continent. They made efforts to develop necessary supporting infrastructures that will make it possible for the use of mobile phones and access to the internet. For example, Van Rensburg *et al* (2021) mention that African countries like South Africa, Rwanda, Egypt, Nigeria, and Seychelles are fast growing in terms of technological advancement. Furthermore, the internet penetration for South Africa is 72% and for Zimbabwe is 35% (Kemp, 2023). This means Zimbabwe needs to improve its internet access and availability. In addition, Zimbabwe has the intention to improve its internet penetration towards 75% and whilst South Africa aims to increase it to 90% (Karombo, 2023)

Who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of technological advancement in Africa? Van Rensburg *et al* (2021) state that Africa is a continent experiencing a growing population of youths, who have the potential to embrace the opportunities presented by the digital era. Furthermore, about 62% of the Sub-Saharan population is under the age of 25 years, who if given opportunities of education and skills levels to participate in the economy could transform the development of Africa. Unfortunately, a lack of education and skills disadvantage of young Africans to harness the benefits of digital applications for effective learning, sparking new business ideas and facilitating domestic and international trade persists. Most of the population in Zimbabwe and South Africa are youths, but less than one-third of youths (16.4%) in Zimbabwe have access to social media as compared to more than half of the South African youths (57%) (Kemp, 2023). The above situation indicates that the youths in Zimbabwe are in dire need to benefit from technological advancement as compared to youths in South Africa.

Women are also supposed to be the beneficiaries of technological advancement in Africa, but they are the most marginalised group concerning education and poverty. In 35 out of 75 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa about 25% of the poorest young women are illiterate (UNESCO, 2020). More than 400 million of the world's extremely poor are in Sub-Saharan Africa and women are the mostly affected (World Bank, 2015). Both Zimbabwe and South Africa

have more female populations than male ones. But more than two-fifths of the social media users in Zimbabwe are female as compared to more than half in South Africa (Kemp, 2023). This means that females in Zimbabwe struggle to access social media as compared to males in Zimbabwe.

Africa is still lagging behind the developed countries such as United Kingdom and United States of America concerning mobile penetration and internet access. Hence, many African countries are faced with challenges like a widening digital divide, low incomes, lack of education in digital technology, slow industrialization and weakening job-rich growth (Van Rensburg *et al,* 2021). According to Gillward and Mothobi (2019) in many African countries the use of the internet and access to smartphones is limited by various factors for example, low-income earners cannot afford the costs of internet access and smartphones and the level of education influences how Africans use the internet and smartphones. Furthermore, Gillward and Mothobi (2019) mention the other challenge as the urban-rural disparity in internet usage whereby South Africa is at 36% as compared to other countries like Mozambique (87%) and Tanzania (84%). In contrast, Zimbabwe has a higher urban-rural disparity in internet usage as compared to South Africa and this is due to the impact of Covid 19 pandemic, the high cost of data, and the installation of broadband infrastructure in Zimbabwe (Karombo, 2023; Frąckiewicz, 2023).

Other challenges that hinder technological development in Africa are as follows. Van Rensburg *et al* (2021) mention them as electricity supply problems in Africa which is a key stumbling block to growth and development in Africa. Lack of industrialization to facilitate high-speed broadband connectivity, sluggish African governments that take long to facilitate licensing of businesses that want to invest in physical and ICT infrastructure, poor human capital development and lack of labour market reforms. Joubert (2021) attributes slow technological development in Africa to the failure of African governments to create a regulatory environment to facilitate innovation and cost-effective access to digital devices and services. The second one is the lack of a spirit to embrace the digital age by delaying the removal of excessive red tape such as old manuscripts to invest in digital technological development. Third and lastly, is lack of trust in online transactions and communication due to tampering with data privacy and security which may lead to an increased risk of proprietary and sensitive information being unlawfully extracted from online systems and then used to prey on people and commit crimes.

After the Covid 19 pandemic various institutions and organizations altered their usual practices of doing business and activities by using hybrid modes of online and face-to-face interactions. In contrast, the occurrence of Covid 19 pandemic exposed other institutions and organisations to their failure to invest in their digital development concerning internet connectivity, digital devices and digital skills (Kühn, 2021). In Africa, some sectors are swiftly moving towards digital adoption more than others, such as financial services, health services, mining, agriculture and education (Kühn, 2021). According to Kühn (2021), digital technologies used in Africa are Artificial Intelligence which is typically associated with automation and machine learning. Machine learning refers to the ability of computers to teach themselves to reason, plan and act in various ways when exposed to data. Internet of Things (IoT) digital technology refers to a network of devices (such as smartphones and tablets, computers, vehicles and appliances) that carry sensors and software and have the computing capacity to collect, exchange and act on data. Robotic process automation (RPA) refers to the automation of jobs (mainly those involving repetitive tasks) using digitally powered robots, bots and chatbots.

To reflect on the above, the advanced technological development brought by 4IR has challenged the church to adopt the use of digital technology in its various ministries and even embrace the concept of digital church. However, it is more of the Pentecostal/Charismatic

churches that adopted the use of technology and digital church as compared to other denominations. For the church, the advanced technological development on the one hand, is an opportunity for innovative ministry, on the other hand, it exposed immoral pastors who practice ministry that is harmful to human dignity. Since the African continent is experiencing a growth in internet and mobile phone access, there is a potential for the digital church to thrive in Africa. It allows qualitative and quantitative growth of faith in Africa. Africa's population has more women and large youth population who are struggling for access to education and income, therefore, the digital church can be a tool to reach out to women and youths for inspiration and empowerment in severely trying times.

Lastly, advanced technological development will continue to critically challenge the theology and ministry of churches in Africa and globally. For example, can one use the AI technology to prepare sermons instead of following tedious exegetical processes of preparing for a sermon? Due to a shortage of pastors and people with skills to do financial management in churches, can one use the AI and RPA technology to fulfill pastoral duties like preaching and counselling and doing the needed financial management of churches? These questions are relevant in the context of the advance technological development we encounter but are not part of the discussion in this article.

Different forms of being a church.

Throughout history, a church has taken various forms to fit and be relevant to a particular context in which it has existed. For example, in the first-century CE, the church took the form of a domestic church where a small number of believers worshipped in a specific household that accommodated them. The common Biblical name for this kind of church was 'house churches' (Acts 12:12; 16:40) and in modern times the closest similar example can be what are referred to as church cell groups. Centuries before the Reformation era the church moved away from a domestic church to being a clergy-centred church with a high sense of clericalism. This was an era whereby institutionalism of the church, hierarchy and authority of the clergy were significant and authoritative, but at the expense of underrating the members of the church. After the Reformation, the church shifted to the priesthood of believers which was valued and mobilized for the prominence and active role of the lay people. A few decades ago, Dulles (1978) summarized the church models that occurred in history as institutional, communal, sacramental, herald and servant.

The digital church is not new *per se* but has since become significant and practised with the evolution of technology. For example; throughout history, technological development brought press, radio, and television, and it was churches that were quick to adopt, integrate, and incorporate it into worship (Musa, 2020:54; Hale, 2022). Modern technological development has brought platforms like digitalized television, YouTube channels, the internet and social media tools such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The digital church is called by various names such as the church online, a virtual church, a cyber church, an online Christian community or even an internet church but this study prefers to use the name digital church.

What is the digital church?

A digital church is a church that utilizes developments in information and communications technology for efficient and effective communication of the Gospel (Dyikuk, 2020). Musa (2020) gives an elaborative definition of a digital church as a virtual place where believers acknowledge that the church as the body of Christ is not limited to physical space or one location but can worship on the social media platforms. Hence, social media platforms have now become an

'electronic tent', 'tabernacle', and 'temple for worship'. According to Musa (2020), the digital church is also people who connect virtually to strengthen each other emotionally, relate to connect and reach out to others for the sake of caring and disciplining them. Lastly, according to Musa, a digital church is when people virtually connect to seek the presence of God because they believe God is omnipresent (Isaiah 11:9) and can while connected to worship Him turn their hearts towards Him, to increase their awe of Him, and to feel closer to Him. Da Silva (2020:8) argues that the digital church should not only be about the church's form of communication and presence on the internet, but it should be about its impact and being part of the network society. Briefly, the digital church presents the church as a community that operates both in reality and virtually through digital media to worship God, to seek His presence and reach out to others for disciplining them (Dyikuk, 2020). Naidoo (2023:4) articulates that:

> The use of smartphones and social media is high among respondents, and the usage varies from person to person; however, it is clear that respondents do feel a sense of gratification when they use their smartphones at church. Their gratification may be realised through engaging technology, which they use to connect and share their status and activity via social media. However, it is quite clear that smartphone usage is ubiquitous, and its presence is on the increase in churches.

As the researchers in this article, we understand the digital church as a Christian community that meets online, virtually or on a digital platform to worship God and reach out to others with a gospel message. On one hand, it may start as an actual worship service recorded and shared on a digital platform. On the other hand, it may be a Christian community that decides to meet solely virtually, online, or on a digital platform to worship God and be positioned to reach out to others with a gospel message.

How was digital church practised during Covid 19 pandemic?

During Covid 19 pandemic there were different ways that churches did worship service on digital platforms. According to Campbell (2020) during Covid 19 digital worship services were done by transferring the standard offline worship services to an online platform, in order to offer members a somewhat similar worship service but in the safety of their own homes. Second, it was by translating the worship experience into more of a talk show format, where a pastor served as a host to introduce the band as if they were guests and interview some staff members about their views on the current troubling situation. The third one was to offer a limited interactive element by allowing church members to ask questions about what has been posted on social media. Lastly, some pastors used a shift to digital worship service as an opportunity to rethink the essence of the church and enquire about what members need and what members suggested was used to transform the worship services accordingly. From the above Campbell is of the opinion that digital worship service must have a character of interaction, sharing of experience and reflect mutual influence of the leader and the online audience.

How did churches in South Africa embrace digital churches?

Joubert and Schoeman (2015) conducted empirical research on reformed mainline churches in South Africa. The aim of the research was to find out how much technology is used within their church ministry to prepare for future ministry that may require a shift towards a greater use of technology. The challenge with the research is that it was a pilot study, and occurred before the Covid 19 pandemic but it revealed the following: The participating congregations used social networks to post congregational activities, and texts and photos are less used. A digital platform is used to record sermons and preferably in both audio and video formats. The weakness of

most participating congregations was that they do not have digital communication task groups. Positively the majority of these congregations agreed that they do annual budgeting for their digital ministry to the congregation. For their digital ministry, they make use of a graphic designer or a volunteer.

In my observation within South Africa, during the Covid 19 pandemic mainline churches and Pentecostal churches made use of digital platforms to continue with their church ministries. The famous digital platforms used were Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube. The mainline churches in the former white suburbs and urban areas were most common on digital platforms. Rural mainline churches and the African Independent Churches (AIC) were very scarce on digital platforms during the Covid 19 pandemic. In my observation, my colleague pastor from one of the AIC churches said during Covid 19 pandemic in 2020 they never opened churches until 2022 when Covid 19 regulations were scraped, and churches were fully opened.

How did Churches in Zimbabwe embrace digital church?

Embracing technology is still an issue because churches which embraced technology during and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic did so out of crisis. We seem to see technology as a barricade which served its purpose during Covid 19 pandemic and we now resort to face-to-face which is more appealing than receiving sermons and prayers online. In short, of all churches cutting across denominational divides less than 20% have embraced technology in their services post Covid 19 pandemic.

Tagwirei (2022) mentions several challenges which forced some of the churches in Zimbabwe to fail to embrace digital churches during and aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. These are economic hardships, lack of material resources, lack of preparedness, lack of human resources, communication disruptions during worship services, cultural barriers, technical constraints, high cost of data, electricity blackouts, and congestion of online platforms and the majority of the AICs in Zimbabwe did not attempt to embrace a digital approach to ministry during and aftermath of the Covid 19 pandemic because of their uncritical solidarity with the government of Zimbabwe they had privilege to hold their worship service without much interference from the state (Musoni, 2019). But the Covid 19 restrictions were in force to the mainline, Pentecostal and Charismatic (Ministries) churches, not the African Independent Churches because they were and are in support with the dictates of the ruling party.

Role of pastors in doing digital church

Magezi (2015) in his research on how pastors in Zimbabwe use the technology in their churches, shares the following information. There are three identities of pastors arising from increased technological use in Zimbabwean churches. The first identity is of a pastor who is a technology embracer, networker and entrepreneur. This kind of pastor uses technology to revolutionise the church and its ministry by exploring new ways. The second one is of a pastor who is very cautious to embrace technology and is a confused technology consumer. The pastor here is aware of the benefits of technology but feels it is wrong and prefers the cautious use of technology in his denomination. The third and last identity is of a pastor who isolates himself from technology, objects to the use of it is unconnected, ignorant and feels that God is somewhat an enemy of technology. This pastor associates technology with the enemy of the Bible, evil and immoral celebrities driven by consumerism and self-glorification. The use of digital technology should not be used to undermine the face-to-face worship services because the two are not against each other but rather complement each other. Technology is not sinful or an enemy of God as it seems under the discussion of the third identity of pastors arising from

the use of technology. In support, Janzen (2020) states that technology is not alien to theology, since it seeks to transform reality and God is in it to guide its process of transforming reality.

Musonda (2022) notes that often pastors used digital ecclesiology for training, encouraging, support and evangelisation. Some online training and pastoral support can save time and costs if done online. The Internet has the power to enable pastors to reach over a million people worldwide with a single sermon. This is possible because from one device digital worship service can be watched by more than one person, shared with others and accessed at flexible times by other people. Another role for pastors is to embrace the digital church as the new identity and tool for the future of gospel outreach. Embracing digital technology is the first step to the digital church in the 21st century and beyond. As was necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic pastors must think outside the box about the way of doing digital church.

According to Musonda (2022), the role of pastors is to initiate new methods of spreading the gospel by setting up a technical team or a group of volunteers to provide the necessary training and support to those who want to learn how to use digital media platforms effectively. Training of digital evangelists and how to use digital media platforms effectively is important. This breaks down the barriers of proximity, allowing you to reach people around the world: and it gives us access to people who wouldn't typically come to church.

The significance and benefits of doing digital church

The church survived the scourge of Covid 19 pandemic when it was compelled to close the doors of its buildings and restrict the number of believers permitted to participate in the worship service. To reach out to its members many churches shifted to the use of digital media to continue offering services of the church like preaching, Holy Communion, and pastoral care and counseling. Therefore, the digital platform offered hope and an alternative solution to the constrained physical contact of believers who need to attend worship services. Since we are gradually shifting towards a post-pandemic church, the church must view digital technology and culture as allies in cultivating people's daily faith and strengthening personal and family spirituality while also facilitating connections of believers for worshipping and reaching out to each other (Da Silva, 2020).

Joubert and Schoeman (2015) relate that we live in a digital age and with congregations that function within a fluid network society. Therefore, they argue that for congregations to remain relevant in this digital age the following must happen: Congregations must not only use digital platforms for mere sharing of the correct information, but they must engage the digital platform to provide mentorship, accompany and guide one another and others to understand correct information and to apply it, to the glory of God and for the benefit of others. Again, Joubert and Schoeman (2015) state that digital communication is more than a medium of communication but is becoming part of a new and global identity. The new identity of the church is being digital and being able to connect virtually and not be limited by space to worship God. Lastly, Joubert and Schoeman (2015) mention that digital platforms can be utilized to develop electronic databases whereby accounting systems and membership registers can be stored and managed. According to Mahiya and Murisi (2022), the significance of the digital platform is to connect with broad membership as well as reach out and be relevant to young Christians. Broad membership here refers to members of the church who cannot attend due to work purposes, illness, disability, and geographical reasons (Silverkos, 2020). By reaching out implies the digital platform of the church can be used as an opportunity to: evangelise non-believers in Christ, share information and communicate with members on Social Media Groups, make available digital gallery of

recordings to be accessed anytime and to be used for personal enrichment and allow sharing online prayer requests (Schaper, 2020).

Churches and traditional churches in particular are losing young people to emerging churches. Hence, traditional churches on average have more older members as compared to many of the emerging churches. Cloete (2020) suggests that to avoid losing young people in this digital age of churches there is a need for intergenerational cooperation between ministers and young people on the issue of digital functioning of the church and the improvement thereof. Since young people are bored easily by monotonous and traditional approaches to worship and liturgy. Furthermore, Mahiya and Murisi (2022) note that digital platforms can be used to enhance and strengthen traditional ministries such as worship, fellowship, pastoral care, education, mission and community outreach, evangelism, and communications. Digital platforms of the church like websites and social media can help facilitate the fundraising process of the church. For example, websites and social media are optimum platforms to share and market the ministries of the church and exhort potential donors to fund those ministries of the church. Unlike traditional worship services that are limited and regulated, the digital platform of the church allows an opportunity for people to be active and open through posting intercessory prayers and expressing themselves whilst service continues (Reimann, 2020).

Challenges of doing digital church

South Africa and Zimbabwe share grossly more than 60% of their religious practices. They have exchanged human and religious resources over the years as multi-religious countries. They are both members of the SADC region with diverse multicultural societies in which the church is one common indicator of religion as the countries are predominantly Christian (Sheree et al., 2020).

The church was one of the major gathering points in the region and a major hotspot for the spread of Covid-19 which therefore called for extraordinary thinking to make sure it survived at the same time the pandemic was still evident (Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020).   South Africa hosts more than two million Zimbabweans and that has had a huge bearing on the sharing of cultural, economic and political ideologies on its Zimbabwean counterpart making the sharing of ideas on digital church easily spread between the two countries. The effects of Covid-19 on churches and life in churches between the two countries are somehow similar and they share the trials and tribulations in a bid to serve the churches and religion in the transition towards the post Covid-19 pandemic.

Campbell (2020) and also Koeze and Popper (2020) say that the coronavirus crisis had forced individuals, communities and organizations to increase and accelerate their digital activity across the world including the business and the religious standings. Thus, the digitalization of life in the wake of restrictive pandemics such as Covid-19 had also found its discourse in the churches of God across the globe, with South Africa and Zimbabwe being examples of the Southern Africa effect of the digitalization that turned the churches towards the new normal. This new normal involved the coexistence of an actual church in a fixed space with restricted attendance and a digital church through the use of digital meeting platforms such as live streaming, Google Classrooms, and Zoom in the execution of church ministries across the world (González, 2020). However, some churches decided not to take the opportunity of restricted church attendance but closed down during the Covid 19 pandemic.

A number of other churches decided to have online streaming of services and offered online spiritual and financial services such as worship service, counselling, paying of tithe, and monthly subscriptions to avoid the destruction of church ministry by the presence of pandemics

(Camacho, 2021). As revealed by Google Trends, during the Covid 19 pandemic the digital search for religious services and spiritual issues had multiplied in African countries with the increase in searches for information about churches increasing by more than 60% since the beginning of the lockdown in 2020. During the Covid 19 pandemic search on Google data, this led to the peak popularity of searches such as heaven, blessing, God, Pope Francis and prayer, and this is a sign of the advent of the digital churches' era due to the emergence of the Covid 19 virus.

Although many churches during the Covid-19 pandemic responded quickly towards embracing digital platforms to offer church services, there were still some churches that did far less to harness the opportunity of shifting to online churches because of rigidness to transformation and reformation. Hence, the innovative digital church is received with mixed feelings in the religious fraternity. Mujinga (2021) argues that whilst the Pentecostals embraced the shift to digital platforms, the mainline churches in Zimbabwe did not regard digital platforms as a major priority. He attributed that to the majority of the clergies and the preachers who lacked technological skill to make plans to reach the unreachable congregants and on the other the members who were not used to receiving the gospel message through digital platforms. The lack of technological skill has led to the consequence of losing young people and the church was left with older people and eventually, they suffered declined memberships.

Tagwirei (2022) notes that the digital church in Zimbabwe is faced with several challenges. It is noted that some of the challenges of doing a digital church in Zimbabwe include the economic crisis, lack of preparedness, material resources, lack of human resources, communication disruptions, technical constraints, high cost of data, electricity blackouts and congestion of online platforms. In our observation, the common challenges of doing digital church in South Africa were electricity blackouts, high costs of data and lack of technological skills to do quality digital worship service. The above are some of the challenges, those in rural and remote areas suffered the most due to lack of relevant infrastructure and money to access internet and data. Those in marginalised places were left out without accessing the word of God unlike those in urban places.

Cloete (2020) states that the shift to digital church creates some unintended outcomes like for example, authority is no longer seated with the pastor but in the hands of the audience. This means audiences have the freedom of choice to listen to their clergy online or shift to other digital platforms to listen to sermons or get other spiritual services as the prefer. Moreover, Dyikuk (2020) says the challenges of the digital church are the audience may be sceptical and question the doctrines of being a digital church. For example, in his discussion of the church as a community and virtual community, Pope Francis warned that faith via media consumption is not the Church, because it is without the Holy Eucharist, without the people of God assembled, and without the sacraments, and he has described the trend as dangerous, and detached from the people of God.

According to Mahiya and Murisi (2022) digital platforms are highly exclusionary in nature because Church leadership may decide to organise worship services on a digital platform, knowing very well that their church members may be lacking resources like smartphones, data, and uninterrupted service of the network. Moreover, the church leadership's digital platform due to lack of digital skills may be of poor quality and does not allow two-way communication for effective interaction.

Protection of privacy and data protection of people is one of the potential hindrances of doing digital church (Reimann, 2020). For example, churches need to be aware of the regulations like

POPI Act 2013 and its equivalent in European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDRP, 2018) which controls how we process the personal data. This may mean that people will have to sign a consent form that by attending the church they allow that they may be recorded and viewed on the digital platform of the church. The other challenge is that the contents of the sermon the pastor provides needs to be sensitive to the information shared in privacy by the individual. In short, because of the POPI Act 2013 and GDPR (2018) laws, the digital platform of the church may be limited to what should be shared as a visual and audio publication.

The digital church has the potential to be misused by those who are reckless and imprudent. South Africa has experienced a scandal of pastors who used social media to advertise their irresponsible ministerial practices whereby they feed their members petrol as if it is a soft drink, and grass as cereal. This kind of behaviour prompted the government to intervene and propose the regulation of churches which is still pending. Lastly, a digital platform of the church promotes interaction and relationships in a virtual space, not face-to-face. The personal contact and touch that is so vital for a congregation's life is then sadly lost.

Guideline towards the digital church

Digital worship services need not be the exact copy of the traditional worship services. There is a need for flexibility, open-mindedness, and interaction. According to Campbell (2020:52) digital worship service is an opportunity to create a unique space for conversation, care, and encouragement that focuses on affirming the relationships and people within their faith community. This implies that whilst the worship service continues people may express themselves, appreciate the message, comfort others and affirm relationships with others whilst on the digital platform. Campbell further states that online worship service must be designed in such a way that it harnesses the interactive features of social media such as Zoom, Google meet, and YouTube to build deeper personal connections between church members and leaders. Moreover, Campbell advises that the influence and communication during digital worship service must be mutual, not unidirectional. This means that the church leaders and members must share words of encouragement and biblical insights on matters that concern their current situation.

Recommendations

After the Covid 19 pandemic, some sectors like financial services, health services, education and mining moved swiftly towards harnessing the benefits of digital technology. Despite the benefits of digital transition during Covid 19, some communities did not realise these benefits. For example, the majority of pastors from traditional churches lack technological skills and do not see any need to prioritise the use of technology in their churches and ministry. Pastors, in particular from traditional churches need to acquire new technological skills to partake and involve their churches in digital platforms which will assist their churches to be visible and relevant. Covid 19 pandemic enlightened us that whilst there is time, churches and pastors need to harness digital theological resources and platforms in order to enrich their ministries, attract the youth and increase their membership (Dyikuk, 2020)

Firstly, Joubert and Schoeman (2015) argue that technology is not value-neutral because as we use technology it affects our understanding of reality, interaction and embodiment of our faith. For example, frequent use of digital platforms may turn us to be lonely, individualistic and skeptical of the authority and doctrines of the church. Therefore, in the use of technology, we must be aware that it does not completely replace the traditional mode of doing ministry. Second, Joubert and Schoeman (2015) argue that religious interactions and experiences on

digital platforms are not the same as those in another context. Old people may feel excluded and those with no resources to connect may feel ignored, hence digital platforms must not be used to replace traditional worship and church ministry. Third, churches are entrusted with the life-transforming message of Christ, therefore churches must communicate in the language of the culture and media of the day (Joubert & Schoeman 2015). Fourth, Mujinga (2021) states that technology helps members to remain connected to their church and can also continuously give their offering which boosts the finances of the church. Fifth and lastly, Mujinga (2021:277) mentions that social media tools are an effective platform that can be used for evangelical purposes. They are a cost-effective method to reach millions of people than other digital platforms.

Conclusion

This article discussed that issue that the emergence of Covid-19 facilitated the need to create digital churches to make sure that the word of God could continue to reach people. The emergence of digital churches did not come about without challenges. These included the high costs of internet access due to data costs, lack of technological skills and relevant infrastructure, and criticism against advanced technological development. The authors also discussed that some of the Churches especially the mainline ones, and Pentecostal-Charismatics tried their level best to embrace the digital church notion during and after the post Covid-19 pandemic era. African Independent Churches in Zimbabwe and some parts of South Africa never attempted to embrace digital churches because of various reasons such as for example, uncritical solidarity with the ruling party and lack of technological skills. However, there is a need to embrace the digital church going forward for the survival of the church. Digital church can assist many churches to reach people at the same time, to do online fund raising, and cut the costs of reaching out to those in need of pastoral counselling and care.

Therefore, the article postulates that the digital church is a noble idea and needs to complement the physical attendance churches rather than replace them. The digital church needs to be characterized by interaction, mutual communication, and influence of both the leader and the audience. Digital church is the new identity and future of the church. Hence, for the church to be relevant, there is need to incorporate the digital church ministry for growth and mission to the people of God.

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