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Holy Spirit Online: Exploring the New Wave of E-Mega Church Concept and its Implications on Mission, Discipleship and E-Church Economy

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Abstract

E-megachurches represent a fundamental transformation in how religious communities form and function, moving from geographically bounded physical congregations to digitally mediated networks that transcend traditional spatial limitations. In this article, I argue that while the megachurch concept has historical roots in modern Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, advent of digital technology provided platforms for their transformation in scale and scope. Drawing on Christopher Helland's distinction between "religion-online" and "online-religion," I develop a typology of e-megachurch models and discuss how different digital platforms are shaping religious practice, and authority structures in virtual contexts. The article offers a missiological perspective of the e-megachurch phenomenon by exploring its theological foundations, implications for mission, and key challenges. In addition, it examines the financial dimension of e-megachurches, highlighting their diverse funding strategies and involvement in the broader religious economy. The study employs a conceptual and typological approach, supported by a systematic review of relevant literature and document analysis.

Keywords: E-megachurch, Megachurch, Digital Ecclesiology, Digital Pneumatology, Holy Spirit Online, Religious Economy, Digital Divide, Sacramental Theology.

Introduction

The concept of the megachurch is not entirely new within the history of Christian gatherings. In fact, its roots can be traced back to the Old and New Testaments. Examples from the Old Testament include Moses' Tent/Tabernacle, Jerusalem Temple, and Solomon's Temple, which are a few examples from (Exodus 25:8-9; Exodus 33:7-11; 1 Kings 6; and 2 Chronicles 7:1-3). In the New Testament, Acts (2:42-47) portrays the early church as a form of megachurch. This idea has significantly influenced modern Christianity, particularly within the Pentecostal and Charismatic church denominations.

A megachurch is defined as a congregation with regular attendance of 2,000 or more (Matthias, 2024; Kgatle, 2024a). Modern historical antecedents of megachurch concept can be traced to the great auditoriums of nineteenth-century revivalism and, more recently, to the explosive growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in the twentieth century (Thumma & Travis, 2007). It could be argued that the Azusa Street Revival of 1906-1915 in Los Angeles, led by William J. Seymour, laid the groundwork for the mass gathering of people in contemporary Pentecostal Charismatic movement. Key personalities of this revival placed much emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and created a dynamic, inclusive

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worship style that later characterised many megachurches. Their emphasis on experiential faith, healing, and prophecy created a template for the large-scale, emotionally engaging worship services that define contemporary megachurches. Additionally, Donald McGavran's Church Growth Movement, which was founded in the middle of the 20th century, offered a theoretical framework for the megachurch phenomenon by focusing on measurable outcomes, cultural relevance, and the use of social science research for evangelism. Inspired by this movement and the global reach of televangelism, individuals like Kenneth Hagin, David Oyedepo, and Yonggi Cho developed patterns of media interactions and church organisation that established the foundation for the contemporary megachurch (Hunt, 2020). However, a new stage in this historical era was sparked by the advent of the Internet and the spread of digital media, leading to the e-megachurch, a phenomenon characterised by the scope of its digital influence rather than its physical congregation.

Although there is extensive literature on the traditional megachurch from scholars such as Hunt (2020), Resane (2022), Patte (2019:783), Knight (2014), Kuponu & Talabi (2021), Ojo (2020), Ukah (2020), Kgatle (2024a, 2024b), and Matthias (2024), this article aims to investigate the megachurch concept from a cyber church perspective with particular reference to e-megachurches, and also to argue that although technology has increased these organisations' reach, it has also brought forth difficult theological, ethical, and practical issues. In response to this, I seek to establish a theological framework through digital pneumatology, place the e-megachurch within a media ecology perspective, provide a typology using Helland's distinction between "religion-online" and "online-religion" (Helland, 2005), examine how ministry and mission can be reconfigured, and examine the economic aspects of the e-church.

Methodology

The core objective of this article is to investigate the e-megachurch concept from a cyber-church perspective, examining its theological foundations, media ecology, missiological implications, and economic dimensions. To achieve this, the study employs a conceptual and typological approach, supported by a systematic review of relevant literature and document analysis. Drawing on existing theoretical frameworks, the research methodology is primarily conceptual, aiming to construct a new understanding of the e-megachurch phenomenon. Conceptual frameworks in theology, as Dreyer (2008:3) notes, are essential for mapping out interdisciplinary discourses and providing a structured lens through which to analyse complex human actions and institutional practices. Consequently, the conceptual theological perspective in this study is built upon three main pillars: digital pneumatology, media ecology, and Helland's (2005) distinction between "religion-online" and "online-religion." By integrating these perspectives, the research design allows for a comprehensive theological and sociological analysis of how digital media transforms megachurch structures and practices.

To operationalise this conceptual theological framework, a typological analysis method is utilised. In religious studies, typologies serve as valuable methodological tools for categorising and comparing diverse organisational forms and practices (Krech, 2017:2). Building on this premise, the article develops a critical typology of e-megachurches, classifying them into three primary archetypes: the Digital Campus, the Broadcast Model, and the Digital-First Church. Through this typological approach, a nuanced examination of the varying degrees to which physical and digital operations intersect becomes possible, thereby addressing the core objective of understanding the diverse manifestations of the e-megachurch concept.

Data collection for this conceptual and typological analysis relies heavily on a systematic literature review and document analysis. As a rigorous qualitative method, document analysis involves evaluating and interpreting existing texts to elicit meaning, gain

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understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009:27). Accordingly, the study systematically reviews scholarly literature, theological texts, and contemporary reports related to megachurches, digital religion, and media ecology. This approach aligns seamlessly with the interdisciplinary nature of missiological research, which often integrates biblical studies, theology, and social sciences to address contemporary mission contexts (Wan, 2017:4). By synthesizing insights from scholars such as Campbell (2020), Helland (2005), and Lundby (2014), the methodology ensures that the analysis of the e-megachurch is firmly grounded in robust academic discourse.

Furthermore, mediatization theory informs the study's methodological approach, exploring how communication technologies shape and define cultural and religious environments (Lundby, 2014:15). Applying a media ecology lens allows the research to trace the historical progression from radio and television ministries to the interactive, networked model of the contemporary e-megachurch. Ultimately, this historical-analytical method is crucial for addressing the article's objective of placing the e-megachurch within a broader media ecology perspective, demonstrating that the shift to digital platforms is not merely a change in delivery mechanism but a fundamental transformation of ecclesiology.

THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTUALISATION OF DIGITAL PNEUMATOLOGY

Understanding the e-megachurch phenomenon requires a theological framework rooted in digital pneumatology, which examines how the Holy Spirit operates within and through digital media.

There is justifiable theological reason to believe that the Holy Spirit can work through platforms, and this theological idea is based on the doctrine of God’s omnipresence. In view of this, one can argue that the fact that if God is everywhere, then God is also present in the digital space. A key biblical reference point for this argument is Psalm 139:7-10. In this scripture, the Psalmist says, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there” (Psalms 139:7-10).

Theological argument of "digital pneumatology" was recently advanced by Menzies and Ma (2024) to articulate a precise understanding of the activities of the Holy Spirit in and through digital media. While their framework offers valuable insights, it raises as many questions as it answers, particularly regarding the relationship between divine presence and technological mediation. Building on this unresolved tension, Nthakheni (2025) posits that a robust pneumatological framework is indispensable for navigating the complexities of the digital age, arguing that a theology of digital pneumatology must acknowledge the role of the Holy Spirit not only in the lives of individual believers, but also in the technological and cultural environments they inhabit.

Central to this framework is the Holy Spirit's role in creating and sustaining community, a conviction that gives rise to a critical ecclesiological question: if the church is understood as a community brought into being by the Holy Spirit, can such a community be authentically realised in a virtual environment? At stake here are fundamental questions about the nature of fellowship, accountability, and embodied presence. It is precisely at this point that Campbell (2020) offers a constructive response, arguing that the Spirit can and does work through digital platforms to create meaningful connections and foster genuine spiritual growth among geographically dispersed believers.

In addition to the ongoing discussions about digital pneumatology, another issue that has surfaced in the debate is the virtual sacraments. Pitt (2023:1) noted that the most significant theological challenges for the digital church are the question of the sacraments, particularly baptism and the Eucharist (or the Lord’s Supper). Traditional sacramental theology

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emphasises the importance of physical presence and material elements such as water, bread, and wine. Therefore, the move to online worship has forced a theological reckoning with these traditions, raising the question of whether sacraments can be validly celebrated in a virtual context. Although there is no consensus on this issue, some denominations and theologians have embraced the possibility of virtual communion, arguing that Christ's presence is not limited by physical proximity and that the spiritual reality of the sacrament can be experienced online (Berger, 2020), others have strongly opposed this view, arguing that the physical gathering of the community, of believers and the tangible elements are essential to the integrity of the sacrament (Grundy, 2022). It is therefore clear at this point that the argument over virtual sacraments highlights the tension between understanding the church as a spiritual community and understanding the church as an embodied, incarnational community.

In light of the above dynamics, Baudrillard (1994) argued that we live in an age of hyperreality, where simulations of the real have become more real than reality. He also noted that the distinction between "real" and "virtual" is often blurred in online environments, which has great implications for our understanding of God's presence, the presence of the community, and the presence of the self. This, therefore, implies that to provide a clear and cohesive justification for sacramental issues in a digital church environment, a comprehensive theology of the digital church must address these complex sacramental questions.

Despite the challenges, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR or Industry 4.0) which is widely considered to have started in the early 2010s, provides the formulation of a digital ecclesiology that is required to recognise 'digital dignity' (Joubert, 2020:6). Niemandt (2022:12, 17–18) is of theview that, "the church must maintain a missional focus and posture, with a default orientation towards digital and online engagement." God's omnipresence ensures that His presence is sensed in these virtual interactions, offering comfort, guidance, and spiritual sustenance to the faithful. In view of the preceding arguments, I submit that the theological understanding of the omnipresence of the Holy Spirit (digital pneumatology), must encourage churches to accept digital platforms as ministry tools for worship, teaching, and pastoral care, thereby extending the reach of the church's mission. In doing so, they ensure that the Holy Spirit's work continues unabated in the contemporary, virtually-driven world.

Having established the basic argument of the presence of the Holy Spirit in online spaces, I will now proceed with the megachurch concept and how it emerged into the digital sphere, leading to the evolution of e-megachurch.

MEDIA ECOLOGY OF THE E-MEGACHURCH

Contemporary media history is closely connected to the development of e-megachurch concepts. To understand the rise of the e-megachurch, it is important to apply a media ecology lens, which explores how communication technologies have and are shaping human perception, organisation, and social structures (Lundby, 2014). As argued by McLuhan (1964), the characteristics of a medium often shape its impact more than the content it conveys. This section investigates how successive media technologies such as radio, television, and the Internet have not only extended the church's reach but also transformed its message and ministry structure.

The Radio and Television Era and the National Congregation

In the early 20th century, radio emerged as the first electronic mass medium, and religious broadcasters quickly recognised its potential. Figures such as Charles Fuller used programmes like the Revival Hour radio programme to build national congregations and

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reach audiences far beyond local church boundaries (Hangen, 2002). By fostering parasocial relationships that created a sense of closeness despite physical separation, radio transformed religious communication from a local, place-bound event into a national, disembodied experience. The radio era introduced innovations that became foundational to the megachurch model. It demonstrated that religious content could be monetised through listener donations, establishing a direct financial link between broadcaster and audience outside traditional denominational systems. This period showed that charismatic preachers could attract large followings without physical presence and highlighted the importance of production quality in religious broadcasting. These practices laid the groundwork for listener-supported programming and direct-mail fundraising, which were later adapted for television and the Internet, forming the institutional and financial basis for future media-driven ministries.

Also, the introduction of television in the mid-twentieth century marked a new era in media-driven religion. Televangelists such as Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, and later, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, harnessed the visual power of television to create highly produced, emotionally engaging worship experiences. Television amplified the celebrity status of preachers, transforming them into national and international figures. The visual nature of the medium also placed a new emphasis on spectacle, performance, and production value, contributing to the emergence of a more polished and professional style of worship that became a hallmark of megachurches (Hoover, Lundby, & Horsfield, 1997). With its focus on tangible proof of God's favour, prosperity theology found a particularly effective medium in television, where preachers could show a large audience the tangible results of their faith. Large-scale media ministries were consolidated during this time, and the first generation of megachurches was built with both in-person worship and television production in mind.

The Internet Age and the Interactive E-Megachurch

From the one-to-many broadcast model of radio and television, to a many-to-many network model, the Internet has completely changed the way churches communicate, moving from the old one-way broadcast style of radio and TV to a dynamic, many-to-many network model (White 2021; White & Assimeng 2016; White, Tella, and Donkor-Ampofo 2016). Helland (2005), helps us understand this shift by distinguishing between "religion-online" and "online-religion." Religion-online is like the broadcast era; it uses the Internet mainly to distribute traditional content, such as sermon videos, service times, and online giving links. It is a one-way flow of information from the church to the individual, with content professionally managed and authority remaining top-down.

Online religion, on the other hand, embraces the interactive nature of the Internet. It creates spaces where people can contribute, connect, and shape their spiritual experience together. This model is all about two-way communication; members aren't just passive listeners; they become co-creators of the faith experience. The two-way communication also manifests in online forums, virtual small groups, and social media communities that foster real interaction and a sense of belonging.

Contemporary e-megachurches function at the intersection of these two paradigms. It uses the high production values and centralised authority of the religion-online model, broadcasting polished and professional worship services to a global audience. To foster a sense of community and involvement, it simultaneously integrates aspects of the online religion paradigm through the use of social media, interactive chat tools, and virtual small groups. By using a hybrid strategy, e-megachurches create space for involvement and a sense of belonging among their online members while simultaneously preserving their strong brand identity and clear message (Helland, 2005).

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Table 1. Summary of the te Media Ecological Evolution (Author's own).

Media Era	Dominant Medium	Communication Model	Primary Impact on Church Structure
Revivalism	Print, Spoken Word	One-to-Many (Local)	The local, and geographically bound congregation
Radio Age	Radio	One-to-Many (National)	The national, disembodied "radio congregation"
Television Age	Television	One-to-Many (Global)	The celebrity pastor and the production-orientated church
Internet Age	Internet, Social Media	Many-to-Many (Networked)	The hybrid e-megachurch (Religion-Online + Online-Religion)

Understanding this media ecological progression is important for understanding how e-megachurches operate. The technological affordances of each medium have shaped not only the church's outreach strategies but also its internal culture, leadership structures, and theological emphases. The move to digital platforms is not merely a change in delivery mechanism; it is a fundamental transformation of what it means to be the church in the 21st century.

A CRITICAL TYPOLOGY AND ANALYSIS OF THE E-MEGACHURCH CONCEPT

Building on the theological and media-ecological frameworks established above, we can now develop a more precise and critical definition of e-megachurches. An e-megachurch is not merely a large church with a website; it is a religious organisation, typically and often Pentecostal or Charismatic in orientation, that strategically leverages digital media to minister to a large, geographically dispersed congregation that participates primarily, if not exclusively, online. These organisations are characterized by their sophisticated digital infrastructure, global reach, and hybrid integration of broadcast-style content and interactive community-building tools. To better understand the diversity of this phenomenon, we identified three primary archetypes of e-megachurches.

The landscape of digital ministry is diverse, but most e-megachurches can be categorised into one of three models based on the relationship between their physical and digital operations.

Table 2. E-megachurches Categorisation (Author's own)

Archetype	Description	Primary Mode	Key Characteristics
The Digital Campus	A physical megachurch that has developed a fully-fledged online campus, often with its own dedicated staff, budget, and community life.	Hybrid (Physical + Digital)	High production quality, dedicated online pastors, virtual small groups, mirrors physical campus structure.

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Archetype	Description	Primary Mode	Key Characteristics
The Broadcast Model	A church (often a megachurch) that primarily uses digital media to broadcast its physical worship services to a wider audience.	Physical-to-Digital	Focus on live-streaming, less emphasis on interactive community, closer to the "religion-online" model.
The Digital-First Church	A religious organisation that originates online and may have no permanent physical location. Its primary mode of existence is digital.	Digital-Only or Digital-First	Highly experimental, it relies heavily on social media and virtual reality and challenges traditional ecclesiology.

E-megachurches have several important traits in common with these archetypes that call for serious analysis. Ng and Taneja (2023), suggest that the most obvious characteristic of an e-megachurch is its scale. These organisations attract thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of virtual attendees each week. However, the metrics for measuring online attendance are ambiguous. Is a "view" equivalent to attendance? How does one account for the fleeting, partial, and often distracting nature of online engagement? This ambiguity makes it difficult to assess the true size and engagement levels of these digital congregations. While the global reach is undeniable, research also shows that web use remains highly regional, suggesting that the audience for most e-megachurch content is not as globally diverse as often assumed.

It is also clear that e-megachurches are distinguished by their significant investment in digital infrastructure. This includes professional-grade audio-visual equipment for high-quality streaming, dedicated mobile applications, interactive websites, and a robust social media presence. This level of investment creates a significant barrier to entry, contributing to a "winner-take-all" dynamic in the digital religious landscape, where a few large, well-funded organisations dominate the online space.

This raises important questions about equity and the marginalisation of smaller, less technologically savvy congregations. The need for specialised staff, including social media managers, video producers, and cybersecurity experts, further professionalises the church and distances it from the volunteer-led models of the past (Usman, 2024).

Furthermore, e-megachurches employ sophisticated strategies to maintain engagement in virtual settings. These include live chat, online polls, virtual prayer rooms, and social media campaigns. Many of these strategies are borrowed from digital marketing and are designed to capture user data and optimise engagement. This raises significant ethical concerns about the use of analytics in ministry, the potential for the manipulation of user behaviour, and the privacy of congregants' data (thinkhardthinkwell.com 2021). The goal of fostering a vibrant virtual community can sometimes be in tension with the data-driven imperative to maximise reach and engagement metrics.

Although e-megachurches invest heavily in community-building tools, the nature of this community is often parasocial. A parasocial relationship is a one-sided, unreciprocated relationship that a media user forms with a media persona (Ng and Taneja, 2023). In the context of the e-megachurch, congregants may feel a strong sense of connection to the celebrity pastor and worship team, but this connection is mediated and asymmetrical.

The interactive features of digital platforms can create the illusion of intimacy and participation; however, they often lack the depth, accountability, and embodied presence of a

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physical community. This is not to say that a genuine community cannot exist online, but to recognise the inherent limitations and challenges of fostering deep, transformative relationships in a purely digital environment.

RECONFIGURING MINISTRY AND MISSION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The shift to a digital-first or hybrid church model has deep implications for Christian ministry and mission practice. The traditional church pillars of evangelism, discipleship, pastoral care, and fellowship are all being reconfigured in the digital context. While digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for global reach and innovative engagement, they also present significant challenges to the relational and embodied nature of the Christian ministry. This section explores the complex ways in which the e-megachurch approach transforms the church's core practices.

Mission and Evangelism From Foreign Fields to Digital Frontiers

E-megachurches have radically redefined mission work by taking advantage of digital platforms to conduct evangelism on a global scale. The traditional model of mission, which often involved sending missionaries to foreign countries, is being supplemented and, in some cases, replaced by digital outreach strategies. These include large-scale online evangelistic campaigns, targeted social media advertising, and the creation of shareable digital content designed to go viral. This approach allows e-megachurches to cross geographical and cultural borders with ease, reaching individuals who may never have encountered a physical church (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2014). The ability to broadcast services in multiple languages and provide on-demand access to religious content has made the gospel more accessible than ever before.

However, this digital approach to missions is not without its critics. The emphasis on mass marketing and conversion metrics can lead to a superficial understanding of evangelism, where success is measured in clicks and views rather than in genuine life transformation. Furthermore, the decontextualised nature of online communication can make it difficult to engage meaningfully with various cultural contexts. The point of contention here is that the risk of digital colonialism, that a predominantly Western, consumerist brand of Christianity is exported globally without consideration for local cultures and traditions. A missiologically responsible virtual or online evangelism must therefore balance the opportunities for global reach with a commitment to be culturally sensitive and must promote relationally oriented engagement.

Discipleship and Spiritual Formation in the Rise of the Digital Disciple

The contemporary digital environment has also led to new models of discipleship. E-megachurches are now offering a wide range of digital resources for discipleship, including online courses, Bible studies, online mentoring programmes, and mobile apps for prayer and scripture reading. The accessibility of these resources is a significant advantage to the church. Ng and Taneja (2023), noted that these online discipleship materials allow individuals to engage in spiritual practices at their own pace, and in their own time. Despite these advantages, there are a number of difficulties with digital discipleship. It can be challenging to cultivate the profound, individual accountability that is necessary for spiritual development because of the disembodied character of online interactions. Also, social media's carefully chosen and frequently idealised portrayal of oneself can be detrimental to the Christian values of vulnerability, humility, and sincerity. Moreover, the constant connectivity and information overload of the digital environment can be a source of distraction and spiritual fragmentation, rather than a means of deeper connection with God. As Berger (2017), notes in her work on digital worship, the practices of the faith are being reshaped by the very technologies used to access them. I therefore argue that effective digital discipleship requires intentional strategies for cultivating contemplative practices,

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fostering authentic relationships, and encouraging a critical and discerning engagement with technology.

Pastoral Care, Counselling and Comfort in the Cloud

The emergence of the e-megachurch has also changed how pastoral care is provided. Digital tools are being used more and more by pastors and care teams to help their members. This includes the provision of digital tools for mental and spiritual well-being, virtual prayer groups on platforms such as WhatsApp, and online analysis sessions via video conferencing. One major advantage of digital pastoral care is its accessibility, which enables people to get help no matter where they are. Digital pastoral care is becoming more sophisticated, as seen by the usage of HIPAA-compliant systems and even AI-powered chatbots for initial analysis triage (Vinayak, Chia, & Kuhn, 2020).

There are also significant issues with the shift to digital pastoral care. Some of the lingering questions in the minds of people are as follows:

- Can a pastor provide effective care without the benefit of nonverbal cues and embodied presence?
- How is confidentiality maintained in a digital environment that is vulnerable to data breaches and surveillance?

Tagwirei (2022) posits that there is also the risk of a two-tiered system of care, where those who are digitally savvy receive more attention than those who are not. He also argues that the concept of a “ministry of presence” is challenged when that presence is mediated through a screen. While digital tools can be a valuable supplement to pastoral care, they cannot fully replace the embodied, relational presence that is at the heart of Christian ministry.

Community Fellowship and the Search for *Koinonia* Online

One of the most concerning aspects of the digital church is the nature of the virtual community being developed or established by various churches. E-megachurches invest a lot of resources in creating a sense of online/virtual community, using interactive chat, virtual lobbies, and online groups to foster connection within the community. Campbell (2020), argues that these platforms provide genuine *koinonia* (fellowship) and create a sense of belonging and mutual support among believers who are in different geographical locations. For many, especially during the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, these online communities became a source of connection and encouragement.

However, scholars such as Finnell (2023), and Schoeman (2015), raise serious questions about the depth and authenticity of online church communities. They argue that the disembodied and often anonymous nature of online interaction can lead to a superficial form of fellowship that lacks the accountability and commitment of a physical community (Finnell, 2023; Schoeman, 2015). The ease of entry and exit in online groups sometimes leads to a consumerist approach to community, where individuals shop for a church that meets their needs without ever making a deep commitment. Resane (2024), contends that the digital divide can be bridged by an ecclesiology that emphasises communion, and the African concept of *botho* (humanity towards others). But this requires intentional effort to move from mere connection to a genuine community of believers. The challenge for e-megachurches is to move beyond creating a sense of belonging to providing a community of disciples of Jesus Christ who are committed to one another in love and service.

THE ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF THE E-MEGACHURCH

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The emergence of the e-megachurch in the 21 Century is not only a theological and missiological phenomenon, but also an economic one. The move to a digital-first model of ministry has been accompanied by a great transformation in the financial strategies and funding approaches of these churches. E-megachurches have developed diversified revenue streams that go far beyond traditional tithes and offerings. Discussions under this section focus on the economic dimensions of the e-megachurch.

Diversified Funding Models in the Digital Age

Despite the fact that traditional giving remains the main source of their finances, e-megachurches have introduced a variety of digital and entrepreneurial funding approaches to ensure their financial sustainability. These approaches can be summarised as follows:

Table 3. Some digital and entrepreneurial funding approaches (Author's own)

Funding Model	Description	Examples	Implications
Digital Tithing & Offerings	The use of online giving platforms, mobile apps, and text-to-give services to facilitate frictionless donations.	Tithe.ly, Pushpay, and church-specific apps.	Increased accessibility and convenience for givers; potential for impulsive giving; data collection on giving patterns.
Content Monetisation	Generating revenue from digital content through advertising, subscriptions, or pay-per-view models.	YouTube Partner Programme (ad revenue) and paid access to online courses and conferences.	Creates a direct financial incentive for high-traffic content; blurs the line between ministry and entertainment; potential for mission drift.
E-commerce and Merchandising	Selling branded merchandise, books, music, and other products through online stores.	Online bookshops, apparel with church logos, and worship albums on Spotify/Apple Music.	Creates a brand identity and a sense of belonging; turns congregants into consumers; raises questions about the commercialisation of faith.
Virtual Events and Conferences	Hosting paid online conferences, workshops, and seminars that attract a global audience.	Leadership conferences, marriage seminars, and prophecy updates are streamed online for a fee.	Leverages the celebrity status of pastors; creates a significant revenue stream independent of the local congregation; high profit margins due to low overhead.

These varied funding approaches have made e-megachurches remarkably resilient and financially sustainable. Their ability to generate revenue from a global virtual audience, independent of the economic fortunes of a single geographic location, gives them a huge advantage over physical or place-based congregations. The frictionless nature of online giving, combined with the emotional power of digital worship, can be a potent combination for fundraising.

The Influence of Market-Driven Neoliberalism

From the table above, one can argue that the financial strategies of the e-megachurch are deeply influenced by the principles of market-driven neoliberalism. As Harvey (2005:2) argues, neoliberalism as an economic doctrine systematically reorders social institutions, including religious ones, around the imperatives of market competition, individual

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entrepreneurialism, and capital accumulation, making it unsurprising that e-megachurches have internalised its logic. English (2019), noted that this economic ideology, which emphasises free markets, competition, and entrepreneurialism, has been absorbed into the economic logic of many modern religious organisations. A close analysis of their approaches to ministry shows that E-megachurches often operate like businesses, with a focus on branding, marketing, growth, and return on investment. Pastors adopt the language of CEOs, and congregants are often referred to as “customers” or “clients”.

It should, however, be noted that this entrepreneurial approach is not necessarily negative. It can lead to greater efficiency, innovation, and a desire to meet the felt needs of the community. Despite these good benefits, their approaches also carry significant risks. Ukah (2020), argues that the pressure to compete in the spiritual marketplace can lead to a watering-down of the theological message, as churches seek to attract the largest possible audience. The focus on growth and financial success can become an end in itself, leading to what has been termed “mission drift”, where some of the churches’ original purpose is subordinated to the demands of the market (Comaroff 2009:20). In this context, the line between a church and a religious media corporation can become increasingly blurred.

The E-Church Economy, its Sustainability and Mission

In light of the preceding discussions, I submit that the evolution of the e-megachurch has created a new “e-church economy”, a sophisticated ecosystem of digital platforms, content creators, and consumers. Within this virtual economy, attention, attraction and brand management are the most valuable currencies, and the competition for these elements is fierce. Within this context, e-megachurches that can successfully capture and hold the attention of a large online audience can generate significant financial returns, which can then be reinvested into higher production values and more sophisticated marketing, creating a virtuous cycle of growth.

This economic approach has huge implications for the future of the church. On the one hand, it offers a path to financial sustainability in an age when traditional approaches to church funding, such as tithes and offerings, are in decline, especially after COVID-19. On the other hand, it raises essential questions about the relationship between money and mission. The puzzling question one might be considering here are:

- Is the primary goal of the e-megachurch to make disciples or to build a brand?
- Is it a community of faith or a media empire?

The economic success of the e-megachurch approach is undeniable, but its theological and missiological integrity remains a subject of ongoing discourse. A critical missiological examination requires that we ask not only if the e-megachurch is financially viable, but also if it is spiritually faithful.

Conclusion

The rise of the e-megachurch, a complicated and multidimensional phenomenon that is significantly altering the religious landscape, marks a turning point in Christian history. The study has shown that although the use of digital technology has given megachurches previously unheard-of chances for worldwide outreach and creative ministry, it has also brought about several difficult theological, ethical, and practical issues that are impossible to overlook. Looking at the discussions in the article, one can confirm that the e-megachurch concept is a testament to the enduring power of faith to adapt and innovate in a constantly changing world. However, there is also a cautionary tale about the seductive power of technology and the perennial temptation to conform to the patterns of the world. The future of the church in the digital age will depend on its ability to navigate these tensions with theological wisdom, ethical integrity, and a steadfast commitment to the core principles of the Christian faith. The digital transformation of religious life presents the church with a

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fundamental choice: Will we allow technology to reshape faith in its own image, or will we critically and creatively deploy digital tools in service of timeless theological commitments? The answer to this question will determine not only the future of the e-megachurch but also the very nature of the Christian community in the 21st century.

Finally, as a conceptual and typological study, this article is limited in its empirical scope; future research should therefore pursue investigations through surveys, interviews, or ethnographic methods, while also directing scholarly attention towards emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, areas that current frameworks of digital pneumatology are yet to fully theorise.

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