LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHURCH GROWTH STRATEGIES USED BY
PASTORS OF DIGITAL CHURCHES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A Prospectus Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Nicholas D. Cole

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHURCH GROWTH STRATEGIES USED BY
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the digital church growth methods that pastors of digital churches in the United States used to increase church attendance during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. For the purpose of this study, pastors of digital/online churches were studied. Since the 1950s, the church growth strategy for many Christian churches has been to attract as many people as possible for in-person worship services. However, in-person church attendance has declined consistently for the past 20 years. The shutdowns of churches worldwide during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic amplified this trend. The only option available to attend church and connect with other people of faith during the pandemic was through digital and social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Although life has shifted globally to the post-COVID-19 era, in-person church attendance has remained relatively low. Adding a digital strategy can be a resourceful option to help increase church growth in attendance, financially, and in discipleship. After all, there are nearly eight billion people worldwide; according to research, more than four billion are on social media and digital platforms for up to four hours a day, seven days a week.

Keywords: Digital church, online church, church growth, COVID-19 pandemic, online church growth methods.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Ben T. Cole II and Cynthia J. Cole. Both of you set a high bar for my two brothers and me. Both of you instilled in me the value of hard work, and by the example of your accomplishments, I can achieve anything I put my mind to. Your support, encouragement, and, most of all, your love have helped me become the man I am today. I love you. You're the best parents I could have ever asked for.

Acknowledgments

To my two beautiful daughters, Zariah and Mackenzi. Both of you bring me such joy. Often, I feel like I am the luckiest father in the world. I could not imagine my life without you. To my wife, Tawanna. You're always pushing me to become the best that I can be, and you never let me settle for anything less than I deserve. I am so blessed to have you in my life. I know that God loves me because He took the time to create you just for me.

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Liberty University (LU)

National Association of Evangelicals (NAE)

Society of Professors of Christian Education (SPCE)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

The Rev. Mark Lewis of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Kitchener, Ontario, according to MacLachlan (2007), is noted for saying, "I am sure that if Jesus were here today, he would use YouTube as a means of spreading the Good News" (para 3). Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic forced Christian churches to utilize online technologies to continue their ministry. The problem many churches face now is increasing church attendance while adapting to the behavioral change of churchgoers becoming comfortable attending church virtually as their primary means of worship. The good news for the Christian church is that the COVID-19 pandemic may have unlocked the key to growing the Christian church by utilizing the various online technologies that are available today.

According to The Barna Group (2020), pastors and churches are now preparing to combine in-person, live-streamed, and on-demand elements as a way of thinking outside the box. Baylor University's *Religion Watch* (2015), an evangelical magazine, reports that churches that have adopted online ministries are growing, expanding, and continuing to experiment with new technology.

Lowe and Lowe (2018) likens roasting coffee beans to the digital world that churches find themselves in. Lowe and Lowe (2018) revealed that when they first started roasting coffee beans, they were limited on what they could purchase because there was not a local merchant in the area to sell them raw beans. However, after they searched online to locate coffee beans, the Internet opened up a whole new world of possibilities to purchase different types of coffee beans from around the world (Lowe & Lowe, 2018).

The digital landscape continues to evolve and shift into one with a new ecology of overlapping contexts. The evolution and shift that is being seen accurately mirrors life, and the social contexts often overlap with one another (Lowe & Lowe, 2018).

The following sections of this chapter will provide background to the problem, a statement of the problem, identify the research questions, assumptions, delimitations, explain the significance of the study, and provide a summary of the research design.

Background to the Problem

In the past, the only way to experience or visit a church was to attend in person. However, without warning, the COVID-19 pandemic changed how churches gather, worship, and connect with their congregation. Churches worldwide streamed their worship services and connected with people beyond their church walls – in other states and countries. Continuing to use digital methods and platforms as the first experience for people who may never walk into a church building and using this same technology to connect with current church members could possibly be the new normal strategy for church growth.

Although some church leaders do not seem to like the reality of where the world is headed, digital is the new default as a leader (Nieuwhof, 2021). And if church leaders are honest with themselves, they will realize that everyone they want to reach is online - it is time to act like it (Nieuwhof, 2021).

For Dyer (2020), the coronavirus pandemic has opened a new window of creativity and opportunity for the Christian church to explore avenues and technologies that church leaders would have otherwise not considered, especially online services. Churches are now connecting with church members and potential new members through devices such as Roku, Amazon TV, Facebook Live, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as connecting with Millennials, a

group that the Christian church struggled to reach utilizing online groups powered by social media platforms (Costello, 2021).

Theological Literature

The underlying theological issues regarding a digital approach to church growth relate to community, meaning the lack of face-to-face interaction. The second issue is the biblical example of church growth in scripture for the early church.

Regarding the nature of communities, the church community serves one of three functions - communities are locational, meaning it is based on location, relational (based on shared interests), or they form so that the members can exercise joint power (Heller, 1989). To this point, Giese (2021) argues that although technology can be beneficial in many ministry areas, adopting online church as an expression of church should be avoided. Giese (2021) points to the example set by the Apostle Paul, stressing that one of Paul's main metaphors for the church is the temple of God.

The local church gathering is the expression in keeping with the literal temple of the Old Testament and the eschatological temple of the future (Giese, 2021). Adegboyega et al., (2021) agree, noting the first documented Christian gathering was in the temple when 120 disciples of Jesus gathered to pray and experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit, as noted in Acts 2:1-5. DeYoung et al. (2003) describe this gathering as multicultural and multilingual. Noll (2012) adds that the first-century Christians were Jews, and the first meeting place was in Palestine, where Jewish temple practices were adopted. One of those practices was gathering in the temple on the Sabbath. It is, for this reason, Giese (2021) believes digital/online strategies should be avoided.

Giese (2021) questions whether church can be done by video, by distance, or whether a digital or online church is something completely different. Giese (2021) also questions whether

online or digital church is nothing more than a Plan B, noting that the norm is always physical

gatherings. Biblical support in opposition to the digital church that some church leaders point to

is traced to at least two Bible passages. The first Bible passage is Hebrews 10:24-25, which

states, "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking

the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so

much the more as you see the Day approaching" (New King James Version, 2011, Hebrews

10:24-25).

The second Bible passage that some church leaders point to is the biblical model for

church growth found in Acts 2:42-47, which reveals:

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (New King James Version, 2011, Acts 2:42-47)

Biblical scholars and commentators agree with the interpretation of the above passages as

the theological basis for in-person gatherings (Schuurman, 2020; Massey, 2020). Massey (2021)

declares that scripture compels Christians to dig deeper than the conveniences and comforts of

live streaming, noting God himself, in Hebrews 10:24-25, declares His church's physical

gatherings to be essential. Massey (2021) describes the neglecting or forsaking of the assembling

with other believers as a turning away from God's design for the church and therefore reduces the

Christian church to being something that is individualistic rather than communal.

Schuurman (2020) states that even in cases where the government tells Christians not to

do things that the Bible commands that believers should do, such as gather as a church,

Christians should follow Acts 5:29, which says to obey God rather than men. Schuurman (2020)

also points to Romans 23, which in his interpretation, does not obligate Christians to obey the government's assembly bans - the same way it would not obligate Christians to stop evangelizing if the government placed an evangelism ban on churches.

Fast (2021), however, notes that during Constantine's time, the church experienced official sanction, which allowed for the construction of buildings - Hagia Sophia being the most famous. This resulted in a transition in church history where Christians primarily met in homes to a structured, confined facility called the church. Fast (2021) points out that the building is not always the norm for how churches gather. For example, in places such as Iran, there are Christians who have never met one another or gathered together due to the danger of doing so.

Fast (2021) asserts, "If they haven't experienced any sense of corporate worship at all does that mean they're not church? Does that mean that they are not a part of the family of God? No, it doesn't mean that at all" (para. 22).

Using technology during the COVID-19 pandemic was useful (Pritchett, 2020). However, some church leaders believe there is a danger in using this strategy for a prolonged period (Pritchett, 2020). Part of the danger that church leaders warn against is prioritizing virtual worship services over community within their congregation (Pritchett, 2020). When churches shifted to digital church methods, the strategy became more about content. The Christian faith is more than content - it is connection and community that nurtures Christians (Pritchett, 2020).

Pritchett (2020) adds that churches offering content for consumption is helpful but notes that content is not a replacement for fellowship because it does not provide a place or option for Christians to gather. The author argues that individuals need to have a sense of belonging, which can only be accomplished by in-person worship.

Declaring his opposition to digital church/church online, Pritchett (2020) said that discipleship is impossible without community and that community is the reason why the church exists. According to 1 Corinthians 12:27, the church, or the body of Christ, is not the same when its members are separate. The hands and feet and ears, and eyes need to be assembled for the body to work and provide a benefit to all (Hansen, 2021).

However, while opposing digital church, Hansen (2021) also agrees that the use of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic removed all previous hindrances to church attendance, allowing people to experience church regardless of their location and even flex around their work and sleep schedules. According to Hansen (2021), the problem with this model is that live streaming is too convenient.

In contrast, as many churches consider hybrid, online-offline combinations of church services and community activities as a long-term strategy, churches need to create and implement relational forms of digital ministry (Campbell, 2021). However, signing the church up for social media accounts, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, to advertise or announce when the next in-person gathering will be is not the same as facilitating online social interactions. Building a church community online must be intentionally cultivated when using digital media (Campbell, 2021).

Regarding the pre-COVID-19 pandemic era, for many churches, the past model was hyper-focused on weekends (Nieuwhof, 2021). But the question that church leaders should ask themselves today is: how often do they need hope, encouragement, and connection? If church leaders are like most people, they need hope, encouragement, and connection every single day. It is the same thing for the church's congregation (Nieuwhof, 2021). It is important to point out that utilizing digital methods is not meant as a replacement for in-person church, but rather a method

that works hand-in-hand to reach lost souls, re-connect with those who are Christian but have left the church, and also engage with current church members throughout the week (Earls, 2022).

Mark 16:15 instructs church leaders to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (New King James Version, 2011, Mark 16:15). Digital and social media platforms give churches the ability to go and reach the world. If COVID-19 taught us anything, it taught that we need to get equally good at building an approach for people who won't or can't come to the building but still need Jesus (Jones, 2020). Matthew 28:19-20 does not instruct church leaders to stand and wait for people to come to the building. It instructs church leaders and the faith community to go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything God has commanded (Jones, 2020).

Critics of the digital/online church note that the community aspect of the church is missing - aspects of the traditional church, such as Communion. This makes it an illegitimate option as a long-term solution for worship. However, this virtual church practice makes it possible to observe Communion together using real elements that have been extended to members of the community in some manner by the pastor or priest (Estes, 2009).

Regarding the historical and theological aspects of church online, Digital Religion Scholar Tim Hutchings pinpoints the origins of the online church services to 1985 (Church of England). The Church of England document Cybernauts Awake! refers to the earliest online church (Hutchings, 2017). The founders claimed that for the first time, people could worship in spirit and in truth, free from the distractions of others (Hutchings, 2017). In essence, the online church is a direct reflection and expression of the global community existing in cyberspace (MacLachlan, 2007).

As for the academic arena, online churches were discussed at length in Christian theological commentaries and frequently appeared in articles, Christian reports, and published books in the 1990s and 2000s because they could be used as focal points for concerns about ritual, community, and authority (Hutchings, 2017). For these Christian authors, online church amplified the dangers of the Internet: it represented a great falling away from face-to-face communication to operating with unknown identities (Hutchings, 2017). For the local church, many church leaders feared that face-to-face-communication would be replaced by computer-mediated pseudo-communities (Hutchings, 2017).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the Christian church to re-examine the online aspects of the church and digital communication. Leaders must now answer questions that affect the church leadership and the congregation, such as what does it mean to do church online (Lee, 2020)?

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed one certainty: digital platforms empower the Christian church with a plethora of cutting-edge and creative ways to grow the church with increased online views, social connections, and even financial giving (Lee, 2020).

Lee (2020) points to Angela Williams Gorrell, who, in her article *"New Media and a New Reformation?"* affirms:

> One promising possibility of having to take church online is that church leaders can experiment with more participatory forms of Christian religious education. Not only does active engagement in a learning community align with the nature of new media and their participatory culture, but it also would mean Christian religious educators embracing best practices in teaching and learning, as well as deepening a community's welcome and practice of love. (p. 509)

The online church and the various digital methods available for churches expands upon the television ministry that some churches have used in the past. Jay Kranda (2020), the online pastor at Saddleback Church, with 19 national and international locations and hosts more than

20,000 online worshipers each week, believes television is great for exposure to millions of people. However, Kranda (2020) notes that the flaw with television is that it is a one-way conversation, which makes the call-to-action aspect of television hard to do. For example, moving viewers from watching on television to taking the action of picking up the phone to call or email the church to become a new member is extremely difficult. However, church online empowers the Christian church with the ability to interact and engage continually (Kranda, 2020).

When it comes to doing online services the right way – a major problem that the Christian church faces now is pastors being satisfied with simply broadcasting their sermons and message once a week (Kranda, 2020). Pastors and church leaders should be more creative by offering a social media-based/powered chat, have people fill out a response card, have a Facebook group, have on-demand classes, set up a Learning Management System (LMS), provide training, and do all of the things that a TV broadcast are not able to do (Kranda, 2020).

The reason church leaders should do this is because implementing online tools allow people to try out or preview the church in many cool ways. Churches can leverage their website by providing ways for people to interact with pastors either on Facebook Messenger or in the DMs (direct messages) on Instagram (Kranda, 2020). In today's digital landscape, church leaders should think of their online ministry as much bigger than a television ministry 2.0 because the church's online paradigm should be much bigger than just pushing things out, church leaders need to provide a way for people to interact, and the Internet is a pretty cool place to make that happen (Kranda, 2020).

There are three audiences churches should be thinking about when it comes to the approach to digital for the church: The New Person, The Engaged Member, and The Far-Away

Watcher (Kranda, 2020). Church leaders should understand that digital, online, or virtual church refers to everything, from streaming, their website, social media, and even digital communication, such as email. Church leaders should also be aware that it is not just about what they put on Facebook and YouTube to provide a weekend worship experience; it is everything in between. When planning these things, church leaders need to be thinking about these three audiences, regardless of their church size (Kranda, 2020).

Theoretical Literature

The gap in the Christian church and the real world is that the Christian church is slowly evolving into the virtual and mobile world (Estes, 2009). Most churches have just gotten their feet wet into the virtual world - they have a website with limited interaction, essentially serving as an underdeveloped, first-wave billboard (Estes, 2009).

Whether individuals are willing to admit it or not, most of today's theology or what some people believe about the church comes from tradition rather than scripture (Estes, 2009). The problem with this is that the value that one church leader places on church tradition for modern discussions may be the opposite value that another church leader places on it. What it boils down to is that individual denominational contexts and church backgrounds are what make a difference in this regard (Estes, 2009).

The fact is that more than 28 million Americans have used the Internet to get religious and spiritual information and connect with others on their faith journey (Larsen, 2013).

As it relates to online streaming during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to The Barna Group (2020), 96 percent of pastors reported that their churches utilized digital technology in the form of streaming their worship services online. As a result of streaming services, The Barna Group (2020) revealed that 40 percent of protestant pastors reported that their church

experienced an increase in attendance - virtually. In addition, 40 percent of churched adults logged in to watch their home church. Twenty-three percent streamed services from other churches (The Barna Group, 2020).

The Barna Group (2020) also reports that 15 percent of practicing Christians versus 30 percent of non-practicing Christians report that online worship gives them an opportunity to multitask. Some critics of the online church movement point to this as a reason why the online church is bad due to the potential distractions. However, The Barna Group (2020) also reports that distraction is a common part of in-person worship, too, regardless of age.

As church leaders consider the potential distractions that digital/online strategies may present against the issue of the decline of in-person church attendance, the problem that is being sought and identified is whether church leaders are overly set in their old ways of church growth, potentially ignoring new ways to build God's Kingdom by leveraging technology to reach more people with the Gospel of Christ.

Realizing that church growth is a problem should be easy to see - despite a continuing increase in the U.S. population, every Christian denomination has experienced a decline in church attendance (Sumpter, 2019). Sumpter's (2019) assertion is based on research conducted by the Barna Group, Pew Research, and the Hartford Institute of Religion Research.

Continuing to turn a blind eye to the failures of the church and refusing to address the issue of declining attendance will lead to more church failures and an increased number of people with no church affiliation (Sumpter, 2019). To prevent the further decline in attendance, connecting with people with no church affiliation and individuals with a church affiliation could be nurtured online, as noted by Stig Hjarvard's Mediatization of Religion Theory. This theory contends that the use of media enables religion to reach more people. During church shutdowns

amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technology and media promoted church growth by allowing God's Word to travel beyond the church walls - even non-Christians could watch sermons on digital and social media platforms such as YouTube (Singarimbun, 2021).

Hjarvard (2008) defines mediatization as a "two-sided process of a highly advanced modernity, where the media—on the one hand, emerge as an independent institution, with its own logic, to which other social institutions must adapt. On the other hand, the media simultaneously become an integral part of different institutions, such as: politics, work, family, and religion, because more and more actions are performed through the interactive mass media" (p. 105). The concept of the mediatization of religion is where the media becomes an integrated part of institutions such as the church. The use of media influences society and culture. In the case of religious institutions, the mediatization of religion can influence society and the culture today (Hjarvard, 2008).

According to Hjarvard (2008), traditionally, media has been viewed as something separate from society and culture. For this reason, researchers of the past have tended to focus solely on the effect of certain mediated messages had on individuals and institutions (Hjarvard, 2008). For example, the impact and influence a headline in the newspaper had during an election campaign was thought to heavily influence the voting behavior. In addition, advertisements influence the habits of consumers, while shopping and film content affects the morals of viewers. However, modern society is permeated by the media to the point to where media is no longer thought of as something separate from society and culture (Hjarvard, 2008).

Schulz (2004) agrees that mediatization plays a vital role in social change in a broader sense. Schulz (2004) reveals four processes where media changes human communication and interaction. The first process is the use of media extends human communication abilities in both

time and space; second, media is able to substitute for activities that previously took place face-to-face. An example of this is internet banking replacing the need to physically meet with bankers in person. In the case of religion, it replaces the need to be physically present to meet with congregants. Hjarvard (2008) notes, "Third, media instigate an amalgamation of activities; face-to-face communication combines with mediated communication, and media infiltrate into everyday life" (p. 109). Przywara et al., (2021) note that in light of the Mediatization of Religion Theory, religion is becoming "increasingly embedded in the logic of media, both in terms of institutional regulations, symbolic content, and individual practices" (p. 4).

Przywara et al., (2021) revels the Roman Catholic Church in Poland put Hjarvard's Mediatization of Religion Theory into practice using live streaming during spring 2020. According to Przywara et al., (2021), the first COVID-19 case in Poland was confirmed on March 4, 2020. During the first phase of the pandemic, 40.8% of Polish parishes utilized online Mass broadcasts. The main source used was YouTube (18.9%), Facebook (18.7%). The online live-streaming of Holy Mass during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland became a spiritual space for reaching out to the roots of the church (Przywara et al., 2021).

Thematic Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted an area in which a growing number of people find a new church home: searching online first – even becoming a member of a particular church before showing up in person, a reality that the Christian church must acknowledge and cater to in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, there is a case where two Dallas residents, Lincoln and Natalie Redmon, were searching for a church home for over two years before finding one online. Prior to searching and finding a church home through online searches, the couple bounced around from

church to church (Robertson, 2019). Frustrated, the couple made a goal to find a home church or have God answer their prayer of finding a church home in an unconventional way (Robertson, 2019). God answered two days later through an Instagram post from Judah Smith, lead pastor of the northwestern multisite ministry Churchome.

Stetzer, executive director of Wheaton College's Billy Graham Center, believes that online is the new front door of the church. Every church should have been online before 2020 (Stetzer, 2022). Where people are is online, specifically on social media. The question is no longer should the church be online, but where should churches be online? Church leaders must also understand that there is a difference between a church simply having a presence online and church online (Stetzer, 2022). According to a Pew Research Center study, nearly 60 percent of adults under 30 use the Internet while searching for a new church, compared with just 12 percent of adults older than 65 (Robertson, 2019).

Online services at Life.Church, one of the country's largest online ministries, has recorded more than half a million unique visitors, according to its communications director, Lori Bailey (Robertson, 2019). Considering today's digital environment, Miller's (2004) statement rings true today that the Internet "displaces in large percentages the evangelization traditional methods such as the radio and T.V., which served to all 20th-century generations" (p. 74). To this point, church leaders must now recognize that the church growth strategies of the Christian church today are failing at engaging Gen-Z (Bergler, 2021).

If church leaders believe their mission is to spread the Gospel of Christ and help people accept the gift of salvation, they should be very concerned by the trend of declining attendance and take steps to address it (Armstrong, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

Growing a church from a few members to thousands of faithful members can be challenging for any pastor. With the decline of church attendance being down within the Christian church, digital strategies for reaching the lost could be an option for increasing attendance (Stetzer, 2022). Sharing digital strategies that have proven to work for some churches could benefit smaller churches and the Kingdom as a whole, especially in the post-COVID-19 era. Because interviews provide deeper insights into the intricate interactions of the population's experiences, according to Peoples (2021), this phenomenological investigation is best suited to exploring and identifying the specific church growth methods the pastors of digital churches have used for church growth.

Understanding the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches can assist in helping pastors and leaders of large and small Christian churches spearhead church growth leveraging technology. By illuminating specific digital church growth strategies utilized by pastors of digital churches, this phenomenological study adds rich information for church growth in the digital age.

The current literature on digital churches indicates opportunities for church growth. Carter (2023) points to a Survey Center on American Life Survey, which teamed up with researchers at NORC at the University of Chicago to measure religious affiliation and attendance both before the pandemic (2018 to March 2020) and again in spring 2022. The survey found that the pandemic accelerated the trend of declining in-person church attendance. The survey revealed that in spring 2022, 33 percent of Americans reported that they never attend religious services, compared to one in four (25 percent) who reported this before the pandemic.

Warouw (2022) states that digital discipleship can be effective even during challenging times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when three elements are present in terms of strategy:

Content creators, Distributors, and Engagers. The author explains that when one looks at the experience of Paul, several aspects can be applied to the digital discipleship approach. Primarily, the content creators should create Christ-centered content while being aware of people's challenges. The content creators should also relate these challenges within the content. Furthermore, the distributor must be consistent in presenting Christ in the content. Lastly, the engagers should implement Jesus' way of touching lives by sharing the content and improving their engagement by pursuing progress in their own spiritual life (Warouw, 2022).

With the focus on digital technology today, it is easy for church leaders to forget how God used cutting-edge technology in the early church for church growth, spreading the Gospel worldwide (Rainer, 2020). Rainer (2020) points to the Romans' skills in building roads. Starting in 312 BC with the building of the Appian Way, Rainer (2020) notes the Romans embarked on a major construction project of 50,000 miles of roadway. The author describes these Roman roadways as technological marvels - some were large, small, some were similar to interstate highways connecting to major cities.

Though the intent of the Romans in building these roads was to spearhead growth for the Roman Empire, the most significant development of this technological advance was that it made way for the Gospel to spread throughout southern Europe and Asia Minor (Rainer, 2020).

Likewise, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the roadways of digital technology became a major source for church growth for prayer ministries to reach more people, a place for gathering via Zoom - social media became a new way to receive prayer requests and testimonials, and smartphones allowed church ministries to connect with congregants instantaneously (Rainer, 2020).

Rainer (2020) goes on to declare that digital technology is the modern Roman road to take the Gospel to unreached people and places, therefore stimulating overall church growth. In addressing concerns with utilizing digital technology, Rainer (2020) acknowledged that the Roman roads of the first century were used as hideouts for thieves and murderers, smuggling, and trafficking, but they were also pathways that followers of Jesus took to share the Good News of the resurrection. However, when one traces the land of the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul, most of it was carried out on the Roman roads (Rainer, 2020).

The research design of this study relates to the problem because the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches empower church leaders with a tried, tested and proven to work model to follow to stimulate church growth. The current literature falls short because it does not provide specific guidance on church growth using digital strategies and does not provide actionable insights based on lived experiences.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of pastors who led exclusively digital churches during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. These pastors are part of an online church planting organization and non-denominational network located in the southwestern region of the United States.

Exclusively digital churches are defined as churches with a dedicated online campus where worship and gatherings occur (Buckner, 2011; Hutchings, 2007). The theory guiding this study is Stig Hjarvard's Mediatization of Religion Theory. This theory contends that the use of media enables religion to reach more people. The relationship between this theory and this study is that during church shutdowns amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technology and media promoted church growth by allowing God's Word to travel beyond the church walls - even non-

Christians could watch sermons on digital and social media platforms such as YouTube (Singarimbun, 2021).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the participants' lived experiences leading digital churches as they relate to church growth during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What are the participants' lived experiences of attracting new church members utilizing digital strategies during 2020-2022?

RQ3: How do pastors of digital churches describe their use of social media to reach people online with the Gospel of Christ during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Assumptions and Delimitations

Research Assumptions

It was assumed, for the purposes of this research study, that the study participants are part of what's defined as the Christian church (no specific denomination), where its core belief is in the Holy Trinity – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It was assumed that the participants approve of online church methods for church growth. It was also assumed that the study participants approve of utilizing digital technology and social media for church growth.

Delimitations of the Research Design

To ensure that the scope of this study provided current methods used for digital church growth amid COVID-19, the delimitations of the study include the following:

1. This study did not include methods used beyond the past five years. Methods used beyond the past five years were considered outdated and, therefore, were not examined in this study.

2. This study did not include digital churches outside of the United States. Digital churches have a designated online campus where congregants worship together online.

According to Conrad (2019), online churches are unique in that they are normally associated with churches that have muti-site locations. The online churches of today view the Internet as a campus all its own. These churches have implemented the latest technology, such as interactive chat, to connect with people at any given time. Online churches have appointed dedicated online pastors and have assembled a web ministry ready to serve their cyber-congregation (Conrad, 2019).

For the purposes of this study, online churches located in the southwestern geography of the United States were included in this study. The study's population of interest are digital church pastors that are part of an online church planting organization and non-denominational network. This network includes church planters, pastors, and ministry leaders interested in online ministry and operating ministry online. There are over 100 members in this network. Approximately 20 of these members are digital/online church pastors. This means that 20 percent of the network is comprised of digital church pastors. This study did not include churches located outside of the United States.

Definition of Terms

1. *Digital Church:* Churches that treat the Internet as a campus all its own, with interactive chat, dedicated online pastors, and a web ministry ready to serve their cyber-congregation (Buckner, 2011; Hutchings, 2007).

2. *Digital Church Pastor*: A pastor whose job is dedicated specifically to the online campus with no physical location (Hutchings, 2007).

<p align="center">**Significance of the Study**</p>

There is an abundance of literature on church growth methods. However, there is limited research geared toward digital church growth. With the shutdowns of churches during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research is relevant, fills a gap in the literature, and adds to the

existing literature in the broader realm of academia. The aim of this study was to shed light on the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches in hopes that these experiences could potentially lead to growth in other churches.

This study relates to other studies that are similar or that investigate the same issue because the data collected from this study provides additional insight to the general church growth topic. There is an abundance of studies that show church attendance has been on a decline for the past 20-plus years (Pew Research Center Survey, 2016). However, there are few studies that provide a solution to the problem. This study provides a guide to growing churches utilizing the digital/online church focus where the online space is treated as the new front door of the church.

According to a Pew Research Center Survey (2016), avid churchgoers report that they are going less to church now than they used to and that the logistics of getting to church are the biggest deterrent. This is significant because it identifies a major hurdle that all Christian churches have to not only recognize but also provide proven-to-work solutions so that the body of Christ and the spread of the Gospel continues to grow and reach the masses. The findings of this study give churches a blueprint to follow for church growth in the digital age and equip churches with online methods to reach people in cyberspace first (Internet and social media) and then funnel them to in-person worship. This study could improve the lives of pastors and church leaders because it provides solutions that can be implemented and provide an answer to the age-old question of what can the church do about the decline of church attendance.

According to data collected by the Barna Group (2020) from 96,171 surveys over more than 20 years, Christianity has changed a lot over the past few decades. In fact, the research from the Barna Group (2020) reveals that just one in four Americans identify as practicing Christians.

But that is not all. The Barna Group's survey goes on to show a dramatic change in the Christian landscape, dating its research to the year 2000, where 45 percent of people sampled identified as practicing Christians. That number has consistently declined over the past 19 years, where only 25% of Americans are Christian. In other words, the number of practicing Christians in the United States has nearly dropped in half since 2000.

Further evidence of a decline in church attendance, the Barna Group's (2020) research discovered that weekly church attendance in the 1990s hovered around 43% of the sample. In barebones numbers, the Barna Group (2020) concludes that there are now 36 percent fewer Americans who physically drive to church on a weekly basis.

Considering the decline of in-person church attendance, the decline of practicing Christians, and the decline in church membership in the United States, a central issue that church leaders must address in the post-COVID and digitally connected world that individuals live in is what impact, has the COVID-19 pandemic had on in-person church attendance and whether the traditional model focused on how many people come inside the church building is the best solution to reach every nation as instructed in The Great Commission in Matthew 28.

Addressing this issue, Cooper et al. (2021) assert the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the organizational aspect of the church. Church leaders have been forced into a reality where traditional physical spaces at times are not available, and social distancing rules dictate daily life. This reality, in turn, affects how people gather for worship.

Jones (2019) points to a Gallup Poll revealing that church membership in America was at 70%. However, less than half of Americans are members of a church. The striking change in membership, according to the Gallup Poll, is that church membership was 70% or higher from 1937 through 1976, with church membership falling modestly to 68% in the 1970s through the

late 1990s. However, the rate of decline has accelerated over the past 20 years, with a 20-percentage point decline since 1999. More than half of this change – decline in church membership - has occurred since the beginning of the current decade.

Perhaps the most striking evidence that a change in church growth approach should be considered is where Bailey (2021), in a *Washington Post* article, reveals the findings of a Gallup Poll showing that the number of people who identify as members of a church, synagogue or mosque have sunk below 50%. This is the first time this has happened since Gallup first asked the question in 1937 when church membership was 73%.

Breaking down Gallup's data by generation, Bailey (2021) points out that age is a factor in church membership. Gallup's data reveals that 66 percent of Americans born before 1946 identify as members of a church, compared to 58% of Baby Boomers, 50% of Generation X, and 36% of Millennials.

Despite the numbers revealing an increased decline in church membership and that people are not attending in-person church services in droves as in years past, some church leaders have continued to be hyper-focused on the traditional model of church growth geared toward filling seats inside of the church. However, regardless of how researchers measure people's faith — whether it is with attendance, giving, self-identification — the attachment to institutional religion that Americans have had in the past is, without a doubt, on a steady decline (Bailey, 2021).

Additionally, the decline of in-person church attendance is not only confined to generation. In-person attendance has also declined by gender. In 2009, 48% of women attended church at least once a week, but in less than 10 years, the number has dwindled to 31%. During this same period, the total number of men who attended church at least once a week declined 12

percentage points. While there used to be a gender gap in attendance, that is not the case anymore (Burge, 2020).

Summary of the Design

This study is a qualitative study. Participants underwent interviews comprised of pastors of digital churches. Since the result of this study aimed to discover the lived experience of the methods digital church pastors have used for church growth, this study used a qualitative phenomenological study design. Phenomenology is defined as being the essence of something and describes the lived experiences of the participant (Peoples, 2021). A phenomenological study is useful to help with providing the context of how and why certain church growth methods were used to successfully grow the church. Merriam (1998) notes that most qualitative studies collect data through interviews. This study collected data through semi-structured interviews. The researcher used an interview guide during the study's interview process (see Appendix E). The interview guide/protocol includes a list of questions, topics, and talking points the researcher covered.

The approach utilized transcendental phenomenology, where the interpretation of the research was presuppositionless and based on intentionality. This insight could prove to be beneficial to churches of all sizes who have tried but have been unsuccessful in growing their church.

Transcendental phenomenology explores the way knowledge comes into being, and knowledge is based on insights rather than objective characteristics – this equals meaning (Richards & Morse, 2013).

This chapter identified the problem and purpose of the current study as well as the research method that was used for data for analysis. The goal was to understand the methods that

pastors of digital churches used for church growth. This chapter also discussed the significance

of this research study of digital church growth and delineated the research questions that were

analyzed as well as assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

The result of this study may provide church leaders with strategies for church growth

utilizing digital platforms. The findings of this study might also provide a better understanding of

the role of technology for churches.

Chapter Two presents the review of the literature related to the theoretical framework of

the study. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology and design that was utilized to

conduct this study. Chapter Four presents a table of demographic and sample data, participant

roles, and emerging themes and major concepts. Chapter Five provides research conclusions,

implications, and applications, research limitations and reveals recommendations for further

research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This dissertation on church growth utilizing digital methods resulted from declining in-person church attendance over the past 20 years, in addition to the effects and limitations the COVID-19 pandemic placed on churches globally during 2020-2022. This dissertation was also born out of this researcher's personal experience and observation that the world people live in today is a digital world. This writer believes the church must adapt to a digital-first mindset for substantial growth. Nona Jones, Head of Faith-Based Partnerships at Facebook (2020), reveals that there are more than 350,000 churches in the United States today, and two out of every three are declining or plateauing in attendance. In contrast, the Christian church has an opportunity to grow in all areas of ministry by attempting to connect with people right where they are - online. Currently, three out of every four people in the United States are on Facebook (Jones, 2020). From a logical, business, and growth perspective, if 75 percent of the people the church wants to reach are located in one place, it makes sense to place a ministry there. This is what the church has the opportunity to do (Jones, 2020).

This chapter will review the literature on utilizing digital methods to grow the church.

Theological Framework

The theological framework centers around The Great Commission found in Matthew 28:19-20, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (New King James Version, 2011, Matthew 28:19-20). The use of digital methods, such as social media platforms – Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, and Snapchat, makes it possible for the

Christian church to carry out The Great Commission of making disciples of all nations (Jones, 2020). A key theological issue regarding church online is the interpretation of the word "go" in The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). Go is the first word mentioned in this passage.

Wells (2018) asserts that the word "go" in The Great Commission means "go." Wells (2018) references William Carey, a British pastor who, in 1792, shook up the world with a controversial missionary essay entitled "*An Enquiry*." Wells (2018) notes Carey's essay challenged his contemporaries by arguing that The Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 meant that God's people were responsible for going to places without access to the Gospel and that those who did not go were responsible for sending them. The author points out that this understanding of The Great Commission has been largely accepted for hundreds of years since Carey's essay. However, in recent decades, a new subtle alternative has emerged.

Wells (2018) explains that some well-intentioned teachers say Carey got it wrong, arguing that The Great Commission is not a global mandate but a summons to be on mission as individuals go about their daily lives. Wells (2018) states that this new argument says the word "go" in the original language is more accurately translated as "as you go" in English, meaning that the phrase means to be a disciple maker as you go about your daily life. Wells acknowledges that there are few proponents who would say global missions are not important and that any preacher would want his people making disciples "as they go."

However, there is a danger of misinterpreting scripture. Wells (2018) asserts, "It feels funny to have to say it, but the command in Matthew 28:18–20 is actually a call for God's people to "go" and "make disciples of all nations." The main verb in the sentence is indeed "make disciples," but it is not an isolated verb, nor is it intended to be emphasized to the exclusion of the other important details in the command" (para. 11). Jesus gave the disciples a global

assignment that required strategic movement from one place to another to make disciples among

all people (Wells, 2018).

When The Great Commission is reduced to an "as you go" lifestyle command, Christian

leaders promote less than complete obedience (Wells, 2018). Wells (2018) adds that from

Genesis to Revelation, God reveals His plan to gather people from every language, tribe, and

tongue.

Wells (2018) explains:

> Proponents of the "as you go" interpretation note that the word "going" is a participle (a verb that acts like an adjective) rather than a command. But their rendition stems from an inadequate understanding of Greek grammar. The word for "go" in Greek is something called a "participle of attendant circumstance," which means it takes the full force of the imperative (the command) that follows ("make disciples"). (para. 16)

Mounce (2008) agrees, saying the misunderstanding of The Great Commission stems

from an inadequate knowledge of Koine Greek. Mounce (2008) tells a story where he recalls

hearing a pastor say that the typical translation of Matthew 28:19 (therefore, go make disciples")

is incorrect because the Greek word for "go" (poreuthentes) is a participle and, therefore should

be translated "going/ as you go."

Mounce (2008) explains that this does make a reasonable homiletical point (day by day,

as you go through life, make disciples), but goes on to ask, is that what Jesus said? He answers

his question, declaring, "I don't think so" (para. 2). Mounce (2008) notes that while it is true that

the Greek word "go" (poreuthentes) is a Greek participle, it is not true that it should be translated

like an English gerund, which is a form derived from a verb but functions like a noun.

Mounce (2008) states:

> In the Matthew passage poreuthentes fits the typical structural pattern for the attendant circumstance participle with the participle picking up the mood of the main verb. Since matheusate is an aorist active imperative, poreuthentes should be translated "Go." Jesus'

instructions are proactive; we are to move out into the world, not simply make disciples when we happen to be there (para. 3).

Regarding using digital/online platforms to fulfill The Great Commission, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2023), there are more than 7.7 billion people on earth. According to Statista (2022), a leading provider of market and consumer data, more than 2.9 billion people use Facebook and its family of platforms - WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram - on a daily basis. However, this writer realizes that within the Christian church, there is some pushback as it relates to church online. Some church leaders who are against church online or utilizing online methods say digitizing church is at odds with scripture regarding the lack of community. For example, Hebrews 10:25 says, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (New King James Version, 2011, Hebrews 10:25).

Grace Community Church Pastor and Theologian John MacArthur (2021) rejects online worship, stating that Zoom church is not church. He categorized Zoom as watching TV. MacArthur goes on to declare that there is nothing about church online that fulfills the biblical definition of coming together. MacArthur (2021) added that the definition of church is crystal clear in the New Testament, that believers came together the first of the week, worshipping, praying, and having fellowship with one another, braking bread in the Lord's Supper.

Regarding his own broadcast, Grace to You, which reaches people via the internet, MacArthur (2021) said his broadcast is an example of a parachurch that should not take the place of corporate worship. MacArthur's church became the center of controversy after his California-based church defied state orders and refused to shut down in-person worship during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gryboski, 2021). MacArthur admitted in his August 29, 2021, sermon that COVID-19 spread throughout his congregation (Gryboski, 2021).

Regarding church community, Spyker (2007) believes community amongst church members can be developed, cultivated, and maintained online. Spyker (2007) asserts that the internet is not just a tool for individuals to access information on their own. Instead, the internet is a space where people connect and interact with one another, building relationships and forming a sense of community even if they are not physically present with one another. Oelerich (2022) points out that koinonia is the term used to describe the first-century Christian church. According to the author, Koinonia means having a sense of community, communion, fellowship, and togetherness.

Oelerich (2022) explains that the term koinonia is used to describe a unique connection that exists between believers. Oelerich (2022) notes that this bond is founded on a common interest or objective, which is to pursue Christ and develop a deeper understanding of His teachings and love.

Mullins (2011) posed the question of whether community can be achieved online. Mullins (2011) notes that God describes all of His children as part of a community. Furthermore, the Bible, in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Acts, all describe the nation of Israel as a community (Mullins, 2011).

However, Acts 2:46-47 gives a vivid picture of what community looked like for the early Christians, noting that the early Christians did everything together in community, eating meals together daily in each other's homes and even selling possessions to ensure everyone's needs were met. However, Mullins (2011) asserts that church leaders of today must ask whether the type of community revealed in Acts 2:46-47 is practiced in churches across the United States.

Diving deeper into the theological and biblical issues related to church online and digital discipleship, this writer reiterates that the purpose of this chapter is not to debate the validity of

the digital church. This chapter is not meant to argue that in-person church should be eliminated but rather provide evidence that utilizing digital methods is beneficial for church growth, particularly in declining areas – church attendance, financial giving, and reaching the masses for discipleship. With this in mind, this researcher points to a biblical verse that moves the theological framework forward. That verse is Matthew 4:19, which states, "Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men" (New King James Version, 2011, Matthew 4:19).

Utilizing online/digital methods, such as social media platforms, is the new front door for the church and opens the door for more fishing of men locally and globally (Nieuwhof, 2019). In addition, connecting digitally enhances community because it is a natural way for individuals to connect in today's time (Nieuwhof, 2019). Social media is where people connect with one another on a daily basis, making it a natural place to reach the lost and connect with current church members and followers of Christ (Jones, 2020). It is this writer's belief that community should not feel boring or forced. To this point of the theological framework, this writer points to Psalms 133:1, which says, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (New King James Version, 2011, Psalms 133:1). Social media and digital platforms provide a place for people to dwell in unity. Unity is established digitally because it is where people choose to be – it is a new way of gathering (Jones, 2020).

In addition, the Bible also reveals that Christians are better together than being alone. Romans 12:4-5 says, "For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another" (New King James Version, 2011, Romans 12:4-5).

Utilizing online methods for church growth is also a modern example of servant-leadership, where church leaders give of themselves and serve the people where they are: online. Examining the life of Jesus, the ultimate servant leader, reveals that his approach to ministry was different than the approach some church leaders in ministry employ today. Jesus was not afraid to go where the people who needed Him were (Jones, 2020).

Matthew 9:9-13 illustrates how Jesus was willing to go where the people that needed Him were. In this story, Jesus first calls a tax collector named Matthew to come and follow Him. Matthew accepts the invitation given by Jesus and becomes a disciple. At this same dinner, while Jesus was sitting inside the house eating, other tax collectors and sinners came and sat with Him and the disciples.

This episode of Jesus going where the people who needed Him puzzled the Pharisees. The Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples why their teacher sat with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus has a profound response - that people who are well do not need a physician, but people who are sick do need one. Jesus further explained that He did not come for the righteous but for sinners. In this same vein, church leaders must take the example of Jesus and go where the people are - online. Although some may not understand it, if people are there, the church should be, too, because people in digital spaces are real people in need of a real Savior (Jones, 2020).

Jones (2020) declares Jesus was always out among the people, wherever they were, and that Jesus did not ask the 12 apostles to stand at a designated gathering place and wait for people to come hear Jesus' new sermon series. Instead, no matter how uncomfortable it may have seemed, Jesus's focus was always to help and reach as many people as possible, which should be the goal of church leaders (Jones, 2020).

Furthermore, utilizing digital technology for church growth is an act of servant leadership (Jones, 2020). An example of this kind of servant leadership was shown during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Ken Austin, pastor of New Walk of Life Church in Montgomery, Alabama, utilized technology as a form of servant leadership to unite scattered and unconnected people into a tight-knit community (Washington, 2020).

The theological theme of servant-leadership is illustrated throughout the Bible. To serve the people, in Exodus 4:10, Moses exemplified servant-leadership despite his excuse of having a speech impediment and being afraid of the assignment that God gave him – leading the people from bondage. To serve the people, Joshua, despite being fearful of the Jordan River, trusted God to be strong and courageous (Joshua 1:9) to lead the people across the Jordan. To serve the people (us), Jesus, in Matthew 26:39, went against His human will to die on the cross. Likewise, to serve the people, church leaders must utilize digital methods as a form of servant leadership to reach more people for church growth.

Relating to church growth, Mark 10:45 reminds us, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (New King James Version, 2011, Mark 10:45). In John 13:12-17, Jesus provides a picture of what a servant-leader is when He washed the feet of the disciples. To this point, Greenleaf (2002), the pioneer of the servant-leadership theory, asserts that a true servant-leader is a servant first. Greenleaf (2002) describes servant leadership as something that is born out of a natural feeling and desire to serve and that being in the trenches serving then inspires the person to lead.

Greenleaf (2002) explained that the servant-leadership concept emerged for him while being heavily involved with colleges in the 1960s and early 1970. He revealed that the colleges were going through a time of turmoil where distinguished institutions were crumbling. As a

result of institutional crumbling, Greenleaf searched for what happened to these historic institutions. Ironically, due to the consistent decline of in-person church attendance, churches worldwide are suffering from the same kind of institutional crumbling.

To reiterate how this relates to the traditional church, as previously noted, there are more than 350,000 churches registered in the United States today, and two out of every three are declining or plateauing in attendance (Jones, 2020). With evidence of consistent decline, church leaders should observe the numbers, reassess their church growth strategy, and listen. Spears (2010), who served as the President and CEO of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, declares that a vital characteristic of a servant-leader is one who listens. Regarding leaders listening, Greenleaf (2002) tells a story of when one leader became the head of a large public institution. Previously the leader relied upon newspapers and new broadcasts to solve the problem he was facing. However, the leader decided to make an unusual change. For three months, the leader stopped reading the newspapers and radio broadcasts (the things that did not work), and instead, the leader relied on what the people in the course told him while also making visual observations. In three months, his administrative problems were solved.

Greenleaf (2002) goes on to question why there is a huge void in listening among leaders. Ironically, for Spears and Lawrence (2004), listening is the first of 10 characteristics of the servant-leader. Spears and Lawrence (2004) note that although most leaders are known for their ability to make sound decisions and communicate their message effectively, a deep commitment to listening can work wonders for leaders. Listening, the authors argue, opens the door to a deeper connection. This concept of listening as an act of servant-leadership relates to the study because church leaders at times, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, may be forced to do

things that are for the sole benefit of the congregation (connecting online and having access to God's word digitally) even if it is not the leader's personal preference.

Connecting online and reaching church members via social media played a role in deeper connections at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This trend should continue, this writer believes. The reason that this trend should continue is because the use of the internet, technology, and people spending time on social media and other digital platforms is not a fad or just a "thing" that people do. The internet is where people live, especially millennials and Gen Z – generations who have only known life with the internet and social media (Jones, 2020). The explosion of digital technology and society's reliance upon technology has no signs of slowing down, increasing the need for churches to adopt digital technology. More people have mobile devices than toothbrushes, and grandparents are the fastest-growing users on Twitter (Craig, 2020). The good news is that using digital technology and social media makes it possible to reach people everywhere and at any time (Craig, 2020).

Statistics have revealed that more than 96% of Americans have cell phones; worldwide, more than 65% own one, and the number is growing by the minute (Craig, 2020). With most of the world using cellphones to connect online, this makes discipleship online possible, even for people who are not tech-savvy (Craig, 2020).

Knowing these statistics and the likelihood that the use of digital technology will increase even more for years to come, it is the job and duty of pastors and ministry leaders to utilize technology to make disciples of Christ (Craig, 2020).

Regarding caring for community online and beyond, Rainer (2020) asserts that the church must continue building on the digital momentum created as a result of the pandemic, specifically in the area of giving. Rainer (2020) reveals that during the early days of quarantine during the

COVID-19 pandemic, he worked with church leaders who were experiencing hardships primarily in the area of financial giving. Prior to the quarantine and mandated shutdowns of churches nationwide, giving was done primarily through the offering plate. However, without in-person worship services, there was no way to collect tithes and offerings from congregants. As a result, there were no incoming funds to support the ministries of the church (Rainer, 2020).

Rainer (2020) reveals that he recommended that church leaders allow any tech-savvy members with good relational skills to show senior members and others who were afraid of digital technology how to use the technology to be able to give whether they are at the church, at home, or anywhere else in the world.

Utilizing digital methods for church growth also aids spiritual growth and opens the door for individuals to participate in church activities when they are not able to attend in person for crucial elements of Christianity, such as partaking in The Lord's Supper, also known as Communion. White (2020) notes that offering The Lord's Supper/Communion is as simple as reading directly from 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. Prayers can also be offered. Perhaps the most important thing to remember, according to White (2020), is that Christ is at work and is working in the lives of those participating in this sacred practice of the church, whether it is done in-person or virtual using digital methods.

Utilizing digital methods not only aids in sacraments but also in discipleship. The function groups formed for discipleship are for the sole purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission (White, 2020). Regarding the activities that these disciple-making groups participate in, White (2020) said they not only reach out to people to share their faith, but they also teach the commandments of Jesus and provide steps to carryout the example set by Jesus in their everyday life. This is what makes disciple-making groups different from Bible study groups

because the focus is on application rather than study (White, 2020). To this point, Lowe and Lowe (2018) speculate that social scientists would agree that growth and development for humans happen best when they are socially connected with other humans. Social scientists such as Urie Bronfenbrenner, Richard Lerner, and David Magnusson believe that normal human development is sustained and encouraged in the reciprocal exchanges that people have with other people (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). This is what happens online - social connections with constant reciprocal exchanges.

Cooper et al. (2021) point out that emerging technologies for digital presence provide the church with theological questions. Those questions include the validity of sacraments when given online and whether a digital presence is a real presence. Cooper et al. (2021) declare that the social, digital, and physical unity of the digital realm as part of the universe gives reason for church leaders to rethink their views on what they believe church is and what they believe church is not.

Mpofu (2021) agrees, noting during the COVID-19 pandemic, most churches held Sunday services and other aspects of their church ministries through digital spaces. Considering how churches were forced to change during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the world continues to change utilizing technology, the mission of the church must stay the same. However, the church must adapt to the changing context of hosting meetings, gatherings, and various aspects of the church through digital spaces (Mpofu, 2021).

Summary of Theological Framework

For at least the past 44 years of this researcher's life, when the word "church" is mentioned, a building comes to mind. However, 1 Timothy 5 reminds us that the church is not a building. The church is the people that make up the body of Christ who are committed to

growing the church by reaching the lost, spreading The Good News, and discipleship. Utilizing online or digital methods has allowed the church to reach more people than ever before, in this writer's opinion. In the digital world that people live and the church operates, effective discipleship now requires church leaders to reimagine the church's role. This means that churches and the various ministries they have should not stop at waiting on people to find the church before connecting. Discipleship requires that churches go find them (Jones, 2020). To be effective in today's digital world, church leaders must develop a social ministry mindset with the understanding that there is a huge harvest of people within the church's city and beyond are all on social media, but some will never come inside of the church building (Jones, 2020).

Acts 2:46-47 reveal that the Lord allowed the church to grow numerically as a result of them meeting together daily, eating together, and worshipping together. The advances in technology have made it possible for the church to invite individuals to meet, eat, and worship together utilizing digital methods and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and more.

Finally, utilizing digital methods, this writer believes, enhances the church to fulfill The Great Commission and grow the church numerically by reaching more people right where they are – online in a digital space - who are able to repeat Romans 10:9, which states, "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (New King James Version, 2011, Romans 10:9).

Theoretical Framework

This researcher also had to consider and shape the dissertation's theoretical framework with an active and accurate theoretical base to provide a strong foundation for this dissertation's research. By way of introduction of theory into this literature review, this researcher found that

Stig Hjarvard suggested a theory that is relevant to the digital society that exists today as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Singarimbun, 2021). That theory, written in 2008, is called the Mediatization of Religion Theory. The Mediatization of Religion Theory contends that the use of media enables religion to reach more people. During church shutdowns amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technology and media promoted church growth by allowing God's Word to travel beyond the church walls - even non-Christians could watch sermons on digital and social media platforms such as YouTube (Singarimbun, 2021).

Hjarvard, a media sociologist from Denmark, Mediatization of Religion Theory is a two-way process where media institutions must be accommodated - in this case, the church. Through the process of mediation, the church becomes a channel for delivering content to the online environment where communities gather - YouTube, Facebook, Instagram - places that are not bound by social distancing mandates or total shutdowns. The mediatization of religion allows churches to present the Gospel of Christ in new ways. It paves the way for churches to become global distributors of sermons and teachings of Christ and reach people wherever they are (Singarimbun, 2021).

Furthermore, the use of media and the internet increases the capacity for church ministry and promotes new forms of spiritual innovation, taking church services from being confined to the inside of the church walls to unlimited virtual spaces (Newport, 2020). Going outside of the walls of the church utilizing media and digital technology to reach people online is crucial. This is crucial because it promotes the formation relationships – relationships that are deeper and more intimate because individuals often are more transparent and open to sharing intimate details of their lives without the fear of being judged. However, in in-person environments, social

anxiety/shyness and also geographic location can stop individuals from meeting their social

needs (Jones, 2021).

However, because people in online communities like Facebook, TikTok, Twitch, Twitter,

etc., do not have to provide their real identity; people are able to meet and share details of their

lives while remaining relatively anonymous, giving them the freedom and courage to share more

than they would face-to-face (Jones, 2021).

The reason that the Mediatization of Religion Theory is relevant to the church and society

today is that this researcher has observed that the world has shifted in culture to a digital society

since the COVID-19 lockdowns, which began in March 2020 for most of the world (Onyeaka et

al., 2021). The Mediatization of Religion supports this dissertation study in the area of digital

church growth.

The main reason for the need for the Mediatization of Religion to be implemented by

Christian church leaders is because the Christian church has endured multiple issues related to

church growth: not only has in-person attendance consistently dropped over the past 20 years,

but memberships of any kind (churches, gyms, services) have also declined (Jones, 2021).

The resistance for some church leaders to adopt digital/church online methods is due to

the fear that online church will replace in-person church. However, that reasoning and fear are

not supported by data. The reason that people are not attending church in-person is because

people do not feel that what is being offered to them in-person is not relevant to their lives

(Jones, 2020). Nieuwhof (2022) agrees, saying there are too many church leaders today who still

view online ministry as second-rate ministry. The author explains that some church leaders use

terms such as 'real ministry' or 'real services' to describe in person and then dismiss anything

that doesn't happen in their building. Nieuwhof (2022) adds that the only legitimate reason to

refer to an online ministry as second-rate is if there are second-rate people and second-rate people do not exist.

A case study of the Indonesian Christian Church, known as GKI Taman Cibunut Bandung, reveals that implementing the Mediatization of Religion Theory for church growth works. At the time of the 2020 case study, more than 1.1 million Indonesians had been hospitalized, with over 31,000 deaths from COVID (Singarimbun, 2021). Like in other parts of the world, including the United States, places of worship were ordered closed.

However, the Mediatization of Religion allowed the church to present the Gospel of Christ in new ways, and became a global distributor of sermons, teachings of Christ, and was also able to reach more people regardless of location. As a result of the pandemic, when churches were shutdown worldwide, both Christians and non-Christians have expressed an increased hunger for access to religious content online, as well as virtual places to gather and connect with others in prayer (Singarimbun, 2021).

Moreover, the number of Google searches for prayer itself has also spiked since the pandemic (Bentzen, 2021). With this increase in demand for religious content online and interest in religious activities, such as prayer, online media serves as an agent of change, giving religious organizations the ability to deliver worship, messages, and various religious-related content. The theory of Mediatization of Religion empowers churches with an avenue to communicate their message to an unlimited amount of people regardless of limitations set globally, such as the COVID-19 shutdown (Singarimbun, 2021). Online empowers the church with a solid starting point for discipleship and building relationships (Jones, 2020). The lived experience of pastors of digital churches could help pastors and leaders of physical churches see how discipleship and building relationships online can foster stronger relationships with church members in-person.

An example of this is utilizing Facebook Groups. Jones (2020) explains there are two reasons digitally connecting with people via Facebook is a good idea. No. 1, the people that churches want to connect with are already on the platform (attendance). No. 2 is people can instantly connect with one another in an environment that already like (relationship) and spend a large part of their time every single day (Jones, 2020).

Morgan (2006) states that organizational structure, rules, regulations, and procedures are often the guiding principles in how the organization operates and serves and guiding principles regarding change – in this case, changing to digital spaces for church growth. In regard to digital change, some organizations need coaching for the change to be effective. Likewise, regarding modern organizations such as the church, Yukl (2013) notes that in most organizations, the subunits (departments, sections) within the organization play a role in the functionality of the organization and are usually under the supervision of a manager, who may need to be coached.

In light of the digital transformation the church is experiencing, the lived experience of pastors of digital churches can influence church leaders' willingness to be coached by people who understand the inner workings of technology and digital platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Twitch, Roblox, TikTok, and more to be used for spreading the Gospel to all nations. As Jones (2020) points out, leveraging technology as a gateway to build God's Kingdom is the goal, whether the increase/building is done in-person or online.

Harwig et al. (2018) point to their case study of a Protestant Church in the Netherlands that started an online church called Minj Kerk. Harwig et al. (2018) said the online church was founded to connect with people who do not or no longer attend church. The authors reveal that to attract people who do not attend church, the online church connected with individuals where they spend most of their time - online, places such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Harwig et al.

(2018) assert that the major advantage that the online church provides for people is a way to connect 24 hours a day, seven days a week, whereas most traditional church buildings are only open a few days a week at best.

Whether church leaders are new to ministry or seasoned, if church leaders continue to ignore the power of digital technology and continue to focus only on their physical address, the trends of declining church attendance will get worse (Jones, 2020). However, there is hope. Skilled leaders have a track record of reading situations, accessing the changes that must be made, implementing those changes, and following through with action to ensure the changes manifest for the good of the organization (Morgan, 2006).

Implementing the Mediatization of Religion Theory may require church leaders to change their mindset regarding church online to get their desired result of church growth. In a biblical case study of Nehemiah, chapters one through six, Nehemiah's role changed from being a cup bearer of King Artaxerxes to becoming the Governor of Judah. Nehemiah used a variety of strategies to accomplish his goal of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

Patton (2017) suggests that the most important aspect before any change is made is for leadership to pray and communicate with God. At the core of Godly leadership, according to Clinton (1993), is the leader being in the presence of God having regular communication. This gives the leader the ability to know God's purpose for the group, organization, or ministry – before he can communicate that purpose and move with action. For example, Patton (2017) points to Nehemiah, one of the most profound leaders in the Bible, noting that when he found out about the condition of the exiled Jews, he immediately asked God for discernment.

Nehemiah 1:4, according to Clinton (2003), is the perfect example for modern leaders to follow. It is written in this passage that Nehemiah took days fasting, praying, and seeking

counsel from the Almighty before he embarked on the monumental task of assisting the Israelites. In this passage, Nehemiah, Clinton (2003) notes, realized that prayer is a vital habit for any leader to have – it enhances communication with God and vision for ministry.

For example, before Nehemiah responded to King Artaxerxes' question of what he wanted, Nehemiah prayed to God for guidance and direction. After Nehemiah prayed, he was given the vision for the ministry (Patton, 2017).

Gordon (2018) agrees and uses a sports analogy to emphasize the importance of leaders being willing to change for the future success of the organization's goals and mission rather than doing what's familiar and comfortable. Gordon (2018) notes that although change is hard, the organization's success depends on leadership to change from what they have always done to get new results.

Gordon (2018) illustrates this point by pointing to the 2002 New England Patriots case study, the team that upset the heavily favored St. Louis Rams to win their first Super Bowl. The challenging change New England Patriots Coach Bill Belichick made - replaced its storied quarterback Drew Bledsoe with an in-experienced quarterback, Tom Brady. Gordon (2018) reveals the short answer for leaders to realize is that their current system is the thing that is keeping them from experiencing success.

Larson and DeChurch (2020) note that digital technologies now play a vital role for leaders because digital technologies have changed the nature of how teams (ministries) operate. Regarding the challenges of virtual teams (ministries), Larson and DeChurch (2020) assert that there is a general consensus among scholars that virtual teams are more challenging to lead versus face-to-face teams. However, the leadership of these teams must navigate the challenges

of virtual environments to ensure that the organization stays up with the times and is relevant to how the rest of the world operates.

Support for Digital Growth

Providing more support that a digital approach to church growth works, Gauxachs et al. (2021) point to their case study on the Catholic Church in Spain's Online response digitization of in-person worship services. Gauxachs et al. (2021) note that in March 2020, the Catholic Church in Spain was forced to reinvent itself as the government shut down places of worship due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The researchers studied 70 Spanish dioceses as a representation of the global Catholic community in the country.

Gauxachs et al. (2021) reveal the results of this case study support that digital technology aids church growth. The Catholic Church in Spain embraced digital technology and implemented creative ideas. The Catholic Church in Spain increased its membership by utilizing new platforms and digital methods. Although offline/in-person worship still plays a crucial role in decisions, the pandemic allowed the church to embrace a new communicative paradigm to the Spanish Catholic community. Digitalization of the church while preserving the best aspects of direct communication and in-person worship activities with congregants is how the church is moving forward. Gauxachs et al. (2021) concluded that digital communities are a place where religions can also carry out their activities.

Campbell (2012) stresses that there are advantages that come with utilizing digital platforms because the church has the ability to reach more people. However, it cannot be a replacement for in-person gatherings.

Campbell (2020) reveals that according to surveys of over 1,500 pastors conducted by a collaboration of church consultancy groups in March and then again in April 2020, most

churches in the United States transitioned from offline to online-only worship services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Campbell (2020) notes that the results of the initial survey revealed that most pastors (41%) were hesitant moving online, citing feelings of being forced to do it and ill-equipped to properly use the required digital tools.

Historical Development

To understand where the Christian church is today as it relates to technological advances and discipleship, this researcher provides a brief history of how technology has changed how the Christian church communicates with the masses in keeping with fulfilling The Great Commission and discipleship.

Perhaps the most significant technological advance in the Christian church's history, this researcher argues, was the invention of the Gutenberg Press in 1455. Prior to Johannes Gutenberg's printing press, the only way the Bible could be reproduced was by written hand.

However, this technological advance made it possible for mass production of the Bible. This gave more people access to the Bible that ordinarily would not have access. The next major technological advance in church history was the use of radio and television to spread the Gospel.

According to *The New York Times* (1936), one of the first ministers to use radio extensively was S. Parkes Cadman, beginning in 1923. After years of radio broadcasting, in 1952, Rex Humbard became the first to have a weekly church service broadcast on television. Notable television broadcasters through church history included the preaching ministries of Rex Humbard, Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Billy Graham, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jerry Falwell, to name a few.

Moving to the 21st Century, Barna (2002) concluded from its study, many Americans assume that attending church services is the most common way of experiencing the Christian

faith. However, Barna's research shows a different conclusion – that a greater number of Christian adults experience Christian faith through various Christian media, such as books, television, and radio, than they do at a church service.

In the study, Barna (2002) reveals that six out of 10 American adults (63%) attended a church service each month. However, the data shows a shift, where two out of every three adults (67%) used at least one of three forms of religious media – radio, television, or book to support their faith in Jesus Christ. In pure numbers, approximately 132 million adults have been to a church service compared to 141 million using Christian media.

It is important that this researcher reiterate that the trend of both Christians and non-Christians utilizing other forms of media for spiritual growth and development did not start out of nowhere when the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. This trend or shift began, according to The Barna Research Group's study, more than 20 years prior to the pandemic.

The bottom line, according to Barna (2002), church leaders must recognize and understand that although the goal has traditionally been to promote in-person gatherings, the world has changed, and considering these changes, traditional Christian activities, such as evangelism, worship, and discipleship can happen outside of the building of the church for most people. This includes millions of people who have no desire to visit a church in-person. Barna (2002) points out that today's culture continues to embrace new forms of education, interaction, and relationships while maintaining their need to connect with God; church leaders may want to consider increasing discussions regarding faith matters as it relates to the use of the internet for faith exploration and communication. This is why this researcher believes the Mediatization of Religion Theory is relevant today.

Moreover, social media is a major part of the lives of young people – it is an everyday thing for them (Hunt, 2019). Hunt (2019) asserts that mere observation of the activities of youth or young adults outside of the church walls tell a fascinating story – the observer would see a room full of social media users, taking pictures on their phones, going live on Facebook at events, or instantaneously updating their Instagram profiles.

Likewise, Perbawaningsih (2016) notes research shows that social media changes how individuals build relationships, the quality of interpersonal relationship, and also how individuals communicate. In other words, building intimate relationships, or social penetration, according to Olson (2012), depends on the person's willingness to reveal layers of themselves. According to the Social Penetration Theory, relationships happen through social penetration, meaning that the openness to share parts of the one's life is at the core of relationship development (Olson, 2012).

Olson (2012) went on to reiterate how quickly things have changed, noting that less than 20 years ago, it was unimaginable to see and talk to people online. Fast forward to today, people can now foster relationships and experience community globally with the use of digital technology and social networking sites such as Facebook (Olson, 2012). In years past, people did not have the ability to share photos with friends in seconds, regardless of where they were in the world. However, people are now able to build stronger relationships through self-disclosure when friends share what is on their minds (Olson, 2012).

Building strong, deep relationships, this researcher believes, is at the heart of discipleship. Kopp (2018) agrees, asserting that young people are leaving the church in droves, but there are still reachable – online. Kopp (2018) adds that the Christina church cannot afford to keep putting off embracing technology. Embracing technology, Kopp (2018) asserts, is a great way to evangelize, and technology is a tool that enhances learning, innovation, and collaboration.

Since we are called to be in the world and not of the world, we should engage where people living in the world are - online spaces (Kopp, 2018).

Engaging in the online space for church growth, this researcher believes, opens the door for church growth through discipleship. Phelps (2019) explains that considering how the world depends on digital technologies, some degree of technological integration with the believer's spiritual life will come into play. The widespread use of technology into every area of modern-day life creates an opportunity for positive spiritual growth and development (Phelps, 2019).

Nieuwhof (2021) stressed that technological cultural change has been happening for decades. However, the church has been slow to adapt. To this point, Garner (2019) declares that one of the most important things that the pandemic should have taught church leaders is that social relationships needed for community within the body of Christ are as real in a gathering on a Zoom call or meeting as they are at a meeting in-person at the church. This reality is proof that there is an urgent to shift towards online church instead of holding on to the old tradition of the on-site building as the only option for worship, meetings, gatherings, and various church functions. Churches will see that the big winner from the pandemic be online discipleship (Garner, 2019).

Summary of Theoretical Framework

The future is technology, and the use of the Mediatization of Religion Theory for church growth through online discipleship, this researcher believes, is the solid model to follow in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As noted previously, an increasing number of technological advances are being made each day. However, the church is lagging behind in technology and reaching the masses through social media. Lee (2018) points to a Lifeway survey, which includes suggestions for narrowing

the gap in social media use between resource-rich and resource-restricted congregations, as well as between urban and rural congregations. Lee (2018) adds that surveys of Christian congregations in the United States view social media as a more effective way to reach people than the traditional ways of placing advertisements in newspapers, radio, television, and knocking on doors. Social media also gives the church the opportunity to do more than advertise but to also socialize.

In addition, Lee (2018) points out that research shows that congregations that adopt digital technology and social media experience an increase in membership. However, research also shows that adding new technology and social media tends to create financial challenges for small organizations due to costs related to monitoring and analyzing the data associated with the usage of digital technology (Lee, 2018).

Related Literature

Numerical, spiritual, and financial church growth are three ways many churches measure growth. The best practices for modern church growth have been established dating back to 1961 in the United States. This section of the dissertation analyzes those best practices and the rationale for adopting new church growth methods as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This section will begin with a historical look at how the early church grew numerically, leading the way to the modern church growth movement. This section will also examine the most utilized church growth methods - evangelism, church planting, and the cell group system, and point out contributors to declining church growth, along with case studies.

Best Practices of Church Growth

Based on the biblical text Acts 2:46-47, where it says the Lord added new converts to the church, Cotrado (2020) analyzed the aspects of the church's growth. Cotrado (2020) reveals that

the first disciples were focused on two areas related to Evangelistic work and liturgy: the temple and houses. The Temple was deemed the house of God and served as the place to gather for collective worship, apostolic teaching, and a place to grow in faith. Cotrado (2020), however, indicates that the place where fellowship grew was in the homely environment of houses – from house-to-house.

Donald McGavran (1961), considered the father of the modern church growth movement, explained that God created the church so everyone would have the opportunity to accept the Savior. McGavran (1961) asserts that God wants churches to grow and that the role of all existing churches is not to simply carry out small pieces of mission work outside of the country but to be focused on initiatives that spread Christian cells (churches) throughout all receptive populations.

In terms of best practices for church growth, McGavran reveals that seed-sowing missions are the first stage. McGavran (1961) notes that seed-sowing is the idea of planting seeds of faith within the community through evangelism, door-to-door efforts, hosting community events, and providing social services that will at some point take root within the community, thereby spearheading church growth with increased members of the church and new Christian converts. Seed-sowing is a form of church planting to reach new people in a targeted area.

Curtis (2020) points out that after decades of the Christian church being focused on foreign missions, the Church Growth Movement (CGM) emerged in the 1970s as the newest and most effective way to stimulate growth within churches in the United States. At the core of the CGM's teaching was that socially homogeneous churches grow faster. Socially homogeneous churches are comprised of people with similar demographical characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, education, and socioeconomic status. Curtis (2020) goes on to note, "As the

Movement's founder, Donald McGavran, declared, "Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers" (p. 108). McGavran, according to Curtis (2020), lived an ordinary life, deeply influenced American missionary practices and American churches during his career, which stretched across the twentieth century.

An (2019) understands church growth from the perspective of reaching, assimilating, and developing people in the church. An (2019) explains that numerical growth does not necessarily mean that the church is growing in terms of being effective in evangelism and strengthening the person's faith. People may join or "transfer" to a church due to a variety reasons, such as the personality of the pastor, the way or style that youth leaders teach, the choir, or other reasons unrelated to becoming a Christian, essentially becoming "holy huddles" because the churches are not being effective in converting new believers and growing where it matters most – the person's faith in Jesus (An, 2019).

To be effective with church growth, churches must be actively engaged in efforts to reach new people, integrating them into the community of faith, and then developing their faith to make an eternal difference in the person's life (An, 2019). A positive aspect of church growth is that from a universal view of the Christian church, if every church in America brought as little as five new people to faith each year for five years, the Christian church would experience an increase of more than 10 million new believers over the next five years (An, 2019).

Perhaps one of the most profound modern church growth methods is the idea of planting churches to reach more people and attract new believers in Jesus Christ.

Planting Churches

Alawode (2020) points to Peter Wagner, who, in his book, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest,* asserts that starting new churches is the best way to spread the Gospel.

Wagner, cited by Alawode (2020), believes that connecting people who have made the decision to follow Jesus with a church is crucial to the effectiveness of evangelism and the central reason why planting new churches is important. Planting new churches give the local church body the opportunity to nurture new believers, otherwise, allowing new believers to take the step of accepting Jesus without being connected with a local congregation could be a strategic mistake because the person's decision may not have a lasting impact.

Alawode (2020) goes on to point out that Rolland Allen, an American missionary and biblical scholar in the 20th century, who is known for his work on the book of Acts and contributions in the field of missiology, affirmed that church growth involves not only the multiplication of Christians but also the multiplication of churches. In terms of church growth strategy, Alawode (2020) notes that the Apostle Paul focused on preaching to responsive people. Alawode (2020) points out that the instructions that Jesus gave the disciples in Matthew 10:11-16 and Luke 10:5-16 is strikingly similar to the approach that Paul took regarding his missionary work. Paul's focus, according to Alawode (2020), was on those who were ready to hear the Gospel. In essence, Paul's strategy for growth was to go to those who were open to the message of Christ, but not ignore those who were not receptive.

For example, Alawode (2020) notes that Paul always felt it was better to move to a more sensitive area if the message was persecuted by one group of people. Alawode (2020) states, "Thus when Paul and his team arrived in Philippi, they went to the riverside and spoke to some women who would listen to them. Through this strategy, Lydia and her household converted to the Lord (cf. Ac 16:12–15)" (p. 2).

Alawode (2020) points out that Paul and his team established churches in strategic cities and towns of the Roman Empire. Paul's strategy was to make disciples. Making disciples was

spearheaded by the preaching of the Gospel and establishing churches in the cities. Alawode (2020), referencing Morgan (2013), explained that Paul's missionary strategy emphasized reaching men in big cities. The reason Paul prioritized the big cities is that, much like today, people from smaller cities and rural areas would often move to the larger cities. By spreading the Gospel in the big cities, Paul believed that it would, by default, also reach people from the surrounding provinces.

To this end, the three critical components of church planting include assembling the saved souls, caring for one another, and Apostles' teaching and discipleship (Alawode, 2020).

Alawode (2020) argues that gathering new believers together is crucial to creating a Christian community where new believers form relationships and bond together as brothers and sisters in Christ. When new believers live this way, they will draw closer together and form long-lasting relationships that promote spiritual growth. Alawode (2020) goes on to note that the teaching and mentoring of the apostles laid the foundation for people who have converted to Christianity to experience spiritual growth. Once they have grown spiritually, they are then able to help spread the Good News of Christ while also participating in Christian services, such as congregational worship, prayer, teaching, mentoring, and helping others.

As for the relevance of church planting as part of best practices for church growth in the 21st century, Alawode (2020) asserts there are a variety of benefits to starting churches in big cities because these large cities and towns can have a significant influence on the surrounding communities. The author stresses that cities are filled with people with different backgrounds, education, professions, trade, or tourism, which opens the door to sharing the message of Christianity with a diverse audience.

To illustrate this point, Marti and Mulder (2020) point to Robert H. Schuller, who arrived in Garden Grove, California, in 1955. Schuller found that people were eager to hear his messages that highlighted self-esteem and positive thinking. By 1969, he appeared weekly on a Sunday morning television broadcast of Hour of Power.

Schuller became an exemplar of how a large church might be built upon the charismatic leadership of its founder. Focusing on Schuller's message of Possibility Thinking, historian Molly Worthen, according to Marti and Mulder (2020), asserts that the minister, in his attempt to remove obstacles to church attendance, "upended the traditional revivalist tactic of railing at sinners until they cried out for redemption" (p. 64).

Marti and Mulder (2020) note that Schuller had a large local congregation in the thousands, in addition to the millions who watched his Hour of Power broadcast on television; people felt that they had an intimate connection with him. An example of this, according to Marti and Mulder (2020), points to "A longtime congregant described the minister's aura: "All that love from the pulpit, all the stories, that magnificent heart that wrapped itself around you, changed my life." One woman described her devotion: "It really made me think that I am God's child, and I am worth something. Anyway, I was worth something to [Schuller]" (p. 64).

It is important to note that Schuller's church, the Crystal Cathedral, filed for bankruptcy in 2010. However, as it relates to the best practices for increasing church membership, Bretherton and Dunbar (2020) point to over half a century ago, when Wicker (1969) revealed the general principle that the ratio of members to activities increases as the size of the church increases. Bretherton and Dunbar (2020) reveal that the key for churches that grow to 400 - even 1,500 plus members, one of the best practices for continued growth while decreasing the risk of losing members, is to reorganize into smaller groups as a way of changing gears in the relational

dynamics of church members. The authors reiterate that when large churches reorganize into smaller subgroups, often groups of no more than 15, function as a smaller version of the larger church for the congregation, the chances of losing members decreases. The authors add that when church members become part of a small group that is attached to the larger congregation, it helps to keep them engaged while being in community with others. Being in community in the small group also helps members become involved with civic activity, volunteering with various community service projects and missions the church sponsors.

Drawing on Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel Stroope's work entitled "*Small Groups, Contexts, and Civic Engagement: A Multilevel Analysis of United States Congregational Life Survey Data*, Bretherton and Dunbar (2020) reveal that the study analyzed data from more than 80,000 individuals in 424 churches and concluded that church members who are involved with small groups within the larger church tend to experience higher levels of civic engagement.

Case Studies

To bring church growth best practices to life, the following case studies from both the United States and abroad paints a vivid picture of what has worked in the past regarding church growth.

The first case study examines Pastor Chuck Smith. Smith became the pastor of Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa in 1965, which at the time had 25 members. Over time, the ministry grew to an international network of more than 1,800 churches drawing 25,000 people weekly. Giffard (2019) notes that one distinctive best practice of Smith's church, Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, was that it was known for its "come as you are" dress code. A second distinctive best practice of the church was its music. Under Smith's leadership, Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, according to Giffard (2019), was a pioneer in modern contemporary music being played in worship services,

specifically targeting and appealing to young adults, hippies, and drug addicts. The author adds

that although the ministry experienced substantial growth, Smith preached that the size of the

church should not be the main concern of the pastor and never should be.

> Giffard (2019) reveals Smith's philosophy:
>
> Pastors ought never to forget that it is not their job to add to the church: that is God's job. He considers counting heads a trap and "a terrible snare to fall into. Pastors should trust in the work of the Holy Spirit and trust that Jesus Christ is building His church as He said He would. Smith considers that the pastor's job is "to feed the flock, tend to the flock, love the flock, and see to it that they're cared for. Pastors should look after those who are there and realize that these are the ones the Lord has brought for them to minister to. The Lord will not make them shepherd over many until they've been faithful with a few. (p. 78)

Smith believed strongly that the pastor's responsibility is to get people into the Word, prayer,

fellowship, and the breaking of bread. Giffard (2019) notes:

> Smith observed that, unfortunately, many pastors strive to gain new members and then have to struggle to maintain what they've gained. They try to come up with new programs to create the spiritual hype that people have learned to long for. They push and stress to increase their numbers, putting pressure on themselves to keep it going, which means they continually have to do something different. This constant striving can destroy pastors: "There are a lot of super churches today, but there are also a lot of tired leaders because they are striving to maintain what they've built.… It's that striving to maintain that creates ministerial burnout or will run you into the ground or will lead you into all kinds of aberrant practices. (p. 79)

Contemporary Growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic Branches of Christianity

The second case study for best practices for church growth is based on ethnographic

fieldwork in one of the largest megachurches in Guatemala - Fraternidad Cristiana, a church with

more than 15,000 members and operates a second large church building and a private school in

Guatemala City, Reu (2019) revealed the use of cell group model, a growth strategy that many

neo-Pentecostal churches deploy. Fraternidad Cristiana was the first Guatemalan church to

implement the cell group system invented by the South Korean Pastor David Yonggi Cho.

Reu (2019) states in the 1930s, Classical Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God or the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), established themselves in Guatemala by developing a system comprised of smaller congregations located in rural and suburban areas. However, the cell group is the modern method of attracting large numbers of people to central urban megachurches. Cell groups meet regularly in addition to the main church services. They are typically led by a leader or facilitator guiding individuals to forming deeper relationships through fellowship, prayer, Bible study, and outreach opportunities (Reu, 2019).

Reu (2019) adds the model involves setting small campuses or offices to serve as the church's base in residential areas. The campuses are run by regular members of the church who plan and organize weekly services and work to expand the group by inviting neighbors, friends, family, and coworkers. When the group has grown large enough, the group breaks off, and the process is replicated or repeated by evangelizing people in the surrounding areas.

As it relates to the cell group system, Reu (2019) notes that the cell group system exists not only to create small networks of church members but also to sustain the growth in numbers regarding church membership. The key to ensuring continued growth or increase in church membership is having good leaders and volunteers, referred to as auxiliary pastors or cell group leaders, who promote spiritual guidance to the small groups in private homes or dwellings.

The third case study for best practices for church growth is the Nairobi Gospel Centers International (NGCI), a Christian ministry founded in Kenya in 1991. At the time of the research, the ministry had two churches in Nairobi and 10 other branches across the country. The church embarked on a church growth initiative codenamed as Rapid Church Planting Strategy (RCPS).

In terms of an effective approach for numerical growth utilizing the RCPS, Ndonye (2018) revealed that the church experienced an increase in membership by primarily using the

growth center model. The growth center model involved church members regularly inviting friends, family, and others to attend church services to help achieve higher numbers. At the time of the study, there were 43 growth centers in operation.

As a result, the church experienced an upward trend in increased membership, growing from 834 members in 2010 to 1,664 members in 2018. The average church attendance in 2018 was approximately 3,000 people. The church's strategic plan was to reach an attendance of 5,000 people by 2020.

In terms of spiritual growth, the strategy that the church used was that it emphasized members read the Bible daily. Ndonye (2018) explained that to help guide members with their spiritual growth journey, the church equipped its members with a daily Bible study guide. The church also held regular meetups for fellowship, prayer, Bible lessons, worship, and Communion. To help supplement church members' spiritual growth, the church offered opportunities to serve. In addition, the church utilized home growth centers, prayer groups, and Bible study groups as part of its strategy.

However, the church's data revealed that their weekly prayer meeting attendance, a key measure of spiritual growth, Ndoneye (2018) noted, varied from month-to-month over a three-year period from January 2016 and June 2018. The overall result during this three-year period is the church experienced a decline in growth. The author concluded that the strategies the church used to stimulate spiritual growth proved to be either ineffective or that there were other contributing factors that led to the negative spiritual growth trends for the church.

Financial Church Growth

In terms of best practices for financial growth, Araujo-Hawkins (2019) points to the National Study of Congregations' Economic Practices, which reports that what is changing today

is how congregations generate revenue. Based on the study's findings, Araujo-Hawkins (2019) found that 81% of the congregations depend on individual contributions for revenue. However, the study revealed that there is no correlation between growth in regular church attendance and growth in income.

Furthermore, the study found that one-third of the churches that reported growth or decline in either attendance or income did not report a corresponding change in the other measure. The findings, according to Araujo-Hawkins (2019), suggest that the methods of increasing revenue for churches are evolving, and the tradition of more attendance at church equaling more revenue is not holding true anymore.

Araujo-Hawkins (2019) goes on to add that the method that is working, the study found, is giving individuals a variety of digital options to give financially can drive positive growth in revenue. Specifically, 60% of the congregations that equipped congregants with ways to give through a smartphone app experienced an increase in revenue, while just 45% of churches without an app reported an increase.

While digital giving is a developing best practice for financial growth, an emerging ethnic group is also leading the way in church growth.

Ethnic Church Growth

Ramos, et al. (2018) reveal:

The recent narrative of American religion is one of decline as the percentage of those who claim no religious affiliation (the "Nones") continues to expand. But amidst the broader dynamics of seeming religious deterioration, the numbers of Latino Protestants in America are growing—fast. More and more Latinos identify as Protestant, Latino Protestant churches are spreading, and Latino Protestant parachurch organizations are broadening their representation and outreach. Much of the growth of Latino Protestantism is associated with losses experienced by the Roman Catholic Church since the percentage of Latinos who identify as Roman Catholics have eroded to 48% while Latino Protestants increased to 24% in 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2014a). More than just conversion from Roman Catholicism continued migration of Latinos from countries with high Protestant

adherence, such as Guatemala and El Salvador,1 contributes to this rise. Looking forward, by 2030, half of all Latinos in America will identify as Protestant. Given that estimates indicate that Latinos will comprise almost one-third of the U.S. population by 2050 (Pew Research Center. (p. 1)

Ramos, et al. (2018) stress that Latino Protestants' growth has implications beyond the numbers. The first implication is that religion plays a significant role in the daily lives of Latino Protestants and that the importance or priority placed on religion is notably higher than on White evangelicals and Latino Catholics.

Contributors of Declining Church Growth

Perhaps one of the most striking best practices for modern church growth, this researcher believes, is the identification of activities that prohibit church growth. A metric that has contributed to the consistent decline of in-person church attendance is shown in a source that may not be as obvious as mere numbers - the emergence of Select/ AAU Youth Sports, where games and events (baseball, softball, football, basketball, soccer, swimming, cheerleading, gymnastics, etc.) are played on Saturdays and Sundays, days that in the past have been reserved for in-person church attendance in the United States.

Livingston (2020) explained that according to a survey given to parents who have children actively participating in sports, due to the demanding game schedules and practice schedules, parents are often forced to decide which comes first: their child's sporting event, church, or a variety of other activities in their schedule.

The study revealed that the demands of youth sports can lead to parents prioritizing sports over their regular family activities, including skipping church to attend games and practices often held on Saturdays, Sundays, and Wednesday nights (days in which churches usually schedule worship services and Bible study classes).

Livingston (2020) reiterates that off-the-field time associated with playing sports, including practices and training sessions, often collide with times that churches schedule activities, leaving parents to have to make a choice between their child's spiritual development and playing sports with the hope of attracting and catching the eyes of college scouts, paving the way for an athletic college scholarship.

The problem with this, according to Livingston (2020), is that youth regularly attending church services and activities is crucial to the child's spiritual development and well-being from adolescence to young adulthood. The author adds that some parents underestimate how much children rely upon their faith in their daily lives, as this is an area of spirituality that is personal and is not observable.

Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature

According to Araujo-Hawkins (2019), the gap in the literature is that studies have been conducted on church growth methods to increase the number of people attending church worship services. However, Giffard (2019) adds that these studies' conclusions aim to increase in-person worship attendance. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is limited literature on growing the Christian church using digital and online methods.

Hess (2017) states online and digital media technologies are proving to be a legitimate way for people to form faith-forming experiences, but the Christian church as a whole is too quick to dismiss it as less important than traditional ways of religious expression.

Stuhlmuller (2018) points to Pastor Craig Mueller, author of *Any Body There? Worship and Being Human in a Digital Age*, who notes that there are two undeniable trends happening in society today: a consistent decline in church participation and a steady increase in the use of digital technologies. To further illustrate this, Blair (2022) points to the May 9, 2022,

announcement by Senior Pastor David Dummitt of Willow Creek Community Church that due to low attendance and giving, the church is cutting $6.5 million from its budget and laying off 30 staff members.

Blair (2022) notes in his *Chicago Tribute* article that, according to Dummitt, Willow Creek Community Church is approximately half the size it was before the COVID-19 pandemic, a reality that is in line with many churches across the United States.

Aside from the large churches like Willow, the average number of people driving to attend an in-person church service is less than one may think. To this point, Shimron (2021) points to the Faith Communities Today Survey of more than 15,000 churches right before COVID appeared reveals that between 2000 and 2020, out of the estimated 350,000 churches in the United States, 65 or fewer people attended church in-person on any given weekend.

Produced by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, the survey, which has been conducted every five years since 2000, consists of 20 denominations and faith traditions (Shimron, 2021). Thumma (2021), director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, reiterates that the consistent decline of in-person worship attendance over the past two decades, church leaders should be concerned, especially when considering the drastically increasing number of church congregations averaging 65 or fewer people in attendance.

Nieuwhof (2022), former pastor and church leadership strategist, said current data speaks for itself and notes that if the mission of the church is to spread the Gospel and reach as many people as possible, church leaders should step out of their comfort zones and try something new beyond packing seats on Sunday mornings. Nieuwhof (2022) stresses, "church is a lot more than one hour of performance or participation on Sunday morning (a little harsh, but that's what it's become in some cases). A lot of the innovation that has to happen in the Church needs to take

place outside of Sunday and outside the building" (para. 39). He also notes that the problem with church leaders not adopting digital methods for church growth is that the church operates similar to a restaurant that only serves certain kinds of food on a certain one-hour-window on a certain day and at one location - and if you miss it, you are out of luck.

The problem with the church continuing to operate the same way that it has for decades is that it is outdated and is years behind the way the rest of the world works (Nieuwhof, 2022). Church leaders live in a world where individuals can get and do virtually everything that they want on their own schedule. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the trend and now even people who regularly attend church want more convenient options as it relates to their faith. The option that people are seeking is to be able to connect with their church and deepen their faith in community where they are already spending a lot of their time each day – online in digital spaces (Nieuwhof, 2022).

Part of the urgency to adopt digital methods for church growth can, according to Shellnutt (2022), be attributed to what pastors and church leaders are experiencing first-hand now that most churches have re-opened from the COVID shutdowns. Shellnutt (2022) points out that although most churches in America have re-opened without mask requirements for more than six months, people returning to church have plateaued.

To illustrate the effectiveness of adopting digital methods for church growth, Scroggins (2019), former lead pastor at Buckhead Church in Atlanta, told a story about how he met Frank Blake, the former CEO of Home Depot. Scroggins (2019) notes how Blake informed him that in 2009 during the financial crisis, Home Depot had identified Amazon, a digital-first company, as its chief competitor rather than Lowes. This company, at the time, was solely focused on in-person store walk-ins. They invested heavily in HomeDepot.com (a digital-first approach) to

provide the first experience for current and potentially new customers. He notes that the managers of the physical Home Depot store initially had the same thought as many pastors do about church online - that it's a terrible idea.

"He (Blake) said we stopped building physical stores and invested all of our money and additional profit into HomeDepot.com. Our store managers were worried. They were scared, but we started seeing that it actually fueled growth in both places. The more someone shopped online, the more they shopped in a brick-and-mortar store. The more someone shopped in a brick-and-mortar store, the more they shopped online. But their sales of both actually grew" (4:30). The same principle or concept applies, Scroggins (2019) said, to today's screen-first church.

While utilizing the best practices for church growth has worked in the past, there is a gap in current literature that accounts for a global changing of the times – the digitization of the world and behavioral changes as it relates to how individuals attend church. This global behavioral change highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic includes the preference for online church attendance and the digital methods and platforms that are available to reach more people on a global scale versus the focus primarily being on growth related to in-person church attendance. It is important to note that the use of digital technology can be useful for church growth, in-person church worship and gatherings should not be totally abandoned – technology should be leveraged to reach people who are not physically able to attend church in-person and to provide access to people who do not want to attend in-person due to a change in preference for worship (Nieuwhof, 2021).

To illustrate that a change has occurred not only in the United States but also abroad, this researcher points to an article published by *The Christian Century Magazine* based in Chicago,

Illinois, which points to a study by the Church Pastoral Aid Society in London. The study found that for some churches, taking worship online has doubled or even tripled the attendance numbers from in-person services. In addition, a US study indicated that among those who regularly attend in-person services, 40 percent have logged onto their church's online services while 48 percent have not. And 23 percent have logged on to another church's service in addition to their own.

Changing of The Times

As it relates to church growth and changes in times, Curtis (2020) points out that American society, in the 1950s particularly, the United States, was engaged in the Cold War, and leaders used religion as a way to define America as a Christian nation, as opposed to atheistic communism. The author explained that this definition of America as a Christian nation was also popularized in mainstream culture, with figures such as Billy Graham using patriotic and religious themes during his revivalist crusades. Curtis (2020) suggested that this environment led to a surge in church membership and increased the number of Americans identifying with a religious affiliation.

Percy (2017) reiterates that Donald McGavran, widely considered the pioneer of the Church Growth Movement, brought light to the idea that like attracts like as it relates to attracting more people to increase the numbers attending church services. This idea of like attracts like, according to Percy (2017), was not only popularized by McGavran but also adopted worldwide by many evangelical churches. He adds that although McGavran pushed the homogenous unit principle (like attracts like), the church growth movement leader's success using this idea was influenced by drawing on the likes of Dale Carnegie, who wrote *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in 1936. Part of the reason why this concept caught on in America

is that people embraced incorporating the subjects of health, wealth, and prosperity into the Gospel, offering a guaranteed way to help grow the church. The author goes on the note that due to embracing this concept, in America, it is hard to tell the difference between business and religion.

The church growth movement, according to Danielson (2019), was intended to help churches grow numerically by attracting more people to attend in-person worship services. The downside of this is that the shift in focus on increasing in-person attendance has led to the actual worship of God not being as important. The author argues that the small church ministry and worship have been affected and influenced by this philosophy. Danielson (2019) asserts that small churches are all capable and equipped with the knowledge and training to worship God, regardless of their size, and that these churches should not lose focus or become distracted by a church culture that relates success in ministry with how many people show up for worship on Sundays.

In terms of the changing of times from when McGavran's church growth methods worked like a charm, the emergence of technology and the behavioral change in how individuals define attending church (in the virtual space or in person) is relevant to the future of church growth.

Ashlin-Mayo (2019) points out some churches' reluctance to shift to the changing of the times, stating that part of the reluctance could rest in the fact that many in church leadership are older and grew up during a time (predigital) when things such as education were done face-to-face with physical campuses and classrooms. However, times have changed to where cell phones, the Internet, social media, and gaming devices are part of virtually all elements of the

current global society. The familiarity with face-to-face environments (what is comfortable) could be playing a role in the reluctance to adopt digital technology (what is uncomfortable).

Ashlin-Mayo (2019) points to Stephen and Mary Lowe, authors of *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age*, who suggest that a major criticism of adopting virtual forms of communication and connection is that some believe that virtual communication and connection is not as effective, or as good as being physically present. The Lowes, however, rebut this argument by pointing to the Bible, which shows that in the early Christian church, the Apostle Paul's letters served as a substitute for his physical presence.

Ashlin-Mayo (2019) goes on to note that Lowe and Lowe cite the orthodox Christian view called Communion of the saints, which indicates that believers enjoy a universal fellowship with Christ and each other through the Spirit, "Thus, the communion of the saints exists and grows both in spite of the dispersed nature of its existence in the world and through the effective ministry of the Holy Spirit operating at a distance but unconstrained by it" (p. 333).

For example, a digital discipleship study on how churches in New York used technology for adult discipleship during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals what can happen utilizing digital methods for church growth. Dunlow (2021) revealed that qualitative surveys of 21 churches in New York shed light on how 95% of churches surveyed in New York shifted and adopted digital forms to continue ministering to their congregations. The research revealed that half of the churches found that digital discipleship was effective for their church membership.

Regarding how the churches in New York utilized online platforms, Dunlow (2021) revealed, "Of the churches that reported engaging in digital discipleship, 18 (90%) utilized a video conferencing site. The overwhelming majority, 17 (85%), utilized Zoom, and 1 (5%) utilized Google Meet. Two of the churches did not use video conferencing for their discipleship

ministry" (p. 466.) Although the results of this case study can be interpreted as positive, Hunt (2019) cautions church leaders to keep at the forefront of their minds that digital discipleship is not limited to sharing the Gospel of Christ by posting Bible verses on digital platforms, such as social media, and offering 'thoughts and prayers' but to truly practice what is being preached. One's devotion to living as a faithful digital disciple for the mission of Christ does more to glorify God than superficial discipleship that defaults to carefully constructed social media posts.

Examining the traditional church growth strategy, Scroggins (2019) notes that during his time as pastor at Buckhead Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and many churches alike, the goal would be to get people into the foyer inside of the church. Scroggins (2019) asserts that model is now outdated and has been disrupted because people no longer attend church to get a first experience with the church. People have shifted to a screen-first culture, where the digital world is the new foyer.

In an effort to make sense of utilizing digital methods for church growth, Scroggins (2019) provides the analogy, "You haven't been to a restaurant in years that you didn't look at the menu first online. You haven't booked a vacation that you didn't do the 360 tours of the lobby of the hotel before you clicked reserve or booked the hotel. You haven't bought a car, probably, that you didn't get inside of and look around on a screen before you actually hit purchase. This screen-first digital age has changed everything, and it ought to change the way we're thinking about church" (2:04).

Scroggins (2019) adds that the implications of the screen-first disruption are that churches must allocate time, budget, and resources to the new foyer – the digital world. By budgeting time and resources for this area, church leaders are setting the church up for success as it relates to church growth (Scroggins, 2019). It is one thing to realize that a screen-first culture

has disrupted the previous church model. However, it takes time to understand what is effective for each church. It is like how any organization operates. There are some general guidelines that one must follow to be successful, but the most successful organizations are the ones that cater specifically to their target audience - this is the same approach that the church must adopt (Scroggins, 2019).

Avery (2022) reveals that according to a report by App Annie, a mobile data and analytics platform, in 2021, the average American devoted more than four hours a day to mobile devices, such as their cell phone, tablet, or watch. The report noted that the time spent on screens reflects an increase of 30 percent from 2019. Avery (2022) goes on to reveal that due to the explosive growth of social media platforms, such as TikTok, the study shows that seven out of every 10 minutes on a mobile device was spent on social media or photo/video apps.

The astonishing that has developed with the emergence of digital technology and social media is that church leaders now have the answer to where the youth department hangs out. Statistics not only tell us where the youth department is hanging out but also where people of all ages are hanging out. They are hanging out in digital places like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, and other social environments that are based online 100 percent (Jones, 2020).

Profile of the Current Study

This researcher agrees that the best practices for church growth identified above have worked in the past. However, this researcher has identified the gap in the literature and mere observation that adopting digital communication on social media platforms is vital for future church growth. However, this researcher also agrees with Adebayo and Govender (2020), who

identify that there is a fine line between adopting digital church growth methods and employing traditional business marketing methods instead of genuine church growth strategies.

Adebayo and Govender (2020) note that although digital discipleship methods are great for reaching people, church leaders must proceed with caution not to simply engage in marketing tactics. Marketing, the authors note, plays a crucial role in helping churches fulfill their social responsibility to regularly connect with their congregation. At the same time, the mission and objective of any organization, especially the church, should be distinctive, feasible, and motivating. Adebayo and Govender (2020) go on to quote McCracken (2010), saying, "If the church operates as a corporation, with a product to sell and a market to conquer, what then happens to our faith when we turn it into a product to sell?" (p. 16).

The literature presented has revealed case studies, statistics, and insight from Christian church thought leaders that adopting digital methods for church growth is a recipe for success. However, if that still falls on deaf ears, the conclusion researchers from Penn State University came to while analyzing 223,815 tweets following a nearly seven-hour-long Facebook outage on October 4, 2021, speaks volumes about the power and influence digital platforms hold.

In the Penn State Study, Gyllhem (2022) declares, "social media has become as essential as gas and electricity for many people" (para. 1). In moving this point forward, Moore (2021) notes that according to the United States Census Bureau, there is a projected 7.8 billion people worldwide. Dixson (2022) revealed that during 2021, more than 4 billion people worldwide were actively using social media, and that number is estimated to increase to more than six billion active social media users by 2027. Dixson (2022) reiterates that billions of people are on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and LinkedIn, for more than four hours a day, seven days a week.

Matthew 4:19 says, "Then He said to them, Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men" (New King James Version, 2011, Matthew 4:19). Church leaders must accept that the church growth methods that have been used since the Church Growth Movement in the 1950s have declined in effectiveness over the past two decades. However, there is good news. There is a new sea loaded with fish (people) that can be ministered to, and as a result, the church can grow numerically, financially, and in discipleship. That new sea of people is active online, seven days a week.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of pastors who led exclusively digital churches during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this study was to shed light on the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches in hopes that these experiences could potentially lead to growth in other churches. This chapter provides the research design synopsis, population, sampling procedures, limitations of generalization, ethical considerations, instrumentation, research procedures, data analysis, statistical procedures, and chapter summary.

Research Design Synopsis

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research is a qualitative research design that aims to describe the "lived experiences" of individuals around a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This section provides an overview of the study's problem, purpose statement, research questions, and the research design and methodology.

The Problem

In-person church attendance has declined consistently for the past 20 years (The Barna Group, 2020). Before, during, and currently – during the post-COVID-19 pandemic, digital churches have used digital-only methods to grow in attendance, financial giving, discipleship, and building community online. Sharing these methods that have worked digitally could help churches grow by utilizing digital tools to reach, connect with, and share the Gospel of Christ to an unlimited amount of people beyond their church walls. Although there is current literature available on the topic of church growth, there is limited literature available that reveals how utilizing digital methods and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube,

Instagram, Twitch, LinkedIn, TikTok, and more, assists in church growth. The world is more connected than it ever has been in the history of mankind (Jones, 2020). With the rapid advances in technology and virtual environments increasingly becoming the new normal, a study that provides literature in this area would benefit all churches and add to the existing literature.

There is evidence that digital churches support church growth. Musonda (2021) points out that God is omnipresent - He is everywhere, and added that Wi-Fi is omnipresent also, and has become one of the most effective and necessary ways of reaching new members. Furthermore, over the past 10 years a new trend has emerged: Americans are slowly replacing traditional church with digital faith (Musonda, 2021).

This, however, does not mean that Americans do not want to attend church. Musonda (2021) pointed out that factors such as having to work on Sunday, something that was not the norm 30 years ago, Americans do not observe the day of worship as a day of rest like they used to. Many people have no choice but to work during regular church service hours. Those seeking God and options for church, seek out digital churches that offer videos of their sermons and an active online community (Musonda, 2021).

A positive benefit of digital churches is that their methods support church growth financially (Woodyard, 2019). In fact, a study by PushPay, an industry-leading donor management system for charities operating within the United States, points out that on average, digital givers donate 33 percent more ($200 a month through digital means versus $150 a month from non-digital means). The PushPay study also reveals that digital givers donate 44 percent more often than non-digital givers - 2.3 times a month versus 1.6 times a month (Woodyard, 2019).

The reason for the growth in giving digitally is not because digital givers are more generous givers than check givers, but because generosity is often a product of opportunity. Digital givers simply have more opportunity to give because they can give at any time, regardless of location, or if they make it to worship service or not (Woodyard, 2019).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of pastors who led exclusively digital churches during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. These pastors are part of an online church planting organization and non-denominational network located in the southwestern region of the United States.

Exclusively digital churches is defined as churches with a dedicated online campus where worship and gatherings occur (Buckner, 2011; Hutchings, 2007). The theory guiding this study is Stig Hjarvard's Mediatization of Religion Theory. This theory contends that the use of media enables religion to reach more people. The relationship between this theory and this study is that during church shutdowns amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technology and media promoted church growth by allowing God's Word to travel beyond the church walls - even non-Christians could watch sermons on digital and social media platforms such as YouTube (Singarimbun, 2021).

The current reality that church leaders face today is that everyone the church wants to reach (approximately four billion) is on social media platforms (Dixon, 2022). However, church leaders are still trying to understand how community is established, nurtured, and conducted online as an authentic means of Christian community. Some church leaders have also misunderstood online platforms such as Facebook as a place to advertise rather than seeing it as a real opportunity for ministry and church growth (Hortin, 2022).

The relationship between phenomenological philosophy and this study is that the lived experiences of digital church growth will require a shift in the mindset of church leaders, some of whom have lived their lives focused only on in-person church attendance. However, in-person church attendance has declined consistently for the past 20 years (The Barna Group, 2020), while the number of people gathering and connecting with one another online has drastically increased, with over four billion of the eight billion people on earth on social platforms for up for four hours a day, seven days a week (Dixson, 2022). Phenomenological philosophy regarding the lived experiences of digital church pastors for church growth implemented within the Christian church sets the groundwork for churches to have unlimited potential in terms of saving souls for Christ. If church leaders are truly interested in growing the church, a change in mindset and strategy must occur, and having a social media presence and utilizing digital tools for ministry is one of the best places to reach younger generations (Hortin, 2022).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the participants' lived experiences leading digital churches as they relate to church growth during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What are the participants' lived experiences of attracting new church members utilizing digital strategies during 2020-2022?

RQ3: How do pastors of digital churches describe their use of social media to reach people online with the Gospel of Christ during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Design and Methodology

The study's qualitative phenomenological design explored the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches for church growth. The ultimate goal of a phenomenological study,

according to Polkinghorne (1989), is to empower readers with a sense of "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (p. 46).

Creswell (1998) defines the need for a phenomenology study is most appropriate when there is a profound need to understand the human experience that is common to a group. Creswell (1998) suggests that the size of the group should be between three to 15 members. The focus of a phenomenological study is not a reaction to an experience, but to know what the experience was like to live it as they (the participants of the study) lived it (Munhall, 2007). Phenomenology, however, should not be confused with case studies, narrative inquiries, or empirical studies (Manen, 2017). Jean-Luc Marion (2002), a leading phenomenologist, describes phenomenology as the study of how things give themselves. He cautions against approaches where the meaning is pre-determined to a phenomenon.

The approach of this study was transcendental phenomenology, where the interpretation of the research is presuppositionless and based on intentionality. Richards and Morse (2013) note, "Transcendental phenomenology explores the way knowledge comes into being, and knowledge is based on insights rather than objective characteristics, which constitutes meaning" (p. 71).

Within Husserl's philosophy are the concepts of bracketing or (epoche); horizon, Phenomenological Reduction; Noema, and noesis. Bracketing (epoche) is the idea that the researcher becomes like a stranger in a foreign land, similar to an alien visiting Earth for the first time. Horizon is the present experience that cannot be bracketed; therefore, nothing is fully seen in its entirety because no human is omniscient. Phenomenological reduction is to suspend judgments to focus on the analysis of the experience. Noema is what is thought about, and noesis is the action of thinking about or interpreting (Peoples, 2021).

The study used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches for church growth. Discovering these lived experiences informed the research problem. Data in a qualitative phenomenological study, is typically collected using interviews (Peoples, 2021). An example that shows the relationship between the problem and this study's design can be seen in a study by Paras et al. (2021), examining the lived experiences of Filipino pastors in online ministry amidst COVID-19 pandemic.

The study described the lived experiences of their online ministry, the challenges of their online church ministry, and the coping mechanisms and attitudes toward leading its community. The study revealed that pastors are challenged by emotional, mental, and physical problems due to isolation and the weight of the online ministry. Many of the pastors also struggled to preach through online meetings and live streams and experienced a lack of materials and equipment for the online ministry. The study revealed that pastors needed social and financial support.

The study concluded that most pastors gained positive and new experiences in online ministry. Just as it was with the phenomenological study by Paras et al. (2021), which showed positive gains with online ministry, this study used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches for church growth.

Setting

The geographic location for this study was digital churches located in the southwestern region of the United States that are part of an online church planting organization and non-denominational network. This network has over 100 members, which includes church planters, pastors, and ministry leaders interested in online ministry and operating ministry online. However, approximately 20 of these members are digital church pastors. The digital church refers to churches that have a designated online campus (Buckner, 2011; Hutchings, 2007).

These digital churches connect with people worldwide by providing worship experiences and educational lessons for discipleship and building community utilizing digital tools and social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitch, Snapchat, and more.

There are approximately 350,000 physical churches in the United States (Jones, 2020). However, the digital church is a new concept and is limited in the number of digital churches in operation.

Regarding the digital church leadership and structure, the selected digital churches are led by a senior pastor with board members and recognized by the IRS as a 501c3 non-profit organization. This study was not limited to a particular denomination within the Christian church. These digital churches were allowed to be Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, or non-denominational.

Participants

The study's population of interest was digital church pastors that are part of an online church planting organization and non-denominational network. For the purpose of this study, this organization will be referred to as Organization D. Organization D has a network of church planters, pastors, and ministry leaders interested in online ministry and operating ministry online.

Organization D has members located within the United States. Organization D provides weekly online training for digital church leaders and provides an asynchronous online platform where members can instantly communicate and build community 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The online asynchronous platform gives digital church pastors and leaders the ability to learn and communicate on their own schedule while providing

encouragement for one another toward a common goal – online ministry and utilizing digital tools to reach more people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and build community online. Organization D has over 100 members in the network. Approximately 20 of these members are digital church pastors. This means that 20 percent of Organization D is comprised of digital church pastors. The remaining 80 percent of members are those interested in the subject of online ministry and provide ideas and participate in trainings on how to use digital tools and online platforms for church ministry. The technique of sampling was chosen modeling after the study by Paras et al. (2021), who selected from a network of Filipino pastors residing in the Province of Bulacan, Quezon City, Valenzuela City, Caloocan City, and General Santos City.

This study's sampling procedure consisted of a post within Organization D's online platform asking digital church pastors to participate in the study. The creator and founder of Organization D posted the message within the group. The names and contact information of pastors willing to participate in the study were sent by email from Organization D's creator and founder to the researcher. The number of participants was 10 digital church pastors. Selected general demographic data related to the 10 participants are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Select General Demographic Data

Demographic Category	Data
Gender	Male: 70%

	Female: 30%
Age	21-30: 10%
	31-40: 40%
	41-50: 50%
Race	Caucasian: 70%
	African American: 30%
Married	70%
Years of ministry in congregation	0-5: 0%
	6-10: 70%
	11-15: 20%
	16-20: 10%
	21-25: 0%
Size of congregation – Sunday service	0-50: 30%
	51-100: 40%
	101-150: 10%
	150 +: 20%

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is not affiliated with Organization D. However; the researcher joined the group for the purpose of gaining access to digital pastors to potentially participate in the

study. The researcher does not have any personal or professional relationship with any member of Organization D.

Regarding bias, the researcher does believe digital church ministry will play a crucial role in growing the church for years to come. The researcher, however, prior to the study, did not have concrete data on the tools and methods digital church leaders used for church growth. Considering the study's design, the researcher has no conflict of interest as there is no relationship that exists between the researcher and digital church pastors. An aspect related to bias, the researcher has some assumptions prior to the study. The researcher assumed that the data would reveal that digital churches would be able to increase church attendance since the method of worship is held where people are already gathering – online, including on Facebook, YouTube, Twitch, TikTok, and more.

The researcher assumed that financial giving would increase due to the convenience – the options to give financially using mobile phones through (text-to-give), giving via the website, and popular digital apps such as CashApp, Zelle, as opposed to giving using traditional methods, such as the collection plate or by mail. The implications of the researcher's role regarding data collection and data analysis procedures are that the researcher is aware of existing biases and assumptions to avoid potential interference with the study's results. The researcher has developed a relationship with the participants, which will increase the authenticity of answers.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure compliance with ethical considerations, this researcher completed the CITI's social-behavioral educational (SBE) basic course on December 16, 2020, and is certified through December 16, 2023. The certificate is on file with Liberty University's Institutional Review

Board (IRB) which authorized the researcher to proceed with the study on November 15, 2022

(Appendix A). This researcher complied with all related federal mandates and university

procedures.

Participants of the study were told the intent of the study. There was no financial

incentive given for participants to participate in the study. The researcher does not have any

financial gain from the study. The researcher has no known conflict of interest in undergoing the

study. The researcher also explained to each participant that a signed consent form was required

to participate in the study. The consent form is listed in Appendix D. The consent form was

emailed to the potential participant. Once the signed consent form was returned, the researcher

contacted the participant by phone to schedule the appointment for the study's interview.

Files used to capture data is stored in a password-protected system that is only accessible

to the researcher and will be destroyed five years after the study (2027).

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

The method of collecting data the researcher utilized is one of the most common ways to

collect data for a qualitative study - through interviews. This up-close method of gathering

information is a major part of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Interviews

empower the researcher with the ability to obtain rich data (Roulston, 2010).

Collection Methods

Prior to the interviews, a telephone screen was conducted to provide details to

prospective participants about what the study entails and to discover the participants' readiness

for the study.

Regarding the data collection activities, the researcher used semi-structured interviews.

The researcher selected the semi-structured format because it provides open-ended questions and

gives the participant(s) freedom and room to answer questions in their own way without the researcher's involvement (Burgess, 1984). An additional reason the researcher utilized semi-structured interviews for the qualitative phenomenological study is that it allows participants to reveal and describe in detail their lived experience with the phenomenon.

Borg and Gall (1983) advise against structured interviews because it requires a great deal of training and beginner researchers rarely have the ability to conduct the activity successfully. With structured interviews, researchers are limited to questions and data that was predetermined (St. John, et al., 2014). Bordam and Biklen (1982) describe structured interviews as a misuse of qualitative methods. However, with semi-structured interviews, researchers can be confident in receiving comparable data across subject (Bordam & Biklen, 1982). Semi-structured interviews give the interviewee the space to provide in-depth answers in their own words, free from pre-determined answers (Drury et al., 2011).

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to gain an understanding of the lived experience of digital church pastors as it relates to church growth methods.

Instruments and Protocols

The researcher used an interview guide during the study's interview process (see Appendix E). The interview guide/protocol includes a list of questions, topics, and talking points the researcher covered. Many qualitative studies, Leedy and Ormrod (2018) point out, "are characterized by an emerging design, in which data collected early in the investigation influence the kinds of data the researcher subsequently gathers" (p. 238). Merriam (1998) writes, "most interviews in qualitative research are semi-structured; thus, the interviews guide will probably contain several specific questions that you want to ask everyone" (p. 81).

The structure of the semi-structured guide includes a broad question at the beginning of the interview to make the interviewee feel at ease. The middle section of the semi-structured guide is where the researcher pursued questions in more depth in hopes of receiving the answers to specific research questions. The semi-structured guide is included in Appendix E.

The end section of the semi-structured interview guide probed to get more information on questions previously covered but need more clarity. The researcher also asked questions linked to the research theory being used. To ensure that the interview questions provided answers to the research questions, the researcher created a list of information the researcher wanted to obtain from the semi-structured interview. Regarding the interview itself, the first step was the interview, where the researcher asked a set of open-ended questions.

Interview

During the interviews, the researcher began by asking questions about the background and life history of the participants. As Leedy and Ormrod (2018) note, "the researcher attempts to situate participants' lived experiences—that is, to place those experiences within a larger context relative to the topic of study" (p. 233).

The interviews aimed to get the details of the lived experience of the participants as it relates to digital church growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews also asked participants questions to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. The researcher utilized memos (reflective, methodological, and analytical memos) to gather initial impressions of the interviewees. The memos were also used to jot down or journal non-verbal communication, such as expressions that could help provide additional context and understanding of what the interviewees were saying. Memos, according to Glaser (2004), serve as "theoretical notes about the data and the conceptual connections between categories" (p. 61).

The interviews were conducted via Zoom. The audio of the interviews was recorded. The end of the interviews was designed as a member check of the interview with interpretive interview questions. The use of interpretive interviews is a trusted method to ensure that the researcher thoroughly understands what the participant meant in their answers to questions (Strauss et al., 1981).

With regard to the interview questions, the researcher paid particular attention to how the participants' cultural background could influence their responses; included participants who could provide the best information for the study; determined a good location; receiving permission; creating a rapport with participants to show genuine interest in what they have to say; asked for concrete strategies rather than philosophy, and let participants express themselves by avoiding putting words in their mouth. After all, a good interviewer, according to (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018), is above all, a good listener.

Regarding the length of the interviews, Seidman (2006) recommends 60-to-90-minute interviews. Glesne (2011) recommends interviews be no longer than one hour. Consistent with Seidman and Glesne, the interviews were 90 minutes or less. The researcher recorded the information from the interviews with hand-written notes, audiotaping, and video recording via Zoom. The transcription was done by an online artificial intelligence engine at https://otter.ai. Creswell and Creswell (2017) note, "Even if an interview is taped, we recommend that researchers take notes in the event that recording equipment fails. If audiotaping is used, researchers need to plan in advance for the transcription of the tape" (p. 189).

The researcher prepared five to ten (10) questions beforehand. Spaces were placed between each question to give the researcher space to record notes and notes as a backup in case

the audio-recording device did not work during the interview. The interview questions were consistent with each participant, meaning each participant was asked the same questions.

The researcher also memorized the questions to assist in having a natural conversation with participants during the interview and avoided appearing to read the interview questions.

Procedures

After the researcher received clearance from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher contacted potential participants by phone. If the potential participants could not be reached by phone, the researcher contacted them by email. The potential participants had 10 days to respond either by phone or email. Once the potential participants were reached, the researcher explained the research study to them by phone, revealed the timelines, and explained how the study would be conducted - through interviews. During this same conversation time, the researcher answered any questions the potential participants had.

Furthermore, the researcher also explained to each participant that a signed consent form is required to participate in the study. The consent form is listed in Appendix D. The consent form was emailed to the potential participant. Once the signed consent form was returned, the researcher contacted the participant by phone to schedule the appointment for the interview.

The researcher explained that their identities in the study will remain confidential, meaning it will not be shared, so no one will know the lived experience of the person or their organization (digital church). All data collected is password protected to ensure the privacy of the participants.

Data Analysis

The process of analyzing data tends to rely heavily on the inductive reasoning process (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). Leedy and Ormrod (2018) explain, "The researcher observes a few

specific situations or events and, from them, imposes specific meanings on them—often by coding them in some way—and then draws conclusions about a more general state of affairs" (p. 344). The flexibility and open-endedness of a qualitative study data analysis can give the researcher insights that might not come to light otherwise (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018).

The researcher utilized NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software, to uncover categories, patterns, and themes in the data. The data analysis process can involve converting existing data into one or more forms that will be easy to organize and analyze (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018).

Analysis Methods

Data analysis methods included transcribing the interviews verbatim. This transcription of data resulted in a lot of information to sort through. With this in mind, the researcher engaged in winnowing the data. This means that the data that is deemed unnecessary was not used. Creswell and Creswell (2017) explain that winnowing the data is "a process of focusing in on some of the data and disregarding other parts of it" (p. 191).

Codes

Coding allows the researcher categorizes data and assign labels to each code (Creswell, 2013). The researcher used codes to pinpoint emerging themes and patterns from the data. Open coding was utilized to analyze specific words and phrases found in the raw data. The researcher used NVivo computer software to organized the unstructured data. A list of codes, Leedy and Ormrod (2018) asserts, "can be specific topics, characteristics, and attributes, actions, processes, emotions, beliefs, values, and evaluations" (p. 346). Yin (2014) recommends the use of computerized software during the process of analyzing written documents and the transcription of data. The researcher also used related words from the index cards and inserted

them into several graphs, including relationship and matrix graphs. These graphs helped the researcher visually see emerging themes. Creswell (2013) asserts that during this process, themes emerge from several codes/categories that represent a common idea.

The researcher interpreted the data - summarized the overall findings, compared the findings to the literature, and discussed the personal view of the findings. In addition, the researcher stated limitations and future research. The overall findings reveal what lessons were learned.

Creswell and Creswell (2017) state, "Limitations often attach to the methods of a study (e.g., inadequate sample size, difficulty in recruitment), and they represent weaknesses in the research that the author acknowledges so that future studies will not suffer from the same problems" (p. 198).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), is the criterion that determines the quality of qualitative research. This includes credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Trustworthiness also refers to validity, meaning the researcher checked for accuracy by using specific procedures. Creswell and Creswell (2017) recommend using multiple validity strategies to assist the researcher in assessing the accuracy of the findings while also convincing readers of the accuracy.

With this in mind, the researcher implemented eight validity strategies. The first validity strategy included triangulating data sources. Merriam (1998) writes, "triangulation strengthens reliability as well as internal validity" (p. 207). Denzin (1978) identifies four types of triangulation: (a) method triangulation, (b) data source triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and

(d) investigator triangulation. The researcher triangulated the data sources by using data from different people (the research participants).

Credibility

There are eight strategies that qualitative researchers commonly use (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Researchers engage in at least two of the eight strategies to ensure credibility. The eight strategies, according to Creswell and Miller (2000), include prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field; triangulation; peer review/debriefing; Negative case analysis; clarifying; member checking; Rich, thick description; external audits.

The second strategy the researcher used is member checking, a form of checks and balances for the study. This involved asking the interviewers to check the transcript.

Dependability

For dependability, the researcher employed an audit trail, where the researcher logs detailed information about the data being collected as they occur. An audit trail created a record and helps verify the research activities while empowering those who may want to undertake a similar study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018).

The fourth strategy was the use of rich, thick descriptions to convey findings. This transports the reader to the setting and provides an element of shared experiences of the study. Creswell and Creswell (2017) state, "When qualitative researchers provide detailed descriptions of the setting, for example, or offer many perspectives about a theme, the results become more realistic and richer. This procedure can add to the validity of the findings" (p. 200). The fifth validity strategy was to clarify bias. Researchers who self-reflect set the tone for an open and honest narrative that readers tend to appreciate. This is a core element of good qualitative research because it provides comments describing how their interpretations of the findings were

shaped by their background, gender, culture, and socioeconomic background (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Confirmability

The sixth strategy was to present negative information that runs counter to the themes. Researchers can be tempted to discard information or findings that are opposite of the major themes. However, presenting negative information can increase the validity of the findings. Creswell and Creswell (2017) note, "By presenting this contradictory evidence, the account becomes more realistic and more valid" (p. 200).

The seventh strategy included peer debriefing. A peer debriefer is someone who asks a series of questions regarding the qualitative study and involves the interpretation of the study outside of the researcher and invested in another person. This peer debriefing, according to Creswell and Creswell (2017), "adds validity to an account" (p. 200). For the purpose of the dissertation, this was done through the researcher's dissertation committee.

Creswell and Creswell (2017) write, "The procedure of having an independent investigator look over many aspects of the project (e.g., the accuracy of transcription, the relationship between the research questions and the data, the level of data analysis from the raw data through interpretation) enhances the overall validity of a qualitative study" (p. 200).

Transferability

Schwandt (2007) notes that transferability gives the researcher the ability to generalize results from this phenomenological study to other phenomenological studies. To accomplish transferability, the research has to clearly show where the research was done and reveal the specific sources from the data gathered. The benefit of this study is that transferability can be applied to other churches. Churches large and small will be able to take the lived experiences of

the participants (digital church pastors) regarding digital church growth, and implement the findings to experience the same results.

Areas in which this does not transfer is with churches without an online presence (website and social media accounts – Facebook page, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.). This transferability of this study will also help others build on this research in a different context.

Chapter Summary

The primary goal of this study was to discover the online methods that digital churches utilized during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic for church growth. The aim is to provide churches of all sizes with digital methods and strategies that they can use for church growth post the COVID-19 pandemic.

This chapter described the methodology, instruments, processes, and analysis that the researcher used in this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Chapter Four presents an analysis of the research data. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of pastors who led exclusively digital churches during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this study was to shed light on the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches in hopes that these experiences could potentially lead to growth in other churches. The chapter is divided into four sections as follows: Compilation Protocol and Measures, Demographic and Sample Data, Data Analysis and Findings, and Evaluation of the Research Design.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

This study used purposeful sampling since it provided research participants who were likely to contribute knowledge relevant to the study. Purposeful sampling, also known as selective sampling, is widely used by qualitative researchers use to recruit Participants who ae able to provide in-depth information regarding the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell & Plano, 2011). More details of the sample were provided in Chapter Three. The research participants were seven male pastors and three female pastors of non-denominational churches in the United States who led their congregations through the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. After receiving approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board, the prospective participants were contacted by email, and invited to join the study. The 10 pastors who accepted the invitation were sent an email providing detailed information regarding the study. A consent form was attached to the email. Participants were also contacted to setup a mutually agreeable day and time to conduct an interview for the study by phone or Zoom.

Data were recorded with the participants during interviews. The interviews were the means of data collection. The interview recorded background information to provide context, as well as data related to the study's three research questions: What are the participants' lived experiences leading digital churches as they relate to church growth during the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the participants' lived experiences of attracting new church members utilizing digital strategies during 2020-2022? How do pastors of digital churches describe their use of social media to reach people online with the Gospel of Christ during the COVID-19 pandemic? Each interview lasted approximately 65 minutes. The researcher used an interview guide during the study's interview process (see Appendix E). The interview guide/protocol includes a list of questions, topics, and talking points the researcher covered.

The interview also included member checking. Each participant was asked to review a copy of their interview and to respond with corrections, clarifications, or additions they wanted to make. The participants were also asked to evaluate the accuracy of a preliminary analysis of their interviews. All 10 participants noted minor misspellings in the printed transcript. After corrections were made, all 10 participants approved the accuracy of the transcript and the preliminary analysis.

The interviews were recorded using Zoom's digital audio recording feature. A hand-held digital audio recorder was also used as a backup for the recordings. The audio recordings were transcribed into a printed format. The transcription was done by an online artificial intelligence engine at https://otter.ai. The data was coded utilizing NVivo, a software program used for qualitative research at https://portal.mynvivo.com.

Demographic and Sample Data

Demographic and sample data were collected during the interview. Because the

interview pool was small – 10 pastors of digital churches, who are part of an online church planting organization and non-denominational network, there was a high possibility that participants could be identified by the demographic details. For this reason, some of the demographic data has been aggregated (see Table 2) and anonymized to maintain confidentiality, and some demographic data has been omitted to protect confidentiality.

Table 2

Participants' Aggregated Demographic Data

Demographic Category	Data
Median Age of Participants	36
Married	70%
Gender	Male: 70% Female: 30%
Race	Caucasian: 70% African American: 30%
Median Years in Christian Ministry	8
Median Years at Congregation	5
Median size of congregation pre-COVID	188
Median age of church (organization, not pastor)	18
Leadership of congregation	Elder-led
Pastor's highest level of ministerial education	Doctorate: 10% Masters: 50% Bachelors: 40%

The participants reported their main roles in their church (see table 3).

Table 3

Participants' Main Roles in their Churches

Participant	Roles
Participant 1	• Preaching/Teaching • Creating Social Media Content • Leadership Development
Participant 2	• Preaching/Teaching • Creating Social Media Content
Participant 3	• Preaching/Teaching • Training Staff • Leadership development
Participant 4	• Preaching/Teaching • Training Staff • Creating Social Media Content
Participant 5	• Preaching/Teaching • Creating Social Media Content • Leading Small Groups
Participant 6	• Preaching/Teaching • Creating Social Media Content • Leading Small Groups
Participant 7	• Preaching/Teaching • Leadership Development • Training Staff
Participant 8	• Preaching/Teaching • Training Staff • Leading Small Groups
Participant 9	• Preaching/Teaching • Leading Small Groups • Creating Social Media Content
Participant 10	• Preaching/Teaching • Creating Social Media Content • Leading Small Groups

The chapter now turns to this researcher's data analysis and findings.

Data Analysis and Findings

As noted in Chapter Three, this study's data analysis method included transcribing the interviews verbatim. After transcribing the interviews, this researcher practiced transcendental phenomenology, a method where the researcher becomes knowledgeable based on insights to determine meaning (Richards & Morse, 2013). This researcher engaged in line-by-line coding and reflected on the lived experience of the 10 participants of this study to uncover the essence of their experience of digital church growth during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. This researcher also utilized bracketing (epoche), where the researcher becomes like a stranger in a foreign land, similar to an alien visiting Earth for the first time (Peoples, 2021).

After reading and re-reading through each participant's interview and codes, this researcher developed a Code Book with definitions to prevent drift (see Appendix C). The codes and Code Book emerged through inductive coding. Inductive coding involves building a list of codes or a codebook from scratch based on the research data (Bodine, 2021).

While analyzing the codes and interviews, four themes emerged and were selected for relevance to this study. The four themes and one major theme was identified and are presented in Table 4. Since each participant's lived experience was different, the analysis of each interview is presented separately in sequence, from Participant One through Participant 10.

The four themes that emerged are both relevant to the focus of this study and provide the essence of the pastors' experiences with digital church growth during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. Those themes include: Intentional digital communication led to community; The use of digital tools contributed to financial increase and stability; Streaming on social media allowed churches to reach more people and gain new church members; Implementing digital platforms

promoted growth in small groups. The one major concept that emerged is: changing to a digital-first approach combined with experimentation leads to growth.

Each pastor, along with their church, was forced to adopt digital methods to have worship services and communicate with their congregation during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. Each pastor had to shift their focus from an in-person approach to a digital-first approach.

It is for this reason that each pastor was forced to experiment with various digital methods before discovering digital church growth. The reality of exclusively leading the church digitally during the COVID-19 pandemic provided learning experiences through experimentation. For example, Participant 3 discovered the best way to stream on Twitch through experimentation. Through experimentation, Participant 3 learned from his experience that preaching a 30-minute sermon on Twitch (a social media platform) without engaging people through the platform's chat feature would result in people leaving. However, engaging in the chat, drew new people to watch the chat and increased the time in which people watched or listened to the sermon.

The emerging themes and major concepts are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Emerging Themes and Major Concepts

Emerging Themes	Major concept
Intentional digital communication led to community.	Changing to a digital-first approach combined with experimentation leads to growth.
The use of digital tools contributed to financial increase and stability.	

Streaming on social media allowed churches to reach more people and gain new church members.	
Implementing digital platforms promoted growth in small groups.	

Theme One: Intentional digital communication that led to community (corresponds to RQ1) was when church pastors intentionally communicated with their congregation through text message and email at least one a week while also posting comments on their followers' social media pages. Posting comments on the church's followers' individual social media pages created a two-way conversation rather than leaving it to one-way communication.

Theme Two: The use of digital tools contributing to the financial increase and stability (corresponds to RQ1) occurred while utilizing digital payment tools, such as PashPay and CashApp, which allowed church members to setup recurrent payments and give at any time and any place, whether they are physically attending church or not on Sunday.

Theme Three: Streaming on social media that allowed churches to reach more people and gain new church members (corresponds to RQ3) happened when church pastors went live on social platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, or TikToK.

Theme Four: Implementing social platforms promoted growth in small groups (corresponds to RQ2) occurred when the church utilized platforms such as Zoom and Discord (an asynchronous digital platform that allows individuals to communicate 24/7 in real-time).

This study's interview began with the question: What has been your experience with digital church growth during the COVID-19 pandemic? The participants' answers were organized under the emerging themes and recorded below.

The Lived Experience of Participant 1.

The interview of Participant 1 (P1) took place on Monday, Nov. 28, 2022, via Zoom. P1 appeared relaxed, and the interview was guided by the Interview Guide (see Appendix E). The themes that emerged relevant to this study are described below.

Forced Adoption of Digital

From the onset, P1 experienced tremendous growth because it was a forced adoption for every attender of the church. However, despite the positive start, there were two major obstacles: there was a variance of opinion regarding COVID within the church. One side of the congregation struggled with how the church should respond, and the other side struggled with not knowing how to handle going digital and not meeting in person.

> The problem was just there were a lot of members of our church that just weren't capable of navigating digital. And so that was probably the biggest blocker, and just figuring out how to do the things you were not used to doing. There were members that didn't know how to use digital, and we had staff that didn't know how to do it. Unfortunately, I believe a lot of churches, like us, were so dependent on one day of a week to do church. We were theologically defending in-person church. But what we were really saying and meaning without realizing it is that we see people on Sunday, and when we lost that proximity experience, we realized, oh, wow, we're really just a Sunday morning-based church. (p. 2)

> Despite the obstacles, P1 was open to the idea of embracing digital technology.

> The first strategy was just dialing in our weekend experience and just making sure that it was available in the right platforms and that it was targeted to those people watching online. That next steps were easy. For us, there was this weekend focused prior to COVID. Then once COVID hit, our strategy shifted around creating tools and trainings, helping individuals to easily convert their existing groups into small groups on Zoom. We went from this weekend focus of church to rallying around converting existing groups into small groups on Zoom that could meet beyond just on Sunday. (p. 3)

Theme: Linked to implementing digital platforms promoting growth in small groups

Although P1's church's strategy had historically been to connect with people physically,

P1 implemented digital platforms that allowed the church's congregation to meet regardless of

their local.

> We implemented Zoom to serve as the primary meeting place for small groups. Our
> ministry shifted to providing an online ministry experience for people as an introductory
> way to connect to our church or, in a deep way, get connected to our church in a small
> group. By us being available for people on Zoom, our regular congregation was able to
> meet. I also noticed that our congregation started inviting their friends, family, and other
> people that they knew were not able to meet with their own church due to the shutdowns.
> As a result, our small groups grew in numbers, and we have been able to maintain that
> growth by offering small groups on Zoom. One key that I think really helped is the
> terminology we use to describe our small groups. We don't refer to our small groups as
> an online campus. We call it an online community. Online campus communicates the
> wrong goal for us. Online community is more inviting. (p. 6)

Implementing digital platforms allowed P1 to discover that it was easier to scale the

church online.

> The idea of never being closed, the idea of having ways to meet people at all hours just
> gave us huge potential – we were able to introduce new people into our ministry at
> various levels. This was significant to us in terms of growth because there are all sorts of
> reasons why people can't show up to church on a Sunday. And the idea is that you get to,
> in a best way possible, engage them through a digital strategy. This gave us limitless
> potential, but it did mean I had to be focused. I was able to really connect with people in
> all types of ways. And I think that is huge, especially if I think of smaller churches
> having the ability to scale. There were tons of benefits around for us reaching more
> people and engaging more people through our small groups. Prior to COVID, we sort of
> undervalued small groups online, but what we discovered is that you get to disciple more
> of your members digitally. (p. 13)

Theme: Links to the use of digital tools contributing to financial increase and stability

P1 described that 80% of the givers of the church were people over the age of 50, an age

group that always brought their tithes to church to put in the collection plate. This meant that

attending church in-person gave them the opportunity to give. When the church could not meet

due to mandated church shutdowns, P1 was facing a major financial problem.

When the church was shut down due to COVID, people were not able to give. They were used to giving their tithes and offering in the collection plate. Because of this, our church suffered financially during the onset of COVID. However, the once we added digital giving platforms, people were able to give through text messaging and online. People were also able to setup recurring giving, which was great because people could still give even though they were not coming to church in-person. The beauty of recurring giving is that it allowed members of our congregation to give on a regular basis, which provided us with stability. Also, the new people that we gained in our small groups on Zoom were also able to give, so we experienced an increase in giving after we added these financial giving platforms. (p. 2)

Summing Up P1's Experience

P1's daily routine consisted of connecting with people throughout the weekday through direct messages, email, and streaming on social media platforms – YouTube and Facebook. This allowed P1 to invite the congregation and new people to join the church's small groups that were held throughout the week. P1 experimented with digital tools and platforms to learn which worked best for him and netted the best results for the church.

Although P1 was not too excited about switching to a digital strategy, the experience of finding growth avenues for the church in the areas of small groups as a first step into the life of the church, and experiencing the advantages of online giving, provided positive outcomes for the church during a global pandemic.

The Lived Experience of Participant Two

The interview of Participant Two (P2) took place on Friday, December 2, 2022, via Zoom. P2 appeared relaxed, and the interview was guided by the Interview Guide (see Appendix E). The themes that emerged relevant to this study are described below.

Digital Experimentation

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, P2 had mixed emotions. In one sense, P2 was not excited about the church being completely shut down. However, in another sense, P2 thought the COVID-19 shutdowns presented an opportunity to experiment with an idea he had been

contemplating for years. P2 had a hobby of playing video games, and over the years, P2 noticed that a large number of young adults (especially males) and teens were also avid video gamers. There are more than 3.2 billion active video gamers worldwide and is expected to reach 3.4 billion gamers by 2024 (Howarth, 2023). In the United States there are more than 227 million gamers in the United States. Approximately 74% of US households have at least one person that plays video games. The average video gamer in the US is 31 years old, and 7% of people over the age of 65 play video games (Branka, 2023). P2 saw the COVID-19 shutdowns as an opportunity to experiment with reaching new people with the Gospel on Twitch, one of the fastest-growing social media platforms filled with video game enthusiasts.

Theme: Links to streaming on social media allowing churches to reach more people and gain new followers

P2 experienced fast growth, revealing, "on Twitch, I noticed just exponential growth happen on the platform for live streamers during the pandemic; it just became a way that people really began to interact. We saw our church grow during that time" (p. 1).

P2 admitted that trying a new strategy to reach people was uncomfortable because he was leading the church into uncharted waters. P2 was attempting to do something that had not been done before. Not only was P2 implementing a digital strategy, but the strategy aimed to reach people a special group – gamers – a group which P2 says, in his experience, is largely comprised of de-churched and unchurch individuals. But by following his gut, P2 said, his experimentation with Twitch proved to be fruitful.

> Every area that we've experienced growth has been because of our digital strategy and implementing digital tools. Every single aspect of our church is growing. Our small groups are growing; our church services are growing year-over-year; our communities, our presence on social media, all of that stuff has grown by anywhere from 50 to 250%. From 2021 to 2022, so our church, we just looked at the stats, we just in terms of unique IP addresses. We've reached over 2,500 different people during a live service or live

stream with our churches page. We're seeing significant growth in that area. And because of the unique opportunities that exist in digital is a reason why other churches should do it. The real reason why I did it any why other churches should do it is because there's people within driving distance of the church that are never coming to the church. There are people who can drive to your church today that would literally rather go to hell, they'd rather roll the dice, and say, when I die, I'd rather roll the dice and maybe end up in hell than ever, ever stepped through the doors of your church. And if you're wondering where a generation of young Millennial men have gone, I can tell you, from my experience during COVID, where they are, they're on the internet. They're all gamers, like all of them. And, you know, they're sitting there; they're not coming to your church on Sunday morning. You know why? Because they were up till three o'clock in the morning grinding World of Warcraft or Destiny 2 on Saturday night, and they're not waking up and coming to church. They're just not; they're not interested. (p. 6)

P2 explained that the church cannot compete with the video game industry when it comes to fantasy escapism and entertainment. P2 added that many video gamers spend six, eight, 10, and 12 hours a day playing video games, and the church is not reaching them. P2 stressed that in his experience, many of these video gamers will not show up to the church building without the church having an online presence. He believes many of these reachable video gamers will go to hell because churches are unwilling to click a button to get on the internet.

Theme: Links to the use of digital tools contributing to financial increase and stability

P2 noted that he implemented online giving to give his congregation more options to give. The result, P2 revealed, "we're up 500% in giving. Internal giving (members) is up; external (non-members) giving is up. Now I'm not saying that this means we've cracked the code. I'm just saying it means that some of this stuff that we're doing is working" (p. 13).

Theme: Links to intentional communication leading to community

P2 discovered that streaming on Twitch doesn't automatically result in success. In P2's experience, success happened only after he became intentional in his communication with people visiting his stream. P2 said, "you have to be very intentional with your communication with people online. It cannot be just a one-way communication where you expect people to follow the

church. You have to also go to their stream and comment on their stuff too. This leads to community" (p. 17).

For P2, that community happens on a platform called Discord (owned by Amazon). P2 reaches people on Twitch and leads people to connect in community on Discord. Twitch and Discord, P2 explained, go hand-in-hand with one another for avid video gamers.

> Twitch is our sanctuary. So, if you think of your church's sanctuary, that's Twitch. Discord is every other part of your church building, and everything else that you do we do is on Discord. Discord is 24/7. For us, we stream on Twitch on Wednesday nights – that's our church service. Not when we are the church. It's like when we do service is Wednesday nights. Community and discipleship primarily happen in Discord. When you think of a regular church service in a building – it's one-way communication – it's just me, the pastor preaching. But when you have the option to encourage community on Discord, you're much better off in an environment where you can build relationships and have two-way communication. Things like Discord and Zoom calls, we use those a lot. (p. 18).

Summing Up P2's Experience

P2's experience leading his church during the 2020-2022 pandemic was an eye-opening experience filled with new discoveries, having the ability to reach more people in new places, and growth in attendance, giving, and online viewers. P2 realized that, in his personal experience, people do not go on social media to build community. However, they do go into digital spaces like Discord to build community, noting, "anybody who creates a Discord account and logs into some Discord servers, for the most part, they're there because they're meeting people and they're building community there. And I would say that the same is true of Alt Space, VR Chat, and virtual digital communities in The Metaverse" (p. 20). P2 added, "The beauties of digital strategies are its scalability is insane. Like, you don't need a bigger building. I can be in a small studio and reach thousands of people. That's awesome."

P2 also discovered that relationships could form in the absence of physical presence.

It happens like every other way that you build relationships or build community. I have had people ask how do you use the internet to build relationships. Well, it's the same way that you use any piece of technology to build relationships. You call people on the phone, don't you? You FaceTime people, don't you? You Zoom people, don't you? Well, you're forming relationships with people that you can't hug. In my experience, I have discovered that for whatever reason, people think to themselves that if I talk to somebody on the Internet where I can't hug, that somehow that's not a real relationship. But it could not be further from the truth. Genuine community does develop. Some of my closest friends right now that were birth during COVID are guys I will probably never have a chance to hug until I see them in heaven. But that doesn't mean that we don't have really tight relationships and community and that they don't know deeply care about my life. This doesn't mean that they don't hold me accountable. This doesn't mean that they don't speak into my life and that they don't invest in me, and I don't invest in them. All of those things happen. It's just happening using digital tools. (p. 19)

The Lived Experience of Participant Three

The interview of Participant Three (P3) took place on Wednesday, December 7, 2022, via Zoom. P3 appeared energetic and excited. The interview was guided by the Interview Guide (see Appendix E). The themes that emerged relevant to this study are described below.

Digital Experimentation

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, P3 and his congregation were not using social media to attract new people. The church's posts on social media were primarily aimed at existing members. However, the church shutdowns due to COVID not only caused the church to shift its focus to only communicating with current members but it also led P3 to experiment with new digital platforms. However, shifting to experimenting with new digital and social media platforms presented a variety of obstacles to overcome.

We had age barriers and technology barriers that some people in our congregation didn't have access to the internet, or they didn't have the technology to be able to utilize the internet, or they just didn't have the know-how, nor didn't have training. And so, in the middle of COVID, we couldn't get people up to speed on those things. We weren't able to meet. So, we missed a whole group of people because they didn't have the capacity, either availability, knowledge, or willingness to go to those places we were experimenting with online. And that really hampered our ability to do things to reach people we were already in relationship with. (p. 1)

Although P3 and his church struggled during the early stages of COVID, experimenting

with the social media platform Twitch enabled the church to reach a new audience. P3 shifted to

creating content for their congregation, whom they already had a relationship with, and also

creating content in an effort to attract more people who did not have a relationship with the

church prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme: Links to streaming on social media allowing churches to reach more people and gain

new church members

> For instance, we shifted to Twitch, which I spend a lot of time on. The biggest thing there is to engage people in the chat. So, if you were to do a 30-minute monologue, which a sermon is, and you're not engaging people in the chat until you finish, people aren't going to stick around. You have to have engagement in the platform the way that other people are naturally engaging in the platform. (p. 3)

> P3 reported that he found success utilizing Twitch by streaming on average of two hours

each day. P3 committed to live streaming on Twitch, where people could see and follow along

with him reading the Bible in a year.

> I had a big shift in mindset. I went from looking at digital and social media platforms as simply communication avenues to digital and social media being a mission field. For example, my typical day is that I get up Monday through Friday, and I stream for two hours plus on Twitch, and I'm reading through the Bible in a year on Twitch. I engage people in chat; we have times of prayer that happens spontaneously. Sometimes while I am streaming on Twitch, someone will ask, Hey, can you pray for me? They'll say, I'm struggling today. I stop, and we pray. We read through scripture. And then, someone may say, hey, I have questions about something in the Bible, or hey, does this passage connect with that passage? So, we spend time in God's Word for two hours plus engaging there. But then I'll leave or end my stream, and we go support somebody else who's streaming. So, I take my community, and I hand them off to someone else, where I usually stick around for a little while engaging that person and watching them for a little bit, depending on it, unless I have other conflicts. (p. 4)

Theme: Links to implementing digital platforms promoting growth in small groups

P3 experienced growth for his church on Twitch by forming a small group that started on

Twitch and came into community on Discord. P3 revealed, "I'm leading small groups that meet

in digital spaces" (p. 6). What surprised P3 regarding the growth of his church through small

groups is that people expressed that they did not feel the guilt as they did when they attended

church in person and missed a few Sundays. There was always this feeling of guilt when church

members asked where they had been. P3 noted, "On Twitch, the experience in quite the opposite.

People are in the chat welcoming the person back saying "welcome, we are so glad to see you

here, and so it doesn't feel like – hey, you've been missing for three months – instead there is

this feeling of love and heart-felt genuineness. For this reason alone, I believe it contributed to

our growth numerically with our small groups" (p. 9).

Theme: Links to intentional digital communication leading to community

One area that P3 experienced first-hand during the COVID-19 pandemic is making the

extra effort to be intentional when communicating with members and new audiences online.

> During the pandemic, I wrestled with people who often approach digital in objection to it, saying we need to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together. And during the pandemic, I questioned what that actually means because in the early church, they were gathering daily in the temple – that's what it says. And we've interpreted that to me, they were gathered Sundays in the church. And I'm going no; I think the forsaking of the gathering was the daily gathering. And I don't get to gather daily with anybody except those people online. I gather daily on Twitch. I engage with people Monday through Friday. Some are there every day, some are there occasionally, it doesn't matter. But every day, Monday through Friday, I am engaged with people digitally in a way I've never been able to do as a pastor in real life. I can't meet with all those people; those people don't have the capacity to gather together; they're not going to drive to church five days a week. You can barely get them there twice a week. But I've discovered during COVID that in the digital space, I can be with you five days a week, six days a week, seven days a week, depending upon my commitment level to being there and their commitment level. And that is amazing. (p. 9)

P3 noted that what excites him most regarding his church's growth as a result of trying

digital methods is that on Twitch and Discord, which are the primary platforms he experimented

with, people are hungry for conversation. P3 stressed that's the nature of the platform.

> When I've been on other platforms like YouTube, in my experience, it's not a place for conversation. You can use YouTube for live streaming a worship service, but unless you

already have an existing relationship with the audience, like your current congregation, there does not seem to be much engagement. But Discord is a platform that was created for gamers to talk to each other while they play video games. So, it in some ways, you can operate it like Zoom. But also, you can have a place where you have all kinds of different things set up for talking about different topics. So I can create that for our small groups. You can engage people. However, there's a learning curve on Discord, so there's the drawback. But once you have people in there on Discord, you can do your discipleship in there. You can do your small groups in there. You can do content sharing, and you can do a whole bunch of things. So, Discord is a great platform for being able to connect with people on multiple levels. (p. 14)

Summing Up P3's Experience

Overall, P3's experience leading his church digitally during the COVID pandemic was a positive experience. The church experience growth in attendance that was initiated digitally. He discovered that intentionally communicating with people at least once a week and being consistent led to growth and also helped to maintain that growth by showing care. Communicating consistently proved to be a vehicle that resulted in growth for participant Three.

You don't want to do is communicate so often that people turn off the notifications, or they look past your communication. So, you need to establish whatever pattern it is and be consistent. You can be intentional with your communication in a number of different ways, because not everything out there is positive. So, if you're able to capture a way to give somebody something that's value added in their day, that just brings them joy, or just brings them some peace, if you can meet a felt need in a short way, in a small piece of communication, people will keep looking for that. And so that's how we utilized digital and social media during the pandemic. (p. 18)

The Lived Experience of Participant Four

The interview of Participant Four (P4) took place on Friday, December 9, 2022, via Zoom. P4 appeared relaxed. The interview was guided by the Interview Guide (see Appendix E). The themes that emerged relevant to this study are described below.

Mixed Emotions Regarding Digital Church Growth

P4's experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic was mixed, noting, "we experienced a decline. We experienced a decline in attendance and engagement" (p. 1).

P4 revealed that in his experience shifting to digital, the church initially experienced growth during the first year of COVID, but now his congregation has had an opportunity to reassess how they want to do church. P4 explained, "A lot of people were on board 2020 through 2021 and going into 2022. Now, we're kind of seeing that plateau" (p. 1).

> The digital space is a kind of overhyped; I'm going just be completely honest with you. It's a little overhyped. It's true that you have all the perks that everybody says - you are able to talk to people across continents, you're able to access people that you've never been able to access before - the door is wide open. So, in that sense, it is positive – the opportunity is huge. But in my experience, it's not all that it's cracks it up to be because you're dealing with the reality of that the people you're meeting in these spaces - their commitment to you and to what your church is doing is now on 'their' terms. In the digital world, you can set time and place to do things, but the likelihood of you getting the people all at one time is very low. (p. 2)

P4, at times, found it hard to function in his role as Pastor leading his church digitally during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> It's all overhyped. You do have this massive opportunity, but at the same time, there's a downside to that massive opportunity. It brings this On Demand, Disney+ kind of mentality just like it is in society now. Most of society is made On Demand. It's hard to function as a pastor because you're so used to, or at least I am so used to, the interaction and the engagement and that kind of thing. And so, with a physical church, you've got that commitment; they've already walked into the building, whereas online, you don't have that commitment. I don't want to say you don't have that instant gratification for the pastor, but the ability to know that you're talking to an audience is missing. (p. 3)

Theme: Links to implementing digital platforms promoting growth in small groups

During the church shutdowns, P4 committed to going live on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, preaching short 20-minute messages or Bible teachings on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Part of P4's strategy was also reading through the whole Bible in less than a year online. P4 engaged in creating Reels for Facebook and Instagram, and YouTube Shorts to serve as 30-second bite-sized nuggets to compliment his 20-minute messages and teaching. As a result, P4 revealed that he was able to reach more people, which led to an increase to his church's Men's and Women's Small Groups.

In my experience, our Women's Small Group grew faster online. In my experience, women adopt things faster. Women live off emotion and feelings. And they'll look at something and just go on how this feels and be a part of it. Whereas men we're super skeptical because we're designed to be the protectors. That's what most men's minds are wired to do. Whereas in the spirit realm, because women are designed to be fillers, they're way more open to what the Holy Spirit is saying. They're way more open to what's happening just because of their innate nurturing nature that God has placed on them. And so, both our men's and women's small groups experienced growth, but just to give some insight, typically in most settings, if done right, the women's small group will grow faster than a men's small group. (p. 9)

Theme: Links to intentional digital communication leading to community

Although P4's experience leading his church digitally, he did discover that community can be established online. The key to establishing community online is being intentional when communicating with people, going beyond making social media posts that says, "come to our church service on Sunday."

People have to know that you care about them. Just posting on Facebook with messages promoting yourself and not trying to establish a relationship with people online, in my experience, will not lead to growth. I've had some ministers tell me we had 20,000 people watching us, but that does absolutely nothing to me - Congratulation, they watched it for three seconds and jumped off. But the ones who sat there and commented, and either commented consistently, or said thank you for this, or something along those lines, those are the ones that I reach out to in direct message and just attempt to start the conversation. Those conversations lead to community. (p. 12)

Theme: Links to streaming on social media allowing churches to reach more people and gain new followers

P4's commitment to streaming utilizing StreamYard and Subsplash technologies to go live on multiple social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok) with one click helped the church reach more people. P4 said, "TikTok and Instagram are the most far-reaching. Those are the platforms where we're reaching 11k and 10k people. But Facebook actually is where we get the most engagement" (p. 13).

Social media opens up that daily opportunity that a lot of churches kind of relegate to Sunday and Wednesday. Whereas with social, it gives you the opportunity to speak into somebody's life daily. Now, it's up to us to use it and utilize it in an effective way. But the way that I believe discipleship is, or our definition of discipleship, is that somebody who is a follower of Christ and telling others and reaching others and making more followers for Christ. Our goal is to have that daily communication with somebody. And if we can have that daily communication, then I believe that we are effectively being disciples. (p. 17)

Summing Up P4's Experience

P4 experienced declines as well as growth. As a result, P4 continues to go live on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok to continue the online growth he experienced leading the church. During the COVID-19 pandemic, P4 saw his role as a pastor leading his church to transform into also being a committed content creator to be used online to stimulate conversation, community and open the door to the possibility of having people he reaches online to coming in-person someday. P4 is not a fan of the On Demand/Disney+ mindset that he experienced utilizing digital to reach more people. P4 experienced a roller coaster of emotions with the initial increase in terms of growth, only to witness that growth plateau. P4 feels that the plateau equals a decline for his church because now he, as the pastor, does not personally experience the commitment and enjoyment of having people right in front of him to preach to in-person. Instead, he is left reaching people he cannot necessarily see with his eyes.

The Lived Experience of Participant Five

The interview of Participant Three (P5) took place on Monday, December 12, 2022, via Zoom. P5 appeared calm and collected. The interview was guided by the Interview Guide (see Appendix E). The themes that emerged relevant to this study are described below.

Digital Epiphany

P5's experience leading her church digitally was an eye-opening experience with the major hurdle of shifting her mindset to a new understanding of what gathering and community are based on how things have been done in generations past - an unwillingness to lean into the fact that younger generations build community in a very different way. By shifting to digital methods utilizing the social media platforms TikTok and Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic, P5 attracted a new audience: Millennials and Generation Z.

> The definition of gathering to the older generations means to be 100% in one place, to communicate face-to-face, and to younger generations, that's not what that means. Now, we could get into the weeds of whether that's healthy or better, and all the things, but young people do not, quote-unquote, gather the way older people do. They just don't. And so, watching a church that's been in existence for over 120 years kind of figure out, well, we have to do something, or we're gonna die, was definitely interesting. It was definitely an interesting experience. But then, through that is how the digital church that we launched was born. (p.1)

P5's experience challenged her to think in new ways and consider the possibility that God was opening a door for churches that had been stagnant for decades to grow in unconventional ways. P5 said she came to a profound conclusion.

> I started noticing on the heels of everything that was going on with the pandemic, just exactly what I said, young people don't engage with things the way that older people do. And if we want to reach them, and we want to be relevant to them, we have to be willing to set aside traditionalism because a lot of what we do inside of churches is just man-made traditionalism. It is even founded on biblical principles. And we must be willing to step outside of the box and look at things from a different vantage point. And so obviously, it impacted me strongly enough to where I was like, we have to do something different. (p. 2)

Theme: Links to streaming on social media allowing churches to reach more people and gain new church members

P5 made a commitment to streaming messages on social media. Through trial and error and analyzing her church's analytics on social media, P5 discovered that sermons, teachings, and messages on social media platforms are too long if they are over 12 minutes. P5 developed a hard stance that anything that her church puts out on video should be 12 minutes or less. P5 also

started filming her messages in what she describes as "bizarre locations" for example, she filmed

a sermon in a Ferris Wheel at the State Fair. The uniqueness of this approach resulted in P5

experiencing exponential growth on social media. P5 revealed, "we started reaching about 1,000

people a month, and now we're up to averaging 12 to 15,000 people per month" (p. 13).

One of the most impactful experiences P5 experienced leading her church during the

COVID-19 pandemic was the testimony of a woman who had been watching P5's messages with

her husband for five months. The woman's husband was sick and could not leave the hospital, so

she stayed with him for the bulk of the day in the hospital.

> I had no idea she and her husband were watching. She sent a message one day and said I just stumbled upon what you guys are doing, I found your messages, and we like the way that you teach; we like the way that you do online community. She said it was just a huge answer to prayer because you kept God in our hospital room. When I think about that statement, I think about how traditional church people are so tied to a certain ideology – they have to understand, and I have come to understand that the benefit of doing church digitally is that we're able to go into places that a brick and mortar space cannot go into. I'm a major advocate for human trafficking victims, and there are seasons of time when those girls cannot leave the place where they're in, so they do not have access to a church building because it's literally not safe for them to do so. Well, digital church meets that need. (p. 11)

Theme: Links to intentional digital communication leads to community

An aspect of digital church growth that P5 experienced was through intentional

communication.

> I discovered the same thing that other churches have to discover and understand that social media is a social space. So, if you're going to be in the digital space, and you're going to use social media if you do not consistently like and comment on your followers' stuff (things they post on their individual pages), you're going to be dead in the water. Because it's like if you and I are friends, and I text you every day, and I check in and ask, How's your wife? Or if I say, I saw your picture, you guys look like you're doing great, and you never talk back to me, we're not friends. So, from a ministry perspective, you have to be social, which means that every single day you have to set aside time to go in and engage with the people who follow you in their space. I literally have chunks of time blocked out through my day where it's non-negotiable for me. I log in from our church social media accounts and comment on the pages of our followers. I like and comment on

their posts and encourage people. I discovered that you have to pastor people; it's just done through a computer. (p. 17)

Theme: Links to the use of digital tools contributing to financial increase and stability

As a byproduct of shifting to doing ministry digitally, P5 uncovered a new way to generate revenue for the church utilizing TikTok. P5 revealed, "From a strategy perspective, it makes sense to be there because TikTok pays you once you get to 10,000 followers, so I get paid for views. When you're getting 1,000s and 1,000s of views a week, it starts adding up. So, from a church perspective, it makes sense to be there" (p. 15).

Theme: Links to implementing digital platforms promoting growth in small groups

P5 utilized digital platforms, such as Agora Pulse, to assist her in automating posting her messages online and to collect data to analyze to improve how she was ministering online. She utilized Final Cut Pro, Canva, and Adobe Suite for content creation. Once people became engaged, she led them to her church's online small groups that meet on Zoom and Mighty Networks (a technology created for online community-building). P5 noted that digital platforms make life easier ministering online, but she also experienced that by simply using digital platforms and tools to connect with people, it leads to growth, especially in small groups.

> In my experience of building community online with small groups, it is literally just being online and talking to people. You just talk to people, just like a senior pastor would be the face of a traditional church, whoever is online engaging with people-day-in and day-out, commenting on other people's posts, and watching their Instagram stories – that's the foundation of community. It's not really any different than how you do it in the traditional church. It's just done through a device. (p. 19)

Summing Up P5's Experience

P5's experience leading her church digitally was a positive experience. P5 discovered that being consistent online is a big factor in reaching more people, gaining new members, and opening the door for increasing financial giving both through tithes and offerings, as well as

unconventional ways, such as gaining 10,000 plus followers on TikTok and receiving payments based on views by being part of TikTok's Creator Fund Program. Instagram, YouTube, and other social media platforms have similar social media influencer programs set up, which P5 has found to provide a financial benefit to her church. P5 also dealt with the obstacle of trying to figure out the social media algorithms. Her experience led to the conclusion, "The key is to just be consistent. So whatever time it is that you're going to post, just post that time every single day. If you post sermons once a week, it doesn't matter what time it is; just make sure that it's done at the same time every single week. Consistency is far more important than attempting to crack the internet code that doesn't exist" (p. 21).

The Lived Experience of Participant Six

The interview of Participant Three (P6) took place on Monday, December 14, 2022, via Zoom. P6 appeared relaxed. The interview was guided by the Interview Guide (see Appendix E). The themes that emerged relevant to this study are described below.

Pushed to Go Further

P6's experience leading her church during the COVID-19 pandemic forced her out of her comfort zone. Moving beyond the comfort of the church building pushed the church to go further than they ever imagined. P6's church experienced growth connecting with their congregation while at the same time reaching new people in cyberspace. A major obstacle that P6 experienced was trying to figure out the social media algorithms. Social media algorithms affect how many people P6's church reaches with each social media post. P6 said, "It has been a fun journey, and it has been crazy to see how we are able to meet different people" (p. 1).

Theme: Links to streaming on social media allowing churches to reach more people and gain new followers

P6 described her experience leading her church digitally during the COVID-19 pandemic as one filled with daily uncertainty. P6 committed to creating and posting videos on social media daily, whether it was going live on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok, or creating a video, editing the video, and scheduling it to be posted.

> Right off, we had a ton of growth on Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. Our numbers on Facebook were right at 300 people within two months, whereas Instagram hit about 75 people. And then TikTok hit about 95 people within a couple of months. Now, a lot of people look at those numbers and say those are small. But for me, those are individual people that are hearing the Gospel of Jesus. And to me, you don't know what they do in their personal time with our videos; you don't know who they've shown in a room. (p. 8)

P6 reiterated that those numbers occurred right at the beginning of COVID, so right away, the church was able to each more people using digital methods than they had previously been able to. Regarding P6's struggle to figure out the social media algorithms, P6 said it can be frustrating but is worth the extra effort.

> We would post a short encouraging video about Jesus and scripture on TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram at the same exact time, around 11 o'clock, and one day the video will go through the roof like we will get 2,000 views and 50 to 60 likes. The frustrating thing would be that we would get a lot of likes on Tik Tok or Facebook using the same video, but then on Instagram, you'll get low views – like 50 views and maybe three or four like total. And then, the very next day, we'll do a different scenario and post at the same time on all three social media platforms, and then Instagram would go boom, and Facebook and Tik Tok would have a low number. So, I think the uncertainty of knowing that on different days you'll have a good day, and then one day, you'll have a bad day. So, it's just one of those moments of uncertainty. (p. 1)

P6 noted that even with the uncertainty of how her videos would perform on social media, at the end of the day, she was still able to reach more people and gain new members to her church by live streaming about 20 minutes each day on social media. P6 revealed, "we have videos on our TikTok page that are over a year old, but people are still watching them, and clicking the like button – the videos are still reaching people regardless of how old or new they are" (p. 10).

Theme: Links to intentional digital communication leading to community

P6 experienced exponential growth in her women's small groups by using digital platforms, such as Zoom and her church's mobile app, to build community with people they reach and connect with on social media.

> For me, the goal is to do life with them. It's simply talking to them, talking to people just like you talk to your close friends. It's texting them; it's Face Timing them; it's giving them a moment to have a phone call if they need to talk. I literally meet with different women throughout the week. I don't have a schedule of it. It just happens because I'm communicating with them. This is the reason our small groups have grown during the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm intentional with communication. People want to feel seen; people want to feel heard; people want to feel like someone cares. (p. 14)

P6 stressed that making an extra effort to reach out to people who have started following the church was another key to her church's digital growth.

> I was on our church profile, liking our followers' posts, congratulating people on their marriages, congratulating people who were having babies, just to let them know, like, yeah, you're following us, but we're also following you in your life. We care. And so that makes them see that even though they don't know us right away, they're saying to themselves, hey, that church just said congratulations to us about our new baby boy, so obviously, they're looking or watching us. They must care about us. So, I think that opens the door for them to be vulnerable with us when they do need prayer. (p. 15)

Summing Up P6's Experience

Overall, P6's experience was positive. She was stretched into a digital environment that she says created a pathway for her church to grow by reaching new people and adding new members to the church during the COVID-19 pandemic. The one thing that P6 noted that she wishes digital technology could do is, "I wish I could just show up in the room in that moment to show them just how much they mattered. So, the limitation (with digital technology) for me is being able to quickly be present" (p. 21).

The Lived Experience of Participant Seven

The interview of Participant Three (P7) took place on Thursday, December 15, 2022, via Zoom. P7 appeared relaxed and energetic. The interview was guided by the Interview Guide (see Appendix E). The themes that emerged relevant to this study are described below.

Thinking Digital-first

P7's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic is that he lived what he already saw happening within the Christian church and society as a whole. Prior to COVID, P7 noticed a consistent decline in in-person church attendance and often wondered whether church could be done online, the same way that people connect on social media and gather on digital platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic presented P7 with an opportunity to test his theory out. As a result of pastoring digitally, P7 was able to lead his church to growth in attendance, financial giving, discipleship, and spiritual and personal growth.

> Our growth during COVID in 2021 was because of the cultural shift that made online ministry more acceptable. It was the COVID isolation and people being at home that made them look online more. And it was our different message that was a bit more refreshing for people. I wasn't preaching anything new; I was just emphasizing some things that others don't emphasize. Our growth happened also due to the fact that, for some people, the Sunday morning model doesn't work for them anymore. And so, what COVID did was it accelerated more people discovering, you know, I think I'm actually doing fine without Sunday morning. You know, I don't think I really need to be in-person. So that's a whole other reason. There's a rise of people going, I don't think I need to be in-person, even if the doors open back up again, I'm not going. All of that all those different factors added to our growth during COVID. (p. 3)

Theme: Links to intentional digital communication leading to community

P7 experienced growth in community by being available for his congregation and new people he reached online. The ability to pastor and minister to people on demand instantaneously brought a shift in mindset for P7.

> If I have to wait on a seven-day cycle to fellowship with somebody in the lobby to let them know I'm going through something, that's actually the weakness of the physical model. However, with the online model, people can type something in a chat, and guess what? There's people responding to that – you can put a prayer request in there, and you

have people praying with you. And it's not just that day, but every day, there's people, new responses coming to support you and encourage you and to pray with you. (p. 4)

P7 also revealed that he experienced an additional benefit to online digital

communication.

Whatever is said online, it stays online. This means you can go back and read it as often as you want. If you have a conversation in the lobby on Sunday, it can be greatly meaningful, but that conversation has gone way. How many times have you said to yourself, man, they prayed for me - it was powerful - I just can't remember what they said. But I know I felt it. Well, online, if somebody prays for you and types it, you can screenshot it, you can read it as often as this time next year. You can go back and read what somebody said or done for you, so these are some benefits of online ministry that I experienced pastoring during the pandemic. (p. 4)

Theme: Links to streaming on social media allowing churches to reach more people and gain new church members

Through experimentation, P7 discovered what he and other churches were doing wrong,

shifting digitally, "taking a physical church paradigm and just broadcasting it online and

expecting results. But you can't do that. The online space is a whole different kind of mission

field, a whole different kind of culture. So, you have to start from scratch, from the ground up,

and think like a digital church planter" (p. 6).

P7's experience with reaching more people and gaining new church members included

the realization that parts of the physical mindset have to also carry over into the digital space. For

example, P7 gave the analogy that if you're going to launch a physical church, you would not do

that by yourself. Likewise, if you're launching a digital campus or digital church, you cannot do

that by yourself, either.

Go and start picking your team, and brainstorm with your vision with your team. And that's what I did. Part of that team was a person who's going to be our Connections Director, meaning when people joined our Facebook group, somebody is following up with them, making sure that they're helping me keep track of these people who are joining as members. For example, if someone does not fill out our membership questions,

myself or my Connections Director are there to make sure that they are not waiting a whole week before they receive communication from us. (p. 10)

P7 noted that his ability to reach more people online and gaining new church members revealed surprising truth that people, in his experience, tend to be more open and authentic online than they are at the physical church building. Screens, P7 revealed, gives people a sense of security.

> You can in-person, and you can still fake it being in person, so being in-person doesn't solve the deception thing because there are people who are in in-person small groups every week, but they're still not growing - they still don't really know people, they're still opening up. But on the other hand, online, sometimes that screen gives people a sense of security where they actually will share more stuff on the screen and more stuff on social media. As a matter of fact, some people are sharing some things on social media posts that they would not dare share in-person, and somebody's living room. (p. 15)

Theme: Links the use of digital tools contributing to financial increase and stability

Utilizing digital tools assisted P7 financially. P7 did not make it a habit to ask for money and donations. P7 revealed that in his experience, preaching the Gospel, being available for people, and having ways to accept donations when people naturally desired to give without him specifically asking for money led to an increase in giving.

> People are giving 1,000s of dollars to us. Just recently, somebody gave $2,000. We have some people who have done reoccurring giving like it's an automatic thing every month. We have others that just give whenever they feel like giving - it might be $50 here, $30 there, it might be $3,000 here, or $1,000. But I've never once talked about tithes and offerings. I've never once said, hey, if you're being blessed by this ministry, we want you to support this ministry. What I have done is try to make sure that we're offering value to people. And I just trust the Spirit of God and the generosity of people to just do that. (p. 18)

Summing Up P7s Experience

P7's experience leading his church during the COVID-19 pandemic netted positive growth in a variety of areas for his church. P7 also experienced several ha-ha moments. For

example, P7 experienced growth in his church's Facebook Group, going from zero to 50 to more than 500 people joining within a few months. However, the obstacle that P7 had to overcome was the Facebook algorithm to ensure that everyone in the group saw his posts. As a general rule, Facebook's algorithms only show a small portion (between 6-8 percent) of the church's audience it posts, P7 noted. However, by honing his digital skills, P7 discovered that Facebook had introduced a new feature called @everyone. When P7 places the @everyone at the beginning of his posts, everyone in the Facebook Group is tagged and is able to see his posts. P7 said the shift in mindset to thinking digital-first is largely responsible for the growth he and his church experienced.

P7's experience also showed him that it is easier to invite people to church online than to invite someone to church in person.

> All it takes is a click of a button. Think about it: when you invite someone to an in-person worship experience, now they have to get dressed; If they have kids, they have to get the kids there. Then we have to meet them there. There's just a whole lot that goes on, and people are not as anonymous in-person. They have to actually show their face. However, online, they can check us out anonymously. They can check out my teaching, they can join the group, and they don't have to say anything; they can just watch. There's no pressure. There's nobody coming up to them, making them feel uncomfortable - hey, is this your first time here? Want to walk around with this first-time guest in the back? Well, when people want to be incognito, they can join an online church and be incognito if they want to. And so, there's less of a barrier there. Online, it's easier for people to invite their friends, it's easier for people to join. It's easier for people to be at whatever level of involvement that they want to be in. That contributes to church growth. (p. 22)

P7 added that, like his church, churches of all sizes have the opportunity to experience growth online and in-person by thinking digital first. He added that it is cheap to get started because Facebook is free, Zoom is only $15 a month, and Canva for content creation is only $12.99.

> Facebook's mission is to give people the power to build community. It is literally designed to do that. So much so that this past year during the Super Bowl (2022), Facebook did a commercial for Facebook Groups. Just think about how much money

they spent to put an ad in Super Bowl to point people towards groups because of all the features that Facebook Groups are designed to build community. (p. 29)

The Lived Experience of Participant Eight

The interview of Participant Three (P8) took place on Friday, December 16, 2022, via Zoom. P8 appeared comfortable and was in a great mood, full of energy. The interview was guided by the Interview Guide (see Appendix E). The themes that emerged relevant to this study are described below.

Finding the Digital Sweet Spot

P8's experienced growth with his church fueled by his commitment to creating content in the context of individual social media platforms. P8 discovered that each social media platform that he shifted his church to have a specific type of content that the algorithms and users of each platform preferred. P8 noted, "my digital strategy was to just push things out and see what works. I had to get it in my mind to stop trying to make things perfect and to just focus on getting things done" (p. 2).

Theme: Links to streaming on social media allowing churches to reach more people and gain new followers

> I had a friend who is not churched; he is completely unchurched and does not rock with God at all. And he kind of lit me up. He told me to stop trying to make things perfect. Stop it, get out here and do what you're called to do, and let it happen. And I'm like, you know, what, you're right. I have a phone that shoots in HD; I have microphones, I'm just going to make it work. And as time progressed, we just moved, and we were able to reach more people. So, the strategy was to get out there and do it because you have to find your level; you have to find your sweet spot. And then once you find your sweet spot, then you can tune it and fine-tune it, and sharpen it. (p. 2)

P8 revealed that live-streaming messages on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok led to massive growth for his church. Consistently posting videos and going live, over time, allowed P8 to experience his social media views go from 50 views per post to 2,000 views, then

3,000 views, 5,000, and 10,000 plus views per video reel. Then something unexpected happened. Instagram changed its algorithm to where P8 saw his massive increase go from 10,000 views to 100 views per video reel. P8 stressed, "I was so frustrated" (p. 7).

P8 discovered that it is normal for social media platforms to change their algorithms over time but noted that his commitment to making adjustments while consistently creating content and posting live video sermons helped him regain the growth. P8 ultimately discovered that Facebook works best for his congregation, although he still continues to utilize Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. P8 pointed out, "A lot of churches sleep on TikTok. We've been able to reach new people on that platform, and the opportunity is huge. I actually have a pastor friend who reaches 2 million people a month on TikTok" (p. 8).

Theme: Links to intentional digital communication leading to community

P8 said that making the extra effort to reach out to followers of his social media pages aided him in creating community and discipleship.

> Creating community and discipleship is one of those things that you have to be really intentional over. I use the Text-in- Church platform, so for example, in my church, when you give your life to Jesus, you receive a text journey to my number, and the person is able to fill out their information. And for the next 30 days, they receive an online devotional. So, for 30 days, I have that discipleship process going. Community is built on Facebook. We build community around interests. For example, one of our Facebook groups is for barbeque lovers. We build community talking about different ways to grill barbeque, we show what we're cooking, what we're eating, we share recipes, and that makes the conversation about God a lot easier because we have built that community within the Facebook Group. (p. 10)

Theme: Links to implementing digital platforms promoting growth in small groups

P8 revealed that utilizing digital tools, such as StreamYard to stream sermons on social media, utilizing Final Cut Pro to edit his videos, Text-In-Church, and a variety of other digital tools allowed him to grow his church's barbecue lovers small group. P8 revealed, "I started

streaming and started the small group, and almost instantly, we jumped to 100 people in the

small group. Now we've surpassed 630 people in that group. These are people I would never

have reached inside of the church building" (p. 12).

Summing Up P8's Experience

P8's experience leading his church during the COVID-19 pandemic propelled his church

to numerical growth, but the biggest takeaway that P8's experience taught him is, "Social media

is made for the Gospel and for winning people. Churches must be on it" (p. 12).

The Lived Experience of Participant Nine

The interview of Participant Three (P9) took place on Wednesday, December 21, 2022,

via Zoom. P9 appeared relaxed. The interview was guided by the Interview Guide (see Appendix

E). The themes that emerged relevant to this study are described below.

Digital Exploration

P9 experienced growth by exploring one of the fastest-growing social media platforms:

TikTok. P9 said her experience allowed her to reach a younger audience, something that she

found hard to do in the physical church pre-COVID. P9 explained, "I had this idea of taking the

church to the people. When our church doors closed, I made the decision to go digital" (p. 1).

P9 said she turned her home living room into a studio where she could film video

messages to put on TikTok.

> I had some obstacles to overcome. One of the main obstacles to going digital is that I
> knew that there would be a possibility of reaching more people, but I had to also
> understand that I probably wasn't going to keep those people. I had to understand that
> this may be the moment that I planted the seed and somebody else was going to water it
> and that this may be the moment when they come to me and get that next step of growth
> somewhere else. But once I grappled with those types of things, growth became a pretty
> easy concept. I had the mindset that it was going to be bigger than me, and if it's bigger
> than me and I'm scared, then God is all over it. (p. 2)

P9 noted that God did prove to be in the details of her church shifting to a digital approach.

Theme: Links to streaming on social media allowing churches to reach more people and gain new church members

Although P9 focused on the social media platform TikTok (typically where younger individuals are) rather than Facebook (typically where older social users are), she experienced growth in reaching more people. The key to P9's thought process of testing the waters with TikTok is that children and youth influence where their parents attend church.

> Even in the brick-and-mortar physical church, kids bring the families, so I was like, if that's already the principal, it's easy. Going digital, I thought to myself that all I have to do is just find where the kids are and just be present in those places – as a result, growth just happened on its own. (p. 4)

P9 noted that the key to her success reaching and connecting more people, especially Millennials and Generation Z on TikTok, is that she put together a cohort of volunteers to serve as a Focus Group to critique the content she was putting on the social media platform. The cohort was made up of youth and young adults to reflect the majority of the users on TikTok. P9 stressed, "to be relevant, you need a volunteer committee of the age group that you're trying to reach and consult with them" (p. 8). The result, P9 revealed, is that her content resonated with users on TikTok.

Theme: Links to intentional digital communication leading to community

P9 noted that reaching out to have international dialog and conversations with people on social media laid the foundation for community-building. P9 said, "Just being able to jump on and say, hey, can I talk to you for a minute? Hey, let's jump on Zoom. You know, I don't have to run to where you are, you don't have to run to where I am, we can just jump on" (p. 10).

P9 explained that when it comes to younger individuals, she reached with the Gospel on social media; she made it a point to always involve parents of young children before communication on Zoom or by phone.

> We had already built a relationship with the mom and dad to be able to talk on the phone with those kids. So, we still have to do what we call a Call Pass, where I contact the parent and say, can I have your email address, so I can send something to you for little Johnny? So, we do have to have this parent partnership pass. Parents appreciate that because then they're not feeling like they've been kept out of the loop or that we're doing something behind their back, or they don't have this feeling that our ministry is questionable because we're not including them. It is very inclusive. (p. 10)

Summing Up P9s Experience

P9 had a positive experience reaching more people by digitally connecting with a young audience. Reaching a younger audience, something that P9 says churches as a whole have had trouble reaching over the past decade, was rewarding to her personally and her church—shifting to digital ministry allowed P9 to go beyond the traditional church walls and connect with a broader audience. Although the audience she was able to reach was often too young to have a job to potentially give financially to the church, those new individuals had working parents who could give. P9 described her experience pastoring digitally during the COVID-19 pandemic left her with a feeling of great joy.

The Lived Experience of Participant 10

The interview of Participant Three (P10) took place on Friday, January 6, 2023, via Zoom. P10 appeared relaxed and happy. The interview was guided by the Interview Guide (see Appendix E). The themes that emerged relevant to this study are described below.

Digital Discord

P10 experienced growth in leading his church during the COVID-19 pandemic in an unexpected way. Prior to the pandemic, P10's church had planned to expand its church with

campuses for in-person worship. However, the forced church shutdowns hindered the plan and changed the vision of P10's church. P10 recalled, "social distancing even today (2023) is an issue, so COVID put us on a new trajectory and a new vision of what we were going to do for campuses" (p. 2).

Theme: Links to streaming on social media allowing churches to reach more people and gain new church members

P10's biggest strategy was to shift to streaming on Twitch and building community on Discord, the platform that works hand-in-hand with Twitch. P10 noted, "Twitch is the platform that we stream on specifically. That's a really good one, especially for people that are gamers. That's where gamers go for really anything" (p. 12). P10 added, "Discord is the place that we go to to be able to be with other people in constant communication at all times. That really was a big help to us with Discord. That was probably one of the biggest things for us, to be completely honest" (p. 3).

Discord, P10 said, serves is his church's digital lobby and fellowship hall. P10 was able to utilize Discord's text chat features, such as instant messaging, voice chats, video chats, group calls, and special events. P10 revealed that what makes the combination of Twitch and Discord different is that on other social media platforms such as YouTube Live and Facebook Live; people are usually only seen as a viewer, the little red number showing how many people are viewing the live stream – they are not necessarily seen as a real person.

> We try to do is we try to make everyone, no matter who they are, feel like they are real people. We know that real people are viewing us, and we try to build genuine relationships with them, getting to know who they are, not necessarily where they're from or anything - if they want to get that information, that's fine. But we really want to get to know who they are, what type of walk of life did it come from, no matter what belief system they have, no matter where they're at, that they are loved, that they are loved not only by us but they're loved by a powerful God. And so, building those genuine relationships is really one of the biggest things for our church. (p. 4)

P10 revealed that his experience during COVID gave him a vivid realization that ministering online in digital spaces is where growth will naturally happen for any church. P10 said his church experienced a spike in attendance utilizing social media and digital platforms. He re-connected with his stream's followers each Tuesday through Friday for at least two hours for prayer needs, devotions, and fun games.

> People are online at all times, and with that being said, you're not going to see these people in the local grocery store or playing basketball down the street anymore, seeing them wherever it might be. Being digitally online is huge because just more and more people are doing it every single day. We live in a technological age, and at this point, society has kind of surpassed seeing each other face-to-face, even though I still think in a lot of ways that it is much better to be able to be with the person, shake hands, whatever it might be. But the digital age has come upon us. I think it's huge for a lot of churches, and I don't think enough churches are allowing digital churches to have a chance or digital ministry within their church to have a chance, unfortunately. (p. 7)

Theme: Links to intentional communication leading to community

P10's leadership ministering digitally with a focus on intentional communication led to community within the church's online small groups. P10 explained that his church's communication was more than the typical message saying, "hey, come watch us, or hey, come visit our church" (p. 15). His church's messages during COVID were always geared toward making the person feel like they matter and trying to connect with the person on a personal level, which he discovered, leads to the person wanting to explore more about what the church has to offer. For P10, the first step is the church's online small groups.

> Our groups are interest-based, so it can be anywhere from a Bible Study on the book of Philippians to a group that is specifically for a game for Rocket League. Now, does that mean that all they're doing to do is playing Rocket League? No, every single group has the spiritual aspect, so it doesn't become your local club outside of your church. They all have the spiritual aspect, and people are finding a breakthrough in these in these groups. There's so much spiritual growth that are going on, and we are really finding what is the next step for people's walk with Jesus Christ. For example, within our groups, once we know the person better, we'll say, okay, maybe this person's next step is to read the Bible

every single day, or baptism, or, hey, let me help you look at classes because you're looking at going into college for ministry; let's look at colleges together, let's look at different classes that you can take. We are really taking people to the next level in their walk with Jesus Christ. (p. 9)

P10 said his experience revealed that intentionally communicating with church members is key to sustaining the growth once the church reaches new people. It also helps to keep long-term members engaged. P10 revealed, "I communicate at least once a week for sure. But we also communicate through our Saturday services and communicate through our small groups. I also have electronic connection cards" (p. 14).

Theme: Links to the use of digital tools contributing to financial increase and stability

Although P10's church experienced growth reaching more people online, P10 pointed out that ministry does cost and that finding creative ways to help finance the vision was an eye-opening experience.

P10 revealed that asking for money for the church on Twitch and Discord can be a struggle due to the audience on the platforms. However, the audience tends to support fundraisers that they feel are for a good cause. His church held a successful fundraiser on Twitch, raising over $100,000. The $100,000 that the church raised is being used as the church's budget.

> A lot of people don't understand it, especially at the beginning. But after they catch the vision of what you're doing, they believe in what you're doing, they want to be a part of it, and they start to understand that it's not just me giving away my money, but it's me something that is going towards something that I believe in. We teach them that it's a form of worship as well as a form of faith. At first, they might be a little bit iffy. And we don't teach unnecessarily 10%; we teach for people to give generously. We believe that Jesus in the New Testament changed a lot of different things. He didn't abolish the law, but he came to fulfill it. And so, he changed a lot of things in the New Testament, so we don't necessarily preach you have to give 10% because that was in Malachi – give 10% of your storehouse. But we do teach that God provides and that God will provide for you, and a lot of people are giving above and beyond. God is truly showing himself in a lot of different ways in people's lives. We have a lot of testimonies. (p. 22)

Summing Up P10's Experience

P10's experience showed him that utilizing digital and social media platforms, such as Twitch and Discord, can be uncomfortable and intimidating at first. However, by sticking it out, being patient, and experimenting with these technologies results in growth in reaching a broader audience, reaching new audiences that are unlikely to happen using an in-person-only focus, and it also opens to door for growth in financial giving by having the option to give digitally. P10 also discovered that with his church's exponential growth online, ministry leaders and volunteers were drastically needed. P10 met with his leaders and volunteers at least once a month. The reason for this is that P10 discovered during the pandemic that for his church, there is a high turnover rate. For this reason, P10 developed trainings for leaders to assist with volunteers.

Perhaps the most profound experience that P10 shared is a story/testimonial where people in one of his online small groups on Discord decided to travel to Florida. There was one person in the small group who could not travel and was not able to get out of his home a lot due to a disability. Members of P10's small group, who were located a few hours away from the homebound group member, took him to a restaurant and hung out for a while. P10 said the small community in which the homebound person lived was all aware of his condition and that people in the town were impressed that an online church group met with him and showed him a great time at a local restaurant. More importantly, P10 said, the homebound group member was so touched that the group would drive that distance just to make him happy.

P10 also revealed that two other members of his small group lived in Australia and discovered that they were only 30 minutes away from each other. After bonding in the online small group, they met in-person for dinner, along with their spouses. P10 expressed, "That's amazing. God is at work" (p. 20).

Evaluation of the Research Design

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to explore the lived experiences of pastors who have led exclusively digital churches during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this study was to shed light on the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches in hopes that these experiences could potentially lead to growth in other churches. This research design relies heavily on data provided by the lived experiences of participants. For this study, interviews were utilized for the purposes of collecting data. According to Peoples (2021), interviews provide deeper insights into the intricate interactions of the population's experiences.

Moreover, Munhall (2007) asserts that the focus of a phenomenological study is not a reaction to an experience but to know what the experience was like to live it as they (the participants of the study) lived it. It was necessary to use this design type because the aim of this study was to shed light on the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches in hopes that these experiences could potentially lead to growth in other churches. This design was selected because the ultimate goal of a phenomenological study, according to Polkinghorne (1989), is to empower readers with a sense of "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (p. 46).

Although this research design enables the researcher to get the essence of the experience of participants with glimpses of how the experiences affected the church congregation, this research design could be improved by adding elements where the researcher could also interview church members to see whether the digital church growth that the pastors describe in their interviews are positive experiences for church members also. This would help the researcher provide a better overall experience for pastors and church members as a whole; as Creswell

(1998) describes, the need for a phenomenology study is most appropriate when there is a profound need to understand the human experience that is common to a group.

Creswell (1998) recommends the group be between three and 15 people. However, adding church members to the design could add to the triangulation of the results. Triangulation, Merriam (1998) notes, strengthen reliability and lists method triangulation as one of the four types of triangulation.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with an overview of the chapter, followed by a table of demographic and sample data, participant roles, and emerging themes and major concepts. Next, the chapter profiled 10 narratives of all 10 participants of the study, detailing their individual stories with comprehensive quotes, capturing the essence of their lived experience exclusively leading digital churches during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, an evaluation of the study was presented.

Chapter Five provides research conclusions, implications, and applications, research limitations and reveals recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the lived experiences of 10 pastors who exclusively led their digital church during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter Five includes a restatement of the research purpose and questions and reveals the practical implications of the study. The chapter also discusses the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of pastors who led exclusively digital churches during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this study was to shed light on the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches in hopes that these experiences could potentially lead to growth in other churches.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the participants' lived experiences leading digital churches as they relate to church growth during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What are the participants' lived experiences of attracting new church members utilizing digital strategies during 2020-2022?

RQ3: How do pastors of digital churches describe their use of social media to reach people online with the Gospel of Christ during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The research questions were open-ended questions, giving all 10 pastors the freedom to speak in detail regarding their experience without the researcher inserting ideas or assumptions.

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

This section provides a summary of the findings of the study by answering the three research questions. Ten pastors of digital churches spoke openly regarding their experience exclusively leading their digital church during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were held during the months of November 2022, December 2022, and January 2023, ensuring that their memories and details were still fresh in their minds. All 10 pastors appeared calm, relaxed, and comfortable. Participant six became slightly emotional, crying tears of joy while telling a short testimony of her experience.

Answering the research questions: Four emerging themes

The study revealed four emerging themes and one major concept. The four emerging themes and major concept were revealed in Chapter Four, Table 4. The following section presents the four themes.

Theme One: Intentional digital communication led to community. This theme corresponds to RQ1*, "What are the participants' lived experiences leading digital churches as they relate to church growth during the COVID-19 pandemic?" The data revealed the following:*

Participants experienced how intentional digital communication led to community. All 10 participants may not have specifically used the phrase "intentional digital communication led to community" but they all used sentiments describing the intentionality of their community, resulting in community. P2 discovered that streaming on Twitch doesn't automatically result in success. In P2's experience, success happened only after he became intentional in his communication with people visiting his stream. P2 said, "you have to be very intentional with your communication to people online. It cannot be just a one-way communication where you

expect people to follow the church. You have to also go to their stream and comment on their stuff too. This leads to community" (p. 17).

Likewise, P3 experienced first-hand during the COVID-19 pandemic how making the extra effort to be intentional when communicating with members and new audiences online works. P3 stated:

> I engage with people Monday through Friday; some are there every day, some are there occasionally, it doesn't matter. But every day, Monday through Friday, I am engaged with people digitally in a way I've never been able to do as a pastor in real life. I can't meet with all those people; those people don't have the capacity to gather together; they're not going to drive to church five days a week. You can barely get them there twice a week. But I've discovered during COVID that in the digital space, I can be with you five days a week, six days a week, seven days a week, depending upon my commitment level to being there and their commitment level. And that is amazing. (p. 9)

Theme Two: The use of digital tools contributed to financial increase and stability. This Theme also corresponds to RQ1, *"What are the participants' lived experiences leading digital churches as they relate to church growth during the COVID-19 pandemic?" The data revealed the following:*

Participants in the study experienced financial increase and stability by adding digital tools for online giving. P1 described that 80% of the givers of his church were people over the age of 50, an age group that always brought their tithes to church. This meant that attending church in-person gave them the opportunity to give. When the church could not meet due to mandated church shutdowns, P1 was facing a major financial problem. By giving congregants a way to give digitally, congregants were able to set up recurring giving, providing financial stability and the ability to give financially whether they were in-person or not. Also, as a byproduct of shifting to doing ministry digitally, P5 uncovered a new way to generate revenue for the church utilizing TikTok. P5 revealed, "From a strategy perspective, it makes sense to be there because TikTok pays you once you get to 10,000 followers, so I get paid for views. When

you're getting 1,000s and 1,000s of views a week, it starts adding up. So, from a church perspective, it makes sense to be there" (p. 15).

P10 revealed extraordinary results by utilizing Twitch and Discord digital platforms, giving anyone who wanted to donate the ability to do online. His church held a successful fundraiser on Twitch, raising over $100,000. The $100,000 the church raised is being used as the church's budget.

Theme Three: Streaming on social media allowed churches to reach more people and gain new church members. This theme corresponds to RQ3, *"How do pastors of digital churches describe their use of social media to reach people online with the Gospel of Christ during the COVID-19 pandemic?" The data revealed the following:*

Utilizing streaming on social media to reach more people and gain new church members is an experience that all 10 pastors revealed. However, there was one outlier. P4 noted that the growth he experienced, in his opinion, actually caused a decline in his church. P4 stated that his church reached more people and gained new members but added that it hurt attendance for in-person worship. Although the church increased in membership, he was left preaching in person to fewer people.

P2 stated that he experienced fast growth, revealing, "on Twitch, I noticed just exponential growth happen on the platform for live streamers during the pandemic; it just became a way that people really began to interact. We saw our church grow during that time" (p. 1). Similarly, P5 explained how she started filming her messages in what she describes as "bizarre locations." For example, she filmed a sermon in a Ferris Wheel at the State Fair. The uniqueness of this approach resulted in P5 experiencing exponential growth on social media,

revealing, "we started reaching about 1,000 people a month. Now we're up to averaging 12 to 15,000 people per month" (p. 13).

Theme Four: Implementing digital platforms promoted growth in small groups. This theme corresponds to RQ2, *"What are the participants' lived experiences of attracting new church members utilizing digital strategies during 2020-2022?" The date revealed the following:*

Digital pastors reported that implementing digital platforms promoted growth for their church's small groups. P8 revealed, "I started streaming and started the small group, and almost instantly, we jumped to 100 people in the small group. Now we've surpassed 630 people in that group. These are people I would never have reached inside of the church building" (p. 12). P10's small groups experienced growth online and led to in-person meetups in Florida and Australia. P10 expressed, "That's amazing. God is at work" (p. 20).

Major Concept: Changing to a digital-first approach combined with experimentation leads to growth

Each pastor's background and experience prior to the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic was a focus on in-person worship for church growth. However, by switching to a digital-first approach combined with experimenting with various digital platforms and tools, each pastor experienced growth digitally.

Transferability

The goal of this study was not to achieve generalizability. According to Vagle (2018), generalizability is not the purpose of a phenomenological study. This study, however, was geared toward transferability. Sundler, et al, 2019, asserts that the basic requirements for a study to be transferable are the study must add new knowledge, is relevant, and that lessons have been learned from the participants of the study. Considering this, the study now transitions to the

implications of the data and findings that can be transferred to pastors, which they can then apply or implement to experience digital church growth.

Implication One: Implementing a digital-first approach will lead to church growth

This study suggests that when churches shift to a digital-first approach utilizing social media and digital tools, churches will put themselves in a better position to reach more people with the Gospel of Christ and gain new members. A digital-first approach requires pastors and church leaders to shift from an in-person-only strategy and mindset to digital, where sermons, discipleship, and small groups are showcased online, such as on social media. This is in line with the Mediatization of Religion Theory detailed in Chapter Two and summarized below.

The Mediatization of Religion Theory, developed by Stig Hjarvard, contends that the use of media enables religion to reach more people. During church shutdowns amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technology and media promoted church growth by allowing God's Word to travel beyond the church walls - even non-Christians could watch sermons on digital and social media platforms such as YouTube (Singarimbun, 2021).

The Mediatization of Religion Theory is a two-way process where media institutions must be accommodated - in this case, the church. Through the process of mediation, the church becomes a channel for delivering content to the online environment where communities gather - YouTube, Facebook, Instagram - places that are not bound by social distancing mandates or total shutdowns. All churches should adopt a digital-first approach. However, this does not mean that churches should eliminate in-person worship. To illustrate, this researcher reiterates the example provided in the Rational for the Study and Gap in Literature section of Chapter Two. In the example, Home Depot, a traditional brick-and-mortar company (the same model as the church) stopped building physical stores and invested all of its money and additional profit into

HomeDepot.com. Initially, the company's store managers were worried. They were scared, but they started seeing that it actually fueled growth in both places. The more someone shopped online, the more they shopped in a brick-and-mortar store. The more someone shopped in a brick-and-mortar store, the more they shopped online. But the store experienced growth in both areas – in-person walk-ins and online visitors and shoppers. The same principle or concept applies to today's screen-first church (Scroggins, 2019).

The mediatization of religion allows churches to present the Gospel of Christ in new ways and paves the way for churches to become global distributors of sermons and teachings of Christ and reach people wherever they are (Singarimbun, 2021). Furthermore, the use of media and the internet increases the capacity for church ministry and promotes new forms of spiritual innovation, taking church services from being confined to the inside of the church walls to unlimited virtual spaces (Newport, 2020).

Implication Two: Churches will likely continue to decline in attendance if they don't adopt a digital strategy

The participants in the study, like many church pastors and church leaders today, previous experience with church gatherings has been in-person. The strategy has traditionally been geared toward getting people inside the church building. However, studies from The Barna Group (2020) reveal that in-person worship attendance has been on a consistent decline for the past 20 years, and that society, even before COVID, shifted to online technology. Although the experience of shifting to digital for the study's participants felt uncomfortable and unnatural at first, in the end, each pastor experienced digital church growth.

According to results of Lifeway Research, Gabbatt (2023) reveals that churches are closing in rapid numbers in the United States - approximately 4,500 Protestant churches closed in 2019, the last year data is available.

When taking into account the experiences revealed by the study's participants, in addition to data indicating the continued decline and failure to attract individuals to in-person worship, the implication is that if church pastors and leaders remain stubborn, refusing to try new church growth methods, churches will continue to experience decline, and or eventually close. Nieuwhof (2022), states, "When you're perpetually afraid to risk what is for the sake of what might be, you might as well cue the funeral music now" (para. 32).

Mark 16:15 instructs church leaders to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (New King James Version, 2011, Mark 16:15). Digital and social media platforms give churches the ability to go and reach the world.

Implication Three: Digital is the new front door of the church

The experience of participants of the study reveals that by shifting their focus to trying to connect with their congregation online while also attempting to attract new people online using social media and digital platforms, individuals were able to experience the church and be encouraged by the church with the Word of God, seven days a week, right where they are – online. The implication is that online is the new front door of the church (Stetzer, 2022). The same way that people search online before going to a restaurant and read reviews before going is the same thing that potential church members do before they attend the church in person. As the literature noted in Chapter Two, Matthew 28:19-20 does not instruct church leaders to stand and wait for people to come to the building. It instructs church leaders and the faith community to go

and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything God has commanded (Jones, 2020).

Implication Four: Gathering in community extends beyond face-to-face

Pastors must step out of their comfort zone of an in-person-only growth strategy. The study indicates that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the decline of in-person church attendance was obvious from visual observation and large-scale research studies and statistics conducted by recognized research leaders, such as The Barna Group, Pew Research, Lifeway, and more. But being unfamiliar or uncomfortable with social media and new technology gave church leaders reasons not to adopt it. However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced churches worldwide to adopt some form of digital technology.

In Chapter Two, this researcher noted that some church leaders who are against church online or utilizing online methods say digitizing church is at odds with scripture. Case in point, Hebrews 10:25, which says, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (New King James Version, 2011, Hebrews 10:25). However, the experience of all 10 participants of this study reveals a different reality: that in the digitally connected society, church leaders live in today, gathering is not limited to face-to-face. In the past, the advancements in technology available today did not exist; therefore, the interpretation of Hebrews 10:25 could only be interpreted one way because the only option for gatherings was in-person/face-to-face. Miller (2011), a former religion editor at Newsweek, in her article entitled, *How Technology Could Bring Down the Church*, acknowledges that when Bible Study can be done on Facebook as easily as it can be conducted in the church, and a preacher can teach lessons via podcasts, the necessity of physically gathering each week in the same place with the

same people turns remote. The author adds that this represents a new crisis for organized religion, "a challenge to think again about what it means to be a "body" of believers (para. 27).

P5 stressed, "the definition of gathering to the older generations means to be 100% in one place, to communicate face-to-face, and to younger generations, that's not what that means" (p. 1). P5 added, "young people don't engage with things the way that older people do. And if we want to reach them, and we want to be relevant to them, we have to be willing to set aside traditionalism because a lot of what we do inside of churches is just man-made traditionalism. It is even founded on biblical principles. And we must be willing to step outside of the box and look at things from a different vantage point" (p. 2).

Recommendations

This study of the lived experiences of 10 pastors leading exclusively digital churches during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic revealed a variety of insights. After listening to the experiences of the 10 pastors of digital churches, this researcher's recommendations are as follows to achieve digital church growth:

- Consistently stream on social media three to seven days a week. Participants in the study discovered that one of the most important elements of experiencing success online is being consistent. The church's followers want to know that they can connect with the church on a regular basis. Likewise, social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitch, TikTok, etc., want to know that the church is committed to its platform and that they can regularly expect the church's content.

- View and use social media as more than just a way to "broadcast" or "advertise" to individuals regarding attending church on Sunday. The reason is that if people that encounter the church's content do not already have an existing/established relationship

with the church, they have no reason to show up in-person. The church's content has to be more than "come to our service on Sunday." Social media is meant to be social. As a church, create content that is meant to connect and engage the audience to want to know more about the church. Use the 80/20 rule: 80% helpful, encouraging content that uplifts the person, and 20% asking followers to attend services.

- Commit financial resources and budget toward digital and social media staffing. Churches should have at least one person dedicated to engaging and connecting with current church members and new people online. Digital and social media require time, consistency, and resources to be successful. Just as any church or new campus of a traditional in-person church requires a pastor to minister to people, so does the church's digital/social media campus.

- Offer digital ways to give financially to the church. Churches should offer online giving on the church's website, app, or platform link (for example, PushPay), text giving, and popular peer-to-peer options, such as Zelle and CashApp.

- Experiment with digital and social media platforms to discover which works best for the individual church. What works for one church may not work for another church. The only way to know for certain which social media and digital platforms work best is to experiment for at least six months before quitting the platform. Participants in the study were able to narrow their focus after they experimented with the platforms. For example, P5 noted that posting on Facebook and expecting to attract the youth is unlikely to net significant results because Facebook's users are mostly aged 30 and up. However, there is a high concentration of Millennials and Gen Z on TikTok.

- Start interest-based small groups with a spiritual aspect. Utilize the Facebook Groups feature to start a prayer group, single moms' group, or, for example, groups for people interested in video games or barbecue, the same way that participants two, three, seven, eight, and 10 did.

- Stay up to date and shift when the algorithms change. Participants in the study pointed out how they experienced growth in reaching more people on social media but also noted that the algorithms change periodically, which affects how many people the church is able to reach organically (non-paid posts). What worked one week may not necessarily work the next week, month, or year. Without changing, the church is likely to experience negative results.

Research Limitations

This study was limited to the memory of the participants' experiences during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. This study was also limited by the researcher's bias, as outlined in Chapter Three. Researchers who self-reflect set the tone for an open and honest narrative that readers tend to appreciate. This is a core element of good qualitative research because it provides comments describing how their interpretations of the findings were shaped by their background, gender, culture, and socioeconomic background (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Further Research

Considering the study's findings, limitations, and delimitations, this researcher suggests the following for further research. The literature in this study mentioned the emergence of a new technology called The Metaverse. This technology, which companies such as Google, Microsoft, IBM, and Meta (Facebook), have invested billions to develop, makes it possible for individuals

to feel like they are in the same room with someone thousands of miles away (Vidra, 2022). Coincidently, the one thing that P6 noted that she wishes digital technology could do is, "I wish I could just show up in the room in that moment to show them just how much they mattered. So, the limitation (with digital technology) for me is being able to quickly be present" (p. 21). The Metaverse is an extension of digital technology. This study would involve identifying the various Metaverse platforms and investigating the best practices for connecting with people on the platforms. This researcher believes that a study would add to the existing literature on church growth. Some churches are already offering worship services in The Metaverse using virtual reality and augmented reality technology (Henao, 2022).

Also, a phenomenological study of pastors of digital churches during the COVID-19 pandemic using a larger population size to see whether the study can be replicated. This study could include digital churches across the United States or internationally to increase the population size. Lastly, a study of church growth focused on the area of financial giving and fundraising for the church. This study referenced a study that showed that more than 4,500 churches are closing in the United States, partly due to decreases in financial giving (Gabbatt, 2023).

Chapter Summary

This chapter opened with a restatement of the research purpose and questions and revealed the practical implications of the study. This chapter answered the research questions with emerging themes, discussed the transferability of the study, and revealed this researcher's recommendations and suggestions for further research. The following section concludes this research study.

Conclusion

In the past, the only way to experience or visit a church was to attend in person. However, without warning, the COVID-19 pandemic changed how churches gather, worship, and connect with their congregation. Churches worldwide streamed their worship services and connected with people beyond their church walls – in other states and countries.

This study reveals that using digital methods and platforms as the first experience for people who may never walk into a church building and using this same technology to connect with current church members leads to church growth in attendance, reaching more people, community, and financial giving. Furthermore, this study validates Dyer's (2020) statement that the coronavirus pandemic has opened a new window of creativity and opportunity for the Christian church to explore avenues and technologies that church leaders would have otherwise not considered, especially online services. In addition, this study has revealed areas of possible further research, such as The Metaverse.

In closing, this researcher points back to the opening statement in Chapter One of this study, which began with a quote noted by MacLachlan (2007), who said the Rev. Mark Lewis of Andrew Presbyterian Church in Kitchener, Ontario, is noted for saying, "I am sure that if Jesus were here today, he would use YouTube as a means of spreading the Good News" (para 3). The result of this study supports the notion that he is correct.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

November 15, 2022

Nicholas Cole
Lucas Farmer

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-444 A Phenomenological Study Of Church Growth Strategies Used By Pastors Of Digital Churches During Covid-19 Pandemic

Dear Nicholas Cole, Lucas Farmer,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B

CITI'S SOCIAL-BEHAVIORAL EDUCATIONAL (SBE) BASIC COURSE

Completion Date   16-Dec-2020
Expiration Date   16-Dec-2023
Record ID   40003376

This is to certify that:

Nicholas Cole

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher
(Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Researchers
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Liberty University

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wd0be1861-7cd8-4c3c-81a0-237c71724cb9-40003376

APPENDIX C

CODE BOOK

CODES	CONTENT/DEFINITIONS
Digital Tools	Software, programs, and platforms that can be used online in the digital space.
	Digital Tool – CashApp: An application that gives individuals the ability to pay, donate, or send money digitally.
	Digital Tool – PushPay: An online application that enables online giving and giving by text.
Digital Platforms	Online platforms that enable online meetings, streaming, and communication to happen in the digital space.
	Digital Platform - Zoom: An online collaboration tool that allows individuals to meet by video, regardless of location.
	Digital Platform – StreamYard: Advanced technology that enables users to connect and stream directly to social media platforms.
	Digital Platform – OBS Studio: Opensource software that enables users to live stream

	videos to destinations, such as YouTube and Twitch.
	Digital Platform – Mighty Networks: An online community-building platform.
	Digital Platform - Text in Church: Provides email and text message communication for churches.
	Digital Platform – Trello: A digital project management tool that enables users to schedule their day and manage tasks via the app on their phone or computer.
	Digital Platform – Hootsuite: A social media scheduler that allows users to create social media posts and schedule for immediate posting on all social media platforms at once.
	Digital Platform – Agora Pulse: A social media scheduler and analytics platform.
	Digital Platform – Twitch: An online streaming service that caters to geared toward gaming, entertainment, music, and sports fanatics.

	Digital Platform – Discord: An asynchronous platform that enables users to gather in community, text, video chat, and hang out in groups.
Social Media Platform	Online platforms that enable users to socialize with one another online, and connect, share photos, videos, life happenings.
	Social Media Platform – YouTube: The world's largest video sharing platform, owner by Google.
	Social Media Platform - Facebook: The world's largest social media platform.
	Social Media Platform – Instagram: A social platform owned by Facebook that enables users to share photos, videos, and messages.
	Social Media Platform – TikTok: Specializes in short videos, where users typically create and share creative messages in 15 to 30 seconds.
Community	Where people gather, share ideas, discuss interests, play games, and get to know one another digitally.

Communication	Speaking to others, sending messages via text, email, video, or phone.
Small Groups	Where people meet in groups online typically of 2-50 people with the goal of growing in their faith, or bonding over common interests.
	Small Groups – Women: A small group comprised of women meeting on an online platform such as Zoom, Discord, etc., with the goal of bonding and growing their faith.
	Small Groups – Men: A small group comprised of men meeting on an online platform such as Zoom, Discord, etc., with the goal of bonding and growing their faith.
Online Discipleship	Lessons and strategies specifically designed to assist individuals to grow in the faith and have a closer walk and relationship with Jesus Christ.

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORMS

Consent

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study of Church Growth Strategies Used By Pastors Of Digital Churches During COVID-19 Pandemic.
Principal Investigator: Nicholas D. Cole, doctoral student, John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University.

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a pastor who has led exclusively a digital church during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of pastors who have led exclusively digital churches during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in an audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 90 minutes.
2. Participate in member checking. Member checking is done after the interview, and allows you, the participant, to review your interview transcript, and review how the researcher interpreted your answers during the interview, to check for accuracy. Member checking will take no more than 60 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include insights into digital church growth methods. There is an abundance of literature on church growth methods. However, there is limited research geared toward digital church growth. With the shutdowns of churches during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research is relevant, fills a gap in literature, and adds to the existing literature in the broader realm of academia. The aim of this study is to shed light on the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches in hopes that these experiences could potentially lead to growth in other churches.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After five years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for five years and then deleted. The researcher and members of his doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Nicholas D. Cole. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Nicholas D. Cole at ▮▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Lucas Farmer, at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Mark Thomas
Director
Organization D
1255 Main St.
Sugar Land, TX, 77479

Dear Mark Thomas:

As a doctoral student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Christian Leadership degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the lived experiences of pastors who have led exclusively digital churches during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be pastors who have led exclusively digital churches during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 90 minutes.

Participants will be asked to participate in member checking. Member checking is done after the interview, and allows you, the participant, to review your interview transcript, and review how the researcher interpreted your answers during the interview, to check for accuracy. Member checking will take no longer than 60 minutes.

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at ███████████████████████████ for more information to schedule an interview.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Nicholas D. Cole
Doctoral Student, Liberty University
████████████████████████

RECRUITMENT LETTER FOLLOW-UP

Mark Thomas
Director
Organization D
1255 Main St.
Sugar Land, TX, 77479

Dear Mark Thomas:

As a doctoral student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Christian Leadership. Last week an email was sent to you inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to respond if you would like to participate and have not already done so. The deadline for participation is January 10, 2023.

Participants will be asked to participate in member checking. Member checking is done after the interview, and allows you, the participant, to review your interview transcript, and review how the researcher interpreted your answers during the interview, to check for accuracy. Member checking will take no longer than 60 minutes.

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at ████████████████████████████ for more information to schedule an interview.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Nicholas D. Cole
Doctoral Student, Liberty University
████████████████████████

PERMISSION REQUEST

11/15/2022

Mark Thomas
Director
Organization D
1255 Main St.
Sugar Land, TX, 77479

Dear Mark Thomas,

As a doctoral student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Christian Leadership degree. The title of my research project is A Phenomenological Study Of Church Growth Strategies Used By Pastors Of Digital Churches During COVID-19 Pandemic and the purpose of my research is to explore the lived experiences of pastors who have led exclusively digital churches during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic.

I am writing to request your permission to utilize your Digital Church Network membership list to recruit participants for my research.

Participants will be asked to contact me to schedule an interview. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to ██████████████. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Nicholas D. Cole
Doctoral Student

PERMISSION RESPONSE

11/15/2022

Mark Thomas
Director
Organization D
1255 Main St.
Sugar Land, TX, 77479

Dear Mark Thomas:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled A Phenomenological Study of Church Growth Strategies Used By Pastors Of Digital Churches During COVID-19 Pandemic, I have decided to grant Nicholas D. Cole permission to utilize my digital church network list to recruit participants for your research.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☐ I will send an email out to the Digital Church Network inviting them to participate in his research study.

☐ I grant permission for Nicholas D. Cole to contact members of my Digital Church Network to invite them to participate in his research study.

Sincerely,

Mark Thomas
Director
Organization D

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW GUIDE

This interview guide has been constructed in conjunction with various research as cited through Chapter 2: Literature Review as it relates to the lived experiences of pastors of digital church growth. The basic framework has been constructed based on the dissertations completed by Paras, Sy, and Tus (2021) and Chavez (2021). The developed questions focus on the lived experiences of pastors of digital churches and relate to the study's research questions. After each question, a series of potential prompts have been listed to guide the direction of the interview.

General opening questions about digital church growth:

1. What has been your experience with digital church growth during the COVID-19 pandemic?

    a. Have there been any obstacles?

    b. Is there a specific strategy that you employed for digital church growth?

    c. How did COVID-19 impact your strategy for digital church growth?

    d. Did COVID-19 help or hinder your strategy?

2. How would you describe your digital church structure?

    a. Are you full-time? Whether full-time or not, describe a typical day for you as a digital church pastor.

    b. In your experience, are volunteers needed? If so, what has been your experience working with volunteers regarding church growth?

3. Are there any benefits of pursuing digital church growth?

    a. Did you experience growth in any particular area of your church using digital strategies?

b. Did you experience any losses using digital strategies?

What is the nature of your experience attracting new church members?

1. In your experience, what specific digital strategies work best for church growth?

    a. How do you determine which digital strategies are working?

    b. How do you determine which digital strategies are not working?

2. In your experience, what is the general perception regarding the use of digital strategies and social media platforms?

    a. Are there any social media platforms that work best to reach new church members?

    b. Are there any digital strategies to avoid while utilizing social media platforms?

3. In your experience, are there any digital tools/software that assist with digital church growth?

4. In your experience, how often should you communicate with current members or potential new church members online?

    a. What challenges, if any, have you experienced trying to meet the required number of communication touchpoints?

    b. How does communicating online contribute to digital church growth?

    c. Do you see a link between your experience and digital church growth?

What is your experience utilizing social media to reach people with the Gospel of Christ online?

1. In your experience, does social media assist with discipleship? If so, what does digital discipleship look like?

    a. In your experience, is social media helpful in building community? If so, how does community happen on social media?

    b. In your experience, do people view social media as a place to gather?

    c. How do you determine the best day and time to reach people on social media?

2. In your experience, are there limitations regarding the number of people you have been able to reach using social media?

    a. If there are limitations reaching people via social media, in your experience, what causes these limitations?

    b. If there are no limitations to reach people via social media, in your experience, how do you decide the best way to use social media to reach people with the Gospel of Christ?