

Digital Church: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

Digital church is a gathering of Christians facilitated through the use of online video stream, audio stream, and written messages. Its purpose is to have its member's meet, connect, and practice their religious beliefs online. Many churches now use websites, Facebook Live, YouTube, Google and Zoom to strengthen their digital presence, reach members and non-members, build the church, and expand the kingdom. A typical online church member can attend a Bible study, pray, worship, donate, attend live services, watch past services, etc. Digital churches are not going away after the pandemic. They are here to stay. This paper introduces the reader to digital church.

KEYWORDS: *technology, digitalization, digital technology, digital church, Internet church, online church, cyberchurch, online religion, analog church*

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INTRODUCTION

The essential ingredients for a local church communities. Common examples of digital technology in churches: following [1]:

1. Spiritual engagement (Colossians 3:16)
 2. Preaching the Word (Hebrews 13:7)
 3. Worship and prayer (1 Timothy 2:8)
 4. Evangelism (Acts of the Apostles 1:8)
 5. Interpersonal responsibility (Romans 12)
 6. Inconvenient hospitality (Acts 4)
 7. Institutional physicality (Matthew 26:26)
- Live-streaming and recording church services
 - Meetings via Zoom or other virtual platforms
 - Church websites
 - Digital giving
 - General use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter
 - Electronic newsletters

Can we achieve all seven elements by doing church online? These ingredients of community can be divided into how they are best facilitated in a local church as shown In Figure 1 [1].

Churches at all levels have been more hesitant to get involved in the digital world than other sectors. The church is witnessing radical cultural changes in the wake of the digital revolution. Today, churches are embracing digital technology and the trend has accelerated as a consequence of the pandemic. Digital technology is helping churches to reach out to their

Digital technology represents a rich and challenging way of participating in God's mission. Although the church has been using digital technologies for decades, the COVID-19 global pandemic took digital adaptation to a new level. Due the pandemic, many churches were compelled to use digital media to reach people. For church leaders, going digital meant far more than streaming Sunday services. Church members needed a way to meet, engage, learn, give, pray, and study Bible online. It is time that we ensure that the Church stays at the forefront of innovation and we reimagine the way we do church without ever

compromising what we believe. We must take the Great Commission seriously. We need to understand our role in God's plan to help churches tell the world about what matters most.

WHAT IS DIGITAL CHURCH?

In the past, the idea of an online or digital church (or megachurch) was not common or respected. The general public viewed many televangelists with scorn and suspicion.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, churches were forced to adapt to online worship. An example of traditional church is shown in Figure 2 [2]. Today's churches are virtual, online, digital, and tech-savvy. Seven reasons why one should start a digital church service [3]:

1. Reaches people who cannot attend services
2. Strengthens relationships with parishioners
3. Share inspiring videos
4. Allows people to re-experience services
5. Encourages regular attendance
6. Encourages online donations
7. No downsides

Digital technology plays an important role in the church of God. Looking for new avenue to continue worshipping together during the pandemic, many church leaders moved services online. This gave rise to the "digital church." Digital church refers to a wide variety of ways that Christian communities can use digital technologies such as Internet to facilitate their religious activities, particularly prayer, preaching, worship, and Bible studies. These Internet-based Christian communities are also known as "online churches," "Internet churches," or cyberchurch. They offer members and non-members an alternative to the traditional physical meetings in a church building. Most of today's digital churches grew out of traditional or brick-and-mortar churches. Church members are now using websites, blogs, social media, chatrooms, discussion boards, and other electronic platforms to provide social connection, and share their faith. These digital tools allow believers to share ideas about faith in new and creative ways [4]. Adding digital features to your church helps the church reach people as they are, where they are, online.

Like other Internet users, Christians are increasingly using social networking sites. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, have at least on the surface rekindled our interest in community and renewed our quest for meaningful connection. Social media platforms provide spaces in which friendships can be formed and developed.

APPLICATIONS OF DIGITAL CHURCH

Free streaming services, affordable website platforms, and online donation processors have made creating a virtual, digital church a simple and exciting possibility. The digital church has taken a step forward with the creation of applications. Common applications of the digital church are presented as follows.

- *Worship Online:* Throughout history, worship has been mediated through technology. Online forms of worship have only existed for a few decades. However, the most noticeable change in church practices during the pandemic was the turn to online platforms for worship. As the pandemic forced the church to go online, church leaders were compelled to revisit age-old concepts of space, presence, participation, community, and engagement with God and with one another in worship. Most of live-streamed services during the pandemic consisted of churches projecting their offline services on digital platforms [5].
- *Digital Discipleship:* Discipleship is one of the reasons for the existence of the church. It is fulfilling the Great Commission, which is Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18– 20). With the ubiquity of technology, there are new avenues for discipleship. We can use technology to help church members share their stories and testimonials [6]. An effective digital discipleship strategy ensures that your church reaches more people. It would be unwise not to take advantage of mobile technology to spread the gospel. Having a digital discipleship strategy in the 21st century is crucial. Paul mentioned his own strategy when he said, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some"(1 Corinthians 9:22) [7].
- *Digital Evangelism:* This is an essential component of ministry today. It involves sharing the gospel through digital media. It is necessary because online communities are more important than ever. It uses social media, mobile apps, and websites. If your church evangelism program relies on door-to-door evangelism, word of mouth, pamphlets, sermons, and many other traditional marketing methods, it is time to diversify and join the digital evangelism phenomenon. The digital tools are good for telling stories and for advertising. There are seven main categories for digital evangelism: Search Engine Optimization, Social Media Evangelism, Content Evangelism, Email Evangelism, Mobile Evangelism, Pay-per-Click, and Digital

Evangelism Analytics. Digital evangelism is the future of church evangelism [8].

➤ *Digital Marketing:* Churches use digital marketing to reaching new people digitally. Digital marketing allows churches and ministries to reach more people beyond their social media reach. It employs digital tools such as social media, search engine optimization, and email marketing for evangelism. It makes it easier for the church to create awareness and engagement both offline and online [9]. Some churches have taken advantage of increased online activity and digital needs. They are looking to increase their online presence through advertising. They are inviting people to join their online experience. Google offers churches an opportunity to advertise for free. Through a combination of technical capabilities and considerable expertise, church marketing has been able to help thousands of churches and nonprofits of all sizes to maximize their efforts and increase their digital impact. Having a strong local search presence is so crucial for churches. Being found in Google local searches is a fundamental pillar of church growth in this day and age. Since a secure websites are preferred, it is crucial that your site uses HTTPS [10]. Every church needs an app since it is one of the most important pieces of church marketing software. For marketing purposes, church services can be streamed on Facebook Live and YouTube, while Bible studies can be hosted on platforms like Zoom. For example, a sign in front of the Church of the Living God promotes its Sunday morning service that is live streamed on Facebook, as shown in Figure 3 [11].

Other applications include digital signage, digital ministry, online communion, digital communication, and digital poverty.

BENEFITS

We are blessed by technologies that allow us to be the church like never before. The church has recognized the real benefits of digital technology. Many church leaders have realized online presence is a wise strategy for the long haul. Religious leaders, groups, and individuals negotiate their presence within this new mediatized reality. They see the potential in the Internet or “cyberspace” for fellowship, outreach, and evangelism. Social media can provide a means to deepen friendships. Access to the Internet opens up endless opportunities for individuals to find alternative worship services beyond the local church. Digital platforms enable leaders and laity worldwide to engage in theologies and spiritualities found online

in ways that are mutually enriching. It is safe to say that more Christians are praising, worshiping, praying, tithing, and studying Bible online than ever before.

Digital technology offers numerous opportunities to the contemporary church. These include corporate worship for the socially isolated, more targeted and effective equipping, more community-building, a greater reach for the gospel, and stronger social influence. The church cannot afford to ignore these God-given opportunities. In a digital church, we can communicate more effortlessly, we can use time more efficiently, we can minister without expensive buildings, we can reach more people, and we can build community with no geographical limitations [12]. A church app helps members to engage from anywhere at anytime. Other benefits of digital church include [13,14]:

1. It keeps with the digital trend; everything will go online.
2. It saves time and energy.
3. It makes it easier for churches to grow in membership.
4. It increasing giving.
5. It creates online presence.
6. It offer convenience to those who unable to attend an in-person church service.
7. It helps Christians communicate their personal religious and spiritual beliefs online.
8. It allows church surfing, viewing sermons, devotionals, music, and content from different sources.
9. It helps people who are looking for answers, not for church.
10. It engages digital natives.

CHALLENGES

There has been some speculation with the idea of having church services within "virtual environments." The church needs to reflect on the implications (on power, ministry, and trust) of the use of digital technology in church practice. The increasing use of the digital technology poses new ethical challenges for the church. If digital technology can be used for manipulation church and collecting members' data, the church leaders should be careful in using it. Some claim that the Internet constitutes a different dimension that suspends the limitations of our bodily existence. The Internet tends to suspend certain bodily limitations and create new ones. Some suggest that the Internet poses a challenge to the authority of Christian leaders. Individuals do not feel a sense of belonging which is common when attending traditional church. There is digital divide creating two

groups, the rich and the poor, on the basis of access, or lack of access.

Understanding the risks with digital technology is important. Although insurance is available for some risks associated with digital technology, each churches should also have policies and procedures in place to manage these risks. The policies may include the following [15]:

- Copyright - ensure that you have the correct permissions to use material.
- Data Distribution – take care any personal data is distributed as intended following best practice guidance.
- Licenses – check that you have the correct licenses.
- Image permission – gain permission to use the images of people where necessary.
- Social media policy – ensure that you have developed an overall social media policy.
- Remote meetings – ensure that you are following Charity Commission guidance and the Church Representation Rules.
- Protection of equipment against loss, damage or theft.
- Safety of clergy or other church officials who may be working alone.
- Safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults
- Protection against computer viruses and cyber-crime.

These unprecedented challenges facing the digital church in the digital age provide unprecedented opportunities.

CONCLUSION

After the pandemic, several church leaders are hesitant to continue online worship. Some leaders have explored hybrid forms of online church as the way forward. To put digital church back on the shelf is to ignore the greatest opportunity the church has today to reach people. The reality is that operating the church digitally is still necessary for many. People need online church more than ever before. In the future, as the number of digital natives increases, there will be a greater migration towards pure online church communities.

The digital age has opened up a new world for the Church to connect with people and grow its membership. The rise of digital church has effected the perceptions of the church. Many churches have gone online for the first time. Digital church is here to stay in the 21st century. More information on digital communication can be found in the books in [16-22].

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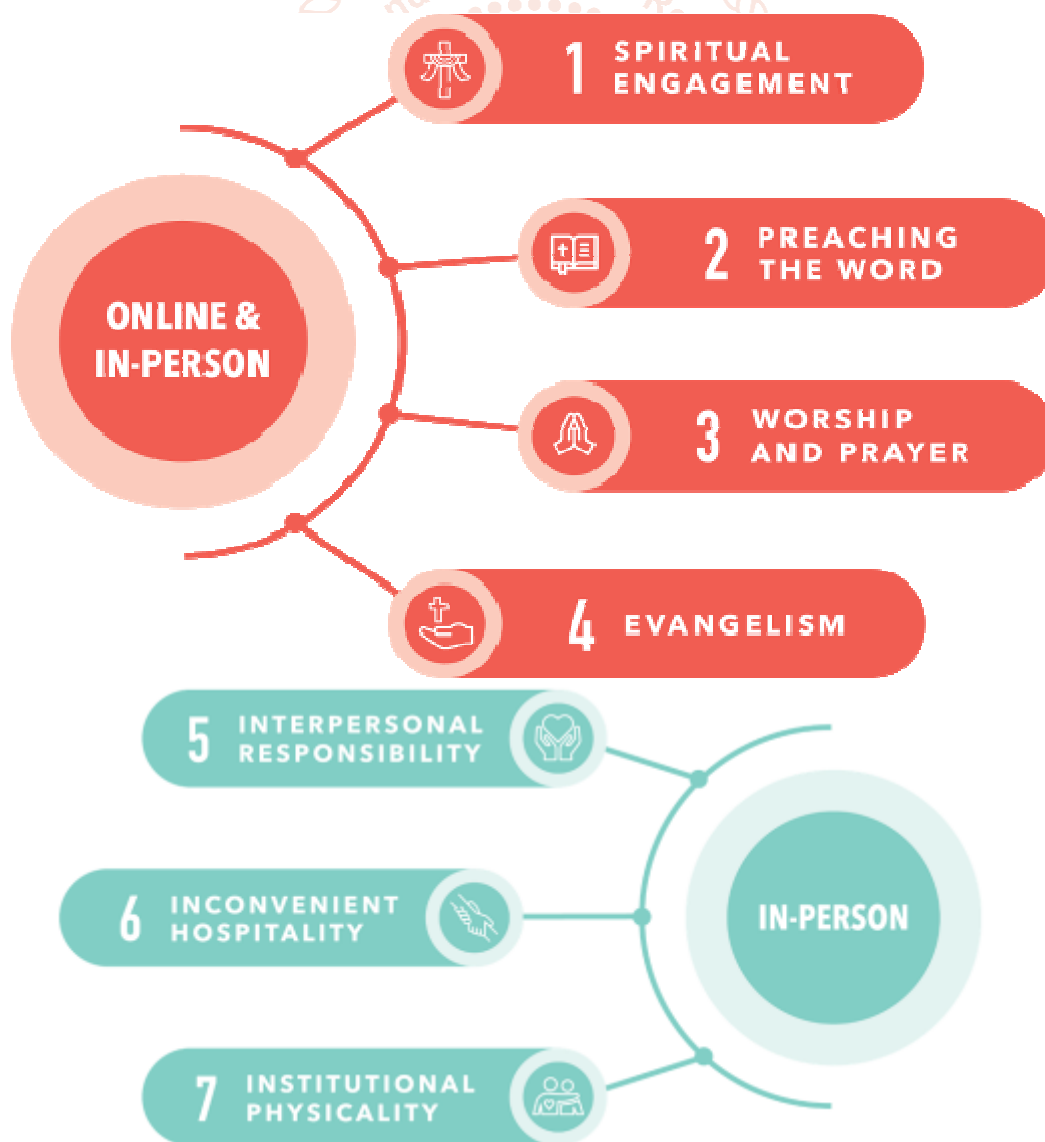


Figure 1 Essential ingredients for a local church community [1].



Figure 2 A typical traditional church [2].



Figure 3 Sign in front of the Church of the Living God promotes its Sunday morning service that is livestreamed on Facebook [11]