

Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)

Volume 3 (3) 480 – 493, September 2022 | ISSN: 2720-9946 (Online) ISSN: 2723-3626 (Print)

The article is published with Open Access at: <http://e-journal.unipma.ac.id/index.php/SHE>

A THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL REFLECTION ON DIGITAL ECCLESIOLOGY FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Isaac Boaheng ✉; Christian Service University College
Kumasi; Research Fellow, University of the Free State, South Africa

Abstract: In the heat of the Covid-19 pandemic, many church leaders were compelled to use digital information and communication technology to maintain their presence and fellowship with their followers and other believers. The unprecedented incorporation of media technology into the church's structures and activities (due to the pandemic) has brought about the urgent need to explore the nature and quality of this digitally-mediated presence from a theological and ethical perspective. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to identify and concretely address key theological and ethical issues emerging from the church's current digital experimentation with technologically-mediated worship. The paper uses a literature-based approach to critically examine data on digitally-mediated services obtained from journal articles, theses/dissertations and books. The main argument is that although digitally-mediated Christian ministry has theological, biblical and historical foundations, it is not appropriate (under normal circumstances) to replace offline church services with online church services. Therefore, the use of the digital space must complement (but not replace) the use of the analogue space for Christian ministry. This is very important especially in the African context where illiteracy rate is high and majority of the people do not have reliable access to electricity and internet facilities. The paper ends with recommendations for the post-pandemic church in its quest to navigate between the digital and analogue spaces in its operations.

Keywords: Africa, Church, Covid-19, Digital Ecclesiology, Technology.

✉ revisaacboaheng@gmail.com

Citation: Boaheng, I. & Kumasi, K. (2022). A theological and ethical reflection on digital ecclesiology from an african perspective. *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)*, 3(3), 480 – 493. DOI: 10.25273/she.v3i3.14086



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INTRODUCTION

The use of media technology for Christian ministry has increased tremendously since March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The coronavirus disease, which was first detected in the Wuhan city of China in December 2019 was declared a global pandemic in March 2020 after infecting more than 127,000 people globally, with more than 4700 deaths (Boaheng 2021). The pandemic necessitated the formulation and implementation of health protocols such as mandatory wearing of nose mask, the observance of social distancing, regular washing of hands with soap under running water, and the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers. In addition, lockdown restrictions were put in place in many countries. Amid the Covid-19-imposed restrictions, many churches employed digital information and communication technology to maintain their presence and fellowship with their members.

Although all churches used social media in one way or the other, and media audiences increased for all churches during the lockdown period, Pentecostal-Charismatic churches “tended to appeal to wider audiences” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2020, p.123). Even under normal circumstances, these churches also appeal very well to those “who feel denominationally uprooted or dislocated because they no longer identify directly with the older ecclesial traditions” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2020, p.123). Pentecostal-Charismatic churches are characterized by intensive use of media technology to reach wider audiences. At the onset of the pandemic, Ghana’s Mensah Otabil—founder of the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC)—outlined to his members how the pandemic informed his church about how to go about ministry. He stated:

Well, praise the Lord. As you know, our world in the last few months has experienced some interesting times. And we live in very interesting times. One moment everything seems to be very peaceful. And all of a sudden,

everything seems to be tumbling, stock exchanges are collapsing, economies are tottering, factories are closing down, offices are shutting down and now church has to be done online and through broadcast ... So we are taking our church services into a new dimension and who knows, it may reach more people for the Christ than we were doing at first. So, beginning from Sunday, our services will be primarily online through our Church App, My ICGC App. And you have instructions on how to get the app installed. So, in each congregation, you can have your service broadcast on the App separately for each congregation. In addition to that, we have Facebook live; thank God for that. And we have other live broadcasts through social media that can help us to reach out with God’s word. The important thing is that the word of God is not bound, the word of God is not restricted. That through these accesses we can get the word of God to as many people as possible; get people to be encouraged; get people to experience new life; get people to be saved. And I believe that there is no distance in the power of God. We have TV stations that will air our services (Otabil cited in Asamoah-Gyadu 2020, p. 150).

One realizes from Otabil’s assertion that the church’s adaptability to current trends is crucial to its survival and relevance, especially under the present realities. Otabil noted the effect of the pandemic on the social, political, economic and religious life of the society. He considered the use of media technology in the ministry of the church as means of increasing the audience of his message. He noted God’s ability to bless, save, revive and encourage his people through online services. For Otabil and some other Christian leaders, such as Bishop Dag Heward-Mills (founder of

Lighthouse Chapel), Archbishop Nicholas Duncan Williams, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome (founder of Christ Embassy church), the use of media technology in mediating Christian ministry to congregants was not entirely new. These church leaders own television stations through which they broadcast their services. The ICGC, for example, had practiced radio, television and internet ministry for years. The use of modern technology in collecting tithes and offerings was also not new to them. Most of these churches had systems in place for resource mobilization through the use of technology.

The historic older denominations were also not left out in the migration onto the digital space. Some of them had also practiced the use of media technology in mediating Christian ministry for an appreciable period. Christian denominations whose pre-Covid-19 activities were organized solely at physical meetings were forced to invent new ways of getting in touch with their members. Consequently, Christian leaders who, previously could have been described as technologically resistant, embraced the internet for worship services and other activities. While the incorporation of media technology into the church's structures and activities gives the church various advantages (such as increased audiences due to global accessibility of service content, availability of service content for viewers at any time, and others), this practice raises a number of theological and ethical issues that need immediate attention. For example, it raises the question of the legitimacy of the online community as a real human community; the acceptability and/or effectiveness of the virtual worship in facilitating the worshipper's spiritual growth; and the efficacy of online Eucharistic and baptismal services, among others. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to address key theological and ethical issues emerging from the church's current digital experimentation with technologically mediated worship, especially experimentation motivated by the Covid-19

restrictions. The paper ends with recommendations for the post-pandemic church in its quest to navigate between the digital and analogue spaces in its operations.

The nature and purposes of the church

Ecclesiology is the study of the church, including its nature and structures. Derived from the Greek word *ekklēsiā* ("to call out"), the word "church" means a convocation or an assembly of people summoned by a herald (Acts 19:32, 39, 40) (Clouse 2001). The Septuagint uses *ekklēsiā* in reference to the gathering of Israel for religious purposes (Weitzel 2011). In Greek literature, *ekklēsiā* refers to the assembly of the citizens of a city (Erickson 2013). The use of *ekklēsiā* for the New Testament church (Acts 11:26), therefore, suggests that the New Testament community of believers recognized themselves as heir to the Old Testament community of God's people—that is, the citizens of God's city (Clouse 2001).

In one of his interactions with Peter, Jesus promised to build his church (Matt. 16:17-18). This promise came after Peter had identified Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. The death and resurrection of Christ forms an important foundation upon which the church was formed. Therefore, at the Last Supper, Jesus reinterpreted the Eucharistic elements in terms of his body and blood, foreshadowing his atoning death on the cross (Mark 14:22-25). Given this understanding, the institution of the Eucharist forms a significant part of the New Testament perspective of the formation of the church. The church was inaugurated on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon and filled the disciples who were praying together (Acts 2:1ff.).

The word "church" may be used in the local sense in reference to a group of believers who meet at a particular geographical area for fellowship (Buabeng-Odoom 2016). In the universal/general sense, the "church" comprises believers of all times, at all locations (Buabeng-Odoom 2016). The local church is therefore a part of the universal church. The church is

visible, yet invisible. The church is invisible when considered in its true spiritual reality as a communion of all true believers. This is because no human can see the spiritual condition of a person's heart and know their spiritual state; only God knows true believers with certainty and without any error. Paul makes this point when he says "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tim. 2:19). The invisible church is the church from God's viewpoint. Though the church has an institutional dimension, it is primarily a spiritual organism that functions and relates to Christ spiritually. Further, the church is both the means and the goal of God's salvific plan. It was foreshadowed in creation, prepared for in the Old Covenant, founded by the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and fulfilled by Christ's atoning and redeeming works on the cross and his resurrection (Weitzel 2011).

According to Grudem (2011), the church exists to perform three main purposes, namely; to evangelize the world, to edify (nurture) believers and to worship/glorify God. The church's role in glorifying God comes to play in all its activities. God is glorified when believers live in accordance with his will and purpose. The paper will not discuss this role separately, but will proceed to consider the other two functions.

One of the significant functions of the church is to make disciples through evangelism. Evangelism involves preaching Christ to unbelievers and inviting them to respond to the call to salvation. The call to evangelize (win souls) is found in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20 and its parallels). The Great Commission emphasizes that evangelism is the very reason the church exists (Erickson 2013). The resurrected Christ, having declared his authority to his disciples (Matt. 28:18), instructed them, saying, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). The use of the word "Therefore" is meant to indicate that what follows is based on what Jesus had said in the preceding verse(s). Jesus had just told them that he has been given all authority in heaven and on earth

(v. 18). Jesus' qualification as the giver of the Great Commission is therefore based on his possession of all authority.

The Great Commission requires one to "go and make disciples." Witnessing to Christ requires moving to people and inviting them to God's salvific call. The word "disciple" derives from the Greek word *mathetes*, which means "learner." The disciple submits to the master, and learns the master's teachings not only by listening, but also by doing. Therefore, "disciples of Jesus are people who do not just profess certain views as their own but apply their growing understanding of life in the Kingdom of the Heavens to every aspect of their life on earth" (Willard 2006, p. xi). Discipleship refers to the process of making disciples. The goal of Christian discipleship is to make disciples conform to the image of Christ.

The Great Commission is universal in scope in that it requires the church to preach the gospel to all manner of people. Aside Matthew 28:19, the universal scope of the Commission was also given in Acts 1:8 where Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and energize them to spread the gospel from their immediate environment to the "ends of the earth" (cf. Mark 16:15). This underlines the cross-cultural dimension of the task given to believers. Evangelism in a cross-cultural setting is referred to as mission.

Before his death, Jesus sent his disciples to reach out to Israel (Matt. 10:6); now (in the Great Commission) he expands the scope to include all nations (Greek: *ethen*). The word "nations" underscores Jesus' concern for ethnographic identities and hence suggests the need to take seriously the ethnic character of the audience of Christian proclamation, especially in cross-cultural missionary endeavors. The command to reach out to "all nations" serves to fulfill God's promise that he would bless the entire world through the seed of Abraham (Gen. 22:18; Matt. 1:1).

Another key purpose of the church is edification of believers. From the Greek

words *oikos* (“house”) and *domeo* (“to build”) “edification” (Greek: *oikodomeo*, “to build a structure”) means “building up” believers. Jesus alluded to edification when he said he will build his church (Matt. 16:18). Jesus builds his church using human agents. Paul repeatedly speaks of the edification of the members of the body of Christ. For example, in Ephesians 4:12 he indicates that God has given diverse gifts to the church for the edification of believers—“to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” Paul further states that believers must be edified so that they can grow up in Christ (v. 16). The edification of the church requires teaching. Jesus’ command that his disciples should teach their converts all that he (Jesus) has taught them (his immediate disciples) (Matt. 28:19) underlines the edifying efficacy of the teaching ministry. The teaching ministry is expected to achieve at least the following aims. First, teaching correct doctrine and rebuking false doctrine corrects wrong conduct and trains believers in righteousness, equipping them for works of service (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Secondly, effective teaching helps conform believers to the image of Christ. Teaching must result in changed lives; that is, people after knowing the truth must obey it and become more like Christ in character, conduct and conversation (James 1:22-25; 2 Cor. 3:18, Rom. 12:2; Luke 6:40). Thirdly, the teaching ministry trains believers to study and apply God’s word to themselves, and once they are maturing, they will be able to teach others (2 Tim. 2:2; Col. 3:16; Php. 4:9). Fourthly, the teaching ministry helps believers to develop a biblical world view, seeing all of life’s issues and problems from God’s perspective (Isa. 55:8-9; Matt. 5:27-28; Mark 7:5-13; 1 John 2:15-17).

Edification also comes through the church’s use of spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and its interpretation, prophecy, healing and deliverance, among others. Paul highlights the need to use of spiritual gifts in edifying the church when he argues that the use of these gifts must strengthen the church (1 Cor. 14:12, 26).

Christians come together for fellowship and this fellowship must end up building one another. Tongues speaking edifies the church when interpreted for each worshipper to access God’s message. Prophecy also edifies the church by making worshippers know God’s message (plans) for them. In the end, the edification of the church is meant to prepare the church for her owner, Christ.

What is digital ecclesiology?

Whether a church avoids, limits or embraces technological innovations in its operations, the social structures, cultural relationships, pastoral ministry, and theological understanding of the Christian church continues to experience serious influences due to technological advancements. The church’s use of media technology for ministry is the result of the society’s growing digital environment and the need to reach all people (far and near) with the gospel. According to Campbell and Dyer (2022, p.14) digital ecclesiology is “the study of the structure and practices of the Church in online or digitally enhanced contexts, and the theological implications of the online–offline or hybrid church experiences this creates.” In other words, “digital ecclesiology” is the existence and operations of the church in a digital environment. Or digital ecclesiology has to do with the church’s relationship with emerging technology and how this relationship informs its nature and operations. It includes “the strategies used, and the motivations behind, churches’ negotiation with digital media” (Campbell 2020, p.4).

The concept of digital ecclesiology is the recognition “that technology decision-making by religious groups cultivates distinctive theological models, which can inform or change the way people conceive of the Church” (Campbell, 2022, p.14). The idea of a digital ecclesiology invites a conversation about how the nature and theology of the church should look like in a digital context. “Digital ecclesiology” presupposes that the media technology has great impact on the expressions of the church—including

practices of communion, prayer, or worship participation. Digital culture is (gradually) shaping and transforming church life at different levels. As the physical community of believers is now being replaced by a virtual community, the proclamation of the gospel has unlimited coverage.

Biblical and historical antecedents to digital ecclesiology

The Bible highlights the need for believers to have regular fellowship for exhortation, administering the sacraments, and for worship, prayer, confession, discipleship, rebuke, healing, care (Heb. 10:25). However, the Bible is not explicit on the when and how of such fellowship. The church is a dynamic institution that adapts to different cultural changes in different environments. As such, the church continues to consider and discuss how it may effectively and efficiently adapt itself to the digital environment which is a relatively recent development. Before the New Testament times, Jeremiah had delivered God's message to the Jews using a letter, the media technology of his time (Jer. 29:1). In the New Testament, Apostles such as Paul, Peter, James and John reached other believers through letters (Rom. 1:1; 1 John 1:1-2; 1 Pet. 1:1-2; James 1:1-2). These letters bridged the geographical gap between the Apostles and their addressees, thereby making it possible to edify/nurture other believers remotely. Some of these letters were personal; others were meant for the whole congregation and so they were read aloud to exhort everyone (Col. 4:16).

The Apostles knew face-to-face approach to ministry as the norm; yet, they considered letter-writing mediated ministry as legitimate and effective means of discipleship. John, in his second and third epistles, makes a clear distinction between the communication technology of his day (pen and ink) and meeting in-person (face to face) (2 John 12; 3 John 13-14). Though he indicates his joy in seeing his audience face-to-face, he does not in any way suggest that technological mediation is inferior or unimportant. Similarly, even though Paul expressed deep "longing" to have an in-

person interaction with members of the Roman church (Rom. 1:11), he also seems to think that some relational interactions were best handled via letters (2 Cor. 7:8), not via face-to-face meetings. Peter also valued his letter-writing-mediated ministry (2 Pet. 3:1) while also finding Paul's letter to be a bit difficult (2 Pet. 3:15-16). The obvious conclusion is that the Bible validates both in-person and technologically-mediated communication for Christian ministry.

As technology advanced, other forms of communication emerged to add to the diverse means of communication in order to maintain and strengthen the communal life of the church. Before the 16th century Protestant Reformation, the Bible was locked up in a private library of the clergy and of a few rich families who could employ the services of scribes to have hand-written copies of the Bible. The laity had virtually no direct access to the Bible. The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg (in 1450), however, made it possible to reproduce the Bible in large quantities in a relatively short time and with greater accuracy than the hand-written copies. Martin Luther and the other Reformers made use of this new technology in publication to distribute the Bible to the masses. At the same time, they used technology to have the Bible translated into various languages. Through the mass distribution of the Bible, Christian evangelism surged and erupted, making Christianity a powerful global religion (Young-Bo 2008). John Wesley used cutting-edge printing technology to print hymnbooks to enhance Christian worship services.

Evangelist Billy Graham became an influential televangelist in his time through the use of media technology in his ministry. He used jets to fly around the world to preach the gospel. He used theaters, sports stadia, and civic auditoriums for reaching crowds. His radio ministry made him reach many people which he could not have reached if he confined himself to his church pulpit. In those days, preaching through the radio was unconventional; yet, he used it

because he knew that technology can be a very useful tool in fulfilling the Great Commission. Around this time, other preachers also began to reach others through correspondences. Books, tracks and letters were written by Euro-American preachers and sent to Africa, Asia and other parts of the world to reach people with the gospel. Later, the use of other tools in communication—such as television, CD-Rom, videos, mp3, mp4, cell phones, computers, smart phones—became the major means of reaching out to people. The church embraced these means and used them to minister to the world. The foregoing points to the fact that Christians have employed different tools of the times and have constantly switched to faster and stronger tools.

Digital Ecclesiology and the church

Digital Ecclesiology and Communion Ecclesiology

The church has a communal nature, referred to as communion ecclesiology. The word “communion” comes from the Greek word *kóinonia* (Latin: *communio*). According to Cyprian (cited in Kasper 2012, p. 246), the church is a community of “people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Given this understanding, it is imperative that we begin the discussion on communion ecclesiology from the communion among the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the prologue of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul gives an exposition of God’s plan of salvation. He contends that the Father predestined everything (1:3-11), the Son executed the plan in the fullness of time (1:5-13) and the Holy Spirit gives believers the seal and pledge of eschatological salvation (1:13ff.; 1 Pet. 1:2; Heb. 9:14). Paul later applies the Trinitarian structure to the church. In Ephesians 4:4-6, he points out that the unity of the church is founded on the unity among the persons of the Trinity: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (NIV).

Communion Ecclesiology is informed by Trinitarian communion. Communion ecclesiology is highlighted in Johannine literature. According to John’s Gospel, Jesus used the incarnation to make the invisible God visible to the world. He invites people to come to him, love him and be united to him. The unity between Jesus and his disciples and among his disciples is underlined by the Johannine imagery of the vine and the branches (John 15). Brown (1967, p.389) considers the Johannine imagery as signifying “the union of the Christian with Jesus—the branches must remain on the vine which is Jesus.” Paul also reiterates this understanding of the Christian call when he argues that God has called Christians “into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:9); it is through this fellowship that an assembly of believers become a spiritual community who experience faith, hope and love together in a life-long relationship. Similarly, in his Priestly Prayer, Jesus prayed for the unity of his disciples just as he and the Father are one (John 17:21). First John 1:7 links communion ecclesiology to the death and resurrection of Christ: “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (NIV).

The relationship between the divine persons of the Triune God is non-hierarchical. No person of the Triune God (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) is superior to another. The divine persons are equal in nature and power but have different roles in the planning and execution of God’s salvific plan. In the same way, no believer is superior to another; every believer has a role to play in building the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-26). According to Brumfield (2020, np), “The church lives from the Trinitarian communion not as some merely instrumental means of bringing humanity into relationship with God, but rather in revealing the triunity of God, Jesus reveals that the entire world comes from and is made for communion.” The Trinitarian dimension of communion ecclesiology is

also evident in the following quote by Lubac (1999, p.237):

God did not make us “to remain within the limits of nature”, or for the fulfilling of a solitary destiny; on the contrary, He made us to be brought together into the heart of the life of the Trinity. Christ offered himself in sacrifice so that we might be one in the unity of the divine Persons... But there is a place where this gathering-together of all things in the Trinity begins in this world; “a family of God”, a mysterious extension of the Trinity in time... “The people united by the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost; that is the Church. She is ‘full of the Trinity.’”

Communion ecclesiology emphasizes the sharing of one another’s burden as they fellowship together. This relational role of the church is captured by the Greek word *koinonia* (Heb. *Habar*) which means to “unite” or “join together.” *Koinonia* is one of the four key ingredients that marked worship in the early Christian Church (Acts 2.42). The early church links *koinonia* to the idea of sharing oneself with others, in other words, a “group of people closely bound together by what they share”, whether it is their food, clothing, income or any other resources (Snyder cited in Campbell 2005, p.31). The early church shared their properties communally (Acts 4:32). Members sold their properties and brought the money to be shared among members of the church (2:45; 4:37; 5:2). Through this practice, communion ecclesiology not only catered for the vertical dimension of Christianity (relationship with God), but also a horizontal dimension (relationship with fellow believers).

Communion ecclesiology resonates very well with traditional African worldview. In Africa, the communal aspect of the church is very important because of the communal worldview of Africans. The Ubuntu philosophy of “I am because you are, you are because I am” expresses the African communal sense of life. In Africa, a

person’s survival is largely dependent on the survival of other members in the community. The African traditional (extended) family system comprises spirit of the dead, the living and the unborn. This compares well with the Christian concept of church triumphant, church militant and church expectant. The great cloud of witnesses (or the saints of the past) that surround believers (Heb. 12:1), from an African Christian perspective, is analogous to the concept of the living dead (ancestors), referring to the spirit of departed one. Therefore, in Africa “the value of humanity is, intrinsically, linked with that of the unity of all people, whether biologically related or not” (Asante 2010, p. 5-6). This is what O’Donovan (1996, p.4) rightly refers to when he writes, “Africans tend to find their identity and meaning in life through being part of their extended family, clan and tribe. There is a strong feeling of common participation in life, a common history, and a common destiny.” The African communal life comes to bear during such traditional activities as funeral celebration, festivals, naming ceremony, extended family system, and marriage ceremony. The African communal sense of life is imported into African Christian worship life. Therefore, African congregants desire regular meetings; there are a lot of activities that go on in most African churches throughout the week. African church services are characterized by singing, drumming, dancing, shouting, hugging, and handshaking, all of which are informed by the communal worldview of life. Traditional Africans prefer sitting on pews, people on each pew depicting a smaller community. Sitting on chairs is a recent practice in the African church setting. In traditional African societies, meals are enjoyed communally—family members eat from one bowl—in the same way that the Christian Eucharistic meal is taken in a communal style.

Given the foregoing discussion, the question of the validity of the virtual community as a real community is important in African digital ecclesiology. How effective can digital ecclesiology

maintain the communal nature of the church? Earlier, the point was made that the African communal sense of life accommodates the spirits of the dead, the living and the unborn. This means that the African view of community goes beyond people in one's physical environment or people whom one can interact physically with to include those that one may not physically meet in his/her life time. In other words, the African view of the human community goes beyond spatial boundaries. This is true for the communal aspect of digital ecclesiology. According to Palka (2004, p.1) "Personal communities have expanded beyond spatial boundaries and include people who live far apart." From the African Christian perspective, the believer's spiritual community transcends the people he/she makes physical contact with to include people of all places with whom he/she can interact in one way or the other. Paul makes this point in his teaching about the universal Christian community (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-30). It is unbiblical to limit the believer's spiritual community to those around him/her in a local environment. The online setting gives people the opportunity to be connected spiritually to more people than the offline space. Therefore, the communal desire of African life can (in a way) be fulfilled even in a digital environment.

Digital Ecclesiology and the Great Commission

In his post-resurrection encounter with his disciples, Jesus asked his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father (Luke 24:49), the baptism of the Holy Spirit. After Jesus' ascension, his disciples gathered in Jerusalem, as instructed, and God gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit. The supernatural visitation by the Holy Spirit occurred on the Day of Pentecost in the context of a "sound from heaven as of a rushing, mighty wind" and "tongues as of fire" (Acts 2:1-5). In the process, the disciples began to speak new tongues which were heard in different dialects (Acts 2:6). The tongues of fire symbolized the empowerment the disciples received for the proclamation of the Gospel, The fact

that people of different tongues heard and understood the tongues spoken by the disciples signified that Christian mission would transcend linguistic barriers to take the Gospel across cultures to the end of the world. Consequently, the pneumatological experience on the Day of Pentecost empowered the disciples to be effective witnesses to Christ. Starting from Jerusalem, the disciples preached the gospel to the world and won many souls for Christ (Acts 2:41-42). Jerusalem was the immediate vicinity, the site of the Pentecost. There were many people in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost who served as the first audience to the gospel call. However, Jerusalem was a difficult place to witness because of it had not long ago witnessed "the scandal in connection with the events of Christ's last days, and especially his humiliating death by crucifixion" (Erickson 2013, p.1062). Beyond Jerusalem, the disciples were to be witnesses in "all Judea." The people of the Judean region were homogenous in thinking and traditions. Additional local churches were to be formed in this region through the proclamation by the disciples. The disciples were then to expand their ministry to Samaria, a people who detested the Jews (John 4:9; Luke 10:29-37) and could therefore be the least receptive to the message. The conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans goes far back to the time of the Jews' return from Babylonian exile. The Samaritans were the product of intermarriages between the Israelites left behind by Assyria and various foreigners who were sent to help repopulate the area (Erickson 2013). The final geographical dimension of disciples' ministry was "to the end of the earth." This expression highlights the fact that the Great Commission has no geographical restriction. The disciples were to send the gospel everywhere, making disciples of all nations. Certainly, the first disciples were not the only ones to take the gospel to every type of people. Every generation has the responsibility of taking the gospel to others until it reaches every people group.

As noted earlier, starting from the pre-Christian era to the 21st century, different people have used different technologies to advance the spread of the gospel. Modern media technology can serve as a useful and effective tool for achieving the global dimension of the Great Commission. The internet is the bridge connecting information, people and different cultures all over the world. The internet breaks the geographical barriers existing between people and makes it possible for everyone everywhere to be evangelized and nurtured. In the contemporary world, the digital space goes as far as “the end of the world”, leaving believers no excuse in fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 1:8) (Jeong-Hyeon 2000, p. 32). The concept of digital ecclesiology does not in any way change the nature and scope of the Great Commission. The message is the same and the command to reach all nations is not altered. However, digital ecclesiology ensures the use of modern technology in fulfilling the Great Commission. Thus, while the nature and scope of the Great Commission remains the same, the means of fulfilling this mandate may vary from time to time as seen in the examples of the Apostles, the Reformers, and other believers. Without technology-mediated services, the gospel may one day reach all nations; however, that will take a very long time. The use of the digital space ensures the spread of the Christian message to a wide geographical area within a relatively short time. To sum up, digital ecclesiology provides the church with a great opportunity to extend God’s rule to every part of the globe and hence make the world have a foretaste of his eternal Kingdom.

Digital Ecclesiology and spiritual growth/edification

Christ’s goal for the church is “to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:26-27 NIV). Disciple-making therefore requires effective nurturing of converts with the aim

of making them grow spiritually in conformity to the image of Christ. Spiritual growth is a life-long process by which the Holy Spirit makes one conform to the likeness of Jesus Christ, for the glory of God and for the sake of others (cf. 2 Cor. 3:17-18) (Fee 2010). The process of spiritual growth is enhanced by spiritual disciplines, comprising inward spiritual disciplines (including fasting, meditation, study of the Bible, and prayer), outward disciplines (like solitude, submission, modesty, humility, and service) and corporate disciplines (such as confession of faith, worship, and mentoring) (Foster 1978). As a person goes through these disciplines, the Holy Spirit facilitates the spiritual growth. For example, as people hear the word, the Spirit sanctifies and empowers to grow to maturity. All these disciplines that facilitate spiritual growth can be mediated through media technology. Since the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying power is not limited by geographical distance between the preacher and the audience, digitally-mediated services have the potential of bringing about the needed growth.

Some examples of how technologically-mediated ministry can facilitate spiritual growth can be cited from Paul’s ministry. As noted earlier, some of Paul’s letters were read to the local church. The oral reading of these letters in the liturgical gatherings served as a substitute for Paul’s personal presence and contributed to the spiritual growth of the congregation. Paul’s letter made “him present to his various audiences in and through his words of worship considered as ritual ‘speech acts’, that is, words that actually do what they say, words that communicate by not only informing but performing” (Heil 2011, p.3). For example, when the audience hear Paul’s greetings, they begin to have a renewal of their fellowship with him; when they hear Paul praying for them, they feel Paul as part of their communal worship; when they hear him praising and glorifying God, they are drawn into his own worship and get inspired to praise and glorify God with him (Heil 2011, p. 3). Paul underscores his

spiritual presence with his audience and the effectiveness of his letters in enhancing spiritual growth of his audience when he writes, “for though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit” (Col. 2:5 NIV) and “for my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. . . . So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present . . .” (1 Cor. 5:3-4 NIV). Thus, despite Paul’s physical absence, his letters made it possible for him to lead the believers, “gathered as a liturgical assembly, in an act of worship that celebrates the significance of what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead” (Heil 2011, p. 41).

In today’s world, the church leader does not send a letter to be read on his/her behalf. Rather, technology makes it possible for the leader and the congregation to see each other and communicate. Alternatively, worship services may be recorded and uploaded online so that people can download and watch at their convenience. The worshippers in an online worship service are virtually present and interactive, unlike Paul who was represented by his letters read to the congregation by one of the church members. Paul’s letter could edify his audience because the Holy Spirit who facilitates the edification process is present everywhere, lives in every believer and has power to use any means to build up the church. Similarly, God, through his omnipresence, creates an incarnational presence for the church in digital and virtual spaces. In the process, the Spirit transcends the limits of the local church to connect worshippers, breaking physical boundaries and making it possible to fellowship with people of all backgrounds for effective spiritual growth.

Theological and ethical reflections

The digital space offers great opportunities for Christian expression and communication. Pope John Paul II pointed to the value of media technology, stating, “Like other communications media, it is a means, not an end in itself. The internet can offer magnificent opportunities for

evangelization if used with competence and a clear awareness of its strengths and weaknesses” (Paul cited in Hvidt 2001, p.17). Paul’s assertion suggests that though the internet is a useful tool for Christian ministry, it is also associated with a number of (ethical, social and theological) challenges that need to be addressed. One of such challenge is the issue of moral degeneration. It is an indisputable fact that the digital space is full of false information, obscene materials, malicious comments, and cybercrimes. Consequently, people may lose their moral standards in their quest to access Christian ministry through the internet. Sam rightly notes how internet use may lead to overindulgence in obscenity, pornography, and games in the cyberspace: “The internet user of the virtual world is a machine infected with paranoia and which has most reprehensible taste. They do whatever they want; there is no reservation or hesitation in their actions. As they came to reshape our society, we will end up with having a reality that resembles their online space” (Sam 2001, p.17). Moral degeneration is common among internet users partly because of the anonymity, openness, and independence one enjoys in using media technology. The lack of supervision and responsibility for one’s action in an online environment makes people cross their moral boundaries and then enter “the infinite possibility of uncontrollable sin” (Lee 2010, p.29). Based on this fact, it is important that measures are put in place to curb the abuse of the internet by believers worshipping in a digital environment.

The issue of false teachings and prophecies also needs attention. False teachers may take advantage of their access to the internet and proclaim false doctrines to deceive unsuspecting believers. The internet is an effective tool for popularizing one’s teachings, whether sound or unsound. The impact of media technology on Christian prophecy is no less significant. The internet has become a major source of prophetic ministry. A new form of Christianity has emerged through internet ministry which combines Christian

spirituality and traditional religious worldviews to appeal to their audience (Hvidt 2001). The unprecedented rise in the proliferation of prophetic messages through the digital media calls for serious theological reflections. The prophetic ministry thrives very well and has become very popular in Africa because it speaks to many African realities such as poverty, ill-health, and influence of evil powers on people's life. More often than not, people equate "popular spirituality" to "true/authentic spirituality" or "popular teaching" to "true/authentic teaching."

Going forward, there is the need to have some guidelines on how people can "test the spirits" and then distinguish true prophecies and teachings from false ones. A key principle in the discernment process is to judge prophecies and teachings in the light of their conformity or non-conformity with Sacred Scripture (Hvidt 2001). Other guidelines include judging by the fruit of the spiritual leader's ministry, by the spiritual leader's character and so on. However, in an online environment, one may find it difficult to access the character and fruits of the spiritual leader. In the process of guarding against false teachings/prophecies, it is important to ensure that true teachings/prophecies are not treated with contempt. One must be careful in judging prophecies because "rash judgment of the obviously true prophetic gifts ultimately is a judgment and rejection of the Holy Spirit" and "to put those who speak in the Spirit to the test means testing the Spirit working within them" (Hvidt 2001, p.15).

Digital ecclesiology has much prospects globally. However, it may have some limitations in Africa because most African societies have challenges with internet connectivity and electricity. Another factor that may limit the use of the technology in mediating Christian ministry is that most African churches cannot afford the logistics (equipment) required to host services online. Digitally-mediated services can be very expensive. In view of this, online services alone cannot be used to meet the needs of African audience. This

does not mean that African churches should stay completely away from the digital space. In the view of the author, physical face-to-face services must be the primary means of mediating God's word in the African environment. However, the face-to-face worship environment must be complemented by online services to reach out to people beyond the chapel.

Finally, the love factor is very important in digital ecclesiology. The fulfillment of the Great Commission (by whatever means) must not be done independent of the Great Commandment of love. The Great Commandment requires believers to worship God ("you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind") and serve others ("And you shall love your neighbor as yourself") in love. The love for God and neighbor will check unethical use of the cyberspace and encourage believers to use modern technology to advance God's kingdom in a theologically sound, biblically grounded and culturally acceptable manner.

Conclusion

In the contemporary world, a healthy church is expected to offer both online and offline expressions of gathers, fellowship, and outreach. There is nothing inherently wrong with digital ecclesiology. However, offline churches should (under normal circumstances) not be replaced by online churches. Rather, ministerial efforts made by offline churches must be complemented by the church's engagement with the digital space. Based on the findings from the paper, the following recommendations are made for the consideration of the (African) church. African churches seeking to move towards a digital ecclesiology must consider not only how technology should be employed in the operations of the church, but also the reason(s) or motivation(s) for which they desire to engage the digital space. This strategic reflection must be contextually informed (considering both the historic and emergent social and ecclesiological implications of a digital church), theologically grounded and biblically supported. Technology is indeed a double-

edge sword, simultaneously offering both opportunities and challenges. The church must, therefore, consider both sides and see how best the opportunities can be used amidst the challenges.

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