Pharos Journal of Theology ISSN 2414-3324 online Volume 107 (1) Regular Issue (2026)

Ecclesiological hybridity and the limits of pastoral authority: the experiences of South African pastors during Covid-19

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https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.107.33

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the multifaceted experiences of South African pastors during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the forced adaptations in ministry, the erosion of pastoral authority, and the disruption of community life. Conducted between 2020 and 2022 in the Vaal Triangle area, the research aimed to describe the shift in ministry norms, analyze the impact of limited physical gatherings on fellowship (*koinonia*), and reflect on the theological implications of a digitally-connected church. A sample of 25 pastors from diverse denominations (Methodist, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, and Independent) was selected using purposive and convenience sampling. Data were gathered through in-depth, one-on-one key informant interviews (KIIs) and analyzed using a six-step thematic analysis framework adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings reveal that pandemic-induced lockdown restrictions led to a significant loss of *koinonia* and a resulting failure in effective discipleship of new converts, as the essential in-person relational aspects could not be replicated online. The forced migration to digital platforms created a "one-stop shop" environment for worship, which exposed churches to heightened membership instability; this facilitated church-switching as congregants compared preachers and transferred loyalty. This, coupled with the difficulty of pastoral oversight and a resulting feeling of pastoral alienation among clergy, introduced intense subtle competition and severely tested the limits of pastoral authority. Overall, the study highlights the painful process of forced adaptation and underscores the urgent need for a resilient and adaptable hybrid ecclesiology that leverages digital reach while intentionally cultivating the irreplaceable value of physical fellowship and interpersonal pastoral care. This empirical study offers a vital contribution by providing qualitative insights into the dynamics of church ministry during a period of forced digital adaptation. The findings challenge the church to fundamentally re-examine its mission in a rapidly digitizing world and to develop resilient strategies for pastoral care and community building that extend beyond physical structures.

Keywords: Church ministry and Covid19; Pastoral ministry and Covid19; Church and technology; Pastoral ministry adaptation; Doing church in changing times; pastoral authority and Covid19

Introduction and Background

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in late 2019 and spread globally in 2020, caused unprecedented suffering and altered the way people do things. It triggered a period of unprecedented social and economic upheaval. South Africa's swift response, including a nationwide lockdown and strict restrictions on public gatherings, had a profound impact on all facets of society, including religious life (Werrett, 2024). Churches, which constitute an important section were severely affected. Churches were forced to abandon their traditional, in-person models of ministry. This abrupt disruption compelled them to re-evaluate their operational norms and theological practices (Magezi and Magezi 2022, Pillay 2020, Kgatle 2020).

The challenges were particularly acute for pastors, who found themselves navigating a complex landscape of spiritual leadership, community care, and logistical problem-solving. A growing body of academic literature on the subject highlights the multifaceted consequences of the pandemic on religious institutions in South Africa (Magezi and Magezi 2022, Pillay 2020, Kgatle 2020). As scholars have noted, the lockdowns forced churches to rapidly adapt to digital platforms for worship and ministry, a transition that had many difficulties, particularly for smaller ministries that lacked the necessary financial and technological resources (Ott 2019; Pillay 2020). This shift gave rise to a notable divide whereby some churches successfully embraced a hybrid ecclesiology, combining both in-person and digital formats, while others struggled to maintain a sense of community and fellowship (Werrett 2024; Khosa-Nkatini 2022).

Beyond the logistical hurdles, the pandemic had significant theological and sociological implications. The loss of *koinonia* (in-person fellowship) challenged core tenets of Christian community, leading to feelings of pastoral alienation and detachment among congregants (Pillay 2020; Mdise 2023). The ease with which members could access online services from various denominations also introduced a subtle but significant element of competition among churches, impacting membership stability and pastoral authority (Kanjere 2020; Matsveru and Matsveru 2025; Scott 2020). The pandemic tested the resilience of faith communities and forcing them to confront their reliance on traditional, physical structures.

Further research into the South African context reveals that the pandemic's impact on churches was not uniform across all denominations or regions. While some large, well-resourced churches, particularly in urban areas, were able to quickly adapt to digital platforms, many African Independent Churches (AICs) and rural ministries faced significant barriers due to a lack of technology and a reliance on in-person communal gatherings (Kgatle 2020). The pandemic also exposed a need for more robust academic research, as much of the initial commentary was based on popular blogs rather than empirical studies (Magezi and Magezi 2022). The crisis highlighted the crucial role of pastoral care in a time of widespread distress, as clergy sought to support their congregants who were grappling with anxiety, loss, and economic hardship (Knoetze and Mkhize 2023). The pandemic ultimately accelerated an existing shift, compelling the church to re-examine its mission in a rapidly digitizing world. This necessitated the development of new strategies for pastoral care and community building that extend beyond the physical church walls. This acceleration is consistent with the prior trend of digital worship already being implemented by some churches to accommodate members unable to attend Sunday services, a finding that will be elaborated upon in the relevant section(s) of this study.

In light of these challenges, this qualitative study aimed to explore the multi-faceted experiences of South African pastors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific objectives were to:

- Describe the forced adaptations and changes in ministry norms experienced by pastors and their churches during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Investigate the impact of limited physical gatherings on congregants' fellowship and participation in church activities.
- Analyze how the transition to online ministry affected pastoral relationships with congregants, pastoral authority, and the overall sense of community within the church.
- Explore the challenges and opportunities that arose from the necessity to move church activities to digital platforms.
- Reflect on the theological implications of the findings, particularly regarding the nature of the church and pastoral leadership in a digitally-connected world.

Methodology[1]

This qualitative study was conducted between 2020 and 2022 and aimed to explore the lived experiences of South African pastors concerning the profound shift in ministry practices, pastoral authority, and community during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative research design was selected because it is particularly well-suited for investigating complex human phenomena and lived experiences within their natural context. This approach enabled the researchers to delve into the participants' unique perspectives, emotional states, and coping strategies, which are often overlooked by quantitative methods. The primary focus of the research was to address "how" and "what" questions, aiming to generate rich, descriptive data rather than relying on numerical measurements.

Participant Selection and Sampling: A purposive and convenience sampling approach was used to select the study participants. While convenience sampling helped identify easily accessible individuals, the primary strategy was purposive sampling, which was critical for ensuring that the chosen pastors had direct experience navigating the complex changes brought about by the pandemic. The inclusion criteria were straightforward: participants had to have served as an active church minister in South Africa throughout the entire COVID-19 pandemic and be willing to share their professional journey during that period.

The final sample consisted of 25 pastors from diverse denominations within the Vaal Triangle area of South Africa. This group included representatives from various denominations: Methodist (4), Roman Catholic (3), Baptist (5), Pentecostal (7), and independent churches (6). This denominational diversity was deliberately sought to capture a wide spectrum of experiences regarding the adoption of different ministry models (e.g., hybrid vs. non-hybrid) and their impact on pastoral authority. A sample size of 25 was deemed appropriate for this qualitative inquiry, as it was sufficient to reach data saturation—the point where no new themes or information emerge—while still allowing for a thorough, case-by-case analysis. It is important to note that all interviewed pastors possessed some level of digital ability, though the specific proficiency varied among them. We acknowledge that the sample is drawn exclusively from a single geographic area (the Vaal Triangle), and therefore, may not necessarily reflect the experiences of churches in rural areas. However, the sample is considered

[1] This methodology was utilized to produce several research papers on the subject. Due to this, readers may notice similarities between this study's methodology section and other works by the same authors.

representative of the experiences found in both under-resourced churches and high-tech urban congregations operating within this specific South African context.

Data Gathering Techniques: In-depth, one-on-one key informant interviews (KIIs) were the primary method for collecting data. KIIs were chosen for their effectiveness in eliciting detailed, personal narratives and insights directly from church leaders. An interview guide was systematically developed and refined to ensure that all critical areas—including the shift to digital platforms, changes in congregant fellowship, and the negotiation of pastoral authority—were thoroughly addressed. The interview guide was piloted with 5 church leaders to confirm that the questions were clear, relevant, and capable of generating the desired information. All interviews were conducted in a private setting to foster a confidential and open conversational environment. With the consent of the participants, all sessions were audio-recorded to guarantee accuracy and capture subtle vocal nuances. Additionally, researchers took field notes during the interviews to record initial observations and non-verbal cues. This process of triangulating audio recordings with field notes ensured a comprehensive and accurate data capture.

Data Analysis Procedures: The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a flexible and powerful method for identifying, interpreting, and reporting recurring patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The analytical process adhered to a six-step framework adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006):

i. **Becoming Familiar with the Data:** The audio recordings were first meticulously transcribed verbatim. Researchers then read and re-read the transcripts to become intimately familiar with the content and context of each interview.
ii. **Developing Initial Codes:** A **grounded, inductive approach** was used to code the transcribed data. This involved systematically identifying and labelling segments of text that were relevant to the study's objectives, allowing the codes to emerge directly from the participants' own words.
iii. **Identifying Themes:** Similar codes were clustered together to form preliminary themes. A **framework approach** was also used to guide the search for specific themes related to **ecclesiological hybridity, pastoral authority, and the loss of *koinonia***.
iv. **Refining Themes:** The identified themes were reviewed and revised to ensure they accurately represented the data. This involved checking for internal consistency and ensuring that the coded data segments fit logically within each theme.
v. **Defining and Labelling Themes:** The final themes were clearly defined and given descriptive names that succinctly captured their core meaning.
vi. **Writing the Report:** The themes served as the foundation for constructing the final report. This narrative was supported by direct quotes from participants to provide powerful, illustrative examples and authentically represent their experiences.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Theology Research Ethics Committee (TREC) of North-West University (ethics approval number: NWU-00763-21-A7). All participants received a detailed consent form that outlined the study's purpose, their right to voluntarily participate or withdraw at any time without repercussions, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Prior to each interview, the consent form was reviewed verbally to ensure complete understanding. To protect participant privacy, all transcripts were letter-coded (e.g., P1, P2) and stored in password-protected and encrypted computer files. To address the possibility of emotional distress, a social worker was on standby to provide support, although their services were not ultimately needed.

Findings on Pastors' experiences of forced adaptation or altering the norm during COVID-19

Loss of Fellowship

Restrictions on Church Attendance

Study participants consistently reported a significant loss of fellowship due to government lockdown restrictions, especially during levels 4 and 5, which prohibited public gatherings. This abrupt disruption negatively affected weekly Christian fellowship, compelling some churches to broadcast services online. However, many ministries were caught unprepared, lacking the necessary resources. Pastor A noted that during COVID-19, "it was completely impossible for Christians to meet" and "Ministers that were caught in an institutional mindset suffered a lot because they viewed themselves as ministers of the body of Christ that meets in person every Sunday."

Pastor D corroborated this, indicating that day-to-day programs like teaching and evangelism were challenged. His church halted activities after elderly members died, making people "anxious about their faith and gatherings," forcing a migration to online services despite the challenges ("This change was not easy because the church did not have the equipment for online services or enough money for data, etc."). Pastor B resisted halting in-person services, arguing his congregation was disciplined and protocols were followed ("The issue of church attendance was a great challenge... There are no cases of people infected in the church"). Pastor K felt the government's decision to ban gatherings without consultation "scattered and affected our power base" and was "discouraging." Pastor E expressed strong discontent, believing the virus was "under the control of politicians." He resorted to "underground churches" in lockdown 4 and secretly reopened after observing politicians campaigning ("I decided to secretly open our church because what happened was not fair"). Despite various efforts, participants were frustrated about getting members to return; Pastor F reported "difficulties trying to get members back to church as they are now used to sitting at home... Some of the members... have either dropped out or have moved to other churches."

Loss of koinonia

The majority of participants indicated that restrictions badly affected the fellowship (koinonia) of believers (cf. Heim, 2004), which is the spiritual and physical unity that mirrors the relationship of the Triune God (McDonnell, 1998:29, cf. Heim, 2004; Van der Merwe, 2019:2ff). This deep fellowship ceased during hard lockdowns. Even under earlier strict protocols, physical fellowship was severely limited. Pastor J reported that meeting under protocols made it "difficult to connect and fellowship with fellow believers," noting that service time was "reduced to 45 minutes."

Pastor K explained that the pandemic "forced us to move to the electronic side of doing ministry," using Zoom for children's ministry and WhatsApp for Bible study, and even developed an internet server for congregants. Despite their efforts, Pastor K admitted: "Overall, this was not easy to manage." All confirmed the importance of in-person fellowship; Pastor D stated, "Nothing can replace the in-person fellowship of God's people" and lamented that singing with a mask on "is not the same as singing without a mask." Pastors O and P lamented that churches were "robbed of koinonia," negatively affecting spiritual lives. Some pastors, like Pastor D, were reluctant to fully migrate, asserting: "Authority to look after the followers comes from the Bible, not from the Government."

The shift towards digital ministry necessitates addressing two crucial theological questions: What exactly does "*koinonia*" mean in the digital age? Furthermore, can online services be

spiritually acceptable and vibrant expressions of faith, rather than merely preliminary or intermediate substitutes?

We contend that the term Koinonia, traditionally translated as fellowship, communion, or shared participation, finds a renewed and complex definition in the digital context. It refers not merely to physical gathering but to the active sharing of life, faith, and spirit. Scholars generally agree that in the digital age, *koinonia* is realized through mediated co-presence, where intentional, sustained, and meaningful interactions replace purely physical proximity Wijaya 2023 & Berger 2018). Digital *koinonia* is therefore defined as the communal and reciprocal participation in the life and mission of the church across digital platforms, upholding the core elements of mutual care, spiritual nurturing, and shared identity, even when dispersed geographically (ibid).

Regarding the spiritual acceptability and vibrancy of online services, contemporary theological consensus has largely moved past the view that they are merely preliminary or intermediate. A growing body of scholarly work affirms that online services can be spiritually acceptable and vibrant forms of Christian worship and community (Wijaya *et al.* 2023). This acceptance is rooted in the understanding that the efficacy of the Word, prayer, and spiritual connection is not strictly limited by physical space; rather, it is dependent on the genuine engagement and the presence of the Holy Spirit (Turkle, 2011). When structured to facilitate meaningful, reciprocal participation—through interactive elements, personal follow-up, and shared liturgy—digital worship moves beyond simple broadcast. It then functions as a fully realized, legitimate expression of *koinonia* and sacramental life, capable of nurturing a robust and spiritually mature faith community (cf. Macaraan 2022).

Disruption of Physical Meetings and Intercession

Participants unanimously decried the disruption of physical meetings and intercession. While online platforms offered flexibility, services were unanimously agreed to be less enriching, "devoid of personal connections, koinonia, and organic discussions." The loss of physical meetings also adversely impacted intercession, which felt detached online. Pastor L noted, "We lost the privilege of meeting together in person as Christians during COVID-19... we cannot compare virtual church services and physical services," adding that when forced online, they "could not praise and worship God together anymore... People became low in spirit."

Drop in Membership

Lack of Discipleship for New Members

Some participants asserted that COVID-19 robbed them of effective discipleship for new converts, as hard lockdown phases restricted them to online platforms. In-person discipleship affords better room for accountability and deeper, organic relationships. Pastor P lamented: "I really struggled with discipling the new members of my church during COVID-19... I tried to do this online, but it was superficial since there were no interpersonal relationships." He concluded that new converts were "badly affected because this could not be effectively attained by the digital online platforms."

Drop in Church Attendance

Participants expressed mixed feelings about post-pandemic attendance. Pastor S noted some members "never came back after COVID-19," attributing it potentially to lost faith and "lots of pain and losses." Conversely, Pastor T reported almost all members returned, and his membership "has even numerically increased through the preaching and free counselling

programs we did on social media... it was our teaching during COVID-19 that made our members understand church not as a building."

COVID-19 as an Opportunity for Church-Switching

The migration to online platforms exposed many members to different churches, allowing them to follow pastors whose preaching resonated with them. Pastor A reported that COVID-19 "brought many opportunities to the members of our church," as they could "decide who is a better preacher among the pastors," leading to a loss of members ("I lost some of my members to different churches").

Abandonment of Church Fellowship

Perceptions of Pastoral Alienation

Some pastors felt unwanted and irrelevant, as members coped without their support by utilising internet resources. Pastor D stated, "I felt like the need for a pastor was diminished during the pandemic," as members developed their own coping "means to get whatever help they needed from the internet." Furthermore, some members were reluctant to invite pastors to their homes due to fear of spreading the virus. Pastor K recalled being avoided by a member, surmising: "I think they avoided me to protect themselves from contracting COVID-19... COVID-19 brought so much fear to our people, and the element of mistrust to each other."

Subtle Competition Among Churches

Pastors felt they were engaging in indirect competition due to members' access to other online services. This eventually led to congregants switching churches. Pastor G noted, "our members had access to different preaching from different pastors... and this resulted in some churches losing members to other churches after the pandemic."

Flexibility of Church Attendance Options: Challenge to Membership Stability

The migration to online services gave members flexible options, allowing them to switch between preachers easily. Pastor O "do[es] not even know how many members of my church listened to those sermons because as many churches moved to online platforms, it meant that... the internet made everything a one-stop shop." Pastor M felt "helpless as a pastor" because young converts could "listen to both bad and good preaching," which worried him since they were not "yet grounded in the faith."

Discussion of the findings

Ecclesiological Hybridity: Doing Church Beyond the Physical Building

It is apparent that many South African-based pastors struggled to run church during lockdown levels 4 and 5, when physical gatherings were restricted. This especially applies to those who were not using digital platforms to conduct services, fellowships, and many other activities in hybrid format, which entails presenting the same sermon or programme to in-person and online audiences simultaneously. It can be argued that if church activities had not been interrupted or discontinued, returning to physical meetings in the post-pandemic period would have been more or less seamless. Such interruptions would have been minimal if all pastors had embraced digital technology and used it to reach out to their existing and potential congregants during the pandemic.

In light of the foregoing observations, we are conscious that many pastors and churches shunned online platforms because they believed that the Christian community could only be vibrant and experience true worship and fellowship in physical meetings. We contend that,

even before the pandemic, churches should have been utilising some digital platforms to reach out to people who could not attend services physically, thereby spreading the range of the Church's reach (Ott, 2019:60). The aforesaid point is succinctly expressed, thus: 'digital technology has transformed the way we connect with one another, shape our identity and form relationships' (ibid). As a result, technology should be embraced and adopted in the way we do church.

While it is generally accepted that activities such as worship, Bible study, and fellowship achieve maximum effectiveness when conducted in-person, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the necessity of overcoming the limitations of physical gathering (Werrett, 2024:569; Campbell & Garner, 2016:85). To maintain effectiveness and relevance, particularly during emergencies like the pandemic, the Church must not be alienated from digital platforms (Campbell & Garner, 2016:85). This recognition does not advocate for the replacement of in-person ministry; rather, it urges church leaders to embrace a hybrid format for conducting church life. As Werrett (2024:575, cf. Cooper et al., 2021:1-9) notes, "the coronavirus pandemic provided many challenges for the universal churches both operationally and theologically, especially around the requirement for physical meetings." In line with this, we concur with Campbell and Garner's (2016:85) helpful observation that God's interaction with humankind "...is not limited to the purely physical, everyday world but is also active in the digital locations we create and inhabit." Thus, ecclesiological hybridity is defined as the simultaneous, intentional, and integrated use of both physical (in-person) and digital (online) environments to facilitate all aspects of Christian practice, mission, and community life.

Limits of Pastoral Authority and Competitive Ministerial Contexts

It is important for pastors to be fully conscious that they in fact have limited power over the members of their congregations and that they are always in subtle competition with other pastors and churches. We acknowledge that the emergence of COVID-19 revealed that members' loyalty to the pastors or churches can change anytime, as they get exposed to different preachers, especially online. In such situations, the tendency to compare churches and pastors becomes inevitable, despite congregants' loyalty and allegiance to their pastors (Kanjere, 2020:n.p.). This is aptly summed up as: "there has never been a time when the leadership skills of the clergy have been under more scrutiny than the time of the COVID-19 pandemic" (Kanjere, 2020:n.p.).

These comparisons are not limited to preaching skills, but they extend to other church activities such as fellowship and Bible study. That is, together with Matsveru and Matsveru (2025:n.p.) and Pillay (2020:n.p.), we argue that due to the migration of church activities to digital platforms during COVID-19, church members crossed denominational boundaries, as they were no longer constrained to church affiliations. Pillay (2020) further argues that most churches designed their online services to attract viewership, yet they missed the fact that the fundamental purpose of the Church is to equip and send the saved people into the world on God's mission of saving the lost (Pillay 2020:n.p.).

Although, for some reasons, one can disagree with the foregoing view on the primary purpose of the Church, the point we are advancing is that if members of a certain church visit another physically or online and find resonance with its pastor's message, they are most likely to leave their own, as they believe that they will still be worshipping the same God. Some pastors only came to this realisation when some of their members never came back to church after COVID-19. In our view, if pastors fail to understand that they have no absolute authority over their congregations, they will be shocked when members leave their churches due to discontentment with their preaching style and many other church activities. Therefore, pastors should always strive to improve the overall quality of all of their church activities. If this is

granted, it means that pastors need to consistently learn and develop their preaching, fellowship, and Bible study, among others, so that they do not lose members, even if they visit other churches for new experiences, as was prevalent during the pandemic. Such visible dynamics, which often culminated in members switching affiliation, created subtle competition among churches and pastors.

Fellowship Is Fundamental to Christianity and There Should Be Ways for It to Be Done in Hybrid Format

The fellowship of believers is a spiritually-connected community that is built on joint faith in Christ Jesus, where members encourage each other, demonstrate mutual care, and worship together. This fellowship stretches beyond the physical-social assembly of believers to spiritual unity, which is aimed at reinforcing Christians' faith in Jesus Christ and service to God and one another. In doing this, Christian fellowship fosters members' relationships with God and fellow believers, as they all strive to attain maturity in Christ.

Most of the pastors who participated in this study viewed in-person Christian fellowships as richer and more effective than virtual alternatives. In-person fellowships tend to create better mutual support, accountability, as well as shared experiences of communal practices, such as the sacrament of baptism and the holy communion. While online fellowships such as WhatsApp and many more others provide Christians with the convenience to meet wherever they are at a given time, the participants unanimously indicated that they lacked in-person connections, which nurture ideal interrelations that enable them to encourage others in their faith and walk with Jesus.

As most of the participant pastors indicated in the findings reported above, the body of Christ lost the benefits of face-to-face fellowship during COVID-19 lockdown levels 4 and 5, when they were not able to meet. As many pastors found out, this challenge was exacerbated by the fact that some members found it difficult to engage in virtual fellowships. That is, the importance of some things can only be fully realised when the opportunities and privileges that they availed are gone. Stated differently, the pandemic served as a profound lesson, highlighting that taken-for-granted privileges like unrestricted gathering are foundational to the Christian experience and their loss reveals the limitations of digital substitution.

In view of the foregoing discussion, the following underlying questions can be posed: In what ways can virtual fellowship be designed and conducted to mimic in-person fellowship? How effective is virtual fellowship? How can churches leverage virtual fellowships to counter disruptions that are caused by unforeseen emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic? In other words, churches are expected to demonstrate:

> [r]esilience and adaptation, embracing new ways of doing things and of being church. Churches have to adapt; they have to ask themselves questions about the implications for being church in this 'new normal' context (Pillay 2020: n.p.).

The questions that were posed above align with Oliver's (2022:1) contention that COVID-19 has taught us that the world is in a continuous state of shift that requires a 'mental paradigm shift'. Consequently, the Church ought to embark on a transformation course, from solely relying on in-person worship and fellowship to embracing and adapting to hybrid worship and fellowship. In saying this, we are aware that there are many acts, such as compassion and pastoral ministry, that cannot be practically demonstrated on digital platforms. Nonetheless, we posit that churches should be innovative and prepared to execute their activities on digital platforms in times such as the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. Mdise, 2023:1ff, Khosa-Nkatini,

2022:1ff, Scott, 2020:1ff). Indeed, this preparedness will help churches to avoid forced adaptation to circumstances and situations like the COVID-19 period. In other words, no pastor should claim that he or she was hurriedly forced to adapt to new ways of doing church (Scott, 2020:1).

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for significant and often painful transformations within South African churches. The outbreak not only disrupted traditional ministry models but also forced pastors to confront fundamental questions about the nature of fellowship, pastoral authority, and the role of digital technology in Christian life (Pillay, 2020; Oliver, 2022). The loss of physical gatherings and koinonia was deeply felt by pastors and congregants alike, leading to feelings of isolation and a perceived decline in the spiritual vibrancy of the community. This study highlights the inherent value of in-person fellowship, which, as the participants articulated, cannot be fully replicated in a virtual setting.

Moreover, the forced migration to online platforms exposed pastors to new challenges, including pastoral alienation, subtle competition with other churches, and the erosion of congregational commitment and stability. As Kanjere (2020) notes, the pandemic placed unprecedented scrutiny on the leadership skills of the clergy. While digital technology offered a way to continue ministry during lockdowns, it also introduced a sense of detachment and diminished pastoral oversight, particularly concerning the discipleship of new converts. The pandemic, therefore, served as a stark reminder that while technology can be a useful tool, it has limitations when it comes to fostering the deep, interpersonal relationships that are essential to a healthy church community. The experiences of the pastors in this study underscore the need for a resilient and adaptable ecclesiology (Pillay, 2020), one that embraces a hybrid approach to ministry that leverages the reach of digital platforms without sacrificing the irreplaceable value of physical fellowship and community."

Building upon the findings and limitations of this study, future research should explore several key areas to deepen the understanding of hybrid ecclesiology: Firstly, a quantitative study is needed to empirically measure the impact of digital services on congregational loyalty, discipleship retention, and financial stewardship in different denominational and socio-economic contexts across South Africa. Secondly, considering the rapid growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI), future research should investigate the theological and practical implications of integrating AI-driven tools (e.g., AI-assisted pastoral care, automated spiritual formation content) into hybrid ministry models, examining the potential benefits, ethical pitfalls, and their effect on human pastoral relationships. Finally, a separate qualitative study, perhaps using focus groups with laypeople, is essential to capture the congregant perspective on *koinonia* and spiritual vibrancy in hybrid settings, providing a necessary counter-balance to the clergy-centric view presented here, and informing the development of pastoral models and guidelines for a robust, resilient hybrid ministry.

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***Conflict of Interest Statement**: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*