




Developing a missional and ethical digital framework for liturgical practices: the case of St. John Apostolic Church of the Whole World (SJACWW)

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Abstract

This article explores the adaptation of African Independent Churches (AICs) to the evolving digital landscape, with a focus on the implications of technology for liturgical practices, community cohesion, and the empowerment of congregants. Utilizing the St. John Apostolic Church of the Whole World (SJACWW) as a pivotal case study, this investigation highlights the digital transformation of liturgical methodologies, including the adoption of online services and the emergence of virtual prayer meetings, which were notably accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Key dimensions of inquiry encompass the development of a missional and ethical digital framework in addressing challenges posed by digitalisation in a congregational setting. The challenges faced by AICs in technology integration, including issues of digital literacy, the potential dilution of cultural traditions, access and equity, and resistance to change, are also addressed. The research suggests a missional and ethical digital framework based on missional imagination and digital ethics, which converge faith and technology, potentially leading to innovative interpretations and practices within AICs. By presenting successful digital initiatives, this study aspires to provide insights into how AICs navigate the complexities of modernization while safeguarding their cultural identity. Moreover, the research makes projections on the future trajectory of AICs in an increasingly digital environment, considering the potential impact of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, on their evolution. Ultimately, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how technology can foster the growth of faith communities in Africa, thereby enhancing spiritual engagement, community connectivity, and social empowerment amidst ongoing digital transformation.

Keywords: missional imagination, cultural identity, digital ethics, digital age, liturgical practices, Digitalisation, St. John Apostolic Church of the Whole World (SJACWW).

Introduction

African Independent Churches, also known as African Indigenous Churches or African Initiated Churches, are recognized for their role in revitalizing the Christian faith on the African continent and in the diaspora. These churches are recognized for their indigenous expression of Christianity in the African context, a continent where Western forms of Christianity previously dominated during the colonial era. These churches have experienced tremendous growth since their inception. The AICs were just under 4 million at the beginning of the 20th century, and the number increased to about 30 million in the middle of the 20th century. The AICs also doubled these numbers to about 60 million towards the end of the 20th century (Anderson



2001a: ix). In the 21st century, it is estimated that there are more than 80 million AICS, which is more than 10% of the total number of Christians in Africa (Hunt, 2015:70). Globalization has presented both challenges and opportunities for AICs. While it has compelled these churches to confront external influences and adapt to modern changes, it has also opened new pathways for growth and connection, particularly through technology (Ugboh, G., 2023). The historical context highlights how AICs have evolved their worship practices in response to shifts in social, cultural, and technological landscapes over time. This evolution includes the adoption of contemporary engagement methods, such as using digital platforms for worship during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, understanding the historical context of AICs provides a solid foundation for examining their current adaptations to technology and the changing dynamics of worship in the digital age.

However, the engagement of AICs with technological development and evolution has not gone without challenges, such as digital literacy, the potential dilution of cultural traditions, access and equity, and resistance to change. The relevant research questions are: What is the relevant framework that can address the current challenges at the intersections of faith and digitalisation among AICs? What are the challenges of technology integration among AICs? How can a digital framework in liturgical practices respond to such challenges? What future trends can be drawn from the intersections of AICs and technology in worship? To answer these important research questions, this article utilizes St. John Apostolic Church of the Whole World (SJACWW) as a pivotal case study to highlight how the church leverages digital space and virtual platforms for prayer meetings. Another important section is the development of a missional and ethical digital framework to explore the role of technology in liturgical practices. The article will highlight the challenges of integrating technology into the liturgical practices of the AICs, using SJACWW as a case study. The missional and ethical digital framework is applied to the digital landscape in response to some of the challenges of technology integration in the AICs. The final section will explore the projections of future trends in the AICS in relation to the use of technology during their worship services.

Methodology

This study employed participant observation in conjunction with a thorough review of secondary sources, encompassing both published literature and unpublished documentary materials, to gather comprehensive data. The involvement of one of the researchers, who previously held membership in the African Initiated Churches (AICs), facilitated participant observation within the congregations she frequently attended, including the St John Apostolic Church of the Whole World (SJACWW), as well as her own church community. This dual role allowed the researcher to engage as a subjective participant while concurrently functioning as an objective observer throughout the research process.

The primary objective of participant observation is to gain an in-depth understanding of the values, beliefs, and lifestyles of a specific demographic (Pine, 2009, p. 208). In this context, the researcher became a subjective participant by leveraging knowledge acquired through personal experiences with the subjects of study. Such engagement fostered enhanced interaction and increased access to the group, providing insights that are often unattainable through traditional survey methodologies. Moreover, participant observation granted the researchers the capacity to function as objective observers, meticulously documenting observations while striving to keep personal emotions and biases from influencing the data collection and interpretation.

As participant observers, we exercised critical self-reflexivity, acknowledging the potential impact of our presence on the research process and the data obtained. Our study sought to maintain objectivity while examining the liturgical practices of AICs and the integration of technology, drawing upon the researcher's dual perspective as both a researcher and a member of the AIC community. One of the principal advantages of participant observation lies



in its capacity to provide profound insights, enabling researchers to explore social issues and phenomena through the lens of those who experience them firsthand (Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, 200).

Historical Contextualisation of St. John Apostolic Church of the Whole World (SJAWW)

St. John Apostolic Church of the Whole World (SJAW) can be understood in the context of AICs, which emerged as a response to Western missionary Christianity, often viewed as colonial and culturally alien. As highlighted above, the abbreviation AICs has various uses, including African Independent Churches, African Indigenous Churches, and African Initiated Churches. However, for the purposes of this study, we will use the abbreviation for general reference to this category of churches. These churches strive to express Christianity in ways that are culturally indigenous to African communities. AICs offer a space where local customs and traditional beliefs can be integrated into Christian practices, thus creating a unique cultural expression of faith. AICs were formed in part to reclaim Christianity and adapt it to African contexts, countering the dominance of Western models. These churches do not depend on external funding; instead, their members generate their own income to support the church's operations. Scholars such as Mwaura (2004:160) describe AICs as churches that have emerged in Africa through local initiatives, aiming to transform existing missionary Protestant Christianity and revitalize African culture within a Christian framework.

Matikiti (2014) characterizes AICs as churches intended exclusively for African converts, which utilize local traditions more extensively and specifically address African issues such as barrenness and witchcraft. Scholars such as Anderson (2001b), Ositelu (2002), and Mapuranga (2013) have documented the emergence of AICs, agreeing that these churches arose from a desire for liberation from the teachings of missionaries that failed to address the needs of local cultural communities. Mapuranga (2013) explained that the religious needs for healing, divination, prophecy, exorcism, and visionary interpretation are fulfilled through Christian means in AICs. Consequently, spiritual experiences in many AICs, such as healing, prophecy, and divination, revolve around the concept of spiritual possession. Thus, this research examines the transition from traditional AIC worship to a modernized form of worship, as churches adapt to globalization and digital technology. This includes using instruments such as microphones and keyboards in worship music to create an entertaining experience for congregants and attract the younger population to the church.

The historical background of the St. John Apostolic Church of the Whole World (SJACWW), commonly known as Johane Wetatu, which means "the third John," the church embodies the concepts of "*gotwe pakubarwa*" (the last one to be born) and "*asi Dangwe patsananguro*" (the first to receive sanctification). It was founded by Bishop Sydney Mabhiza in Mhondoro, Zimbabwe, in 1985 (<https://History and Origin of St. John Church of the Whole World - Search>). The church's founding was preceded by a vision to establish a religious institution, set against the backdrop of the Zimbabwean liberation war. Bishop Mabhiza received a divine calling at a remarkably young age, reportedly before the age of 10. However, he did not fully grasp the profound mission that awaited him nearly a decade later. The divine message reiterated that he had been chosen to lead a significant global congregation, to be named the St. John Apostolic Church of the Whole World. The founder had a prophetic dream in his youth, in which he was informed about his future role as the leader of a congregation. After a period of silence, the same voice returned, declaring, "You shall become a Bishop of a congregation, and you shall call it St. John Apostolic Church of the Whole World." The SJACWW operates as an apostolic, prophetic, evangelical Christian denomination, characterized by a deep appreciation for the gifts of salvation and prophecy. The church is dedicated to authentic worship and strives to establish the kingdom of God throughout the world. As highlighted by St John's TV, from humble beginnings in Mhondoro, St John has now planted more than 1000 branches across Zimbabwe (Aug 2024 statistics); the last international gathering held at Mutumwa St John City in August 2023 had over 100,000 people in attendance. Furthermore,



St John is growing phenomenally with branches across the globe, including areas such as Zambia, South Africa, Namibia, Mozambique, Malawi, Botswana, Australia, Canada, America, and the United Kingdom (St John's TV).

A missional and ethical Digital framework for liturgical practices

This section seeks to develop a missional and ethical digital framework to explore the role of social media and mobile applications in fostering connectivity in a congregational setting. Since the emergence of COVID-19, new liturgical practices have also developed, including online prayer, livestreamed sermons, online giving, online praise and worship, and the celebration of sacraments on online platforms (Dowson, 2020; Parish, 2020; Oliver, 2022; Thinane, 2022; James, 2023). These practices necessitate a framework to examine the role of social media and mobile applications in promoting connectivity within congregational settings. Digital liturgy emphasizes the utilization of various digital platforms in presenting liturgical practices, shaping how the church conducts worship in the digital age (Berger, 2017; James, 2023). In this context, it refers to the use of various social media and mobile applications in presenting liturgical practices within the church. This is crucial in understanding how the church, particularly the AICs, has adopted digital platforms for presenting the gospel.

A missional and ethical digital framework offers an opportunity to examine the liturgical practices of the church beyond conventional physical gatherings. This framework offers an understanding of how the church interacts with the digitally oriented world, particularly in its use of social media platforms and mobile applications. Oliver (2022:56) explains that digital liturgy becomes a platform in which “digital media and platforms [are used] to advance and coordinate the proclamation of the gospel and actualise the Christian mission”. This framework fosters transition from offline realities to online platforms within a congregational setting (Thinane, 2022:194). Therefore, through this missional and ethical digital framework, liturgical practices can be understood within the context of a technology-driven society, particularly in relation to the use of social media and mobile applications.

This framework must be able to address some of the challenges that arise when the church engages with technological and digital developments in society. In this way, the writers suggest that the framework should be informed by missional imagination. Missional imagination is the orientation of the mission of the church towards the mission of God (Van Gelder & Zscheile, 2011; Maponya & Baron, 2020; Wright, 2025). Missional imagination in an ecclesiastical setting enables the church to maintain its missional character by orienting itself toward God's mission. Most scholars of the missional church, such as those quoted above, argue that the church does not have its own mission but should instead align with the mission of God, which is to reach humanity through the propagation of the gospel. Missional imagination is crucial in applying a missional and ethical digital framework to liturgical practices without compromising the essence of the gospel. The framework can respond to challenges posed by the intersections of liturgy and digitalisation by remaining faithful to the mission of God, thus by a missional framework. In other words, the transition from offline to online, as proposed by Thinane (2022:194), is not expected to alter the message of the gospel. On the contrary, the mission of God in the propagation of the gospel remains unchanged amid such a transition which is to provide salvation to all humanity. As churches find creative ways to utilize social media platforms and mobile applications in the propagation of the gospel, careful consideration should be given so that the core message is not lost in the process (Gould, 2015).

A missional and ethical digital framework should also be based on digital ethics. Digital ethics refers to the moral principles applicable in the utilization of digital platforms, including social media and mobile applications (Ess, 2013). This enables the framework to address some of the ethical issues that may arise in presenting the gospel. A missional and ethical digital framework in the wake of social media and mobile applications can become relevant when



there is an awareness of the ethical issues surrounding virtual worship, given its global reach (Berger, 2017). The liturgical practices in physical meetings are limited to the audience (mainly believers) present in the meeting. However, when the message is streamed through various virtual platforms, it can reach a larger audience than a physical one. Therefore, those involved in presenting liturgical practices need to be aware of the variety of audiences, particularly the ethical aspects of such presentations to unbelievers. A missional and ethical digital framework should be developed with consideration for those who are on the margins, who lack access to social media platforms and mobile applications. This means that social media platforms should be harnessed to prevent exploitation of the poor and marginalized. Furthermore, a missional and ethical digital framework must consider the ethical issues associated with soliciting funds from the audience during online worship services (Elizabeth & Mikaere, 2025). Therefore, the four aspects of a missional and ethical digital framework are the presentation of an uncompromised gospel, the impact of virtual worship in the public square, consideration of the poor, and ethical considerations. It is suggested here that a missional and ethical digital framework is a relevant one that can help address some of the challenges of technology integration in the AICs. These challenges are highlighted in the next section.

Challenges of Technology Integration in the SJACWW

In the twenty-first century, religious leaders, scholars, and practitioners face the critical challenge of balancing the benefits of technological advancements with the preservation of religious traditions and values (Tsekpoe, 2019, p. 285). One significant concern is the potential distractions during worship services, as congregants may engage with media platforms unrelated to their faith. Furthermore, there are growing worries about the commercialization of spirituality and the ethical ramifications of incorporating technology into religious practices (Tsara & Mwapfaa, 2025). Discussions have surfaced regarding the commercialization of faith within specific ministries. For instance, churchgoers are often expected to invest substantial money for a “One-on-One with the prophet,” indicating heavy commercialization of the prophetic dimension (Tsekpoe, 2019, p. 285). Chitando and Biri (2016:76) also note that followers are encouraged to purchase custom bracelets, T-shirts with distinctive messages, and photographs of the leader and his spouse. The SJACWW is also implicated in these practices that encourage financial contributions from its members. Internet connectivity is another issue, particularly in most parts of Africa, where many church followers reside. Members' ability to engage with new media platforms and participate in online activities may be limited by their lack of access to reliable internet services (Kgatle, 2022). Load shedding, slow internet, and power disruptions present further challenges. It is something that Southern African nations, such as Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Zambia, are well acquainted with. Another challenge when services are done digitally is that the SJACWW under discussion must uphold its theological purity. It must address issues such as misinformation, online disputes, and the potential erosion of biblical doctrines.

There is a challenge of digital literacy amongst many congregants in SJACWW and they lack the necessary skills and understanding to effectively use digital tools and platforms, which hinders participation in online services and virtual meetings, considering that AICs used to be churches that completely uphold traditional and African beliefs in their style of worship, as evidenced by their use of mbiya (clayport) in their healing sessions (Tsara, 2024). Integrating technology poses a significant challenge; as of now, SJACWW still contacts its services outside, not in church buildings, and a few have managed to build shades that only cover the roof. This makes it very difficult for many congregants to adapt to technology. However, compared to other AICs, SJACWW has gradually adapted to incorporating technology into its worship services and delivering messages that meet the needs of the entire congregation worldwide. The SJACWW has managed to introduce St John TV, where they broadcast church announcements, prominent singers in the church, and live stream the bishop's sermons to the whole World. The introduction of St John TV has made SJACWW more popular compared to other Apostolic sects, such as the Johane Masowe Church (JMC) and the Johane Marange



Apostolic Church (JMAC), which still adhere to traditional worship practices without adapting to technology.

There is a risk that the introduction of digital technologies in SJACWW may dilute traditional practices and cultural expressions integral to the church's identity, raising concerns about maintaining cultural heritage. For instance, in the traditional culture of the church, women are not allowed to dance at all, but to follow a specific pattern of dancing allowed in the church. With the introduction of digital technologies, it will be very difficult to control the dancing patterns. As highlighted above, AICs emerged as churches that responded to colonial missionary churches, which had failed to address African problems (Matikiti, 2014). AICs, such as SJACWW, attempt to address African problems through their form of worship and healing, where everyone is entitled to participate in singing, and people dance in accordance with the song's tune. The use of technology may pose a challenge in that some African rhythms cannot be reproduced effectively when an instrument is used to play them. Hence, the use of technology poses a potential threat to cultural preservation within the church (Neglia, G., Angrisano, M., Mecca, I., & Fabbrocino, F., 2024). 6343. We see singers like Mambo Dhuterere, a member of SJACWW, modifying the dress code when recording most of his albums to make them more appealing to people outside SJACWW, while still adhering to the church's colour code.

There is a challenge to access and equity. Implementing and maintaining the necessary technological infrastructure can be a logistical and financial challenge for many AICs, particularly those in rural or under-resourced areas. The idea of technological advancement may be beneficial, especially for those in urban areas, but for those in rural areas, it presents a significant challenge in terms of mobilizing resources. Not all members of SJACWW have equal access to technology or reliable internet connections. This creates disparities in participation and engagement within the congregation. The use of technology in SJACWW also creates many inequalities among the church members. There are financially stable church members, as well as others who are struggling to earn a living; hence, buying internet or data to watch an online service will not be a priority for them. Thus, the use of technology is creating many classes among the members. This is particularly evident when one compares the setup of rural and urban congregants. Besides equal access to technology and reliable internet access, some places lack electricity, necessitating the purchase of alternatives such as generators and petrol to operate the technology used for conveying messages.

Lastly, there is a challenge of resistance to change. Some members or leaders within SJACWW may be resistant to adopting new technologies, preferring traditional forms of worship and community engagement. Some members in SJACWW still had mixed feelings on whether they should embrace technology or not. They still firmly believe that the adaptation to digital spaces raises questions about ethical implications, including the commercialization of faith, data privacy, and the potential alienation of members who prefer in-person interactions.

Implications of a missional and ethical digital framework

A missional and ethical digital framework has implications for the intersections of the gospel and digitalisation. Firstly, the changes in the digital space must be harnessed so that they do not compromise the core message of the gospel. In other words, the message of the gospel as spread by the AICs, including SJAW, remains the same amid the changing digital age. This highlights the importance of the missional element in this framework, where attention is given to the mission of God amid digital changes. Bevans (2002:37) states that "The message of the gospel is an unchanging message". The AICs are tasked with spreading the gospel using digital technology, including social media and mobile applications, without compromising the message. Oliver (2022:60) points out that the AICs must "strive to remain true to the essence of the gospel; they must be a Messianic people in any given context and location and



circumstance or crisis". This is only possible when there is a clear framework to follow the mission of God, hence the proposition on the missional imagination as part of the missional and ethical digital framework. Therefore, a missional and ethical digital framework can bring balance to the interaction between preaching the gospel and using digital space in SJAWW. This framework is a call for the preaching of the gospel against all odds, remaining true to the mission of God as expressed in the Great Commission. Matthew 28:19 states: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Therefore, the SJACWW should remain faithful to this commission regardless of the changes that exist in the digital space.

Second, a missional and ethical digital framework is important for the impact of virtual worship in the public square. The presentation of the gospel in digital spaces exposes the church to the public more than a physical meeting. Therefore, one of the important factors of this missional and ethical digital framework is the caution that AICs should exercise when communicating to the public. A missional and ethical digital framework is pivotal for fostering discernment among pastors in the AICs, enabling them to choose which content is relevant to the public and which is not. For example, a pastor with a small congregation in a physical meeting can attract more than 1,000 views of his sermon on Facebook. Even pastors with large numbers in their physical meetings can attract even more numbers on their online and digital platforms. This raises a matter of public concern within the discussion framework of a missional and ethical digital approach to integrating faith and technology among SJACWW. Even Jesus, in his ministry, demonstrated some level of discernment in choosing what to say before the public and what to say before his closest disciples, such as James, Peter, and John. For example, in (Matthew 16:6), he warned them to be careful of the Sadducees and Pharisees. A missional and ethical digital framework should adopt the same posture in deciding what to communicate to the church and what to communicate to the broader audience. In essence, the AICs should be able to distinguish between church activities and public activities. This is crucial in preserving the public image of the church while remaining faithful to its mission activities.

Third, the use of digital space in SJACWW should consider the needs of the poor, illiterate, and marginalized, particularly in terms of access to social media and mobile applications, as well as access to data. While it is essential to embrace technology in this digital age, it is also crucial to be aware of the underlying issues surrounding the unaffordability of data and devices, such as cellphones and laptops, among the impoverished. This is where a missional and ethical digital framework becomes relevant in addressing ethical issues, such as exorbitant prices charged for mobile data. Additionally, an older adult in a rural village in the Eastern Cape or Limpopo may not be well-versed in social media platforms and other mobile applications. Thus, a missional and ethical digital framework comes in teaching the elderly among the AICs such as SJACWW on the use of Microsoft Teams, Skype, Zoom, and GoToMeeting for the propagation of the gospel. Furthermore, there are other challenges, such as children accessing sites and information while using their gadgets for the online church service. Therefore, this also calls for a relevant framework on how the SJACWW, through a missional and ethical digital framework, address the negative impact of technology, particularly among children.

In the context of digital evangelism, it is imperative to prioritize ethical considerations, particularly concerning the collection of online offerings. Several pivotal factors can significantly enhance both the effectiveness and reach of such initiatives. Understanding the demographics, preferences, and digital behaviours of the target audience is essential. By tailoring content to resonate with specific demographic groups, organizations can enhance engagement and foster more meaningful connections. Furthermore, it is vital to recognize that different digital platforms serve varied purposes and audiences. The strategic selection of appropriate platforms, such as social media, email, or video streaming services, can optimize outreach and amplify impact. Engaging in evangelism with a focus on cultural sensitivity and



ethical considerations is crucial. Respecting the diversity of audiences and avoiding methods that may be perceived as intrusive or insensitive can lead to more meaningful interactions and cultivated relationships.

Regular assessment of the efficacy of digital evangelism efforts through analytics and feedback is also necessary. This ongoing evaluation and modification enable informed adjustments to strategies and content, thereby enhancing their effectiveness. Within this framework, the significance of digital ethics emerges as a fundamental component that underpins a missional and ethical framework, strengthening the moral dimensions of digital engagement.

A particularly salient aspect of digital evangelism is fundraising, which plays a vital role in sustaining ministry efforts. Nevertheless, this pursuit requires discernment in the way funding is solicited in public forums. For instance, while it may be acceptable for pastors within organizations such as SJACWW to request tithes during physical meetings attended by congregants familiar with this form of giving, such appeals may not resonate with individuals outside of the faith community. Non-believers may be more amenable to the concept of providing donations to specific African Instituted Churches (AICs), like SJACWW; however, this too necessitates a commitment to transparency regarding financial management practices. Thus, the implementation of a missional and ethical digital framework becomes highly relevant to ensure transparent and ethical conduct among AICs, particularly in relation to financial stewardship. This approach not only fosters trust within the community but also aligns with the core ethical principles of digital engagement.

The framework encourages a reimagining of mission activities through digital platforms. This means leveraging technology to reach congregants and potential believers who may not be able to attend physical services. It allows SJACWW to extend its reach beyond geographical boundaries, fostering a more inclusive community. A critical aspect is maintaining and promoting cultural identity amid digitalization. The framework suggests that while embracing technology, SJACWW should also ensure that its practices and teachings reflect the cultural values and traditions of its congregants. This balance can help prevent the dilution of cultural significance in worship. The ethical considerations of digital engagement are paramount. The framework calls for a responsible approach to technology use, emphasizing transparency, privacy, and respect within digital interactions. This includes being aware of the potential risks of misinformation, fostering a safe space for discussion, and nurturing trust among congregants. By utilizing digital tools for communication and worship, SJACWW can strengthen community ties. Virtual prayer meetings, online services, and social media engagement can foster connections among members, providing support and a sense of belonging even when they are physically apart. Digital engagement can empower members by providing them with the resources and skills needed to navigate technology effectively. The framework encourages initiatives that enhance digital literacy, enabling congregants to participate actively in both religious and communal activities.

The framework emphasizes the importance of being responsive to ongoing societal changes. By adopting a flexible approach, SJACWW can better navigate the complexities introduced by technological advancements, ensuring that its worship practices remain relevant and practical. The research also emphasizes the need for sustainable digital practices that do not compromise the integrity of worship. For instance, in SJACWW the church also come up with a church band who sing blowing trumpets dressing in the unique church regalia during their important gatherings. This initiative enhance liturgical elements while preserving the essence of the church's spiritual activities. In summary, the implication of the missional and ethical digital framework for SJACWW emphasizes the intersection of faith and technology, encouraging innovative practices while upholding cultural integrity and ethical standards. This approach not only addresses the immediate challenges posed by digital transformation but also positions the church for future growth and engagement within a digital society.



Future Trends in AICs and Technology in worship and community

Throughout history, technology has played a crucial role in religious engagement, community development, and spiritual expression, from ancient temples to modern virtual realities. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated advancements in media, and even more positive changes are anticipated in the future. According to Dougherty (2020), new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR) have the potential to transform religious experiences and practices significantly (Ugboh, 2023). VR and AR technologies enable participants to engage with virtual sacred spaces and religious ceremonies, creating immersive environments for rituals, pilgrimages, and spiritual experiences. Furthermore, AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants can offer personalized spiritual counseling, guidance, and prayer support, catering to the diverse needs of religious followers. Bennett (2021) argues that as technology continues to evolve, new opportunities for artificial intelligence in communities (AICs) will emerge, potentially reshaping how faith is practiced and experienced.

Digital platforms such as live streaming on television, You Tube and WhatsApp provide broader access to worship services and church activities, enabling individuals who cannot attend in person due to distance, health issues, or other barriers to participate (Struzek, Dickel, Randall, & Müller, 2019). This increased accessibility can lead to larger congregations and greater inclusivity. As AICs navigate the digital landscape, they may adapt their liturgical practices to incorporate technology in ways that resonate with their cultural contexts. This adaptation can foster new forms of expression that blend traditional elements with modern practices. The use of digital tools, such as social media and mobile applications, can strengthen community bonds among congregants. Virtual prayer meetings and online discussions enhance connectivity and support systems, enabling members to engage more frequently and share experiences. However, integrating technology into church activities may require training in digital literacy for both congregants and leaders. Over time, this training can enhance technological skills across communities, empowering members to interact with various aspects of the digital world.

While digitalization opens new avenues for worship, it may also present challenges to the preservation of cultural identity. The potential dilution of traditional practices and values could occur as AICs adopt global digital norms, possibly leading to a loss of distinct cultural expressions. Additionally, the digital age may influence how religious teachings and theological discussions are shared and consumed. Online platforms can facilitate diverse interpretations and dialogues, prompting new theological insights that reflect contemporary issues and concerns.

The digital sphere presents SJACWW with unique opportunities for outreach and evangelism that transcend geographical boundaries. This could result in a more global presence, enabling congregations to engage with diverse audiences and expand their mission work. As SJACWW adopts digital tools, it will need to navigate ethical concerns surrounding privacy, data security, and the digital divide. Developing a framework for digital ethics will be important to ensure that the use of technology aligns with the values and principles of the faith. The ongoing integration of technology can lead to innovative worship practices that may resonate with younger generations. Incorporating elements like virtual reality, interactive content, and multimedia presentations can create engaging worship experiences. As new technologies emerge, SJACWW will need to remain adaptable to stay competitive. The potential impact of innovations, such as artificial intelligence or virtual reality, may redefine worship experiences and community engagement in ways that are currently unforeseen. Overall, the long-term impacts of digital trends in AICs will hinge on how these churches strike a balance between embracing technological advancements and maintaining their cultural identities and traditions.



Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant role that AICs, particularly the SJACW, play in adapting to the challenges and opportunities presented by digitalization. By developing a missional and ethical digital framework, AICs are not only enhancing their worship practices but also fostering greater community cohesion and empowerment among their congregants. The findings reveal that while the integration of technology into worship can present challenges, such as issues of digital literacy and cultural preservation, it also opens avenues for innovative expressions of faith that resonate with a younger generation. The case of SJACWW demonstrates how embracing digital tools can revitalize traditional practices and facilitate a more inclusive and participatory worship experience. As AICs continue to navigate the complexities of modernization, these faith communities must remain rooted in their cultural identity while exploring new methods of engagement. The future trajectory of AICs in this increasingly digital environment will likely involve harnessing emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, to enhance spiritual engagement and community connectivity.

This study aims to contribute to an enhanced understanding of how the SJACWW can successfully navigate the complexities of the digital age, thereby ensuring that its historical and cultural legacies not only endure but thrive alongside contemporary advancements. By adopting such an approach, SJACW has the potential not only to uphold its spiritual missions but also to establish itself as a paradigm for other faith communities encountering similar obstacles in their adaptation to the digital landscape. To achieve this goal, SJACWW must implement training programs designed to enhance the digital literacy of its congregants. Such initiatives may encompass workshops focused on utilizing online platforms for worship and active engagement, thus ensuring that all members, irrespective of age or technological aptitude, are equipped to participate fully in digital liturgical practices.

The study emphasizes the importance of honouring and reflecting the cultural identities of congregations when implementing digital initiatives in worship. This includes integrating local languages, customs, and traditional worship styles into digital formats. Establishing ethical guidelines for the use of technology in worship is crucial for addressing privacy concerns and fostering spiritual engagement. A systematic assessment of the effectiveness of digital practices is necessary, with feedback from congregants helping to inform adjustments and improvements. Collaboration among African Independent Churches (AICs) can support the sharing of best practices for navigating the digital landscape. Ongoing research into emerging technologies is advised to help churches adapt to future changes while balancing traditional worship practices with technological innovation. Engaging congregations in discussions about merging these aspects is crucial for preserving faith and cultural identity.

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