Liberty University

# The Online Member's Experience of Pastoral Care Through Worship

A Dissertation Submitted to

The Faculty of the School of Music

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Christian Worship

by

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Lynchburg, Virginia

July 2023

**Ph.D. IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP**

**DISSERTATION DEFENSE DECISION**

The committee has rendered the following decision concerning the defense for

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## Disclaimer Page

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**Acknowledgements**

The path the Lord has walked me through to come to this point in ministry and education has been so clearly ordained. Mom and dad, thank you for modeling heartfelt worship at our small Lutheran church as you pioneered contemporary worship in the early 1990s. Your faithfulness and desire to guide others toward a deeper understanding of worship was deposited into my heart at a young age. My passion to equip the saints for the work of worship ministry started through your faithfulness to the Lord.

Charity, your love and encouragement through all of the highs and lows that come with life and ministry has been, and continues to be, a daily reminder of God's faithfulness. Judah, Phoebe, Levi, and Sophie, you continue to show me how much a father can love his children. I thank God daily for the family he has entrusted me. You bring me so much joy, and I thank you all for bearing with the late nights and early mornings I needed to finish this dissertation.

Dr. Joel Dorman, thank you for being a constant encouragement and sounding board throughout my studies. Dr. Brian Nixon, thank you for the constant reminder to filter everything through the word of God while you taught me in high school. Your leadership built into me a heart for relying on the Bible in all aspects of my life. Pastor Jeremy Oldenburger, thank you for taking a chance on me twenty years ago as a worship intern. It was an honor to serve your church and grow in ministry with you. Rob Carpenter, thank you for the uncountable phone calls and meetings over coffee as I learned how to navigate ministry and grow in my relationship with the Lord. Ed Kelley IV, thank you for always pushing me to be confident in how God wired me. We did some amazing things together at Shelter Cove and I will always be thankful for how you championed me.

To the faculty of the Liberty University School of Music, every course brought new perspective and understanding. I have had the honor to interact with many professors and you all have left a deposit in me that bears fruit today as I lead and teach my students. Dr. Scott Connell, thank you for encouraging me to step from the Doctor of Worship Studies to the Ph.D. in Christian Worship and for being my advisor. The work has been arduous but fulfilling and you have helped guide and refine my thoughts every step of the way. Dr. Jerry Newman, thank you for the constant reminder during courses that you were praying for me and thank you for being my reader. Becca Stegall, thank you for being my editor.

To those who served on my staff, worship ministries, students, and those involved in The Church Collective, thank you for being faithful with what the Lord has entrusted to us in various seasons. I am honored to know each of you, may we continue to grow in the breadth and depth of our understanding of worship as we guide others.

**Abstract**

Online church services are normative for many churches. Given the relentless nature of creating a service every Sunday, church and worship leaders often do not consider how the online participant experiences the service they are viewing. Virtual reality church services are not yet as ubiquitous as online services but also warrant study. Careful attention must be given to how and why a church provides online and virtual services for its members. To not do so is a disservice to congregants and potentially a waste of time and resources for a church. This phenomenological qualitative study through the lens of a biblical worldview explores how online participants experience pastoral care through worship. The experiences of the three participant groups are compared with each other: online service participants, online service planners and practitioners, and virtual service participants. Responses vary but certain themes emerge such as the recognition that the online church service, which does have a place at times, cannot be the entirety of church life for believers. There are differences between what a church or worship leader believes they are providing online and what the participant experiences. Ultimately, churches should consider the biblical, philosophical, and methodological implications of their online services to develop a well thought out strategy and rationale to serve as a foundation to best shepherd those who participate.

*Keywords:* Online Worship, Virtual Worship, Worship Leading Online, COVID-19 Worship, Pastoral Care, Synchronous Online Worship, Asynchronous Online Worship, Online Church

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

Technology is constantly evolving. A device such as an iPhone was considered science-fiction fifty years ago but has now become something nearly everyone keeps in their pocket. The internet has changed how the world operates, allowing someone to connect with an almost limitless range of content and people. Many churches have embraced technology over the past few decades.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated an essential aspect of technology in the church—the online church service. Forced to close the doors to their physical buildings at the start of the pandemic, many churches found themselves scrambling to find a way to provide their church services online. While there is still room for healthy theological debate as to if and how an online gathering constitutes a legitimate gathering of the church, many embraced streaming their services out of necessity. With the pandemic waning, churches have mainly felt compelled to continue streaming their services to minister to those that have grown accustomed to the accessibility of online church. While there is a desire to regather the church, many pastors and worship leaders hesitate to stop offering their services online for fear that their members may stop attending even the weekend stream. However, if a church continues to provide its services online, worship leaders should consider the experience for online participants.

The role of the worship leader in an online church service could seem easy at first glance. One could argue that he or she simply leads the worship set, and therefore the online version is merely a window into that experience. However, in a physical church service, the worship leader carries some pastoral function in their leadership. The worship leader's job is to help the congregation connect with the Lord through corporate worship. This goal should not change for the worship leader conducting an online church service. Because of this rapid and recent

adoption of online church due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a significant gap in research related to the lived experience of online worship participants as to how they are led, cared for, and shepherded.

An important aspect to consider when evaluating any church method is how the members experience the plans of their church's leadership. A worship leader may think that he or she provides a robust online worship service. However, the best-laid plans of the worship leader do not guarantee that the participants are experiencing an online worship service as intended. To provide the most insight, this study is conducted as a phenomenological study to look at the lived experiences of online worship participants.

## Research Title

The title of this phenomenological dissertation is, "The Online Church Member's Experience of Pastoral Care Through the Online Worship Services of Select Churches."

## Statement of the Problem

Many pastors and worship leaders develop and implement plans for online worship pragmatically and through perceived necessity. Unfortunately, very few take the time to evaluate whether their methods bear fruit in the lives of online participants. Much writing has been done on the validity of an online church gathering, with the vigorous debate surrounding the validity of an online gathering in light of passages such as Hebrews 10:25.[1]

However, a study has not been identified that focuses on online or virtual worship participants and how they experience worship leadership and being cared for pastorally in these

[1] "Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb. 10:25, English Standard Version).

services that have become pervasive. Further, attention needs to be paid to the experiences of church leaders as they determine if and how they will provide online or virtual church services at their church. The internet is constantly evolving, and churches are often chasing the next technology that can be used to reach people for the gospel. A savvy church leader needs to be aware of how people are experiencing online church services if they hope to continue to be effective. Some churches provide their services online merely because other churches do so. Others do not provide services online and are content with meeting at a physical gathering. Still, other churches capitalize on the ready access available through the internet to reach people worldwide. In each scenario, careful examination of the lived experiences of church members and leaders is crucial. This study seeks to serve as a foundation for future researchers and church leaders to examine the efficacy of their online and virtual efforts.

Further, virtual worship is a relatively new phenomenon that will continue to grow in popularity as technology becomes readily available to church leaders and consumers. This study examines the lived experience of those who have participated in a virtual worship service and compares it to that of both an online and physical one. Given the infancy of virtual worship, this foundational research may serve as a model to continue to examine how virtual participants experience worship.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the phenomenological study is to ascertain the worshiper's experience of being led and shown care through online worship. Regardless of the biblical debate on the validity of the online church gathering, many Christians attend or consume online services every week. As such, examining how these Christians experience an online service is crucial. This study focuses on the lived experiences of participants of online worship. To provide a rich

narrative through interviews of online participants and worship and church leaders of varying backgrounds, the research describes the experiences of both the practitioner and recipient of pastoral care engaged in online worship. A second phase of the studies interview virtual worship participants to compare their experiences to the online and physical church gathering. As a result of the study, underlying principles for effective online worship leadership are developed. These principles can be adapted for various church settings when determining the place of online worship.

## Research Process and Questions

### Process

After a thorough literature review, the research begins by identifying several churches offering online or virtual worship. This researcher chooses participants from churches of varying sizes and backgrounds. Three groups of participants are involved in the study: those who have experienced both an online and physical church service, those who plan and execute an online and physical church service, and those who have participated in a virtual worship service using a virtual reality headset such as Meta Quest or PlayStation VR. Comparing the experiences of these three groups provides a rich narrative as to both the planning and praxis of online and virtual church gatherings, recognizing the reality of participants who join in the services having a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences.

Appropriate permissions are obtained, and an initial round of interviews is conducted with participants. The first round of questions is conducted in a semi-structured interview so the data can best represent the lived experience of the participants. Interviews are conducted in person or online, either one-on-one or with a focus group. Individual interviews follow the semi-structured interview to fill gaps, if needed. If the initial round of interviews does not provide data

saturation, another round of interviews is conducted to obtain enough data. Data from each group are compared within each group first, and the results are compared and contrasted with the data collected from the other groups.

An experiment is conducted with virtual worship. Using virtual reality headsets, participants experience a virtual reality church service. They are interviewed about their experience, and the data is analyzed. Once the interviews are concluded, follow-up interviews and questions help the data reach appropriate saturation. The data is investigated. If the data warrants, overarching principles are developed that could be used by many worship leaders to develop more effective pastoral care through their online worship services.

### Research Questions

The central question for the research is, "How do participants experience pastoral care through online worship?" Four subordinate questions follow:

1. How does the worshiper compare and contrast their online experience with that of an in-person worship experience?
2. How do worship leaders experience leading online worship?
3. How does an online participant experience a live online worship service compared to a prerecorded online worship service?
4. How does the worshiper compare and contrast an online worship service to a virtual reality worship experience?

## Theoretical Framework

To best highlight the lived experiences of participants, a phenomenological study is preferable. Through phenomenological research, participants' experiences relate to each other to discover overarching themes. Katarzyna Peoples explains, "Meaning-making is essential to

phenomenological inquiry but only within the context of experience."[2] Within phenomenological study, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger advocate two primary schools of thought. The theoretical framework of this research is a hermeneutic phenomenological study. Peoples explains, "He [Heideggar] believed that there was no way we could bracket our experiences because we are always in the world with others in circumstances of existence."[3]

This researcher has been involved in local church worship ministry for nearly twenty years and, as such, brings his own understanding of the phenomenon to the research. Rather than setting aside his experience, this researcher travels along the hermeneutic circle, constantly revising his understanding as the nature of the phenomenon becomes clearer. Peoples explains, "As I am interpreting something, I have a pre-understanding of the phenomenon, and as I get new information, there is a revision of that understanding. As a researcher, I grasp the whole text in individual parts and as a whole again and again in a circle until there is a full understanding of the phenomenon."[4]

This study is conducted through the lens of a biblical worldview. The Bible is the inspired word of God detailing God's plan for all creation. As such, any research and conclusions are drawn through this lens, as the Bible is considered authoritative and sufficient for all matters related to faith and practice, including worship in the local church.

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[2] Katarzyna Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation: A Step-by-Step Guide*, 1st ed., Qualitative Research Methods Series (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2021), 3.

[3] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 32.

[4] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 33.

## Significance of the Study

This study is valuable for both the local worship leader and the academic field of worship because online worship has become so prevalent. Despite the massive growth of online worship services, many churches do not consider what the experience is like for those joining online. Further, while there has been much study of online worship, there has not been research done yet as to how worshipers are experiencing pastoral care through online worship.

Worship leaders can use this research as a guide for how they go about planning and executing online services. Understanding how participants and leaders are experiencing online worship is essential if one expects to minister appropriately. This research can be used as a model to study various aspects of online worship further phenomenologically, examining the lived experiences of both planner and participant to best understand the phenomenon as a whole.

## Definitions of Key Terms

*Worship* – Passages such as Romans 12:1 explain that worship encompasses the believer devoting their entire life to service and honoring the Lord. However, for this study, David Peterson provides a robust definition: "In everyday speech, Christian worship is usually identified with certain public religious activities, such as going to church or more particularly singing hymns, saying prayers, listening to sermons or participating in the Lord's Supper."[5]

*Online Worship* – A church service or portions or a church service accessible through the internet, either prerecorded or live.

*Church Leader* – For the purposes of this study, someone who currently has or has had influence over the decisions of their church.

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[5] David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 16.

*Worship Leader* – Someone who leads the sung portion of a church service.

*Pastoral Care* – Defining pastoral care can be difficult.[6] Through the lens of a biblical worldview and for the purposes of this study it is defined as: Providing biblical instruction, shepherding, and showing a level of love and care through worship, sermons, and praying for others. Although a pastor often provides pastoral care, one does not need to have the title of pastor to offer pastoral care to others.

*Worship Stream* – A weekend worship service from a church being offered online.

*Synchronous Worship* – A worship service executed and broadcast over the internet live, not pre-produced.

*Asynchronous Worship* – A worship service that is recorded and pre-produced before being broadcast on the internet.

*Stream* – The act of providing a church service over the internet.

*Virtual Worship/Virtual Worship Service* – A worship service provided over a virtual reality headset such as Meta's Oculus.

*Dasein* – Being there.[7] "Myself, yourself, each person is *Dasein*, in the circumstances of each one's own existence."[8]

*Fore-sight/fore-conception* – Preconceived knowledge about a phenomenon.[9]

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[6] Lynne M. Baab, *Nurturing Hope: Christian Pastoral Care in the Twenty-First Century* (1517 Media, 2018), 22–23, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22p7kqv.

[7] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 34.

[8] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 32.

[9] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 34.

*Hermeneutic Circle* – Interpretation as revision. It is a description of the process of understanding and not a technique.[10]

*Virtual Participant* – Members of the participant group focused on virtual worship. Having access or being given access to a virtual reality headset to experience a virtual worship service.

## Assumptions of the Study

A biblical worldview for each participant is a core assumption of the study. While there could be fruitful research surrounding how someone without a biblical worldview experiences online worship, it is outside the scope of this study. Those who participate are assumed to consider themselves Christian.

A fundamental assumption for this research is that the online worship service is a viable means to gather in worship. Numerous writings have debated the validity of an online gathering considering passages such as Hebrews 10:25. This study does not argue for or against the biblical foundations of an online gathering. Instead, it focuses on how online participants are experiencing worship through their churches' online efforts. The data collected is assumed to come from interviews conducted in good faith. However, it is crucial to recognize how both the participant and this researcher bring their fore-conceptions to the interviews and subsequent data analysis.

## Limitations

The boundaries of the research must be clearly defined if a compelling study is to be conducted. First, the nature of phenomenological research limits the findings to the lived experiences of those interviewed. A purposive sampling technique is employed to interview an

[10] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 34.

appropriately focused group of online and virtual participants, worship, and church leaders. The number of participants is related to appropriate data saturation. The journey along the hermeneutic circle has no clearly defined ending. There is always room to attempt to find another participant or conduct a follow-up interview to clarify data further. However, at a certain point deemed appropriate by this researcher, data collection ceased to complete the dissertation.

The second limitation of this study is that it narrows the research to current online worship practices. Whether discussing the printing press, broadcast radio, or the advent of the internet, churches have looked for ways to capitalize on new technology to reach new people with the gospel. A wealth of history and research is given to online church, which is primarily dealt with in the literature review. However, the study focuses on the interviewees' recent and current experiences.

The third limitation is that the participants and worship leaders represent evangelical churches that currently offer their worship services online. This element is essential to explore the contrasts participants experience between online, in-person, and virtual services. The fourth limitation is that the research is limited to the experiences of those interviewed. A different group of participants will invariably provide different experiences as everyone brings their unique perspective.

This researcher attempts to involve a broad selection of participants through personal and professional connections to combat any bias that may arise from a small pool of participants. However, it cannot be assumed that the experiences of those interviewed in this study are identical to those of everyone who participates in online worship. The literature review is limited by the amount of scholarly work available on this subject, particularly regarding the biblical merits of an online worship gathering. Where warranted, popular articles are used.

Finally, the virtual reality online worship experiment is limited in two ways. First, the online worship experiment can only involve services that are provided virtually, leaving many churches that only stream online out of the study. Second, the virtual participants need access to a virtual reality headset.

## Delimitations and Population

Effective research requires concise delimitation. As such, this study is focused on participants within the evangelical Christian church. Those chosen to participate in the online worship participant group must have experienced both an online and physical church service to provide the data best. Members of the leader group must have or had experience preparing both online and physical church services. Those in the virtual participant group are required to have or had access to a virtual reality headset to be able to participate in a virtual church service.

## Qualifications of the Researcher

This researcher has nearly twenty years of experience as a pastor overseeing worship, creative, communications, and guest services ministries. For years, there has been a heavy emphasis on the internet, social media, and service streaming. However, in March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, his church in California shut its doors to its physical weekend service. It began to focus on the online church service as the primary focus. This researcher helped develop a comprehensive online church that involved daily community and Bible studies and a robust weekend worship experience.

Many church members voiced concerns that they could not worship if they were not gathered in the building. As a worship pastor, this researcher became concerned about how he was shepherding his congregation in what it meant to worship. The church gathering is important, yes. However, a believer can worship the Lord anywhere through the work of Christ

and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, as found in John 4. This researcher pursued the Doctorate and then Ph.D. in Christian Worship at Liberty to equip himself to disciple his church and others into heartfelt worship even if they were not together in the room.

This researcher has also led a non-profit called The Church Collective, which facilitates worship training conferences worldwide and hosts a podcast that interviews major worship and Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) artists. This background provides a wealth of personal experience and connections with multiple churches that will prove invaluable for potential worship leader interviewees and church participants from several churches. This researcher serves as the Academic Director for The Belonging Company's College, giving him a unique insight into a larger church that facilitates weekly online worship services for thousands of people. This broad worship and online church background will help this researcher find strong participants for his research.

## Summary

The practice of online and virtual worship will continue to grow throughout the church. As such, much writing and research have been conducted about online church. However, this research is essential to examine the lived experience of online worship participants. It is crucial to recognize that solid planning does not necessarily mean that the online worship service is effective for the pastoral care of the participant. This research provides insight into the current practice of online worship services and creates a foundation for future research.

Chapter two surveys the literature surrounding online church and ministry. Chapter three details the phenomenological method used to collect and analyze the data regarding the online member's experience of pastoral care through worship. Chapter four reports the findings, and chapter five discusses the results.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Introduction

Over the past decade, there have been several studies conducted regarding online church. However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many more churches to begin to provide online services than were previously doing so.[1] The past few years have seen an explosion of both scholarly and trade writing about the subject. A wealth of recent scholarly and trade literature regarding online worship is explored in this literature review. It is essential to recognize that very little research has been done about the lived experiences of those participating in online worship. This dissertation explores how participants experience online worship using the current body of literature as a foundation.

The terms *online church* or *online worship* are relatively new in church history. The infrastructure of high-speed internet and the technology needed to send video content worldwide has only existed for a few decades. Several churches, such as Lifechurch or Elevation, utilizing the connectedness available through the internet, have built decentralized churches comprised of members who live worldwide. Conversely, many churches have avoided providing services online because their leadership feels that worship participants need to gather physically to fulfill the church's calling. This hesitancy has been challenged in recent years.

## An Acceleration in Practice and Study

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced governments to call for the shutting down of most of the world in an attempt to inhibit the spread of the virus. Churches were

[1] Adebola Adegboyega et al., "Social Distance Impact on Church Gatherings: Socio-Behavioral Implications," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 31, no. 1–4 (May 19, 2021): 21, https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2020.1793869.

primarily not exempt from the shutdown. Whatever reticence many churches had about streaming their services was left behind to provide some sort of church service, albeit online, for their members. Many worship and creative teams at churches were forced to turn their focus to becoming some sort of video studio, producing services and content for their congregations. An effort was generally given to the quality of the content: making sure the music was mixed well, that the lighting was done well, and that the production quality was the best it could be. However, in the scramble to provide so much online content, many churches did not pay much attention to the pastoral care these virtual attendees needed.

## Vigorous Debate

At the center of the literature surrounding online worship is a debate on the biblical merits of the church not meeting physically. There is perhaps no more important passage of scripture that deals with this concern regarding digital and physical church than Hebrews 10:25, which simply admonishes believers not to forsake the gathering. Anna Cho dovetails from this passage and remarks, "When the church community collapses, the church is no longer a church."[2] Many authors echo Cho's concern, arguing that the online stream does very little to emulate or even provide a legitimate worship gathering without the physical gathering of believers.[3]

During the height of the pandemic, well-known author and theologian John MacArthur explained that his church would not neglect the gathering as described in Hebrews 10:25 and would continue to meet despite government mandates in California requiring the church to not

[2] Anna Cho, "For the Church Community after COVID-19," *Dialog* 60, no. 1 (2021): 15, https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12642.

[3] Adegboyega et al., "Social Distance Impact on Church Gatherings," 224.

gather for a time.[4] In response to pastors such as MacArthur, David Christensen argues that Hebrews 10:25 entails a broader warning for believers not to leave the fold of Christianity rather than merely continue a physical gathering.[5] Other pastors echo a similar sentiment, one of which remarks, "A video of a sermon is not a substitute for a covenanted congregation assembling together and all the various means of God's grace in that. I think it would be healthier to respect God's strange providence in a period of abstinence from meeting together."[6]

Adam Bajan highlights, "At odds with religious tradition and the ubiquitous and informal communal gatherings that characterize contemporary evangelical Christians, the longer these organizations are forced to deliver their content online without the full support of embodied worship, the longer they risk losing their material advantage in the saving of lost souls."[7] One would be hard-pressed to argue that an online worship service should replace a physical one. To do so would be to argue against the church's tradition since its inception. In an interview of church leaders by the Religious News Service, Adelle Banks recounts one pastor's response: "We do not think that live streaming a worship service is inherently wrong or sinful, he said in an e-mail to religion news service. However, we do not want to unintentionally communicate that an online service is the same as, or even like, worshiping with the gathered body in person."[8]

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[4] John MacArthur, "Open Your Church. | Open Your Church. Hebrews 10:25; Matthew 16:18 #ChurchIsEssential | Facebook," accessed December 3, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/JohnMacArthurGTY/videos/open-your-church/1649268771909715/.

[5] David Christensen, "Misusing Hebrews 10:25," The Rephidim Project, accessed December 3, 2022, https://www.rephidimproject.org/misusing-hebrews-1025/.

[6] Adelle M. Banks, "Shunning Online Services, Some Churches Preach 'Abstinence' from Gathered Worship," *The Christian Century (1902)* 137, no. 10 (2020): 19.

[7] Heidi A. Campbell, *Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World*, 2020, 35, https://doi.org/10.21423/religioninquarantine.

[8] Banks, "Shunning Online Services, Some Churches Preach 'Abstinence' from Gathered Worship," 19.

Given the recency of the pandemic, there will be continual debate over the essentials of the online worship gathering, with more academic writing coming discussing Hebrews 10:25, among other passages, and the tensions of the online gathering compared to the physical one. It is important to note that most churches, such as John MacArthur's Grace Community Church, offer their services online, so there is clearly a place for the online service, even for those who adamantly defend the physical gathering. Generally, worship and church leaders expect the need for online services in perpetuity.[9] This dissertation is not setting out to argue that an online gathering is more important, or even a replacement for, a physical church service. Instead, the world and the church at large have embraced online worship, and the lived experiences of online participants need to be given attention. Tim Hutchings notes:

> Initial Christian responses to online religion lacked systematic observational grounding and drew heavily on assumptions regarding the importance of face-to-face meeting, the nature of online community, the efficacy of the Internet as a medium for proselytism, and the effects of the Internet on authority and accountability. There is urgent need for new theological appraisals of these important issues, based on sound sociological understanding of the nature of online behavior and on detailed ethnography of specific online groups.[10]

Taylor Burton-Edwards argues that the COVID-19 pandemic precluded any debate on whether a church should offer its services online or not. While vigorous discussion remains today about the validity of an online gathering, the proverbial cat has been let out of the bag, and churches feel pressured to keep up or be left behind in a post-Covid world.[11] Similarly, Ferdinand Kruger explains how believers have become more accepting of online church services.

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[9] Randolph Haluza-DeLay, "Who Are We as the Church Now?" *Canadian Mennonite* (Waterloo, Canada: Mennonite Publishing Service, March 7, 2022), 5.

[10] Tim Hutchings, "Creating Church Online: A Case-Study Approach to Religious Experience," *Studies in World Christianity* 13, no. 3 (December 2007): 243, https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.2007.13.3.243.

[11] Taylor W. Burton-Edwards, "Unmute Yourself: How to Know Whether and How to Offer Online Worship Options," *Liturgy* 36, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 4, https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2021.1990645.

The Covid-19 pandemic, emphasizing social distancing, has influenced participants in the liturgy convictions about worship. "After all, face-to-face worship services could be seen as usual in most faith communities before the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic."[12] Burton-Edwards leans on his expertise as a worship consultant for over a decade and provides insight into practical considerations church leaders should consider when offering their services online. Burton-Edwards readily admits that, even though he largely advocates for the practice of online worship services, there are some elements, such as communion, that he does not think should be facilitated online.[13]

## A Feeling of Necessity and Keeping up with Other Churches

Despite such concerns, many congregants expect their churches to offer their services online, even if merely as a convenience for the participants. Burton-Edwards cautions that, because of the consumerist nature of the internet, providing church services online forces others to judge the service on its watchability more than anything else.[14] If the quality of the service is poor, it is distracting; many online participants quickly tune out. Because of this need for quality, Burton-Edwards argues for a prerecorded worship offering that is not a stream of the weekend service.[15] There is considerable concern on his part for the quality of the online church offerings to be of the highest quality. While this is an admirable concern, Burton-Edwards leaves much to be discussed regarding the spiritual nature of worship and engaging online participants.

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[12] Ferdinand P. Kruger, "Descriptive Empirical Perspectives on Participants' Attitudes on Virtual Worship Services Kindle an Ineluctable Revisiting of Ecclesial Assumptions in a Post-Pandemic World," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021): 8, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4102/hts.v77i4.7125.

[13] Burton-Edwards, "Unmute Yourself," 4.

[14] Burton-Edwards, "Unmute Yourself," 4.

[15] Burton-Edwards, "Unmute Yourself," 5.

There can be a temptation to try to keep up with the influential churches that stream online, such as Elevation or Hillsong. It is undoubtedly much easier to produce high-quality video through post-production. However, Burton-Edwards's study does not consider how the online participant feels about pre or post-produced worship services. It is important to consider if a participant would rather have a lesser quality service if they knew it was being streamed live. Burton-Edwards concludes with an encouragement and a caution that is well suited for many church leaders, "Do not let what the church down the street is doing pressure your decisions about online and in-person worship. Focus on whether and how your team, if you have one, can do this work well for the long haul."[16]

Andrew Village and Leslie Francis have completed several studies on online worship, COVID-19, and the church. Conducted in 2021, Village and Francis researched an exploratory factor analysis of a little over two thousand Anglican and Roman Catholics in England in which they attempted to determine how their participants perceived online worship. Village and Francis admit that developing a universal definition of "good" worship is challenging.[17] As such, they developed a scale named the "Scale of Perceived Affect Response to Online Worship" or SPAROW.[18] Participants were given six options, three positive: energized, inspired, fulfilled, and three negative responses: detached, unmoved, and distracted.[19] Of particular interest is the

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[16] Burton-Edwards, "Unmute Yourself," 6.

[17] Andrew Village and Leslie J. Francis, "Introducing the Scale of Perceived Affect Response to Online Worship (SPAROW): A Psychometric Assessment of Ritual Innovation during the Pandemic," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, Advance online publication, (July 31, 2022): 3, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2022.2081317.

[18] Village and Francis, "Introducing the Scale of Perceived Affect Response to Online Worship (SPAROW)," 1.

[19] Village and Francis, "Introducing the Scale of Perceived Affect Response to Online Worship (SPAROW)," 6.

study's focus on how prerecorded and live-streamed services are perceived compared to each other. Live-streamed worship services elicited more of a positive response than prerecorded, but only by a few percentiles, providing a relatively equal positive response to live-streamed services compared to prerecorded services. Village and Francis admit that their data is quite broad, and that a further, more direct study could be conducted utilizing their scale as a foundation.[20]

Village and Francis continued their study of online worship and the church of England in another article published in August 2022. A similar instrument to SPAROW was used, and those that lead and plan worship were added as a group alongside those that participate in online worship. They highlight the results, "The data demonstrates that for both those leading services and those accessing services, online worship was less rewarding than in church worship, even as expressed within the context of Covid restrictions. Moreover, prerecorded online services were less rewarding than live-streamed services both for those leading and for those accessing services."[21]

Despite the preference for a physical gathering over an online service, the study found that many more people participated in an online worship service than a physical one. Some church leaders found this to be an opportunity for the church. Village and Francis quote Stephen Cottrell, the Archbishop of York: "Many churches report that they have more people participating in their online services than used to meet in person. Of course, I hope these new online worshippers will join us in person one day. But even if they don't, we must carry on

[20] Village and Francis, "Introducing the Scale of Perceived Affect Response to Online Worship (SPAROW)," 6.

[21] Andrew Village and Leslie J. Francis, "Lockdown Worship in the Church of England: Predicting Affect Responses to Leading or Accessing Online and in-Church Services," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 44, no. 2 (August 22, 2022): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2022.2101087.

nurturing these online communities and seeing it as a way of reaching out to new people and building new communities of faith."[22]

## Before the Pandemic

Written in 2019, Wim Dreyer explores the implications of online church services in a world that uses technology more every year. He likens this move to another industrial revolution and explores the term *homo digitalis*:

> In the current academic discourse, the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" is often mentioned. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is predominantly shaped by digitization and networking. Klaus Schwab, founder, and chairman of the World Economic Forum, is of the opinion that it will change not only what we do but also who we are. It will affect our identity, our sense of privacy, our notions of ownership, our consumption patterns, the time we devote to work and leisure, how we develop our careers, cultivate our skills, meet people, and nurture relationships (Schwab 2016:1). Since the Stone Age 8000 years ago gave way to the Bronze Age and Iron Age, humanity had been exposed to accelerating change. In the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the primary tools in human hands are no longer made from stone, bronze or iron, but rather silicone. How does this change our understanding of humanity? For some, humanity has moved past *homo sapiens* to *homo digitalis.*[23]

Dreyer continues and directs his attention to the church:

> The necessity of developing a relevant and contemporary ecclesiology and ecclesial praxis is evident. The complexity of developing a practical ecclesiology is mind-boggling. How can churches give expression to the authentic nature of the church, take new realities and contexts seriously, and find a way between tradition and renewal? What are the challenges and opportunities in terms of internet ministry? How could communities in the cyberworld become faith communities? What pastoral care and guidance could the church offer to victims of the cyberworld?[24]

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[22] Village and Francis, "Lockdown Worship in the Church of England," 3.

[23] Wim A. Dreyer, "Being Church in the Era of 'Homo Digitalis,'" *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40, no. 1 (2019): 3, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4102/ve.v40i1.1999.

[24] Dreyer, "Being Church in the Era of 'Homo Digitalis,'" 6.

These questions are not easily answered and deserve due attention. The pandemic accelerated the need for research and study as to the theological implications of the online church.

## An Acceleration of Change in the Church Due to the Pandemic

Like Dreyer above, Adam Possami explores what he calls the *i-Zation* of society, a play on words using the iPod or iPhone as a convenient, connected form of technology readily available to people in modern society. The advent of such technology has given anyone that has it unprecedented access to information.[25] If someone wanted to learn guitar thirty years ago, they would have likely gone to find one-on-one instruction or perhaps started by buying a book. In today's paradigm, one has access to a nearly limitless amount of guitar instruction on a device in their pocket. The implications for this change of method for information touch the church as well. Possami highlights, "Recent technological and scientific changes have certainly not dispensed with religions—but they have certainly affected them. As these social and technological changes are affecting our lives, religions cannot remain 'pristine' and apart from mundane matters."[26] Any pastor may utilize technology to connect with anyone around the world with their services.[27]

## A Barna Study on Hybrid Church

Perhaps one of the major researchers regarding the church is the Barna Group. Their website provides their credentials:

> In its nearly 40-year history, Barna Group has conducted more than two million interviews over the course of thousands of studies and has become a go-to source for

[25] Adam Possamai, "Religion, the i-Zation of Society and COVID-19," *Social Compass* 69, no. 2 (June 1, 2022): 175, https://doi.org/10.1177/00377686221083759.

[26] Possamai, "Religion, the i-Zation of Society and COVID-19," 172.

[27] Possamai, "Religion, the i-Zation of Society and COVID-19," 181.

> insights about faith and culture, leadership and vocation, and generations. Barna Group has carefully and strategically tracked the role of faith in America, developing one of the nation's most comprehensive databases of spiritual indicators.[28]

Not surprisingly, the Barna group has conducted several studies regarding sentiment toward online churches before and after the pandemic. In their research, *Hybrid Church,* they report their findings during the pandemic.

The study found that eighty-one percent of participants explained that a physical church gathering with other believers is important for them.[29] While the majority highly value a physical church gathering, "63 percent of churched adults believe churches should use digital resources for purposes of spiritual formation and discipleship."[30] This hybrid nature of the church continues to become normative for the modern evangelical Christian. Despite this, because of social distancing protocols during the pandemic, many self-professed believers have not participated in church online. The study highlights, "Still, it's striking to learn that, as of September 2020, about one in five of those who would normally be defined as churchgoers (22% churched adults, 19% practicing Christians) says they have 'never' attended a service during the pandemic, either in person or digitally."[31]

Interestingly, responses differ when asked if they "attend" or "watch" an online service.[32] The study explains:

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[28] "About," Barna Group, accessed February 17, 2023, https://www.barna.com/about/.

[29] David Kinnaman et al., "Glossary & Key Findings | Barna Access," accessed February 27, 2023, https://barna.gloo.us/reports/the-hybrid-church-experience-glossary.

[30] Kinnaman et al., "Glossary & Key Findings | Barna Access."

[31] David Kinnaman et al., "Chapter One: What Has Changed? | Barna Access," 1, accessed February 17, 2023, https://barna.gloo.us/journals/the-hybrid-church-experience-chapter-1.

[32] Kinnaman et al., "Chapter One."

> For instance, almost half of churched adults who are currently dropouts (47%)—that is, those who report they have not "attended church worship services, either in person or digitally"—still say they have "watched a church service online" during that same period. Likewise, one-quarter of those who say they've recently watched an online service (24%) reports that they have "never" attended digitally or physically during that same period.[33]

It is essential to define terms when conducting research. The sentiment of feeling that one is merely watching an online church service rather than participating is a topic that is worthy of an entire study.

The modern attention span is getting smaller and smaller. Barna notes:

> More than one-third of adults who've attended church and engaged with online services during the pandemic (36%) says they have trouble focusing during said services. This is especially true for those with children in the home (41% vs. 33% of attendees without kids in the home say they struggle to focus), hinting at some of the difficulty guardians may face as they try to simultaneously facilitate their household's church attendance, occupy children and youth and still engage in worship themselves… 67% of those who've only attended once or twice during the pandemic admit their attention wanes in online services.[34]

It stands to reason that the level of engagement one shows in their online church service has a solid relation to how distracted one is during the service. It is important to note that this is not necessarily relegated only to the online church service. The study reports, "Similarly, about two-thirds (67% of those who've engaged with online services during COVID-19) say they are learning just as much from a streamed sermon as from an in-person sermon. After all, it's nothing new for churchgoers to face some distraction or tendency to multitask during services."[35]

Another fascinating finding is the participants' sentiment toward asynchronous worship and sermon content. The study explains:

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[33] Kinnaman et al., "Chapter One."

[34] David Kinnaman et al., "Chapter Two: What Is Working (or Not)? | Barna Access," accessed February 27, 2023, https://barna.gloo.us/reports/the-hybrid-church-experience-chapter-2.

[35] Kinnaman et al., "Chapter Two."

> Pre-pandemic, Barna began using the term "worship shifting" to refer to a transition from live, communal participation in church to alternatives that could be engaged on one's own time. We've been tracking this subject well before it was a trend; in 2001, less than 1 percent of all adults used the internet as a substitute for a physical church, 3 percent used it as a faith supplement, and an overwhelming 94 percent said they didn't use the internet for faith purposes at all. As of December 2019, half of practicing Christians who use faith-related media—whether traditional forms such as radio and books, or digital options such as podcasts and social networking—said that, at least occasionally, they "rely on Christian resources such as these instead of attending a church." This was especially the case with Millennial practicing Christians, one-third of whom said this was "often" their practice.[36]

There is a shift happening in the online church space that places a more considerable emphasis on the weekend stream and the content distributed throughout the week through social media, podcasts, and websites. Many Christians, especially younger ones, engage with several churches throughout the week through these avenues. The study explains:

> However, more than one-third (35%) says some combination of both physical and digital gatherings would suit them well. To Millennials, this approach seems particularly promising; in fact, they are just as likely to choose hybrid church (40%) as they are to choose physical gatherings (42%) as their preference moving forward. Boomers are the generational holdout on this point, overwhelmingly preferring physical gatherings (71%) to digital (2%) or hybrid ministry (24%).[37]

Further surveys and research should be conducted surrounding the generational gap in sentiment toward the online and hybrid church. One can invite friends and family to participate in or observe an online church service easily, but, at least at the time of this study, the physical gathering is still prominent. The Barna study shifts attention to encouragement for pastors and church leaders from the data and explains:

> Some affirmation for pastors worried that digital or hybrid ministry might leave congregants feeling isolated: Even during the pandemic response, churched adults who have participated with online services by and large feel connected to their church communities (81%)—and even feel cared for by their pastors (77%)! Six in 10 churched

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[36] Kinnaman et al., "Chapter Two."

[37] David Kinnaman et al., "Chapter Three: What Is Possible? | Barna Access," accessed February 27, 2023, https://barna.gloo.us/reports/the-hybrid-church-experience-chapter-3.

> adults (60%) hope that, even post-COVID-19, churches will keep using digital means of gathering people together. As such, they're keen to play a role in inviting friends, family or acquaintances to participate in online services (38%). However, in-person gatherings are still the more appealing invitational environment.[38]

## Barna and Online Prayer

While the Barna study on hybrid church deals with general sentiment and interactions with online church services, the study titled, "Five Questions Every Church Leader Should Ask About Digital Prayer," turns attention to how participants are involved in online prayer. The study begins with a sobering and encouraging analogy that connects the story of Jesus instructing the disciples in Luke 5. "Digital church today feels like Jesus' call to Peter: to leave the nets and boats and follow him. It means leaving behind what we know for the unknown. Yet, when we pray and follow Jesus, we will experience extraordinary things along the way. Prayer is not everything, but everything is nothing without prayer."[39] There are new opportunities for pastors to care for the members of their churches and beyond through participation in digital prayer. The study sets out to shed light on the situation. The study continues:

> Ultimately, the data reveal warmth toward prayer in general and promise in online group prayer. And it challenges ministers to ask: Does our church have a modern model that invites people past their hesitations and into the beauty of corporate prayer? If not, why not? We hope this report enlightens faith leaders as they facilitate intentional prayer experiences and help Christians see prayer as a shared endeavor, in person and online.[40]

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[38] David Kinnaman et al., "Chapter Five: How Do We Cultivate Community? | Barna Access," accessed February 27, 2023, https://barna.gloo.us/reports/the-hybrid-church-experience-chapter-5.

[39] David Kinnaman et al., "Five Questions Every Church Leader Should Ask About Digital Prayer | Barna Access," accessed February 27, 2023, https://barna.gloo.us/journals/five-questions-digital-prayer.

[40] Kinnaman et al., "Five Questions Every Church Leader Should Ask About Digital Prayer | Barna Access."

Not surprisingly, younger people are more open to participating in prayer online rather than in a physical gathering.[41] However, it is crucial to recognize that any openness to prayer online is strongly tied to being open to group prayer in the first place.[42] The study distinguishes between those that regularly participate online and those that join in prayer physically:

> Those who engage in digital group prayer are enthusiastic and persistent. Christians who participate in digital group prayer are no more likely than others to report praying regularly on their own, but, across multiple measures, they express more passion in their prayer lives. Christians who have only engaged in in-person group prayer are less likely than their more digitally open peers to report a number of other meaningful prayer activities.[43]

The study also finds that over two-thirds of those surveyed are open to actively participating in online prayer.[44] As the analysis above highlights the difference between watching and participating in an online church service, online prayer is one of the main activities that congregants are invited to join. However, there is still a large portion of online viewers who do not move toward participation, even when invited into online prayer during the church service. The study notes:

> Most adults who have attended churches providing online services through the pandemic (60%) say this is the only digital activity through their church. Additionally, we know that, among those who have actually watched church online during the pandemic, not all (just 53%) actually follow along with prayer times while viewing anyway. In other words: During the pandemic, many churches have had only one door to corporate prayer—and not all churchgoers choose to enter.[45]

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[41] David Kinnaman et al., "The Research at a Glance | Barna Access," accessed February 27, 2023, https://barna.gloo.us/journals/digital-prayer-research-glance.

[42] Kinnaman et al., "The Research at a Glance | Barna Access."

[43] Kinnaman et al., "The Research at a Glance | Barna Access."

[44] David Kinnaman et al., "Chapter 2: Are People Drawn to Digital Prayer? | Barna Access," accessed February 27, 2023, https://barna.gloo.us/journals/digital-prayer-chapter-2.

[45] Kinnaman et al., "Chapter 2."

While the study finds that online prayer is something participants desire second only to the sermon itself, the data reveal that a minority participate:

> Yet, just as with online church attendance, openness and participation (not to mention meaningful engagement) don't always go hand in hand. Only about three in 10 Christians report participating in the various types of digital corporate prayer Barna asked about (28% in digital prayer gatherings in the past year, 34% in small group digital prayer every 6 months, 32% in large-group digital prayer every 6 months). During the months of the pandemic response in particular, 16 percent of churched adults noted their whole household had been a part of digital prayer experiences.[46]

Not surprisingly, one of the major hindrances to participation is an aptitude for the technology needed to connect with others.[47]

The study offers some conclusions:

> Barna data reveal that digital prayer is merely one piece of the puzzle in a vibrant prayer life. Those who practice prayer in a digital group setting see the fruits not only of this experience but also of choosing to practice group prayer at all. Barna studies have seen such a pattern across a number of spiritual disciplines and positive behaviors: Intentionality begets intentionality, generosity begets generosity—and prayerfulness begets prayerfulness. During a year of turmoil, some Christians have continued to prioritize praying alongside others—and that means, where resources are in place, they've ended up on the leading edge of a digital prayer movement.[48]

## Heidi Campbell and Online Church

Heidi Campbell has written several books, articles, studies, and papers about online church. She is considered one of the foremost authors on the subject due to her interest and prolific contribution to this body of work both before and after the pandemic. She is often cited by many of the authors found throughout this literature review. Campbell describes herself as "a

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[46] David Kinnaman et al., "Chapter 4: What Are the Common Barriers to Engaging in Digital Prayer? | Barna Access," accessed February 27, 2023, https://barna.gloo.us/journals/digital-prayer-chapter-4.

[47] Kinnaman et al., "Chapter 4."

[48] David Kinnaman et al., "Chapter 5: How Does Digital Prayer Fit Within a Broader Life? | Barna Access," accessed February 27, 2023, https://barna.gloo.us/journals/digital-prayer-chapter-5.

researcher who has spent her career studying religious communities' use and negotiation of digital media."[49] Reading her earlier works shows that she has a good grasp of the future as much of her predictions have come to bear on the church and its adoption of the internet and its use in online worship services. Her framework for study can also be found in the following:

> To this end I offer what I call the religious social shaping approach to technology. This takes into account the factors and forming a religious communities' responses to new media dash their relationship to community, authority, and text dash and combines it with a social shaping approach that highlights the practices surrounding technology evaluation. The result is a four-part analytical framework that researchers can use to explore in greater depth religious communities' negotiation of new media.[50]

There is nuance in how one uses technology to offer church services online. Many churches and their pastors view technology and media "as a neutral instrument that can be used for good or evil, dependent on the manner in which it is used.[51]

Campbell explains the implications of the online church through the lens of early scholarship about the matter:

> Since the publication of O'Leary's study (1996) asserting how the internet functions as sacred space for religious practitioners, a corpus of research has been gathered, allowing scholars to begin to make informed claims about the social implications raised by religious practice online. Early scholarship often suggested that using the internet for religious purposes might possibly transform religious practice and ideology in revolutionary ways, from challenging the roles of traditional religious authorities to altering religious expectations of community and connection.[52]

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[49] Heidi Campbell, ed. *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online* (Digital Religion Publications, 2020), 3, https://doi.org/10.21423/distancedchurch.

[50] Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (Milton Park, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 41–42, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=496334.

[51] Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 44.

[52] Heidi A. Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 66.

Whether religious practice has been transformed in revolutionary ways can be debated, but the landscape of the modern church involves technology in some capacity.

When evaluating technology and the use of media in the church, Campbell argues for an area of research called the "social shaping of technology," or SST.[53] However, she argues that it must be refined when dealing with the church:

> Yet it is not enough to simply apply SST to a study of religious communities' use of media. Religious communities are unique in their negotiations with media due to the moral economies of these groups, and the historical and cultural settings in which they find themselves. Therefore, what is needed is a 'religious-social shaping approach' that draws on SST, but also extends it in order to look at the special qualities and constraints of religious communities … I describe this new approach as the 'religious-social shaping of technology' because unlike other SST approaches, it seeks to give an account of the specific conditions that occur within a religious user's negotiations with a technology.[54]

A religious-social shaping approach to examining the practices of the modern church shows a decentralization of church authority. Campbell explains, "The malleability of religious community and identity online has contributed to a struggle between traditional sources of religious authority and new authority figures appearing online."[55] The use of an online platform allows any pastor to reach beyond the walls of the church, thus providing a level of influence on those that see their content. Campbell unpacks, "Online leadership roles, it is suggested, have the potential to influence individuals' standing in their offline religious community; thus, the internet offers the ability to change offline religious power hierarchies by introducing new forms of governing authority (Thumma 2000; Herring 2004)."[56]

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[53] Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 50.

[54] Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 58.

[55] Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," 74.

[56] Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," 74.

The communal aspect of church can potentially be eroded through online church offerings. Campbell cautions:

> This flexibility of practice and tendency toward individualism online has also been noted within internet studies. Concern has been raised by some as to the potential implications this networked individualism may have on offline socialization and community practices (Campbell 2004). Indeed, Greg Armfield and Robert Holbert found that "individual-level religiosity is negatively associated with Internet use," meaning that the internet users primarily interact at an individual rather than at a community level, which might possibly encourage a "secularism model" of engagement (2003: 139).[57]

Individualism can be seen in most modern believers who have ready access to as many sermons, worship songs, and Christian media as they may want to consume. They are generally not consuming merely what happens in their local church on Sunday. Campbell explains, "What the internet does is make the practices of 'pic-n-mix' religiosity mainstream, as the process of mixing multiple sources or forms of spiritual self-expression, once done by individuals in private or on the fringes, becomes more accessible and visible to the wider culture."[58] There is room for further study into whether this "pic-n-mix" religiosity is healthy for the believer. However, it is essential to note that the consumeristic nature of watching content is not isolated to only religion. Anyone can access almost anything they want to watch or listen to online.[59]

The interconnection of offline and online finds its way into nearly all of life. Campbell explains:

> This means people can live out their lives online through Facebook, blogs, and participation in online groups while also engaging in an embodied life offline that may or may not draw from those experiences. Connected to the idea of a multisite reality is that the online world is consciously and unconsciously imprinted by its users with the values,

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[57] Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," 78.

[58] Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," 79.

[59] Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," 79.

> structures, and expectations of the offline world. Multisite reality means online practices are often informed by offline ways of being, as users integrate or seek to connect their online and offline patterns of life. It also means that there is often ideological overlap and interaction between online religious groups and forums and their corresponding offline religious institutions.[60]

Today, this influence can be seen in the proliferation of a particular worship song that has gained popularity through people sharing it through social media. Campbell notes, "Members of a religious group online are frequently guided by the motivations or mission of the wider group to which they belong; thus, offline meta-narratives and goals inform what they see as the purpose of the internet or how they justify their engagement."[61] The interconnectedness of online and offline life strongly influences how religion evolves in a technological world.

Campbell made a comment in 2010 that is still quite relevant to the church today:

> A second trend to watch is the response of the leadership of conservative communities, or those with tightly bound hierarchical structures, to the rise of new media. A growing concern over the identity management of the community has emerged from some, as religious users become producers or religious content independently online. This is in some cases forcing religious authorities to engage with technology they might otherwise avoid in order to take control of such presentations or to appear still relevant in a contemporary society.[62]

The ever-changing landscape of religion in the face of technology is not limited only to Christianity.

## Online Judaism

Campbell turns her attention to Jewish practice and interaction with online technologies through a collection of essays. She begins by recognizing, "While the study of Judaism and

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[60] Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," 80.

[61] Campbell, "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society," 82.

[62] Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 192.

digital culture is gaining momentum, to date, much of this work has often been limited to individual case studies mostly focused on the study of the ultra-Orthodox sector's response and use of the internet."[63] It can be assumed that there will be resistance to online methods replacing or even augmenting *ultra-Orthodox* Jewish practice.[64] Campbell elaborates:

> They fear the internet may facilitate a transgression between sacred-secular community divides, running counter to daily rituals that seek to maintain clear distinction between the sacred and secular aspects of life. Therefore, access to unmonitored secular and sinful content online is seen as highly problematic, which individuals may easily and unintentionally access (Tsarfaty and Blais, 2002).[65]

However, as with any religion, there are varying degrees in which practice holds to historical tenets.

One group, Aish Hatorah, seeks to bring Jewish practice to the internet. Heidi Campbell and Wendi Bellar explain:

> Through a structured approach they seek to sanctify the internet, bringing a Torah-based lifestyle into the digital realm. This shows that concrete strategies used by some Orthodox groups to balance their internet use and to demonstrate that online presence can not only be seen as acceptable within a halachic lifestyle but as an essential part of a religious mission as well.[66]

Furthering the religious mission through technology can also be seen in video and computer games. Campbell and Bellar note, "Through a focused case study of current trends in Jewish Games for Learning genre within progressive Judaism, Gottlieb argues that Jews can adopt and

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[63] Heidi A. Campbell, ed., *Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1, E-Book, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315818597.

[64] Campbell, *Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Culture*, 3.

[65] Campbell, *Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Culture*, 6.

[66] Campbell, *Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Culture*, 9.

adapt modern Games to religious ritual, sacred text, and sacred study."[67] Campbell dedicates a study to the use of video games in religion.

Video games are a pervasive aspect of many people's lives in the modern world. Campbell argues that religious scholars should contribute to the study of digital gaming.[68] At face value, there is little congruence in connecting games and religion. However, Rachel Wagner remarks, "But just as the study of religion extends beyond the analysis of the supernatural, the study of video games provides insight beyond childish recreation."[69] Many video games have aspects of religion built into their narrative, be it one found in the real world, such as Christianity, or something else entirely written for the narrative of the game.

The realism of digital games has gone so far that one player of a game called *Bioshock: Infinite* said that he had to quit playing the game because it required him to choose to have his character baptized in the name of an invented deity. Wagner notes:

> Because the game did not offer the option to skip this scene or refuse the baptism, he was unable to progress beyond the opening sequence, and requested a refund. As the Christian gamer explained to a journalist, "I am basically being forced to make a choice between committing extreme blasphemy by my actions in choosing to accept this 'choice' or forced to quit playing the game before it even really starts" (Hernandez 2013).[70]

Technology has advanced to such a point that playing a video game brings with it some sense of agency on the player's part. They are a participant in the game, rather than a passive observer, and, as is seen in the above example, there is a sense of moral responsibility for the decisions being made in the game. It stands to reason that one should ask themselves how an online church

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[67] Campbell, *Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Culture*, 9.

[68] Heidi A. Campbell et al., "Gaming Religionworlds: Why Religious Studies Should Pay Attention to Religion in Gaming," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 3 (2016): 641.

[69] Campbell et al., "Gaming Religionworlds," 647.

[70] Campbell et al., "Gaming Religionworlds," 648.

service could elicit the same sort of response, changing the observer to an active participant. The foundational work done in Campbell's study of gaming and religion prove quite helpful in this study's research on virtual reality church services.

Campbell collected essays from thirty different church leaders of various backgrounds and had them describe how their churches responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Campbell takes a generally hands-off approach and lets the various church leaders share their opinion on the subject. However, Campbell's excitement for the church's future in a digital space can be seen through the leaders she has selected. Everyone is generally excited about the future of the online church. One church leader remarks:

> The key questions churches are faced with at this juncture are not how they can become experts at streaming video over the internet, nor are they about how many cameras will be needed, or what kind of microphones, lights, or video mixers. Instead, on a fundamental level, the question is about the use of a new medium and how it can nurture and strengthen the connection with and between the members of a faith community or parish. It is about how this medium can facilitate participation that empowers a faith community to witness rather than merely watch a worship service.[71]

Including dissenting opinions from church pastors and leaders who chose not to stream during the pandemic would have been particularly interesting amid what is primarily enthusiasm for the future of online church services.

That said, a recurring thought found throughout the study is that worship should constitute far more than the gathering on the weekend.[72] The advent of online church draws attention away from the synchronous nature of the Sunday morning gathering. Congregants can connect with a church service at their chosen time, provided the church leaves the stream online throughout the week.

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[71] Campbell, *The Distanced Church*, 11.

[72] Campbell, *The Distanced Church*, 12.

Campbell's collection of essays is a broad and helpful collection of the thoughts of church leaders regarding online church at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given Campbell's interest in the subject, a follow-up collection of essays from the same leaders could easily be prepared to see how each leader has adapted to the online church's *new norms* as the pandemic wanes. Missing from Campbell's research is the experience of the online church participants. A follow-up study from their perspective on the leaders' efforts in this work would be fascinating.

Campbell continues her essay format and gathers the thoughts of religious studies faculty from Texas A&M University regarding their opinions on the future of the online church. Campbell explains how creative church leaders have a tremendous opportunity to redefine the essentials of a church gathering.[73] There is room to reimagine what a gathering could look like online without trying to imitate a physical church service.

In one of the essays, Adam Bajan cautions against the ubiquitous availability of online services, noting that people who do not know the Lord will not likely join an online church stream.[74] However, others explain that moving to an online church service breaks down barriers for reaching new people.[75] While some authors are concerned about the ramifications of online church services being so easily accessible, others see it as the next step for the church, similar to how the radio gave evangelists new ways to reach others for Jesus.[76]

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[73] Campbell, *Religion in Quarantine*, 12.

[74] Campbell, *The Distanced Church*, 35.

[75] Campbell, *The Distanced Church*, 59.

[76] Campbell, *The Distanced Church*, 81.

Campbell's collection of essays from the religion faculty is insightful. However, her bias for the online church is found again:

> As the pandemic continues, religious innovation and adaptation will continue to be demanded of religious communities. The "new normal" means there may never be a full return to the business of religion as it once was, event and location dependent. Religious groups will continue to have to imagine new forms of gathering, opportunities for relationship building, and ways of expressing their devotion to meet with the new social conditions and demands created by COVID-19. By capturing the researchers' and scholars' reflections on this moment, we will be better able to track the extent of the impact and outcomes of the religious and cultural shifts being experienced during this unprecedented time in history.[77]

Many believe that some form of hybrid online church will become normative.[78] However, thought is needed regarding how participatory worship can be facilitated online, with attention given to the balance and interplay of corporate and personal worship. Furthermore, pastoral care and guidance through the worship event must be examined. Given how prolific Campbell is regarding this topic, some use her research as a springboard for their own, such as Oliver, Martyr, and Wong, which are discussed below.

## Memes and Online Church

If one spends just a little time on a social media network such as Facebook or Instagram, one quickly finds a meme related to whatever topic relates to his or her interests. Memes making light of the church and its practices can be easily found. As memes have become more pervasive, academia has begun to study them.[79] Heidi Campbell and Zachary Sheldon explain, "Internet

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[77] Campbell, *Religion in Quarantine*, 59.

[78] Emily Summach, "A Pastor in the Digital Age," in *Canadian Mennonite* (Waterloo, Canada: Mennonite Publishing Service, January 10, 2022), 35.

[79] Heidi Campbell and Zachary Sheldon, "Religious Responses to Social Distancing Revealed through Memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Religions* 12, no. 9 (2021): 2, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090787.

memes have become a growing area of research within Media Studies, helping scholars explore the nuances of cultural and political critique within digital culture."[80]

The virality of a given meme can indicate how much it resonates with a subset of people. The response of Christians to the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic generated many memes which provide a foundation for research. Campbell and Sheldon explain, "We seek to investigate how memes with religious themes promote and/or critique certain aspects of socially distanced focused memes by employing religious language and imagery to make sense of pandemic social practices in relation to religion and religious rituals."[81] The memes circulated on social media regarding the church online give insight into how congregants and church leaders felt about the changes to the norms in church.

During the pandemic, churches needed to lean into technology, and many were not prepared for how much they would need to do so.[82] Before the pandemic, the church focused mainly on the Sunday gathering, but the pandemic forced them to rethink the essentials of providing a gathering without having people in their building. Campbell and Sheldon highlight:

> Community and communal gatherings are essential components of many religions and religious traditions, such that the requirements for distancing and shelter-in-place orders disrupted many standard religious rituals, from weekly services and gatherings to religious holidays such as Passover and Easter. As such, churches and religious individuals had to respond to these challenges and many disruptions to their traditions in 2020.[83]

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[80] Campbell and Sheldon, "Religious Responses to Social Distancing Revealed through Memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 2.

[81] Campbell and Sheldon, "Religious Responses to Social Distancing Revealed through Memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 3.

[82] Campbell and Sheldon, "Religious Responses to Social Distancing Revealed through Memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 2.

[83] Campbell and Sheldon, "Religious Responses to Social Distancing Revealed through Memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 3.

The government forcing churches not to gather was met with mixed responses, with some churches insisting on continuing to meet. In contrast, others felt they were doing their part for the health of society through social distancing. The tension between the church and state was felt by many. Campbell and Sheldon explain, "Restrictions on in-person gatherings immediately raised questions in the United States about religious freedom and the regulatory capacity of government over religious institutions."[84] Memes can be found that show both sides of the political spectrum regarding the shutting down of the church. Campbell and Sheldon note, "Memes are one critical way that individuals have done this work, using humor and the micronarratives contained in memes to tell stories about their own experiences and how they have made sense of events around them."[85]

The findings of the research show that the memes confirm that many believers realize the need for a new norm and a change to how the church functions, with changes to activities such as communion or baptism being much different than they were as part of a physical gathering.[86] Campbell and Sheldon highlight how the memes show an embracing of change. "Another positive narrative promoted by these memes was that rather than social distancing being seen as a limitation to religious groups and their practices, it could be seen as a facilitator of creative innovations."[87]

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[84] Campbell and Sheldon, "Religious Responses to Social Distancing Revealed through Memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 3.

[85] Campbell and Sheldon, "Religious Responses to Social Distancing Revealed through Memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 4.

[86] Campbell and Sheldon, "Religious Responses to Social Distancing Revealed through Memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 7.

[87] Campbell and Sheldon, "Religious Responses to Social Distancing Revealed through Memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 10.

As could be expected with any opinion, a dissenting thought can be found. The gathered memes follow suit, with Campbell and Sheldon highlighting opposition to the church not meeting. “Though many of the memes are structured in such a way that they encouraged following social distancing protocols, and frame doing so as a positive thing that is in step with the character of religious expression, there is also an ironic or sardonic flavor to some of these memes that undercut the sacrality of religion.”[88] Campbell and Sheldon conclude, “One result of such discrepant narratives is the opening of a discursive space for discussing and addressing the role of religion and religious rituals in media and culture as the world continues to respond to and learn to live with COVID-19.”[89]

## Online Church Beyond Sunday Morning

Deborah Wong argues that the weekend gathering, whether physical or digital, should be the start of a week lived in obedience to the Lord and living out the great commission.[90] When the emphasis is placed on living a life of worship rather than gathering on a Sunday, the nuances of an online gathering become secondary to serving the Lord. It stands to reason that the online worship service should focus on encouraging believers to share their faith throughout the week.[91]

Wong highlights that there should be some form of measurement for spiritual growth through participation in online services.[92] She concludes, “Christian communities might view it

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[88] Campbell and Sheldon, “Religious Responses to Social Distancing Revealed through Memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 12.

[89] Campbell and Sheldon, “Religious Responses to Social Distancing Revealed through Memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 15.

[90] Deborah Ann Wong, “Liturgy in Lockdown: Restricted Movement, Expanded Worship,” *Religions* 13, no. 1 (2022): 1, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.3390/rel13010025.

[91] Wong, “Liturgy in Lockdown,” 5.

[92] Wong, “Liturgy in Lockdown,” 7.

not as a restriction on their worship, but rather as an invitation to reclaim a more expansive vision of worship that begins in the event but continues far beyond it, inviting us to encounter and serve God everywhere and at all times."[93] Wong's study strongly encourages someone who may be on the fence about providing church online to utilize the medium to reach new people. Her treatise is compelling but leaves room for discussion about how the online worship experience can drive the participant toward a lifestyle of worship. Further, it is important to look at the experiences of the online participants to determine if they feel the leadership and care that church leaders intend. Wong is right to encourage church leaders to utilize new means of sharing the gospel. However, the new methods must be evaluated to determine if they are effective in helping believers grow in their walk with the Lord.

## Biblical Foundations in the Online Gathering

Nakjung Kim explores the biblical foundations of online gathering. However, It is important to note that Kim's work is narrowed to a handful of Korean churches in Virginia. Still, the research is conducted in a way that can be applicable to many evangelical churches. Like Burton-Edwards's discussion above, Kim highlights that the Presbyterian Church of Korea agrees that an online gathering is a legitimate gathering of the church because of the shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.[94] Before the pandemic, this question had not been addressed in such a polarizing way. Still, it is crucial to see that, in many of the studies throughout this literature review, churches and denominations have codified an acceptance of an online worship

[93] Wong, "Liturgy in Lockdown," 7.

[94] Nakjung Kim, "A Study on the Essence of Worship in Online Worship Groups under Covid-19 Pandemic: Focus on Korean Ministers in the Northern Virginia Area" (DWS Thesis, Liberty University, August 1, 2021), 3, Scholars Crossing.

service. With the online gathering as a foregone conclusion, Kim surveyed church and worship leaders to discover what they felt should be the biblical essentials of the gathering.

Kim spends a significant portion of his study connecting online worship to the exilic period of Israel, as found in Exodus. Kim argues that five aspects must be present for a gathering to be considered a legitimate church service: the "five ancient marks of the church," which are *Kerygma*, *Didache*, *Koinonia*, *Diakonia*, and *Liturgia.*[95] *Kerygma* is the need for the proclamation of the gospel, *Didache* is teaching and training, *Koinonia* is fellowship and community, *Diakonia* is serving, and *Liturgia* is the work of the people in worship.

## Pastoral Care

Lynne Baab devotes a book to exploring what pastoral care looks like in the twentieth century. It is important to note that her work predates the pandemic by a few years, but much of what she discusses proves relevant to a world that has so rapidly moved toward online church services. Baab connects pastoral care to shepherding as found throughout scripture and defines it as, "The care the shepherds provide for sheep includes feeding, guidance, protection, healing, and seeking out the lost." In many congregations today, this kind of shepherding happens in small groups, music teams, and various task groups where the members provide care and support for each other.[96]

[95] Kim, "A Study on the Essence of Worship in Online Worship Groups under Covid-19 Pandemic," 10.

[96] Lynne M. Baab, *Nurturing Hope: Christian Pastoral Care in the Twenty-First Century* (1517 Media, Minneapolis, MN, 2018), 2, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22p7kqv.

Of particular interest is Baab's explaining how pastoral care can, and arguably should be, reciprocal.[97] The burden of care rests not only on the person with the title of a pastor but on each Christian and their relationships. Baab explains:

> In the introduction of this volume, I gave you a glimpse of my years of depression and the kinds of care that brought me rays of hope. I wanted you to see from the beginning of the book that I am a person who needs pastoral care sometimes and gives it other times which is true for all careers. One of the significant trends in pastoral care today is an emphasis on its reciprocal nature.[98]

The decentralization of pastoral care is a fascinating concept that needs further exploration. It would be interesting to hear Baab's thoughts on the state of pastoral care both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Digital Pastoral Care

In her dissertation, Pamela Grayson explores the efficacy of what she calls *digital leadership* compared to *traditional leadership*. She argues that churches providing online content and services should hire a digital pastor, someone on staff at the church whose primary focus is pastoring and connecting with those that join online.[99] Rather than providing a stream as a window into the physical church service, a digital pastor moderating and responding to comments and engagement on the online platforms can be a vital connecting point for the church. Once connected, the digital pastor takes the reins and connects with the online attendee through phone calls, texts, or Zoom meetings. Given the highly technical nature of the online offerings of a church, pastoring the people who participate often takes a back seat to ensuring the

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[97] Baab, *Nurturing Hope*, 84.

[98] Baab, *Nurturing Hope*, 84.

[99] Pamela L. Grayson, "The Spiritual Development of Online Church Attendees Compared with Traditional Church Attendees" (Ed.D., Dallas Baptist University), 47, accessed September 16, 2021, ProQuest.

stream looks and sounds the best it can be. Grayson cautions that the digital pastor should see themselves as the shepherd of those that join online.[100] This requires more than making sure an online service is functioning.

An exciting finding of Grayson's research is that younger people feel more instability in their spiritual growth through online means than older people who had been Christians for most of their lives.[101] Given that younger people tend to adopt technology more readily, this is a worrying finding that church leaders and pastors should consider. Grayson does not focus on worship in her study, but much of her research is helpful as this research connects pastoral care with worship. There is a need to find ways to engage online participants in discipleship, and worship must be part of this equation rather than merely passively viewed.

Technology is rapidly advancing, and virtual reality church gatherings are only seeing minimal adoption primarily because the equipment needed to participate has not become as ubiquitous as having the internet at one's house. Guichun Jun explains that the metaverse needs biblically based churches and a heart for reaching people.[102] The current landscape primarily consists of churches merely offering their online stream on a screen in a virtual world where people may view it. Hutchings notes, "The literature around virtual worlds suggests that an experience of immersion in an environment is possible, indeed common, and first-person interviews with online churchgoers confirm that this immersion can lead to powerful emotional

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[100] Grayson, "The Spiritual Development of Online Church Attendees Compared with Traditional Church Attendees," 47.

[101] Grayson, "The Spiritual Development of Online Church Attendees Compared with Traditional Church Attendees," 21.

[102] Guichun Jun, "Virtual Reality Church as a New Mission Frontier in the Metaverse: Exploring Theological Controversies and Missional Potential of Virtual Reality Church," *Transformation* 37, no. 4 (2020): 303, https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378820963155.

commitment and experiences of sacred space."[103] Despite such findings, Jun expresses a concern for the consumeristic and observational nature of virtual reality and highlights the need for churches to find ways to engage with the online participants directly, such as through a one-on-one conversation.[104]

Many church leaders are concerned that their online viewers are encouraged to engage and connect with the church services.[105] Without some connection, it is nearly impossible to gauge if someone is being cared for, discipled, or engaging. Jun voices this concern: "There is no ecclesiastical authority in VR church to deal with the sins of individuals and discipline to censure and restore them from their sins."[106] There must be a connection made with the online congregant if there is to be healthy spiritual growth.

Anthony Cooper et al. devote their study to the implications of pastoral care and community online. Cooper explains that community needs to be the central focus of any church's online efforts.[107] Interestingly, many studies echo this sentiment and essentially move away from considering the elements of an online service, favoring studies on connecting points outside the service. Cooper also argues that pastoral care needs to be available constantly because the online

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[103] Hutchings, "Creating Church Online," 257.

[104] Jun, "Virtual Reality Church as a New Mission Frontier in the Metaverse: Exploring Theological Controversies and Missional Potential of Virtual Reality Church," 302.

[105] Christen Kong, "Toronto-Area Leaders Reflect on Virtual Worship," in *Canadian Mennonite* (Waterloo, Canada: Mennonite Publishing Service, September 27, 2021), 19.

[106] Jun, "Virtual Reality Church as a New Mission Frontier in the Metaverse: Exploring Theological Controversies and Missional Potential of Virtual Reality Church," 303.

[107] Anthony-Paul Cooper et al., "The Reconfiguration of Social, Digital and Physical Presence: From Online Church to Church Online," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 77, no. 3 (June 17, 2021): 2, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6286.

content of churches is always available on the internet.[108] Kimion Tagwirei concurs and explains that while physical pastoral care is vitally important, being available digitally is also essential, especially when a physical meeting is not possible for whatever reason.[109] Rather than telling someone to visit a pastor during business hours, a forward-thinking online church should have someone available throughout the day as someone may be on the other side of the world looking for a connection with the church.

The schedule of the local pastor makes it impossible for him to be available anytime a congregant needs him. William Young examines a *pastoral carebot,* a program that can automate responses to those who connect with it, much like an auto-responding feature in Facebook Messenger. Young concludes that the nuance of pastoral care is far too complex to be able to rely on some sort of artificial intelligence to handle.[110] There must be actual care given to those in need. Online participants should be asked about their experience with a live or prerecorded worship service and how it affects their spiritual engagement. What sort of interactivity is expected from an online service, and can community happen within it, or does there need to be some ancillary connecting point that fosters community?

## How do Congregants Feel About Online Church?

Ferdinand Kruger conducted a quantitative study examining online church participants' sentiments regarding their participation in online services. This research is beneficial because it

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[108] Cooper et al., "The Reconfiguration of Social, Digital and Physical Presence," 8.

[109] Kimion Tagwirei, "The Ministry of Presence in Absence: Pastoring Online in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 78, no. 4 (October 2022): 11, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7161.

[110] William Young, "Virtual Pastor: Virtualization, AI, and Pastoral Care," *Theology and Science* 20, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 15, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2021.2012915.

considers the perspectives of the actual participants rather than surveying the opinions of church leaders. Kruger explains that the participants' experience should be central to planning an online church's offerings.[111] There is often a considerable difference between the intent of what a leader plans for their church and how the congregants experience it.

Kruger found that, among those surveyed, most online worship participants felt that they could have a full church experience through the online stream.[112] This indicates that the *new normal* of church participation is largely here to stay. Much like Grayson's study above, demographics also play a part in the results found. Younger generations feel that they can fully engage in more significant numbers than older generations.

One of Kruger's findings is important: "Most respondents have indicated that virtual services are genuine worship services, although some aspects of the liturgy offer challenges that should be investigated."[113] While pastors and theologians still debate the validity of the digital gathering, it seems that participants accept the online service as a legitimate expression of the church. This adoption does not mean that church leaders must give up the theological implications and conversations. Still, it gives insight into the ministry's future as participants become more comfortable joining online.

Further, Kruger remarks, "Almost 90% of the respondents have suggested that one of the benefits of virtual engagement in worship services has to do with them being able to revise and

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[111] Kruger, "Descriptive Empirical Perspectives on Participants' Attitudes on Virtual Worship Services Kindle an Ineluctable Revisiting of Ecclesial Assumptions in a Post-Pandemic World," 1.

[112] Kruger, "Descriptive Empirical Perspectives on Participants' Attitudes on Virtual Worship Services Kindle an Ineluctable Revisiting of Ecclesial Assumptions in a Post-Pandemic World," 5.

[113] Kruger, "Descriptive Empirical Perspectives on Participants' Attitudes on Virtual Worship Services Kindle an Ineluctable Revisiting of Ecclesial Assumptions in a Post-Pandemic World," 7.

edit some aspects of the liturgy."[114] This shows that most online participants, at least the ones involved in Kruger's study, jump around or skip portions of the service, such as the worship or the sermon, based on their interests. If this is normative in a more extensive sampling for the online church service, there is much to consider in how church leaders plan for and execute online ministry. Is it acceptable to skip any portion of a worship service? It would be fascinating to see if there is a correlation between someone that skips parts of an online service and whether they have the tendency to come to their physical church service late or leave early before the pastor finishes. Kruger promises to continue writing articles exploring online worship.[115]

## Care and Connection through Online Church

Maghboeba Mosavel, Ariel Hoadley, Aderonke Akinkugbe, Dina Garcia, and Sarah Bauerle Bass examined how online church participants felt they received social support during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Mosavel et al. remark, "Research also suggests that individuals' overall quality of life is positively impacted by social support and the sense of community formed through participation in religious congregations."[116] This relatively uncontroversial thought begs the question of whether congregants find similar social support through online church services. Mosavel, et al. discovered that they were not:

> Adults who initiated and continued using remote worship during the COVID-19 pandemic had poorer perceived social support outcomes relative to adults who never used or stopped using remote services. Despite continued engagement with their religious

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[114] Kruger, "Descriptive Empirical Perspectives on Participants' Attitudes on Virtual Worship Services Kindle an Ineluctable Revisiting of Ecclesial Assumptions in a Post-Pandemic World," 7.

[115] Kruger, "Descriptive Empirical Perspectives on Participants' Attitudes on Virtual Worship Services Kindle an Ineluctable Revisiting of Ecclesial Assumptions in a Post-Pandemic World," 8.

[116] Maghboeba Mosavel et al., "Religiosity and COVID-19: Impact on Use of Remote Worship and Changes in Self-Reported Social Support," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 16 (August 11, 2022): 2, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19169891.

> communities, adults participating in worship remotely may have had residual personal, emotional, and instrumental social support needs that remote worship did not mitigate.[117]

Many aspects of the church are generally not offered through an online service. Mosavel et al. explain, "It may be that the lack of the offline, physical networking components that can be so important when participating in activities, such as prayer groups or Bible study, may have been lost when shifting to online services, especially at the beginning of the pandemic."[118] Generally, churches have shifted to streaming their weekend services online and have left many mid-week offerings off the table. The churches that find ways to connect through things such as prayer groups or Bible study will likely find their congregants feel more socially connected and given appropriate care.[119]

## The Past and the Future of the Online Church

Willem Oliver explores what the online church looked like before and after the pandemic while providing insight into what he thinks the place of online church services will be in the future. Like many, Oliver uses Campbell's *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online* as a source.[120] Campbell's body of work is discussed above.

Oliver argues that the *old normal*, that is, the way the church functioned before the pandemic, was largely not in a healthy place.[121] He muses, "Was the Sunday worship really what 'church' was all about, or was there more to the church of God than that, and how much more?

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[117] Mosavel et al., "Religiosity and COVID-19," 1.

[118] Mosavel et al., "Religiosity and COVID-19," 9.

[119] Mosavel et al., "Religiosity and COVID-19," 11.

[120] Willem H. Oliver, "From In-Person to Online Worship," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (January 2022): 1, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2404.

[121] Oliver, "From In-Person to Online Worship," 2.

Answers and words are few. However, when it comes to the 'interim period,' it looks as if the opposite is true."[122]

The *interim period*, as Oliver titles it, is the current paradigm for the church. The church is clearly not operating as before the pandemic, with a larger emphasis on online offerings, but not in a place that fully embraces the possibilities of doing church online. Oliver notes how there is a need to have participation from the online congregant:

> What is very important here is that the focus should not be on how good we can stream the service over the internet, or how many cameras, microphones, and video mixers we need or already have, but on how this new medium will be able to strengthen and nurture the interactive communication between the pastor and the congregants, and between the congregants mutually.[123]

Participation is an important aspect of the worship gathering, and it is no different for the online worship service. Many churches, both during and after the pandemic, largely streamed what happened in the physical gathering space, with slight variations in how the service was conducted. Oliver notes, "Interestingly, during the pandemic, research by the Barna Group (2020) has indicated that most people in the USA are not interested in the usual worship experience anymore. They want something new. This implies that the pastor and their church council should consider creating new forms of worship which are applicable for online presentation."[124]

Pivoting toward what the church of the future could look like, Oliver explains how a *new form* of worship should encompass more than the weekend gathering: "The pastor should ask themselves about how the Sunday worship should be supported by other social media and by

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[122] Oliver, "From In-Person to Online Worship," 3.

[123] Oliver, "From In-Person to Online Worship," 3.

[124] Oliver, "From In-Person to Online Worship," 5.

events during the week. In fact, the pastor should regard the Sunday worship as part and parcel of all the activities in their congregation in a week's time."[125] This question is one that many church leaders face. Oliver concludes with more questions about the church's future that are worthy of contemplation. "This article has just touched the ears of the hippo regarding in-person versus online. Much more thinking, discussion, and debate are needed for the church of God to work through the 'interim period' and be ready for the 'new normal.' Will the church of God be willing to engage in this kind of debate?"[126]

**The Sustainability of Online Church for the Health of the Believer**

Philippa Martyr conducted a study in Australia that sought to determine how Catholic church members felt their spiritual well-being was during and after the pandemic. Martyr highlights the well-being during the pandemic: "Catholic worship prioritizes real-life worship with face-to-face, in-person ritual contact (Schmalzbauer, 2006). Because of this, virtual worship—televised, live-streamed, or online—is not customary, although televised Mass services have been available in Australia since 1971."[127] As with most businesses and other churches, the Catholic church needed to pivot and move toward online offerings during the pandemic.

Martyr sought to determine the well-being of online participants using the *Spiritual Well-being Scale,* which is explained, "The Spiritual Well-being Scale (SWBS) developed by Paloutzian and Ellison (1982) captures both existential and religious well-being and is widely

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[125] Oliver, "From In-Person to Online Worship," 5.

[126] Oliver, "From In-Person to Online Worship," 7.

[127] Philippa Martyr, "Worship Choices and Wellbeing of Australian Churchgoing Catholics during COVID-19 Church Closures," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 25, no. 5 (May 28, 2022): 532, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2022.2066645.

used internationally across clinical and non-clinical populations … The SWBS is recommended for use in stable worshipping congregations, especially those that are experiencing imposed or internal changes."[128]

Using the SWBS, Philippa discovers, "The results show that religious well-being—and to a lesser extent, existential well-being—is closely tied to church attendance in this population. The Religious Well-being score in both groups was most likely to be strongly and significantly positively predicted by the rate of worship engagement rather than demographic variables."[129] Philippa explains that online church services were considered very important for the well-being of Catholics when in-person church services were unavailable. Still, the importance of the online service waned as physical services opened up.[130]

### The Scattered Early Church Compared to the COVID-19 Church

Grant Sandercock-Brown surveyed congregants in the Salvation Army in Australia and connected the findings to the letters of Paul. He argues that Paul's letters and directions to churches scattered around the ancient world in the early days of the church can be used to give direction to the scattered modern church during the pandemic.[131] Sandercock-Brown explains, "Paul's rhetorical discourses, team-created and crafted content, heard and seen as narrative

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[128] Martyr, "Worship Choices and Wellbeing of Australian Churchgoing Catholics during COVID-19 Church Closures," 533.

[129] Martyr, "Worship Choices and Wellbeing of Australian Churchgoing Catholics during COVID-19 Church Closures," 539.

[130] Martyr, "Worship Choices and Wellbeing of Australian Churchgoing Catholics during COVID-19 Church Closures," 539.

[131] Grant Sandercock-Brown, "Paul's Letters as a Guide to Online Worship: Reflections on a Denominational Survey of Worship during Lockdown," *Practical Theology* 0, no. 0 (August 27, 2022): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2022.2108805.

proclamation, were a means of divine encounter and the process of their creation and delivery has some parallels with online worship and will allow us to draw some helpful comparisons."[132]

The modern church delivering their service online similarly creates content (a sermon, worship, etc.) that is subsequently sent to others. The pastor and worship leader do not generally see those participating online, which removes that contemporaneous feedback that exists in a physical church service, in which a worship leader can see how much or how little others are participating in worship. Where initial feedback is lacking, there is room for a broader reach of the message that has been prepared. Sandercock-Brown notes, "Online worship can be a means of spiritual connection and ongoing formation even for physically dispersed households and worshippers, particularly where the congregation continues via various means, to share, discuss and ponder their common experiences in worship."[133]

The potential to reach many people with the online church service is immense. Sandercock-Brown concludes with encouragement for church leaders to do so well:

> In online worship, just as they do in a physically gathered worshipping community, worship content creators craft and then narrate worship that proclaims God's salvation and plays an important role in the ongoing formation of the people of God. The crafting and delivery of innovative and adaptive proclamation, as Paul's letters reminds us, is, and has always been, a communal enterprise. Online worship is not a new tradition but rather the latest incarnation of an ongoing tradition of team-created and team-delivered narrative proclamation that shapes, connects, and forms the Christian community. When such proclamation is heard and seen it becomes an event where God can be encountered, and spiritual connection is possible. Online worship has a role to play in the ongoing formation of the Christian community. The content creator's responsibility, like Paul's team, is to create, present, and preserve quality worship that is shaped for their own community. They can do so trusting that the online worship narrative and its

[132] Sandercock-Brown, "Paul's Letters as a Guide to Online Worship," 7.

[133] Sandercock-Brown, "Paul's Letters as a Guide to Online Worship," 8.

> proclamation have intrinsic power and that those who are in Christ may truly worship even though apart.[134]

## A Case Study on Hillsong's Online Church

Sarah Young conducted an ethnographic study on the online worship of Hillsong. She describes the worship of Hillsong at their physical services as "kinaesthetic worship."[135] She ties her study to a distinction between contemplative and celebratory worship, as defined by Daniel Albrecht in *Rites in the Spirit.*[136] Young highlights and recognizes her role as a staff member at Hillsong and argues that, rather than being a conflict of interest, it has provided her with deeper insight and access to the data needed for her study.[137]

One of the most notable aspects of an online church service is the diversity of environments in which participants join. Young describes this situation in the context of Hillsong's online services:

> The integration of online and offline worlds allows HCO members to join services from various points around the globe. Quite a few of the attendees of Hillsong's Australian livestream services join in from North and South America, Africa, Asia, Europe, as well as wider Oceania. This is regardless of whether the service is streamed at a time suitable for their respective time zones. Therefore, many international attendees join in the middle of their night. While some attendees join HCO from their home or local cafe, others participate while in transit from one fixed point to another. People have commented on the service livestream chat that they are watching from the train or listening to the service in the traffic on their daily commute. I have also joined a service myself while in the air flying across Canada from Vancouver to Toronto. This multiplicity of offline environments would never have been a consideration in traditional Pentecostal worship

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[134] Sandercock-Brown, "Paul's Letters as a Guide to Online Worship," 11.

[135] Sarah Young, "'Reimagined, Not Redundant': Hillsong Church Online and Worship Practices," *Journal of Contemporary Ministry*, no. 6 (March 2022): 21, https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.392479239019043.

[136] Young, "Reimagined, Not Redundant," 21.

[137] Young, "Reimagined, Not Redundant," 23.

> practices. However, they must now be taken into consideration when establishing the limitations of digital embodiment and the reimagining of worship practices online.[138]

The broad reach of the online service is an essential aspect of Hillsong that predates the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the shutdowns imposed on churches in Australia allowed Hillsong to place greater emphasis on their online efforts. Young recounts a personal conversation with Paul, the person in charge of creating the online offerings of Hillsong: "We had one guy working on it for a few months in the background, just because he felt God put [it in] his heart, then Covid hits, and we had it overnight, literally within a week, that was done."[139] Despite potential debates about the validity of an online gathering, Hillsong church was prepared to offer its services to those that needed access.

Young turns her attention to the physicality of worship in the Pentecostal tradition. Where someone in a physical gathering at the church raise hands and dance to the worship, Young likens the digital equivalent to the use of the chat feature and emojis.[140] Young describes the experience during a more contemplative time during the worship service:

> Comments focus now on expressing adoration and affirming the lyrics of the worship song. There is an increase in cry-face and raised hand emojis, as well as the bubbling up of hearts and prayer hands from the corner of the Hillsong Church Online chat box inspired by Instagram Live—an application developed to increase the community's sense of participation in the service. Prayers are typed out, asking God to do what only He can and accepting that He is the one in control while the congregation actively waits on divine intervention.[141]

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[138] Young, "Reimagined, Not Redundant," 24.

[139] Young, "Reimagined, Not Redundant," 28.

[140] Young, "Reimagined, Not Redundant," 32.

[141] Young, "Reimagined, Not Redundant," 33.

The expression of worship in a digital space using emojis and prayer requests can generally be seen on most church live streams. Young's attempt to shed light on how these expressions can be considered participatory worship is a helpful foundation upon which others could build.

## Pew Research Center and Online Church

Pew Research Center conducted a quantitative study examining the opinions of participants toward many aspects of online church services titled, "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular."[142] Michelle Faverio et al. share:

> It's been clear for more than two years that the video technology that helped Americans stay in touch with relatives, friends and colleagues during COVID-19 lockdowns was also helping many to connect with houses of worship. From kitchens or living rooms, in their Sunday best, pajamas or something in between, those with an internet connection and a screen could pray along with other virtual attendees, listen to sermons, and sing along with choirs, all in real time.[143]

With the rapid adoption of technology by the church during the COVID-19 lockdowns in mind, Faverio et al. share the necessity of their study: "What wasn't clear, though, was how people felt about these virtual experiences. Would they keep watching services on screens, even after they thought it was safe to attend in person? What did they like about joining services remotely? What didn't they like? The survey was designed to explore these kinds of questions."[144]

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[142] Michelle Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), June 2, 2023, 1, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/06/02/online-religious-services-appeal-to-many-americans-but-going-in-person-remains-more-popular/.

[143] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 7.

[144] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 8.

Often church and worship leaders voice a concern for ensuring the best possible quality of their online church services. According to the study, two thirds of those surveyed are satisfied with the quality of online servies they watch.[145] The study further looked into the sentiment of participants toward the worship or the sermon, with participants being slightly more satisfied with the sermon than the worship.[146] When asked about satisfaction with the worship and sermon in a physical service, participants show that the physical gathering is preferable to the online one.[147]

## A Matter of Convenience

The frequency of attending online services has dwindled as the COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted, with 43% of Americans attending an online church service as of November 2022.[148] Faverio et al. highlight, "[T]he survey indicates that as the coronavirus pandemic winds down, about a quarter of Americans (27%) are still watching religious services on screens. This includes 10% who take part virtually but do not regularly attend in person, plus 17% who watch online or on TV and attend in person on a regular basis."[149] Interestingly, convenience is the largest factor prompting people to attend online compared to in person. "When asked why they watch religious services online or on TV, many regular viewers cite multiple reasons. But as the

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[145] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 8.

[146] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 8.

[147] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 8.

[148] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 10.

[149] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 11.

COVID-19 pandemic recedes, convenience is the most- commonly selected option—not fear of catching or spreading any illness."[150] As the COVID-19 pandemic has waned, concern for social distancing and avoiding infection has become less of a concern for those surveyed but still weighs as a factor. Faverio et al. explain, "About half of all virtual viewers say that being able to worship without worrying about catching or spreading COVID-19 or other illnesses is a reason, including a quarter who describe this concern as a major incentive for watching religious services online or on TV."[151] Faverio et al. summarize why participants chose to view an online service rather than attend a physical one:

> The most common reason Americans give for watching services online or on TV is simply that "it is convenient," with 43% of regular viewers citing this as a major reason and an additional 31% describing it as a minor reason. Six-in-ten remote viewers cite the ability to watch services that are held far away from where they live, including about a third (34%) who say this is a major reason why they watch services virtually.[152]

## Connectedness

Interestingly, a sense of connectedness in the physical service compared to an online one provided the widest difference. Faverio et al. explain:

> In addition, virtual viewers are much less likely to report feeling connected to other worshippers. Roughly two-thirds (65%) of regular in-person attenders say they feel "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of connection with their fellow attenders, the two highest options on a five-point scale. By comparison, far fewer regular viewers—28%—say they feel a strong connection with people who are attending a service in person while they, themselves, are watching on a screen. And 22% of virtual viewers say they feel strongly connected to the other people watching online or on TV. Not everyone who watches services remotely feels fully engaged. A quarter of regular viewers say they usually feel

[150] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 11.

[151] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 32.

[152] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 32.

> they are an "active participant" in the service. But 32% say they feel they are watching "without truly being an active participant." And 42% say they feel a little of both.[153]

Many churches offer their online services as a means for members to view the service when they do not attend. Regarding this issue, Faverio et al. explain:

> Survey respondents who said they watch religious services online or on TV were asked a follow-up question: Do they watch virtual services at the same congregation they typically attend in person, or do they sometimes go online/on TV to see services at other congregations, or both? Among the 17% of U.S. adults who regularly do both things—attend worship services in person and watch them virtually—most say they watch services offered by a congregation other than, or in addition to, the one they typically attend in person. This represents 10% of all U.S. adults. An additional 7% of U.S. adults say they sometimes attend in person and sometimes watch online/on TV, but they only watch services offered by the congregation they attend in person.[154]

Connection through something other than the weekend church service does not see much engagement. Faverio et al. highlight:

> Overall, fewer than one-in-ten Americans (7%) say they ever participate in online prayer groups, scripture study groups or religious education programs, compared with more than twice as many (19%) who say they say participate in such groups in person. Just 4% engage in these activities online at least weekly, compared with 11% who do so in person that frequently.[155]

## Online Participation

The study turns attention to detailing the habits and practices of participants during online worship. Where the physical church gathering is communal by nature, a little over half of the

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[153] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 9.

[154] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 11–12.

[155] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 57.

participants responded that they tend to view an online church service alone.[156] Faverio et al. report a particularly interesting finding:

> Most regular viewers (61%) say that when they are watching services on a screen, they typically do not do things they would normally do when attending in person, such as praying out loud, singing or kneeling. For nearly four-in-ten virtual viewers (39%), though, the remote experience is similar to worshipping in person in ways such as these, all or most of the time.[157]

The study finds that those who engage in physical participation in an online service report that they feel more connected to the service. "Virtual worshippers who report doing the things they normally would do at services in person—like praying or responding aloud, singing or kneeling—are more likely to feel like active participants than those who don't engage in those kinds of behaviors."[158] Furthermore, "Viewers who watch services with others, rather than by themselves, are also more likely to feel connected to other virtual worshippers and to those worshipping at the same services in person."[159]

Participation in online church services is an area that requires further study to determine why so many people such as those in the Pew study are more comfortable engaging in more physical and participatory aspects of church services when they are alone. It would seem that privacy allows for one to step out of their comfort zone, but it warrants further examination so

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[156] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 14.

[157] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 14.

[158] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 36.

[159] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 41.

that worship leaders can be aware of how to continue to encourage participation for those who join online.

## The Use of Asynchronous Religious Technology

Speaking about online church often brings different definitions. In a narrow sense, online church could be a single hour on the weekend that entails merely watching a stream of a physical church service online. However, this narrow focus does not encompass the volume of religious media and technology available to the modern Christian. Sermons are released as podcast episodes that can be consumed later. A modern Christian can listen to multiple sermons from many different pastors every week. Similarly, worship services are often left online or broken up by song titles for people to listen to or watch at their leisure. Faverio et al. explain how widespread the use of religious technology is in America:

> In addition to asking about virtual worship, the survey asked respondents whether they use online apps or web-based technology for religious purposes. Overall, three-in-ten U.S. adults say they go online to search for information about religion. Roughly one-in-five say they use apps or websites to help them read scripture or to remind them to do so, including 9% who do this daily. A similar share (20%) say they watch religion-focused online videos, such as those found on YouTube or TikTok.[160]

The study gives attention to what is considered religious technology. Faverio et al. differentiate into six categories. "The six items are: using apps or websites to help with prayer; using apps or websites to help with reading scripture; watching religion-focused online videos; searching for religious information online; listening to religion-focused podcasts; and participating in online prayer groups, scripture study groups or religious education groups."[161]

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[160] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 16.

[161] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 62.

The adoption of religious technology is more pervasive among those whom Pew identify as highly religious, which they define as "U.S. adults who say they attend services weekly, pray daily and consider religion to be very important in their lives."[162] Among these highly religious Americans, religious technology is widely used. Faverio et al. explain:

> Digital technology clearly has a foothold among highly religious Americans … About half of Americans with this high level of religious commitment say they use an app or website to help them or remind them to read scripture (52%) or go online to search for information about religion (53%). Nearly three-in-ten (28%) say they use an app or website to help them or remind them to pray.[163]

## Social Media and Online Church

The platforms used to distribute church services warrant study themselves, as they provide the infrastructure needed to provide online church. Interestingly, Faverio et al. explain that a small portion (one in ten) of those studied follow religious leaders on social media.[164] This is an interesting phenomenon that warrants further research. As churches look to increase the reach of their online services, it is important to examine the social media presence of their pastors and worship leaders who, as is demonstrated by this study, are under the scrutiny of some viewers in the same manner as the online church service.

## The In-Person Service is Preferable

While there is widespread adoption of online church services, it is important to realize that, when asked to choose between online and physical church services, the physical gathering

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[162] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 46.

[163] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 46.

[164] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 51.

is still preferable. Faverio et al. highlight how participants feel about the physical service compared to an online one. "Among U.S. adults who both watch services online or on TV and attend them in person on a regular basis, there is no ambiguity about which mode of worship they prefer. Roughly three-quarters (76%) say they prefer attending in person, while about one-in-ten (11%) say they prefer online services. An additional 14% say that they have no preference."[165]

## Watching Online Services from Other Churches

Widespread access to the internet, and intentionality of churches around the world in offering their service online have made it possible for people to view a church service from anywhere around the world. This access has affected the viewing habits of online church participants. Among those surveyed, thirty-two percent share that they regularly watch online services from multiple churches.[166] Faverio et al. highlight, "A majority of U.S. adults who regularly watch religious services online or on TV (60%) say they stream or tune in to the services of just one house of worship."[167]

Choosing which service to watch online can be daunting for any viewer, with a nearly unlimited amount of church offerings to choose from. One might think that those that watch online would first want to view their own church. However, a large majority of participants in

[165] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 42.

[166] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 43.

[167] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 43.

the study choose to watch services from churches they do not consider to be their home church. Faverio et al. explain:

> Nearly three-quarters of virtual viewers watch services at a congregation they do not attend in person. This includes those who watch at least one congregation other than the one they attend most often in person (38% of virtual viewers) as well as those who do not have an in-person congregation (36%). Both of those figures are higher than the 26% of virtual viewers who watch services only of their own, in-person congregation.[168]

## Summary

The technological infrastructure needed to provide online church services has only been available for a few decades—a relatively small amount of time in the scope of church history. In many ways, churches have had to adapt and utilize online church services in innovative ways, without much uniformity. Academic study follows developments, providing direction and reporting on the place of online services in the scope of the global church.

There is still fierce debate as to the validity of an online gathering, with opponents of online church services citing passages such as Hebrews 10:25 as biblical reason to not engage in online church. Despite this debate, people regularly view online church services so there continues to be a need to study the phenomenon as lived. The following chapter details the methodology employed to examine the lived experience of participants regarding online worship.

[168] Faverio et al., "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," 45.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## Introduction

This chapter details the phenomenological research design and methodology used in this study. The framework for the methodology chapter is based on protocols established by Katarzyna Peoples, who describes how to conduct phenomenological research in her excellent book.[1] As such, the design and rationale, the researcher's role, delineation of participant groups, and procedures are provided. Attention is then given to data collection and analysis, followed by ethical, validity, and reliability considerations.

## Rationale and Design

### Phenomenology

The study explores how online worship participants and leaders experience online and virtual worship. A phenomenological design is preferable because it allows the participants' lived experiences to drive the research. Katarzyna Peoples asks, "What is it like to experience a certain phenomenon?"[2] The interviews provide a rich narrative of the lived experience of those involved in online worship, which is used to "construct a meaningful reality through data analysis."[3]

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[1] Katarzyna Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation: A Step-by-Step Guide*, Qualitative Research Methods Series (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2021), 47.

[2] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 3.

[3] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 5.

## Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The use of a hermeneutic phenomenological research method further refines this phenomenological research. Martin Heidegger advocates what he calls the *hermeneutic circle.* One's understanding of a given concept continually changes as one conducts research. Peoples explains, "[U]nderstanding increases by moving from the understanding of parts to the understanding of the whole and again back to parts, continually changing as new data are introduced."[4] The researcher's understanding of participants' lived experiences in online worship continues to change as further analysis is conducted. Ultimately, a complete picture of pastoral care and online worship is seen, which continues to inform the research.

## A Biblical Worldview

As the inerrant word of God, the Bible is the foundation upon which this study is built. Further, a study directly connected to worship and pastoral care that does not acknowledge the preconceptions that come with faith in Christ is not preferable. Scripture is the objective guide that is relied upon during the hermeneutic circle process which allows for the research to anchor in the objective truth of the Word of God. The Bible governs the interpretation of the experiences of participants. Further, the study is concerned with experiences dealing with the church gathering which, within a biblical worldview, brings with it the presence and power of Christ (1 Cor. 5:4). As such, a biblical foundation must inform the research.

David Ream establishes a "Phenomenological Method for Christian Worship," which recognizes the biblical worldview as central to phenomenological research.[5] God is involved in

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[4] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 33.

[5] David L. Ream, "The Worship Leadership Model at Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa: A Phenomenological Study of the Lead Pastor and Worship Leader Relationship, 1961–2013" (Ph.D. Diss., Liberty University, 2022), 80, ProQuest.

the week-to-week planning and execution of a local worship service. The role of the Holy Spirit in the daily planning, experience, and execution of a church service cannot be left out of the research as it removes the essence of the church gathering to do so. Although online church services look different, God is still reaching people and utilizing the efforts of church leaders. The study is concerned with how participants experience online worship, and the activity of the Holy Spirit is intrinsically tied to their experience.

## Researcher Role

In hermeneutic phenomenological research, the researcher is both an observer and a participant.[6] The hermeneutic circle is employed throughout this study. As each interview is conducted, analyzed, and reflected upon, the researcher comes to a new understanding of the lived experiences of those he interviews—further, his knowledge about online worship and the pastoral care that churches facilitate continually changes.[7]

Peoples explains, "Phenomenological researchers pause and look at a phenomenon as the lived experience of some activity and illuminate its specific characteristic as experience rather than trying to turn it into an abstract structure and comparing it to other structures."[8] This researcher has had many experiences with pastoral care and online worship throughout his life. Peoples explains the phenomenon of *Dasein* which makes it difficult for researchers to remove

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[6] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 48. "Students will need to explain their roles as observers and participants in their phenomenological research studies."

[7] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 34. "A person modifies the nature of understanding by this constant process of renewed projection (interpretation). This happens through each lens. By looking through one's biases and understandings (instead of trying to suspend them), researchers revise understanding. So researchers are always looking through these changing lenses (new understandings) in order to understand a phenomenon."

[8] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 5.

or bracket themselves from their research.[9] As such, it is critical to briefly explore some of this researcher's foundational experiences with online worship and pastoral care which helps reveal bias.

**The COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant disruption in the way a weekend service was conducted. This researcher has had many experiences that have left a lasting impact on how he views both the form and function of the physical and online offerings of the church.

This researcher was the Experience Pastor at a non-denominational church in California when the government made the call to shelter in place. As the Experience Pastor, he directed the worship, production, creative, and greeting teams. The weekly efforts of his team were almost entirely aimed at the weekend gathering, but because of the shelter-in-place order, attention went completely toward the online church service.

This researcher's church was already streaming services weekly and had a considerable presence on social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. As such, the pivot to online efforts was easily accomplished. This was not the case for many churches around the world, however. This researcher is well connected with many leaders and offered advice and guidance for others on beginning to provide their church services online, whether through purchasing equipment or simply using the pastor's phone to stream the service to Facebook.[10]

The researcher's Experience Department turned from focusing on a physical gathering to what is, in effect, a television studio, creating content to share on the internet every day. The

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[9] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 32.

[10] It is important to note that many of the churches that sought to purchase equipment to stream at this time were hindered by the ability to purchase the necessary cameras and streaming infrastructure due to the supply chain issues that started because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

weekend service times were now when the service would be streamed for anywhere between three and six thousand viewers on the weekend. Further, great effort was given to developing ways to stay connected with the congregation throughout the week. For instance, small groups moved from homes to online using the Zoom platform. A Facebook group was created for all members to join regularly, and daily content was uploaded to the group page, both prerecorded and live. This researcher was responsible for producing a morning stream in the group from his backyard called "Guitar and Coffee." He took requests for worship songs and led those who participated in worship online. As the shelter-in-place order began to relax, this researcher helped guide his church toward a hybrid model that involved many of the new online efforts as an augmentation for the physical gathering.

**The Essence of Online Worship**

A seminal experience for this researcher regarding online church was a conversation with his lead pastor and leadership team at the church shortly after his church decided not to meet physically on Sunday and to pivot toward an online church service. The leadership had agreed to honor the shelter-in-place order from the state of California. Still, some churches in the same town decided to continue to meet, mainly citing Hebrews 10:25 and insisting on the separation of church and state. There were little data available about the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic at the advent of the shelter-in-place order in California, and the leadership of this researcher's church decided to err on the side of caution and suspend the physical gathering, knowing that the church already possessed the required infrastructure to create online church content.

However, several church members voiced deep concerns about the church not meeting in person. A comment made by many of the members was that, without the physical gathering, it

would be impossible to worship God. This sentiment stirred fierce debate among the leadership of this researcher's church.

As the pastor directly in charge of the worship services, this researcher felt he had failed to disciple his congregation meaningfully toward a lifestyle of worship. Romans 12:1 details how obedience to God is an act of worship that goes far beyond singing. However, the services and sermons at this researcher's church did not regularly touch on this foundational truth. This researcher committed himself and his team to create and scheduling regular training about worship and how it encompassed more than singing. This was not to negate the need for a physical gathering but to take the time to disciple the congregation and give them care for their theological understanding of worship. When the physical services finally continued, the church participated more than it had in the past. The church's leadership attributed this to the efforts to disciple the congregation.

The providence of the Lord is not lost on this researcher, who started a Doctor of Worship Studies and then a Ph.D. in Christian Worship degree shortly after. This researcher's understanding of both physical and online worship invariably grows as he continues to research. His view is constantly informed by the coursework taken as the courses were completed during the pandemic and subsequent reopening. Each class informs his understanding of worship and influences his leadership. As the dissertation approached, it became clear that this researcher would study online worship. The choice for a phenomenological study looking directly at the lived experiences of those involved in online worship and pastoral care came naturally, given the background of this researcher leading up to the dissertation proposal.

**Connected with Others**

This researcher founded and has operated a non-profit organization, The Church Collective, for ten years. Through this organization, he has experienced both relatively superficial and deep connections with hundreds of worship and church leaders from around the world. Further, he hosts a podcast that allows him to converse with influential worship and church leaders such as Kristian Stanfill, Kari Jobe, and Louie Giglio. The experience of facilitating these conversations has given this researcher a unique insight into church culture at large while he has also led ministry at the local level. His experience informs a fore-conception that plays a part in the research.[11] The hermeneutic circle is refined, and this researcher is not separated from the process. Peoples explains, "Phenomenological researchers also aim to reveal their lived experiences as they focus on named phenomena and how they have an impact on their experiences."[12] It is critical to note that scripture serves as the anchor for this phenomenological process, with the Word of God informing the interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences of participants.

## Participants

The central research question, "How do participants experience pastoral care through online worship?" informs the selection of participants. Each participant must have participated in an online church service. Further, they must also have attended a physical church service at some point to compare and contrast their experiences between each. A professed Christian faith is also required. Although outside of the scope of this study, research regarding the experience of those

[11] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 34.

[12] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 5.

who do not consider themselves Christian in online worship could also use this study as a framework. Every participant is at least eighteen years old or older. Scripture serves as the anchor for all interpretation and re-interpretation of the lived experiences.

Within the above criteria, there are three subsets of participants. Group A consists of those not serving or employed in a leadership capacity at their churches. They are considered simply a member of their church or congregation. Group B is comprised of worship and church leaders. The contrast between the lived experiences of those who attend an online service and those who plan them is of particular interest. Group C are those who have attended virtual church services using a virtual reality headset such as the Oculus from Meta. The contrast between an immersive church service through virtual reality and watching on a screen is the focus, while the hermeneutical circle continues to inform the research. To participate in the third group, one must have attended both an online and physical church service and have access to a virtual reality headset to attend a virtual church service and speak about their experience.

Peoples recommends purposive and snowball sampling for phenomenological research.[13] Initial participants are chosen through the personal network of the researcher, and, where appropriate, participants suggest those within their network that may be interested in being involved in the study. Given the nature of phenomenological research, saturation is difficult to quantify as each participant's lived experience is unique to them. The researcher keeps the interviews directed toward the participants' lived experiences to develop a rich picture of pastoral care through online worship. As such, each of the three groups is limited to a maximum of twenty participants for the sake of the size and scope of this research. Further study could be

[13] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 49.

conducted with more extensive sampling, especially if it looked toward quantitative data rather than lived experience.

### Recruitment

Participants are recruited through personal connections with the researcher, recommendations from those within the social sphere of the researcher, and posts by the researcher on social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube. A focus group comprised of students from The Belonging Co College is part of the study and interested students are vetted to ensure they have experienced both an online and physical worship service. Because of the nature of using a virtual reality headset, a disclaimer highlighting the potential for dizziness and nausea is given to those that choose to be involved in the study of virtual worship. Those that do not want to risk dizziness or nausea are asked to participate in one of the other groups. The recruitment documents are found in the appendix of this dissertation.

## Instrumentation

The study explores the lived experience of those who plan and participate in online and virtual worship services. Interviews are the primary form of instrumentation. They are conducted in person, over Zoom, in groups, or one-on-one. To fully immerse himself in the experience, the researcher takes minimal notes during the interview to be present for the discussion. Immediately after, the researcher contemporaneously journals his thoughts and impressions from the interview. This journal, the recorded interviews, and follow-up interviews, if needed, comprises the instrumentation required to move along the hermeneutical circle. Clarity of data is sought as one can always endeavor to refine one's understanding further. Continual refinement of the data

could involve more interviews and journaling. However, at a certain point, one must limit the amount of data collected to realistically complete the work.[14]

## Procedures

A compelling study requires procedures that guide current research and serve as a template for further research. As such, these procedures can be replicated for further phenomenological research regarding worship. The interviews begin with questions regarding online and physical worship. The complete instrumentation is in appendix A. The interviews serve as the entry point into the hermeneutic circle of each participant. Their lived experience discovered during and after the interview shapes and forms the researcher's understanding of pastoral care and online worship.

Peoples argues, "When constructing interview questions, students must only ask about experiences and not about thoughts, feelings, or perceptions."[15] However, one's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions are intrinsically tied to their experience. Malte Brinkman, Johannes Türstig, and Martin Weber-Spanknebel argue, "Emotions and feelings represent an important focus of phenomenological research that can open up theoretical, methodological, inter-disciplinary, and intercultural perspectives."[16] Online worship, its practice, and its validity compared to the physical gathering naturally draw feelings from participants. The participants are continually directed toward elaborating on their lived experiences. Still, it is essential to realize that thoughts and feelings intrinsically come from the natural conversation of the

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[14] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 50.

[15] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 35.

[16] Malte Brinkmann, Johannes Türstig, and Martin Weber-Spanknebel, eds., *Emotion – Feeling – Mood: Phenomenological and Pedagogical Perspectives*, vol. 12, Phänomenologische Erziehungswissenschaft (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2021), 12, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-34124-4.

interview process. They are conducted in person or online through Zoom. In both instances, they are recorded on the researcher's password-protected computer via Zoom or the webcam using QuickTime.

Few notes are taken during the interview for the researcher to immerse himself fully in the participants' experiences. The researcher reflexively journals after each interview to continue the hermeneutic circle. The interviews are then watched to understand further and note the participants' body language and inflection. An application called Otter is used to generate a transcript, read through by the researcher, corrected for errors, and sent to the participant for member checking. If the data warrants, a follow-up interview is scheduled with a participant to clarify or further examine a theme that has emerged from the data. The interviews from each of the three groups of participants are first singularly compared without crossover.[17] Once the relative themes and data are discovered within each group, the three groups are compared.

## Data Collection

A semi-structured interview process is employed, with a list of interview questions used as a starting point for the conversation. The interviews are conducted in person or online, in groups, or one-on-one. The researcher does not take notes during the initial interview to fully immerse himself in the participants' experiences. The researcher journals after each interview and, if warranted, generates follow-up questions and highlights themes from the data. A transcript is generated and read while watching the interview recording, taking notes of the

[17] The three groups are those that participate in online worship, those that plan or lead online worship, and those that participate in virtual reality worship.

participant's body language and voice inflection. The recordings and journals are kept on the researcher's password-locked computer and stored in a private folder on Dropbox.

## Interview Questions

The phenomenological study utilizes the semi-structured data collection protocol discussed above as it uncovers the lived experience of participants as they participate in and receive pastoral care through online and virtual worship. The questions are intended to continually point the participant toward a response that recalls a specific experience with online worship. However, as discussed above, the feelings and thoughts of participants are inherently revealed as they discuss their personal experiences. As such, some questions ask for specific data, such as "What are some of your favorite worship songs and bands?" or "How would you define pastoral care?" Questions like these are followed immediately by a prompt that helps illicit phenomenological thought, such as "Tell me about a time when you received pastoral care," or "Describe the experience you had when you first heard your favorite worship song." The participants are allowed to follow their train of thought to ascertain the complete picture of their experience. Where warranted, some of the questions ask the participants to explain how they imagine they will experience online worship in the future.[18] The researcher has a list of questions that are not necessarily all asked depending on the participants' experiences. The

[18] Some phenomenologists argue that only the lived experience can be examined in phenomenological inquiry. However, others, such as Julia Jansen argue, "Of central importance, especially in post-Husserlian phenomenology, is the creativity of imagination. Moreover, the imagination is also seen to have an important cognitive and justificatory role insofar as it enables us to generate and consider hypothetical and alternative situations to those that we actually find ourselves in. Imagining is understood as an act (though not always voluntary or self-aware) of experiencing something as possible (rather than actual or necessary), which makes it central to questions of human freedom and to the phenomenological method itself." Julia Jansen, "Imagination – Phenomenological Approaches," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780415249126-DD3589-1.

questions in the interview guide below provide various entry points into the hermeneutic circle for the researcher.

## Interview Guide

The research has three different participant groups: Group A, those that participate in online worship; Group B, those that plan online worship; and Group C, those that participate in virtual worship. Some questions overlap among the groups to draw comparisons and contractions. Some questions are specific to each group as well. Combining similar and varied questions enables the researcher to see a broader picture from all the data. It is important to recognize that each individual may have an experience that overlaps from one group to the other. For instance, a member of the virtual group is also a leader at their church and regularly participates in online worship. Group A questions are as follows:

- How would you define worship?
- When someone says “online worship,” what does that mean to you?
- How long have you been a Christian?
- What does your daily and weekly rhythm of Bible study, prayer, and devotions look like?
- What are some of your favorite songs and bands/worship teams? Why?
- What does it mean to be a member of a church?
- Explain what the online service is like at your church.
- Describe the physical service at your church.
- How long are the services at your church? How long are sermons? Do you have an ideal length for either? Why?
- How large is your church? How big would your ideal church be?
- Describe the online service of your church.
- What device(s) or platforms (Facebook, YouTube, etc.) do you use to attend online services? Are you doing anything else while the service is on?
- When attending online, do you participate in the entire service as it is broadcast? Do you make a point to participate on Sunday morning or do you watch it at another time?
- What does it mean for you to participate in online worship? Do you sing at home? Would you consider yourself a spectator, participant, or something else when watching an online service?
- Do you attend or watch services from multiple churches? Explain why you choose to do so and what they are like.
- Do you watch an entire online service in one sitting? If not, what does it look like for you watching an online service?

- How many times a month would you say you attend a service online compared to going to a church physically? Explain how you decide which you will attend on a given week?
- How would you describe your church experience both online and offline before, during, and after COVID-19? Would you consider any of them better than the other? Why?
- Describe a recent experience you have had in a physical church service.
- Describe a recent experience you have had in an online church service.
- Do you feel that you are missing something when you attend an online service? Explain.
- Do you prefer an online worship service to be streamed live or prerecorded? Why?
- How would you define pastoral care?
- Do you feel that your pastor and church give you the care that you expect? What does that look like?
- What are the differences you have experienced in pastoral care when you attend a physical service compared to an online service?
- When participating in a worship service online, do you find you are more excited about the worship or the sermon? Do you feel differently when you are at a physical worship service? Explain.
- How do you think churches will be providing online, on-campus, and virtual services ten years from now? What will the services look like?
- What do you think the place of virtual reality will be in the life of churches?
- Do you have any other thoughts that you would like to add?

Group B turns attention toward those that plan and execute online worship:

- How would you define worship?
- When someone says, “online worship,” what does that mean to you?
- How long have you been a Christian?
- What does it mean to be a member of a church?
- What are some of your favorite worship songs and teams that you regularly listen to and choose songs from for your church? Why?
- Explain what the online service is like at your church.
- Describe the physical service at your church.
- How long are the services at your church? How long are sermons? Do you have an ideal length for either? Why?
- How large is your church? How big would your ideal church be?
- What is your church’s strategy behind offering online worship services? In what areas do you feel your church is succeeding or failing in this strategy?
- Explain the process involved in the planning and execution of your physical services.
- Explain the process involved in the planning and execution of your online services.
- What device(s) or platforms (Facebook, YouTube, etc.) do you use to attend online services? Are you doing anything else while the service is on?
- When attending online, do you participate in the entire service as it is broadcast? Do you make a point to participate on Sunday morning or do you watch it at another time?
- What does it mean for you to participate in online worship? Do you sing at home? Would you consider yourself a spectator, participant, or something else when watching an online service?

- Do you attend or watch services from multiple churches? Explain why you choose to do so and what they are like.
- Do you watch an entire online service in one sitting? If not, what does it look like for you watching an online service?
- How do you encourage participation in your online service?
- How many times a month would you say you attend a service online compared to going to a church physically? Explain how you decide which you will attend on a given week?
- How would you describe your church experience both online and offline before, during, and after COVID-19? Would you consider any of them better than the other? Why?
- Describe a recent experience you have had in a physical church service.
- Describe a recent experience you have had in an online church service.
- Do you feel that you are missing something when you attend an online service? Explain.
- Do you prefer an online worship service to be streamed live or prerecorded? Why?
- About how many people attend your physical services on a given weekend?
- About how many people attend your online services on a given weekend?
- Do you keep your services available for people to view after the service is over?
- Are your services prerecorded or live-streamed? Why?
- How would you define pastoral care?
- How does worship provide pastoral care for your church members? How does your church and ministry do this?
- Can church members experience this same level of pastoral care online as they do when they attend physically? Explain.
- What place do you think online and virtual worship services will have in the life of the global church in the future.
- How would you compare your online service to other churches? Do you feel a sense of competition? Explain.
- How do you feel about your church members viewing multiple churches online services throughout the week?
- How would you respond to someone who says they do not need to attend church in person because online has all they need?
- How do you think churches will be providing online, on-campus, and virtual services ten years from now? What will the services look like?
- What do you think the place of virtual reality will be in the life of churches?
- Do you have any other thoughts that you would like to add?

Group C looks toward the experiences of those involved in virtual worship:

- How would you define worship?
- When someone says “online worship,” what does that mean to you?
- How long have you been a Christian?
- What does your daily and weekly rhythm of Bible study, prayer, and devotions look like?
- What does it mean to be a member of a church?
- What are some of your favorite songs and bands/worship teams? Why?
- Explain what the online service is like at your church.
- Describe the physical service at your church.

- How long are the services at your church? How long are sermons? Do you have an ideal length for either? Why?
- How large is your church? How big would your ideal church be?
- What device(s) or platforms (Facebook, YouTube, etc.) do you use to attend online services? Are you doing anything else while the service is on?
- When attending online, do you participate in the entire service as it is broadcast? Do you make a point to participate on Sunday morning or do you watch it at another time?
- What does it mean for you to participate in online worship? Do you sing at home? Would you consider yourself a spectator, participant, or something else when watching an online service?
- Do you attend or watch services from multiple churches? Explain why you choose to do so and what they are like.
- Do you watch an entire online service in one sitting? If not, what does it look like for you watching an online service?
- How many times a month would you say you attend a service online compared to going to a church physically? Explain how you decide which you will attend on a given week?
- How would you describe your church experience both online and offline before, during, and after COVID-19? Would you consider any of them better than the other? Why?
- Have you participated in a virtual worship service before this project? If so, what was it like? If not, explain why you hadn't.
- How would you compare and contrast a virtual worship service with an online worship service?
- How would you compare and contrast a virtual worship service with a physical worship service?
- How would you define pastoral care?
- Do you feel that you can be cared for pastorally, virtually, or online? Is one better than the other?
- What do you think the church will look like in using online, virtual, and on-campus worship services ten years from now?
- What do you think the place of virtual reality will be in the life of churches?
- Describe a recent experience you have had in a physical church service.
- Describe a recent experience you have had in an online church service.
- Do you feel that you are missing something when you attend an online service? Explain.
- Do you prefer an online worship service to be streamed live or prerecorded? Why?
- How do you think churches will be providing online, on-campus, and virtual services ten years from now? What will the services look like?
- Do you have any thoughts that you would like to add?

## Journaling

Researcher bias must be explicated when conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological study.[19] Utilizing journaling before and after data collection and analysis allows the researcher to recognize his pre-understandings and note changes to conceptions as the phenomenon is uncovered in parts. The researcher does not take many notes during the interview to immerse himself in the participants' lived experiences. Once the interview is complete, the researcher reflects on the conversation and writes down his thoughts, insights, and any connection to his lived experiences with pastoral care and online worship. Contrasted with transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology does not use bracketing.[20]

## Follow-Up Questions

Peoples notes, "After reading the initial transcript, students will find that, in many cases, there is incomplete, unstated, misunderstood, missing data or any areas that seemed unfinished or implicit. This is where follow-up interviews are employed to fill in these gaps in information."[21] When warranted for the sake of data saturation, follow-up interviews are set up with participants to come to a better understanding of their lived experiences.

## Focus Groups

As discussed above, some interviews are conducted in a focus group, segmented by the three participant groups. Facilitating a group interview allows new data to be uncovered through

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[19] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 56.

[20] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 56.

[21] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 54–55.

the interaction of participants during the interview process.[22] A mixture of individual interviews and focus groups in all three groups of participants helps discover experiences that may be missed in either. The ultimate goal is data saturation so that a rich picture may emerge.

## Data Analysis and Explication of Data

Peoples notes, "The term *data analysis* is not completely in line with phenomenological inquiry simply because *analysis* means to 'break into parts,' whereas phenomenological inquiry seeks to understand a phenomenon as a *whole.*"[23] She continues, "Hence, other terms are more appropriate in phenomenological research. *Explication* is one such term, which means an 'investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while keeping the context of the whole.' (Hycner, 161, p.161)." Despite this more appropriate term, Richard Hycner explains that there is precedent for using both *data analysis* and *explication* interchangeably:

> I have decided not to use this term initially because of the lack of familiarity of most readers with it. Also, there is a tradition of using the phrase "phenomenological analysis" in such writers as Binswanger, Boss and May, where an analysis of the constituents of the phenomenon does not detract from the whole phenomenon.[24]

Peoples echoes a similar sentiment and chooses to use the term *data analysis*.[25] This researcher takes the same stance as Peoples and Hycner. The data is explicated as the parts are connected to the whole phenomenon, but the terms *data analysis* and *explication* are used interchangeably.

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[22] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 56.

[23] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 57.

[24] Richard H. Hycner, "Some Guidelines for the Phenomenological Analysis of Interview Data," *Human Studies* 8, no. 3 (1985): 300.

[25] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 58.

The data analysis in this dissertation is based on the flow chart provided by Peoples.[26] Hycner cautions researchers against looking to one specific method of phenomenological research as a *cookbook* for their study and offers guidelines for research.[27] As such, the flow chart developed for this dissertation combines Peoples' prescription for research with insights from Hycner. For instance, the first step in the below flow chart (figure 1) is journaling immediately after the interview to uncover any fore-conceptions of the researcher that may have changed because of some insight gleaned from the interview.

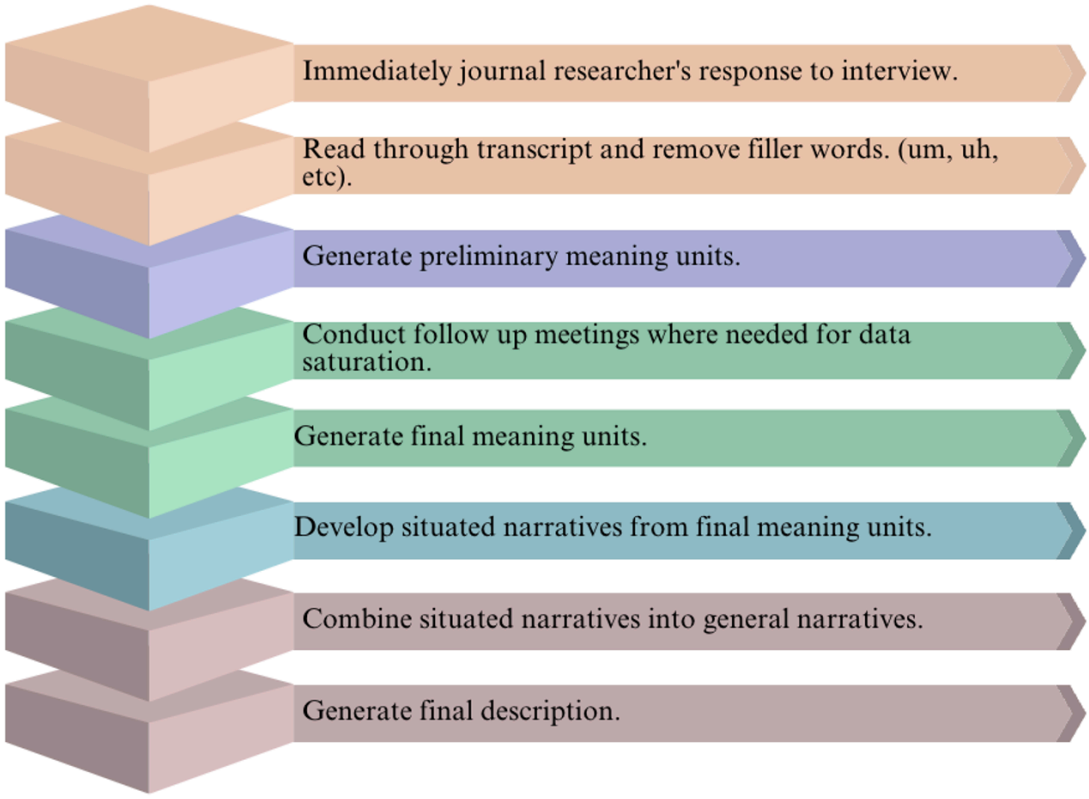


**Figure 1. Explication of Data Flow Chart**

[26] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 59.

[27] Hycner, "Some Guidelines for the Phenomenological Analysis of Interview Data," 280.

To explicate the data to the fullest, the interview data is broken into parts and subsequently categorized and reconnected. The goal is to paint a rich picture of the lived experience of online worship and pastoral care. As such, coding other than to bring anonymity to the data and the use of software are eschewed to keep the researcher close to the experiences as told by the participants.

## Validity and Reliability

Peoples recommends several methods for verifying the validity and reliability of a phenomenological study.[28] This research relies on three recommendations: an explanation of researcher bias, rich descriptions, and member checking. The researcher's bias is highlighted through the journaling process. Subsequent interviews show where his bias may have shifted and bring new insights into the phenomenon. The biases are explained throughout chapter four. Rich descriptions are a core aspect of phenomenological study, and each interview continually points toward the lived experience and the context in which the participant experienced online worship. Participants are given the transcripts of their interview to verify accuracy.

## Ethics

The study is exempt from IRB approval (see appendix B). The participants' names are coded, and only the researcher has access to the key. Data is kept on a password-locked computer and in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's home office and are deleted three years after the publishing of this dissertation. Some of the participants are students of the researcher. However, their participation in the study is voluntary and not connected to any coursework. If participants ask to remove themselves from the study, their interviews and

[28] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 69–70.

transcripts are not considered. If they are part of a focus group, their responses are removed from the transcript.

## Summary

This chapter details the hermeneutic phenomenological study's design and rationale through a biblical worldview. It describes the researcher's role, delineation of participant groups, instrumentation, and procedures. The data analysis, validity and reliability, and ethics are discussed. The following chapter details the lived experiences of pastoral care through the online worship of participants.

# Chapter 4: Research Findings

## Introduction

This chapter presents the research findings from participant interviews using the hermeneutical phenomenological method, using a biblical worldview as an interpretive lens. This lens is critical to understanding how the participants experience worship online, physically, and virtually. Whether expressed in words or not, each participant has some form of a biblical worldview in which they experience church. The experiences and testimonies presented in this chapter show varied lived experiences with pastoral care and online worship, which is to be expected given the wide variety of forms and practices for online church.

The participant interviews are delineated into preliminary meaning units and subsequently placed into general narratives so that a fuller picture of the phenomenon may be observed and presented in this chapter.[1] The research is carefully examined, but intentional breaks in the work to return to the original transcription and recordings are essential to keep the researcher as close to the phenomenon as possible.[2] Furthermore, there is intentional revisiting biblical truth in order to maintain the authority of scripture in the process. The experiences of participants are interpreted through the Word of God in order to maintain the authority of scripture over the experience. Participants are delineated by the first letter of the group they belong to: (P) for the online worship participant group, (L) for the leaders of online worship group, and (V) for the virtual worship group. Of the experiences examined, one of the most

[1] Katarzyna Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation: A Step-by-Step Guide*, Qualitative Research Methods Series (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2021), 61.

[2] Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*, 68.

vibrant is the participants' recollection of how they experienced online worship in the initial weeks following the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Online Worship During COVID-19

### Introduction

A subordinate question to the research is, "How does the worshiper compare and contrast their online experience with that of an in-person worship experience?" The COVID-19 pandemic is a fitting place for this chapter to begin and interact with this question because it changed how many churches function both online and offline. While the scope of the study is not limited to the online church during COVID-19, the inquiry into the participants' lived experiences invariably highlights the emotions, decisions, and actions of each during the pandemic. The recollection of experiences by the participants is vivid and leads them well to phenomenological inquiry. So many things changed so quickly in the online church space that each participant recalls descriptive details on how they experienced the shift in focus at their church. Pastoral care, online worship, and the decision to offer services live, or on-demand, are all central questions to this research. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a microcosm of interaction with these central questions and serves as the foundation of this chapter.

### The Need to Offer Online Worship Services with Little Notice

As discussed in chapter 2, the effects of the pandemic on church practices are still felt today. Those in the group of leaders that had to plan and facilitate online worship during this time were stretched in ways they had not planned for. The shutdown of churches happened rather

quickly and with little warning.[3] L1 found themself in a precarious situation in that they began working at their church when the pandemic started. L1 recalls their first experience with an air of humor: "The week that our county and state shutdown is the weekend that I started. And so, they had never streamed [a worship service] before. And so, what we had was bare bones. It was finicky. And it was totally not the system that we have now. And so it was, it was 'jank,' so it wasn't received properly."[4] L1's church had no experience streaming or offering services online and had to pivot quickly under L1's leadership. L1 remarks, "There was no planning or preparation [in taking their church online]. We did not have a leg up on COVID when it came to continuing our services."[5]

The transition was difficult: "It was a frantic three days to make that happen because the infrastructure didn't exist. And so, we had this sloppily thrown-together thing that we managed to make work until we could get something done."[6] Despite the difficulty, L1 speaks highly of how their team, under their leadership, transitioned. With a sense of pride in the work that was accomplished, L1 explains the details of the technical hurdles that needed to be cleared in order to offer their services:

> We had one camera and a switch that went straight to Church Online. And from there, we could link to YouTube and whatnot. So, we had sent out a mass email and social media posts saying this is what we're doing, and you all know what's coming. Here we are. This is where you can watch. And so, it was just making sure that our lines were good, and our stream was tested.[7]

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[3] L1, interview.

[4] L1, interview.

[5] L1, interview.

[6] L1, interview.

[7] L1, interview.

The technicalities involved in offering the stream often go over the heads of those unfamiliar with what is needed. However, for participants such as L1, the technical details of service became paramount to their ministry. Without the equipment and internet services such as Facebook, YouTube, or Church Online, it would have been nearly impossible to provide weekly worship services for members to join online.

## Making Choices Quickly and the Results

L1's experience echoes that of many other leaders in this study. P5 remarks on their experience during the initial COVID-19 shutdown. "[I]t was definitely a lot to get into."[8] There was a need to learn how to handle the technology required to stream, which was not a problem for those part of a church already offering services online but was especially difficult for those that needed to learn how to provide online services quickly. L1 recounts the initial week, "We made the decision ahead of time on a Wednesday to shoot live. Instead of pre-recording everything, we're just going to run a service as if [there] were people in the seats and then stream that out. It was the path of least resistance. So that's how we rolled."[9] It is essential to highlight that the decision to shoot and provide the worship service live was not universal among participants and is discussed later in this chapter.

Conversely, L5 chose to pre-record. When prompted for early COVID-19 experiences, L5 begins by recounting how many local worship and production leaders in their area responded to the shutdown. "When you have to pivot really fast, everybody did it their own way. Some people just threw an iPhone up. Some people had a couple of smart people and did some cool

[8] P5, Interview.

[9] L1, Interview.

stuff right away."[10] For L5's church, their team did not have the equipment to provide a live stream. Furthermore, the restrictions on public gatherings imposed by their state only allowed a handful of people to be in a room together at any given time. The choice was made to prerecord the worship and sermon during the week and offer it online on Sunday morning.

L5 had some video editing experience, so they took on the workload themselves, pre-recording all the needed elements and then putting them together. The pre-recording was short-lived for L5's church as the leadership voiced concern about moving to a live stream. The choice was not taken lightly and required a change to the staffing at the church. L5 explains, "Our twenty-hour-a-week tech guy, we made seventy hours a week … so he's working on [preparing the technical details needed to offer a live-stream solution for the church] while I'm just keeping the band together planning services and editing. We kind of divided those roles, and he's turning the behind-the-scenes engine so that we could be ready to fly when it's time."[11] After a few months, the weight of the video editing work took a toll on L5. "I was about ready to quit. I think I was gonna, if I had to keep doing that … I couldn't keep [editing services] on top of everything else. [It was] God's grace in that."[12] The participants in the leader's group of this study all voiced similar experiences of being overwhelmed as their churches pivoted to online services. The technical requirements, as well as the planning, needed both for worship and sermons, were much more work than most were accustomed.

The early days of the COVID-19 pandemic were incredibly taxing on the leaders. L7 recalls the pressure that came with moving online and needing to have a way to care for their

[10] L5, Interview.

[11] L5, Interview.

[12] L5, Interview.

congregants not just online but physically as well: "We had physical congregational care we had to do in terms of [if] someone was sick, we need to bring them groceries, or they were [a] senior adult, and we need to help them get their medications. So, we had younger people who volunteered to help the older people."[13] The efforts to bolster online offerings were juxtaposed with the continual need for physical care amid new regulations. L7's church was already offering services online and explains, "It was live streamed, and also we did a lot with [the service and sermon] during the week, replaying segments of it, and really trying to get people to engage with it through social media. I'd say kind of typically what medium-sized churches did. We had a bit of money and could do it."[14]

When COVID-19 restrictions were put in place, there was a desire for what L7's church was offering but also uncertainty about the financial future of the church in light of the lockdowns and the potential for giving to go down significantly. As a lead pastor, L7 explains the considerations with which they had to wrestle. "We didn't financially want to risk setting up a lot of additional chat rooms and a lot of virtual interaction because we didn't know financially if the church is gonna make it and we're trying to keep people paid … We didn't want to invest all these thousands of dollars."[15] L7 excitedly began to share the technical choices that did not require significant financial investment but, for L7, afforded a stream that was more engaging for their congregants. Before COVID-19, the livestream had wider camera shots that captured those on the stage from head to toe. After COVID-19, L7 explains, "Once we went online only during COVID, we did more of a TV shot. It was much more waist to head just so they can see the face

[13] L7, Interview.

[14] L7, Interview.

[15] L7, Interview.

really well."[16] L7 moved to the closer shot, allowing those watching to feel closer to the speaker and worship leader. Practical considerations were also made, with the need to intentionally look at the camera as if they were looking directly at the congregant watching.[17]

## The Opportunity for Pastoral Care Through Worship in a Unique Way

When prompted to speak about pastoral care and worship, most participants had difficulty connecting the two without thinking through their thoughts. As the conversations continued, it was clear that participants had a wealth of experiences providing and receiving pastoral care through online worship services.

### Pastoral Care Through Technology

Internet church services were too technical for some of the members of L1's church. They remark, "Externally, the end user had a difficult time with it because they've never done it before. And a lot of our people are on the older side … This newer technology just was not jiving with them. And so it was difficult."[18] L1 continues thinking aloud about many of the church members' questions and how they might solve them: "A lot were just asking for help. 'Okay, is there a way that we can deliver it via DVD? Can we deliver physical media … what can we do? Did we record it, and if so, can we watch it later? And you're gonna put it up on your social media pages?' So a lot of it was just looking for help with access."[19] L1 was able to navigate

[16] L7, Interview.

[17] L7, Interview.

[18] L1, Interview.

[19] L1, Interview.

these problems and direct their church toward the solutions needed to be able to join the online services.

There was a unique opportunity for L1 to give pastoral care by helping others with the technology needed to connect to the online church service. L1 guided their members to the gospel and worship by assisting them in navigating the technology required to connect. They explain, "And because it was Church Online, and not social media, … they didn't want to go to a different website, there wasn't our church website to view it. So, it was difficult to get the people on board."[20]

During a period of around three months, L1 took feedback from members of the church and guided them on how to access the services properly. L1 was diligent in taking the criticism to heart and would continually improve the online service.[21] L1 was concerned with constantly enhancing the stream for the sake of their members. A better quality online service removed distractions and allowed for better engagement. Throughout the interview, L1 speaks of their role at their church as pastoral in nature through instances of help such as this during the early days of the pandemic.[22]

**When Physical Pastoral Care is Out of the Question**

L5 had a similar experience. Although they were on staff as a worship leader during the pandemic, their technical acumen was an essential aspect of their work in providing online worship, and a form of pastoral care, for their church. L5 recalls how cared for the members of

[20] L1, Interview.

[21] L1, Interview.

[22] L1, Interview.

their church felt. “Our church was so, so thankful that we had provided [online church services] and done it.”[23] Continuing to reminisce, L5 recounts a conversation they had with an elder: “[O]ne of our elders said that there were two kinds of shut-in type people that had been living at home … even before the pandemic, and he had been checking on them. One of them was in tears. The other one was also thankful that because of the pandemic, [their church] was being forced to go online. They finally felt like they were back at church again.”[24] For these two shut-ins at L5’s church, the online worship service was the only means for them to feel connected. L7 was also able to provide care for a specific member of their church who could not attend a physical gathering.

As a lead pastor, L7 still deals with the debate among their members as to the need for and validity of online church services. L7 recalls a particular conversation recently with a member of their church: “I still hear it to this day. I heard it this week. People are saying, ‘Man, I really wish we could shut down our online stuff because I really want people just to come in person.’”[25] L7 recognizes the validity of their congregants’ argument. “I agree with that. I mean, the word *church* in Greek implies together—a movement that is together. I don’t argue [against] that.”[26] Despite their acquiescence that the physical gathering is preferable, L7 recounts a specific conversation they had with a member of their church:

> We do have a specific gentleman. His name is [redacted]. He is a real person. He has stomach cancer. And Stan, he’s one of these guys [that cannot attend the physical church service.] He’s got cancer. It’s gonna eventually kill him. He’s in his 50’s. He’s not some old guy. Obviously, during COVID, his oncologist is like, “Dude, you have to avoid people,” And he would. He’s that person, he had to avoid them during flu season, so

[23] L5, Interview.

[24] L5, Interview.

[25] L7, Interview.

[26] L7, Interview.

> COVID was next level. What he says, on a regular basis, is that there'll be times he cannot get out of the house, just physically can't get up, and he watches online, he chats with us online, he actually will engage with other people, and pray with them online and encourage them. And he has told me as recently as last week. He just said, "Pastor, I'm so thankful we have that." He said, "Because, for me, that's most of my church interaction. If that wasn't there, I wouldn't be connected to my own church." And it really hits me that, for him, that's what he's got, and that's his family. He's just so appreciative of it because, for him, that's what separates us from just a televangelist. I'm a real person to him. And I really chat with him and really talk on the phone.[27]

L7 is hard-pressed not to offer an online service because of its impact on people such as this congregant who is fighting cancer. Continuing to contemplate the issue, L7 explains how their staff debates the merits of a thought put forth by Sherry Turkle in her book *Alone Together,* in which she argues that virtual interactions are not real.[28] L7 recalls the argument they lean on often: "I think of guys like [redacted], and … for him, [online church] is real, and that's all he's got."[29] V2 shares a similar sentiment and explains how the shut-ins at their church see the online service as their only means of staying connected with their church.[30] Most participants voice a similar thought.

**When They Do Not Want Physical Pastoral Care or Worship**

For L7, there is a healthy tension between meeting people virtually and encouraging them to join a physical church. On the one hand, there are valid biblical reasons to encourage every Christian to get connected to a physical church. On the other hand, many Christians have gotten into the habit of online content consumption, so they find an online church to match their habits. L7 has seen this situation firsthand: "We still have a couple of small groups that meet virtually

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[27] L7, Interview.

[28] L7, Interview.

[29] L7, Interview.

[30] V2, Interview.

… because they moved out of state. They kept meeting, so we still offer them. We still have people here in town that participate virtually with their small group, and that's not a COVID thing anymore. It's a convenience thing … So, we've maintained that."[31] Going further, L7 explains, "We're not trying to make it something where it's like … the Metaverse … [but] it's not as simple as well, 'this is a gateway to get them in the door.' That's true because we want in-person interaction, but … they may stay online for years. And that's okay. We just try to meet them there."[32]

**Pastoral Care Through Online Worship**

As a worship team member during the COVID-19 shutdown, P3 recalls their experience: "I was the worship leader at church. And so having to navigate, 'Oh, we're gonna record videos ahead of time,' and doing worship in an empty room was just so hard."[33] A typical worship service has a feedback loop between the worship leader and the congregant. The worship leader can see the faces of those in the church and can lead the room based on feedback received in real-time.

There is a pastoral nature in leading worship. For instance, if the congregation is singing the bridge loudly, the worship leader can continue to sing that portion of the song as it resonates. When this interchange between leader and participant is severed, leading worship for online members can become quite different than what a worship leader may be used to. Despite this change, there were new opportunities to care for each other during the weekend stream of the

[31] L7, Interview.

[32] L7, Interview.

[33] P3, Interview.

service. With a fair amount of enthusiasm, P3 recalls the anticipation that came with prerecording a worship service and waiting to see it during the Sunday hour online. “There was a huge community that we built online coming out of that because we couldn’t wait as a congregation till Sunday came around. And we could all watch church together and be in the chat and that kind of stuff. So, there is so much power to that.”[34] The sense of community found in rallying around the new paradigm brought to the church during the COVID-19 pandemic is echoed in many of the interviews. There was a unifying cause among churches to provide their services online, and although they found it challenging, many participants fondly look back on the comradery.

Similarly, the interview with P3 reminded this researcher of his experience preparing a pre-recorded worship service and being excited about watching it online with others. There was a tremendous amount of effort given to every element, from the introductory remarks and the worship, which was polished and produced at a high level, to the sermon, which was often recorded in unique locations. The online stream on Sunday morning offered the chance to minister to others through chat on various platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. There was always a sense of anticipation among the researcher’s team to present the service as there was a tremendous amount of effort given to preparing it.

L4 was involved in pre-recording their worship services. Recalling the early weeks of the pandemic, L4 explaines, “Earlier in the week, like Wednesday or Thursday, we’d have a smaller team get together and record a worship set separately from the message [that would be recorded later]. And then our video editors would put together something before Sunday and have an

[34] P3, Interview.

hour-long service that we got to watch."[35] L4 enjoyed watching the service from their church on the weekend, much as P3 above. However, L4 took the opportunity to join many different churches. "I was kind of church browsing during that year. I feel like I actually attended five churches, just watching all of them online."[36] The internet allowed L4 to reconnect with churches they had previously served. "So the cool thing was, I got to see some of the old churches that I had been a part of because they were starting to post Facebook Live videos of their services."[37]

P5 was part of a limited worship team at the pandemic's start. The state in which they lived placed restrictions on the number of people that could be in the room preparing an online worship service. P5 recalls their experience in the early days of the pandemic: "It was a big thing for those of us that were allowed to be there for the filming and the streaming of the service. We had to be there. And we had to be engaged."[38] P5 was involved in the services as a worship leader and a proxy for those watching, appropriately participating in worship, and responding to the sermon.

P5 found the experience challenging: "The room was just empty … You're in the auditorium and there's no one there, but you're leading worship, and you're trying to do it [as if] you are looking at everyone you normally see."[39] Worship leaders were required to imagine those they were leading and approximate how it would feel to lead them were they there in the

[35] L4, Interview.

[36] L4, Interview.

[37] L4, Interview.

[38] P5, Interview.

[39] P5, Interview.

room. At the start of the pandemic, P5 struggled with acting as though there were participants when there were none in the room.[40]

**Pastoral Care and Worship for Children Online**

P7 was in a leadership capacity in the children's ministry of their church at the start of the pandemic and was presented with a unique challenge in providing pastoral guidance and care. With excitement, P7 explains how it felt to navigate the move to online service offerings for children: "I had to create lessons for children online. And so that was so interesting because it was like, 'Okay, how do you allow children to engage online but not just sit there and watch the screen but actually interact?' So that was a whole learning experience and challenge."[41] Dealing with a child's attention span to engage with an online church service was uncharted territory, and a lack of tangible response exacerbated the situation.

Similar to P3's experience above in leading people they could not see in worship, P7 struggled with not having direct feedback from the children they were leading in online worship. "And I didn't have much communication with the actual children, so I had no idea if we were just putting it out there."[42] This tangible feedback for the worship leader is a theme that often occurs throughout the research and is heightened in the early days of the pandemic, as most churches had no one in the room to participate in worship other than the worship leader and team.

[40] P5, Interview.

[41] P7, Interview.

[42] P7, Interview.

P3 explains how their background in church played a part in their difficulty in leading worship to an empty room: "I grew up going to church, my whole life in person, and then the online thing hit, and I was like, 'This is weird.'"[43] P3's church prepared and curated videos of singing and dancing to encourage active participation. Still, they relied on the feedback of parents to know whether the videos were compelling or if the children were even participating in the first place.[44]

**A Missionary's Pastoral Care and Worship Leadership**

During the pandemic, L3 served on the international mission field. One would assume that a worship leader on the mission field would have a different experience than someone in a modern evangelical church. Still, there were many similarities to the above experiences. L3 recounts the pandemic's start and how it affected their family: "People were just getting sick … no one knew what was really going on. Two weeks after we got back, the world started shutting down. Thankfully, we got all the stuff that we needed into our new place."[45]

Given the nature of the missionary work, L3 did not need to provide worship leadership online. As such, they became a participant in services provided by churches to which they were connected. L3 explains, "As people who already viewed our home churches from a distance, [we were] thousands of miles away, we just got inundated with the online church experience, and so, me being the nerd that I am, really sat back and watched."[46] L3 explains with excitement how they connected with multiple churches: "I got to sit back and just watch so many churches that I

[43] P3, Interview.

[44] P3, Interview.

[45] L3, Interview.

[46] L3, Interview.

love and know just evolve. They just constantly evolved."[47] L3 viewed multiple churches and services and enjoyed engaging in online worship.

L3's remarks about the various churches providing their services synchronously or asynchronously are particularly interesting. Regarding asynchronous services, L3 appreciates the quality of the mix and video work that post-producing afforded. "[Y]ou can tell this was prerecorded, and it sounds good because they multitrack [recorded], and this sounds really good."[48] L3 turns their attention to the churches that live-streamed their services. They appreciate the growth in quality. "And they're doing it live. [I like] the evolution from it being an iPhone going into a little USB interface to people putting in full-fledged production work. It was really interesting to watch from afar."[49] L3 did not seem to prefer either a live or pre-recorded church service. Instead, they found details from each that could be appreciated, emphasizing continual improvement from week to week.

### Those with Technical Aptitude

An interesting theme emerged among the participants. Those with technical knowledge and aptitude were excited to discuss the details of setting up and providing an online service. It was common for them to name specific platforms and equipment and to revel in the details of their use. Both L1, as discussed above, and L3 spoke of the technical information nearly as much as the spiritual and pastoral considerations. Further, technology was a means to provide worship for others online. Improving the quality of the online service is similar to a musician rehearsing

[47] L3, Interview.

[48] L3, Interview.

[49] L3, Interview.

their music to help eliminate distractions. Those in a leadership position during the COVID-19 pandemic were able to point people to Jesus through worship utilizing the tools at their disposal.

**Creating Online Worship**

Given their background in both worship and audio and video recording, L3 could create pre-recorded worship videos that they could share with the churches with which they were affiliated. The pandemic shutdowns were still in place during Christmas of 2021. L3 had previously recorded some Christmas music and was able to provide the music for their home church, even though they were still out on the mission field. With some excitement, L3 explains the process: "I bounced down stems for them to use as backtracks and everything, but then I recorded myself and just my vocal. And then we cut it together with the church band on their live stream for their Christmas services."[50] From the mission field, L3 could participate in worship leadership with their home church, albeit asynchronously. With a fair amount of excitement, L3 recalls the feedback they received from their church: "It was really cool for them to be able to see [how] we took [redacted], who's in North Africa, and we're doing [their] song and [they're] leading it, but [they're] still in [redacted] while our band is here type thing."[51]

L3 could also participate in worship song recordings from multiple leaders. This method of preparing worship songs surged in popularity during the early days of the pandemic. It was utilized by many churches, worship teams, and ministries, one of which was a recording of "The Blessing" by Kari Jobe, compiled by Worship Together.[52] Utilizing this method, L3 could join in

[50] L3, Interview.

[51] L3, Interview.

[52] "The Blessing // Virtual Choir (Kari Jobe, Cody Carnes, Elevation Worship Cover)," 2020, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kH7uUzWs1u4.

on recordings from churches in which they were involved. They explain, "It that was a fun experience. I did a lot of stuff. I did a couple of prerecorded multi-takes … one take playing guitar and singing. The other take doing keys, and stuff like that and putting that together in a video and sending it to them and being a part of their online services that way."[53] None of these aspects of online worship were new. Still, the pandemic forced worship leaders and technicians, without the ability to conduct a physical church service, to embrace ways of connecting their church and the world to God.

L6 was transitioning between jobs at two churches when the pandemic began. Their role at their new church quickly changed focus to all technical details needed to execute the service. L6 explains, "When everything shut down, [our church] is fortunate enough to have a full film studio, as well as an actual music recording studio here on campus. They had a lot of the infrastructure in place."[54] With a smile, L6 continues to speak about the nature of the work they were trying to accomplish: "A lot of people [were] flying by the seat of their pants with trying to figure out how to do this…really effectively in a really short amount of time."[55]

L6 was not just technically capable, but their team had a strong understanding of how they could best leverage social media during this time. Utilizing the film and music studio, they created a weekly video that was not as long as a standard service. L6 remembers how many of their congregants had to spend much of their day in video conferencing meetings through Zoom,

[53] L3, Interview.

[54] L6, Interview.

[55] L6, Interview.

so they wanted the online content provided by their church not to be too long and not to overwhelm the viewer with too much screen time.[56]

## An Unease with Not Meeting

Some participants were concerned that the church would not meet when the governmental shutdown occurred. L2 was in a minor leadership position at their church at the time and recalls how they felt when the word came that the services at their church would go entirely online: "It was just instinctive. I don't like this. I don't like the idea that a church would be shut down. I figured the people above me knew what they were doing. But I didn't like it. I didn't think purely online made any sense to me."[57] The need for gathering with other believers is biblical, and L2 did not want to stop meeting. While recalling how they felt during the immediate shutdowns, L2 explains about online worship services: "It's a tool for meeting, but it can't be it. It has to be something that leads to real community."[58]

V3 shares how some of the leadership of their church responded to members who could not come to the gathering: "They viewed the live stream as a crutch, that some people will just make it an excuse that they can watch it at home … I think they viewed it as [those that watched online] too lazy to come into church … They didn't want [online services] to be an option for people because they wanted people to come back in [to church]."[59] V3 dealt with an illness that made it unwise for them to attend public gatherings so the opinions of the leadership of their church felt personal. "[They] pretty much disregarded people like me who weren't really allowed

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[56] L6, Interview.

[57] L2, Interview.

[58] L2, Interview.

[59] V3, Interview.

to go in."[60] Given the circumstances, V3 shares what went through their mind regarding the possibility of their church stopping their online service: "I would totally feel disconnected from the church if I wasn't able to, and I would just seek another church that had a live stream."[61]

V2's pastor had a hard time during the pandemic's early days with being unable to gather with the church on Sunday. V2 explains how their pastor pushed toward returning to normal:

> He always wanted to hug people even when we weren't supposed to be hugging people. He was like, "I don't care, we're not gonna not hug people. We ended up having multiple outbreaks because of that. It really got psychological with that. We were fighting … a psychological battle, with his desires versus what's best for the church. He knew that we had people that had been exposed to COVID. And he expressed that he didn't care. And he ended up infecting people … because he was chasing a feeling.[62]

**What's the Difference Between a Large Church and an Online Church?**

L2 is now only a participant at his local church rather than in a leadership position. Interestingly, L2 draws a connection between online church services and large physical gatherings that was particularly insightful: "What's the difference between a huge church where you don't know anybody and an online thing, where you just intake, and there's no back and forth, and there's no output, and there's no community to it?"[63] For L2, a smaller church or a smaller group setting feels better for fostering their relationship with the Lord. In L2's case, a larger church consists of a few thousand people attending on the weekend. L2 is emphatic that their most robust experiences with the Lord have come from times with a small group of people, be it a Bible study in a living room or at a church with only a few dozen people. For L2, an

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[60] V3, Interview.

[61] V3, Interview.

[62] V2, Interview.

[63] L2, Interview.

online church service feels similar to what they would experience in a room with thousands of people. Their presence is not recognized, they do not feel seen, and they feel primarily as one merely looking through a window into the church service.

P1 comes from a similar background with a larger church and speaks of the need to find a personal connection. “I feel like in this season, God has been telling me that I really need to get into some kind of Bible study or reaching out to other people in the church.”[64] Online church services work for a while, but P1 continually speaks of the need to connect. Interestingly, they talk more about how they want to spend time in a small group setting rather than attend Sunday morning church service.

## Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic serves as an insightful moment in history to examine the practice of pastoral care through online worship. Each participant has vivid lived experiences that they quickly recall because of the profound change to their routine from going to a physical church every Sunday to worship with others. Those whose churches were not already streaming online had to quickly implement new technologies to continue providing services for their members. There was an innate desire not to give up the physical meeting, but given the uncertainty of the situation, most churches acquiesced to the mandates.

[64] P1, Interview.

## The Physical Worship Service

### Introduction

Two subordinate questions for the research are, "How does the worshiper compare and contrast their online experience with that of an in-person worship experience?" and, "How do worship leaders experience leading online worship?" To draw vivid contrasts between online and physical worship services, the study participants were asked to recount their experiences in what would be considered a "normal" church service at their church. As expected, the experiences are varied, but some themes do appear.

### Minister to One Another

One of the most profound worship experiences for L4 came when they were thirteen. "I was 13 years old and just hearing other people singing, and there's someone next to me that was just sitting and crying during the worship set, and I was like, 'God is doing something in the hearts of people.'"[65] The energy in the room and the sense of the move of God encouraged L4 to try something new: "Just getting to see that around me, it moved me to lift my hands in worship for the first time."[66]

P1 voices a similar experience. "One of my favorite parts about going to church is the worship. Because I'm a part of it … I always enjoy going in person because it feels different, obviously, when you're in person than when you're watching it online."[67] There is a recurring theme among participants that their times in physical worship are very important to their church

[65] L4, Interview.

[66] L4, Interview.

[67] P1, Interview.

experience, with the physical gathering with other believers offering something much more impactful than the online worship experience. L4 is often blessed by just hearing those around them sing. "That was … really great for me to just sit in worship, and not even necessarily singing along, but to hear a congregation singing is so powerful to me."[68] With an opinion that validates the same thought from another angle, L1 talks about how they experience worship online compared to their physical church service. "So it's a little disjointed because there's that disparity of 'I'm not in the space. I'm not in the room. I'm not with my community. I'm just by myself.'"

**The Sermon, Scripture, and Worship**

When asked about impactful worship services, some participants immediately jump to speaking about the sermon and how the word of God emotionally moved them. L1 finds that the deeper their pastor goes into scripture, the more impacted they are by the sermon and the worship.[69] However, L1 quickly notes, "But my most impactful moments come from musical worship," and proceeds to explain how the song "Grace so Glorious" by Elevation Worship has a strong theological basis and nearly brings them to tears whenever it is sung.[70]

There is a clear connection between strong biblical teaching and heartfelt worship. L2 explains how their church services plainly emphasize scripture:

> We open up a book of the Bible, and we see what it's got. And I'm like, "That's awesome." They don't come with some preconceived question or idea or like, "…[W]hat's the catchy question we can ask and then see what the Bible has to say about it, and the spiffy title and all that stuff." They're just like, "Well, let's open up Joshua."[71]

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[68] L4, Interview.

[69] L1, Interview.

[70] L1, Interview.

[71] L2, Interview.

L2 appreciates dealing with complex topics as they come up in the Bible while the pastor teaches sequentially through chapters of a book such as Joshua and is drawn to their current church for the sermon more than for the worship. L2 also finds that the community they have gotten involved with at their church is of paramount importance.

**Community and Connectedness**

Participants recall the value of finding a community of other believers through their church and primarily consider community to be a challenge to maintain online. L2 talks about their first visit to their current church: "Everybody was crazy friendly, shaking hands. 'Hey, we haven't seen you before….' People recognized that we were new and just introduced themselves. That was fantastic."[72]

After attending for a few weeks, L2 and their spouse became volunteers on the worship team and in the children's ministry. Shortly after their involvement in volunteering, they joined a ministry aimed at married couples. "We met some great people, and that never would have happened online. At least, it's not set up to, and I don't know that it would have worked out because now we go out to dinner with these people on a regular basis."[73]

L2 regularly remarks how they do not see online worship services as much more than a form of content to be consumed: "I'm trying to imagine the entirety of that experience happening in only an online group and never actually having been physically with these people."[74] With a

[72] L2, Interview.

[73] L2, Interview.

[74] L2, Interview.

brief pause and an air of finality, L2 remarks, "No, it wouldn't work."[75] Continuing with the thought of community as a foundational aspect of the church, L2 explains how their church goes about connecting people: "Come in but then find your place very quickly. That's the goal. Find your small place in here. Find where you serve and where you hang out—who your people are."[76]

A sense of community in a smaller group setting is also essential to L5's church. With a sense of pride, L5 talks about the hospitality of the greeters at their church, "There are people coming back to Bible study because our greeters are welcoming them and inviting them beyond the worship service."[77] For L5, the intentionality of inviting others to a Bible study is critical for helping people get connecting. L5 shares of one experience with a church member: "One lady told me a story recently. She [said], 'I would not have come back to Bible study.' Every Sunday, you're out the door, and whenever I saw you at the door the last few months, you were like, 'Hey, can't wait to see you in Bible study!' … It really begins at the door people are really welcomed in."[78] L5 continues and explains how it feels to be in the lobby of their church between services: "There's really a lot of joy in the Commons [the name for L5's foyer] … there's already connections happening."[79]

When describing their church services, L5 again highlights the importance of community: "We start our services by looking someone in the eye and saying, 'I'm happy to see you.' We

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[75] L2, Interview.

[76] L2, Interview.

[77] L5, Interview.

[78] L5, Interview.

[79] L5, Interview.

start our services, wanting to build that part of our brain that God designed us for joy. We're happy to see one another with a twinkle in our eye. I want to point that out because I think that's really important. We're building culture."[80] Throughout the interview, L5 is excited to talk about all the ways the members of their church enjoy connecting. The services have other aspects that highlight the connectedness of the members.

A new aspect of L5's church service is how they handle prayer requests. Previously the pastor would pray for them each from the pulpit while the congregation silently prayed along. However, now, while congregants are taking communion, the names of people who have asked for prayer are projected on the screens. L5 explains, "Another cool thing we added during communion recently is that instead of praying all these individually-named prayer requests like we used to do, we'd have … eight or nine minutes of reading name after name."[81] While further explaining, L5 muses about the place for contemporaneous online prayer requests in their workflow: "People can submit their prayer requests online, but we don't pray for those right there, which would be kind of cool if we could get a way to submit those right away."[82]

### The Impact of Worshiping with Others

P4 is deeply impacted by contemporary corporate worship. Coming from a Catholic background, they remember a certain disdain for attending church irregularly. "Easter was not something I was ever excited for growing up. [They would think] 'Oh Gosh! Another boring Sunday. I can't, I can't!' That's how it was, but [it was] because I hadn't had that experience

[80] L5, Interview.

[81] L5, Interview.

[82] L5, Interview.

with the Lord."[83] P4 came across an online service for their church, began to watch for months, and decided to attend the church for the first time on Easter 2021. "I've been watching online a few months, and it happened to be that weekend. And so, I came in and went all the way to the front."[84]

The participation of the congregation and the worship team was inspiring. P4 explains, "I'm watching the BGV [background vocalists] singers with their hands raised praising Jesus, and I remember thinking, 'Wow, that's so awesome that they're doing that, and I love that, but I could never do that … I love you, God, and I love you, Jesus,' but I'm carrying so much shame on my shoulders I could never raise my hands and praise Jesus like that."[85] As they entered the gathering, the Lord ministered to P4 through corporate worship each weekend. After around a year, P4 recounts feeling comfortable raising their hands and getting involved in the worship ministry: "The Lord starts doing the work on you. Things have changed. One year later, exactly, I ended up doing choir on Easter Sunday with my hands raised and everything, and I would have never thought I could do that."[86]

P4 found community and friends at their church, and through regularly attending and being surrounded by passionate worshipers, P4 slowly stepped out of their comfort zone regarding physical expressions of worship. This "ministering to one another," as found in Ephesians 5:19, is a regular theme that participants mention, albeit without citing the Bible verse. Being with others and participating in worship has an intangible, emotional effect.

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[83] P5, Interview.

[84] P5, Interview.

[85] P4, Interview.

[86] P4, Interview.

P8 was deeply moved by worshiping with others in a physical space at a conference in 2019. They explain how the preacher shared a sermon based on the angels and throne room worship as found in Isaiah and Revelation.[87] The preacher compared how the angels shield their eyes in the book of Isaiah but are then fully viewing the Lord in the book of Revelation. The comparison is drawn to the believer before they come to know the Lord and then after. Through Christ's work, the believer can view the Lord in His full glory. P8 then explains how the preacher ended the message: "He said when worship is happening, it's not that I get something out of worship, or how did worship feel to me today? Right now, worship is going on everywhere, and I enter into that worship of God with the angels and all of creation."[88]

The preacher began to sing a worship song for everyone in the conference. "He started singing, just little old him, and he's got … all the best Christian musicians in the world in this room, and he's up there just singing, and he wasn't any good. But it was just humility. And he put out the most effort that he could."[89] The worship of the preacher and the room's engagement with the humble song impacted P8. "I entered into worship, and I was laying there on the floor. I didn't want to get up."[90] As the conversation continued, P8 describes why physical worship with a body of believers is so powerful for them, likening worship to a transfer of energy between everyone, saying, "You have to be in the presence [of others] to get the feeling."[91]

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[87] P8, Interview.

[88] P8, Interview.

[89] P8, Interview.

[90] P8, Interview.

[91] P8, Interview.

L6 voices a similar experience when recounting worshiping with their church body: "There's something for me. Personally, there's something different about getting to worship together and getting to grow together in person, you know? I think I still utilize online as much as anybody."[92] L6 continues by talking about their first experience coming back to church after the COVID-19 restrictions: "It's kind of one of those things you don't know you have until it's not there anymore, and, for me, it was like a breath of fresh air when we got to be back in the room and be like, 'Oh my gosh, I forgot what this was like.'"[93]

### Summary

As is expected with participants of various church backgrounds, the physical worship service experiences are quite diverse. Among participants, there was a general, new-found excitement for gathering with other believers after their churches stopped meeting during the COVID-19 pandemic. With vivid pictures of physical worship experiences as a foundation, the study shifts to the online worship service to provide contrast to see what aspects are similar and what are divergent.

## The Online Worship Service

### Introduction

Many churches offer their services online in various ways. Some are synchronous, while others pre-record their services. Some do not include worship at all, while others choose not to stream their service because they do not feel they can do so at an acceptable quality level. The

[92] L6, Interview.

[93] L6, Interview.

participants in this study bring various backgrounds and represent several different churches and denominations. As such, there is a wide variety of methods and ways their online services are offered. It is essential to recognize that as participants speak of *online worship*, they each likely have a different context than another because they have different lived experiences.[94] However, some general themes emerge from the data. One of these themes is the contrast between community and engagement during corporate worship online compared with a physically attended service.

## A Participant or a Consumer?

Many participants miss the strong sense of community and encouragement that comes from participating with others in corporate worship. Without other believers in the same room, it is difficult to feel like one is participating in corporate worship. As a leader at their church, L1 is keenly aware of the need for the online service but finds it difficult to connect with it in a meaningful way. "I think that it's like the consuming of a product. Wherever in the world, whether I'm at home, I'm in a hospital room, or I'm out of the country, if I can consume a church service, I have done the online worship thing."[95] L1 finds themselves in a difficult situation at their church in that they had not offered an online service before the COVID-19 pandemic but now continue to offer it because some of the members of their church have grown accustomed to having it available.[96]

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[94] The term *pastoral worship* elicits similarly varied responses as will be discussed further later in this chapter.

[95] L4, Interview.

[96] L1, Interview.

**Spiritual Voyeurism**

With an eye on the end product and looking for small ways to improve their online offerings continually, L1 purposely schedules themselves to not come to their church once a month. "On that weekend off, I don't come into the office. I stay at home. I don't go to church. The only way for me to get to church on those weekends is to view our online broadcast. I become the consumer at that point and just view it."[97] Becoming introspective, L1 tries to think of a time that they were particularly impacted by online worship and struggles to have something to share. With a sense of resignation, L1 explains:

> If I'm watching it online. I think that there's a sense of community that's lost, but if I'm in person, I'm a part of something. We're not forsaking the gathering [when joining an online service]. However, I don't feel like I'm connected. And so, it just feels like I'm an observer instead of a participant … It's not that I can't be worshipful at home by myself. And it's not that I can't participate with what's happening through sending a message on Facebook or YouTube or but there's a barrier that exists. I don't know if it's quantifiable, but there's a barrier that exists through the glass of the camera that disconnects me, and it takes me out of the experience. I think that when I'm watching a service at home online, my feelings are a mix of boredom and "Oh, we could have done that better." And we can always do better. Yeah, I think I see things in a different light when I'm not there in person.[98]

P3 recalls a similar experience when trying to participate online: "I have a hard time when I watch it live at home to be able to engage … I feel like I'm being entertained."[99]

L1's online church service is primarily a window into the physical gathering, with little done differently for the online audience than those in the room. L1 notes that they try to look for ways to encourage participation: "We try really hard to include the online audience. But

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[97] L4, Interview.

[98] L1, Interview.

[99] P3, Interview.

oftentimes, it falls flat, or it's not done at all."[100] Remembering a time when they were at home observing the online service, L1 recalls the pastor encouraging everyone to extend their hands to bless the children's ministry: "I'm at home by myself. That's just super weird. That disparity of 'Yes, I can participate,' but is it appropriate to do so?"[101] L1 continues to describe how they experience their church's online worship service, "It's a little disjointed because there's that disparity of: 'I'm not in the space, I'm not in the room, I'm not with my community, I'm just by myself.' I don't know of anyone who can counteract that."

L1 concludes by likening the consumption of an online worship service to what they call "spiritual voyeurism." That is, watching others participate in corporate worship without L1 feeling they can meaningfully participate through the stream.[102] With a sense of needing to do more, L5 unpacks what one experiences when watching their online service: "I have to be honest, that our online service is mostly just a window into our live service."[103] They explain what they do to encourage participation and connection: "We play this video, and it only shows online and says, '[We're] so glad you worshiped with us. We're so glad you connected with us this way. That's really the only touch point of care and connection."[104]

**Freedom to Participate Online**

In contrast to L1, P5 describes the freedom found in participating in the online church service: "I'm in my bedroom but still being led by the team. There was so much physical

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[100] L1, Interview.

[101] L1, Interview.

[102] L1, Interview.

[103] L5, Interview.

[104] L5, Interview.

freedom to do what I wanted without thinking that anyone's looking at me. I know that people aren't watching me."[105] Jokingly, P5 acknowledges the tendency of people in the room not to close their eyes when the pastor asks them to do so during prayer or at specific moments in the service:

> They'll say, "Everybody bow your head and close your eyes." I know everyone doesn't do that. That makes me mad. [When participating online] Nobody can watch me. I could dance as crazy as I wanted, or I could cry as much as I wanted, and no one would come up to me and be like, "Are you okay?" Like, "Yeah, I'm just being ministered to. I'm ok. Jesus has me."[106]

Where L1 above finds a disconnect, P5 finds freedom. V1 shares a similar experience: "I would stream at home by myself, I'm the only one who attended church and my family, [so] I would wrap myself up in a sheet, and I would stand up and worship. The Lord really met me where I was at."[107] P5 explains how they have to continually make an effort to participate in the online service: "There's always going to be that level of participation that's required if you really want to go deep if you really want to have an encounter. You have to show up … You don't just walk in and say, 'Oh, I stumbled upon this encounter with Jesus.' There is some action required."[108] V1 echoes the experience of P5 and explains how their worship engagement is contingent on their participation: "Communication is a two-way street. They [the worship team] can be doing the best they can, but if I'm not engaging, it's kind of hard to feel involved."[109]

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[105] P5, Interview.

[106] P5, Interview.

[107] V1, Interview.

[108] P5, Interview.

[109] V1, Interview.

P5 talks about the freedom they feel when they worship at home through an online church service: "I think there's something so beautiful and beneficial of doing church online … I can really go as deep as I want while still being led."[110] P1 had a similar experience and appreciated the freedom found when joining an online worship service. "I definitely enjoyed the worship … It was a good time for me to try to connect to God in a one-on-one relationship without feeling the pressure of being around others."[111]

**Somewhere in Between**

Some of the participants express mixed emotions about their experiences with worship online. L4 talks about how they respond differently to how the worship is presented in an online service. A concert-like atmosphere can be a challenging one with which to engage, while a more intimate service feels more participatory. L4 describes a recent experience with an up-tempo opening song during a live stream: "It's really hype at the beginning of a lot of services, and they're like, 'Get up, stand up, clap your hands!' When I'm sitting on my sofa, that's not really matching the energy in the room."[112] When asked to elaborate on the experience, L4 continues:

> It's hard for me to engage with those. I think they're speaking to a room that might be full of people and … there's a lot of energy with two to three thousand people in a room, and when it's me in some basketball shorts with a cup of coffee in my hands, it's hard to feel the same thing.[113]

L4 draws a contrast with how they experience an online worship service that has a different setting. "There have been times where there's more of an intimate in the round kind of setting

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[110] P5, Interview.

[111] P1, Interview.

[112] L4, Interview.

[113] L4, Interview.

where I'm watching a music video or something of a time of worship, and it's just more acoustic-based and intimate. That meets me really well where I'm at. And I'll find myself lifting hands or closing my eyes and engaging in that way."[114]

P3 speaks of having trouble engaging with their church's online service because the quality is lacking. However, they find they can engage much more when they view services from other churches that seem to invest in the quality of the video, audio, and attention given to the online viewers. V1 also struggles when the quality and intentionality are lacking. "You're just watching a still camera, you feel like you're there, but no one's hosting you in the chat, you don't feel acknowledged. It's kind of like you're just watching from afar"[115] In contrast, P3 describes their experience and appreciates how deliberate the pastor is in acknowledging the online audience, "[The pastors] make you feel seen."[116] P7 finds they struggle watching the stream for their service. "I get distracted by the video because sometimes during worship, I'll just find myself watching. I actually have to set my laptop aside in order to worship."[117]

**The Presence of the Lord Everywhere**

P6 notes how they feel they can connect with God just as much in a physical service as in an online gathering, explaining how they do not have a sense of missing out on anything in either situation.[118] They feel that the Holy Spirit ministers to them wherever they are. For P6, the medium for the church service is secondary to spending time with God. P4 shares a similar

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[114] L4, Interview.

[115] V1, Interview.

[116] P3, Interview.

[117] P7, Interview.

[118] P6, Interview.

experience when joining a recent online service: “I felt like I was at church in my room experiencing the Lord, even though the preacher was through a screen, preaching online. But I still felt the authenticity, the realness.”[119]

V1 finds they can engage with God through their online services just as much as their physical services. “The main thing is Jesus, and that transcends no matter what communication medium you’re on … there’s people that don’t have access to a life-giving local church, or they just don’t have the means to get to a life-giving local church.”[120] V1 talks about how their roommate is involved in an online small group, “The conversations [and growth] these people are having is real.”[121]

Interestingly, despite the generally positive commentary about online church and worship, V1 remarks, “Obviously, it’s better to be in person.”[122] Several participants in the study voice this sort of concession. P6 talks about a time when they helped connect missionaries to their church’s online service: “I helped caretake for the missionaries that were all over, and they would meet online because that’s the only thing they can do. But the hunger that would come and the realness that they would come with, that was what they had. That was the only connection to our church.”[123]

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[119] P4, Interview.

[120] V1, Interview.

[121] V1, Interview.

[122] V1, Interview.

[123] P6, Interview.

## A Morning at Home

L2 unpacks a particular morning in which they and their spouse stayed home and joined their church through the online stream. They begin by recognizing how they would prefer to go to a physical service if possible, but, "Either somebody's sick, or we've just got up late, or we stayed out late or something."[124] L2 proceeds to talk about the recent experience they had with online church: "[We] didn't even get out of the bed. We're just not even getting dressed. It's very, very chill. We turn on the TV, we go to YouTube, and we find the live service and start streaming it. The worship's great. The mix is amazing."[125] When pressed for details about the mix, L2 explains how their church has a separate audio console [compared to the one used for the live mix in the room] and a person running the mix specifically for those streaming.

Turning attention to engagement, L2 notes how their church leadership encourages participation: "It's done very well, and it feels good. They're always addressing [and welcoming] the people online."[126] Addressing the online audience is a recurring theme found in most participants' experiences as they explain their churches' online offerings. Further, many of them highlight how their pastors make a point to invite online participants to come to a physical church service when possible. L2 explains, "[The church pastors] never go without saying: 'If you're in town, we want you to come visit, we want you to come hang out with us."[127]

During the interview, L2 realizes that they are much more engaged in the sermons when they are in a physical church service than when they're online, usually having both their Bible

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[124] L2, Interview.

[125] L2, Interview.

[126] L2, Interview.

[127] L2, Interview.

and note-taking apps open and taking copious notes during a physical church service. Still, at home, "I'm lying in bed watching. I'm not doing that."[128] L2 compares the difference between online worship and physical worship to that of a restaurant:

> We've been watching Next Level Chef with Gordon Ramsay. Imagine watching Gordon Ramsay cook up this amazing dish. [It's a] well-produced show, and you see the plating, and he's explaining how it's all happening; you get to see all of it behind the scenes, and it's great stuff. And then you go to the restaurant, and you actually eat it, but you don't get all that high-quality production. I'd rather go the restaurant and eat the food rather than sit at home and just watch a TV show about how the food gets made. It's not the same kind of experience … What's the point of the food? The point of the food is to be tasted, to get the ambiance of the place that they've made it. You don't get the ambiance of the restaurant; you don't get the chatter of the people around you and the sounds and the smells.[129]

### The Awkwardness of an Online Gathering at Home

P8 has had very little interaction with online church before the COVID-19 pandemic. They explain, "The only online church I saw was … where you'd go to … a sister church, and they would stream in the pastor. You'd have live worship … That was the first virtual experience I had with church. I thought that it missed the mark."[130] When asked to expand on what "missing the mark" means, P8 explains how the personal connection with the worship leaders and pastor is missing. "So much of not just public speaking, but so much of ministry in the Holy Spirit works with presence and, if you're speaking, and you can't even see the people you're speaking with, it changes it. It's different."[131] P8 had a hard time with the physical worship gathering where the pastor was a recording on a screen, but their experience with online worship was equally tricky.

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[128] L2, Interview.

[129] L2, Interview.

[130] P8, Interview.

[131] P8, Interview.

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, P8 had to keep their family at home and attempt to participate in online worship. With a family of young children, it proved challenging to encourage participation in a meaningful way. P8 unpacks a particular Sunday morning: "We'd sometimes have people over, so we'd have families over, and we put it up on the big screen. I would try to stand up during worship and make sure everybody's standing during worship, just to get some kind of engagement. So, we did that, but even that felt uncomfortable at times."[132] P8 continues by explaining what they were missing from their physical church gathering:

> I feel like so much of the power in the worship is because [the congregation is] present in the room and the presence of God inside the room, and I'm not saying it's confined to that because God can go anywhere but the people interacting virtually, I think just loses so much. It's like any kind of communication; in-person is always best, video is next, then phone, and text is worst. It's just a lower tier of communication.[133]

**Morally Repugnant**

As P8 continues to talk about their experience with online church services, they give a particularly energized comment: "I think online churches, I call them morally repugnant … the purpose of church is to gather a community of believers whether or not they get a good message from a pastor. [The quality of the sermon] doesn't matter. What matters is coming together in community, coming together in worship, and coming together for a common purpose."[134]

With this insight into why P8 dislikes online services, they explain how they need the community aspect of the church gathering over everything else. "The purpose of church is not to learn a lesson. It's not necessarily about learning something new about Jesus. You can get that from the Bible. You can get that from just public speakers or [there is] enough online content out

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[132] P8, Interview.

[133] P8, Interview.

[134] P8, Interview.

there."[135] Online church services do not generally offer a community aspect other than commenting in a chat box. P8 continues, "The purpose of church is getting together with your people every single week, and so with, with churches doing live streams or video of their content … I feel like enables believers, especially the newer believers, to not participate."[136]

**Enabled Not to Participate**

P8 expresses a deep love for the physical church gathering and a fair amount of disdain for an online church service, which, as far as P8 is concerned, should not be considered a church gathering at all. As they continue describing their concerns, P8 bemoans the convenience of online church and how their extended family have embraced it. "I think it's too much of a crutch, though. Even our own family, my wife's sister, my wife's parents, everybody does home church. They just sit there, and they watch church at home. And it's like, [my wife's] dad, [redacted] doesn't go to church. And he's like, 'Well, I can't hear the sermon.'"[137] With a certain level of concern, P8 continues by talking about what they believe to be the main reason for the church gathering in the first place, "It's not what you're there for. You're not there to hear. You're not there to learn … you can learn anywhere by watching online. You're going to church to create community."[138] With the focus on community for P8, the conversation shifts.

[135] P8, Interview.

[136] P8, Interview.

[137] P8, Interview.

[138] P8, Interview

**The Need for Community**

Some unique insights are uncovered through P8's interview. Now that they speak about how important community is to them, they explain how the small group ministry of their church is the most essential aspect of church for them, so much so that it is the main reason they attend their church.[139] P8 explains, "Presence [with other people] is important. Getting together is important. For me, the only way to do that is with [small] groups."[140]

The community fostered within their group is central, with the couple hours of service on the weekend being important but largely a first line into getting connected with others—in the case of P8's church, through a small group.[141] P8 continues, "The reason we started [our church] was not because of Sunday service with the pastors. [We] didn't have a relationship with him. The reason [we stayed] was because of the [small] group and the people that we did life with that we were seeing every single week."[142] For P8, the community aspect of the small group is something that cannot be fully experienced through an online platform such as Zoom.[143]

The Online Service as an Invitation to the Physical Gathering

Some participants express how their churches utilize the online service as a means of inviting viewers to come to the physical gathering. L2 recounts a conversation with their leadership and explains that the online service is a tool used as a front-door invitation for those

[139] P8, Interview.

[140] The name of the small groups ministry of the church has been changed to protect the anonymity of P8.

[141] P8, Interview.

[142] P8, Interview.

[143] P8, Interview.

that watch.[144] L5 describes how many of their current congregants first had a connection with their church through the online service.[145] As discussed above, P4 came from a Catholic background and was first connected to their current church through the online service before attending online.

During a focus group interview, V1 was impacted by P4's recounting how they moved from watching a church online to becoming deeply connected to the physical church gathering and people. "I love your story … You started [by participating in the online service], but you couldn't stay in that. The way you started your relationship with God, privately. Normally, it's the other way around. You go into the community and find [God] in that. I love that perspective."[146] It is important to note that P4's church utilizes many methods of engaging online viewers, such as the pastor and worship leader recognizing those that are joining online.

From a leadership perspective, L3 talks about how they encourage those that are watching a stream to attend their church in person:

> There's so much more to Jesus than just sitting on your couch and watching your cell phone or watching YouTube. There's something just really meaningful about coming alongside brothers and sisters, not going it alone. Whether you're having a really good day and you want to stay home, or you're having a really bad day and you want to stay home. Either way, it's only made better by coming alongside people around you and being in community at the same time and experiencing it together.[147]

Although not a member of the same church, P4 was drawn to their church because their church leadership employed similar tactics to that of L2's church. L2 explains the language their team uses to encourage viewers to become physical visitors: "A lot of our viewers are still in the

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[144] L2, Interview.

[145] L5, Interview.

[146] V1, Interview.

[147] L3, Interview.

vicinity of our general zip code. We really put it out there that, 'You may be joining us [online]. But if there's any chance you could come to our physical campus, we'd love to have you.' It's reminding people that there still is something physically happening here."[148]

Once coming to faith, P6 used online church services to connect before coming to the physical gathering:

> I [felt that], "I should probably find a church." But I really wanted it to just be me and Jesus for the first few months because I had no experience with church life. And I was like, "I want it just to be me and the Lord and no other influences or distractions." If I want to go to church, I don't want it to be about the people who are there or how people look or listen. It's just about me and the Lord. I started asking Him, "Which church, which church?" and I felt called to [redacted], so I said, "I'll just watch online first." December 2020 through April, I only watched online. So, it was like, "I want to get a feel for this first before I go." So, I just watched every weekend. And I loved it. I felt pulled to it. And I was like, "I think this is it. I think this is it." And then, finally, in April, which happened to be Easter, I went for the first time. And when I finally attended, I was like, "Yeah, I feel Holy Spirit."[149]

L3 gives the perspective of the leadership of their church and talks about the experience they hope their online viewers have: "We hope to see those online, people who are still in the vicinity of our zip code, eventually come to church, get into a small group, find community, and serve on a team."[150]

## Summary

Compared to the physical worship gathering, the participants' experiences are much more varied. Some, such as P8, are morally opposed to online church services. Others see it as a gateway to invitation to the physical gathering, yet others view it as merely something that is

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[148] L4, Interview.

[149] P4, Interview.

[150] L3, Interview.

added to the offerings of a church. A particularly interesting theme that emerges from nearly every participant is the thought that the online church service, whether good or bad, cannot be the regular way they experience church.

## Pastoral Care Through Online Worship

### Introduction

Given the nature of phenomenological research, this researcher is constantly coming to new understandings of the phenomenon of the research topic. The journey along the hermeneutic circle has been the most profound regarding the connection between pastoral care and online worship. At the start of the research, this researcher intended to explore how online worship itself is experienced as a catalyst for pastoral care, with sung worship ministering to the believer as they participate.

Some participants voiced experiences that aligned with this definition. However, when hearing the term *pastoral care,* most participants immediately moved toward what many churches may call care ministries—those ministries that pray for church members, provide food for the hungry, and evangelize the lost. Having returned to the hermeneutic circle to confirm the research subjects' data, this researcher's conception of pastoral care through online worship now incorporates what has emerged from the data.

### Growing in Participation Through Online Worship

V1 describes how, early in their faith, they watched and participated in online worship through videos on YouTube. They felt they needed to take their spiritual growth into their own hands and describe how they did so: "You can't take the worship team home with you. You can't take the pastor home with you. You have to develop it on your own … I would watch Kari

Jobe's 'Forever' every night before bed. It wasn't a live stream, but it ministered to me … It's an investment that they have to make, [but] you have to participate in it."[151] Turning attention to the online church service stream rather than worship videos, V1 talks about how their experience is stronger when the church utilizes online hosts and mentions those that are joining online, "It's better for me to be acknowledged and have the discipleship than it is to just have worship and a sermon that gets shown to you."[152]

Continuing to talk about the online hosts that speak before and after V1's online church service, V1 describes a particular moment of pastoral care in which they heard a testimony about at their church: "I just think it's so cool how … they'll get a word for somebody, and it's just for someone online, and they find out two weeks later, that someone got healed of shoulder pain, and that had prayed for shoulder pain in the pre-show. You can't have that if you don't acknowledge your people."[153] V1 concludes by talking about pastoral care and how they are most engaged and led during online worship when they intentionally participate. "God will meet you in your room because God can do that."[154]

P6 was part of the same focus group interview as V1 and P7 and responded strongly to V1's remarks about regularly worshiping to Kari Jobe's "Forever." "It's funny, you were talking about the Kari Jobe video of 'Forever,' and that deeply impacted me … That made me hungry for more [videos of Kari Jobe leading worship] and then just experiencing her intimacy through her voice and then being like, 'I want this … I want this.' And it was not even her, but it was her

[151] V1, Interview.

[152] V1, Interview.

[153] V1, Interview.

[154] V1, Interview.

intimacy."[155] P6 has regularly worshiped on their own using the same Kari Jobe video on YouTube.

They felt challenged and called toward a deeper level of intimacy with God in their worship through the impact of watching a video of Kari Jobe leading worship. Those in the focus group with P6 and V1 agreed that Kari Jobe has a particularly intimate manner of worship leadership, one in which it seems as though she's directly connecting to the Lord when she is leading corporate worship. V1 and P6 felt pastored in their worship participation by seeing Kari Jobe leading online. P6 explains, "I come to places like [redacted], and that's when I recognize … 'Whoa, they are really engaged.'"[156] P7 adds to the conversation and shares their experience: "Also, with the Kari Jobe videos, growing up, I would watch those, and yes, you can just feel the intimacy that she has with the Lord … It just draws you in. It's like, 'Wow, okay, I want that. How do I get there?' And so that's crazy. They're not even live videos, and they really impact us so much."[157] The comment by P7 regarding the worship being prerecorded and having an impact is discussed below when dealing with synchronous and asynchronous worship.

**Watching Others Receive Pastoral Care**

P6 explains a particular online church service in which they felt challenged and cared for pastorally even though they were watching others: "I've also been in [online services] where they're done kind of like online groups or discipleship, but really talking about inner wounds … and I've experienced deep healing from that. And it was just watching other people walk through

[155] P6, Interview.

[156] P6, Interview.

[157] P7, Interview.

that."[158] P6 found that God had helped them tremendously through watching others, with what feels as a sense of happy nostalgia. P6 continues:

> Being in that, I was like, "Whoa, this is gonna be weird…." But watching somebody walk them through exercises of their heart and where they are with it, it was so vulnerable and so beautiful. The connection that happened between the women that were there; the life that they were speaking over each other. I was like, "Wow," my heart was healed just by seeing that.[159]

## Pastoral Care and Meeting Needs

Many participants, especially those from the leadership group, immediately begin talking about their experiences with what many would consider to be pastoral care in the strictest sense—meeting the needs of those lacking or laying hands on someone and praying for them. L1 immediately jumps to what their church provides for its members, explaining how they have a benevolence and an elderly care pastor on their staff who handle things such as visiting the sick, preparing memorial services, or providing funds for congregants to handle unexpected bills as they arise.[160]

Interestingly, L1 bifurcates how the members of their church experience spiritual and physical pastoral care. "So between [benevolence and elderly care pastors], [the congregation is] well taken care of physically and then we have a good team of teaching pastors that take care of them spiritually."[161] L1 is particularly excited to talk about how their lead pastor engages with the congregation. "You can email him directly and talk to him directly. He's not one of the

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[158] P6, Interview.

[159] P6, Interview.

[160] L1, Interview.

[161] L1, Interview.

untouchable pastors."[162] In many larger churches, direct access to the lead pastor is often protected or limited, making it difficult for a congregant to have hands-on interaction with them.

L1 talks about how their congregants can experience pastoral care directly with their lead pastor: "He's just doing [things such as] spiritual direction for people and taking an intrinsic look at what God's doing in their life. He does that every Wednesday morning … you can just show up to this thing. And he's giving one-on-one pastoral care. That's something that has nothing to do with teaching on Sunday. He's just being a pastor."[163] When discussing how their church provides pastoral care to those who join online, L1 unpacks a conversation with their leadership: "We have grand ideas. We just don't have anyone to do it. And so there's going to be some restructuring of roles … We don't have any communications director … There's not anyone who has oversight over the internet, which is a bummer."[164] L1 recognizes that their church has the opportunity to provide more for their church online, but the pressing needs of the physical campus ministry tend to take precedence over online expansion.[165]

### Decentralized Pastoral Care Through the Small Group

When speaking about pastoral care, L2 finds that they rely much more on the members of their small groups rather than the pastor of their church. L2 begins by explaining how one can get access to the pastor if needed: "We have a campus pastor that I could call the office and try to meet with, or chat with them online, or send them an email and get a response within a day or so. I never do it, but I could. So, there is that pastoral care. I can also just go up and talk to him after

[162] L1, Interview.

[163] L1, Interview.

[164] L1, Interview.

[165] L1, Interview.

any service. He's always there. Great guy, love chatting with him."[166] Despite the access to a vocational pastor at their church, L2 explains how they go about pastoral care personally: "If I do need to talk to somebody in a Biblical sense or in a godly setting … that would be my [small] group."[167] The interpersonal connection within the small group of people that meet weekly affords L2 everything they consider needed for pastoral care.

Shifting attention to the online worship service, L2 talks about how most of their experiences with their church's online streams feel as a one-way street, with L2 being largely an observer. When asked what online pastoral care is like at their church, L2 explains, "I haven't done it on a computer screen. I know that I've heard them mention from the stage several times that there's a welcome card that they can fill out. There's a digital version of that you can click."[168] To receive hands-on pastoral care through L2's church, one needs to identify themselves by clicking a link, sending an email, or calling the church office. The pastoral team is willing and available, but L2 explains the church would benefit from something that serves as a middle ground where the online participant would not need to connect so directly. However, they struggle to explain what that middle ground is. Participants quickly talk about the practical aspects of pastoral care, such as praying for someone rather than connecting worship to pastoral care or even focusing entirely on online methods of pastoral care.

Similarly, V1 talks about the difficulty they have in connecting with pastoral care at their church through online methods: "There wasn't much follow up, we didn't have … a chat host or anything like that … [they gave] you a thing if you got saved to fill out a form so they can follow

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[166] L2, Interview.

[167] L2, Interview.

[168] L2, Interview.

up."[169] Conversely, P6 describes how online pastoral care began to thrive when the church hired a pastor who was dedicated to engaging online members. "They were really trying to engage in that place [online], but it wasn't until they had a pastor whose heart was for deep discipleship, [He would say] 'Hey, here's a group. Hey, let's get connected.'"[170] Among the participants' churches, intentionality in discipleship and pastoral guidance through the online service is a required aspect of helping congregants feel a connection.

### Teaching Children How to Participate in Worship Online

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, V1 created services for their church's children. This required a new understanding, or at least some innovation, of how to pastor the children toward worship participation at home. V1 describes the online children's experience at their church and details how the worship involved physical dances for the kids to do at home.[171] The dance moves were part of the physical gathering, so V1's church made an amalgam of that experience for those children that joined online. Similarly, P7 also led in kids' ministry during the pandemic. P6 describes how their team tried to navigate pastoring kids online: "I had to create lessons for children online. And so that was so interesting, because it was like, 'Okay, how do you allow children to engage online, but not just sit there and watch the screen, but actually interact?' So that was a whole learning experience and challenge."[172] V1 and P7 were most concerned about helping their children move from passive spectators to participants in the online kid's ministry offerings.

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[169] V1, Interview.

[170] P6, Interview.

[171] V1, Interview.

[172] P6, Interview.

Without seeing how the children participated, V1 talks about the feedback they received from parents. “They do dance-based worship. But we saw a lot of good testimony come from kids, feeling like they were involved in learning, but only when their parents made it a priority … The kids stood up and participated.”[173] V1 needed the help of the parents at home to effectively disciple and teach the children how to participate in worship. P7 describes a similar phenomenon: “[We] were just putting it out there. I had feedback from the parents. But we were just learning because this was right when COVID hit and everything. So that was a whole interesting experience.”[174] Similar to V1, P7 had to rely on the feedback of parents to know whether or not the children were engaging in the online services.[175] A theme continues to emerge among participants in which they speak about both themselves and those they lead, needing to engage with online content if they are to expect spiritual growth. The children at V1’s church who engaged most in the online services were those guided by their parents.[176] The more effort one applies to participating rather than spectating generally yields a stronger sense of being part of a service, even though it is offered online.

### Pastoral Care and Support Remotely

L3 spent a few years as an international missionary and speaks highly of the pastoral care they received from others, even though they could not meet them physically. In much the same manner as L2 describes their pastoral care coming from their small group above, L3 details how they had many people supporting them from around the world via the internet: “For a while my

[173] V1, Interview.

[174] P7, Interview.

[175] P7, Interview.

[176] V1, Interview.

[spouse], [redacted], and I had a private Facebook page. We had hundreds of our people, prayer supporters, and financial supporters. It's where we would post our newsletter."[177]

The newsletter being posted on Facebook offered immediate feedback and responses. Where there was a prayer need, L3's prayer partners could pray for them in real-time and comment that they had done so. A certain amount of formality is involved with creating a newsletter for supporters. L3 appreciated the informal nature of the Facebook group as it allowed them to give people a glimpse into a larger picture of their work on the mission field. L3 explains, "The Facebook page was really reserved for … our day-to-day … the mundaneness of overseas life is not as glamorous as our newsletters would write."[178]

L3 and their spouse also took advantage of the ability to live stream to the Facebook group. "Once or twice a month that we would do live streams of just, like, letting people talk to us and check in on us and also reciprocating showing care [for them] … People were just, you know, living on their computers, essentially. So why not use it to our advantage and be able to update people about our life?"[179] L3 was also able to lead their home church in worship remotely from the mission field. "I would lead songs as I would live stream on their Instagram and lead songs for twenty-five to thirty minutes, a few times a month, along with other worship leaders who were in [redacted]."[180] L3 was able to stay connected and provide a level of pastoral care through worship, leading their church remotely.

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[177] L3, Interview.

[178] L3, Interview.

[179] L3, Interview.

[180] L3, Interview.

L4 finds themselves in a similar situation, regularly providing what they describe as pastoral care for others through online communication such as text messaging or various social media platforms. L4 has a relatively active social media presence and is involved in a local church, so people regularly reach out to them via social channels. L4 explains, "People reach out through Facebook Messenger or a direct message on social media platforms. I feel like that happens quite a bit. There's a lot of … texting, especially recently, in the last six months."[181] L4 finds that they often provide spiritual direction for those with whom they connect because they tend to have similar interests because of the social media connection. L4 explains, "I feel like I've been an auxiliary piece for the pastoral care for people. I'm at my computer so much at the time that my messages are up and, you know, communicating that way."[182]

As the senior pastor of their church, L6 tries to maintain some of the effort that their church has placed on reaching those that are not at their church services. L7 describes a strategy they employ at their church to encourage participation and foster engagement: "So we do a whole lot in terms of trying to interact a lot. [We're] trying to connect … We have an internal policy that someone responds [to a message] within thirty minutes."[183] The timeliness of the response gives L7's church a chance to bring people from passive observers to potential participatory members of the church. L7 describes the thought process: "Someone reaches out to one of these virtual channels and says, 'Hey, I need prayer.' We will pray them, of course digitally, but then we even offer: 'Hey, here's a phone number you can call us, and we can actually talk with you and pray with you. So, we just try to take them from virtual to physical

[181] L4, Interview.

[182] L4, Interview.

[183] L7, Interview.

interaction if we can."[184] L7 admits that it is difficult to maintain the quick response time now that the COVID-19 pandemic is largely over but that it is important to consider those that are virtually connecting as members of the church too.[185]

## Burnout and Soul Care for the Church Leader

Given the number of years serving as a leader in both the local church and the mission field, L3 describes how they have been most impacted by what they call *soul care,* which they describe as giving attention to the spiritual health of church leaders.[186] L3 unpacks what it was like to experience *soul care* while on the mission field: "Our organization that we were sent through was huge on soul care. We had soul care representatives in our region that would come see us every so often whenever we had regional or team gatherings."[187]

These soul care representatives would interact relatively often with L3 to help stave off the burnout that can come from serving in ministry. L3 explains, "The longevity of missionaries on the field of workers on the field is reflected in their daily … small things that happen to you [that] add up and ultimately lead to burnout."[188] L3 greatly appreciates the care they were given that focused on how they were doing emotionally and spiritually while they were doing international missionary work. Now that they serve in the local church, L3 finds they tend to overwork themselves if they are not careful and must continually remind themselves not to do

[184] L7, Interview.

[185] L7, Interview.

[186] L3, Interview.

[187] L3, Interview.

[188] L3, Interview.

so.[189] While describing the work that is involved in doing both online and physical ministry, L3 reiterates how crucial personal care is: "Counseling and soul care are ways to mitigate and to get wisdom of how to navigate what it is to be in full-time ministry … Full-time ministry is never-ending battles and burdens, because sometimes those battles and burdens ultimately outweigh the joys of what it is to be in a full-time ministry role."[190]

### Decentralized Pastoral Care Through a Wealth of Content

Many participants appreciate how easily they can connect with the content, worship, and sermons being produced by so many churches. They can engage with multiple churches throughout the week, and the quality has greatly improved for many churches, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. While consuming content or watching a worship service online may not be considered pastoral care in the strictest sense, it is essential to realize that many participants enriched their spiritual lives through this content.

L4 speaks to how much they enjoy hearing perspectives from different denominations: "Especially from a teaching standpoint, I feel like I got to hear a lot broader of a range, especially … how people reacted during all the stuff in 2020. …[B]eyond COVID … there's so much political and racial stuff. Just to see how different the body of Christ is, as far as the reaction to that, was fascinating to me."[191] The thoughts from other church leaders challenged L4's beliefs and gave them new perspectives.

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[189] L3, Interview.

[190] L3, Interview.

[191] L3, Interview.

Many churches L4 admired would bring in guests, and the pastor would conduct interviews. L4 explains, "A lot of impactful moments for me were just listening to interviews that churches would have … I feel like several of the churches I tuned into were doing more of the, 'Hey, let's bring in an expert in the situation and talk with them,' thing."[192] L4's church utilized this interview style as well: "We had a racial reconciliation talk with a doctor, and it was fascinating to hear about his experience as an African American … it was just a lot of food for thought, in that time, with, you know, the [murder of] George Floyd."[193]

### When Someone Discovers a Church Online

Often churches provide their online services mainly for congregation members to engage with the service when they cannot attend the physical service. At L5's church, many members give regular feedback about how much they appreciate the availability of the online service.[194] The members regularly use the online offerings as a way to invite their friends and family to check out the church. L5 shares a specific example: "My associate pastor's grandma-in-law or something … [she] lives in Mexico and watches every Sunday and … has just been growing in her faith in leaps and bounds."[195] With excitement, L5 jumps to telling the story of a particular woman who has had a strong experience with L5's online church: "There's a woman in Chicago … She was a single woman who never found a church she really connected to and randomly … found our traditional service on YouTube. [She] started watching and just felt that connection.

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[192] L4, Interview.

[193] L4, Interview.

[194] L5, Interview.

[195] L5, Interview.

This was the church that was … helping her feel at home again."[196] This online participant did not remain as simply a consumer of the weekend stream, "She started going into the online Bible study with our pastor. Every couple of months, she would buy the altar flowers for our church. She donates to college ministry."[197]

While thinking about the people in their church that join online, L5 continues, "I know there are others in similar situations. I can probably … come up with a dozen people that have moved away because of their jobs that still watch [redacted name of church] every Sunday and still stay connected. Because where they moved, they just couldn't find something that they connected to."[198] When asked to further expound upon what it is about their church that resonates with these online members, L5 explains, "I really think we do a great job of balancing the traditional and the expected liturgical flow with a joy and a lightness and a hospitality that even comes across on screen."[199]

### A Variation Between Online and Physical Programming

Throughout their interview, L5 is excited to talk about how their church might use the internet to connect and help their members engage through changes in the online service only. To begin, L5 paints the picture of what their current online service, "[It's] mostly just a window into our lives service. At the very end, we have a prerecorded video from our senior pastor that we

[196] L5, Interview.

[197] L5, Interview.

[198] L5, Interview.

[199] L5, Interview.

play … It only shows online and says, 'We're so glad you came in join.' … And so that's really the only touch point of care and connection."[200] However, there is a desire for more to be done.

L5 talks about the potential: "I would love to see more pastoral care in the online realm that we have a space where someone jumps on midstream and talks live to the people at home, in a spot where it makes sense."[201] L5's church has members come forward to take communion, and the whole process takes around fifteen minutes of the service.[202] With that in mind, L5 discusses how this portion of the service could be strategically used online to create a stronger experience for online viewers: "People at home are just kind of wiggling their phones. Maybe it could be a moment where [a pastor] could come on and take prayer requests for people that are online." The fact that members and visitors need pastoral care online is a foregone conclusion for L5, and they continue to explain what a healthy experience for their online viewers would look like:

> Maybe say, "Hey, we're going to have a month online Zoom hangout for all of you that watch online primarily. And we're just going to … take Q&A and talk about life and maybe questions you have about theology or Jesus or things like that." Having those types of events that we have for in-person people and having more connection points for the online folks, I think, would be a really great addition.[203]

### Should Pastoral Care Stay Online?

L7 finds that they regularly want the opportunity to provide more of a connection for their online members, knowing that there is an incredible potential to connect with new people

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[200] L5, Interview.

[201] L5, Interview.

[202] L5, Interview.

[203] L5, Interview.

but struggles with allocating resources and effort to do so.[204] L7 describes the tension they experience when thinking through how to engage people online:

> From a lead pastor perspective … I have a love-hate relationship with online communities. Because I don't have a system to actually care for those people … I don't really know what they're going through, and that hurts me. And that hurts my deacons and deaconesses because we can't really connect with those people. We don't really know those people.[205]

There are tangible elements of pastoral care that are difficult to provide online. L7 explains, "We have systems to care for people, but we can't do that virtually nearly as well, and that pains me as the lead [person] … I don't know how to get better at it."[206] During the interview, L7 regularly talks about their heart to pastor and care for both the members of their church and those new visitors online and in person. Still, they acknowledge that their best chance to minister to others is through a physical connection. L7 explains, "That's why, at some point, I gotta get them in the door. It's like a hospital. I can't treat you at home. I can do some stuff like telehealth, but eventually, I gotta lay hands on you. I gotta interact … Maybe because I'm Gen X, but as a lead [pastor] guy, it is impersonal."[207]

Nearly without taking a breath, L7 offers the competing view: "I can talk my own point down because any church past a hundred people is impersonal. The sheer size makes it impersonal. But there is no virtual pastor who can virtually touch them with the photons they're watching… Those pixels can't lay hands and pray for them."[208] L7 concludes by reflecting on

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[204] L7, Interview.

[205] L7, Interview.

[206] L7, Interview.

[207] L7, Interview.

[208] L7, Interview.

how they regularly have conversations with other lead pastors who voice a similar concern over online pastoral care.[209] As has been seen when discussing the comparison between physical and digital ministries above, participants tend to state that the physical church service is the preferable way to minister to others.

## Dealing with Church Hurt

A unique experience emerged from the interview with P1. P1 had worked for their church for a few years and was eventually let go for what they considered unfair reasons.[210] After they were let go, they found that they did not want to attend their church anymore but also did not feel as though they would be comfortable visiting another church. For a time, online church became their only means of attending church. P1 describes their experience: "I'll be honest because I was still filtering through the emotions … when you're separated from your position, it hurts."[211] P1 decided they did not want to leave their church, so they chose to use the online service to stay connected. They describe the experience, "It's kind of like, do you still want to go there? I mean, a lot of people don't. And I didn't want to do that. And so that allowed me time to kind of focus on my emotions and kind of figure out 'Okay, I still love these people' … It gave me a nice transition time to go back."[212] P1 describes what the online service was like for them during the time: "It was great. It was a baby step … So, I definitely enjoyed the worship if I knew the song. It was a good time for me to try to connect to a one-on-one relationship [with the Lord] without

[209] L7, Interview.

[210] P1, Interview.

[211] P1, Interview.

[212] P1, Interview.

feeling the pressure of being around [others]."[213] It is important to recognize passages of scripture that speak to this situation. Matthew 5:23–24 directs the believer toward reconciliation with others rather than avoiding and Hebrews 10:25 instructs one to not neglect the gathering of believers.

L4 has not personally experienced the same sort of hurt from their church but does talk about how the online service can serve as a balm for those that have: "I do think there are certain seasons where wounding has happened at church … but still wanting to be plugged in. Online might be actually a good place to heal for a moment and not have to answer for something hard that happened at church with random strangers in the lobby as you're trying to get coffee."[214] However, L4 provides a caution when dealing with church hurt: "I do think that some of that [church hurt] if it's coming from a place of selfishness and isolation, online church is not the answer to that … I'm probably leaning more towards the side of like, I think it's okay in certain seasons to say that the people just want to go online."[215]

### Participants Looking to Be Cared For, Leaders Looking to Provide Care

An expected trend emerges from the data among participants dealing with pastoral care. Those in the P group generally speak about their experiences in receiving pastoral care through online and physical means. Those in the L group talk about how they or their churches are providing pastoral care for the members of their church. For example, L7 makes every effort to

[213] P1, Interview.

[214] L4, Interview.

[215] L4, Interview.

draw connecting points with those that participate in their online service to serve them best spiritually.[216]

L3's church takes similar proactive steps to connect with those needing care. L3 describes what an online visitor experiences when they connect with an online service: "We have selections, especially on our Church Online page, to request to be prayed for, submit a prayer request, or learn more about the church."[217] Having the button enables the viewer to become more of a participant. However, L3 explains how the online participant has to make a similar effort as someone who would come forward to be prayed for at the altar of a physical service: "They have to be definitely open to it … It takes just as much effort on their end and prayerful consideration to be able to click that button than it would be to stay after church for ten minutes and have a conversation with somebody."[218]

## The Validity of Communion Online

Most participants in this study have generally non-denominational, Pentecostal, or Baptist backgrounds, and their churches facilitate communion online by asking their members to grab some bread and juice or something similar from their kitchen to participate in communion online. However, a fascinating aspect of online pastoral care emerges when speaking to L5, who serves in a Lutheran church, about the sacrament of communion and how it is dealt with denominationally. This researcher grew up in the Lutheran church and was aware of how those in the Lutheran church tend to hold a weightier view of the spiritual aspects of the Lord's

[216] L7, Interview.

[217] L3, Interview.

[218] L3, Interview.

Supper. Where a Catholic believes in *transubstantiation*—that is, the real presence of Christ in the communion elements—the Lutheran holds to a belief that is not recognizing the actual presence of the Lord in communion but does not view them merely as symbolic either.

L5 gets excited when the topic of communion comes up. "For what it's worth, I did a whole paper on 1 Corinthians 11 … and I came to the conclusion that the Lutheran church which stands so strongly on Luther's the bread and wine in, with, and under the body and blood. It's not *Transubstantiation*. It's not representation. It's this weird, mysterious middle ground."[219] When this researcher offers the term *consubstantiation,* L5 quickly responds, "Yeah, that's the non-Lutheran word for 'in, with, and under' in the Lutheran arena."[220]

The consecration and ritual required among the Lutheran church would naturally cause one to pause if they were watching church online and being asked to take communion with unconsecrated elements. L5 explains how there was "a hot debate" at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic among the leadership of their Lutheran Synod about if they should allow their members to take communion at home if they were not allowed to meet at a physical church gathering.[221] Interestingly, L5 explains that their denominational leadership "came out with an official statement that said they are not encouraging [taking communion at home]. [However] They said you will not get in trouble [if you take communion or your church leads members to do so]."[222]

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[219] L5, Interview.

[220] L5, Interview.

[221] L5, Interview.

[222] L5, Interview.

The decision to facilitate communion mainly came down to the pastor's background at L5's church. "For a while our…former-Baptist-became-a-Lutheran senior pastor was a lot more open with that. And so, he, for a while, during the pandemic, he would say, 'Hey, get your bread, get your wine, for those of you that are confirmed … take your bread, take your wine.'"[223] For the physical service, the common cup was eschewed for the sake of preventing the spread of COVID-19. L5 describes how members now use prepackaged elements, which a team member colloquially calls "Communion Lunchables," to participate in person.[224]

Even now that the COVID-19 pandemic is largely over, L5 explains how several church members are still participating in communion online, even though they are not encouraging it necessarily: "They're still doing it. A lot of people are still just doing it."[225] Returning attention to the paper L5 wrote about 1 Corinthians 11, L5 becomes animated and explains their conclusions:

> We, as Lutherans, have been so strong on the body that it is His body and blood that we've taken 1 Corinthians out of context—Paul's writing to people who are getting drunk. Paul's not worried about that; they believe it is his body. Paul's concerned that people are literally dying because you're [The people of Corinth are] eating all the food. You're taking communion with your brothers and sisters who were in the fields all day and came in late at night, and you're drunk, and they're barely getting anything to eat, and then you're communing together. Shouldn't the body and blood have some significance of … life, not only eternal life but the lives of your brothers and sisters? Shame on you. And then the very end of First Corinthians 11 says that they wait for one another. Wait for one another. This meal is so important.[226]

L5 then explains how their brother, who also serves in the Lutheran denomination at another church, responds to being unable to meet: "My brother, his church … took 1 Corinthians 11 at

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[223] L5, Interview.

[224] L5, Interview.

[225] L5, Interview.

[226] L5, Interview.

Paul's word. He said, 'If we can't all be together during the pandemic, no one will have communion until we can get together. We're gonna wait for each other.' That's bold."[227]

### Summary

Speaking about pastoral care brings about varied responses from the participants that largely depend on their leadership experience, or lack thereof, at a church. The main consensus of those that have participated is that pastoral care provided online can and should have a place in the church's life but does not replace the physical aspects such as communion or the laying on of hands. Among participants, little connection is made between worship and pastoral care directly, with attention given almost exclusively to how they either provide or receive guidance or attention from a pastor or spiritual leader in the church. Much like asking someone to define the word *worship*, the term *pastoral care* can be both simple to describe and worthy of an hour-long conversation to attempt to explore the many facets of each. Even so, participants do receive pastoral care online as is defined for this study in varying degrees.

## Asynchronous vs. Synchronous

### Introduction

A subordinate question for this research asks, "How does an online participant experience a live online worship service compared to a prerecorded online worship service?" Those studied recall varied experiences, both positive and negative, for both pre-recorded and live-streamed online services. Given the nature of this phenomenological study, the experiences are unique among those studied. Further, individual participants often share negative and positive

[227] L5, Interview.

experiences with synchronous and asynchronous services. This section parses the pros and cons of each.

### Positive Experiences with a Synchronous Stream

In general, participants voice how the online service being streamed synchronously gives them a stronger sense of involvement in the worship gathering. L4 recalls, "If I'm watching something on a Sunday morning, I'm usually just watching live, and I kind of like the live thing without editing afterward. Just because it feels kind of like I was there."[228] P8 describes their online experience: "I think getting something live is different than watching something prerecorded. It's like watching a game, watching a live sports game versus watching a prerecorded game. It's not the same."[229] Turning their attention to the spiritual aspects of the sermon in a live stream, P8 voices that they feel they get a more relevant sermon when it is live-streamed, as the pastor is fully informed of current events.[230]

P5 shares their experience: "I think when it's live, I'm actively engaging and participating. I'm part of the story."[231] P5 continues and details what it means to be part of the story: "I feel like live streaming … is easier to engage with because I have no idea where this is gonna go. So, we're all doing this together because it hasn't happened before. So, nobody knows something I don't. And we're all … going together."[232] Recalling a recent experience, P5 details how they engaged in online worship:

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[228] L4, Interview.

[229] P8, Interview.

[230] P8, Interview.

[231] P5, Interview.

[232] P5, Interview.

> I feel like there's more unity, more freedom when I'm engaging in something that is ongoing because then … my heart is part of the people that they are stewarding … They are just as much stewarding this time of worship that I'm engaged in as they are for everyone in the room because they can't see me. But the Holy Spirit is the one ministering to each of us. And He knows that my spirit is … lifting up praise and saying, "Here I am, God. Take me on this journey with you."[233]

V2 shares how their church leadership dealt with the choice between live and pre-recorded services at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: "The younger generation is okay with live and raw or pre-recorded, but the older generation was like, 'No, [pre-recorded] is not authentic. It has to be live. And so, ultimately, we are stuck with just all live things. We didn't pre-record anything."[234] With a small amount of defiance, V2 explains how they attempted to sway their leadership toward letting their team pre-record the worship to no avail: "I threw a couple … prerecorded things up there. And everybody's like, 'Wow, this sounds amazing.' But ultimately, [the leadership] were like, 'I want it live at exactly the same time.'"[235] V2's experience highlights an important aspect of the live vs. pre-recorded debate: There are preferences for both in any given church.

### Negative Experiences with a Synchronous Stream

V2 could not convince their church leadership to let them prerecord their service for the sake of quality. The subsequent raw quality of the recording is viewed as a negative experience for V2. With a background in audio engineering as well as church leadership, V2 explains their concern:

> One big thing that was kind of … a realization for me was that people that don't know better [in this case, the leadership at their church] are more fixated on the visuals. And the

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[233] P5, Interview.

[234] V2, Interview.

[235] V2, Interview.

> people that do know better, we're more aware of audio. You quickly realize what's more important in the church room because, with video and no audio, you don't get any information. You're just watching somebody move his mouth. Audio with no video, you get 90% of what you're supposed to be getting. It's kind of like podcasts. If you have a podcast with just audio, you can consume that content. If you have a podcast with video, you can consume the content and get a little bit more of the emotion behind the content. If you have a podcast with just video and no audio, you have no clue what's being communicated. You get 0% of the content. It's no good. There's nothing you can consume where it's like the video works and the audio doesn't work. When our video cameras went out, but we're still pumping the audio, people can still consume the service.[236]

V2 feels as though taking the time to pre-record and, more importantly, post-produce the service allows the church to remove distractions that may come from technical problems that may arise when streaming the service live.

Further, the ability to live-stream a service at a quality that many would consider acceptable is often too expensive an investment for some churches. L2 finds their church in such a situation. "We're not even showing the worship because we don't have the infrastructure to do it right now. It's all moved to the other building, and we're left with kind of bare bones."[237] V1 shares their experience as their church invested in the infrastructure needed to live-stream: "The live stream at my church was just a backup if you were sick … it wasn't professional. It was kind of an afterthought until COVID. Then they made it really nice. They invested in cameras and stuff, and at first, prerecorded it … and then as things got crazier, they would live stream it, and they invested in … live stream cameras and stuff."[238] Interestingly, many participants have an underlying preference for a live-streamed worship service, with the quality of the equipment

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[236] V2, Interview.

[237] L2, Interview.

[238] V1, Interview.

used to broadcast as the most important factor. The live-streamed service is preferred if the church can offer it with sufficient quality.

P3 struggles with the synchronous worship service. They unpack how they experience it: "When I watch it live, it's hard for me to engage because I'm like, 'Oh, this is live.' I feel like I'm spying … it's harder for me to get engaged with it … I feel weird. I feel like I'm just spying on these people because this is happening right now."[239] Again focusing on the technical and practical aspects, P6 explains, "Live makes me a little nervous sometimes because [what if you] lose service and I'm like, 'Oh shoot, I just missed ten minutes. Or … what if you have to go to the bathroom? … There's that weirdness, but with a regular video, you have the control … I can pause."[240]

### Positive Experiences with an Asynchronous Stream

Those who share experiences with asynchronous church services often voice how they could experience God regardless of whether the service or worship they were watching was being recorded live or had been pre-produced. V1 recounts how they were impacted by an asynchronous recording of a worship moment: "I got healed of depression one time, just watching a worship video … God healed me radically in that moment … God does those things."[241] V1 continues and details how they find they can connect with God more deeply when they know the service has been pre-recorded because they can focus only on their relationship with the Lord rather than being concerned with what may be happening live in the room.[242] It is

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[239] P3, Interview.

[240] P6, Interview.

[241] V1, Interview.

[242] V1, Interview.

important to note that, where a biblical worldview is concerned, one cannot bifurcate the need to gather with other believers in corporate worship so they may focus solely on their personal relationship.

Although P5 voiced their preference for a synchronous online worship experience, they share a positive experience similar to that of V1 and recognizes how God can minister to the viewer regardless of whether he or she is watching synchronously or asynchronously: "Pastors would say, 'Everyone under the sound of my voice,' they would acknowledge people driving in their cars, and I would be streaming [redacted home church] in my car on my drive home."[243] P5 continues and explains how, when they watch other church services throughout the week, the pastors voice a similar thought: "They would say … Everyone under the sound of my voice, this is for you' and just pray things, expecting people to watch it at a later date, and expecting people to watch it in a different setting."[244]

P3 appreciates being able to view the asynchronous stream at their own pace—pausing and jumping to various points of the service at their discretion, with a particular emphasis on enjoying the ability to scroll back and replay a worship song that is particularly powerful for them.[245] P3 explains, "The disconnect for me is … this is when church is, this is when it is live, this is when I have to be ready, this is when I have to be mentally engaged."[246] Engaging with an asynchronous stream at P3's discretion affords a more intimate experience, as they can engage when they see fit.

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[243] P5, Interview.

[244] P5, Interview.

[245] P3, Interview.

[246] P3, Interview.

## A Negative Experience with an Asynchronous Stream

Sometimes the quality that can be afforded by pre-recording a service can be a distraction in and of itself. L4 shares their experience:

> It almost feels like when you edit something … still kind of feels live but less authentic to me. Not that it's inauthentic … I know that they chopped something up to make a transition smoother, and so it takes me out of a space real quick since I've seen behind the curtain and have done some of the post-production. It's like, "Yeah, I know what they did there." And it takes me out of a moment, actually, instead of just experiencing it.[247]

It is important to note that L4 comes from a background in church production, so the details they notice that take them out of participation may not be the same for those who do not have a technical aptitude.

## Somewhere in Between

L7 leverages the technology available to them and provides an online synchronous stream but then takes that stream and creates multiple smaller video clips shared throughout the week on their church's various social media channels. L7 shares what their team does: "They'll take snippets of the sermon if I say something quasi brilliant and usable, they'll pull that out … That actually gets us more traction than our live service does. Understandably, it's snippets. It's short."[248] L7 continues and explains the strong traction, "We get a lot of interaction off that, not just views, but interaction. People will comment, 'like,' [and] they'll share it. Even people out of state, you know, because … that's just the way the world works. And that's been really cool to see."[249]

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[247] L4, Interview.

[248] L7, Interview.

[249] L7, Interview.

With a certain level of excitement, L7 explains how the asynchronous content created out of the synchronous service could serve as a driver to encourage their team to continue creating content: "That's kind of what drives even our team, our staff team going, well, how important is the live stream when it gets twenty views, but these things will get hundreds of views? Each one gets hundreds of views …We're killing ourselves for nothing when we need to be thinking more. Let's record it on Sunday and produce content during the week."[250]

### The Asynchronous Service Watched Synchronously

P3 shares an interesting experience involving a pre-recorded service that was watched together by the church members. During the pandemic, P3's worship team pre-recorded their worship service with no one around. P3 explains, "Doing worship in an empty room was just so hard. But at the same aspect, there was a huge community that we built online coming out of that because we couldn't wait as a congregation till Sunday came around, and we could all watch church together and be in the chat … there is so much power to that."[251] Even though the service was pre-recorded, P3 and their team were able to foster a sense of synchronous community.

L3's church has the budget and staff to offer their services synchronously and asynchronously on a given weekend. L3 unpacks the work their team does each weekend:

> The way we do it currently is we have four services per Sunday morning. We have an 8, 9:30, 11, and 12:30 service. We have cameras, and we have a broadcast audio guy at our first two … we record all that onto a HyperDeck, just a solid-state recorder that can be played back instantaneously. And we have the HyperDeck feeding into our video switch. So essentially, we do our first two services as normal, and then we're able to rewind and punch in at the quote-unquote 'start' of the third service where a third service online is just seeing [the] first service recorded, and then it plays through [the] fourth service. This

[250] L7, Interview.

[251] P3, Interview.

> allows us to have all four of our services theoretically streamed, but we only need our camera ops and audio op there for our first two services.[252]

Depending on which service they join, the viewers of L3's church watch a synchronous or asynchronous service. Unless they are involved in the production ministry of the church, they may not be aware of the later services being pre-recorded. L3 explains, "Unless they're volunteering or in the room, no one online knows they're seeing a difference. Because of the first two services … we put a very high value on our production environments. So, the first few services usually capture what is happening across all services."[253]

L6 finds they enjoy both a synchronous and asynchronous service for different reasons. "I think it was different for both. I wouldn't say one more than the other. I think it was just a different kind of excitement."[254] Because each has its value, during COVID-19, L6's church offered both. L6 explains:

> We would still do a sit-down, "Hey, everybody, jump on. At this time, we're going to be live, and we're going to take prayer requests live over chat," and that kind of thing. So people still had a way to connect as "in person" as it could be … we also did want to spend some time making some more quality content, something that we could spend a little more time on and sink our teeth into a little bit more. And so, we ended up doing both of those things.[255]

## Summary

Most participants voice both positive and negative experiences with synchronous and asynchronous online worship services. Those in leadership positions in the church generally spend most of their time discussing both technical and practical details. Those who are largely

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[252] L3, Interview.

[253] L3, Interview.

[254] L6, Interview.

[255] L6, Interview.

participants only tend to share experiences related to the spiritual aspects of the services and content.

## Virtual Worship

### Introduction

The experiences shared thus far in this chapter focus on the online participant essentially watching a church service on their television or phone. When studying online worship, though, it is essential to recognize that new technologies allow some consumers to have a virtual reality worship experience. The technology will continue to evolve and provide participants with a more immersive experience. As seen throughout this chapter, participants share both positive and negative experiences and bring their preconceived notions of church to the study. The novel nature of virtual reality worship provides detailed descriptions and lived experiences.

### A First-Time Experience

#### V1's First Experience

While a television or a smartphone is a foregone conclusion for nearly everyone, a virtual reality headset is not readily accessible to everyone. V1 shares how their experience with virtual reality worship started from having access to a headset: "One week for church, I was visiting family. They have a PlayStation VR set, and I had the idea that I would watch our church live stream on the headset. I thought it'd be fun to try."[256] With the headset ready to go, V1 makes a point to explain the technical situation at their church: "This was before our church livestream was multiple cameras. So, it was just one angle, and it had the whole stage during worship. And

[256] V1, Interview.

then, during the message, it would zoom in. And I just participated in worship and the message on the VR headset, instead of watching it on my screen."[257]

It is important to note that the technology used by the church to capture the worship service significantly impacts the participants' perceptions. V1's church did not have cameras meant for virtual reality, which harmed V1's experience. "It wasn't a 360 camera or something specifically for VR …. This was before our church had … really upgraded our cameras. And so, our live stream was very basic. So, watching the live stream wasn't very enjoyable because the audio and video were just kind of lower quality."[258] Although V1 did not connect their lack of enjoyment to participation directly, they did share: "I just watched [the] service, and I sat in a chair in the middle of my aunt's living room and just was a part of church … I just kind of sat and looked and worshiped in my heart and listened to the message. I'd never used VR until then. This was my first time."[259]

V1's experience was not entirely negative. They found that the headset forced them to keep their attention on the service because it encapsulated their entire field of vision. "I was less distracted, I think, because I was getting the visual covering my whole field of vision. So, there was no way to look at something in the background. All I could see is what I would see if I was in the back of my sanctuary."[260] V1 concludes by sharing their first virtual reality experience by commenting on their need for community: "Part of church is being with people. So, unless

[257] V1, Interview.

[258] V1, Interview.

[259] V1, Interview.

[260] V1, Interview.

you're watching it with your family …. You engage with people around you and with the service …. It can't be as natural and genuine feeling."[261]

### V2's and V3's First Experience

V2's first virtual reality worship experience involved a worship service recorded with a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree camera set in the center of the room in the middle of the audience. V2's experience is quite different compared to what V1 experienced, which was essentially a fixed screen within the headset. V2 begins by sharing their first impressions:

> It was a completely different experience from watching just on your phone or watching from a laptop … It made me feel, after a while—when you kind of stop thinking about the hardware and the thing being on your head … it made me feel a lot more connected than just watching on a screen …. Everything's blocked out from your environment, except for the service.[262]

V3 viewed the same service and shares their experience: "I did find it interesting. More interesting than watching it on a laptop just because I felt like I was in it …. I enjoyed that experience just because it was different. It was pretty engaging for me …. I felt more connected to it, like I was part of the service."[263]

## The Hindrance of Technology

Given the novel nature of the technology and the relative unfamiliarity with wearing a virtual reality headset, both V2 and V3 voice being distracted by the feeling of the equipment on their head. V2 voices a desire for the technology to evolve: "I think the clunkiness of the hardware, if we can get to a point where that's not a thing, where you're not thinking about that,

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[261] V1, Interview.

[262] V2, Interview.

[263] V3, Interview.

then it would be a lot better experience."[264] V3 shares a similar sentiment and explains that they would have a better time engaging with the service if they were not aware of the weight of the headset or holding the controllers in their hands.[265] V2 continues to share how the physical headset was a distraction:

> When you start, your mind starts accepting the fact that that's your reality, and you forget [where you are]. You start believing you're there. But then, when you move your head [and] you're reminded that there's something on your head. Number one … the weight of it. Number two … the actual interface, has a kind of lag, and you see skipping. There are so many things reminding you that you're not there. But … if you can start forgetting about it, the weight of it … the heat, you start to sweat … It's similar to watching a movie, and … you're immersed in it, and all of a sudden, somebody's phone goes off [or] a baby cries behind me or something like that …. You're in it and then all of a sudden, you're reminded you're not in it. It's not real.[266]

V2 enjoys their virtual worship experiences but expresses, "The hardware and the technology shortcomings would probably make me get lazy and just not watch it on my phone."[267]

## An Eye Toward the Future

Despite the hindrances, V2 describes an overall positive experience and is excited about the future of virtual reality worship. More than the current experience, V2 is excited about what may happen in the virtual reality space in the years to come: "It gives you a feeling of like, 'Oh, this could be the future.' You're getting a behind-the-scenes glimpse into what the future of things [that] might be." V2 explains, "If I were sick … Or [if there was] another pandemic where you just did not come out of your house and if the technology was there … I'd be pretty stoked

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[264] V2, Interview.

[265] V3, Interview.

[266] V2, Interview.

[267] V2, Interview.

to use that technology, as opposed to just watching on a laptop … I would have 100% preferred [virtual reality] to feel like I'm connected."[268]

During V2's interview, Apple announced a new mixed-reality headset called Apple Vision. V2 shares their excitement for the possibilities for online worship using Apple's new equipment" "I would love to experience that with Apple. It might fix it all … If there was a possibility I could get something better, it would make me want to go down that path [participating in VR worship]."[269]

### Those That Have Not Experienced Virtual Reality Worship

Participants from the leader group are asked about virtual reality worship to compare how those who have not experienced virtual reality worship would respond compared to those who have. Responses are varied. L1 addresses how they would react to someone who regularly attends a virtual reality church service: "I think that it's escapism and not going to church."[270] L8 saw the potential at their church during the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, the excitement has waned. "Everyone wanted everybody back in the physical building …. We don't need to really put any effort into doing too much VR anymore."[271]

L7 explains how their church was looking to larger churches such as Life.Church as pioneers for virtual reality worship during the early days of the pandemic but, at the time of this study, has largely moved away from providing a full-fledged virtual reality service.[272]

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[268] V2, Interview.

[269] V2, Interview.

[270] L1, Interview.

[271] L8, Interview.

[272] L7, Interview.

Interestingly, this researcher intended to have virtual participants attend one of Life.Church's services in the Metaverse. However, in March of 2023, Microsoft discontinued running the software AltspaceVR, which was the backbone of Life.Church's online services. At the time of this research, it appears that Life.Church only offers small groups utilizing the Oculus rather than the full-service experience they were offering with AltspaceVR.

### Summary

Virtual participants have mixed feelings about virtual worship. However, there is a consensus that future technology has the potential to make virtual reality worship much more engaging. Those church leaders who have not experienced a VR service generally view it negatively.

## Video Games and Church

### Introduction

When discussing online church, video games occasionally are discussed during the research. Some participants share experiences they have had with video games that have been used to connect with others spiritually. While this researcher is most interested in virtual reality worship with a headset, it can be argued that interacting with others in a video game is a form of virtual reality. As such, the experiences of L4 and L8 are particularly interesting.

### Digital Evangelism in *RuneScape* and *World of Warcraft*

At a young age, L4 and their brother utilized a popular online video game, *RuneScape*, to share the gospel. L4 recounts their experience:

> My brother was like, "What if we were to create a *Runescape* account to just evangelize to people?" Because there are churches in the game. So, you can work on prayer levels. It's a part of … the talk of the game …. So, we thought it was just interesting that people

> have a part of their speech in the game, something that is, you know, potentially faith-based. And so we were like, "I wonder if we could even get people interested in hearing about the gospel or something?" So my brother would just drop thousands of coins and be like, "Follow me." And I would be waiting in the church to basically share the Gospel …. And sometimes we'd even take up like an offering where people would just drop stuff for us to take and, like, find someone in the game to give it to.[273]

Excitedly, L4 shares about the time they were able to help someone come to know the Lord through their interaction in *RuneScape*:

> We kind of would be like, "If anyone wants to accept Jesus as Lord, follow us out of the church afterward, and we'll have like a conversation about it." And most people would go back to, you know, like, chopping up goblins or something. There's one guy that followed us into this wooded area in the game, and he was just asking questions, like, "I grew up Catholic, and I heard of these things, but I don't really understand what you're saying about Jesus as Lord." He's like, "What does 'the Lord' mean?" So, we're explaining all these different concepts that, even as teenagers, we didn't fully understand that when we were evangelizing in these churches, we're just saying *churchy* words that people probably hadn't ever heard of. They're just like, "What does this mean?" So, he was just asking for definitions. And he was like, "I'd love to accept Jesus into my heart." And so, I'm like, "Okay, well, you know, type after us. It's not about the words, but this can connect to your life, and hopefully, you can experience Jesus in your everyday life." We prayed by doing kind of … a typical sinner's prayer, basically acknowledging the need for God, allowing him space as Lord over their life. [Afterward, he] added us as a friend. And he … went on with his game, but it was that one guy basically that actually wanted to know more after our church service.[274]

L8 shares a similar experience with a friend who conducts church services in the game, *World of Warcraft*: "He has a whole guild … he actually created a whole church that's online … they have a physical location, everything like that. And they have people that come. But it was really started as a gamer church … They have online worship; they have a whole church service on a Saturday night because they still want people to get connected to the local church."[275] As has been seen among many participants, L8 again voices the concern for those who start in an

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[273] L4, Interview.

[274] L4, Interview.

[275] L8, Interview.

online church service to move toward a physical gathering. They explain, "I think the digital church is good and is an add-on to what we should do on a Sunday. I think people still need to go to a physical location and be a part of a church body."[276]

## Sharing the Gospel and Connecting via Twitch

L8 serves as a pastor in a local church but also regularly streams on the gaming website, Twitch. L8 describes their perspective: "I think of using the online space … to reach people online for Christ in a unique way that maybe the physical church building can't. I know, from my experience with that, I've been being able to reach people through gaming through streaming on Twitch."[277] L8 shares what a typical experience is like when viewing their stream:

> I always introduce myself as a pastor because, you know, I've been a pastor for a while, and automatically when people come in, they know I'm a Christian. They may not be Christian, but it's a way for me to introduce myself. They know what I'm about. I pray for people at the end of everything, and we've seen people saved. We've seen all that. I think overall. It's just taking everything that was in the physical church and putting it into an online platform.[278]

With excitement, L8 shares how broad the audience is within the gaming space, providing an opportunity to share Christ with new people: "There's … 3 million people on Twitch at all times, and then there's even more people on TikTok at all times."[279] L8 continues, "Let me go out as Paul did to all these different places, and let's preach the gospel, and let's show people who

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[276] L8, Interview.

[277] L8, Interview

[278] L8, Interview.

[279] L8, Interview.

Jesus is … I think the digital space is like, honestly, as weird as that is … the final frontier of missions because it's a whole new ministry that no one has really dived into."[280]

### Summary

Much like virtual reality church services, a worship gathering within a video game is a horizon that has not become commonplace. L4 and L8's experiences provide a glimpse into the potential for reaching people with the gospel that may not come to a physical church gathering. However, it is crucial to recognize even when talking about virtual services in a video game, participants express concern that viewers should ultimately attend a physical church service if possible.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter details the online and virtual worship experiences of the participant, leader, and virtual groups. However, it is critical to recognize that each participant naturally has varied experiences. Chapter five connects themes and offers suggestions for the local church and academia to continue to develop online worship experiences.

[280] L8, Interview.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

## Introduction

Chapter five details a summary of the study, purpose, and procedures. Findings are given and connected to the primary and secondary research questions and prior research. Phenomena that have emerged from the data outside of the research questions are provided, followed by limitations of the study and suggestions for further study. Chapter five concludes with implications for individuals who prepare and plan online worship in a local church context.

## Summary of the Study

Chapter one argues for the need to examine the lived experiences of those participating in and planning online and virtual worship. There can be a wide discrepancy between what happens during a physical church service and what is perceived by those joining online. The phenomenological method of study lends itself particularly well to discovering rich narratives and is the chosen methodology employed in this study. Further, a biblical worldview, with the Bible serving as an anchor to the research, undergirds the process, continually bringing the experiences of both researcher and participant back to the spiritual implications of online and virtual worship. The purpose of the study is to ascertain the worshiper's experience of being led and cared for through online worship.

Chapter two surveys current literature related to online and virtual worship. The terms *online church* and *online worship* are relatively new in the scope of church history. Still, there is a wealth of academic material interested in the scriptural, philosophical, and methodological implications of this practice. This study does not endeavor to argue for or against passages such as Hebrews 10:25. Rather, it seeks to illuminate the experiences as lived by those who participate and

plan online and virtual worship. There continues to be vigorous debate about the biblical validity of an online gathering.[1]

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the rate of scholarly writing regarding online church as many churches were compelled to close their physical doors and offer their services online. Some churches continued to meet in person despite mandates. Others wholeheartedly embraced a new paradigm. However, many churches between these two extremes attempted to provide online church services to the best of their abilities, given their team and budget. With the pandemic over, many churches are now faced with the implications of providing both an online and physical church service in tandem, if for no reason other than keeping up with every other church that is doing the same. The rapid move to provide online services is causing many churches, and their members, to rethink what they consider to be needed or desired engagement with a weekly church service. This phenomenological study fills a gap in the research by providing rich narratives from the participants regarding their online and virtual worship experiences.

Chapter three details the phenomenological procedure for the study, further narrowing it to a hermeneutic phenomenological study rooted in a biblical worldview. The researcher's background and role in the study are provided to give appropriate context to the study. The hermeneutic circle is seen throughout as the researcher interviews participants, and his understanding of the phenomenon is continually refined. The three participant groups are provided: those that participate in online worship, those that plan online worship, and those that join in virtual worship. The instrumentation and procedures are provided, followed by the details of data collection. Data analysis is set forth with an explication of the data. Finally, the ethics of the study are discussed.

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[1] Anna Cho, "For the Church Community after COVID-19," *Dialog* 60, no. 1 (2021): 15, https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12642.

Chapter four presents the data collected from the three participant groups and connects this data primarily to the research questions provided in chapter one. The chapter begins by presenting participants' experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic because these experiences are particularly memorable and vibrant due to the rate of change participants have endured. Attention turns to participants' physical church gathering experiences to appropriately set in contrast to how they experience online church, which is then presented. The experience of pastoral care through online worship is then explored. Attention then turns to how participants experience asynchronous online church services compared to synchronous services. Finally, virtual worship experiences are examined.

## Summary of the Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study through a hermeneutic lens and a biblical worldview is to ascertain the worshiper's experience of being led and cared for through online worship. The debate that surrounds the validity of online church services is essential. However, people attend their online church services and develop participation habits, regardless of the biblical implications. As such, examining how online church viewers experience church services as lived is critical.

## Summary of Procedures

Interviews were conducted with three groups of participants: those who regularly attend both a physical and online church service, those who are or were involved in the planning and execution of online and physical church services, and those who have experienced online, physical, and virtual church services. The interviews were conducted to answer the central research question: "How do participants experience pastoral care through online worship?" Four subordinate questions were developed and used below as a lens to interpret the findings.

Interviews were conducted in-person or online, one-on-one with the researcher or in a focus group with other participants. After each interview, the data was examined through a biblical lens to find preliminary units of meaning. The research traveled along the hermeneutic circle as the preliminary meaning units from one participant connected with others, generating more significant themes that continued to be illuminated through subsequent interviews. The study aims to provide a rich narrative of the experiences regarding online and virtual worship of those interviewed.

## Responses to the Research Questions

### Research Question 1

Question 1: How does the worshiper compare and contrast his or her online experience with that of an in-person worship experience?

All participants could recount an experience in a physical worship service which they considered particularly impactful. In Ephesians 5:19, Paul highlights the horizontal nature of the worship gathering, in which each believer plays a part in encouraging those around them. Participants share experiences in which they have been deeply impacted by the heartfelt participation of others around them, spurring them on to engage with God in new ways, such as raising their hands for the first time. Some participants with a liturgical background were particularly moved by what many would consider a modern church service, with a darkened room, high production level, and a worship band on the stage.

When planning online church services, the church leader must recognize that this corporate aspect of encouraging one another is inherently missing. At best, a leader might encourage a family watching at home to stand and participate, giving some sense of corporate worship to those in the room. However, many people who engage in an online church service are

often alone and may be in a place such as their car during a commute, which hinders participation.

In contemporary circles, there are arguments as to whether the sermon or the time of singing is more important. Some participants voice that their most impactful times in a physical church come from when they are most moved by the word of God through the sermon, while others are almost exclusively moved by singing with others. This juxtaposition highlights that church leaders should recognize the diversity in preferences of their congregants. There may be room to argue over the relative importance of various elements of the church service. However, there are likely a wide range of backgrounds and preferences represented by the people in any given church gathering. As such, the application of careful attention to both the sermon and singing is essential.

Applying careful attention to each element of the service is critical. Still, it is important to realize that how something is perceived in the room differs from how someone at home watching the online service experiences the same element. An element in the physical church service does not necessarily have the same effect on the online viewer. The same can be said for a service component meant for online viewers. For example, many churches represented by the participants of this study utilize a live host that speaks to a camera both before and after the online stream. These online host moments need to be modified if they are meant to connect with those in the physical service. An online host may talk about connecting to an online small group or encouraging those watching to make space in their room and stand. The same online host sharing the same information before the physical gathering is confusing at best.

Similarly, a worship leader in a physical gathering being streamed simultaneously should be mindful of those online. If they reach the end of their worship time and encourage everyone in

the room to greet each other, those at home are immediately reminded that they are not at the gathering. The worship leader should remind themselves that others may be watching online so that they can best minister to both those online and in person.

**The Physical Gathering is Preferable**

An interesting theme emerges from nearly every participant. If an online church is the only way someone can participate, participants express their view that the online gathering is an acceptable form of church. However, attending a physical church gathering is preferable or even mandated if the congregant can get to the physical meeting. Even P8, who calls online church "morally repugnant," admits that an online church service is acceptable if it is the only way to join a church service. Regardless of how excited they may be about an online church service, no participant in this study argues that it could be the only church gathering someone should attend. This finding mirrors the findings of studies in the literature review, such as the work of Andrew Village and Leslie Francis.[2] The implications of this finding are important for any church or worship leader to consider.

Leaders in the church, such as L7 and L5, look to push those that join online to move toward coming to a physical gathering if they are able, with much of the language used in the online service fostering an open invitation to visit. However, some members of these churches cannot physically attend, yet they are still welcome to regularly be involved online. Some online members are connected to an online small group, regularly tithe to the church, and serve in various remote capacities.

[2] Andrew Village and Leslie J. Francis, "Lockdown Worship in the Church of England: Predicting Affect Responses to Leading or Accessing Online and in-Church Services," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* (August 22, 2022): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2022.2101087.

It stands to reason that most churches offering online services should carefully consider what it means to be a church member. If a member can join remotely, attention should be given to leading the online viewer into membership. If the leadership of a church feels strongly that an online service is meant only to be a stopgap until the online viewer can come to a physical church service, that philosophy should be made clear. For example, it could be very healthy for a church to acknowledge the importance of the physical church service to such an extent that they encourage the online viewer, if they are not in the vicinity of the church, to find another suitable church that they may attend. Such a choice would require humility on the part of the leader to potentially lose viewers to another church's physical gathering.

**Keeping up with Other Churches**

While nearly every participant from the leader group voices a preference for a physical gathering, all of their churches continue to offer online services. There is a perception of the need to keep up with other churches offering online services. Not having a service online would forfeit a crucial aspect of church growth upon which many churches rely today. It could be likened to being the only church in town not putting on an Easter Pageant. One would be hard-pressed to argue that an Easter Pageant is required to share the gospel, but if every other church is preparing a pageant, the one that is not will likely see fewer people come through their doors.

In the same way, not having an online church service has the potential for a church to miss out on potential new members, as many people view an online church service to get a feel for a church before they visit. To further exacerbate this issue, the quality of the audio and video of a live stream is often the first aspect of the service that is noticed by online viewers. A poor

quality online service may deter an online visitor from ever visiting in person.[3] The quality can be poor if a church offers its services online but only does so with a camera stationed in the back of the room and audio taken directly from the sound console. If the quality is insufficient, it may be wise to choose not to stream the service and not to give a poor first impression. However, this choice must be weighed against risking what some would consider irrelevance online. Many churches are not considering if they should stop streaming their services. Instead, there is a pressing need to have something available online because other churches are doing so.

**Important Considerations**

Technology is constantly evolving, and it is not prudent to refrain from attempts to adapt and evolve church practice to match.[4] While trying to keep up with other churches, church leaders often do not consider the philosophical aspects of offering church services online. If every church is doing it, it is easy to follow suit without considering if it is prudent for a specific church. Churches should philosophically think about why they are offering their services online. It could simply exist for those in the church who are sick and cannot physically attend on a given week. A church may decide to wade into the global mission field, using its online service to reach as many people as possible with the gospel. Some may hold firmly to Hebrews 10:25 and not offer online services at all, encouraging members to invite friends and bring them to their physical gatherings.

With appropriate philosophy, worship leaders can thoughtfully execute their online worship leadership through intentional methodology. A worship leader in a church that has

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[3] Taylor W. Burton-Edwards, "Unmute Yourself: How to Know Whether and How to Offer Online Worship Options," *Liturgy* 36, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 4, https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2021.1990645.

[4] Adam Possamai, "Religion, the i-Zation of Society and COVID-19," *Social Compass* 69, no. 2 (June 1, 2022): 172, https://doi.org/10.1177/00377686221083759.

decided to reach the nations with their online stream must spend considerable time thinking through how they lead others through the lens of the camera. One small example of a methodological change is that the worship team can often be coached to look at the camera to help the online viewer engage in worship. Budgetary considerations need to come into play as well. Some participants in this study explain how the audio quality of the live stream is very important for their engagement. As such, a church embracing offering its services online should invest in the equipment needed to provide an online audio mix separate from that in the room.

Consideration should also be given to whether the service will be streamed live or post-produced. A post-produced service allows it to be mixed after being recorded. However, some viewers want to know if their services are streamed live, regardless of audio quality. This highlights the need for every church to examine the philosophy behind their choices regarding the online stream. Considerations regarding synchronous and asynchronous online church services are discussed further below.

**Online Church as an Excuse Not to Attend**

Participants voice concern about how some of the people they know, whether other congregants of their church or family members, chose to regularly attend an online church service instead of a physical gathering. With an appropriate philosophy in place, church leaders need to address this issue for people in their church. If the church decides that they do not want people to watch the stream instead of attending the church service, it could go so far as to stop providing the online service altogether. They could have their stream marked as unlisted on YouTube and only provide the link to those who ask for it to add a layer of accountability to those streaming. If a member needs to request access to the stream, the person sharing the link can engage with the member and see what may be happening in their lives. There could also be a

layer of pastoral care offered through praying for the needs of the member who could not attend. However, for a church that decides to address its members who primarily attend online, intentional language throughout the service that represents the philosophical considerations of the church is essential.

**Online Church as the Only Means to Attend**

In the case of V3 and various members of churches represented by participants, illness often hinders the ability to attend a physical church gathering. For these people, online church is the only way they can gather with other believers, even though it is digital. The debate on the biblical validity of the online gathering becomes secondary to the person who cannot come to the church building. There are likely a handful of people in similar situations that consider themselves members of any given church. Suppose a church decides not to offer its services online at all for the sake of bringing people to their physical services. In this case, the leadership of the church should realize that they are likely alienating these few members of their church who have come to rely on the internet for their connection to the church. Church leadership should take the time to carefully consider whether to offer online services or not, paying attention to the implications of choosing not to stream.

Having a few members who cannot attend the physical church building does not necessarily mean every church should feel compelled to provide an online service. However, if they choose not to share their service online, appropriate care should be given to those who cannot physically attend. Perhaps the pastor could set aside time to meet with those unable to attend regularly. They could be directed to another church offering online services for their weekly connection. Such a decision does not come easy to most church leaders but could be a

healthy means to remain true to Hebrews 10:25 while still caring for the people who can no longer gather physically.

**Varied Responses to the Online Service**

Suggestions have been given on how to navigate the choice to either provide or not provide online services. However, the church leader must recognize the varied backgrounds and responses that will come from those that join their services online. Participants share both positive and negative experiences regarding online church services. Further, individual participants have often had both negative and positive experiences. Many participants talk about being deeply affected by the worship and highlight being alone either in their car or at home during this time. Others share the impact of the sermon as they hear the word of God unpacked. With such a broad spectrum of responses, worship leaders may be stymied by attempting to minister to others effectively online.

**The Need to Evaluate**

Those in a position of leadership at the church should look to gather feedback from congregants regarding their thoughts about the online church service. As can be seen through the varied responses of participants in this study, no overall consensus will likely be found, but themes will emerge. One church will likely find that some members do not interact with the online service. If this is the case for a large portion of the church, the budget and staffing required to provide a solid online service may not make sense. It may be appropriate to scale back the online efforts because of a lack of online participation.

Another church may look at the analytics of its online stream and realize thousands of people worldwide view its services. The leadership of this church should consider what they feel is appropriate action concerning this broad attention. There is an argument to be made for

investing in the things that are working at a church, and if the online stream sees such success, it could make sense to invest in more infrastructure and staff to continually improve the online service.

However, it is critical to realize that, given the interconnectedness of the internet, seeing a spike in viewership could be transitory or may even be considered negative attention if, for instance, a service in which the worship team made a musical mistake has gone viral as people highlight the mistake. In either case, it is critical for the leadership of a church to regularly evaluate the interplay and habits of attendance for both their physical and online church services. Failure to do so leaves little room for improvement and is likely wasting the budget and staffing of those who make the online service happen.

**Connectedness**

Participants in this study regularly voice how vital a sense of connectedness is for them in either the physical or online church service. In the physical gathering, connectedness can be accomplished in traditional ways: a smile from a greeter at the entrance, a handshake during the passing of the peace moment of the service, or the pastor being available to talk to church members after the service. Further, members can be encouraged to join a small group or get involved in serving in the church's various ministries. It is more difficult to offer easy means of connectedness through the online service.

Those who join online often do so while also doing something else. They could be in the car, doing chores around the house, or merely have a service up on their phone in the background while doing other things. One could argue that the online participant's connectedness is related to how much effort they put into getting connected. In the physical gathering, merely walking into the building are likely met with someone smiling and welcoming them. The online stream

for many churches starts with an online host who does the same sort of welcome, albeit to the camera. If the participant is not paying attention to that portion of the service, they miss out on that moment of connection.

A church that wants to push for a stronger connection with those online might encourage their worship team and those that speak on stage to regularly verbalize their awareness of those online. If the worship leader asks the congregation to stand, they could also look at the camera and ask those who are watching from home to stand for worship if they can. During the sermon, the pastor should regularly recognize those joining online to provide a sense of connectedness.

Special service elements such as communion require planning and intentional language for the online church. As the service begins, a host could tell the online church members to go to their kitchen to collect communion elements for later use. This would help the online member feel more connected as, if they had not prepared their elements beforehand, they may miss the opportunity to take communion with the rest of the church. As seen in the data, some churches choose not to offer communion online because they do not feel it is possible to do so biblically apart from the physical gathering. The data highlights how important it is for any church's pastors and leadership to develop a philosophy behind what and how they offer online ministry. What works for one church cannot be considered a universal norm for any given church.

**Corporate and Private Worship**

The authority of scripture must be recognized throughout this study. An interesting theme emerge among some participants as they speak of worship as a private matter between themselves and the Lord. If worship is primarily an interaction between one person and God, the differences between an online and physical church service may diminish. To continue along a biblically grounded hermeneutic circle, one must recognize passages such as Hebrews 10:25

which instructs believers to not neglect the gathering or Ephesians 5:19 which speaks to the need for believers to minister to each other during the corporate gathering.

P1 talks about how online worship can be preferable for them because it allows them to "try to connect to God in a one-on-one relationship without feeling the pressure of being around others."[5] However, times of personal worship cannot biblically supplant the need for corporate worship. One does indeed grow in the breadth and depth of their relationship with the Lord through private worship but that cannot be the only avenue in which one worships.

## Research Question 2

Question 2: How do worship leaders experience leading online worship?

The body of work regarding corporate worship leadership is vast, but the study of the experience of leading online worship needs to be fleshed out. In many ways, an online stream is often merely a window into the physical gathering. Online viewers can see into the room and see how the congregants in attendance are experiencing worship and be moved by what they see. As the research shows, some participants are moved deeply by watching leaders and congregants worship through the stream.

While not necessary in the strictest sense, worship leaders require some level of feedback from the congregation members as they lead a worship set. Suppose the congregation seems to resonate with a particular chorus. In that case, the worship leader may choose to have them sing it again if there is room for spontaneity in the service execution. A church that prefers to plan its services is not left out of this feedback loop. A careful worship leader evaluates congregational

[5] P1, Interview.

participation after the service and may choose to repeat a song that resonated so well the following week.

Similarly, pastors often rely on the congregation's response to know if the point they are making is impacting the congregation. In many congregations, members will say, "Amen," or applaud at a particularly important point. Pastors learn to rely on this feedback as they deliver their sermons and continually refine their delivery to maximize their impact on their congregation.

**Leading Worship During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Losing this feedback can be jarring for the worship leader and the pastor. In the most extreme case, the COVID-19 pandemic broke this feedback loop for many worship leaders. Participants share how difficult it was to lead worship to a camera. There is no way to tell if those watching online actively engage in worship. Even something as simple as asking the congregation to stand leaves church leaders with no way of knowing if those viewing online are standing. Worship leaders commonly add exhortations throughout the worship set, such as "Sing it out," or "Clap your hands," but there is no easy way to discern if this helps encourage participation for those joining at home.

Some worship leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic tried to combat this lack of feedback by inviting a handful of people to join them for the recording of the stream. The handful of congregants in the room acted as a proxy for those at home, providing feedback and participation for the worship leader and pastor. However, depending on the church's location, some worship leaders could not have more than just themselves and a skeleton crew in the room to execute the online service.

**Leading Worship Online**

With the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic now lifted, worship leaders again have the feedback of those in the room. However, those viewing online are still present in many churches and need pastoral care and guidance from their worship leader. Perhaps the first and most crucial step is for the worship leader to recognize that there are people who are not in the room, connected via the internet, and participating through the lens of the camera. As highlighted by P4, a simple recognition of this fact will help the worship leader pay more attention to the camera in the room.[6] It should help inform exhortation moments in which the leader encourages participation. Similarly, the pastor should regularly remind themselves of those watching online so they can also look to the camera and craft what they say to engage those best online.

**Appropriate Leadership for Each Church**

As seen throughout this research, each church must realize the unique nature of how it offers its services and how its members receive them. If a church finds that very few people engage with their online service, the worship leader may decide not to pay much regard to the online audience. In an extreme case, there may not be anyone watching, rendering the worship leader's considerations on how to best lead those online to nothing more than something to think through in the future.

If a church decides to offer its service asynchronously, there could be time for the worship leader to add video content to the stream instructing those joining online and better providing context for the worship service. The choice to have a host—someone who speaks directly to the online audience before and after the service—is a choice that should be weighed

[6] P4, Interview.

carefully. Rather than focusing on what other churches are doing online, the leadership of each church should determine the best means and methods of online church for their congregation.

**Budgetary Concerns**

Among participants' responses, the financial burden of offering services online is often a factor involved in the choices made to do so, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The churches already offering their services online, with the appropriate staff and budget to do so, found that, at least from a technological standpoint, the pivot to online church was relatively easy. The churches not offering their services online did not fare as well. Not only did they need to navigate the philosophical shift, but they needed to procure the finances to purchase the required equipment during a time when giving was likely to be low. Some churches could not bear the financial burden of needing to stream services.[7]

Budgetary concerns have the potential to affect how a worship leader experiences leading worship online. Many pieces of equipment can be purchased to make the leading experience go more smoothly. In the case of a service utilizing multiple cameras, a tally light can be added that shows the worship leader which camera is currently broadcasting to online viewers. With this light, the worship leader is conscious of which camera they need to focus their attention to make eye contact, in a digital sense, with online participants.

Some participants explain how, when the audio and video are of high quality, they feel they can engage more deeply with online worship. The audio and video quality can be directly affected by the budget spent on equipment and salaries and the aptitude of the people operating the equipment. A church with a team of paid staff can potentially provide a better looking and

[7] V2, Interview.

sounding online service. However, it is critical to recognize that some teams can also be comprised of volunteers who are professionals as well who can lend their expertise to the process. In either case, investing time and resources toward creating a strong online service can help participants engage without distraction.

It is critical to realize that few worship leaders find themselves in a situation where their church has a nearly unlimited budget to pay for the desired staff and infrastructure. In a church in this position, worship leaders should evaluate how much emphasis they want to place on the online stream. Some churches may forgo online services and focus entirely on physical gatherings. This may be a perfectly acceptable solution for that church. In either case, it is again imperative that church leadership determine the philosophy behind their online services, or lack thereof so that the methodology is informed, and finances are appropriately spent on the things that matter to the church.

**Burnout**

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online church services, and within a matter of weeks, churches needed to figure out how to provide a stream of some sort for people who could not attend. In many cases, especially in small- to mid-size churches, the worship leaders needed to lead the charge in developing and implementing online services. Worship leaders often needed to learn how to be video producers, IT professionals, and social media managers to help their churches get their services online.

As the pandemic waned, many churches did not want to stop or pull back on the quality of online services while still looking to offer physical church services. The interviews participants about this topic with reminded this researcher of his own experience. His church in California had begun to provide online services on the weekend and a host of video content and

streams throughout the week. Multiple pastors at his church were streaming daily worship songs, devotionals, and prayer meetings to maintain a connection with the church members. After a few months of being unable to meet in the building, the local municipality began allowing churches to meet in their parking lots with appropriate space for social distancing.

This researcher found himself in charge of a department that still needed to provide daily video content for online viewers but now also needed to set up a video screen and audio system in the church's parking lot every week. Further, a worship team needed to meet to record worship for the online service, and a worship team needed to be assembled to lead worship for those in the parking lot. Months later, the church offered services inside, in the parking lot, and online. Compared to what the church did before the COVID-19 pandemic, this researcher and his team were stretched very thin in time and resources. This specific experience is unique to this researcher, but the burden of the extra work needed to produce both online and physical church services has been felt by many worship leaders.

The idea of burnout in the church is not new. Pastors and worship leaders can feel that they bear a tremendous burden when leading the church. The demands of putting together an effective weekend service often overshadow the need to spend time caring and praying for congregants, leaving church members feeling disenfranchised. There can be a constant sense of not having enough time to complete the work needed for an excellent worship service every weekend. Some participants said they nearly quit their ministry jobs because of the burden of executing so many new endeavors online.

Worship leaders should build healthy relationships with their leaders so they can have conversations about how much the work of the ministry may feel like a burden. As discussed above, each church should weigh the troubles and benefits of their choice to offer services

online. If the team at a church wants to quit working for the church, there may need to be a decision made to either stop offering services online, scale back what is being offered, or hire more staff to help accomplish goals. The modern paradigm for many churches now expects a strong physical service and an excellent online service. However, these churches should not expect this paradigm if it comes at the expense of its team members.

## Research Question 3

Question 3: How does an online participant experience a live online worship service compared to a prerecorded online worship service?

Participants share varied experiences regarding asynchronous and synchronous online church services, a continual theme for this chapter regarding nearly every aspect of online church services. Each church faces a decision in this regard, deciding what values they hold in higher regard. A synchronous service can bring a sense of "being there," while an asynchronous service typically has stronger quality because it can be post-produced. There are specific recommendations that need consideration for both.

### Synchronous Online Church Services

A synchronous online church service engenders a stronger sense of connectedness to the church for some of the participants in this study. Simply knowing that what they are viewing is happening in real-time helps congregants feel as though they are part of the work the Lord is doing in the service rather than watching a recording of what has happened in the past. The implications of this data should be considered by churches deciding between prerecording or streaming their services live.

Depending on the church members and the philosophy developed by church leadership, this sense of contemporaneous participation between online and physical church service

attendees could be a strong enough factor to set aside whatever concerns exist about stream quality. Some participants in the study voice their preference for the unpolished nature of a live stream, with post-production efforts taking away a sense of the authenticity that may come from watching a service live. If a worship leader makes a mistake in a physical church service, they are not allowed to return and fix it. However, church members may find the occasional mistake as a bridge between the stage and the room, making the worship leader feel more like a person than a performer at a concert. The less-than-perfect quality of a live stream can be a similar bridge for those watching online.

**Asynchronous Online Church Services**

While participants share their appreciation for the lack of polish that can come with the synchronous service, there is a certain point at which the quality can become so much of an issue that the live aspect of the service is no longer worth the diminutive quality. An asynchronous stream has a significant benefit in that regard. The church's audio engineer can edit the recording of the church service for as long as needed to make the audio sound as good as possible. Depending on the equipment, the video from multiple cameras can be edited to make the service as high quality as possible. The mistakes that are part of a live service have the potential to be fixed in an asynchronous stream.

It is essential to realize that, in the case of audio and video editing, there will always be something more one can do to refine a recording. In the case of a weekly church service, there will invariably be a deadline by which to prepare the service to upload it to whatever streaming services the church utilizes. Being able to edit the service can be both a blessing and a curse depending on the culture of a given church. A worship leader may find they constantly want to re-record their vocals to get things "just right," even though most that watch would be hard-

pressed to tell the difference in quality from the first recording to the fifth. A senior pastor may want to go back and record their sermon multiple times, leaving their video editor to splice together portions of the sermon to get the best possible product. As discussed above, burnout is a common concern for worship leaders and their teams as they attempt to navigate the demands of both physical and online church services. An asynchronous stream could very well introduce a level of stress that is not warranted or worth the effort required.

**Synchronous Elements of a Service**

Engagement of online viewers is often one of the most critical aspects of the weekend online church service. An interesting aspect of this research highlights that there are aspects of an online service that can be synchronous regardless of whether the video content is live or prerecorded. Some participants voice their appreciation of being involved in the chat box of their services. This contemporaneous interaction does not rely on the service being either synchronous or asynchronous.

Churches should look to foster engagement in whatever chat area they have available through platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, or The Church Online platform. A greater sense of being part of the service can come from simply typing a prayer request or engaging with others during the service in the chat. While some churches have paid staff who devote their attention to fostering this kind of engagement, if the budget is not there for hiring someone, it could be simple to enlist the help of a handful of volunteers to be moderators who monitor the chat on various platforms and respond accordingly.

As songs are sung, the moderator could list the titles and artists of each song so those watching can make notes and listen to that worship music throughout the week. Links can be provided to music, the portal to give online, and whatever else may be deemed appropriate by

church leadership. During the sermon, whatever points the pastor may have on the screens in the room could be added to the chat so those watching online feel more connected. All of these elements of synchronous connection do not require the service to be live or prerecorded and can be executed with relative ease with a volunteer and can provide an excellent form of interaction.

**Synchronous Content Viewed Asynchronously**

Another aspect of the decision between asynchronous and synchronous church services that needs discussion is the viewing habits of online church members. A church may only make its service available to watch as it is being streamed, taking it off platforms such as Facebook and YouTube as soon as the service is over. Some churches leave their services online after they are streamed to be viewed whenever someone wishes. Church and worship leaders must think through whether they want their services to be available for viewing in perpetuity.

If it is decided that a church prefers their members to attend, if possible, it stands to reason that their online stream should be taken down as soon as it is finished to engender a sense of needing to get to church or at least watch the service at the appropriate time so as not to miss out on the service. A church that wants to leave its services online may decide to invest in the necessary equipment and staffing to continue to make the services look and sound as good as possible. In either case, a church must develop a philosophy as to how and why they offer services online, which can drive the methodological choice between keeping a service online or taking it down as soon as it is over.

Another aspect that warrants discussion is the nature of social media and how churches use it. Some argue that churches should fully embrace the ability to meet people throughout the

week through this technology.[8] Many churches take portions of their service and create small highlights, usually under sixty seconds, that can be shared on TikTok, as Instagram Reels, or as YouTube shorts. These bite-sized moments of the church service, and the nature of these platforms, allow churches to reach thousands, sometimes millions, of people with a single piece of content. A live-streamed service can be broken up into these clips and consumed by viewers asynchronously. Impactful moments from the sermon or worship can be shared with viewers and seen by people who might potentially visit the church or who have yet to meet the Lord, thus providing a means for church growth and evangelism.

## Research Question 4

Question 4: How does the worshiper compare and contrast an online worship service to a virtual reality worship experience?

Despite decades of technological advances, virtual reality is a technology that is, in many ways, still in its infancy. The headsets are evolving to provide a more immersive experience continually. However, as seen in the experiences of this study's virtual participants, currently available headsets have yet to offer an entirely immersive experience. Further, the equipment needed to record a truly immersive online church service can be expensive. When evaluating the cost of the necessary equipment to record and the relatively small subset of people worldwide who own and regularly use a virtual reality headset, a church would be hard-pressed to endeavor with online church services.

As discussed above, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many churches to adopt new methods of facilitating church online. A small subsection of churches saw the opportunity to engage a group

[8] Deborah Ann Wong, "Liturgy in Lockdown: Restricted Movement, Expanded Worship," *Religions* 13, no. 1 (2022): 7, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.3390/rel13010025.

virtually, providing their services utilizing platforms such as the now defunct AltspaceVR, in which participants can attend a virtual service and walk into the venue as their virtual avatar, providing the opportunity to even speak to individuals as they enter. While not as extensive, other churches set up three hundred and sixty-five-degree cameras to capture their worship service so online viewers could use their headsets to see the entire experience.

**A Pull Away from Virtual Services**

When this dissertation began, this researcher intended to have members of the virtual worship participant group attend a virtual service offered by Life.Church. In 2022, they seemed to provide a vibrant weekly virtual service. Whoever sought to join could expect to be greeted by virtual greeters as they walked, virtually, into an auditorium where they could watch a service on a screen. The experience looked like attending a movie theater to watch a church service. In March of 2023, Microsoft discontinued support for the app AltspaceVR that provided the infrastructure Life.Church upon which built their virtual service.[9]

Interestingly, Life.Church changed the language on its website to no longer highlight the virtual service but instead point people to join a small group facilitated in virtual reality.[10] Other churches that once offered virtual services using AltspaceVR have similarly stopped offering the large-scale virtual services that were garnering headlines during the height of the pandemic. Further study of the reasons these churches have not sought a replacement technology to continue offering

[9] Emma Roth, "AltspaceVR Is Shutting down as Microsoft's Mixed Reality Division Shrinks," The Verge, January 21, 2023, https://www.theverge.com/2023/1/21/23565188/altspace-vr-shutting-down-microsoft-layoffs.

[10] https://www.life.church/metaverse/

services is warranted. Still, for the sake of this research, it is important to recognize that there has been a shift away from an initial exploration of the potential of virtual services.

**A Taste of What's to Come but Not Quite Yet**

All of the participants share a similar experience. They appreciate the novelty and level of immersion afforded by participating in a virtual reality service. However, all participants voice concern about several aspects of the virtual service, largely surrounding the technology involved. The weight of the headset and the pressure it exerts on one's forehead is an issue. Wearing it for longer than a few minutes also introduces a certain level of heat, and the lenses can tend to collect condensation. The resolution of the headsets is also a problem, not quite delivering a realistic experience and potentially causing eye strain or a headache from encompassing one's entire field of vision for long periods. Despite these issues, participants voice excitement about what could be. V2 specifically wonders if the headset would not be as cumbersome once Apple releases its headset, the Apple Vision Pro.[11]

Disregarding the clunkiness of the headset itself and resolution issues. Participants are excited by the potential of virtual church services. Were technology not a problem, all remarked that their experiences with virtual services are preferable to online. This experience echoes the findings of some found in the literature review, such as those of Tim Hutchings.[12] Watching virtually for a length of time leads to forgetting one is watching with a device, and being able to look around virtually provides a sense of being in the room.

[11] V2, Interview.

[12] Tim Hutchings, "Creating Church Online: A Case-Study Approach to Religious Experience," *Studies in World Christianity* 13, no. 3 (December 2007): 257, https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.2007.13.3.243.

### An Advantage for the First Mover

At this time, virtual church services are still a novelty. Still, with the advent of better technology and a lower cost of the equipment needed to create a virtual service, there is potential for the technically savvy church to capitalize on the opportunity—some advocate for churches embracing this new space.[13] In many ways, wading into the virtual church service space is a new form of evangelism, potentially reaching new people with the gospel. Adopting the technology early could also cement a church in the modern virtual psyche if and when more and more people purchase virtual reality headsets and use them daily.

## Discoveries Outside of the Research Questions

When interviewing participants in a phenomenological study, it is natural to discover experiences outside the planned research questions. A certain question may bring to mind something from a participant that the researcher did not anticipate. The journey along the hermeneutic circle brings new facets to the phenomenon that are often unexpected. Nearly every participant shared some new aspect of online worship that pushed this researcher along his journey of understanding. While not exhaustive, this section details some of the most prominent experiences shared outside the research questions.

### The Difference Between a Large Church and Online Church

P8 and L7 both independently brought up a fascinating concept. While speaking about the connectedness that can be lost by only attending an online service instead of a physical one, both voice their concern about attending a very large physical church service. Attending a smaller church

[13] G Jun, "Virtual Reality Church as a New Mission Frontier in the Metaverse: Exploring Theological Controversies and Missional Potential of Virtual Reality Church - Guichun Jun, 2020," October 2020, 303, https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/doi/full/10.1177/0265378820963155?utm_source=summon&utm_medium=discovery-provider.

allows the pastor to look every member in the eye and say, “Hello.” The church staff member can form a personal relationship with nearly everyone if there are only fifty church members. This personal touch might be lost in a large church.

When thousands gather on the weekend, often split amongst several services, one can easily get lost in the crowd. A congregant can attend, receive a handshake on the way in, and a smile during a greeting time, but can also just as quickly come in and out of the service without anyone recognizing who they are. Depending on the church, the pastor may not be available to speak to people before and after services. If one attends a church of this size, P8 and L7 rightly point out how the physical experience is not much different than the online experience. Both are impersonal, requiring the participant to reach out to others if they wish to engage, but they can stay anonymous if they so choose. The implications of this phenomenon for church planning and praxis warrant attention.

If one finds themselves on the staff of a large church, it is crucial to find ways of fostering connection for both online and physical participants. Many churches look to fill this gap with small groups or ministries oriented toward women, married couples, or any number of life stages. If a church provides online services, it could be worth exploring having these options available online. In either case, it is critical to realize that both a large church’s online and offline members are at a disadvantage in getting involved in the church beyond just attending the weekend service. As a church leader, it can be easy to assume that if someone attends a physical gathering, they are connected more than someone joining online. However, church leaders should realize this may not be the case.

**A Deeper Understanding of Worship**

All participants bifurcate their experiences with worship and pastoral care. In general, worship is spoken about as the time of singing during an online or physical church service. Pastoral care is largely discussed as taking care of the material and spiritual needs of others. Interestingly, both those from the participant group and the church leader group split their experiences between worship and pastoral care. This highlights the need for church leaders to expand their understanding of worship and subsequently guide their church to discover the all-encompassing the worship of God.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, this researcher was responsible for all aspects of the worship experience at his church, both online and offline. When compelled to stop meeting in person, a regular comment from both congregant and church leader was that they were concerned that they could no longer worship without meeting in the room. At that time, this researcher recognized the need to help his congregation better understand that worship is more than just singing together with others for a portion of the service on Sunday. This is not to say that the gathering is not a vital aspect of the life of a believer. However, saying that one cannot worship if one is not attending a physical church service is inaccurate.

It is the responsibility of the pastor and worship leader to help their congregation come to a deeper understanding of worship. This requires careful planning and likely needs to include some sermon time. Foundationally, it is essential to look to Romans 12:1, in which Paul explains how the believer is to worship through obedience, without the mention of singing. This foundational passage in the life of a worship leader needs to be regularly referenced and studied. Pastoral care can be provided by giving instruction and helping a church member develop a stronger relationship with the Lord, one who worships God with their whole life. A deeper understanding of worship helps a

congregant engage both online and in a physical church service when they realize how the singing portion of a service is an extension of a life lived in obedience.

**Considerations About Pastoral Care**

Throughout the research, it is important to continually revisit the definition given for pastoral care in chapter one. The journey along the hermeneutic circle throughout the study highlights how varied pastoral care looks for participants. When dealing with online worship and church services, it is important to realize that participants often take pastoral care into their own hands. When they join an online service, the level in which they connect spiritually is reliant upon how much they engage.

While this is true for someone in a physical church service, it is magnified for those who are online because they are missing any feedback from others in a corporate gathering. Standing shoulder to shoulder with other believers during worship should in general encourage active participation. A pastor may stand at the door at the end of the service and ask how someone is doing as they pass. These sorts of interactions are not possible when joining online. An online service host may ask for people to submit their prayer requests, but the initiative is entirely on the online participant to identify themselves. In this way, pastoral care needs the online church member to take the initiative if they are to receive.

It is also important to realize that online content and services produced can stay on the internet in perpetuity. As such, asynchronous pastoral care through instruction, guidance, and encouragement can happen for years after the service has ended. The Lord may see fit to guide someone to a particular church service from an archive and utilize that moment to minister. The church leader will be largely unaware of the pastoral care they are then providing from a distance. The Lord is faithful to use the efforts of his people as they carefully prepare and execute a weekend

service and there is no reason he cannot impact the online participant at just the right time in their lives.

**There is No One-Size-Fits-All**

It is essential to highlight the uniqueness of the experiences of participants. The leadership of each church represented makes the choices they feel hold the most value and validity for preparing and executing online church services. Perhaps the starkest example of this from the research is L5's experience with communion during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Within their circle of influence in the Lutheran church, vigorous debate during the pandemic surrounded the validity of an online time of communion. Some churches allowed congregants to use elements at their homes without consecration. Others decided that communion could not be taken unless members were together physically, not considering joining others online as a valid gathering.

The implications of this decision are still felt by L5's church, with the pastor not openly condoning taking communion at home for those who join online but also not drawing a line and telling members they cannot do so. The way L5's church handles this online church aspect is unique to them. Further, there is disparity within their denomination. It is essential to realize that each church must make appropriate decisions regarding online church for themselves. It is wise to seek counsel and guidance from others, but every church has unique situations. As such, the leadership of any given church should carefully consider the biblical and philosophical reasons for how they go about facilitating aspects of the service, such as communion online.

**Virtual Worship through Video Games**

Video games offer particularly impactful experiences, some of which two participants consider *spiritual*.[14] When asked about virtual worship, some participants, chiefly L8 and L4, shared experiences that the researcher did not expect. Rather than speaking about a church service while wearing a virtual reality headset, both participants began to share how they have participated in church services and worship through video games such as *Runescape* and *World of Warcraft*. L4 goes as far as calling video games a new digital mission field.[15] A cursory search on the internet shows that not many churches endeavor to provide virtual churches within online video games. If it aligns with the vision of a given church, there could be tremendous potential in trying to reach new people with the gospel in this manner, with relatively few options available for those looking for a church in this way. The same considerations as online church would need attention, such as determining the biblical foundations for a virtual gathering within a game or what the essentials of worship participation would look like in a video game.

Another fascinating aspect is how a Twitch streamer who is a pastor and shares regularly about Jesus can have a strong spiritual influence on those that watch. L8 has built a community of which they are quite proud, and, for all intents and purposes, L4 serves as a pastor for some of their viewers, providing regular prayer, spiritual guidance, and many aspects of pastoral care that one would expect. In many ways, L4 is evangelizing and helping people meet Jesus, meeting people where they are—in this case, browsing Twitch, rather than expecting them to attend a church service so they can hear the gospel.

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[14] Heidi A. Campbell et al., "Gaming Religionworlds: Why Religious Studies Should Pay Attention to Religion in Gaming," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 3 (2016): 647.

[15] L4, Interview.

## Limitations of the Study

The nature of a phenomenological study is naturally limited to conclusions drawn from participants' lived experiences and the researcher's evolving *Dasein*. Saturation of the phenomenon is sought, but adding more participants and continuing rounds of follow-up interviews invariably adds new facets of online worship to be discussed. Traveling along the hermeneutic circle has the potential of never ending and must be concluded at some point as deemed necessary by the researcher. The researcher is satisfied with the data saturation based on the number of participants but is unaware of what could have been uncovered by adding more participants.

## For Further Study

This hermeneutic phenomenological study anchored in a biblical worldview can serve as a template to examine several ministry and church life aspects. Interviewing multiple groups of participants, particularly leaders, and church members, to compare and contrast their experiences can yield fruitful discussion as to whether an aspect of church praxis is being experienced by members as the leaders expect it should. There can often be a discrepancy between what these two groups experience in the life of the church.

Another aspect within the overall topic of online church that requires additional research is the implications of synchronously broadcasting an asynchronous church service. L3's church highlights this issue by recording their first two services but then broadcasting them online as if they were live during later service times.[16] Those that watch are led to, or rather assume, that the service they are watching is live, but it is not. Several churches follow suit and provide their online church services in this way. Further study should be given to this issue. It would be valuable to see how

[16] L3, Interview.

participants in these churches feel about watching an online service that is perceived as live-streamed but instead prerecorded.

Virtual worship is a relatively new phenomenon that will only grow in use and popularity. As such, it will be critical to continue examining the theological and practical issues arising from individuals utilizing this new technology to attend a worship service virtually. This study could be used as a model to compare virtual and physical worship further.

P1 shares how they dealt with the ramifications of being asked to step down from their position at their church.[17] The online church service offered a way for them to feel connected when they were uncomfortable seeing people at the physical church gathering. The merits and extensiveness of "church hurt" throughout the modern evangelical church require nuanced study. Particularly, it would be valuable to evaluate the place of the online church service to avoid going to a physical church in light of passages such as Matthew 5:23–24 which directs believers to reconcile with each other. Avoiding the church gathering while one heals themselves is not a biblical response to conflict in the church even though many believers do so. Further study on this matter would be fruitful.

Finally, based on P8's description of online church services as "morally repugnant," there would be tremendous value in gathering several participants who are morally opposed to online worship and comparing their experiences with those who are embracing the internet to go to church. Each group could be asked about anchor passages such as Hebrews 10:25 to this issue. The starkly different responses to the same phenomena could prove to be fertile ground for study.

[17] P1, Interview.

## Implications for the Local Church

Several key issues arise from the data that have implications for the local church and are discussed throughout this chapter. However, it is important to note how one issue may have a more profound impact on one church's leadership over the other. Church leaders must weigh carefully which issues should take priority at their specific church. The best way for a church to decide if and how to offer online church services is to commit to preparing a philosophy of online worship for their church.

In what could be a simple document, a worship or church leader should create a list of guiding principles that can be used to decide how to prepare and execute online church services. The biblical principles of online church should first be examined. For instance, as is often mentioned in this dissertation, Hebrews 10:25 is a passage of scripture that still draws debate surrounding the validity of an online gathering. Some churches decide not to offer services online at all.[18] Church and worship leaders should come to their own conclusions on dealing with this passage rather than leaving it for others to debate. With a well-thought-out and reasoned biblical foundation, the philosophical implications of the established theology can be examined.

If a church decides that gathering online is acceptable biblically, they can proceed to detail how they plan to produce online worship philosophically. Issues such as whether the service is offered asynchronously or synchronously can be dealt with in this portion of the guiding document. In the case of L5's church, deciding how to handle online communion is important, given the theological debate surrounding this issue in the Lutheran church. A well-thought-through philosophy of online worship can be the foundation from which church leaders can make decisions.

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[18] Adelle M. Banks, "Shunning Online Services, Some Churches Preach 'Abstinence' from Gathered Worship," *The Christian Century (1902)* 137, no. 10 (2020): 19.

With the biblical and philosophical aspects of online church wrestled with and committed to, the methodological application becomes a healthy result of the foundations laid. For instance, if a church decides to firmly hold to Hebrews 10:25 but still provides an online church service for those who cannot attend on any given week, it would be wise to have a host talk before and after the service, reminding those watching how important it is for them to stay connected with the physical gathering, encouraging them to make every effort to attend in person the next week. This same church would likely also decide not to leave their online church service available to watch throughout the week to encourage further the importance of coming to the church service. Another church may determine that its online church service will be a form of evangelism, thus leaving its service online in perpetuity. Still, they will also make dozens of shorter video clips to share on various social media platforms to reach as many people as possible. The most important implication for the local church highlighted throughout this study is that churches should develop a biblical, philosophical, and methodological document detailing how they will or will not offer online church services.

## Conclusion

As technology evolves, churches can explore new ways to reach people with their church services. There must always be attention given to whether what church leaders prepare for the in-person gathering is experienced by online members as the leaders expect or desire. Further, a church should not merely try to emulate what they see other churches doing with their online services. Instead, church and worship leaders should develop guiding principles regarding online church unique to their membership. These guiding principles can help the church make appropriate, God-honoring decisions in both form and practice for online worship.

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## Appendix A: Participant Questions

Group A // Online Participants Questions

1. How would you define worship?
2. When someone says “online worship,” what does that mean to you?
3. How long have you been a Christian?
4. What does your daily and weekly rhythm of Bible study, prayer, and devotions look like?
5. What are some of your favorite songs and bands/worship teams? Why?
6. What does it mean to be a member of a church?
7. Explain what the online service is like at your church.
8. Describe the physical service at your church.
9. How long are the services at your church? How long are sermons? Do you have an ideal length for either? Why?
10. How large is your church? How big would your ideal church be?
11. Describe the online service of your church.
12. What device(s) or platforms (Facebook, YouTube, etc.) do you use to attend online services? Are you doing anything else while the service is on?
13. When attending online, do you participate in the entire service as it is broadcast? Do you make a point to participate on Sunday morning or do you watch it at another time?
14. What does it mean for you to participate in online worship? Do you sing at home? Would you consider yourself a spectator, participant, or something else when watching an online service?
15. Do you attend or watch services from multiple churches? Explain why you choose to do so and what they are like.
16. Do you watch an entire online service in one sitting? If not, what does it look like for you watching an online service?
17. How many times a month would you say you attend a service online compared to going to a church physically? Explain how you decide which you will attend on a given week?
18. How would you describe your church experience both online and offline before, during, and after COVID-19? Would you consider any of them better than the other? Why?
19. Describe a recent experience you have had in a physical church service.
20. Describe a recent experience you have had in an online church service.
21. Do you feel that you are missing something when you attend an online service? Explain.
22. Do you prefer an online worship service to be streamed live or prerecorded? Why?
23. How would you define pastoral care?
24. Do you feel that your pastor and church give you the care that you expect? What does that look like?
25. What are the differences you have experienced in pastoral care when you attend a physical service compared to an online service?
26. When participating in a worship service online, do you find you are more excited about the worship or the sermon? Do you feel differently when you are at a physical worship service? Explain.
27. How do you think churches will be providing online, on campus, and virtual services ten years from now? What will the services look like?
28. What do you think the place of virtual reality will be in the life of churches?

29. Do you have any other thoughts that you would like to add?

Group B // Church and Worship Leaders

1. How would you define worship?
2. When someone says, “online worship,” what does that mean to you?
3. How long have you been a Christian?
4. What does it mean to be a member of a church?
5. What are some of your favorite worship songs and teams that you regularly listen to and choose songs from for your church? Why?
6. Explain what the online service is like at your church.
7. Describe the physical service at your church.
8. How long are the services at your church? How long are sermons? Do you have an ideal length for either? Why?
9. How large is your church? How big would your ideal church be?
10. What is your churches strategy behind offering online worship services? In what areas do you feel your church is succeeding or failing in this strategy.
11. Explain the process involved in the planning and execution of your physical services.
12. Explain the process involved in the planning and execution of your online services.
13. What device(s) or platforms (Facebook, YouTube, etc.) do you use to attend online services? Are you doing anything else while the service is on?
14. When attending online, do you participate in the entire service as it is broadcast? Do you make a point to participate on Sunday morning or do you watch it at another time?
15. What does it mean for you to participate in online worship? Do you sing at home? Would you consider yourself a spectator, participant, or something else when watching an online service?
16. Do you attend or watch services from multiple churches? Explain why you choose to do so and what they are like.
17. Do you watch an entire online service in one sitting? If not, what does it look like for you watching an online service?
18. How do you encourage participation in your online service?
19. How many times a month would you say you attend a service online compared to going to a church physically? Explain how you decide which you will attend on a given week?
20. How would you describe your church experience both online and offline before, during, and after COVID-19? Would you consider any of them better than the other? Why?
21. Describe a recent experience you have had in a physical church service.
22. Describe a recent experience you have had in an online church service.
23. Do you feel that you are missing something when you attend an online service? Explain.
24. Do you prefer an online worship service to be streamed live or prerecorded? Why?
25. About how many people attend your physical services on a given weekend?
26. About how many people attend your online services on a given weekend?
27. Do you keep your services available for people to view after the service is over?
28. Are your services prerecorded or live-streamed? Why?
29. How would you define pastoral care?
30. How does worship provide pastoral care for your church members? How does your church and ministry do this?

31. Can church members experience this same level of pastoral care online as they do when they attend physically? Explain.
32. What place do you think online and virtual worship services will have in the life of the global church in the future.
33. How would you compare your online service to other churches? Do you feel a sense of competition? Explain.
34. How do you feel about your church members viewing multiple churches online services throughout the week?
35. How would you respond to someone who says they do not need to attend church in person because online has all they need?
36. How do you think churches will be providing online, on campus, and virtual services ten years from now? What will the services look like?
37. What do you think the place of virtual reality will be in the life of churches?
38. Do you have any other thoughts that you would like to add?

Group C // Virtual Headset Worship Participants

1. How would you define worship?
2. When someone says "online worship," what does that mean to you?
3. How long have you been a Christian?
4. What does your daily and weekly rhythm of Bible study, prayer, and devotions look like?
5. What does it mean to be a member of a church?
6. What are some of your favorite songs and bands/worship teams? Why?
7. Explain what the online service is like at your church.
8. Describe the physical service at your church.
9. How long are the services at your church? How long are sermons? Do you have an ideal length for either? Why?
10. How large is your church? How big would your ideal church be?
11. What device(s) or platforms (Facebook, YouTube, etc.) do you use to attend online services? Are you doing anything else while the service is on?
12. When attending online, do you participate in the entire service as it is broadcast? Do you make a point to participate on Sunday morning or do you watch it at another time?
13. What does it mean for you to participate in online worship? Do you sing at home? Would you consider yourself a spectator, participant, or something else when watching an online service?
14. Do you attend or watch services from multiple churches? Explain why you choose to do so and what they are like.
15. Do you watch an entire online service in one sitting? If not, what does it look like for you watching an online service?
16. How many times a month would you say you attend a service online compared to going to a church physically? Explain how you decide which you will attend on a given week?
17. How would you describe your church experience both online and offline before, during, and after COVID-19? Would you consider any of them better than the other? Why?
18. Have you participated in a virtual worship service before this project? If so, what was it like. If not, explain why you hadn't?

19. How would you compare and contrast a virtual worship service with an online worship service?
20. How would you compare and contrast a virtual worship service with a physical worship service?
21. How would you define pastoral care?
22. Do you feel that you can be cared for pastorally virtually or online? Is one better than the other?
23. What do you think the church will look like in using online, virtual, and on-campus worship services ten years from now?
24. What do you think the place of virtual reality will be in the life of churches?
25. Describe a recent experience you have had in a physical church service.
26. Describe a recent experience you have had in an online church service.
27. Do you feel that you are missing something when you attend an online service? Explain.
28. Do you prefer an online worship service to be streamed live or prerecorded? Why?
29. How do you think churches will be providing online, on campus, and virtual services ten years from now? What will the services look like?
30. Do you have any thoughts that you would like to add?

# Appendix B: IRB Exemption Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 10, 2023

Ryan Loche
Scott Connell

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-413 The Online Member's Experience of Pastoral Care Through Worship

Dear Ryan Loche, Scott Connell,

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 [redacted]

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

# Appendix C: Consent Form

## Consent

**Title of the Project: The Online Member's Experience of Pastoral Care Through Worship**

**Principal Investigator:** Ryan Loche, Ph.D. Candidate, School of Music, Liberty University

**Invitation to be Part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years old or older and have experienced both an online and physical church service, **OR** you must currently serve or have served in a leadership capacity (worship leader, pastor, etc.) at a church that conducts online and physical worship gatherings, **OR** you must have experienced both an online and physical church service and have access to a virtual reality (VR) headset. 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 this research study is to determine how online participants are experiencing pastoral care through worship online.

**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:

ONLY participants with access to a VR headset will

1. Experience a virtual reality church service which should take approximately one hour.

ALL Participants will

2. Participate in an audio- and video-recorded interview or focus group either via Zoom or in person which should take approximately thirty minutes. You can choose whether you'd like to do an interview or focus group.

**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 a deeper understanding of how participants are experiencing pastoral care through worship online.

**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.

If you plan to participate in the VR study, you can expect the risks that come along with using VR equipment such as dizziness, nausea, or headaches from the headset.

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I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

**How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. 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 and focus groups will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data from interviews will be coded and keyed and kept on a locked computer that is only accessible by the researcher.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and hard copy data will be shredded.
- Hard copies of data will be stored in a locked filing box in the researchers office.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher and members of his doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

**Is the researcher in a position of authority over participants, or does the researcher have a financial conflict of interest?**

The researcher serves as Academic Director at Southeastern University at The Belonging Co Campus. To limit potential or perceived conflicts, data will be coded and keyed and kept on a password locked computer. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate 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, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be

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included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Ryan Loche You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [redacted]

**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 [redacted]

*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 and video record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

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