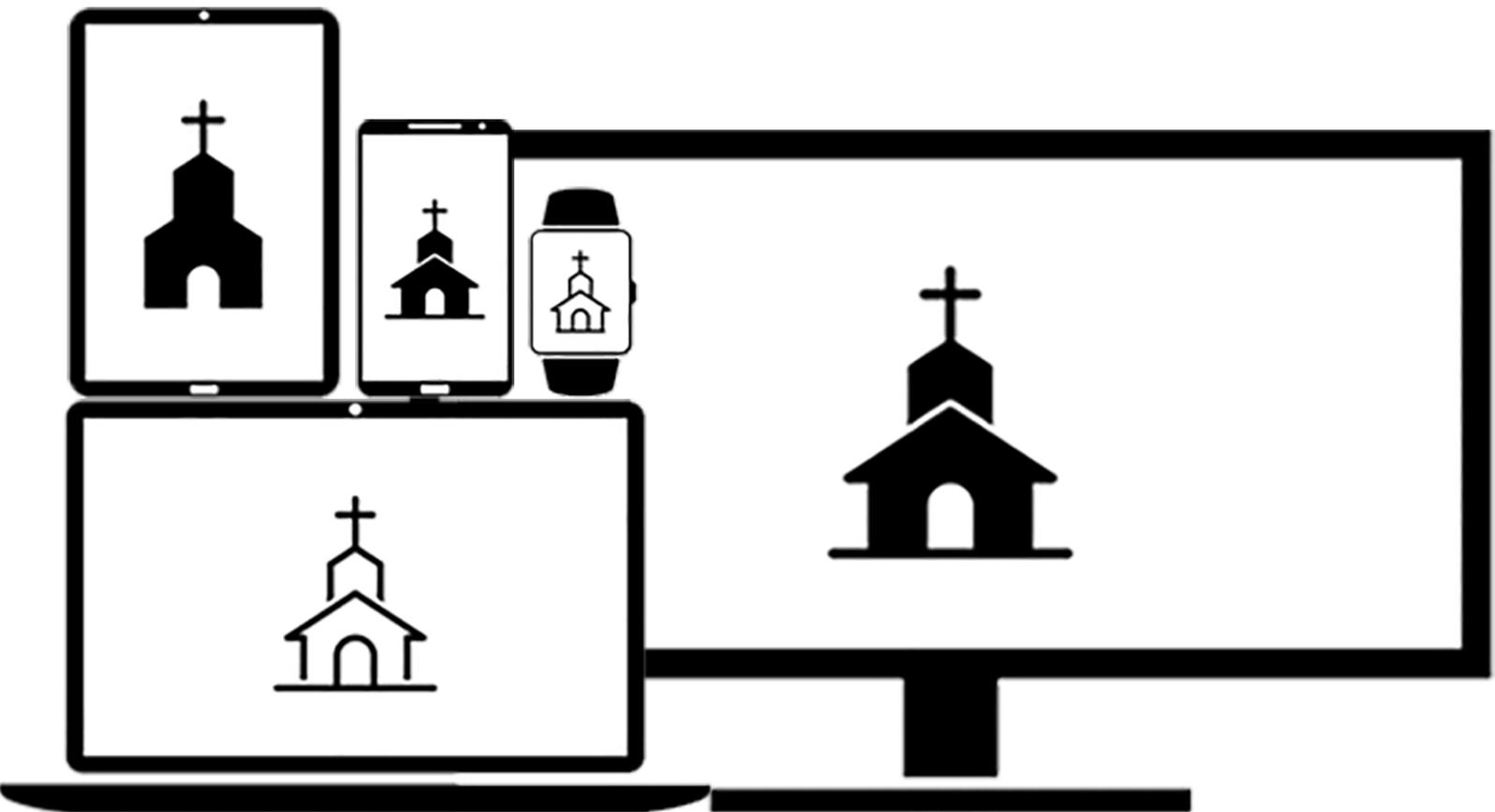


# SPROUT DIGITAL & THECHURCH.DIGITAL

## DIGITAL CHURCH RESEARCH REPORT October, 2021



## Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary.....	3
2. Project Overview .....	8
3. The Church .....	9
4. Church Structure: Phygital.....	13
5. Church Structure: Digital Stand-alone .....	21
6. Location and Reach of Churches .....	26
7. Characteristics of Members, Online Churches .....	31
8. Online Evangelism.....	35
9. Online Discipleship.....	40
10. Pastoring Online.....	44
11. Ministry Content - Online Churches.....	49
12. Software Platforms for Online Churches .....	53
13. Church Management.....	60
Appendix: Background of Research Participants.....	63

# 1. Executive Summary

## 1.1. The Church

Participants in the research had a reasonably concise perspective of what would constitute a church. Acts 2:42ff was frequently cited, where the first church met together for teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer, and all things were shared. The passage also includes signs and wonders taking place and praising God. From this basis, the research indicated that if those things were an integral part of a meeting of Christians, then the meeting could be considered a church. And as almost all these things can all take place in an online gathering, then the online gathering can be a church.

Other aspects that were commonly identified included fulfilling the Great Commission (therefore having a focus on evangelism, discipleship, and baptism) and being a community that met each other's needs and served each other. Most of these things can take place online.

The two factors that were commonly identified as being sticking points involved the 'breaking of the bread' (communion) and baptism. For both these celebrations, participants were comfortable, if not confident, that the omnipresent Holy Spirit can and does minister on a remote basis to ensure that these are conducted in a Godly manner.

## 1.2. A Digital Hybrid 'Phygital' Model for Church

Almost all participants were engaged in churches where a digital expression of church was one aspect of a church, while the church also operated physically. Within this model there were different expressions of ministry. An overriding factor identified by many was that most aspects of life in our society function in a phygital manner; and having churches operating in this manner was a natural extension of our lives.

In some instances, the digital expression was used as a tool of evangelism, bringing the gospel into the marketplace of the 21st Century - the internet. Churches using this model were likely to focus on engagement with the unreached or the de-churched; providing paths for people to be introduced to Jesus, to have the opportunity of accepting Jesus' gift of life, then to be disciplined. Once people grow in their faith, they may be encouraged to ground themselves in a physical church. The overriding perception among participants who followed this path was that every person is a physical being, and at some stage we all may need physical support - possibly in times of sickness or injury; or in times when comfort is needed.

A second expression of a digital church provided ongoing ministry with no functional expectation of physical interaction. Many participants had church campuses that operated in this manner. Yet they would still see opportunities for face-to-face interaction in specific circumstances, such as when a church member or pastor was traveling and passing through

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## Digital Church Research Report

the other's location; having watch parties or micro churches planted where the members continued to receive ministry digitally but shared aspects of life together, or having members come together for a time of celebration or ministry on an irregular or semi-regular basis.

### **1.3. A Digital Stand-alone Model for Church**

Some participants served in churches that had no physical base. There were two reasons identified for churches to choose to operate in this manner.

The first reason was associated with specific cultural groups within society. Two such groups were those who choose to inhabit Virtual Reality (VR) and online gamers. Participants from churches in these spaces identified that the people to whom they minister spend much, if not most of their time on these platforms. They are created in the image of God. And to share God's love with them, churches need to be prepared to be 'all things to all men', living and functioning within these societies.

The second reason focused on meeting with and evangelizing people who live in countries that are closed to the gospel. In this instance, participants may desire to meet in-person but functionally cannot meet due to the risks posed by their governments. These churches will therefore remain digital-only as their members are disciplined, grow in faith and multiply, despite the government laws.

### **1.4. Church Growth**

Participants from phygital and digital-only churches were seeing growth in their membership as they brought the message of Jesus to the communities, societies, and cultures where they operated. There were various models for church growth.

Some digital churches sought to bring people to know Jesus, work with them to strengthen their faith, then see the new Christians planted in a local physical church that had similar DNA to the missional church. Others worked with new believers to have them meet face-to-face. Initially, these would include watch parties, but as leaders were raised in various locations, the watch party may become a micro church, and in some instances, a campus of the missional church. In other instances, churches indicated that they would plant a new church once there was sufficient maturity in the local body. Where such micro churches and church campuses were planted, the missional church generally had some strategies in place for oversight, helping ensure that the planted church maintained integrity while being free to have the Holy Spirit move.

Churches looking to plant new churches cited some functional and legal reasons for electing this path.

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## Digital Church Research Report

### **1.5. Membership of Online Churches**

There are several types of people who commonly engage in digital churches. The first are those who are already in that church, but for COVID, life circumstance, illness, travel, holiday, or other similar reasons, they need to engage digitally. The second is the unchurched, who have been brought to engagement through an online link or discussion with an online member. Another group often found in digital churches are 'church refugees' or the 'de-churched'. These are people who have come to faith in Jesus at some stage in their lives, have engaged in a physical church, but at some stage lost their connection with the church. Finally, trolls may frequent online churches.

While there are various reasons for someone to attend an online church, a frequently expressed characteristic of members was they'd be more likely to open up about their personal lives and issues in a virtual setting versus in a face-to-face engagement. This meant that digital pastoring may require different skills to regular pastoring.

### **1.6. Online Evangelism**

When participants were asked to discuss online evangelism, three issues were raised. The first was associated with the changes in western culture over the past generation or two. In the past, evangelism may have focused on discussion of whether God is real or not, or discussing who Jesus is. Participants indicated that the cultural questions have moved to the point that most unsaved would never even consider bothering to know whether there is a God, as God has no relevance to their lives.

As a result, the focus of evangelism needs to change and be directed at understanding the challenges and issues that people are facing, then providing details of the possible solutions to these issues.

Different participants used different approaches for engaging with people in digital spaces. One approach involved actively posting or tweeting messages in forums and allowing people to engage. In parallel, this could also involve monitoring posts with key words or hashtags, then engaging based on the expressed concern or need. In a passive approach, participants used keywords and SEO to bring people to their pages which had content specifically addressing the issues in the key word or hashtag. A third approach was best outlined in the gaming community. In this approach, Christians engaged in the game in the same way as all other players. However, as they played, they engaged with other players in discussion, and brought Jesus into the discussion where it was appropriate and relevant to do so.

### **1.7. Discipleship**

All participants were comfortable with the idea of online discipleship. Some went out of their way to define discipleship noting that, in the Hebrew context, a disciple was an apprentice

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## Digital Church Research Report

rather than a student. As with all aspects of this discussion, there was more than one approach implemented. Some churches have developed active and structured discipling, while others see discipling as more of an impromptu process. A crucial aspect of discipleship is seeing people's lives changed. This means that discipleship is not simply a transfer of information, it is a transformation of how people understand and live their lives

Some participants used a structured approach to discipleship. This may have been formal to the point of having regular weekly digital meetings to work through pre-prepared study notes with specific subject matter and teachings. In this model, cohorts of new believers are disciplined through a range of classes to provide them with biblical instruction and understanding. Some churches set up online classes that could be attended asynchronously, allowing for people to grow in their biblical understanding at their own pace. Many churches have found that the most effective method of discipling is having people relate to each other in small groups. Groups met using video conference platforms such as Zoom, or in online discussion boards such as Discord.

Other participants used an unstructured approach. A common theme among these participants was the need to disciple a small number of people, but to do so in a very open manner, sharing their lives with the new Christians by being both a coach and a mentor.

### **1.8. Online Pastoring**

Crucially, pastors need sufficient self-awareness to know their strengths and weaknesses, and to know how best to delegate roles to ensure the church can operate effectively. In a digital format, four skill sets were discussed.

Preaching (and teaching) in an online situation is very different than doing so in an auditorium. There is no interaction with members. The pastor needs to be able to engage and make eye-contact with a camera, and to be able to express themselves without having the ability to use the space around them.

Interaction with church members may be through video conferencing or it may be through discussion boards and online chats. There are fewer non-verbal cues in video conferencing than in face-to-face engagements, and even fewer in text-based interactions. Pastors need to be able to understand the nuances of conversation in these formats; and to ensure they express themselves effectively, avoiding (wherever possible) the risk of misinterpretation.

Technical skills may be required in a digital pastoring role. There were various views on this. Some participants indicated that the best digital pastors were those with no technical skills who had the ability to surround themselves with technical support. Others felt that they needed at least a basic level of skill to ensure they could trouble-shoot a situation as it arose.

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## Digital Church Research Report

The fourth skill often expected of pastors is management. This is the case in physical and digital churches, and is sometimes a misplaced requirement, as it has little relevance to pastoring.

### **1.9. Ministry Content**

Most of the discussion around content focused on the delivery of church services in an online environment. The delivery of a digital church service differs from an auditorium expression of church in four ways: the role and function of singing (praise or worship), the presentation of the sermon, the need for the teacher/ preacher to be able to interact with a remote congregation, and the duration of the church 'service'.

In addition, many pastors identified the need for processes to be set up to engage with the congregation in areas such as ministry, prayer, and fellowship. The focus should be on delivery of content that met the needs of the listeners. As each online platform could represent a different segment of society, content should be developed to meet the cultural needs of those segments.

### **1.10. Software Platforms**

Participants identified 23 different software platforms that are either currently in use or have been used in digital ministry. Almost all churches indicated that they used more than one platform to cover all their ministry needs. Key features that influenced participant's decisions included the reach and the functionality of the platform. Another factor was the ability to engage in both a synchronous and an asynchronous manner. The most used platform was YouTube, used by 24 of 29 participants, closely followed by Facebook (23/29). Users of both platforms referred to data that indicated they had the highest penetration, use, and engagement. The Church Online Platform was the most used platform for church websites; and users highlighted the ability of the platform to support a wide range of digital ministries. Zoom was commonly used for video-conferencing, while Altar Live was identified as a newly released platform that incorporated the benefits of the Church Online Platform with Zoom.

### **1.11. Church Management**

Universally, participants identified that online church members are less likely to give to the church; and when people do give, the amount is lower on average than in a physical church. However, the parallel factor for most digital churches is that the cost of operation is lower than for real-world churches. The exceptions to this were VR churches, where there could be significant costs involved in developing and maintaining the virtual presence.

A range of legal and compliance issues were raised, including management of contact/member databases in a manner that complied with privacy laws; training and vetting volunteers in a manner that mitigated risks to the safety of members; and copyright laws associated with publishing of copyright material on websites and social media pages.

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## Digital Church Research Report

## 2. Project Overview

Sprout Digital, THECHURCH.DIGITAL, and Stadia Church Planting commissioned a research project to investigate the functionality and effectiveness of online ministry in general, with a specific focus on the ability for churches to function in a digital space. The specific issues that were addressed included:

- New models of church discovered
- Discipleship pathways in digital spaces
- Developing best practices and trainings out of those key learnings and research for the purpose of equipping digital church planters to become more effective

An interview guide was developed to address the project objectives. The research fieldwork was conducted between August 21 - September 17, 2021, with analysis and reporting continuing until October 15, 2021. During this period, 49 pastors and church leaders were invited to take part in interviews. Of this overall population, one declined, identifying that they were no longer ministering in a relevant role. Two accepted interviews but were unable to engage due to being hospitalized with COVID-19 infections, and a further 17 elected not to take part in the project.

Participants included members of Anglican, AoG, Calvary Chapel, CMA, EFCA, Independent Baptist, Southern Baptist, United Methodist and independent churches. Furthermore, some had formerly been members of Episcopalian and Vineyard churches. A total of 29 thematic interviews were conducted, providing insights into the function and operation of churches based in the USA and operating either as online-only churches or as churches with an online campus or associated ministry.

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## Digital Church Research Report

### 3. The Church

Many participants addressed the question of whether or not a church could exist in an online-only format. This entailed a discussion around the definition of a church.

There were two paths of discussion. The first was associated with identifying what the church is, while the second was associated with identifying the events and processes that are associated/ required in an entity being a church.

#### 3.1. What a Church Is

Respondents addressed this question from a range of different directions. Several pointed out that in American general perceptions (whether among Christians or non-believers), a church is still a building. As an example, one informant noted that while very few (if any) members of churches would consider the church to be a building, they continue to speak of buildings in that manner. One pastor gave the example of someone giving street directions and saying, 'turn left at the church'. If people were being honest with themselves, they may see a group of Christians talking to each other as they walk down the road and consider that place to be the appropriate place to turn left. However, they will inevitably ignore the real church and turn left at the building.

Some pointed to the early church, posing questions such as, 'If Paul showed up today without an American framework, how would he plant churches?'. While Paul was demonstrably a biblical authority on church planting, others addressed earlier issues, with one noting:

*Jesus actually didn't give a lot of instructions to the disciples on how to do things. But he did give them real clarity on what- what he wanted to accomplish: make disciples.*

Similarly Jesus clearly said that the minimum number of people required was two. One pastor addressed the apparent dichotomy of two bible verses: Hebrews 10: 25 and Matthew 18:20. While Hebrews talk of 'not abandoning the gathering of the brethren', in Matthew, Jesus provided the detail for the minimum of two:

*For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst. (Matt 18:20, NASB20)*

*Not abandoning our gathering together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. (Heb 10:25, NASB20)*

More than one pastor referenced Acts 2: 42-47, where the function of the first church (in Jerusalem) was outlined as including teaching (the apostles' doctrine), fellowship, the breaking of the bread and prayer, and sharing all things in common. Other aspects that were

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## Digital Church Research Report

considered central to a body of believers being the church included having a biblical basis for all aspects of their fellowship, being the expression of God's plan for redemption, and fulfilling the Great Commission.

*A church is fundamentally the people. I think, when people come together, there's a million different expressions that can occur. Could be worshiping God, it could be coming together for a sacred space, or getting away from the secular or the mundane. It could be connecting into community; it could be coming for support. It is people and the whole goal is to get together, and you know, love God and love each other, and hopefully, change the world by sharing that.*

*The church is fundamentally a gathering of people that come together around their faith and commitment to Christ and being mutually committed to the growth and the benefit of one another. And not only for the benefit of the people in the church, but ultimately taking the responsibility of the Great Commission and sharing their faith and love to those around them.*

*A church is a group of believers, who are who are in community with each other, worshiping God, helping each other become like Christ and engaging the world with the mission of Christ and the message of Christ.*

*The fact that the church ecclesia in the five different definitions we find in the New Testament, not a one refers to a building. It's always the people. Yep. Even when we talk about gathering, it's important that when Paul uses that term in the New Testament, he's not just talking about them, gathering there. But he also, in several instances, refers to the church gathering. And in the broadest sense of the word, the church gathering the church being together, even though not located physically. And so we get the sense that Paul felt like the church in Jerusalem, the church in Corinth, the church in Ephesus, they are the church. They're not just the church at that centralized location.*

*I think when you hear the words of Jesus, when He says 'where two or three are gathered, in my name, I am there'. And that for us is the core nucleus of church. And so whether and I told people that I said, you know, this virtual building and all these things, if they just go away, we're just in a blank space. If we are two or three are gathered here, we're having church.*

One pastor noted that many churches seem to operate in a manner contrary to a biblical model. The current model has a focus on Sunday morning, while a biblical model should be the other way around, where the members minister in the field every day, but come together on Sundays to celebrate, to be encouraged, and to be empowered to go back out into their ministries for the rest of the week.

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## Digital Church Research Report

In summary, interviewees agreed that the mission of the church has not changed and should never change: 'Go into all the world, preach good news to every living creature, make disciples of all nations...'. While the mission hasn't changed the way that the church has functioned has changed throughout the centuries and is likely to continue to do so. In the climate of the 21st Century, that entails working within a culture that functions digitally and physically at the same time.

### **3.2. Events and Processes That Are Required for an Entity to Be a Church**

Several respondents addressed the way many churches currently operate, noting that it is 'weekend centered'. This operating model is not necessarily biblical or unbiblical. Rather it is a function of various developments over decades (if not centuries). While it may no longer resemble churches of previous eras, the general presentation and function of the church largely revolves around a Sunday morning gathering. This gathering will include a time of singing (variously referred to as 'praise' or 'worship'), a time of celebrating communion, a time of teaching, and in most instances, a time of interactive fellowship, and baptism of new believers. Many identified that there were direct commandments (referred to by some as 'sacraments') regarding baptism and communion. One pastor noted:

*Christ was really clear. As often as you gather, do this in remembrance of Me, have communion celebrate, you know, so would we say that, churches that don't celebrate communion every week aren't real churches. Well, biblically, you could probably back that up and you could make that assertion. But nobody's walking around telling Baptists, 'You are a horrible people because you only have communion once a quarter.'*

Others identified a broader function in current churches that extended into areas such as giving, community service, discipleship (often through structured small groups or bible studies), and outreach to the community. One pastor followed through in this in his definition of the church, indicating that if there wasn't spiritual growth evident among church members, there may be questions regarding whether that body of believers was fully functioning as a church. Maturity would be likely to be shown in the evidence of the person being aligned to the Father's heart, with evidence being apparent in serving others and generosity.

The question of singing (frequently referred to as 'worship') was raised by more than one pastor. While not central to the discussion, several pastors addressed the terminology of 'worship', noting:

*Worship is not a genre of music. Worship is everything we do that brings glory to God. So if I'm learning about Jesus intellectually, worship, if I'm loving my wife and my daughter's worship, if I'm having a chat with you, and we're both*

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*growing as a result of that worship, if we're both singing songs to Hillsong worship, like it's all worship.*

And

*I think worship is essential. I don't think that worship can be limited to just singing. We get hung up on worship is just what we do, during you know, three or four songs on a Sunday morning, or what have you. And worship is so much more than that.*

Another summed up his perceptions of church, noting:

*There are some things that we've put in segments in boxes that we need to unbox and rip it down and rebuild and create a different model.*

One pastor noted that their church does not meet regularly on Sunday mornings. They have ongoing fellowship, bible study, and other engagements all month but meet on Sunday evenings to have a time of singing and worship. They only have a teaching message once a month.

In summary, there was consensus that the church did not need a specific structure or form to be a church. Rather, it had to meet a set of biblical criteria that included meeting together, making disciples, growing in knowledge and understanding of God and His redemptive work through Jesus, and taking that message to the wider community.

## 4. Church Structure: Phygital

*The digital church is the greatest missional tool for successful church planting ever devised. We're using metadata from hits to our website to identify global areas for ministry, then working among local leaders to engage people and plant churches.*

Most respondents were involved in churches where the digital aspects were conducted as part of an overall ministry, generally in parallel with the physical ministry. There were variations around this general perspective. In many instances, COVID restrictions had limited all ministry to being conducted in a digital manner for extended periods of time. However, most pastors in this situation had either reverted to a phygital ministry after the end of COVID lockdowns or intended to revert to a phygital ministry as lockdowns eased and physical gatherings were able to recommence.

In its simplest form, the concept of a phygital church could be seen as using technology to maximize the reach of the gospel:

*You look at Jesus pushing a boat out in the water, so His voice would amplify and be heard better. As far as sound and audio, I think Jesus would use technology. If you look at the biblical model of churches, meeting in homes, and using whatever means necessary, you know, Paul said, I became all things to all men so that I might win some. I think Paul would have used technology.*

Some saw the growth of online relationships as being a natural follow-on from casual online interactions. Pastors described situations where they had met people online in various forums (such as Facebook or on gaming platforms) and had gone on to become very close friends. One pastor cited an example of someone he'd met on an online gaming platform, and over time had become so close that he had been the best man at this friend's wedding.

A central factor of those advocating a phygital church structure relates to the fact that in our 21st Century society, we effectively live in a hybrid digital/ physical world in our daily lives. We relate to our family, friends, and work colleagues in both a digital and a physical manner. Organizations such as Google, Apple, and Microsoft have developed business models focused on digital engagement. But in general, the church has not focused on this form of engagement. Yet at the same time, almost everyone in society has immediate access to all aspects of the church in their pockets. Having churches operate using a phygital model is simply an extension of most peoples' real-life experience.

*People experience life through a hybrid of both physical and digital spaces. It is an extension of our culture today, where so much of life has been digitized.*

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Based on the common definition of a church, pastors identified that a phygital church can help people to grow spiritually and to mature, to experience their communities and bring their spiritual lives into alignment with their other relationships. As a result, churches need to find a way that leverages digital ministry so that it enhances and supports physical ministry, allowing a more holistic approach to ministry. One pastor said:

*Digital only - it's not our preferred path. But I think it is possible. And we really work hard to try to move people into the physical community.*

One pastor gave an example of their family's migration into a hybrid relationship. When their daughter went to college, they started a messaging thread. The family has continued to use the thread for over seven years. Other members have moved to different states for work or study, but the messaging thread is the central point of family communication, possibly providing a richer form of family engagement than may have been the case if the family all still lived in the same city. Another noted:

*We need to be able to see digital not as our enemy, or a platform to be distrusted, but to see it as a leverage and an opportunity for us to shape the right conversations.*

A crucial point made by one pastor is that churches operating in a digital space are all learning, all the time. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to develop a digital ministry. While some digital expressions of church have been operating for many years, the changing nature of the digital world means that new opportunities are opening, while previously used options may rapidly become outdated. This means that the function of digital churches is constantly improving, while also meaning that those who lead digital churches need to constantly be learning.

While discussing the constant changes in technology, another pastor noted that you have to remain 'very intentional' about the fact that technology is a tool for the church and not an end in itself. It is easy to be distracted by new digital tools and lose sight of the fact that the church is there to provide for the people, not to use the tools.

### **4.1. Participation in Church**

Several pastors talked about the relative lack of frequency of member engagement in church. While no one referenced a source for the data, they cited an average attendance at physical church services of between 1.2 and 2 times per month on Sundays. One pastor noted that in order for the church to have a significant impact on people's lives, the church needs to find a way to stay connected in conversations that occur more than once or twice a month.

In parallel, some reported an increase in engagement with online content. Some pastors who have apps that can monitor frequency of access reported that the rate of access implied

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## Digital Church Research Report

many church members were accessing church content far more frequently than their attendance at church on Sunday indicated.

One pastor addressed this and aligned it with published research data that indicates that the church is in decline, noting:

*Churches are not in decline as much as it is in, you know, dispersed dispersion, right? That means the average Christian is receiving their worship music from all over. They're listening to multiple teachers and preachers. They're part of a small group in a certain way, but they also may be serving in a community engagement in another way.*

A common theme was that churches need to operate as supportive communities. To do this, they need to interact regularly, far more often than once a week (or less). To achieve this, digital interaction is necessary as a tool for providing support and ongoing engagement, as well as sharing the 'good parts of life' together.

### **4.2. Pre-COVID Phygital Churches**

While COVID has been a catalyst for many churches to develop a digital ministry, several churches had been operating in a digital manner for many years. There had been a range of motivations for churches to engage in digital ministry.

For some, it was based on circumstances. One example was the church whose pastor had been engaged in a multi-church annual conference. The conference managers approached the pastor and told him that they had invested significantly in technology to provide a digital platform for their conference. The conference was held annually, which meant that for 50 weeks a year the equipment was not being used.

The managers offered the equipment to the church for those 50 weeks. The church accepted the offer and commenced an online ministry using that equipment.

In another situation, the church was located 'in the back of a dead-end street in the middle of absolutely nowhere, in a town of 3000 people'. Despite the small-town location, the church leadership had a discussion, and decided that if they were going to serve the Kingdom and reach out beyond themselves, they needed to do so in a digital manner. The church's vision is to establish micro communities that may sprout up due to the online content they could provide. This church isn't necessarily looking to develop a multi-site church. Rather, they are looking to organically plant micro-sites that meet in people's houses, helping to foster community and relationships. This church's perspective is clearly to work in a phygital manner, sharing content digitally which can lead to physical outcomes.

One pastor outlined the process by which their church had developed in a digital space, starting with a vision, and becoming a functional entity. The vision entailed developing a structure to foster the growth of house churches. The process began with developing an app

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that was used for streaming of services, interaction between members and ministry support. The goal was to empower people to gather in their living rooms to 'do church'. There was an experimental process that included people gathering on their own and joining through websites. The church moved to a continuous feed, with service broadcasts re-starting on the hour, every hour, 24/7. Volunteers were engaged to be always available for ministry. Small groups were encouraged to not simply meet for bible study once a week, but to be available to engage with each other at all times. COVID meant that the model of meeting together moved to meeting by Zoom, but the church has continued to function on a phygital basis without having a physical location.

### **4.3. The Impact of COVID**

There were two distinct groups within the interviewees - those who had been involved in digital ministry prior to COVID and those who had developed digital ministry because of COVID. Some had been involved in digital ministry for ten years or more, either as part of a digital or a phygital church. One, who had been involved in a phygital ministry for many years, noted the opportunity for long-term phygital ministry after COVID lockdowns, stating:

*I just hoped and prayed that the 'Big C church' as a whole didn't turn to online search out of desperation during the pandemic of 2020 and 2021. And then abandon it when it's safe to go back to physical gatherings and COVID-19 is not an issue. It's my hope and prayer that they will continue exploring and growing and reaching those in a digital context and a hybrid model.*

And another:

*I think it would really behoove us if we were to kind of sweep all of that together under negativity, and not see the opportunity of technology and capacity available to us to connect and to stay connected.*

Due to COVID and association lockdowns, probably every church has been undergoing significant changes due to the need to develop online interactions with members. Pastors saw this as an opportunity to reinvigorate the church. One noted:

*It gives us the opportunity to hit Ctrl, Alt, delete, and reset the whole thing and keep the mission in mind while modeling it out in a different way. We need to start changing our model, to go beyond just the Sunday 'come to us' experience for half an hour,, and then leave, and we'll see you next Sunday.*

COVID has impacted some pastors' perceptions regarding the effectiveness and functionality of an online church. More than one noted they would not have believed that an online gathering could provide all the functionality required to meet the definition of a church. At

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## Digital Church Research Report

the same time, many Christians changed their views regarding online ministry. One pastor noted:

*I think what that did is that changed the mindset. Because people realize that their relationship with God, and the relationship with the church doesn't have to stop just because they can't be there in person. But they also found that the online church may not meet ten tenths of their church needs.*

One large church that had been providing a digital ministry for many years prior to COVID noted that the pandemic had two effects on their ministry. The first was that many people were suddenly concerned for their spiritual health and were seeking the support of a church and faith. The second was that many people who were unable to attend their regular church in-person were looking for a digital church when their own local church was unable / unprepared to provide that level of ministry. As a result, this church (who already had thousands of members) saw a four-fold increase in their weekly attendance during the pandemic-related lockdowns.

Some participants expressed concerns that churches would see COVID and the move to a digital ministry as a one-off event in the life of the church rather than as an opportunity for the church to renew and expand its role in society, noting that once a digital ministry had been established, there would always be a role and opportunity to use that ministry to reach members, minister to them, and to disciple them.

#### **4.4. 'Digital Campuses' within Phygital Churches**

Most churches who operate using a phygital model talked of having a wider range of contact points with their members. Some saw their phygital model as operating in parallel with their physical model and operating a 'Digital Campus' as part of their multi-campus church operation. In churches using this model, the members of the digital campus were generally unlikely to be members of one of their physical campuses. Others saw that the digital aspects of ministry would best be structured if they permeated all aspects of the life of church members.

There were two reasons that these people may choose to engage in an online-only manner. The first was that they were geographically isolated from the church, living in other towns, states, or even other countries. Some pastors indicated that membership of their digital campus among geographically dispersed church members may continue in the long term. Others indicated that they looked to have members from different locations meet, possibly initially in peoples' houses, becoming a 'watch party', possibly growing to be a micro-site or eventually being a church plant.

Some pastors indicated that geographical dispersion was occurring due to COVID. One Californian pastor noted that several members of his church had left California as they now

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## Digital Church Research Report

realized they could keep their higher-paying Californian jobs while living in lower-cost states. These people were, in general, maintaining their relationship and membership with his church despite having moved to other locations, and so his church continued to minister to them.

The second reason was that there were people who may have issues with physically attending church, such as ill-health or personal concerns; but were more than happy to engage in a church digitally. Some identified specific groups within the population such as the 'de-churched'; those who had been hurt by a church at some stage in the past. These people had left the church and may not have engaged with a church for many years. However, they now had an opportunity to re-engage in a manner that was non-threatening.

Pastors who identified these groups noted that, over time, those suffering from ill-health may recover and be able to attend a physical campus. Similarly, those who were challenged with physical engagement in a church may see their barriers broken down over time and once again be comfortable engaging in a physical church, and when they were ready, would be encouraged to take that step. But for some members, the digital campus would likely remain their primary form of engagement.

### **4.5. Advantages of a Phygital Church Model**

All pastors involved in the research are currently ministering in roles that have some digital functionality. By nature, the insights provided indicate that all see some advantages in a phygital church model. One factor that was commonly discussed was the ability to engage in both a synchronous and an asynchronous manner. For most digital platforms, content is available to be viewed 'live' and at any other time a viewer may choose.

This asynchronous model allows for the message and 'church meeting' to be experienced at times that suit the viewer. This creates a challenge, as many meetings involve ministry activities such as a call to faith, praying for those in need, and one-on-one ministry. Churches where this need has been identified provide ministry teams (including pastoral staff and / or volunteers) who are available at various times to minister to these needs. The engagement may also take place in the form of discussion forums, where discussion points are raised; and responses are provided in an ongoing discussion that may take place over hours, days, or even weeks.

Several pastors noted that a benefit of a digital church presence was being able to capture the contact details of those who 'visited'. In a physical church, an aim would be to engage with visitors, to make sure they feel welcomed and to ideally capture contact details to help foster a relationship. (Some pastors noted that this is not always the case and that they haven't necessarily felt welcomed or engaged with when visiting other churches.) When someone is a visitor on some online platforms, they leave a digital footprint that can be used for further engagement. This may not directly identify the person but may be as simple as

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## Digital Church Research Report

being able to see a Facebook profile that allows for personal messaging after the initial interaction.

Several pastors who are developing a phygital model discussed the process of developing micro churches. These daughter churches operate under the guidance or oversight of the main church, taking on the teachings and 'DNA' of the main church, but providing distributed ministry in various locations.

Another benefit of online church engagement is the ability for people to have a voice. One pastor cited the example of a large church environment, where someone has a specific need for prayer. Unless there is a ministry call, the person may have no opportunity to seek prayer or support for their need. But in a digital church (subject to the platform being used), that person can visit a digital prayer room, outline their needs, and know that people are praying for, and supporting, them. The moderator of the digital prayer room can also reach out to the person in need and find ways to provide additional support.

### **4.6. Risks and Challenges of a Phygital Church Model**

No participants identified any risks in a church providing a phygital ministry. There were three areas that were called out regarding phygital ministries that could be perceived to be risks. The most common of perceived risks was that small, local churches may see a decline in membership as their members were increasingly engaging with larger, possibly more vibrant churches who provided online ministry.

Interviewees noted that pastors of smaller, local churches possibly needed to be aware of, or at least acknowledge, the possibility that their members were already engaging with other online ministries for various reasons, and possibly (or probably) had been doing so for a long time. While these ministries may operate as churches or as para-church organizations, the reality is that, in a digital age, many people will share content from various sources. In sharing this content, others were likely to start to find additional content online to support or augment the teachings received in their local church. Pastors could view this as a threat, particularly if they had any self-doubt regarding their ability to provide effective teaching. However, the reality in most cases appears to be that members will only seek additional content to augment teachings from their local church and are generally unlikely to altogether stop attending their local church based on the opportunity of engagement in an online church. An example of this response was:

*I've never met an online pastor who believed online churches could replace physical, in-person churches. A lot of local church pastors are wary of online because they think it's coming to replace what's happening offline.*

Interviewees also noted benefits of face-to-face engagements that aren't necessarily available online. One is the level of non-verbal engagement such as body language that is not

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## Digital Church Research Report

available in text-based online interactions and is only partially available in video-based interactions such as video conferencing (e.g. Zoom). If a person is listening to someone or just reading something, they don't necessarily have the full context that is available based on the tone of voice. One pastor indicated that, in his understanding, 90% of communication is non-verbal.

While the asynchronous nature of online engagement can be an advantage, it also entails risk. A church member who is in need may engage in digital content, then identify their need (for ministry, prayer, etc.). They may be in a situation where their need is urgent. However, the available online ministry team may not be available or in a position to respond immediately. This may result in the needy person perceiving that the church isn't taking an interest in their situation.

Effective content needs to be developed that understands the dynamics of engaging with a church in an online manner. When content isn't purposefully developed for an online audience, it can be challenging to maintain engagement. One pastor noted:

*It's like the fireplace on Netflix. It sounds like fire, it looks like fire, but it lacks heat. They long for the manifest presence of God.*

After nine months, the pastor noted people were sick of the digital church because they saw it as an extension of digital work or digital school. The idea of sitting in front of another video or video conference meeting had a significant lack of appeal. The moment that their state (or country) removed restrictions, they wanted to go back to physical meetings. One pastor noted a positive aspect of this, where many who had not been church members (either unsaved or de-churched) had engaged with the digital church during lockdown; and when barriers were lifted, were now more comfortable coming to meet physically. The pastor noted:

*We had so many guests those first couple of weeks, because they're like, I've always wanted to come, I was just afraid of coming in the room and being judged. There was a huge influx of salvations, those first couple of weeks.*

Because of the effectiveness of the online ministry in engaging or re-engaging with people, the church had decided to continue the ministry in parallel with their physical campus ministry.

## 5. Church Structure: Digital Stand-alone

Some participants are currently involved in pastoring stand-alone online/ digital churches. There are various reasons they have developed their churches in this manner. One noted that the earliest digital church they were aware of was held using Yahoo Instant Messenger in 2002 in a country where it is illegal to preach the gospel. And while the software platform and structure of ministry may have changed in the time since 2002, the church has grown and thrived, with many people coming to know Jesus. A common theme is that they have been motivated by the Holy Spirit to do so.

*We feel like God is leading us to reimagine the church, not replicate it, which again, might be startling to some, the re-imagination of doctrine, but it's exploring the expression of how church can look. And so we've gotten used to being a one-hour event on Sunday morning, and you come at 9AM, you leave at 10. And that's church. It doesn't have to be a single event or a one-hour event on a Sunday morning, it can be much more than that.*

One noted the general functions of the church and how they can be delivered in an online forum:

*Fellowship, discipleship, worship, evangelism, missions... our collective of believers, doing evangelism, doing fellowship, doing discipleship, worshipping, and in mission, engaging the world around them, and all those things can happen on the internet.*

Pastors identified three reasons for having a church meet in a digital-only place: churches operating in ministry situations among existing online communities; churches operating digitally in places that are too distant for face-to-face interaction; and churches operating in countries where meeting face-to-face may risk exposure of believers, resulting in punishment such as imprisonment or death.

While many pastors noted that churches can operate in a digital-only format, there were limitations. As one pastor noted:

*One of the big debates is, 'can there be church online?' I would say, a resounding yes! Can you do everything online you could do in person? Well, absolutely not! I can't hug you. You can't cry on my shoulder. I can't high-five you. I can't baptize you through the screen. We can share a meal together, but we won't be sharing the same meal.*

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## Digital Church Research Report

Although the ministry focus among these digital-only churches focuses on online engagement, all pastors involved in digital-only churches noted they will always seek the opportunity to meet with the members of their church face-to-face when the opportunity presents itself. The crucial point is that while churches can exist online, God created people as physical beings, and as such, they need people to be able to physically support them in some form. One pastor had organized an international short-term mission trip for their church to get together in an African country to provide ministry in an orphanage and work in local schools. So while the church is a digital church, its members get together for real-world ministry.

### **5.1. Churches Operating in Ministry Situations Among Existing Online Communities**

Several examples were identified of churches operating in digital spaces that were specifically developed to engage with people who lived in a 'digital society'. Examples of these churches included churches that met within gaming platforms and churches that met in Augmented Reality (AR) or Virtual Reality (VR). In both instances, the churches engaged people whose lives were focused on the culture or attributes of the digital community. For example, the members may have come from an online gaming community; or have enjoyed the idea of VR and were looking for a church engagement that was in their Augmented Reality or VR space.

One pastor talked about the world of online gamers, focusing on the way they live their 'real world' lives with a focus on their gaming. This pastor talked about the way that these people are frequently isolated from those around them socially, possibly other than their employment. They already have their social needs met within their online gaming community. So evangelizing in the place they socialize, then meeting with them in the same place to disciple them and see them come to spiritual maturity works in much the same way that missionaries operate by moving to other countries and immersing themselves in that culture.

Some churches are operating totally in VR. A pastor who provided insights regarding this community indicated that he didn't see his church as a stand-alone church, he saw it as a 'church planting movement' in VR space. To provide context for this, he outlined a little of the VR world (which he called the 'metaverse'), noting:

*They've painted this world where we go into this living, breathing space that exists in virtual cities; think of like Tokyo and Paris. But now what we're seeing is these virtual cities like VR chat Altspace VR, where people inhabit, they work, they play, and we do church there. We're planting in the metaverse across these virtual cities.*

Within the VR metaverse, this church has developed virtual spaces, including a place for gathering for teaching and celebration. They have built a VR waterfall with a river flowing to a

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## Digital Church Research Report

lake where people can be virtually baptized. The people go under the water in VR and, while the whole process is virtual, it is just as real as any baptism in the real world to all who are present in the VR space. The only difference is that the person being baptized isn't feeling the water on their body.

### **5.2. Churches Operating in Countries Where Meeting Face-To-Face May Risk Exposure of Believers**

One pastor outlined the online church in a country that is closed to the gospel. Under this country's laws, it is illegal to open a church. So the church doesn't operate from a building. It operates digitally. There is no centralized place for a worship service, but people can meet digitally from their homes. The digital services are watched by house groups throughout the city. They worship together online; perhaps they're part of a Zoom service, where you have one house during the reading and one house where the preacher is preaching. One house is the couple leading worship. Another house is leading the discussion; but they're all part of the same service.

The church is fully functional and isn't simply a 'watch party'. They can engage, ask questions, receive prayer in real-time, connect with a pastor in real-time, follow up, and be a part of a digital small group. The church operates groups for children, youth, women's, men's, and family ministry, using a variety of platforms to meet the varied needs.

There are levels of security in place to keep members safe. For example, while there is shared music for praise and worship, members generally don't sing aloud, even in their homes. They mouth the words and clap without their hands touching each other, so that neighbors will be unaware of the celebration that's happening in their house.

They have addressed the question of baptism using the following method:

*We will be on one side of the computer, and we'll encourage a local believer, if possible, or if there's not a local believer already baptized, the oldest person in the room will be baptized first. And then that person, in turn, would then baptize other people.*

*I've seen this, for example, where a pastor was in a western country. He took the oldest man; then he asked for the two younger guys to help him in the water. The pastor talked through the process of baptism 'buried with Christ and death, raised to walk in the newness of life'. And then the elder in the group was responsible to baptize all the others. And, at that point, the pastor stood back and he didn't need to say anything else because the guy knew what to say.*

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## Digital Church Research Report

This pastor noted that, biblically, we know that God is omnipresent. The physical barrier between the western country and the country where this took place was no barrier to God, who was always in both places at the same time. Talking about communion, he noted:

*There's nothing magical about my hands. It's the Holy Spirit who consecrates. If it's the Holy Spirit of God who consecrates, and God is omnipresent, then what in the realm of possibility would exclude that family sitting in [city] with bread and wine in front of their computer?*

### **5.3. Benefits of a Digital Church**

The primary focus of digital churches is to reach people from different cultures. Pastors from stand-alone digital churches all identified that their ministry has specific audiences in mind. Christians in the western world may perceive that there is a moderately homogenous culture within their towns and cities. However, there are sub-cultures that may have limited access to the general culture and may be more appropriately reached through a digital ministry. The two areas cited by pastors were the gaming community and those who live in VR. Informants clearly identified that, within these two groups, there is also heterogeneity, with diverse populations within different gaming communities, and different 'cultures' inhabiting different 'continents' in VR.

More than one pastor also highlighted benefits for Christians living in countries where churches are illegal. Access to a digital church provides a functional and viable opportunity for Christians to meet, learn, disciple each other, worship, and have fellowship with each other despite the laws of their countries. And in doing so, many people have been evangelized and brought to faith through digital churches.

Another benefit of digital churches is the ability to minister in real-time, ideally anywhere in the world. One pastor noted:

*Online benefits: speed with what you can respond to needs. Again, having a phone in your pocket, I can respond to anything at any point in my church, and actually have it be part of the church. So that's, that's number one thing.*

### **5.4. Challenges of a Digital Church**

Two areas of risk were identified in digital-only churches. The first is the underlying need for people to engage physically. This need varies based on the nature of the people involved, the nature of the church community, and other limitations such as living in closed societies.

A specific example of the location-related barriers to effective online churches is ministering to those in need, such as caring for the sick and injured, providing meals to those in need, and other face-to-face related ministry. One pastor addressed the ability of modern

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## Digital Church Research Report

technology to meet one of those physical needs, recalling organizing Uber Eats to pick up a meal and deliver it to a family in need in another city. Another noted:

*The Achilles heel of digital is when I have a life situation in which I really need someone beside me, like the loss of a loved one. I'm in the hospital, those type of like, real ministry moments digital, that's where digital hits that wall, you can only do so much for me to you.*

The second is ensuring the church incorporates any specific biblical requirements. The bible has clear instructions regarding two aspects of communal life that are not readily available in a digital world. These are baptism and communion. However, pastors working in these churches expressed comfort, if not confidence, that their churches were able to biblically meet these functional needs.

## 6. Location and Reach of Churches

A function of digital churches is their ability to reach beyond the geographic boundaries of their location. In some digital churches, this has resulted in watch parties and micro churches being established in various locations globally while, for others, their focus has been on ministering to people within their local areas who may otherwise have been challenged to attend a physical church service.

### 6.1. Phygital Churches

Participants who were ministering in phygital churches identified diverse locations that their ministry had reached. While their ministries may have global distribution, many found that a large proportion of their online church membership was based within the general area of their main campus. For example, one indicated that half of their online membership was in their city, a further 20% in their state, another 15% throughout the USA, with the remaining 15% were globally scattered. Another indicated that over 95% of their online membership was within one of the three cities where their campuses were located.

A crucial factor in ministering in more remote locations was time zones. One pastor indicated that they were effectively able to minister to locations that were one time zone away from their physical location but moving two time zones or more in either direction had an impact on their ability to minister. Others noted that members would go out of their way to engage. One indicated that they had a regular volunteer based in Perth, Western Australia, which was halfway around the planet, close to 12 hours out of sync with their location (depending on daylight saving in both places).

Some churches had established micro-campuses globally and were able to minister in all time zones. Many had campuses planted elsewhere in the USA. Several indicated that engaging with European members was relatively more effective from a time-zone basis than engaging with time zones to the west, such as Asian countries. In contrast, one church had planted a congregation in Hong Kong and had many watch parties happening in Singapore that they were looking to bring together into a new congregation. Others had high levels of engagement from the Philippines. One pastor indicated that their ministry now had in excess of 2,000 micro-sites, globally.

Irrespective of where the watch parties of micro churches and church plants were located, pastors identified the need to have systems in place that produced a healthy level of accountability.

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## Digital Church Research Report

Other churches did not have a vision for planting churches in diverse locations. Rather, they saw their role as evangelizing and discipling online. If and when the church member was looking to find a physical expression of church, these churches would be likely to reach out to churches in the relevant locations that had similar DNA, then provide an introduction, helping the person to become a member of the local church.

Two barriers to dispersed ministry were culture and language. Several churches had a Spanish language ministry, engaging Spanish speaking members in the US as well as in Latin America. Others identified ministries in Chinese, Tagalog, French, and Polish. Where language was identified as a barrier, technical options were available to provide translation with pastors identifying Google and YouTube as translation services.

Some of the more diverse locations identified included more distant 'western' countries such as Australia and South Africa, as well as non-western countries and regions including the Middle East, North Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. The pastor who had a church plant in Uganda noted:

*We actually have a community in Uganda that identifies as being a part of our church. And they're following that model all the way through to the point that they're even multiplying their own group, which has been amazing.*

When providing ministry in countries such as this, cultural issues had a significant impact, and one pastor noted their need to learn how Jesus was presented in the Quran, so they could effectively minister.

### **6.2. Digital-Only Churches**

One pastor of a digital-only church identified that there was no functional limit to the church's reach, subject to people having access to the appropriate software and/ or hardware. Their reach was largely associated with language barriers. Their ministry was in English. This meant that almost all people in the USA, Canada, the UK, and other English-speaking countries were able to take part, as well as about half the people in Europe, and smaller proportions in other non-English speaking countries. However, they had launched a remote campus, with ministry provided in German. This also allowed for greater sharing of the ministry requirements, as having someone based in the Central European time zone meant that a greater proportion of the ministry could be provided in a synchronous manner. One pastor expressed their geographic reach simply, noting:

*We're not a church for gamers, we're a church that exists where gamers are.*

### **6.3. Oversight of Planted Churches**

There were diverse perceptions of the appropriate level of oversight for watch parties, micro churches, and church plants.

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## Digital Church Research Report

The concept of a watch party had the greatest level of oversight. The watch party provided in-location ministry among members, but all content was generated from the planting church, pastoral care was provided by the planting church, and the watch-party functioned as a small group, in the same manner that a home group or discipleship group would function if they were physically located in the same city as the church. This was considered to be the first level of having a local expression by many pastors, and there was a degree of consensus among pastors regarding the status of a watch party.

Once a local expression of a church reached sufficient size, choices needed to be made about oversight and function of the daughter church. There were different perceptions regarding how this should take place. In one church a structured approach was developed, with different levels of oversight all coming under the authority of the primary church. This included having a team of regional leaders who had oversight of micro churches in different regions (mainly the USA, but with one 'rest of the world' region), then having local pastoral functionality in each micro church. Through this structure, the church believed that they were providing effective oversight at a local level while ensuring that those ministering at the local level had clear and appropriate support.

Several pastors outlined a deliberate training and educational programs within their churches. Watch party leaders could be trained to be online volunteers who were empowered to provide ministry, including moderation of discussion groups. Additional training was provided to bring these members to a level of leadership within the church. Some churches indicated that they had appointed key people within their church to oversee the training process. In contrast, another pastor indicated that they had relaxed their standards for leadership, as they found that their high standards were 'scaring off' potential leaders, which added pressure on the existing leadership and limited the church as a whole. Once the leader had gained the confidence of the church, greater autonomy could be provided. One pastor noted:

*A church grows at the rate that it multiplies leaders that it develops. So the same thing applies online.*

Another said:

*We have to be willing to be able to delegate, you know. I think we have to pour into a couple of people so they can pour into a couple of people in a component or a couple of people and that sort of thing. We see that modeled in Jesus, he had thousands who followed him, and he had 500 who followed him regularly, and 12 were His disciples and three within the 12.*

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## Digital Church Research Report

And another:

*So, do we have control? No. But my gut tells me that if Jesus entrusts us with His word, what could possibly go wrong? God has an uncanny way of building His church because that's His job. Our job is to make disciples. We don't control. We empower and encourage and pray a lot. And we let Jesus control a lot of that stuff.*

Risks were identified by various pastors. One church was very cautious about allowing a micro church to use the label 'campus', as there were legal implications of the activities in that local body if anything went 'off the rails'. Another pastor outlined their perception of risk to the effectiveness of ministry in trying to over-structure church growth. They noted:

*You can either have growth or control, but you can't have both. And so if you want to have that kind of exponential growth, you can't control everything.*

Another said:

*I think that's a heart issue. At some point, it will happen that people may intentionally or unintentionally misuse the digital church that God is building through us, and we will need to intervene. And so you can shut that down pretty fast. But the Holy Spirit tells what's happening - you just have to be in tune with Him.*

They noted that at the micro church level, there are people who may have been Christians for a shorter period, may have lower levels of biblical understanding, and yet are being placed in ministry positions to serve their local micro church. The church provided support in terms of ministry materials, discipleship, and engagement, but understood that the Holy Spirit would move in each micro church differently and that they needed to allow space for that ministry.

Some churches indicated a lack of desire or intention to plant churches in other locations. One pastor indicated that when a local group reached a large enough size to operate independently, they would introduce the members to a local church who had similar DNA and encourage the members to become an online campus of that local church.

One pastor outlined the church planting process within their denomination, noting that each church in the denomination was congregationally led, while subscribing to the agreed core beliefs of the denomination. They identified that, as micro churches reached the size where they were able to operate autonomously, they were given the opportunity to establish themselves as a new church plant with local oversight, subject directly to the denomination.

In a similar vein, another church identified that they were willing to 'send a church'. They differentiated this from planting a church, as the new church would have no functional oversight, but would operate in partnership with the original church. The new church would

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## Digital Church Research Report

have their own board, leadership, and eldership. This may be modeled on the structure of the original church, and there may even be a 'spiritual covering', but legally the two entities would operate independently.

## 7. Characteristics of Members, Online Churches

A central question to the reason for having churches operating in a digital space is understanding their role in ministry, outreach, and discipleship. In the same way that there are a range of churches providing different needs among their online communities, the churches attract different types of people.

There are several types of people who commonly engage in digital churches. The first are those that are already in that church, but for COVID, life circumstance, illness, travel, holiday, or other similar reasons, they need to engage digitally. One pastor provided an example of a woman in her 60s who had been diagnosed with cancer. She was well into her chemotherapy when COVID lockdowns started and had a weakened immune system. Her small group continued meeting with her online and engaged her in non-contact ways such as stopping outside her house to sing Christmas carols. The woman is now in remission but still feels less than safe from COVID exposure despite the lifting of lock downs. So she continues to be an active member of her small group and the church, but only engages digitally.

This pastor identified the opportunity of expanding the church's digital reach to include many shut-ins such as this woman. There are other community members who are also isolated for similar reasons. Another pastor cited single mothers who are unable to get childcare, while another talked of engaging a single father, trying to cope with a child who had a severe disability that required round-the-clock care. The man had previously had a negative experience with church (while in his teens) but managed to engage with an online church. By a miracle of the Holy Spirit, the church was only 20 minutes away. After a time of online engagement, members met with him face-to-face, and he is now being mentored through that church.

The second group is the unchurched; those who have been brought to engagement through an online link or discussion with an online member. These people are unlikely to engage in anything as in-depth as a Zoom call in the first instance - they tend to want to keep their anonymity until they understand what the church is, why it is functioning in a digital space, and are introduced to Jesus.

Another group often found in digital churches is 'church refugees' or the 'de-churched'. These are people who have come to faith in Jesus at some stage in their lives, have engaged in a physical church, but at some stage lost their connection with the church. This may have been due to a perceived or real offense against them, or because they were in some way forced out. They are no longer a part of regular church activities but maintain their faith. From the discussions, there are many of these people in the world, and when they come across a

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## Digital Church Research Report

digital church, they can enter anonymously, feel drawn in, cared for and welcomed, and gradually renew their engagement as part of the church. For some, this may gradually move to attending a physical campus of a church, while others may remain in a digital environment for longer periods.

Irrespective of the situation and mental state of the people who initially engage with digital churches, pastors identified that those who are open to being disciplined have seen significant changes in their lifestyles and ability to walk in ministry. One said:

*The loner, the person who doesn't like to be in front of people, the person who is agoraphobic or doesn't like to talk or shy, you know, they can be the moderator of a Facebook group or welcomed into an online chat. And we're seeing people blossom in ways that they've never been able to serve in the physical.*

Finally, several pastors warned about manipulative trolls who may enter digital churches. Under the guise of relating and presenting details of the challenges that life has thrown at them, they will seek emotional support. However, their real aim is to find people of goodwill and ask/ beg for money to help themselves out of the challenging situation. The challenge for a digital pastor is to know when such a request is genuine and have the discernment to know when the person is simply trying to fleece the church members. Pastors who have identified this behavior suggest interventions to ensure that church members are protected while providing a path to providing support if the need proved to be genuine.

### **7.1. Interaction with People in a Digital Space**

Many pastors focused on the nature of online discussions, and how people who would never walk through the door of a physical church are more than comfortable opening a dialogue online and expressing their deepest concerns. In the real world there are many social norms that preclude such an open discussion, but in the digital world the barriers are down, possibly due to the apparent anonymous nature of the engagement. However, many of these discussions take place in social media, where even if fake names are used, there is the ability to capture some form of contact information for re-engagement.

This openness of sharing does not necessarily translate to engagement. Pastors noted that people who are most open about their challenges can at the same time be the least comfortable about losing their anonymity and moving into a personal relationship or a community.

One unusual aspect of digital relationships is understanding perceptions of response times. In a real-world situation, people may send an email or leave a voicemail, and a response within 24-48 hours will be acceptable. In the digital space, that person may feel that a response that takes 12 hours is way too slow, and feel judged, unloved, or that they are not

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## Digital Church Research Report

part of the community because they are being ignored. Digital pastors need to be aware of the perceptions and expectations of response times in a digital community, and ideally ensure resources are available to meet expectations and build relationships. A crucial outcome of this is that the person may feel rejected and leave. As digital membership has a lower bar of entry, it also has a lower bar of exit. One pastor said:

*I have had deeper relationships in my online church than I ever did in my in-person church because there was always that wall of me being 'the pastor'.*

Some pastors addressed the issue of relating to people in a digital space. Universally, they acknowledged that real relationships can develop in an online situation, true friendships can be formed, and couples may even get married after having met in an online church situation. As one pastor said:

*One of my good friends is a co-host on a podcast that I do. I've never met him in-person, but I've been podcasting with him for a year and a half. And he knows some of the deepest things about me and I know some of the deepest things about him. And I would call on him for just about anything at this point in my life.*

While genuine relationships and friendships can develop in a digital space, people are all physical beings, and at some stage they may all be in a situation where they need to give someone a physical hug, or to be hugged. Digital pastors need to be aware of the physical needs of their members, and understand that as people mature, they may look to engage in a face-to-face situation (such as a micro church or watch party), or move to a physical campus or a church with a physical presence.

### **7.2. Membership of Digital-only Churches**

The members of the church based in a country where Christianity is illegal are almost all new Christians. They have come to faith in Jesus through the ministry of the church or other supernatural means. The people in this church ostensibly are no different from others in their country, and their ministry is to all their people.

VR churches appeal to people who have taken the step to investigate the metaverse and spend time there. The platform to-date has had a relatively high cost of entry; to take part in the metaverse, people need to invest in VR equipment. This high cost of entry means the experience is strongly age-related, with most church members being in their 60s or possibly even 70s. One VR pastor indicated that the cost of access was becoming more reasonable, and as a result, the average age of membership was lowering.

Another characteristic identified among the VR population is it is generally a 'high-tech crowd'. Articles have been published about one VR church indicating that many who self-

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## Digital Church Research Report

identify as 'atheists' have visited, simply to find out why a church would consider planting itself in a VR space.

Another pastor of a digital-only church said:

*A lot of these people think that, for various reasons, that is really their main world. They might, you know, go to work and interact, but they really spent a lot of time there. And there's all kinds of good and bad reasons. And if people have social anxieties, we just want to help them work through those things. So we're not forcing you to go to a physical church.*

A common attraction for people engaging in the metaverse is the anonymous nature of participation. However, people give themselves a screen name and possibly an avatar, and they have a personality within that digital persona. While they present with a persona, they still function and interact as a community. One pastor said:

*I think it's pretty human, no matter where they congregate, they're pretty much the same nature. And so the ones that are not really committed, they wouldn't be committed in a physical setting. I've noticed that VR can actually be even more engaged.*

## 8. Online Evangelism

### 8.1. Understanding Our Society

More than one pastor identified that 21st Century western culture has changed significantly from the culture of previous generations or times. One pastor summed this up by saying:

*Most people in the general population aren't asking whether God is real or not; they're not asking whether it can be validated that Jesus is the son of God. They're not atheists, they're not agnostics. They're 'nones'. They aren't even asking the questions that we're trying to answer.*

When they do hear about Christians, they don't think of Jesus or the love, redemption, and forgiveness of his sacrifice, they think of hypocrisy, or they think of the 'Religious Right' and Donald Trump. And they believe that Donald Trump hates them. Based on this presumption, a starting point for the ministry is to redirect any discussion to have them reach a point where they can start to think that there is a question to be asked. Christians need to understand their world view in the same manner that Paul understood the world view of the people in Athens (Acts 17). One pastor said:

*It isn't like the days of Billy Graham, where everybody's one decision away from being a Christian. They're probably three or four decisions away from becoming a Christian.*

Other pastors were more comfortable with a more traditional messaging process and had set up SEO links to questions such as 'Is God Real?' or 'What does the bible say about [blank]?' (where blank could be any relevant subject that impacts our society). The church that provided this example publishes podcasts with brief, biblical content that addresses such questions. As one pastor noted:

*When people search for 'my marriage is in trouble', what would be better for them to find? A bunch of divorce lawyers, or someone who was willing to listen, support, and help?*

Some talked of evangelism as a funnel. At the top of the funnel is an initial low-level online engagement with another person. Some people will never move beyond this low-level initial engagement. For others, relationships develop as they move through the funnel. The bottom of the funnel is reached when a person decides to live their lives in God's plan and will. The aim of online evangelism is to support people on this journey, encouraging them, trusting them, and overtly praying for them. Filling the top of the pipeline is part of the evangelistic ministry, and it can happen through active or passive means.

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## Digital Church Research Report

Developing relationships was a common theme. According to one pastor, in our society there are many people who feel that no one cares for them. The church's role is to show that this isn't the case; that everyone is of immense value in God's eyes. No one is a 'nobody'.

In a similar manner to missionaries being sent to other countries (a process that has happened for centuries), many churches are establishing 'digital missionaries' to go into the social networks of our 21st Century society, learn the challenges that people are facing, and help people to see that Jesus is willing and able to provide an answer to their problems and needs. One noted:

*If the Apostle Paul was alive today, he would be shooting videos, and he would be preaching the gospel all over the internet. So you can literally reach the world.*

Along similar lines, another noted:

*But most everybody has a phone now. So I think that that's God who has given us technology, and a digital space to really reach every corner with the message of Jesus.*

### **8.2. Active Evangelism**

Several pastors identified active forms of evangelism that they used online. One has developed a ministry that they refer to as 'digital missionaries'. In this digital mission, he uses Twitter Spaces (a tool within Twitter) to engage with and reach those in need.

Active evangelism can come from a church, from members of a church, or from both. One pastor encouraged their members to use their social media to reach out to people, noting:

*Online, everybody becomes an evangelist of something. Digital has given a voice to everyone and everything. Missionaries in the 21st century are digital influencers.*

When pastors and their churches use social media platforms as an evangelistic tool, they need to tailor their message and their content to their potential audience. God can work through any platform, but if the message and the delivery do not align with the culture of that platform, the message is likely to not reach the intended audience. When seeking to reach these different online cultures, people need to realize that their message needs to be all things to all men.

One pastor talked of his use of hashtags to link to content through Twitter to engage with people in need. This pastor found fertile soil among people who specifically identified as atheists or even Satanists, noting that when these people responded to a tweet, they may do so with the intention of engaging in an argument; but they're still open and willing to engage.

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## Digital Church Research Report

The pastor has seen many people come to faith despite approaching the initial engagement in an antagonistic manner. He said:

*I look to see what's trending every day. See what people are having conversations about. See what people are scared about, and I comment on them. And I say, 'Hey, I'm praying for you' or 'Hey, I'm sorry, this happened to you'.*

While stating the obvious, this pastor encouraged people to pray before they go online and start tweeting, asking God to open their eyes to see tweets and hashtags of people in need, while giving them the appropriate response to help build a relationship and lead them to Jesus, who can address their needs.

Another pastor will post questions into various search engines to engage people. When people respond, the pastor engages all respondents in an open forum discussion, allowing all participants to share their point of view. The pastor doesn't aim to confront any one view but will use the group engagement to show how Jesus can provide support for whatever the issue is. An example of the topics he has used was, 'Why do Christians suck at loving people?'

Another pastor related the following story:

*We had a lady who came about a year ago, and she declared herself a Satanist. If you can imagine a sweet Satanist. She's the sweetest person ever. But she was more into the new age-y type stuff. And she goes on to say, she came to troll and to kind of pick on us, but then she just stuck around.*

*And we just befriended her, we loved on her. We've been praying for our Lord, please bring her. And about five weeks ago, she came to Christ. And so now she's already a part of the church.*

*She never, ever would have walked into the physical church - she told us that. But she would come to a digital church because it's a little safer.*

### **8.3. Passive Evangelism**

Several pastors identified that search engine providers such as Google have been identified as being a challenge for Christians. However, search engines also serve as a useful tool. If churches can understand the challenges being faced by members of our society and develop an SEO program that has keyword searches based on those issues, then people will see the church or ministry websites, click on the link, and ideally engage with the content.

Some churches are using Google advertising to reach a global audience, advertising content that is relevant to people in need. This may not specifically be about God, Jesus, or the church. It is more likely to be about things like, how to cope with being a single parent, how to manage a relationship break-up, or some other life-impacting situation where people need

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## Digital Church Research Report

help and support. One pastor identified that Google provides grants to non-profits to advertise through their search engine. This pastor has found ways to creatively use those grants. They also use Facebook advertising to generate initial engagement, bringing people to content that can, through God's power, impact their lives. As one pastor said:

*YouTube is the place where people go to find answers for everything, from fixing their car to fixing their marriage.*

There are millions of searches every day, where people will search for something, and the search engines will direct them to a response. Using SEO and advertising, it is possible for Jesus' message (through a church) to come onto the first page of the search, increasing the opportunity of a church being able to provide insight or content, and through this establish a relationship with the person in need.

COVID has had an impact on peoples' perceptions of society. One pastor cited Pew Research that indicated that, during 2020, when the lockdown happened, more people than ever were searching or exploring faith online by way of Google and YouTube. If people are searching, then it's vital that churches are providing content within those spaces.

Pastors noted that different platforms have different levels of effectiveness in reaching people. One pastor discussed YouTube. A feature of YouTube is that once the video that someone has chosen has ended, YouTube will automatically run another video. This pastor has found that if his content is presented in an appropriate manner for YouTube's cultural guidelines, his videos have been shown to people who never specifically searched for the content. He reported many people had said something along the lines of, 'I was watching something on YouTube and then this was the next video that came up and I got pulled in.' If churches can provide appropriate content, God can use YouTube to have that content appear in someone's feed, whether they searched for it or not.

Finally, one pastor noted that their primary ministry was to provide discipleship. They had established SEO keywords associated with this ministry. But while the key words and the ministry were not focused on evangelism, it hadn't stopped God using search engines to bring people in need to the ministry, see relationships grow, and ultimately see people come to faith.

### **8.4. Specific Platforms for Evangelism**

Some churches have established themselves on platforms with the specific intention of reaching the communities that inhabit those platforms. For example, there is a church that operates on Minecraft. Ministry takes place within the platform, as does discipleship, and members of the church evangelize others who play the game. A pastor from one of these churches indicated that they challenge their members to engage with other players within

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## Digital Church Research Report

the game, build relationships through game-play, while at the same time making sure their faith is visible and a part of their lives.

### **8.5. Engagement and Establishing a Relationship**

One pastor noted that there is a low bar for people to get over to see content that's been posted online. There is a low initial bar for engagement. At the same time, there is a low bar for leaving that engagement. It is therefore crucial that churches understand how to engage people who are starting to engage (whether through passive or active evangelism).

An initial key factor is being able to obtain contact details without risking people leaving. This is why some pastors favor a platform such as Facebook, where someone's online contact details are available as a digital footprint following the first direct engagement.

### **8.6. The Timothy Initiative**

One pastor discussed a program called 'The Timothy Initiative'. Based on Timothy from the New Testament, the focus of this initiative is to train people on how to tell their story in a manner that relates to those around them. This pastor noted:

*It's all of our jobs, our missions to go into the world. That wasn't a command given to just the preachers, the pastors, the leaders; but that was to all of us to be able to go. The Timothy Initiative really breaks down and gives you the tools to be able to share your story, and 15 seconds are used to explain the Gospel story using visuals and something that you can draw up and engage people within a few minutes.*

## 9. Online Discipleship

When discussing the question of 'what is a church?', there was almost universal acceptance that one of the functions of a church was to build communities that functioned to help fulfill the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). Clearly, one aspect of the Great Commission is 'making disciples', and every pastor agreed that this was a crucial aspect of online churches. All agreed that discipling can and does happen in an online situation, and all agreed that people can be disciplined in a digital space to be led from being unsaved to being mature Christians operating in the ministry that the Holy Spirit empowers them for. Some churches have developed active and structured discipling, while others see discipling as more of an impromptu process.

The most crucial aspect of discipleship was that all participants agreed that this can and does effectively happen in a digital space. There are some functional differences in the way people can be disciplined online compared to physical discipleship; but these differences do not change the outcome. This is seeing people grow in maturity in their faith as they grow in knowledge and understanding to the point in which they are moving in the power of the Holy Spirit in the ministries they are called too.

Pastors saw discipleship as central to their role in their online ministries, whether in physical or in digital spaces. While the research focus was on digital engagement, one pastor noted that discipling isn't necessarily conducted in an effective manner in many physical churches, saying:

*Here in America, we put a lot of emphasis on that Sunday morning service. And we kind of dropped the ball a little bit on discipleship.*

They actively encouraged new Christians in understanding their faith and being baptized. Pastors who noted that this was one of their key roles also were aware of the need to be able to disciple larger numbers of people than they could realistically engage with on a one-on-one basis. One pastor referred to the structure that Jesus used, noting:

*Jesus probably had 72 disciples. He chose 12 to really pour into; and then he was extremely intimate with three.*

While another said:

*It's really up to the Holy Spirit to give you wisdom about who you should engage with, and who you should delegate that engagement to. So long as everyone is disciplined.*

A crucial aspect of discipleship was seeing people's lives changed. This means that discipleship is not simply a transfer of information, it is a transformation of how people understand and live their lives. A pastor used this example:

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## Digital Church Research Report

*When Jesus says, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men, he's saying that there's some kind of transformation that's going to happen there. He wants to take them from being just average fishermen, or tax collectors or whatever, to being world changers, with the message of the gospel.*

*He didn't just say, I want you all to sit down and meet me on this hill, as I teach you every week. He says 'you need to be with me, you need to watch me do some things, you need to see me do it, you need it to be a part of you, and you need to do it yourself while I walk you through some things'.*

Following a similar theme, another pastor talked of the Hebrew meaning of disciple. The best translation into English is not a 'student', but rather an 'apprentice'. In the times of Jesus, Jewish rabbis would pick disciples, then spend their lives, 24/7 with these disciples. In his day and time, Jesus was not unique in following this model. For example, there is reference in the bible to John the Baptist having disciples (e.g. John 1:35; 3:25).

While online discipleship is possible, several pastors indicated that, at some point, physical interaction may be important, and can or even should be considered. One pastor said:

*When things get serious, you have to shift from online to offline. You have to meet face-to-face for it to go to the next level. And I think it's the same with faith, I think there comes a point where we have to go in-person, we have to, you know, be face-to-face in the same room with somebody, I think that that has to happen.*

### **9.1. Structured Discipleship**

There were various methods employed by different churches to facilitate discipleship. Structured discipleship in some churches was formal to the point of having regular weekly digital meetings to work through pre-prepared study notes with specific subject matter and teachings. In this model, cohorts of new believers are disciplined through a range of classes to provide them with biblical instruction and understanding. Some developed their own programs while others used existing programs, such as Alpha. Even in structured programs, this level of personal contact and interaction was identified as being a crucial aspect of pastoring. And while the focus was generally on understanding the bible, other aspects were also commonly mentioned such as Christian living and witnessing to others.

Alternatively, some churches set up online classes that could be attended asynchronously, allowing for people to grow in their biblical understanding at their own pace. The pastor that discussed this process indicated that the challenge was balancing the biblical teaching with the development of relationships. They had therefore included a time of gathering, once a month, to have a general discussion about the things that the new Christians had been learning. Even among the more structured programs there is a focus on relationships. As one pastor noted:

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## Digital Church Research Report

*Our goal is that they've moved from being a viewer to an engager. The call to action via our content. Our purpose is to turn content into community. We have very intentional classes, too, but our purpose of classes is to point people towards community. So what we don't want is just for them to learn, we want to connect them to others.*

Similarly, another noted:

*Content will allow us to build relationships with other people. It's not a primary piece, it's supplemental; the primary piece is making disciples.*

Many churches have found that the most effective method of discipling is having people relating to each other in small groups. Groups met using video conference platforms such as Zoom, or in online discussion boards such as Discord. Some churches structured their discipleship groups based on geographic location, others let people group together by common interest, while one church grouped people together based on who had come to faith at the same time.

More than one church encouraged all members to download and use their app. These church apps have been developed to provide regular prompts each day. Prompts could include bible readings, prayer, or detailed programs. One program on the app ties in with the Christian-based TV series 'The Chosen', providing a tool for interactive discussion about the life of Jesus as portrayed through this TV series.

Churches that were operating in countries where being a Christian is illegal provided comprehensive online training to pastors and church planters. Their discipleship programs were therefore structured to provide a full path to taking on pastoral roles (if appropriate).

### **9.2. Unstructured Discipleship**

Some pastors had different processes to meet the needs of new Christians, subject to factors such as personality type, and the location of the new believer. In one example, a digital-only pastor had someone come to their church who had been going through a rough time. They shared the gospel and the person prayed to receive Christ. The person then connected with online discussion boards on the Discord platform, entering into discussion groups. The pastor engaged, one-on-one, and talked through a range of issues over many months. The new Christian began volunteering in many roles, coming to a range of meetings, learning more and more and growing in faith. He's now part of the staff of the digital church and has been talking about Jesus to others in his online gaming community.

As another pastor said:

*Discipleship in its truest format - it's just doing life with people.*

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## Digital Church Research Report

The pastor said that the best way of discipling people in a real-world situation is having an open door to your house. Let people come in when the house isn't cleaned up, when there are things left lying around. When the kids are running wild. Let people see the 'real you'. The same is true in a digital format (although uncleaned houses are not visible). We need to be vulnerable to let each other see us as we are, warts and all. When we're willing to be open to that level with people, they will see the power of Jesus in our lives, and discipleship will be a natural outcome.

One outlined a process they used when someone came to faith in a remote country where they would endeavor to engage the new Christian in a local Christian church. For example, they had someone in Estonia who had recently come to faith, and they were currently trying to find a church that they could link this person to. In this instance, they were aware of Orthodox churches operating in Estonia, but were not aware of any bible-centered churches. They were therefore discipling and engaging with this person online, but at the same time were praying and seeking for a local church to plant this person into.

The same pastor was comfortable with longer term digital discipleship for appropriate people. They outlined the situation of some Muslims from MENA countries who were attending their digital campus. If and as these Muslims came to faith in Jesus, the pastor would not be looking to plant them into physical churches, as church gatherings are illegal in these countries. Therefore a digital discipling process was the only practical solution.

Impromptu discipling included pastors meeting with digital church members face-to-face when traveling through their countries or cities, or local face-to-face gatherings of members in remote locations for a meal or coffee.

Several pastors discussed discipleship as being an ongoing, in-depth relationship as the apprentice learns the trade of the master. One pastor gave an example that was physical, not digital, saying:

*I had two people who were my interns. One of them would come to my house for 20 hours a week of internship. And she would sit across my desk, and I'd have her make graphics with Bible verses. And after a couple of weeks, I was like, these are really good. Where did you learn the Bible? And she said, 'You taught me the Bible, right?' She's learned about Jesus just by being a volunteer. She wasn't a Christian. But now she's given her life to Christ, gone to college, and she's now a part of Young Life and other college groups.*

## 10. Pastoring Online

*Whether it be physical, digital, or hybrid, we still want to be as pastoral as possible. And lead with our hearts. It's okay to have thick skin, but to have a tender heart and to be as pastoral as possible.*

*To be a good online pastor, you have to love people. More than you love the tools.*

Pastoring online involves two parallel ministry opportunities - preaching to a camera and engaging people in digital forums (chat/ video conference/ VR). The skills required to preach effectively and to manage digital forums are both important in digital pastoring. Not all digital pastors will have good skills in both areas. In addition to pastoral and teaching skills, the question of technical ability was included in some discussions. While there were varied views on this, the general response was that digital pastors don't necessarily need high-level technical skills. But they do need to be able to see how to leverage technology to connect with, and minister to, people.

Another aspect of effective pastoring is being managerial. Many churches will look for someone who is an effective preacher and manager, who also has pastoral skills to be their church pastor (leaving aside the question of technical skills). Addressing this, one pastor said:

*In a physical church, when the church gets over 500 people in attendance, there's an expectation that the pastor, the lead pastor, will be a pastor or teacher and the CEO. In reality, the very best people in the world are only good at two of those, and the average person is good at one. I think the church leader of the future needs to be a little bit more open handed, a little bit more secure as a leader to be in a position where they can hand off and delegate leadership to people who are called, and who are skilled and who are gifted in those particular areas.*

To address this, pastors need sufficient self-awareness to know their strengths and weaknesses, and to know how best to delegate roles to ensure the church can operate effectively.

There are many gifts of the Spirit. One pastor identified a crucial gift in digital ministry as discernment. You have to be able to read between the lines in all forms of communication and respond appropriately. You also need to be faith-filled, as you don't see the fruit of your ministry in front of your eyes. And you have to have a strong biblical foundation, because you need to be able to provide biblical insights in real-time.

One pastor noted that a mistake made by many churches is that they consider a digital ministry to be associated with younger generations. Based on this misconception, they

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## Digital Church Research Report

empower their youth pastor to develop their online ministry, perceiving that younger people are more likely to have a better understanding of technology, and to be aligned age-wise with the potential online congregation. In reality, the need for spiritual maturity to be able to handle the diverse and challenging online engagements may mean that a more senior pastor within the church may bring experience and wisdom to a digital pastoral role.

While many pointed out the challenges and issues that digital pastors need to consider when stepping into the role, one also said:

*So you have to meet the challenge of being in a relationship with others. Is it exhausting? Absolutely. Is it hard? 100%! But is it rewarding!*

### **10.1. Establishing Boundaries**

Almost every pastor in the research project identified the need for time-related boundaries in their ministry. Several noted that for 'real world' pastors, they are available for their church members at fixed hours. They may be called out for emergencies outside of those hours, but other than the fact that Sunday was a workday and they had different 'weekend' days, their hours of work paralleled the hours of work of the general community. The challenge for online pastors is that their ministry is as close as the phone in their pocket. They are effectively on-call at any time. The notifications from the phone will buzz or ring constantly, and there is always someone needing ministry. This is exacerbated when the church is operating across diverse time zones. Universally, digital pastors said it is vital to have the ability to turn the phone off, and to be unreachable, giving their body and mind a chance to be renewed.

*It's easy when you have everything on your phone, when you can chat and watch YouTube and comment on YouTube and comment on Facebook Live and do everything from your mobile phone. It's very difficult to cut it off and to walk away and to say, 'I'm done for the day'. It is always a temptation to scroll online on my phone. And to start checking back again. And so you have to be very disciplined with delegating and knowing when to say 'no'.*

Even within time boundaries, some pastors identified that they were taking on more than their mind and body could manage in the longer term. One pastor with a global ministry noted that he was engaging with people in four services every Sunday. While he generally preached the same message in each service, there was also the interaction and engagement with members after the service. The process was taking a toll on him, and he was reviewing how to manage that to avoid burn-out, and looking at what could be delegated to others within the ministry.

One pastor noted that turning the technology off does ensure that they are able to stop working in a 24/7 mode. However, there is still a need to have some form of failsafe in their ministry, as sometimes people do have needs that don't occur within normal working hours.

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## Digital Church Research Report

While many discussed the importance of boundaries, one anchored this in scripture, noting:

*The first thing in all of the Scriptures that is defined as holy is Sabbath. We get so caught up following in the steps of Jesus, that we forget about the stops of Jesus. And the Gospels constantly say how often Jesus stopped and rested.*

One pastor noted that they had appointed someone to oversee their digital time. This pastor had given this person authority to intervene if required, forcing them to take time away from their screen to ensure that the pastor remained within their boundaries.

### **10.2. Skills – Preaching Online**

While digital pastoring is a novel process, remote pastoring has been going on since the birth of the church. Paul was cited as being a great example of a virtual pastor. He was remotely pastoring, even among churches in locations he had never visited. While his letters show that churches needed to be corrected in some areas and encouraged in others, they also show that the churches were able to function effectively with remote oversight.

There were two common themes identified regarding the skills and experiences needed to be a digital pastor. The first was that technical skills were not essential. While this is counter-intuitive, pastors almost universally indicated that the pastoral skills were more important than the technical skills, and that having technical support from people who understood the technology was just as effective (if not more so) than having the pastor operate the technology. There were some caveats on this theme, with some pastors noting that they needed enough technical ability to restore a connection in a 'live' situation if some hardware failed.

The second was that online preaching and/or teaching are different experiences than preaching in an auditorium. As one pastor noted:

*It's crazy to know that there are a whole bunch of people on the other side of the screen that I don't see, and I can't get them moving. Whereas in person, if I am already up on-stage teaching, I see all the faces, right, I can see the numbers attached to that.*

When pastoring in a face-to-face situation, pastors are generally able to see the effects and impacts of their ministry. However, when pastoring online, the effects and impacts may be invisible, which can lead some pastors to question the effectiveness of their ministry. They may never be aware of what is happening on the other side of the screen. One pastor noted that they are 'wired to people taking the next step', and when you can't see that step being taken, it challenges you personally. The pastor said:

*There might be somebody on the other side of the screen who gave their life to Christ. And even though we have ways for you to tell us, they might not ever*

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## Digital Church Research Report

*tell us and it's just like, cool. Well, I have to be okay with Paul planting seeds, and spreading Apollo's waters around and know that God is growing.*

Preaching or teaching while looking at a camera is a skill to be learned. With no church members in front of the person providing feedback, the experience can be sterile. However, it is crucial to be able to make 'eye contact' with the eyes of people in their living rooms, even though they can't be seen. Delivery is important. In a face-to-face church, it's OK to mess up the words a little. The church will observe and understand, and maybe even engage with laughter. The platform that the church employs to deliver their message has a role in providing some level of engagement. Some identified that at least with Facebook Live, people can respond with emojis on screen, helping the speaker to know how they are responding.

Some pastors talked about their 'dynamic delivery'. When preaching, they will walk all around the stage, engaging with members of the church by making eye contact. One pastor spoke to the struggle of sitting still and looking into a camera while delivering his message. The pastor noted 'this isn't something that they teach you at seminary'.

An example was given by a pastor referring to a colleague. He indicated that the best digital pastor he knows is a woman who is rapidly approaching retirement age. She has no great grasp of technology. But she has the pastoral skills and empathy to be a highly effective pastor and has the technical team to support her as required.

### **10.3. Moderating Chats**

Many pastors serve as moderators in chat rooms. The nature of these chat rooms may vary - some are for engaging with the unsaved or de-churched, while others are for ministry within the church. Moderators need to be aware that people can and often do read tone into written communication that was never intended, and as a result can 'grab the wrong end of the stick'. This is a heightened risk when considering that many members of digital congregations may come from different cultural backgrounds or have personal issues that have discouraged them from attending a face-to-face church. Therefore, even in casual discussions, pastors need to be vigilant regarding the tone of their message.

The risk of misinterpretation was not confined to the moderators. One pastor discussed a challenge in a chat situation when various chat participants had different backgrounds. The pastor recalled a discussion between three people - an older woman, a younger man who had severe Asperger's syndrome, and a participant from an African culture. The lack of ability to comprehend the messages of each other led to a significant conflict within the chat. All participants misunderstood comments from each other. The pastor had to engage in urgent conflict resolution to be able to keep the focus of the chat on ministry and the study topic, something that they were grateful that they had appropriate training to do.

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## Digital Church Research Report

Another issue in open chat situations (in contrast to chats within a church) is the risk of 'trolls' entering the discussion. Several pastors identified that through effective engagement they have ministered to trolls and seen them come to faith. But at the same time, trolls can be disruptive and have a significant negative impact on a chat ministry. One pastor suggested a process of engaging with the trolls on a one-on-one basis in the first instance, encouraging them to be constructive in the open chat. But if that was ineffective, then the moderator needed to have the confidence to remove the troll from the discussion.

Moderating online discussions also requires moderators who are available at times that meet the expectations of those in the chat. If a church is only providing a chat service during specific time periods, then it is vital to let those in the discussion know when the chat will be moderated. Some churches ensure moderation at specific times to give their members confidence, particularly if the issue involves some urgency (such as prayer for a specific situation).

People who need ministry are often more open in an online forum than they would be in a face-to-face conversation. Pastors need to be aware of this and should be prepared to enter a significant conversation with people they barely know. Also, pastors need to know how to talk online, which can be as simple as keeping up-to-date with popular acronyms.

Some digital ministries had experienced dynamic or even explosive growth. These ministries needed to rapidly engage enough trained volunteers to be able to meet the needs of those who were in need, were in the chat rooms, and wanted support.

Finally, one pastor noted that a crucial skill to minister in a chat situation was the ability to type.

### **10.4. Pastoring**

Being a digital pastor involves pastoring. While that may appear obvious, it is frequently overlooked. In the real world, a pastor will develop relationships with people in their church. They may meet by chance while in the street. They may meet by design for a catch-up or a coffee. In the digital world, people need the same level of pastoring (if not more). However, there is no opportunity to bump into someone while shopping. Therefore, there needs to be a level of intentionality to maintain and develop relationships with members, to foster those relationships, and see them grow into friendships. This is unlikely to happen in a passive manner, and digital pastors need to be aware of the time and energy required to build these relationships.

## 11. Ministry Content – Online Churches

Almost all pastors interviewed identified that a digital expression of church needs to be presented in a manner that suits a home environment. This expression is likely to differ from an auditorium expression of church in four ways: the role and function of singing (praise or worship), the presentation of the sermon, the need for the teacher/ preacher to be able to interact with a remote congregation, and the duration of the church 'service'. In addition, many pastors identified the need for processes to be set up to engage with the congregation in areas such as ministry, prayer, and fellowship.

A central point of content development was ensuring that the outcome would be effective and purposefully designed to meet the needs of the audience. It was highlighted that simply broadcasting a church service from an auditorium was functionally little more than the 'televangelist' messages that have been broadcast for many years. Rather, the focus should be on delivery of content that met the needs of the listeners. As each online platform could represent a different segment of society, content should be developed to meet the cultural needs of those segments.

The important focus isn't on the inclusion or exclusion of any one aspect of content. Rather, the aim should be to develop content that understands the nature of the congregation and is delivered to meet their expectations and needs. This may not necessarily mean that a digital service has a similar look or feel to a physical service. As one pastor said:

*We're not in the Sunday service business. We're in the business of helping people take their next step.*

And another:

*The Apostle Paul... you never find in any of his writings dictating church. You don't see a church service; you don't see any of it. But you see him being adept, shaping his message and ministry to the needs of the local expression of where he was.*

This was not universal. Some digital pastors deliberately developed an online expression of their church to reflect the physical auditorium expression and had the online expression function in a similar time frame to their physical time frame. Even when this was the case, the structure was modified, with reduced time allocated to singing, a similar amount of time allocated to the message, but more time allocated to ministry and fellowship. There is time specifically allocated to interaction, in the form of a Q&A with the pastor about the message.

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## Digital Church Research Report

Finally, one pastor provided their perspective on poor delivery of content, saying:

*There are some churches that are so bad at digital, that it's really a black mark for the body of Christ. It just looks bad. They haven't invested in technology; they haven't invested in cameras, equipment, and platforms. And they do a poor job. I'd rather they just stay self-contained in their small campus, and nobody knows what's going on, except those in that room.*

Much of the discussion is associated with content related to the online 'service'. At the same time, many pastors discussed content of other aspects of their online church, such as bible studies, content for their app, and content for their various ministry software platforms. One pastor discussed how her church seeks to have ongoing engagement with its church members by providing fresh content on a very regular basis. This church empowered all their senior leadership to provide content, work to make graphics, and to keep the digital space fresh and renewed. This fresh, new content provided reasons for members to continue engaging with the church, helping facilitate discipleship. Further details of content associated with these ministry functions are included in relevant sections such as evangelism and discipleship.

### **11.1. The 'Service': Overall Look and Feel**

As noted under 'Skills of a Digital Pastor', a pastor with experience indicated that the message should ideally be delivered by the pastor looking directly at the camera. There were some exceptions cited. One pastor recalled a message he had seen that was delivered by a pastor who was sitting in his garage, tinkering with his motorcycle, and using it from time to time as an example to draw out part of his message.

An effective delivery of an online service experience will involve effective planning and prayer. One pastor talked about the need to ensure the digital service is designed to understand the average living room experience, and how that will differ from an auditorium experience. This pastor said:

*Holy Spirit is in the planning of the service as much as She is in the actual service. And what do you think people get hung up on?*

While the look and feel of the service is more effective if it is purposefully designed for digital ministry, it should still maintain the DNA of the church. One pastor indicated that they felt they had found the correct balance when a member of their digital church visited a physical campus and felt that they were already comfortable in the context of the physical church, as the digital and physical experiences had the same feel.

Some pastors provided unique insights. One pastor noted that content was secondary and existed only to provide a focus on the church ministry (including all aspects outlined in Acts 2:42ff).

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## Digital Church Research Report

One church has structured their online service to be limited to once a month, while during the other weeks, a gathering is held that allows for teaching, prayer, and ministry in the form of interactive engagement.

The look and feel of VR churches are clearly an exception to these points, as within the virtual construct, the service can effectively operate in the same manner as a physical auditorium service.

### **11.2. The Presentation of the Sermon**

A common theme was that campuses within a church would have the same central focus each Sunday. Several pastors identified that in their physical church campuses, each campus pastor would be tasked with developing a message based on a specific topic or bible passage. The same was true for their digital campus. The specifics of the message, the examples used, and the length of the message may vary in each physical campus.

Some churches have moved away from a 'sermon' presentation. Rather, they may have a series of five-to-ten-minute teaching clips, published each week on a suitable platform, providing 'bite-sized' messages. There were generational aspects to this choice, with pastors noting that this size of message aligned more closely with expectations of those who regularly engage with Tik Tok and YouTube. As one pastor noted, Jesus' first message ('Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' Lk 4:21 NASB20) took just nine words. The role of a church 'service' was questioned, with the pastor noting that, ideally, the focus should be on empowering and equipping the saints to do the work of the Lord in their community.

### **11.3. The Teacher/ Preacher**

Many digital pastors indicated that they pre-recorded their messages, and posted to the online platform of their choice, timed to coincide with the live service being conducted in their church's auditorium. The church members found that although they were aware that the message had been pre-recorded, they had a greater relationship to the message that was delivered; they perceived that they were the primary audience, not just a ministry afterthought.

### **11.4. Duration of an Online Church Service**

In many churches, the length of a church service varies based on constraints of the location. Some churches conduct multiple services, others need to schedule their service to meet time constraints. Others have a single service, so they have greater flexibility. Universally, digital pastors indicated that there are time constraints on a digital expression of church. In general, people have more distractions at home than they would in an auditorium. As a result, a 60-90 minute service is too long for a digital presentation. Similarly, a sermon may run for 45 minutes in an auditorium, but in a digital format, needs to be kept shorter, ideally in the 20-30 minute range.

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## Digital Church Research Report

*All our pastors speak each Sunday on the same content. If you go to one campus, the sermon is 35 minutes. At the next, it might be 20. They both have different metaphors, different stories, same passage, same points, but they teach expression and their own unique way in the context. Same with online.*

### **11.5. Interaction with the Church Members**

From the first stages of the interview process, pastors continually identified that a focus of church is the relationships. Relationships require interaction. When delivering digital content in the form of a church service, there is limited opportunity for interaction.

To address this, most pastors recommended incorporating the church 'service' into an online platform or app that also provides the opportunity for human connection. People come to church services with needs. It is important (if not essential) to ensure that there is an opportunity and there are appropriate tools available for those needs to be expressed and addressed.

### **11.6. The Role of Singing (Praise or Worship)**

Many pastors commented on the challenges of translating a physical time of singing into someone's living room. Universally, the responses were uncomplimentary. Some examples included:

*Let's really be clear about the musical component of a church service that most people call musical worship- it is the worst part of an online service. Nobody does it well.*

*The live room is very forgiving of a bung note or a flat singer. Live stream is not.*

*My worship pastor hates this 'online worship'. I call it karaoke.*

To address this, pastors indicated that they had found it to be more appropriate to only include one song prior to a message.

## 12. Software Platforms for Online Churches

Most pastors identified a range of software platforms that they used to facilitate their online ministries. Many had platforms that they used for different aspects of ministry including evangelism, facilitation of small groups, delivery of church services, fellowship, ministering to the congregation, and prayer. Most churches used more than one platform noting that, while each platform had strengths and weaknesses, there was in most instances no one platform that could effectively meet all ministry needs. One pastor whose church included members in countries where it is illegal to be a Christian commented:

*I would say, the biggest need is a secure, encrypted, dedicated platform that churches could use. And that's something that I know the foundation I work for would be very keen in investing in something like that. But it would be taking the right team, you know, together to build that out that could be used for the benefit of the wider church.*

Another pastor commented on the need to be on multiple platforms, quoting Paul being 'all things to all people' (1 Cor 9:19-23). People of different ages, focus, and cultures meet on different platforms. So his church meets on different platforms to reach people from different cultures and ages. Where churches use multiple platforms, they often structure their content to meet the culturally accepted standards of the platform. For example, Facebook may have the shortest video content (at around two minutes), while on YouTube, content could be slightly longer, at three to five minutes. Several pastors also mentioned generic email and text messaging as being in their ministry toolbox.

The number of churches who identified current use of each platform is shown in brackets (noting that there were 29 pastors who provided their input).

### 12.1. YouTube [24]

YouTube was the most frequently identified platform. It provided a tool for streaming of services and sermons/ messages. Some churches used YouTube as a 'front door' to engage with people but didn't use it as a primary site for content or ongoing engagement. Based on the volume of users, one pastor indicated that YouTube was the largest front door in terms of outreach. This was both in terms of primary reach, but more so in terms of viral or organic reach where content is circulated to other platforms.

A benefit of using YouTube was the ability to engage in an asynchronous manner. Once your content is posted on YouTube, it can be viewed at any time, and discussion can be managed in YouTube's chat over time.

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## Digital Church Research Report

Another pastor said:

*If a church has a YouTube channel, they are setting up a church in the marketplace, rather than up on the hill at the back of town.*

This church had built their ministry primarily on YouTube for '12 different reasons'. They understood that YouTube was now the largest social media platform; and also the most active. They indicated that 95% of 18-29 year-olds are regularly on YouTube, 91% of 30-39 year-olds, and 87% of 39-59 year-olds. The platform accounts for 37% of all internet traffic. It reaches males and females equally with no gender bias.

Another benefit of YouTube is that it links with other platforms. So if a church posts content on their YouTube channel, that content can be shared to Facebook and Instagram, among other platforms, increasing the reach of the message.

Finally, there were copyright issues. If a church inadvertently streams content that includes a copyrighted song from Hillsong, YouTube will respond by putting an advertisement in the feed but won't mute the stream.

### **Facebook [23]**

Some churches have heavily invested in Facebook. For most, Facebook is one platform that they use, but they will also use a basket of others. While Facebook can provide a platform for content, discussions, and ministry, there are issues with it. The algorithms it uses mean that, unless your members actively visit your Facebook page, content that was directed to them may never appear in their Facebook feed. One pastor said:

*Facebook groups. That's where the conversations happen. That's where the teaching happens. That's where the prayer request happens. That's where our small groups meet. That's where our prayer time is. We do all that stuff right there. You can watch the replays. It's like I just showed you those screenshots. You can go back and watch all those teachings, so it stays there.*

Another said:

*Facebook is the oldest and the widest reaching social media network. There are nearly 2.8 billion people using Facebook every month now. Yeah. 1.8 billion users every day. There are 190 million Facebook users in the U.S.*

And another:

*They're bringing 2.65 billion people online, and it's free. And so if they shut me down, I had a good run. We ended up on Facebook, because that is where the people are.*

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## Digital Church Research Report

Churches that used Facebook as their primary platform appreciated the ability of using Facebook's closed group system to ensure the church was effectively managed and moderated, while using open content in an evangelistic manner.

Some churches used Facebook as a 'front door' to engage with people but didn't use it as a primary site for content or ongoing engagement. There were various statistics quoted regarding the use, demographics, and engagement of different platforms. One pastor noted 'there are billions of people on Facebook', and that it had the largest audience, therefore making it the greatest tool to reach people. Some pastors identified that Facebook targeted the over 40s, and possibly an even older audience. One indicated that he uses Facebook, but none of his five children do. Others identified that the largest age group who uses Facebook is the 25-34 year-olds. In contrast, another pastor indicated that he perceives Facebook to be in decline, saying that he is continually hearing comments that people are using Facebook far less frequently, are limiting their engagement with Facebook, or are giving up on the platform altogether.

Others use Facebook more sparingly, with some noting that they occasionally post on Facebook as they find little traction there. Another highlighted copyright issues, saying that if you livestream content on Facebook and the content includes a copyrighted song from Hillsong or Bethel, Facebook will mute your live stream.

One pastor indicated that they wouldn't use Facebook. While functionally, the platform could meet all their church's needs, there were too many issues associated with the service. They said:

*But I think in today's world you're handcuffing yourself if you're too dependent on one company or platform. We've seen too many Facebook pages shut down because of copyright things that weren't even active. Or it's marked as hate speech... whatever it might be.*

One pastor discussed the apparent concern among churches that Facebook would shut down their ministry. This pastor noted that Facebook had never shut down a church or ministry for preaching the gospel. Some of them may have been shut down for publishing political perspectives or for going over the line regarding Facebook's rules regarding certain factors that impact our society. As long as churches continued to use Facebook to preach the gospel, there was no current risk that Facebook would de-platform that church.

### **12.2. Church Online Platform [CHOP, 11]**

CHOP provides a tool for website development that has been designed by Life Church (<https://www.life.church>) to meet a range of digital church requirements. It integrates streaming from various sources including YouTube, Facebook Live, Vimeo, Resi, and Boxcast. One pastor said:

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## Digital Church Research Report

*Church Online is a great resource because it is free from Life Church. So for a lot of people, where budget or cost is a factor, that's a great free option.*

One church has given up on CHOP, putting their focus on YouTube, and using Zoom and Facebook groups to manage other engagement. While they see the benefit in ministry within the church of CHOP, they also have an evangelistic focus, and CHOP doesn't reach people outside of the church.

### **12.3. Zoom [11]**

Zoom was commonly mentioned as a video conference platform for small group interaction. One pastor indicated that he sees Zoom as his best tool for ministry, as there's nothing more personal in the digital space than being able to have a one-on-one Zoom call. While Zoom was widely used, it had specific and limited functionality; and as such could only be used as part of a package of tools.

### **12.4. Instagram [7]**

Only one pastor indicated significant use of Instagram. Most indicated that they occasionally post on Instagram, but that the platform didn't provide the diversity of tools to meet significant ministry needs. Technically, one pastor stated that Instagram doesn't publish an API, limiting its effectiveness in a church setting.

### **12.5. TikTok [7]**

TikTok is a platform with a powerful reach, particularly among the younger demographics. One church uses it to provide five-minute on-topic messages. While TikTok was commonly mentioned, most pastors who used it saw it as part of their toolbox and did not use it exclusively.

### **12.6. Twitter [6]**

One pastor indicated they use Twitter extensively as an active evangelistic tool, reaching out to people who have expressed needs; and using hashtags to highlight content to reach certain people. Most others who mentioned Twitter indicated they only use it occasionally. One pastor said that their church had tried it but never found traction here. One church has been conducting bible studies using Twitter.

### **12.7. Altar Live [4]**

Altar Live is a recently-launched platform, providing a similar offering for church websites to CHOP. While CHOP is free, Altar Live is not. However, those using it indicated that the platform had greater functionality than CHOP, as it includes a video conferencing tool that operates in a similar manner to Zoom.

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## Digital Church Research Report

### **12.8. Discord [4]**

Discord was commonly identified as a community platform that has the capability of hosting content such as videos as well as providing interactive discussion rooms and voice chats. It provides private and public rooms for interaction and ministry, and it can operate in both synchronous and asynchronous modes. Some churches were using Discord to provide a 2D community to support their VR ministry. One pastor indicated that their church had tried Discord for a while, but it hadn't really worked for them.

### **12.9. Websites [other than CHOP, 4]**

One church has added streaming to their website that isn't through YouTube, as they have ex-felons in their membership. An aspect of parole in some jurisdictions is that parolees are not permitted to watch YouTube. The church has therefore changed their platform to be able to reach the ex-felon community.

Another church had tried using their own website as a primary focus for their ministry but had migrated their ministry to Facebook. The pastor noted that they couldn't drive people to their website, but the people were already on social media platforms, so it made sense to build the church where the people were.

### **12.10. Apps [3]**

Some churches had developed their own apps. While the pastors identified slightly different objectives, they saw an app as being a tool they could use to engage with their members without needing to risk a third-party having access to their processes or personal information, or even closing their platform. Those who use apps have functionality including prayer ministry, bible study, providing daily reading plans, and messaging.

*We could have easily given three prompts per day on Facebook or YouTube, for people to take a step closer to Jesus every day. But those platforms change constantly; what doesn't change is that we build with our own app, because then we own that real estate, and we have control over that same thing with our website.*

Another church has built an app so they can foster and support discipleship more effectively. They have paired their database with their app and will promote appropriate content to relevant members. For example, if they know that a family has young children, they will promote child-friendly and family-relevant content to those members. If someone is a new Christian, they will promote content regarding first steps as a Christian and about baptism. The app also includes chat rooms to be used for ministry. The pastor also indicated that having their own app liberated them from the risk of Facebook or YouTube having an impact on their content or ministry.

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## Digital Church Research Report

The app that one church uses has a focus on prayer ministry (among other things). When a member asks for prayer, the request is circulated among those who have indicated they're open to receiving prayer requests. When the prayer is answered, the requestor can post that the prayer has been answered, providing details (if appropriate), and building up faith in the body of believers as they see God answering prayers.

### **12.11. Resi [3]**

Resi is a streaming service. Pastors identified that they've used it to stream content, while also linking it / embedding the stream into their church website.

### **12.12. Altspace VR [2]**

This platform was used by churches to build their VR platforms. Churches that used it also identified 2D platforms that they used to engage their members when not in a VR space.

### **12.13. Twitch [2]**

While Twitch can be used for streaming any content, it is primarily used by the gaming community. The churches who have used Twitch tended to be digital-only churches. One church indicated that they use Twitch as 'their sanctuary'. One pastor who had used Twitch said:

*I have tried Twitch because I was a video game streamer from way back. Twitch doesn't really work for churches, in the context that it's simply just not the audience.*

### **12.14. Vimeo [2]**

One church is using Vimeo to host their sermons. More than one church had been using it for live streaming but has moved to other platforms for various reasons. Vimeo has very tight policies regarding content, and it isn't necessarily in line with Christian faith. The pastor moved to other platforms when he heard that Vimeo had cut their contract with some churches for publishing content that Vimeo deemed to be 'inappropriate'.

### **12.15. Bitmovin [1]**

A streaming service.

### **12.16. BlueJeans [1]**

A video conference service.

### **12.17. Clubhouse [1]**

One church indicated they were venturing into Clubhouse to try to establish a footprint there.

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## Digital Church Research Report

### **12.18. Fireside Chat [1]**

One pastor indicated he was looking at this platform to 'try it out'. There was no feedback regarding functionality or effectiveness for hosting a ministry. Fireside was identified as being similar to Clubhouse, but also included the ability to stream video.

### **12.19. Google Groups [1]**

One church had used this platform for their bible studies but had migrated to Facebook groups.

### **12.20. Google Meets [1]**

A video conference service.

### **12.21. Minecraft [1]**

This gaming platform is the primary focus of one church focusing on the gaming community.

### **12.22. Roblox [1]**

One pastor is using Roblox to host his Children's Ministry. He noted that there are real communities operating within Roblox, and that the platform is trying to be part of the metaverse. While the presentation appears to be aimed at a younger audience, the pastor using it noted that the community is huge and that the opportunities to reach a population is significant.

### **12.23. Rumble [1]**

Rumble is a social media platform with similarities to Facebook but without the political influence. The church that identified Rumble indicated having concerns regarding potential de-platforming by Facebook.

### **12.24. Telegram [1]**

Telegram has a similar function and appearance to WhatsApp. One church has moved their interpersonal engagement activity to Telegram.

### **12.25. WhatsApp [1]**

WhatsApp was used by one church for interpersonal communication, group support, and ministry. The church using WhatsApp indicated they were looking to move to a different platform due to security concerns. They were considering Signal and Telegram.

## 13. Church Management

### 13.1. Financial Issues for Digital Churches

A common issue raised by pastors was the financing of digital churches. Universally, interviewees identified that online church members are less likely to give to the church; and when people do give, the amount is lower on average than would be the case in a physical church.

However, the parallel factor for most digital churches is that the cost of operation is lower than those of real-world churches. One pastor said:

*Digital ministry is different. It's a whole different ministry model altogether. There is a financial and economic model that is there to sustain the ministry model so that the job can get done, right. And in the prevailing way of doing church planning, it all makes sense. You got big buildings? Well, what if your ministry model was different, that didn't require the economic model to the degree that another prevailing model does, and really a lot of house church, small and reproducing movements people don't get nearly as much online as they do on-site. But it also doesn't cost as much to run.*

This is not always the case, as some digital churches invest considerably in equipment, staff, and content. One church cited a cost of \$10,000 in the first year to set up the ministry platform, with a budget of about \$7,000 per year to maintain it. In the area of cost, there is a need to differentiate general digital churches from VR churches, as VR churches need to invest more heavily in their digital infrastructure.

Respondents indicated that most digital churches can have their financial needs met with lower levels of giving. Where digital campuses operate as a campus of a physical church, some churches identify giving based on the campus identified in the giver, while others simply collate their funds rather than accounting for each campus individually.

The relatively lower level of giving was not evident in all digital ministries, with one pastor identifying generosity among the church membership:

*I think that generosity and giving are linked to the spiritual maturity of the follower of Jesus. They're not linked necessarily to the platform that you're on.*

Another church was operating at a level below that left funds available for ministry. The church decided to give back funds to their communities, so they started a program called 'The Difference Maker'. Everything in excess of funds required to drive the ministry would go to organizations on the ground that could serve people in that community who were in need.

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## Digital Church Research Report

One pastor of a digital campus indicated frustration with the oversight of the church. In this instance, the digital campus had a significant membership and apparent significant giving. However, the church was more likely to invest funds into something physical that the whole membership (physical and digital) could see, such as an event, than they were in investing in further growth to the thriving ministry. In this situation, the church leadership demonstrated that they had lower levels of support for the digital ministry than a physical ministry, as the members of the physical church campuses were not easily able to see the effectiveness in Kingdom growth occurring through the digital expression of the church.

One newly established digital ministry is in a growth stage where the giving is not sufficient to meet the needs of the church, and the pastor has a part-time job to provide for his family's needs as the church becomes established. Another identified an associate who was described as a 'trailblazer'. This trailblazer had planted a digital church; and with perceived wisdom had asked for someone to provide oversight for the church from a material perspective. Unfortunately, the overseer did not provide sufficient direction and oversight, and the church has now ceased to exist. More than one pastor in the research indicated that the level of giving within their digital ministry was currently nowhere near a self-sustaining level.

### **13.2. Legal and Compliance Issues for Digital Churches**

Some other issues were identified as important regarding management of digital churches. One church that operates software that monitors engagement highlighted a challenge in available digital data and a possible risk to churches in misunderstanding the effect and impact of their ministry. This pastor noted:

*Within metrics, it's easy to look at a Facebook live feed and say, 'I had 12 times the amount of people watch on Facebook than I did in person'. In the counter to that, we started tracking next steps, rather than attendance. And so what's more important? One million views or six people who have prayed with a pastor for the first time in their lives, or six people who decided to download the discipleship app and engage in it daily?*

Another pastor discussed church databases, talking about the generally amateur approach used by churches in managing their member database, with some having something as simple as an Excel spreadsheet. In the USA (and in many other countries), there are privacy obligations for any organization that maintains a database that includes personal information. There is significant risk to churches that do not develop their member databases with appropriate security, and ensure that they comply with all unsolicited electronic communication laws. This pastor indicated that all churches needed to be aware of their legal risk in operating in this manner (whether or not they have a digital reach); and should seek professional advice to ensure they have systems that comply with all federal and state laws. If

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## Digital Church Research Report

they are found to be lacking in this area and their database is used for inappropriate purposes, the legal (and corresponding financial) risk to the church could be enough to force it to close.

One pastor identified the risks that are posed by having volunteers provide ministry. Her church has established a code of ethics for the people who are volunteering called a social media checklist. This checklist lays out specifics of what volunteers are able to do and say, and all volunteers are asked to sign it before being allowed to engage in ministry.

Another potential area of liability identified by some churches was the understanding of copyright laws and ensuring that their ministries (particularly their music ministries) complied.

# Appendix: Background of Research Participants

Participation in this research project was conducted with explicit confidentiality. As a result, details that may be used to identify individual respondents and attribute responses to those respondents have been collated in a manner to help ensure anonymity is maintained.

## Types of Churches

Among the research participants, six were pastoring Digital-only churches, with the balance ministering in phygital churches. Three were not directly involved in pastoring, but rather, were involved in consulting roles.

## Backgrounds

Those being interviewed came from a diverse range of backgrounds. Participants had served in many different churches including Anglican, AoG, Calvary Chapel, CMA, EFCA, Independent Baptist, Southern Baptist, United Methodist and independent churches. Furthermore, some had formerly been members of Episcopalian and Vineyard churches. The pastors came from a range of lifestyle backgrounds. Many had been born and raised in households with Christian parents, but some had been raised in households where their parents had not known or followed Jesus. One had been born into a Muslim family.

Most were born in the USA, with one born in Australia and one South Africa. Several had ministered in other countries. Some were in the MENA region, with others identifying ministry in Australia, Germany, East Asian and several Central and South American countries.

Pastors involved in the research had been involved in a range of roles in the secular world as well as in the church. Secular roles were as diverse as being in the military, being in senior executive corporate roles, running a concrete construction company, being a journalist, and being a bar tender. Ministry roles that pastors had been involved in started from interning and being a volunteer, and included youth and student pastoring, missionary roles, worship leading and pastoring, being a campus pastor, being a senior pastor, and being an overseer over multiple churches within a region.

## Paths to Digital Ministry

Several participants had been involved in digital ministry for many years. Various participants identified the oldest online churches that are aware of, with some dating awareness of churches going back to 2002. The longest time that any interviewee had been ministering in a digital space was since 2010.

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Many had been ground-breakers in their churches or even in their denominations as churches investigated and developed an understanding of operating in a digital space. The two earliest ministries mentioned in interviews started in the late 1990s, with another starting in 2002. The next ministry to be established was in 2010. By the middle of the decade, several more ministries started and as a result, before COVID, twenty of the participants were already involved in digital ministry. COVID led to a further seven moving into the digital space, with two more ministries being initiated in the last year.

### **Reasons for Engaging in/ Developing Digital Ministries**

Some pastors indicated that when commencing they had been invited to move into digital ministry (either within their existing church or by invitation from another church). One example was:

*I've been in ministry for nearly 10 years now my activity over 10 years at this point, majority of that has always been in next generation kind of stuff. I've always been a youth pastor. Three months ago, my senior leadership really saw that I would be really good in the digital side of things. So they asked me to step into that role to kind of spearhead our digital side of adult discipleship*

In contrast, some did not feel that they were 'called' into a digital ministry and had to be convinced to be involved. When asked, he believed that the church had approached the wrong person, as he wasn't a 'digital ministry champion'. This was pivotal in forming his current perspective on digital ministry. He clearly identifies that the best people for digital ministry aren't necessarily those who have a bent towards technology. He said:

*We will have the right people to fill in the gaps and to grow execute those areas, but we need people who are going to be thinking about the reason behind the ministry and how to think well, so that we don't just mimic things in a digital world context, but we are asking the right questions and modeling ministry in a way that translates to digital and ultimately a hybrid experience of life.*

Others identified that they 'just wanted to try it', or more explicitly felt the Holy Spirit was encouraging them to consider such a ministry. One noted:

*I've always been techie and kind of geeky in that way. And I've always been so excited about VR, you know, VR has been around a long time, it just never took off.*

In one church organization, the church conducted research among their member in about 2015. This denomination found that 40% of the people that were in their online groups were not going to church. This included those who would not or could not go to church but wanted to know Jesus. They wanted to serve Jesus and be in communion with other

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Christians. As a result, this denomination planted a digital church in 2017. What began as 'a handful of people' has grown in the intervening years to thousands of home groups ministering to tens of thousands of people.

One identified a moment when they realized that the greatest way to reach the lost wasn't inviting them to a prayer meeting or a bible study, it was by going to where the people were. As people are generally living hybrid lives with a physical and digital component, he felt led to start a church with a digital and physical component. In a similar vein, another pastor talked about the number of people who are attending church less frequently, or possibly not at all. He cited a decline of one million in average Sunday attendance in the USA in the last ten years. This pastor felt led to expand their ministry into the digital space, noting that many of these people can be and are being re-engaged through digital ministry. He said:

*People have left a model. They love church, they don't like the model. And these are some of the best people in the church, what are they doing? God still has a plan for them to be connected in the body of Christ. And if they're these people who are these gifted, passionate, serving, giving people, then there has to be another way that God wants to connect them in one model doesn't work, then we should be able to offer another model that does*

An unusual reason that one church established an online campus was financial. The church had been setting up new campuses every few years. The growth of the church was being limited by physical constraints. As a result, the church decided to experiment with a digital campus with the specific aim removing pressure from the physical constraints of the church.

COVID was a driver for many churches to develop an online ministry. One pastor noted that their members couldn't meet for 60 weeks, so the only option was for them to bring their church into a digital space. While COVID was the prompt for moving, this pastor now believes that online church is the future of church ministry (including evangelism, discipleship, prayer, and fellowship). One pastor talked of developing a digital aspect to their church's ministry from as early as 2013. Over the subsequent years, the ministry had ticked over, but hadn't been a central focus of the church's ministry. Then COVID came, and the church had all the tools, structure, and experience to quickly and effectively migrate to a digital space.

While in most places, COVID lockdowns and restrictions have been lifted, pastors from these churches have identified that many of their members are not yet comfortable returning to physical church. As a result, they are continuing and, in some instances, increasing their focus on digital ministry.

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### **Examples of Digital Ministry Development**

One told of first seeing a live-stream of preaching, online, in the early 2000s. He thought it was an interesting form of ministry and continued to follow the development over the years. While still at high school he organized his church to develop an internet café in his church. The church's youth ministry had its own MySpace account, and local high school kids would come to the café after school. As he matured and moved into ministry, his ministry has always included a digital focus.

In a similar vein, one pastor dated his introduction to online ministry back to 1999, He talked of having an aim to reach every teenager in his home city for the gospel. He set up an AOL Instant Messenger account and introduced it to all members of his church youth group. Through an online forum structure, over the coming years he saw 20 people come to Christ. He said:

*I would have never called it online ministry. It was just the tool that teenagers told me that's where they were hanging out. Then this new website called Facebook.com came along and I was doing college ministry*

His church became aware of the ministry and talked with him about building an online face of the church, and the ministry has grown since then.

One pastor who was a gamer talked of meeting someone in an online gaming platform while still at high school. Over the years, the two developed a firm relationship despite never having met. As the years went by, the online friend got engaged. The pastor was surprised and blessed to be asked to be the best man for the wedding, even though the two had never met, and proceeded to fulfill the role. This pastor cited this as an example of how he knew that real, robust relationships can develop and last for years in a digital-only space.

Another pastor talked about his love for technology, a love he had developed from an early age. When he asked his parent for a computer as a child, his father told him 'no, you can make your own' and bought him the tools to build his own computer. Over the years, he engaged in online chat rooms. He was studying theology in the 1990s. He learned through the chat that someone he'd been engaging with for a long time was in hospital. So he broke the physical / digital barrier, went to the hospital and asked if he could pray for her. When he came back to his theological class, he told his colleagues 'This cyber-church thing, this is the way of the future'. His class-mates didn't agree with him at the time. He said:

*It was an epiphany moment for me that there could be something on the horizon, in the future, connecting people together. But I always had this call, I never could quite understand where the technology and ministry fit. I just saw technology as a way to do more for the kingdom*

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In another example, the pastor described the time in 2010 when his senior pastor went on vacation to a lake, several hour's drive from home. While at the lake, some people approached him and said 'hey, great to see you, we're members of your church'. The pastor said: 'that's awesome, which campus?'. The people responded 'None - we live here at the lake. We download your podcasts every week and a group of us watch them together'. The senior pastor returned from his vacation, inspired, and approached the pastor to discuss how to establish a digital ministry. The pastor said that ministry needs to be interactive, working as a two-way tool, and proceeded to set up an online church that provided for interaction with disbursed members.