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Two or three gathered online

Two or Three Gathered Online: Asian and European Responses to COVID-19 and the Digital Church

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In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a rapid increase in the use of digital technology by Christian communities worldwide. This paper offers a cross-continental analysis of how churches in Asia (Hong Kong and Singapore) and Europe (the United Kingdom and Sweden) understand and choose to implement (or resist) online services or mass. Undoubtedly, there are practical reasons behind differences which can be observed, such as the technological readiness found amongst church leadership and laity, and past experiences of public health crises, such as the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak. However, accompanying these developments are debates around the theological implications of digitising church ministries, and the general concern that the digital church is somehow not 'church' or, even, not 'Christian'. Different contextual perspectives help us to understand that the digital church offers a new dimension of the church embodied and, therefore, one that has the potential to live out the *missio Dei* within and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: contextual theology; COVID-19; digital church; digital technology; internet; *missio Dei*

Introduction

In the midst of the COVID-19 lockdown, Pope Francis made plans to live-stream Easter Sunday Mass on 12 April 2020 in an empty Saint Peter's Basilica. As news of this began to circulate, one bishop raised concerns, which the Pope later summarised:

> The Church, the Sacraments, the People of God are concrete. It is true that at this moment we must make this familiarity with the Lord in this way, but to get out of the tunnel, not to stay there. And this is the familiarity of the apostles: not Gnostic, not virtualized, not selfish for each of them, but a concrete familiarity in the people.[1]

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[1] 'Pope: we pray for expectant mothers, attentive to a "virtual" Church', *AsiaNews*, 17 April 2020, http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Pope:-we-pray-for-expectant-mothers,-attentive-to-a-'virtual'-Church-49842.html.

The view of this bishop underscores a concern that the digitisation of church ministry makes it 'virtual'—that is, it is digitally simulated and therefore not real. This can be noticed in an earlier 2002 Vatican report, 'The Church and Internet', which similarly states:

> Although the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel, it can complement them, attract people to a fuller experience of the life of faith, and enrich the religious lives of users.[2]

In other words, the 'virtual' is an insufficient substitute for 'real' community, sacraments, and evangelism. Whilst we will revisit this in the final section of this paper, this statement recognises at least a limited complementary role of internet religious activity for what is 'real' in the church.

Furthermore, the Pope's reference to 'Gnosticism' is of no accident. Whilst the term is often used to denote a cluster of philosophical and religious systems of the first few centuries AD, such as in Irenaeus's *Against Heresies*, its ancient and contemporary usage is weaponized against that which is considered heretical. According to the Pope, the bishop was concerned that digitising Easter Sunday mass results in a separation of the spiritual from the material. This underscores a general concern of critics coming from a variety of denominational backgrounds about digital church: disembodiment. According to Tim Hutchings:

> For many Christian commentators… community is not just communication but embodied presence, face-to-face relationships, discipline and the physical service of each member to the group. This argument emphasises the irreplaceable value of embodiment, and we encounter it in different forms from representatives of a very wide range of denominations…. The argument from embodiment relies on the conviction that online community (and church) operates as a replacement for and a retreat from face-to-face relationships, and the word 'substitute' appears frequently….[3]

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[2] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 'The Church and Internet', 22 February 2002, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html.

[3] Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 31. Hutchings goes on to highlight the range of those who have underscored this point, from Catholics to evangelicals such as N. T. Wright and John Piper. For an earlier discussion on this point, see Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 119–23.

Part of this includes the key event of Christian history found in the Incarnation, whereby the God Who is Other than this world became human, within this creaturely world. This incarnational principle undergirds not only Christology, but also ecclesiology—an 'incarnational ministry' which extends Christ's work, after the resurrection, into the church's work in being (bodily) present in this world. Within Eucharistic theology, especially amongst Catholics, embodiment is also understood in terms of the presence of Christ's body and blood in the consecrated elements.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, debates around whether the church can gather online have become even more sharp. This is because most governments around the globe have banned mass gatherings. Some Christian communities have argued that government-mandated distancing policies are an infringement on the freedom of religion. Others deliberate over whether the Lord's table can be administered and shared by individuals separated by an internet connection. Still others are concerned with the more fundamental question of whether two or three gathered *online* in Christ's name is still the church.

The cognate fields of digital religion and digital theology are dominated by studies conducted in Western societies, such as the United Kingdom and the United States. However, COVID-19 was initially an epidemic in Asia, especially in Sinophone regions, before it developed into a global pandemic. Hence, in this context, we determined it would be advantageous to develop a cross-continental study, exploring how select churches in Asia (Hong Kong and Singapore) and Europe (the United Kingdom and Sweden) understood and chose to implement (or resist) online services or mass. We conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with church leaders, most via video chat, and some churches have also shared with us web analytics data from the digital platforms used for their online services, especially around Easter. The research is based on selective engagement with the standpoints of church leaders and official church statements, as opposed to the views of the laity. It is also limited from fully considering those who have less access or less ability to utilise digital technologies. This study has not attempted to develop a focused social scientific case study, but to explore broader theological points concerning the relationship between the church and digitality. The data we have collected offer us snapshots into how church leaders in these four locations deliberate over the use of digital technology in the wake of COVID-19. Surprisingly, explicit concerns about embodiment seem to be absent from most of these discussions; the more important points raised seem to be related to the less-than-real nature of the digital church. This paper argues that perspectives from various denominations and contexts help us understand that the digital

church offers a new dimension of the church embodied and, therefore, one that is living out the *missio Dei* within and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Practical Factors Affecting Digital Response

A quick comparison of the contexts discussed in this paper would notice that the locations selected are broadly separated between Confucian (Hong Kong and Singapore) and Christian (the United Kingdom and Sweden) societies. Already, generalisations have been made about these cultural differences shaping responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.[4] Whilst there may be some truth behind these correlations, a brief examination of these contexts reveals other practical factors which shape the digital responses of churches in these locations.

The first of these factors is related to how governments and societies have responded. In Asia, where the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak is still in recent memory, most churches in Singapore and Hong Kong switched to live-streamed meetings within weeks of the first confirmed COVID-19 cases in their respective locations, both on 23 January 2020. In Singapore, this was perhaps due to churches recognising their responsibility in slowing down the spread of the virus. Two of Singapore's earliest clusters of COVID-19 cases were in churches—Life Church and Mission, and Grace Assembly of God, which were later found to be linked through a shared Chinese New Year celebration on 25 January.[5] Singaporean theologian Roland Chia explains:

> Under this particular circumstance, nobody would question the advisory given by the government. There is still quite a high level of trust when a national emergency like this is concerned.… There is no intention of defying any government advisory or instruction. It has worked well for us. It has also worked well for them.[6]

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[4] See S. Nathan Park, 'Confucianism Isn't Helping Beat the Coronavirus', *Foreign Policy*, 2 April 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/02/confucianism-south-korea-coronavirus-testing-cultural-trope-orientalism/; Ian Inkster, 'In the battle against the coronavirus, East Asian societies and cultures have the edge', *South China Morning Post*, 10 April 2020, https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3079176/battle-against-coronavirus-east-asian-societies-and-cultures-have; Pepe Escobar, 'Confucius is winning the Covid-19 war', *Asia Times*, 13 April 2020, https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/confucius-is-winning-the-covid-19-war/.

[5] Timothy Goh and Rei Kurohi, 'Grace Assembly coronavirus mystery solved', *The Straits Times*, 25 February 2020, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/grace-assembly-coronavirus-mystery-solved-mega-cluster-linked-to-2-wuhan-tourists-via-a.

[6] Roland Chia, video interview with Alexander Chow, 28 April 2020.

Such a view would less likely be expressed by a church leader in Hong Kong. The trust in Hong Kong between the government and the broader society has become fragile due to the social unrest of the Umbrella Movement (2014), the anti-extradition bill protests (2019–), and the government delay in closing its borders in the early weeks of the disease. Hong Kong church decisions to halt physical meetings and to switch to live-streaming were made during a time when there was much confusion and disagreement over how to properly control the spread of the virus.

By the time WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March, European states were just beginning to realise the gravity of the situation. The United Kingdom announced a ban on mass gatherings on 16 March, followed by a more restrictive lockdown on 23 March which banned gatherings of more than two people of different households and closed places of worship. In contrast, Sweden did not follow the decision of most other countries. On 27 March the government announced a ban on gatherings larger than 50 people. This has meant that many churches in Sweden streamed services online but have done so from inside their buildings. Thus government policy seems to have directly limited the creativity of Swedish churches, which have not been forced to think outside the box in the same way as churches under stricter lockdown measures in other countries.

Another important factor that influences a church's adoption of digital technology in the wake of COVID-19 has been the digital readiness of society, church leadership, and church members. Many Catholic, Anglican/Episcopalian, and Presbyterian churches in the UK have scrambled to get the right equipment and knowhow. For instance, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales has provided the platform ChurchServices.TV for parishes to live-stream their masses; however, it is only a minority who have chosen to utilise this provision. Canon Pat Browne, whose parish church has live-streamed mass for years, attributes this to digital illiteracy amongst the clergy.[7] This is quite different from the situation in Singapore, promoted by the government to be a 'Smart Nation' since 2014. The Singaporean Catholic diocese has created well-produced outputs that engage young and old, with dedicated YouTube and Telegram channels. Furthermore, for a number of years now, the city-state's many megachurches such as City Harvest and New Creation have had their own dedicated smartphone apps. A similar development can be noted in Hong Kong where there has been a rise in churches with strong online platforms, especially

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[7] Pat Browne, phone interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 1 May 2020.

since the wake of recent protests, such as the Umbrella City Cyberchurch (est. 2014) and Flow Church (est. 2019).

However, the national or regional technological readiness of these contexts does not necessarily translate into church readiness. According to IMD's World Digital Competitiveness Ranking 2019, Singapore and Sweden were ranked 2nd and 3rd respectively.[8] Yet whilst the Singaporean churches have quickly adjusted to the new situation, the Church of Sweden has been slower to adopt digital technology. Karin Sundmark, coordinator for services in the diocese of Lund, observes that some churches in the diocese have not broadcast services out of the assumption that their elderly congregants will be unable to access the technology.[9] The approach of the Wesley Methodist Church—the largest and oldest Methodist congregation in Singapore—is markedly different. Church staff have actively assisted their senior members to overcome barriers by calling them individually to help them access the church's online services.[10] Benjamin Lee, one of their pastors, repeatedly emphasised the church's drive to find innovative solutions in light of the current situation. This attitude can be compared to Archbishop Antje Ackelén, who praised the innovation of many parishes during the COVID-19 pandemic, whilst maintaining that, in her role, she is a steward of church tradition rather than an entrepreneur.[11]

Thus, the theologically liberal but liturgically traditional Church of Sweden can be contrasted with the often conservative but utilitarian churches of Asia. As Simon Chan has remarked, Asian Christianity of all stripes tends to emphasise an 'essentially evangelical character'.[12] This lends itself towards the propagation of an 'old' Christian message through new forms of media, from print media to radio/television broadcast and contemporary music. This seems true of many Asian Protestants and Catholics. For the latter, we can see an example in the live-streamed Easter service of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore, which proved to be an impressive production including stirring videos about the body of Christ and a child-friendly talk explaining Lent.[13] Indeed, it appears as though churches which are more evangelically-oriented—or, better, evangelistically-

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[8] IMD, 'World Digital Competitiveness Ranking 2019', https://www.imd.org/wcc/world-competitiveness-center-rankings/world-digital-competitiveness-rankings-2019/, accessed 19 May 2020.

[9] Karin Sundmark, video interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 14 May 2020.

[10] Benjamin Lee, video interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 19 May 2020.

[11] Lisa von Garrelts, 'Digitalisering—Rekordpåsk för kyrkan' [Digitalisation—A Record Easter for the Church] , *Techarenan,* 20 April 2020, https://www.techarenan.news/2020/04/20/rekordpask-for-kyrkan/.

[12] Simon Chan, 'Evangelical Theology in Asian Contexts', in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, edited by Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 226.

[13] Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore, 'Easter Sunday Mass 2020—Livestream', *YouTube*, 11 April 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBp0edIArMU.

oriented, tend to be more keen to employ digital technologies in their engagement and mission with the broader society and world.

Digital readiness or not, some churches have stepped up to the challenge. St Paul and St Georges, a low-church Scottish Episcopal congregation in Edinburgh, was very quick to switch its Sunday services to an online format. Before the lockdown, the church regularly welcomed 500–600 attendees to Sunday services; its first online service on 22 March reached more than 8,000 viewers.[14] Another example is Durham Cathedral, which never considered live-streaming prior to the pandemic. Today the cathedral is streaming services and daily prayers on Facebook attracting thousands of viewers. The web analytics from the cathedral's Easter Sunday service point towards an elderly demographic, with over 45 percent of viewers falling within the 65+ age category. However, from the feedback the cathedral has received, it appears that many senior congregants, having been forced to use digital technology, are not only growing in confidence, but are even enjoying it.[15]

In part, the practical factors observed here nuance the analytical framework that Heidi Campbell describes as the religious-social shaping of technology.[16] Campbell's framework points towards the internal processes involved when religious communities negotiate new technologies. The researcher seeking to understand this process needs to be attentive not only to communities' specific traditions, moral codes, and core beliefs, but also to how these are drawn upon in the intra-communal negotiations that transpire, and to how decisions are communicated to the wider community. The framework, then, rightly emphasises the role of tradition and theology. However, the external and practical considerations highlighted in our research suggest that, in reality, these negotiations are more complex. Furthermore, the speed at which churches embraced online services in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that little time has been afforded for theological and liturgical reflection. A number of factors come into play as churches make speedy decisions to live-stream their services, most for the first time. Despite the seemingly haphazard way in which this digital turn has come about, most churches act out of their liturgical instincts, tacitly informed by the theological particularities of their ecclesial traditions. Yet, beyond theological considerations, other

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[14] Angie Brown, 'Edinburgh church congregation grows under lockdown', *BBC*, 12 April 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-52262025.

[15] Charlie Allen, video interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 7 May 2020.

[16] Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 57–63.

important factors include cultural presuppositions, governmental and societal responses, digital readiness, and missiological dispositions.

Theology and Technology in Tension

Preoccupied with practical issues, few churches have purposely reflected theologically on the implications of using digital technology to deliver their services. It is evident, however, that many have acted and deliberated in ways that are largely consistent with the theology of their respective traditions.

Again it is interesting to note that despite Sweden being one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world, there is widespread unease amongst the clergy of the Church of Sweden to digitally broadcast services. In an open letter published for his diocese on 27 March, Bishop Fredrick Modéus writes that 'the service is the nerve centre for us Christians. It is my strong opinion that services have to continue as long as it is possible for people to gather.'[17] As such, he advises his clergy to continue celebrating services in their church buildings and, if necessary, hold multiple services on a given Sunday to accommodate government restrictions on mass gatherings of over 50 people. A few days later, however, he reverses his recommendation in light of health concerns and guidelines from the Ministry of Health, encouraging clergy to be creative in using digital means to continue making the gospel available to parishioners. He also emphasises the importance of keeping churches open as sanctuaries for individual prayer and for church bells to be rung as a sign of the church's presence in the midst of suffering.[18]

These letters typify the Church of Sweden's emphasis on place in their liturgy. 'The Church Handbook' from 2018 is influenced by Lutheran liturgy scholar Gordon Lathrop's focus on *ordo* or 'ritual ordering' in the gathered congregation.[19] Ordained theologian Frida Mannerfledt suggests there is a deeply ingrained liturgical sensibility within church hierarchy, which has resulted in an instinctive suspicion of digital spaces as a threat to the embodiedness of liturgy.[20] This liturgical

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[17] Fredrik Modéus, 'Ställ inte in gudstjänster—fira fler!' [Do not cancel services—celebrate more!], *Church of Sweden*, 27 March 2020, https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/pressmeddelande/stall-inte-in-gudstjanster---fira-fler?publisherId=3235445&releaseId=3273911&webid=1729437, Jonas Kurlberg's translation.

[18] Fredrik Modéus, 'Vi tar ansvar och ställer om' [We are taking responsibility and are switching], *Facebook*, 2 April 2020, https://www.facebook.com/fredrik.modeus/posts/10157540350308052.

[19] *Kyrkohandboken för Svenska Kyrkan* [The Church Handbook for the Church of Sweden] (Stockholm: Verbum, 2018). See Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998).

[20] Frida Mannerfeldt, video interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 5 May 2020.

instinct surfaces in an article by Karin Rubenson published in *Kyrkans Tidning,* a weekly newspaper associated with the Church of Sweden. She concedes that digital technology makes the situation of isolation bearable in these exceptional times; but without the physical gathering of believers in the sanctuary, the church is no longer as it should be. The assembly of physically-gathered bodies is so fundamentally instilled in the ecclesial reflexes of the Lutheran church, she contends, that 'our bodies cry out', longing to be present with one another again.[21] A small group of priests who have been vocal on social media go further than Rubenson and oppose the digital broadcasting of services altogether. Referencing 'The Church Handbook', Per Gyllenör, minister of a parish in southern Sweden, maintains that a service can only be celebrated in a sanctified space, presided by an ordained minister, wherein the gathered engage with all their senses in liturgical worship. He forcefully insists that the only logical conclusion of the directives stipulated in the handbook is that watching a broadcasted service can never recreate the participation of the whole body and therefore is to be resisted altogether.[22]

Churches in the UK have on the whole been more positively inclined. Cardinal Vincent Nichols in a conversation with Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis and Archbishop Justin Welby gives a resounding endorsement of the role of digital technology in maintaining worship during the pandemic:

> There's a kind of burgeoning of spirituality, a burgeoning of helping each other to pray and we're remarkably benefiting from these internet facilities. It's the house church of the early church combined with the technology of the twenty-first century. And for once the technology looks unambiguously positive in this period and I'm astonished by the creativity and the richness and the inventiveness of what's on offer to help us.[23]

Despite such positive appraisals, there are also British churches that are not digitally broadcasting their services during the lockdown. Whilst most abstain for practical reasons, such as lack of resources, there are those who express theological concerns. A Catholic parish priest, who wishes to

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[21] Karin Rubenson, 'Corona är en ut ur kroppen-upplevelse för kyrkan' [Corona is an out-of-body-experience for the church], *Kyrkans Tidning,* 15 April 2020, https://www.kyrkanstidning.se/teologi/corona-ar-kyrkans-egen-ut-ur-kroppen-upplevelse.

[22] Per Gyllenör, video interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 19 May 2020.

[23] Catholic Church England and Wales, 'Faith leaders on prayer and worship during the pandemic', *YouTube*, 3 April 2020*,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoVD2pegDJA.

remain anonymous, chose not to stream Sunday mass since he holds that the 'private' Eucharist prescribed by the Catholic Church during lockdown implies a return to pre-Vatican II theology. He is, as such, wary of celebrating communion alone in the sight of a passive laity unable to participate. Nevertheless, he has used Zoom for Sunday 'gospel reflections' and Bible studies, and thus is not opposed to the use of digital technology for religious gatherings *per se*.[24]

The sense that digitally-mediated services limit participation was repeated by several interviewees. On the other end of the ecclesial spectrum, whilst reverberating the longing for physical gatherings expressed by Karin Rubenson, Chris Juby, the Worship, Media and Arts Coordinator at King's Church Durham, a large charismatic evangelical church, has largely found online worship 'very meaningful'. Nevertheless, as a low church congregation, their primary theological question has been how to live out the 'priesthood of all believers' when worshiping via digital platforms. In their normal services this teaching has been translated into actively incorporating contributions from a wide range of people. They have found this to be more cumbersome online.[25] The issue of participation has also been raised amongst the leadership at a Brethren church in Singapore. Pastor Leong Che Yeong says that it has proved difficult to implement the Brethren format of 'open worship' in which any member of the congregation can say a prayer, read a Bible passage, lead in worship, or share a 'word' or testimony.[26]

Concerns such as these are consistent with the traditions of these low church denominations. However, even at Durham Cathedral this very issue has been one of the more prominent topics of discussion amongst the clergy. Canon Charlie Allen explains that in their regular cathedral worship there is a deliberate attempt to include a plurality of voices. Since lockdown, clergy have been live-streaming services from their homes and several have felt uneasy with the format as it entails merely one person leading the worship, which can seem 'hierarchical'.[27] Given the cathedral's high-church tradition and the emphasis it often places on the materiality of worship, its univocal embrace of digital technology is noteworthy. Durham Cathedral primarily understands itself as a place of prayer and sees digitally-mediated prayer as perhaps less theologically problematic. Prayer is already mediated through material objects such as our bodies, prayer books, icons, and rosaries.

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[24] Anonymous, email correspondence with Jonas Kurlberg, 1 May 2020.

[25] Chris Juby, video interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 30 April 2020.

[26] Leong Che Yeong, video interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 22 April 2020.

[27] Charlie Allen, video interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 7 May 2020.

Canon Pat Browne, a priest at the Church of the Holy Apostle, Pimlico, London, raises a related issue to that of participation. The church has been broadcasting mass online for 6–7 years and, thus, he unsurprisingly applauds the benefits of live-streaming during lockdown. Nevertheless, he is clearly ambivalent: 'A lot of elderly say that the digital is a lifesaver, but it can never replace [physical gatherings]. God-forbid that it will be replacing it.' He fears that the convenience of following mass from the comfort of one's home might result in some members of the congregation not returning to regular Sunday mass once restrictions are lifted. Live-streaming could thereby nurture an individualistic spirituality.[28]

These conversations note that, despite the benefits of digital technology, especially under the extraordinary circumstances of a pandemic, online services are still the less preferable option.

Communion, Online or Not

Regardless of geographical location, amongst the churches that we have studied, those connected with more traditional denominations have tended to not administer communion online. Although there are some theological concerns raised with regards to these matters, most emphasise a consistency with their denomination's historic teaching on the matter.

Most Catholic dioceses and a number of churches in the Anglican communion have allowed clergy to broadcast the celebration of the Eucharist, on behalf of the laity who cannot themselves participate in person, as well as encouraging the practice of spiritual communion.[29] Whilst this is consistent within an Anglo-Catholic Eucharistic theology, Kelvin Holdsworth, provost of St Mary's Scottish Episcopal Cathedral in Glasgow, laments such practice since 'the gathering of a community is intrinsic to the Eucharist and we are all learning rapidly and unexpectedly what is intrinsic to the way we express our faith.'[30] Dave Richards, rector of St Paul and St Georges Church, agrees with

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[28] Pat Browne, video interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 1 May 2020.

[29] 'Holy Week and Easter in 2020', *Church of England*, 1 April 2020, https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-parishes/holy-week-and-easter-2020; 'Online worship: "From my home to your home"', *Scottish Episcopal Church*, 20 March 2020, https://www.scotland.anglican.org/online-worship-from-my-home-to-your-home/. For spiritual communion, see John Paul II, 'Encyclical letter *Ecclesia de eucharistia* of his Holiness Pope John Paul II', http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html, art. 34; Church of England, 'Guidance on Spiritual Communion and Coronavirus', https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Guidance%20on%20Spiritual%20Communion%20and%20Coronavirus.pdf, accessed on 22 May 2020.

[30] Kevin Holdsworth, 'What if this is the end of the Eucharist?', *What's in Kevin's Head?*, 5 May 2020, https://thurible.net/2020/05/05/what-if-this-is-the-end-of-the-eucharist/.

Holdsworth, explaining that 'if people aren't able to receive [communion], it's actually more of an act of solidarity for the priest not to.'[31] Whilst plenty of clergy have accepted the recommendations of church hierarchies, there are those who have proceeded with online celebrations of the ritual despite prohibitions. We may consider the views of Canon Dana Deelap, vicar of a village parish that gathers 'all sorts of Christians' in the Cotswolds and formerly a member of the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England. Deelap is uneasy with 'spiritual communion' for similar reasons to those stated above. After careful consideration, she decided to celebrate communion with her parishioners via Zoom during the Easter weekend. Acknowledging the importance of physical consecration and a physically gathered community, she asserts that, in essence, consecration is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit, 'whose action is not contained within the crusts of a loaf, the walls of a church, or the doctrines of the Church, but who, through God's grace, meets us in bread and wine.'[32]

Another example of such contention can be noted in the Methodist Church in Great Britain. The Methodist Conference extensively debated this in 2015, producing the conference report 'Communion Mediated through Social Media', which concludes that online communion 'compromise[s] the integrity of the sacrament'.[33] The pandemic has renewed this debate on social media. Whilst similar controversies can be found in other Methodist churches in the West, such as the United Methodist Church (USA), this seems less the case in Asia. For instance, Bishop Chong Chin Chung has instructed Singaporean Methodists to keep 'this rite sacred and not try to conduct Holy Communion on our own in our homes.'[34] Though no further theological rationale is offered, Benjamin Lee suspects that it conforms to the recommendations of the 2015 British Methodist Conference, although there does not seem to be any open discussion in Singapore challenging the conclusions of the British report.[35] This suggests a stronger tendency to submit to the local hierarchy, but also towards the endurance of the power dynamics of the colonial past.

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[31] Dave Richards, video interview with Alexander Chow, 7 May 2020.

[32] Dana Delap, 'How we shared the bread and wine on Zoom', *The Church Times,* 14 April 2020, https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/17-april/comment/opinion/how-we-shared-the-bread-and-wine-on-zoom.

[33] The Methodist Church, 'Conference Reports 2015: Communion Mediated through Social Media', https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2015-37-Communion-Mediated-through-Social-Media.pdf, accessed on 22 May 2020.

[34] Chong Chin Chung to the Methodist Church in Singapore, 6 April 2020, https://www.methodist.org.sg/images/2019-nCoV/episcopal-letter-to-methodists_06apr20.pdf.

[35] Benjamin Lee, video interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 19 May 2020.

Amongst churches connected with the Magisterial Reformation, the historical precedence has been to see two marks of the church in the Word and the Sacrament. In what is the first official theological statement on digital technology by the Church of Sweden, there is an unequivocal rejection of online communion. Citing Martin Luther's 'Large Catechism' and a statement by Dirk G. Lange, the Deputy General Secretary for Ecumenical Relations of the Lutheran World Federation,[36] the document refers to the relation between the Word and the Sacrament. It is in the speaking of the Eucharistic liturgy—reciting the words of Jesus during the Last Supper—over the elements that they are sacramentally transformed. Furthermore, as communion is an act that transpires in the local congregation, this gives additional rationale for this prohibition. As such, it is the physical distance between the Word and elements, and between those assembled for celebration that is problematic with 'virtual communion'.[37]

Perhaps a similar concern for the Word and the Sacrament can be found in the historical legacy of Scottish Presbyterianism. Donald Macleod, retired professor of theology of the Free Church of Scotland College (now, Edinburgh Theological Seminary), notes that, until recently, Scottish Presbyterians tended to celebrate communion only a few times a year. Macleod further argues against such innovations as online communion and, instead, highlights that a greater tragedy would be the lack of the ministry of the Word.[38] On the other end of the spectrum, Albert Bogle, former moderator of the Church of Scotland and minister of the online community Sanctuary First, argues that even the ministry of the Word happens at a distance between the person who is speaking and those who are listening. With regards to online communion, Bogle argues, 'The Holy Spirit, is He not able to work through the internet? … When the minister blesses the bread and the wine and sets it apart, is it the minister that [*sic*] does it or the Holy Spirit?'[39] In contrast to those deliberating the legitimacy of the online practice of the Sacrament in 2020, Bogle has been offering online communion since 2008.

Whilst communion is often connected to the body and the blood of Christ, arguments for online communion often point to the work of the Holy Spirit. Part of the rationale within the

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[36] Dirk G. Lange, 'Digital Worship and Sacramental Life in a Time of Pandemic', *The Lutheran World Federation*, 23 March 2020, https://www.lutheranworld.org/blog/digital-worship-and-sacramental-life-time-pandemic.

[37] 'När vi inte kan fira nattvard under coronakrisen' [When we cannot celebrate communion during the corona crisis], *Church of Sweden,* 23 April 2020, https://internwww.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=1490718.

[38] Donald Macleod, 'Online Communion Services?', 10 April 2020, https://donaldmacleod.org.uk/dm/online-communion-services/.

[39] Albert Bogle, video interview with Alexander Chow, 8 May 2020.

Reformed tradition may be built upon John Calvin's view that Christ is 'spiritually' present in communion through the power of the Holy Spirit.[40] This seems reflected in the Presbyterian Church in Singapore's proposed guidelines on communion, which offers three options to each constituent church: postponement until after the end of the pandemic, clergy performing small communion services in the homes of church members, or the administering of communion through live-stream. The last option 'Affirm[s] that Christ dwells amongst us by his Spirit even when we gather virtually.'[41] In the statement, the Synod explicitly underscores that these are recommendations, and that church members have the 'God-given liberty' to adhere or differ on these proposals. We may also consider one of the first churches in Hong Kong to offer online communion, the evangelical Flow Church. When they were still holding physical meetings in the early days of the virus, communion was already adapted by asking participants to bring their own cups to the service to receive grape juice and prevent cross-contamination. When they ceased meeting face-to-face, Flow put out a statement offering a theological rationale for online communion, stating that the work of the Holy Spirit can be received everywhere and pointing to the sacramental nature of the act as an outward and visible sign of God's invisible grace.[42] Founding pastor John Chan, drawing on Karl Barth's understanding of grace to explain, 'Our communion is our doing, our response to God. It is a thankful action for us. This thankful act is important because it helps us to make things that already happened, happen in our minds and in our lives… subjectively.'[43] In both these examples, church leaders highlight the laity's responsibility in being spiritually prepared and having a thankful posture before participating in communion.

Perhaps the most widespread acceptance of online communion can be found amongst churches which are known for their emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit: Pentecostal and charismatic churches. Many in the UK and Sweden have administered the sacrament online, recommending those participating to prepare a cup and some bread ahead of the live-streamed service. A fairly unique example can be found in the Singaporean megachurch New Creation Church. Often described as teaching a health-and-wealth prosperity gospel, senior pastor Joseph

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[40] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.14.9.

[41] 'Proposed Guidelines on Holy Communion during COVID-19', *Presbyterian Church in Singapore*, 1 April 2020, https://www.presbysing.org.sg/news-2020-04-proposed-guidelines-on-holy-communion-during-covid-19.htm.

[42] Flow Church, 'Youguan Flow Church wangshang shengcan yiji qi shenxue jichu' [Concerning Flow Church's Online Holy Communion and its Theological Basis], *Facebook*, 12 February 2020, https://www.facebook.com/flowchurchhk/photos/a.252167298662675/608250346387700.

[43] John Chan, video interview with Alexander Chow, 8 May 2020.

Prince previously wrote of how communion has the potential to heal individuals from medical ailments, and that all Christians are called to be priests administering the sacrament in their own homes.[44] In February 2020, Prince preached a series of sermons which underscored that God protects his followers from viruses like COVID-19,[45] and even about how anointing oil protected a woman 'from the COVID-19 virus despite being in contact with someone who was infected. She and her family have cleared the quarantine period and are unharmed.'[46] Situated on the other end of the spectrum from Catholic Eucharistic theology, the communion theology of Pentecostals and charismatics underscores perhaps the greatest democratisation of Christian ministry, through the priesthood of all believers.

The Digital Church's Missional Role

A common denominator between the churches that we have observed in this study is the reach that their online services have had. With few exceptions, the number of views of online prayer and church services by far outstrips average church attendance. As already mentioned, St Paul and St Georges Church in Edinburgh witnessed a fantastic reception to their live-streamed Sunday service. Dave Richards explains that, in order to meet the spiritual needs of people online, it has created three new online midweek 'connect' groups and three new online evangelistic Alpha courses.[47] Likewise at Durham Cathedral, the high interest in their live-streamed services and daily prayer has caught the clergy by surprise. Charlie Allen is baffled by the thousands of viewers joining their daily prayers compared to the 20-odd persons they normally have in the cathedral. Their viewers are geographically dispersed and they are considering creating local groups in order to connect these individuals for mutual support.[48] For the Wesley Methodist Church in Singapore, which gathers an average of 5,000 worshipers, online services have not yielded larger numbers. However, Benjamin Lee suggests that they have seen an increased international audience and many members have been

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[44] Joseph Prince, *Eat Your Way to Life and Health: Unlock the Power of the Holy Communion* (Nashville, TN: Emanate Books, 2019), 185.

[45] Joseph Prince, 'Can You See The Angels Protecting You?', 2 February 2020, https://www.josephprince.com/sermon-notes/can-you-see-the-angels-protecting-you; Joseph Prince, 'Protection From Deadly Viruses—Answers From Psalm 91', 9 February 2020, https://www.josephprince.com/sermon-notes/protection-from-deadly-viruses-answers-from-psalm-91.

[46] Joseph Prince, 'Anointing Oil For Healing And Protection', 16 February 2020, https://www.josephprince.com/sermon-notes/anointing-oil-for-healing-and-protection.

[47] Dave Richards, video interview with Alexander Chow, 7 May 2020.

[48] Charlie Allen, video interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 7 May 2020.

sharing sermons with friends on social media. The digital shift has made him aware of the possibilities of evangelism through digital means but they have yet to 'leverage the opportunities' that this affords.[49]

Whilst web analytics of online views reveal certain trends, perhaps more important is how churches interpret this data vis-à-vis their mission. Several of the UK church leaders we interviewed are aware that newcomers to their services, now online, had previously been affiliated with Christianity but stopped regularly attending church. In part, this echoes what Libby Talbot, Associate Rector of St Paul and St Georges, states, that Christianity offers hope in times of adversity, and that online platforms are means of exploring religious faith in a non-threatening way.[50] Perhaps this also offers some legitimacy to the claim that the UK is a post-secular society, which has been witnessing a resurgence of religion—and possibly even more so now, albeit in an online format.

The situation is more complex in Hong Kong. According to the pastor of one evangelical church, which previously had 2,000 attendees gathering for their normal Sunday services, the switch to online services resulted in a drop to around 500 weekly viewers. Part of this was attributed to the less polished nature of online services, especially when compared to English-speaking international churches in Hong Kong which have generally seen a several fold increase in weekly viewers. The pastor further posited that, for Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong churches, many congregants previously attended physical meetings out of fear of losing face for not being active church-goers. The anonymity associated with live-streamed services allows those individuals to *not* participate online, without being shamed.[51] Of course, this is a rationale for anyone to miss online church services, whether they are part of a more collectivist context or not.[52]

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[49] Benjamin Lee, video interview with Jonas Kurlberg, 19 May 2020.

[50] Brown, 'Edinburgh church congregation grows under lockdown'. Surveys in the US and the UK have noted an increased engagement with religion in the midst of the pandemic, many through digital media. Claire Gecewicz, 'Few Americans say their house of worship is open, but a quarter say their faith has grown amid pandemic', *Pew Research Center*, 30 April 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/30/few-americans-say-their-house-of-worship-is-open-but-a-quarter-say-their-religious-faith-has-grown-amid-pandemic/; 'Many Brits look to faith during lockdown', *Tearfund*, 3 May 2020, https://www.tearfund.org/en/media/press_releases/many_brits_look_to_faith_during_lockdown/.

[51] Anonymous, video interview with Alexander Chow, 29 April 2020.

[52] We need to be careful not to strongly dichotomise between 'shame' vs. 'guilt' cultures or 'collectivist' vs. 'individualist' societies. Andy Crouch helpfully argues some ways that social media has reintroduced the role of shame in Western societies. Andy Crouch, 'The Return of Shame', *Christianity Today*, 10 March 2015, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/march/andy-crouch-gospel-in-age-of-public-shame.html.

In Hong Kong, another dimension includes a growing sense of confusion amongst evangelicals in knowing how best to be relevant in Hong Kong society today. This latter point seems consistent with the mission of the evangelical Flow Church, which was started in part to reach those who left the church because they saw Hong Kong evangelicalism as indifferent towards the recent social unrest. Flow grew from 100 attendees in the beginning of 2019 to approximately 500 by the end of the year and, in the first two months of Facebook Live services (February and March 2020), was witnessing over 1,000 live weekly viewers, including those based in Canada and the United States.[53]

Even in Sweden, churches have seen record numbers as people participate in services from their devices. However, whilst the evangelical free churches in Sweden have a prominent missional impulse, the Church of Sweden, which sees itself as the national church, views its role in society as largely vicarious. In a pastoral letter to the parishes in the diocese of Lund, bishop Johan Tyrberg, reflecting on being church during COVID-19, suggests that whilst it is desirable that more people encounter the divine, the purpose of the service is not to gather as many as possible but that the Word is preached and the Sacrament celebrated.[54] Reflections on the evangelistic opportunities of digital technology are therefore largely absent. The mission of the church is not to reach the largest numbers of people but to continue to bear witness to Christ through its local presence.

Whether a church seeks to reach those who do not attend church—regardless of whether they previously attended church or they never stepped foot into a church building—or to bring together a spiritual goal with a civic one, the introduction of digital technologies offers new possibilities for the expression of the church's missional role, beyond the limits of space and geography. But it is not only a matter of the utility of digital technologies. Digital technologies raise questions of how the church's mission needs to adapt to the ever-changing realities of the present.

Beyond the Complementary Nature of Digital Church

In the outset of this paper, we highlighted a discussion between a bishop and a pope about the risks of online mass resulting in a Gnostic and virtualized church—a disembodied church. However, worship, prayer, and liturgy are always mediated. Technology is an intrinsic part of Christian

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[53] John Chan, video interview with Alexander Chow, 8 May 2020.

[54] John Tyrberg, 'Att Vara Kyrka i Coronatider' [Being the Church in the Age of Corona], *Church of Sweden*, 8 May 2020, https://internwww.svenskakyrkan.se/lundsstift/fran-biskop-och-stiftskansli.

practice, whether that be a Bible or hymnal printed and bound, stained-glass windows soldered together, songs of worship resonating through church organ pipes, or the ministry of the Word proclaimed through loudspeakers. The incorporation of new technology in church is itself unremarkable. Where contentions arise is whether digitally-mediated church practices are unreal, inauthentic, and disembodied. Countering charges of disembodiment, Catholic liturgical theologian Teresa Berger contends that 'no digital world can be entered, no website accessed, and no app installed without a body.'[55] To exemplify bodily engagement in digital liturgy, she points to a prayer app which suggests its users bow their head before swiping the screen to move on to the next page. What is novel about digitally-mediated Christian practice is not the use of technology nor that it is disembodied or 'unreal', but rather that corporate worship in digital spaces means that human bodies are not congregated in the same physical spaces.

From our research, we were surprised that there was a noticeable absence of much explicit discussion of (dis)embodiment in the debates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps part of the reason for this is that, in contrast with theologians and heads of global churches like the Catholic magisterium, local and regional church leaders today are less steeped in philosophical notions of presence and embodiment framed in opposition to Platonic or Gnostic understandings of the world.[56] Rather, those who disagree with certain aspects of online church practices tend to offer reasons to prioritise historical precedence over and against technological innovations, or centres of power within persons and places against the loss of control to the masses and the outer trenches.

Even the strongest advocates of digital church suggest that online may not always be as good as face-to-face. Albert Bogle of Sanctuary First explains the significance of online communion with eschatological imagery: 'What we are doing on the internet is a foretaste of the reality of communion that we have in the physical place, which is a foretaste of the reality of the eschaton, of what will be in the consummation of all things.'[57] For Bogle, it is a pastoral matter. The internet provides access to communion to those who in the past would have otherwise been prevented from physically attending church services due to physical ailments. Whilst it is not the same as participating in communion face-to-face, it is no less real to those who participate in it. We need to not devalue the

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[55] Teresa Berger, @*Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 18.

[56] For Catholicism, transubstantiation was articulated when scholastics were shifting from a (Neo-)Platonic understanding to a more Aristotelean understanding of Eucharistic presence. See Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ's Feast with the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 46–50.

[57] Albert Bogle, video interview with Alexander Chow, 8 May 2020.

digital church. But the subtext is still there: as much as there are ways that digital is better than analogue, likewise, there also are ways that analogue is better than digital.

As we earlier suggested about the 2002 Vatican report 'The Church and Internet', is it correct to consider the internet as providing mainly a complementary role to church, or does it also have a supplementary contribution to make? All church leaders we interviewed who chose to adopt digital technologies in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic have said that their church recognises the immense value for an online presence and will continue to maintain some form of one in the aftermath of the crisis. This comes out of a realisation that digital technologies open new vistas for the *missio Dei* which were hidden in a pre-COVID-19 world. On the flipside, with all the benefits of any given technology, there are also new challenges which are introduced.

Digital technology is not just a novel and innovative tool to be instrumentalised in times of crisis, but digitality has become a key dimension of the way church is practiced and, therefore, how Christians theologise. Scholars of world Christianity have for a long time spoken of the interplay between Christian thought and practice, in every new context it encounters. Digitality is but another context for Christians to hold in tension the 'indigenising' and 'pilgrim' principles.[58]

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[58] Andrew F. Walls, 'The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture', in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 3–15.