Rethinking Religious Practice and Activities through the lenses of Information and Communication Technologies in the era of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

There has been a steady rise in the practice and performance of religious activities within the cyberspace since the 1980s. Many pastors have embraced the use of technology in their religious and ministerial practices. However, what would be more critical is to understand how technology, once adopted and operational would assume the function of support and fulfil religious members' spiritual, emotional and social needs. This paper discusses technology use in religious organizations, particularly during the lockdown period of Covid-19 between March 2020 to the July 2021. The article uses South Africa as a research context to explore technology use and its role to address the challenges of support, space and practice. The paper employed a qualitative interpretive paradigm to source data from six members from different religious organizations in South Africa. Three themes arose from the data: information and communication technologies provide space for religious member to network; information and communication media facilitate religious practice and activities; and information and communication technologies enhance management of resources.

Keywords: Religious practice, religious activities, information and communication technologies, Covid-19 pandemic, lock down.

Introduction

The answer to the question of what it will take to fulfil individuals and religious group's spiritual, emotional and social needs remains elusive in the current state of the Covid-19 pandemic. For this reason, the search for more effective strategies to support the needs of individual religious members continues in many countries around the world. The world has now for over a year been struck by the pandemic of Covid-19 that, for safety reasons has restricted all sectors to close their businesses. These restrictions do not exclude religious organizations. In South Africa, religious gatherings were prohibited to curb the spread of Covid-19 (Moodley, 2021). Consequently, religious leaders have to rethink their approaches to religious practice and activities (RPAs) that will serve their members. One such approach is to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as broadcast and digital media. The author in this paper assumes South Africa is at an initial stage of introducing the range of media to its religious organizations. Thus, lack of resources and inadequate knowledge and skills of ICTs for religious purposes challenges many South Africans including religious bodies (World Bank, 2012).

Nevertheless, the use of technology for religious purposes is only just beginning, it is highly significant and generally an under developed area of enquiry (Bell, 2006). Because of a lack of resources and theoretical debates especially in South Africa, many new approaches to RPAs have begun to emerge. Most of these are aimed at transforming traditional religious gatherings into digital ones (Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Campbell, 2013; Consalvo & Ess, 2011). In other countries and contexts, digital services are also referred to as 'cyber-Sacred space'

(Consalvo & Ess, 2011), 'spiritualizing internet' (Campbell, 2010), 'digital religion' (Campbell, 2013), 'networked religion' (Campbell, 2012), and 'religious digital' (Hoover & Echchaibi, 2014).

Although digital religious practice and activities have gained popularity in countries such as Indonesia, America, Rome, Asia, Mali and Singapore, little is known about how such practices fulfil individual's spiritual, emotional and social needs. Even less research on digital religious practice and activities have been done in Africa and other developing countries. This also applies to South Africa with limited ICT resources such as the Internet and low data application (World Bank, 2012). This study seeks to explore the utility of ICTs in helping religions in South Africa to fulfil individual needs. The research primarily addresses the question of whether and how technologies can create space for individuals to support each other spiritually, emotionally and also socially, specifically within the South African context.

In response to the above research questions, this paper shall present the findings from different religious organizations in South Africa, involving six religious' members. The paper discusses the influence of ICTs to provide different contexts of RPAs and activities and support to individuals within the religious organizations. With the advent of technology infused into all walks of life, and the challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, and that religions are sub-systems of society and part of the information community, it is essential to investigate how ICTs are used in RPAs (OssaiUgbah, 2011; Magezi, 2007).

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: The next section describes the theoretical perspective underpinning the study, followed by the mode of enquiry, a report on a series of interviews with members of different religious organizations in South Africa to uncover how they experience the interaction among ICTs. Finally, the discussion of the study findings and conclusions are presented.

Theoretical perspective

Kumar and Kar (1985) have observed the way Information Technology (IT) has extensively penetrated the lives of people and predicted its use to affect every individual in the world. The Use of Technology.com (2011) has provided a list of over 100 ways falling into more than 36 categories in which technology is used in peoples' lives which include inter alia, churches. The practice and performance of religious activities within the cyberspace has however arisen earlier in the 1980s. According to Campbell (2012) these religious activities started with the formation of religious sub-groups on Usenet and email-based religious communities, as well as the creation of 'virtual temples' or churches and sites of online spiritual pilgrimage. However, many social scientists had for several decades assume that the spread of technology around the world would replace religious faith with an atheistic set of beliefs, or would become socially and culturally irrelevant (McGrath, 2004; Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Stark, 1999).

Numerous studies have already established the use of ICTs for religious purposes. For example, studies conducted in Indonesia, America and Rome provide statistics on the use of social media for religious purposes (APJII, 2017; Preston, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2014; Guzek, 2015). These studies confirm the concept of an increase in the number of Internet users who actively participate in online religious activities. Indonesian literature explains how the Sunni Islamic groups develops radio and television in order to provide teaching and to discuss issues of faith 'aqida', law 'sharia', and morality 'ahlaq' (Bakti, 2018). Unfortunately, much of the studies focused on the use of technologies for general religious purposes such as teaching and discussions of faith, law and moral issues. In such cases, little is revealed about the use of technologies to support an individual's spiritual, emotional and social needs. This is a gap that this study attempts to fill.

Information and communication technologies are tools that provide a context within which individuals and religious members when connected to the internet, can engage and fulfil their needs. Kluver and Cheong (2007) regard the internet as a convenient and valuable tool for disseminating information and contributing positively to religious communities. Humeira and Sarwono (2019:70) write that:

> The internet is a tool that expand offline religious activities in cyberspace and has changed the existing religious activities to some extent that there is no need for religious group members to be present at church, to listen to homilies or make confessions, or be present in the study room to study the Koran. They further mentioned that religious group members only need to visit religious service sites to fulfil their needs for worship.

Considering the above, one denotes that there are religious organizations that still find it difficult to transform their practice; they tend to view technology negatively. For this reason, Humeira and Sarwono (2019) arranged religious groups' technological perspectives into two dichotomous categories: religious groups that reject the internet and those that accepted the internet. The religious groups accepting the Internet consider it to be a 'space that offers easy access for anyone to search for religious content, spread God's message and reach more followers' (Humeira & Sarwono, 2019:69). Campbell (2005b:4) contends that, religious users often conceptualize and introduce the internet as suitable resource for spiritual purposes. Campbell further states: "The spiritual shaping of technology highlights that technology is embedded in a social process of negotiation between individuals or groups who inevitably shape them towards their own desire and values".

That said, an appropriation of the internet and other communication technologies occurs among most religious traditions (Adamu, 2002; Bunt, 2004; Prebish, 2004). As an illustration, the Majelis religious group in Mali view the internet an essential means of providing easy access for worshippers far away and those unable to attend offline (Schulz, 2007). Humeira and Sarwono (2019) provide some examples of religious service sites. The Majelis group created a website which was expanded using social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as well as YouTube account to upload videos to build group interaction with worshipers and to reach new worshippers (Humeira & Sarwono, 2019). Pope Francis preferred Twitter as a social medium to spread God's revelations and sacred Catholic missions (Guzek, 2015). In the United States, a group of Muslims use the internet for religious purposes such as studying the Koran and discovering the worship schedule (Mishra & Semaan, 2010).

With the above expositions as constituting an understanding of the use of internet in religion, Campbell (2010) defines the process of engagement with the technology for religious purposes as 'spiritualizing internet'. Similarly, Consalvo and Ess (2011:233) introduced a concept 'Cyberspace as a Sacred Space' to refer to a phenomenon of the presence of religious rituals in online spaces. In this regard, the Internet plays an essential role in widely spread religious practices and activities for followers in daily life (Campbell, 2013; Mishra & Sermaan, 2010).

Although there is no single definition of online RPAs, Humeira and Sarwono (2019) have observed that streaming religious shows through live broadcast on the internet connect group members to religious activities that they present a holy atmosphere in a different space. One such example is illustrated by Lockhead's (1997) observation of an online memorial service in the 1980s. Lockhead (1997) describes an online memorial service conducted on a network discussion board (Unison) involving liturgy of Christian prayers, scripture and meditation followed by individual postings of their reactions to the tragedy. The service demonstrated the power of the computer medium to unite the community in a time of crisis beyond the limits of geography or denomination (Lockhead, 1997:52). Pacey (2000) views technology as no longer a tool, nor a machine, but a system that involves aspects of values, traditions and human habits in its use.

At face value it could be interpreted to mean that the presence of online service sites does not replace RPAs in the offline space. Though online and offline realities seem increasingly vague, challenging religious institutions to maintain control over online practices, the use of internet can merge offline and online RPAs (Barker, 2005; Humeira & Sarwono, 2019). Religious practice and activities in the offline space act as a source of knowledge for online RPAs, and strengthen the offline practices (Campbell, 2005; Martinez-Zarate et al., 2008). As Campbell (2013:1) argues: "Digital religion is a 'framework for articulating the evolution of religious practice and activities online which are linked to online and offline context simultaneously. Digital religion explores the connection and interrelation between online and offline religious contexts and how these contexts bridged, blended and blurred over time".

This would suggest the blending of online RPAs with offline ones. Humeira and Sarwono's (2019) study confirms that some religious groups continue to hold religious activities in the offline space and upload the materials and videos to the Internet. Similarly, Hoover et al. (2004) believes religion online mirrors the trend of people merging their online activities with their offline lives.

The same can be said on traditional religious services to be blended with the use of broadcast media. As an illustration, the Muslims in Mali saw the benefit of using local radio stations to broadcast their sermons (Schulz, 2007). As Schulz (2007:58) echoes: "The local radio stations generally broadcast the sermons of various preachers. The sermon cassettes were cheap and accessible to people without literacy skills and religious training and allows believers to enlarge the spectrum of spiritual experiences and to integrate them into their daily, 'mundane activities".

A similar observation was that of Klaver's (2015) ethnographic study wherein several modes of preaching practices were supported by Power Point projections: real-time preaching on stage casted on the screens and showing videos of sermons when a live speaker was unavailable. Based on this ethnography, Klaver argues that real-time video casting and showing of sermons on video has substituted live preaching across limits of time, place and context.

Technology has been appreciated by many authors as well as considered a threat by others (Drees, 2004). In this context, Schroeder, Heather, and Lee (1998) argue that the lack of physical proximity precludes the practice of religion as conventionally conceived. Likewise, Dawson (2005:19) enquires: "If religion becomes 'detached from real places, real people, and a real sense of shared time and cultural memory, then how can there ever be a significant measure of collective conscience and collective effervescence?".

To sum it up, these authors suggest that if religion is enacted online, it would lose something of what it is supposed to be.

This study adopted a conceptual framework based on the work of Hjarvard Stig (2008). In his theory of mediatization, Hjarvard (2008) provides an analytical framework for theorising media as agents of religious change. His views are based on religious organizations and practices as shaped by the presence of media, and that media is pervasive, and conditions interpersonal interactions and social formations. Mediatization emphasizes the factor of religious change with respect to the media's long-term influence on social and cultural institutions, aesthetic practices, and technologies. Several authors used this theory to understand how media can influence religion and vice versa, as well as on the mediated nature of religion itself (Meyer & Moors, 2007; Morgan, 2008; Stolow, 2005). While this concept emphasizes religious change, they still fall short to articulate on how media connect individuals and religious members. This study therefore blended Hjarvard Stig's framework with the connectivism framework of Siemens and Downes (2009) which, identifies knowledge as being distributed across a network of connections. As Downes (2007:1) attests, "Connectivism is characterised as a reflection of our society that is changing rapidly. Society is more complex, connected socially, global, and mediated by increasing advancement in technology".

Linking the two frameworks concerning the influence of media on RPAs made sense, especially for examining the relationship between media and religion and the resulting changes in RPAs amidst the global pandemic. This combination of perspectives on the religious change in the study's conceptual framework helped to address the limitations of previous studies that sought to understand the use of communication technologies by pastors (Wyche et al., 2006).

Methodology employed

This study employed a qualitative research approach with an interpretive paradigm to explore the extent of technology use in religious organizations and its role in supporting individuals' needs. An interpretive paradigm allows researchers to experience, interpret and understand the complexities of the sociocultural world (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Maxwell, 2005; Babbie & Mouton, 2006). This article finds meaning and experience built by individuals based on the perspectives of participants related to technology use in RPAs. A qualitative study aims to understand objects in depth, not to find laws and make generalisations (Lincoln & Guba, 1992). The data were collected using in-depth interviews with individual members of the six religious' organizations. These include three Christian denominations and three Charismatic churches. The characteristics of participants are members of either the social network group and or the follower of a certain broadcast for a sufficiently long period or more than a year - during Covid-19 lockdown. The assumption is that the involvement for such a period enable them to understand the role technology plays to fulfil their needs. Ethical considerations were observed. Informed consent was one of the means by which the right to autonomy of participants was protected. Individuals could make informed decisions in order to participate in the research voluntarily as they had information on the possible risks and benefits of the research. There was no physical harm or discomfort, any invasion of privacy and any threat to dignity for any participant and they were not compensated to participate. In addition, the researcher made the subjects aware of any expected benefits either to them or to religious bodies through the gaining of new knowledge.

Online interviews through WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams were conducted with the selected individual members in June of 2021. The author attempted to identify and interview at least an individual who would be recognized as a leader within the religious community and well nested in the issues of technology. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, all the major religious representations could not be reached. Invitations and consent to participate in the study was sent through WhatsApp messages, and only six participants consented to their voluntary participation. Thus, the interviews included one member per religious organization.

Each interview followed a standard set of questions and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Although most of the interviews were conducted in English, some responses were given in Setswana and Northern Sotho where the participant was more comfortable in speaking that language. All the languages are considered official languages in South Africa. Almost all participants were adults (4 males and 2 females) active in the use of ICTs. All interviews were translated, transcribed verbatim, coded and analysed using a grounded theory approach. According to Babbie and Mouton (2006), in grounded theory, codes emerge from the data set as read by the researcher.

Findings

The study of the rethinking of religious practice and activities through information and communication technologies was motivated by the author's desire to explore and understand what underlies trust that many researchers have placed on ICTs as a platform for religious meetings. In this section the author discusses precisely what some religious organizations in South Africa did to utilise ICTs and how they did so. An interesting finding based on the

responses of the participants (P) was that their responses reflected a pattern like that noted by researchers who study the internet for religious purposes (Kluver & Cheong, 2007; Guzek, 2015; Humeira & Sarwono, 2019; Preston 2011). Most responses reflected the utilisation of social media in their religious gatherings (Bakti, 2018; APJII, 2017; Guzek, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014; Preston, 2011). As the participants' responses were analysed, three major themes developed. These three themes could all be found unveiled in one person's responses simultaneously: information and communication technologies provide space for religious members to network; information and communication media facilitate religious practice and activities; and information and communication technologies enhance management of resources.

Information and communication technologies provide space for religious members to network

All the interviewees agreed that their participation in RPAs was through the broadcasts and social network which Siemens (2006) described as the provider for new forms of communication and knowledge formation. The participants respected the Covid-19 regulations. It was therefore unexpected for members to have physical gatherings in their respective religious organisations, and for this reason have to interact with ICTs such as voice note, video calls, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, as well as radio and television (Humeira & Sarwono, 2019; Guzek, 2015; Bakti, 2018). As participants explained, religious members interacted in social networks for religious purposes:

P1*: I have been receiving daily sermons through WhatsApp that really fulfilled me spiritually.*

P2: *As a pastor you can use voice note, video calls, Facebook, YouTube to reach out to members. Last week Friday I used livestream to conduct a funeral where the attendance was limited to 50 in terms of the regulations.*

P3: *At times someone will pass you information that's when one will get sermon through WhatsApp. You do chat groups, sermons passed by through chat groups. The group admin post and in other groups somebody will be sending message from other churches.*

P4: *The Facebook page is the only invite of where we had an interaction with some of the Christians and our congregants. They created that platform, I think every Thursday they invite congregants, Pastors and Deans. They also invite other pastors who have interest, for example, pastors from outside are invited. there are lot of positive comments regarding the sermon on the Face book page'.*

P5: *WhatsApp, it's easy to use and cheap.*

P6: *We also have Zoom for one-on-one service where we interact with our spiritual parents.*

In these quotations, the participants suggest that their RPAs revolved around two major ICTs; social networks and broadcasts. It is clear from these quotes that the majority prefer the WhatsApp chat groups, whereas other participants have interacted on Facebooks and You Tube. It is also clear that participants receive sermons and religious messages from other religious organization's members and pastors outside their own affiliated bodies. Whatever the case, sermons and religious messages become shared entities. Religious members gain knowledge from a network of connections formed from experience and interactions between individuals and the technologies that link them (Siemens, 2005). It may be safe to assume that technology provided a space for individuals and groups to engage in RPAs. The author pursues the idea of social network as a space for religious meeting, where members share and discuss religious messages with the one of the participants cited above. He provided the following example to illustrate the point: *"*Plus, minus 80% of followers listen to the messages

or read the daily messages. The messages shared, go viral in a way such that others share with other groups. In a way the communication media bridge the gap".

The importance of social network and engagement of religious organisation members was central to the narratives of each of the participants interviewed. Though some of the participants preferred listening to radio and watching TV broadcasts (Schulz, 2007; Bakti, 2018). It is from such broadcasts that they come across channels that are courage promoting to listeners and viewers. In this regard, participants explained how TV broadcast nurtured their soul:

> TBN channels nurture me because they are there. I watch Joel Osteen in the morning and with Joyce Meyer I can move from one channel to another. They send you inspirational messages once you partnered with them.

> I would say the radio is making a lot of difference as compared to the social network. First, there are two programs broadcast on radio. There is gospel Thursday from morning until 12 midnight. In this program they invite pastors and motivational speakers from various religious denominations and groups. Their music is fulfilling it makes me calm for the day. On Sunday, there is a sermon on Motsweding radio (broadcast). In this sermon they are teaching, they give you hope. They are trying to give you a picture of what we are going through in real life. The Sunday program is broadcast twice in a day, that is in the morning and evening. I'm telling you the team of Motsweding take me half way to heaven. They are so practical, they don't just share the word, they relate the scripture to the practical situation.

The foregoing quotations highlight two more key benefits of media that work, which will now receive attention: media as a tool to reach out individuals and members, and also media as a tool to support individuals need. The foregoing quotation draws attention to the importance of reaching out to individuals remotely (Kluver & Cheong, 2007). This would suggest that the extensive use of ICTs during lock down periods played a crucial role of reaching individuals and religious members who were craving for greater spiritual nourishment. One participant indicated the importance of information and communication media to worshippers: "Half a loaf is better than no bread. Media was not replacing the physical religious meeting and worship but softening the blow of being together. It softened the blow of not being able to meet physically. If media was not there and we could not meet, many people would have been in isolation. There was preaching, singing, worshipping that was taking place".

Though the use of media during lock down did not mean to replace physical worship and religious meetings, it has assisted to support and enrich individuals and religious members' spiritual fulfilment (McGrath, 2004; Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Stark, 1999). For this reason, one participant explained how he "…used video calls and voice notes to conduct council sessions". Another participant shared a sentiment and explained: "It's working because people need God, spiritual support, emotional support and or religious encouragement where they go through a difficult time when we are losing many people or being hospitalised due to illness".

One more participant commented on how some online preachers are practical and inspiring in the manner in which they simplify their preaching:

> It does a lot, because their preaching is like…they preach the bible in simple terms. Joyce Meyer can also demonstrate how God can change you from this person to that person, she even dramatizes it. Due to this dramatization, one learns that if you ask God, things are possible. Let me give you an experience of my life, I'm a divorcee, I got divorced when my son was one year old. I hate this woman who took my husband. Joyce demonstrated how hatred hurts you, it's like you are putting a sword to yourself. I cried, I prayed and asked forgiveness from God. Joel Osteen is inspirational, he will teach you that you don't talk negative about yourself.

Although initially excited about some of the online preachers, this participant's comments draw attention to how she finally managed to forgive herself from hatred. Her comments suggest that she drew inspiration from listening to other preachers, especially the online preachers who will tend to relate their preaching to real life contexts.

The idea of togetherness was important to religious members in terms of worship, comforting each other during difficult times, and receiving sermons in the presence of the preachers. One participant described his experience of togetherness as follows:

> In our black culture we are gregarious people, operating in groups there's where we find comfort, where we can comfort one another in proximity. When a person is physically around, where you are with your brother, sister, mother you can share the emotions whether the person is happy you share the happiness, whether the person is in pain, you share the pain.

It became clear from this participant's response and those of others, that the absence of physical meetings affected many people both socially and emotionally. The spirit of togetherness among members would suggest the presence of a spirit of Ubuntu within the Black cultures and religious organisations. Though it is considered as Ubuntu to provide support to individuals and members, it is also important to abide by the Covid-19 protocols of social distancing (Moodley, 2021). Thus, physical contacts between members remained a high risk. Participants are aware of the Covide-19 protocols, as explained:

> During lockdown contact must be minimal. However, religious members need support, people continue to need pastoral care because some of them are depressed, are anxious. For an example, when a person is Covid-19 positive, that person is in isolation and need support.

An increase in the number of ministries mushrooming nationwide affect the number of TV channels broadcast to the masses. To this, many ministries have some slots to broadcast their sermons. These might confuse viewers as to what channel relates to their RPAs. One of the participants who experienced this challenge opines:

> Because you don't want yourself to be bombarded with lot of information, so one would choose certain channels that would resonate well with him. It is not every channel or preacher who will make you, whose presentation would resonate with you. You would choose your preachers, you would choose your channels.

It is true from the responses that participants are selective on what they watch or listen (Campbell (2005b). Some of the participants listen to 'Gospel gold' because the music they perform and videos they share, are found very edifying and empowering. Whilst other participants are regular viewers of TBN, Daystar and Faith TV channels. The participant explains reasons for her choice:

> In daystar, I love their music, especially when is time for Johnny Lam and the Husband's program. The choir that performs is nurturing, the message send is so holly. People are singing, worshipping, you feel part of the whole process whilst in the house, at times I end up jumping and dancing with them. With other channels you listen to the praise programs, and other programs where there are interviews conducted with different preaches. You get to know where the preachers come from and how they grew up.

It is so interesting to learn from participants that information and communication media stimulated them to behave in certain ways whilst watching the show on TVs. It is also worth to note that participants became part of the virtual worship group. This can only happen if there is a preacher or program that connect to you spiritually. One of the participants explained spiritual connectivity to music and preaching programs:

> In the myriad of channels there, even not specifically hundred percent, you need a channel that will make you feel comfortable spiritually. The pastor that resonates well with what you believe is useful. There are different pastors with different preaching styles and maybe interpretation of the word.

Similarly, another participant supported the idea of selecting the channel that relates to his spiritual needs: 'the rationale behind the choice of program is selecting those Christian channels which are aligned to your Christian faith'. In the same tone one more participant explained her choice:

> You go to church listen to someone preaching but not getting the message. Since I listened to Joyce Meyer's sermons, I end up understanding the sermon. Integration in the church preachers is not there, no relationship between their preaching and what is practically happening.

The foregoing quotation draws attention to the importance of interpreting the gospel. The responses suggest that some traditional preachers cannot interpret the gospel, and as such listeners are misled by their preaching. Thus, participants are convinced that listening and viewing other virtual preachers make them understand the gospel better than before. Many of the participants are positive about the virtual sermons they observed and confirmed:

> Seeing that we not sure for how long Covid-19 will be with us, people should not discard the media for wanting to meet physically. Because if you find a channel or a preacher who resonate well with your spirit it will soften your spiritual fulfilment.

> These are messages of hope, courage and sustenance in the mist of Covid-19 pandemic. I will encourage the society to view the channels because they are source of spiritual upliftment.

> It is important because it nurture us, some people will send you messages that advice you to listen to a certain priest preaching. I believe media assist a lot, if you find it nurturing you share with others. I always send people I know messages that they watch Joel's preaching.

> I think with this new normal you cannot sit back and wait to your church. So, the radio is very much important because if I compare radio and TV I rather listen to radio.

Participants are in favour of the communication media such as the YouTube and WhatsApp because of their convenience. They believe YouTube works better for people who travel a lot and do not have access to TV. At the same time, WhatsApp is useful because is accessible and affordable to many religious group members. This information and communication media assisted and supported individuals and religious members spiritually, emotionally and also socially during the lock down. The participants explained their experiences of the support received through the information and communication media:

> People who experienced some loss of family members were comforted and supported emotionally through WhatsApp, sms, and voice notes. Support to bereavement were also shown by attending virtual memorial services and funerals broadcast through Zoom, Teams, and Facebook platforms.

> For me it works, especially during lockdown, as you are down and quiet and someone drops a message, someone sent a verse that will talk in line with what you are going through. You get some words of encouragement; your spirit is uplifted. When someone is not well, we send some message and we pray for that person, socially we share such messages or verses or information.

> I've done counselling, I've sent voice messages, I've called some of them. In terms I do it through telephone and I physically visit them. We are afraid of Covid-19 but simply take precautions.

It became clear from these participants' responses that many religions have transformed their approaches and aligned them towards the digital way of using a variety of information and communication media. The various types of media have been used to support individuals and religious members who experienced bereavement and who needed support to fulfil their spiritual, emotional and social needs.

Overall the data suggest that on the topics of interacting with information and communication media as discussed in this study, there were serious gaps in individual member's knowledge and accessibility of digital resources to fulfil their spiritual, emotional and social needs. This contrasts studies that showed an increased number of social media users for religious purposes (Bakti, 2018; APJII, 2017; Guzek, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014; Preston, 2011).

It was somewhat surprising to learn from the participants' responses that the religious organizations have slightly transformed their RPAs to align with Covid-19 regulations. The next focus was then on trying to understand the extent to which information and communication media would be able to assist individuals and religious members to facilitate their offerings to the church. The advance of technology seems to play a key role in that process of transformation, by moving from more traditional methods of making contributions physically during religious meetings, to a new method of using the process of electronic fund transfer (EFT).

Information and communication media facilitate religious practice and activities

To adhere to the Covid-19 regulation of social distancing, Information and communication media were used by religious organizations to facilitate activities such as serving the holy communion to members. Though all the participants' religious organizations believe in holy communion, not all of them managed to serve it during the lockdown. When interviewed about their individual responses, participants alluded to the approach churches facilitated for holy communion during the lock down:

> Holy communion served once a month regardless of Covid-19 using pre-packed holy communion under the supervision of the pastor. Pre-packed is where you have the bread and juice which the members can self-administer under the pastor's supervision. The church made the pre-packaging available, some request from the church or purchase their own and serve from their places. They will listen to the recording and follow the instruction.

Though holy communion was not served the way it has been served before, some organizations still receive it virtually from their homes, either guided by the pastor or the scripture. When asked if religious members were comfortable with this practice, participants responded positively: "Yes, they are, I suppose they are satisfied because they understand the reason for doing so".

It became clear from this participants' responses and those of others, that within religious organizations, possibilities exist for serving holy communion virtually with or without the presence of the pastor.

Secondly, individuals or families can either receive the package from the church or provide themselves. Overcoming the challenge of not having holy communion for a long period by individuals and religious member is an important first step in adopting information and communication media as a vehicle for serving holy communion. However, what would be even more critical is to understand how the information and communication media, once adopted and operational, then assume the function of challenging and changing the religious organization's resources.

Information and communication technologies enhance management of resources

When asked how they manage their organisation's resources such as finances, in one breath all participants mentioned that they believe in offering to the Lord in the form of monthly tithes and or pledges. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, these offerings were presented in physical church meetings. The format has recently changed during the lockdown. The responses create a collective understanding that their organizations have recently resorted to electronic funds transfer (EFT) method. Though not all the members are able to use the EFT facilities. Participants' responses help to uncover some of the critical issues that lead to new methods of offering in the church.

A sense of cohesion began to develop amongst religious organizations. It is this cohesion that seems to have been critical to the successful functioning of churches in this difficult circumstance. The interviews with participants confirmed the importance of this sense of cohesion in addressing the challenge of limited and depleted funds in the church coffers using information and communication media, such as the internet. For example, when the participants were probed on how the church resources were administered, and if all members contribute accordingly, they mentioned important facts such as the following: commitment and self-discipline, conscience, voluntary contributions, education about the importance of offering, and faithfulness.

The importance of cohesion in religions and the participation of members as contributors to the collective resources of the Christian church in this study, again come through as critical factors in creating the spirit of compassion in the church. Similarly, one participant emphasised the need for churches to recognise unemployment as a challenge to individuals' affordability: "My sister was saying her daughter is in arrears as she has been unemployed. You don't even know how many people have contributed and those who did, even the pledges".

It is clear, therefore, that participants felt different about offering. It has been noted from their responses that offering to the Lord should not be commercialised in a sense that members incur some arrears and that they owe the church. Moreover, the responses further revealed that the church leadership has continuously made announcement about depleting funds, requested members to make offering. The participants further believe that it is not obligatory that members contribute as prescribed, individuals can still contribute more to meet the given targets. For this reason, the author argues that there is some of the evidence of using the internet to facilitate the organization's funds. The author further explored the idea of consistency in using technology to offer to the Lord. In the next segment, the author captures a discussion from the participants to exemplify the notion of consistent offering: "People who are Christians and their faith not yet staunched they feel they are on leave, you can even hear from your colleagues at work as we speak, and it is a priest salary though we don't know how much his salary is".

The interesting point about this participant is that she realised that it is difficult for organizations to follow who had or had not offer accordingly. Her responses further identified members who do not offer without valid reasons. A comment from one participant captured the sentiment: "My biggest worry is where these offerings do, we don't know where they go? Are they not the one supposed to assist the needy community?"

From these responses and the foregoing analyses of the administration of organisation's funds, it is reasonable to suggest that individuals were indeed challenged during the lockdown, and that some possibilities for change in their knowledge of the administration of funds within the church also existed. As a result of the removal of this challenge to understand the administration of organization's funds, the participants were given opportunity to provide the treasurers with some proof of payments and that in turn the treasurers avail electronic financial report. Removing the challenges, however, is more of a digital transformation that seems necessary for organizations to create a kind of opportunities for members' access to financial records.

Conclusion

One of the most critical contribution of this study is its ability to shed light on how ICTs serve as opportunities for religious organizations to change their practice and activities in the era of Covid-19 pandemic. While it was evident from the study discussed here that ICTs begin to provide religions with the opportunities to connect, and share RPAs, it is important to note that not all religious members will participate with the same enthusiasm in an online space. This therefore disbands the assumption that ICTs are unitary and offer identical benefits to all participating religious members. The differential benefits of ICTs to participating religious members are very important for considering whether technologies are to be considered for a large-scale programme of digital literacy for religious organizations in South Africa and elsewhere. This would concur Siemens and Down's (2007) connectivism, where religious members connect socially, globally, and mediated by increasing advancements in technology. Moreover, there is an orchestration of a complex disarray of ideas, networked to form specific set of information by religious members.

What matters the most in this study was not simply whether religious members interact in an online space for RPAs, but also how such engagement provide opportunities for fulfilling their spiritual, emotional and social needs. Discussions and dialogue leading to listening, viewing and sharing on RPAs seem to provide better opportunities to challenge and change RPAs. As discussed earlier, religious organisations have to rethink their practice and activities that they mitigate the challenges of reaching out and support their members during the pandemic. This depend entirely on members' access to ICT resources, digital literacy skills and a sense of commitment to interaction and engagement in a digital space. This study has provided a gap on why and how ICTs make it possible for religious members to change their practice and activities. The major hypothesis can be restated as follows: by focusing on the participating members interactions through connectivism discourse and practice, the technologies were able to overcome the limitations of many online religious practice and activities that have failed to meet members' spiritual, emotional and social needs.

In conclusion, although the study shared light and better idea of whether technologies influence the religious practice and activities among members, there is still too little known about how other members of religious organizations may respond to online religious practice and activities and the various opportunities that technology presents. This suggests that online religion creates new possibilities to help scholars investigate in broader context how members from various religious organizations form communities and share ideas through practices and activities that happen in an online context.

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