ON THIS ROCK: CHARTING THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN VIRTUAL CHURCHES

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Abstract: Immediately after the onset of COVID–19 and the consequent restriction of physical gatherings in Kenya and many parts of Africa, several churches onboarded their members in the virtual spaces. Virtual churches were quickly and haphazardly constituted, some as ad hoc and others as permanent ways of remaining a church in contemporary times. These churches were received and transmitted via many gadgets, but mostly via mobile phones. As a result, there is currently a sizeable African church in virtual spaces. Initial findings from a Nagel research team that focused on the phenomenology of virtual churches in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa congregations in Nairobi reveal that the COVID–19 pandemic restrictions brought into reality a virtual church that will last for many years in Africa. The research further revealed that various forms of "church" being transacted in the virtual space remain inchoate, unformed, and mimicked misrepresentations of African realities. This state represents potentialities for weak theologizing and nurturing of believers in the African space. If the African church is to remain truly African and truly virtual beyond COVID–19, then her sons and daughters need to conceptualize its virtual presence to make it a solid virtual rock, relevant to Africa's evangelistic aspirations. Based on Matthew 16, this paper proposes conceptualizing ways the African virtual church can remain faithful to Jesus's promise to build and sustain a prevailing virtual church beyond the pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

This research is situated within the multi-year initiative "Engaging African Realities," led by the Nagel Institute at Calvin University, an organization focused on the study of world Christianity. The Institute's framing of this theme underscores the profound demographic shift within global Christianity, noting that recently, "Africa has become massively Christian. It is currently home to nearly a quarter of all the world's Christians. It is believed that Africa may become the home to 40 percent of all Christians within the next twenty-five years."[1] This projected growth establishes a critical imperative to understand the evolving nature of African Christianity, particularly as it adapts to new digital and post-pandemic contexts. The following section will explore these emerging realities.

The global COVID-19 pandemic, emerging in late 2019, profoundly disrupted religious practice worldwide, significantly altering the momentum of African Christianity. In efforts to mitigate the virus's spread, African nations that recorded their first cases in early 2020 implemented a series of public health measures. These interventions, which included nationwide lockdowns, the closure of educational institutions, and restrictions on movement, also entailed the prohibition of public gatherings. Most critically for this study, these mandates resulted in the unprecedented ban on in-person worship, forcibly displacing congregational life from its physical sanctuaries and necessitating a rapid, unplanned transition to digital forms of fellowship.

The severe transmissibility and mortality risk of SARS-CoV-2, particularly for vulnerable demographics, prompted African governments to enact stringent containment protocols. Mirroring global responses, these measures were often enforced by state security apparatuses with a severity that, in many instances, extended beyond public health guidance into the realm of state coercion. In Kenya, for example, the implementation of a "state curfew" was subject to divergent and often violent interpretations by security forces, creating an atmosphere akin to a militarized state. This pattern of utilizing police brutality and excessive force against citizens alleged to be violating protocols was observed across sub-

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[1] See https://nagelinstitute.org/, accessed December 10, 2025.

Saharan Africa. This response has been critically framed by scholars such as Tinyiko Maluleke, who, reflecting on the South African context, notes the incorporation of state violence against a citizenry already threatened by the pandemic. [2] It was within this specific context of dual precarity—facing both a public health crisis and securitized state responses—that churches were compelled to innovate mechanisms to maintain relevance and ensure the continuity of ministry. The turn to online and virtual platforms thus became not merely a pragmatic necessity but an inevitable adaptation for ecclesial survival.

This article explores the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on African Christianity, arguing that the securitized enforcement of public health protocols created a unique context of dual precarity—a public health crisis compounded by state violence—which catalyzed an unplanned yet consequential shift to digital ecclesiology. While the pre-pandemic trajectory of Christianity pointed to continued demographic growth across Africa, the sudden prohibition on physical gatherings forced churches to migrate rapidly and often haphazardly to online platforms. Drawing on empirical data and situating the discussion within the Nagel Institute's "Engaging African Realities" initiative, this paper contends that these nascent virtual congregations remain largely inchoate and risk fostering theologically shallow engagement if not critically conceptualized. Therefore, this study moves beyond mere description to propose a normative framework, grounded in the ecclesiological promise of Matthew 16, for constructing a sustainable and authentically African virtual church that can endure and thrive in the post-pandemic era.

VIRTUALITY AND THE CHURCH

The virtual church has attracted scholarly attention, and a growing school of thought and body of literature are now focused on this phenomenon. Though the knowledge being documented has not been brought to bear on neat categories, there is a general tendency to group this research under a single, large category of churches under virtuality on account of COVID–19. With time however, there are a few emerging and observable categories. Writings on churches in virtual or online spaces have taken up a huge amount of space. According to Albert Bogle,[3] although the church in liquid space has been there since the cybernetics days, the COVID–19 virus has simply accelerated the need for livestreaming services. The real prize is to go further and allow the theology of imagination to begin to create new networked church communities, online and offline. Some scholars[4] have termed the crisis an excellent opportunity for the church to begin reaching out to creatives in this area. Thus, they saw it for many as a missional opportunity, as the church started to include those on the edge of faith, the artists, the musicians, the techies, the honest inquirers, those who are not far from the Kingdom of God. The importance of such groups has been documented as a turning point in their ability to invite the church to begin to understand the specific nuances of various media and to promote, develop, and shape the Gospel of Jesus in the 21st century.

Tim Hutchings has argued that the online space has been received ambivalently by the church. Whereas the church has praised the internet and virtual space as a gift from God, which can be used to evangelize and reach people in the margins, others have felt that the internet and virtual space have been used to castigate the church. It is no wonder that during the pandemic, several online and virtual hackers intruded the church with disruptions and obscenities. Writings by Roman Catholic church scholars have been quite categorical insofar as virtuality and the church are concerned. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications has argued that,

> Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the
> sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh–and–blood

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[2] Tinyiko Maluleke, "Why I Am Not a Public Theologian." *The Ecumenical Review: WCC* 73, no. 2 (2021) 311.
[3] Bogle, Albert. "Turning Flavor of the Month into Staple Diet." In *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online,* edited by Heidi A Campbell, (Texas: NC–SA Digital Religion Publication, 2020) 1-9.

human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real–world interaction with other persons of faith … pastoral planning should consider how to lead people from cyberspace to true community and how, through teaching and catechesis, the Internet might subsequently be used to sustain and enrich them in their Christian commitment.[5]

Other scholars, for example, J. A. van den Berg, have praised the virtual space and even anticipated what a virtual ritual, or e-ritual, may look like. According to van den Berg, E-ritual refers to the migration of elements of empirically observable rituals into cyberspace. In many cases, this results in new and evolved ritual expressions unique to cyberspace. This is an important development for liturgical and ritual studies.[6]

What begins to emerge is that several scholars have focused on a body of writings on the church's engagements with the virtual space, albeit with notable disagreements over how the church should face the increasingly changing realities of our times. What has not been extensively documented, however, is the future of these engagements in terms of right theologizing and adequate pastoral care. Although Scott Thumma has written a few thoughts in an article titled "Virtual Now, But For How Long?"[7] However, he has not made his views generalisable, touching on the African church and its theology and ritual. It takes African voices in lived African realities to predict the future of African virtual churches. This chapter contributes to the debate.

THE CONTEXT

The research was undertaken against the backdrop of the complex and multifaceted COVID-19 pandemic. This global event manifested uniquely across different societies, particularly in Africa, where pre-existing conditions of development and underdevelopment created a distinct landscape for the crisis. The study's methodology was necessarily shaped by the official health protocols established to ensure safety, yet its execution demanded significant adaptations and compromises to align with the situational and contextual realities on the ground.

Acknowledging the vast disparities in global circumstances was fundamental to the research approach. The investigation was designed with an awareness that in many majority world settings, populations faced a multitude of severe threats to life beyond the coronavirus, including pervasive poverty, fragile healthcare infrastructure, and other endemic health challenges. Scholarly analysis, such as that by Mhandu and Ojong, informed the study's framework, highlighting how factors such as economic constraints, low health literacy, and cultural practices complicate public health interventions.[8] In the specific context of Kenya, the research was conducted with the understanding that the population was already navigating a high mortality burden from issues such as gender-based violence, cancer, and malnutrition long before the pandemic emerged. This context critically informed the study's design and its engagement with the subject matter.

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[5] John P. Foley,. "Pontifical Council for Social Communications: The Church and Internet." In Vatican (Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2002).

[6] J.A. van den Berg, ed. *Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Perspectives from Theology, Philosophy and Education* (Bloemfontein: Sun Press, 2020), 214.

[7] Scott Thumma, "Virtual Now, but for How Long?" In *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, edited by Heidi A Campbell (Texas: NC–SA, Digital Religion Publications, 2020) 83–86.

[8] Mhandu John and Ojong Vivian B. "COVID–19 and the South African Pentecostal Landscape Historic Shift from Offline Liturgical Practice to Online Platforms." *Journal for the Study of Religion* 34, no. 2 (2020), 6; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans, 2009), 428.

AFRICAN CHURCH BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

The text of Matthew 16:18 presents a conversation between Jesus and His disciples at Caesarea Philippi. Here, Jesus promises a post-messianic movement that would stand against all odds. It would not only be a gathering or a congregation in the sense of the Greek word *ekklesia* but a building built by Jesus and Him, "replacing the "builders" who rejected him (Psalm 118:22, Matthew 21:42)."[9] Although many commentators agree that the "gates of Hades" envisioned here refer to opposition and persecution, it would not be too much to suggest that the effects of the COVID–19 pandemic seemed like a "gates of Hades."[10]

The African Church before the COVID-19 pandemic was a different rock altogether and with its own mechanisms of preventing the gates of hell from prevailing against it. If COVID–19 were a type of gate of hell, then the "rockiness" of the African church had not yet been tested to this level. The face of the African church before the pandemic can broadly be categorized as urban and rural. The rural church was purely face–to–face, with members expected to meet every week and occasionally during rituals. In most rural spaces, the church was a mere center for weekend/Sunday meetings while the pastors' performed visitations and other rituals during the week. On the other hand, the urban though largely face-to-face – or the "pack them in" type, had some aspects of virtuality. However, the virtual element of many city churches was an affluent mimicry of realities happening in other parts of the world and was not an extreme reality. It was a mark of status, a mark of sophistication in thought; its usefulness on a more sensible state was just beginning to be felt. Guided by the African value of communality, the church was a gathering, whereby gathering defined what it meant to be church. Church was defined in terms of numbers, and numbers meant those people parked in the building, and the most successful pastor was defined in terms of those people gathered and seated before them every Sunday. It is the pastor who has managed to gather resources, build a large charge, and equip it for huge gatherings. The genuine meaning of being in church was reduced to congregational competition over seating capacity and seating numbers.

A gathered church provided opportunities for expressions of familial love and kinship, including shaking hands, hugging, congregational prayers, and other tangible gestures. True to its Africanity, the church gathered not because they could not perform church in their own homes, but because it was meet for kinsmen/people so to do. As Chinua Achebe has proclaimed, "A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so."[11] Therefore, the African church before COVID-19 struck so gathered. No insecurities and no uncertainties ever crossed its mind. If there was anything to mind was the tendency of some to forsake the gathering of saints (Hebrews 10:25).

Church before COVID–19 can also be described in terms of denominationalism and a predisposition to internal mission. Great emphasis was laid on pastoral care for the gathered rather than reaching out to the lost and unchurched. Proliferation of churches and ministries with fancy and appealing/sentimental names, some as breakaways from their mother denominations, was common. Denominationalism and sectarianism were propelled in the naming and in the desire to replicate their former denominational affiliations. In these quasi–denominations, some pastors, before COVID-19, were focused on healing miracles but only within the walls of the church. Those sick, demon-possessed were not encountered in the mission field but were required to come to the building and the gathered congregation for healing. No wonder the pre–COVID–19 church was criticized for faking miracles and sometimes commercializing them. Why healing miracles for COVID-19-related illnesses were scarce or absent is yet to be explained.

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[9] Keener, *Matthew*, 428.

[10] Keener argues that the words used here suggest that death itself assaults Christ's church. Keener cautions against using this text to unnecessarily venerate peter but to see him as a "fisher of men" per-excellence. His authority is delegated because of his right confession of Jesus. The real builder is Jesus to whom all believers, "church" should owe allegiance, 429.

[11] Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1992), 146.

THE CHURCH'S TURNING POINT THROUGH THE EYES OF RESPONDENTS

The study was conducted in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) Nairobi Region. A total of 102 participants from five presbyteries were involved in interviews and FGDs. The study was titled, *African Value of Communality and Religious Experiences in Virtual Space Amidst COVID–19 Pandemic: A Comparative Study of Selected Churches in Kenya*. The churches and participants were selected through non-probability sampling. Methodological challenges of sampling and ethnographic data collection during pandemics are documented in another offering. This article is interested in the respondents' views that bear directly on envisioning a future for virtual churches in the African cultural space, especially the value of communality.

As has been stated, on the onset of COVID, the Ministry of Health protocols required the closure of churches, as they were considered weak links in the pandemic. A scattered church was not an anticipated reality in Africa. A church where people could not shake hands, hug one another, sing with wide-open mouths (shout for Joy to the Lord), and extend their hands was not expected. The Church also accepted itself as existing in the "new normal," a time in which it had to cope with many things that other sectors of society were trying to adjust to. Church had to re–invent a new normal pattern of life that ensured either continuity or modification of existing life and practices as vehicles of faith.

Reverting to virtual space meant many things that weren't necessarily virtual. A large number of churches turned to electronic media to reach their congregations, which gave rise to a form of digital church pushed into the virtual spaces of the times. As Jerry Pillay[12] observes, while it is important for the gathered church to meet, it is also important for the church to imagine new ways to remain relevant and functional amid challenges. COVID–19 taught the church to reimagine its existence beyond the four walls. Some of the imagined ways of remaining "alive and active" were quite postured. Some respondents noted that their pastors turned to using SMS to reach to members. Other pastors returned to social media and created groups. WhatsApp and Facebook were the most popular. Others turned to recording sermons and posting them on YouTube; the recordings felt static and mechanical, lacking life. This type of speculative, haphazard online alignment by the church due to pandemic containment measures has continued to date. However, the ongoing study reveals that the highest peak of church alignment with virtuality occurred within the first six months. As containment rules continued to be relaxed, so did the virtual presence of members continued to dwindle. Platforms that could host more than 200 attendees during the pandemic have recorded very low numbers. For example, the highest recorded attendance during the pandemic peak at PCEA Bahati Martyrs was 130. Presently, the first several minutes can record zero attendance, and throughout the service, at most five attend, with many logging in and dropping out occasionally. Some churches, like PCEA Eastleigh, stopped livestreaming the services altogether after all the rules were relaxed. Many members complained that the virtual space was not edifying enough. Other participants cited that church leaders and clergy were not prepared for the virtual dimensions of religion. Some respondents also acknowledged that churches deployed expensive gadgets to sustain the scattered church; however, the disconnect was that most members did not have gadgets of equal measure. There was also online content, transacted in the virtual space. Some respondents reported attending several virtual platforms and noted that unregulated theology was being communicated.

ONLINE BEHAVIOR: IT'S CHARACTERISTICS FOR BEING A CHURCH

The virtual space has evolved, and some online behaviors are worth noting. Kithinji and Omukoba have observed that the online space affords users the ability to interact while protecting their offline identities. Online users are free to share thoughts, forward messages, and say things without taking responsibility for them.[13] This is particularly pronounced in matters of human or national interest, such as the COVID–19

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[12] Pillay, Jerry. "COVID–19 Shows the Need to Make Church More Flexible." *Transformation* 37, no. 4 (2020): 269
[13] Omukoba, and Kithinji. "Hermeneutics of Online Religiosity." *The South African Baptist Journal of Theology* 30 (2021): 29

pandemic. Because these individuals have a ready platform and audience, they quickly criticize sensitive issues, vilify them, and develop opinions on these platforms. Because no one is fact-checking, most online users assume expertise in these matters by creating unsubstantiated theories, impulsively forwarding uncited or unsupported messages, and engaging in back-and-forth chats that can even be misleading. Anonymity is a behavior that the African church will have to contend with as it charts its future in virtual spaces. The anonymity offered by virtual space ruptures the behavioral containment provided by communality and is therefore bound to contribute to the virtual space becoming a vehicle for poor and misleading theologies. For the African church to remain virtual, therefore, it has to maintain some strict online structures that remain authoritative in matters of faith and the church.

The online space also presents opportunities to fake it and become unreal. Worship leaders expressed how the recorded services became a challenge to their own spirituality. At the height of COVID-19, when only a few people were allowed in the sanctuary to record a service for broadcast the following day, worship leaders and preachers expressed how they felt the void. They wanted the recording to express their deep spiritualities through their gestures and their voices. However, there is something in them that kept saying that it is just a recording and nothing more. This posed the challenge of whether the spirit was present in the recorded service or in the real-time broadcast.

There is no single theological statement for this scenario. The spirit can be present in the recording and in the real-time worship. Many Christians have confessed to being edified by the Holy Spirit through the messages of people long gone. The Bible itself is a recording in the technology that the fourth-century Christians could afford. If they had voice and video recording, there is no reason why we could not have the images of Moses at Mount Sinai or Jesus at the Mount of Transfiguration. The preserved voices of Billy Graham, Chuck Smith, or any other powerful person that God has used are not curtailed by the medium in which they are preserved. God is omnipresent, and that goes beyond the time of the life of the preacher, if truly God had spoken to them.

Christians approaching the virtual space should do so with all confidence, whether the space is mediated by recording or it is real-time worship. It is not a performance per se but a presentation of the divine presence. God is Holy, and His holiness cannot be curtailed by human limitations. Moreover, God is spirit, and his spiritual worship entails some abandonment of physicality, anticipating that the spiritual aspect will take over and unite our spirits with the spirit of God.

FUTURITY, AFRICANITY, AND VIRTUAL CHURCH

The question many African theologians are grappling with is that of the future of the church in virtuality. Can grace be mediated in the virtual space? Although Ignatius of Antioch… said that where the Bishop is, there is the church,[14] it should be noted that there are too many bishops online. Virtuality means that the central authority of the church is no longer a preserve of the physical church. For this reason, the virtual African church must adjust some of its terminology. Concepts like excommunication may slowly die, and therefore, there is a need for discipleship and correction of errant followers in the virtual church. Authority must be negotiated and move from authoritarian to negotiation. The virtual church has to self–theologize in such a way that sinners must be brought first to themselves so that they can voluntarily lay their lives at the foot of the cross.

The stability of technology is a factor the African church must grapple with if a sustainable virtual presence is to be achieved. One reason many congregants have slowly abandoned virtual services in favor of face–to–face services is dropping out of sessions due to technological hitches. Poor online receptivity causes disconnection to the gadget and to the Holy. For Africans who are notoriously religious,[15] being logged off a worship session presents a spiritual disconnect. Moreover, heart connection

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[14] Antioch, Ignatius of. "Letter to the to the Smyrnaeans.", 2. edited by Cyril Richardson. https://www.orderofstignatius.org/files/Letters/Ignatius_to_Smyrnaeans.pdf Accessed 02/04/2023. This is based on a J R Willis Translation.

15 John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann Educational, 1989), 24.

is not the same as gadget connection. Similarly, closed eyes is a ritual that Africans inherited from the missionaries and has proved to be a great enhancement in African expressions of encounters with the Holy. For this reason, open eyes, which are necessary in virtual worship, tend to desacralize the mystery. A closed eye is a let go and let the mysterious function. With more open eyes also comes a seemingly diluted mystery. Respondents expressed how difficult it was to feel in church in the virtual space and agreed that virtuality should be used only in exceptional circumstances. The stability of equipment and teaching/content should be a priority for retaining the remaining aspects of post–COVID virtual churches.

A primary theological challenge concerns the nature of sacramental and communal grace in digitally mediated environments. The foundational ecclesiological principle that authority and presence are geographically anchored in the episcopacy is fundamentally disrupted when ecclesial life is dispersed across a global digital network. This decentralization necessitates a critical re-examination of the mechanisms for maintaining community, discipline, and spiritual formation. Traditional models of corrective discipline, such as excommunication, which rely on physical and social boundaries, have lost their efficacy, requiring new pastoral strategies that emphasize persuasive engagement and internal conviction over institutional enforcement. The objective becomes fostering an environment where individuals are guided towards self-reflection and genuine, voluntary repentance, rather than relying on the imposition of external authority.

Concurrently, the phenomenological experience of worship through a digital interface presents significant hurdles to sustained engagement and spiritual immersion. The inherent instability of digital infrastructure, including unreliable internet connectivity and power supply, creates a barrier that is not merely technical but also profoundly spiritual, as involuntary disconnections rupture the perceived continuity of sacred participation. This technological mediation also alters the embodied nature of ritual, a core component of African religious expression. The normative practice of closing one's eyes to facilitate a deep, personal connection with the divine—a gesture that enhances interiority and receptivity—is often compromised by the practical need to gaze at a screen. This shift in posture can inadvertently diminish the sense of transcendent mystery and full, embodied participation that congregants associate with authentic worship. Therefore, forward momentum depends on intentionally designing digital ministry that prioritizes robust, accessible technology and develops liturgical and pedagogical content specifically crafted to facilitate deep, focused engagement, mitigating the distractions inherent in the medium and moving beyond its perception as a mere substitute for in-person gathering.

CONCLUSION

Africa can no longer take space for granted in the virtual world, as encounters with the Holy have been necessitated and accelerated by the pandemic. Moreover, most of her youth are quickly embracing these spaces for varied reasons. There is a virtual note that strikes the African church across all generations, and which will remain for a long. This article has evaluated the circumstances that necessitated virtual worship during the pandemic, the gains it brought, and the continued presence and future impact of what remains. In cementing the grounds achieved by the African virtual church, it is important to let virtuality function at the level of necessity. Deliberate effort should therefore be made to retain the gathering, the assembly, the *ekklesia* – the physical meeting, for this is enhanced and enhancing to the African value of communality. For this reason, the African virtual church should be encouraged only as an enhancement of the church, not as an effacement of it. Church is not church if it is a Sunday-only affair; it is a ministry to real humans, real people, and real Christians. Unfortunately, most virtual churches have only catered to the "Sunday" needs of African Christians. African church is performed in rituals of baptism, in rituals of death, weddings, and in all African spaces. The paradox of virtuality, though an intangible reality, is that it is a weak link for mediating objective reality; on the contrary, it is a good platform for mediating objective reality.