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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v43i1.6195>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2023
43(1):98-111

Date received:
12 April 2022

Date accepted:
5 May 2023

Date published:
30 June 2023



Published by the UFS

<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

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Digital ecclesiology and Africa's digital natives: prospects and challenges

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised important issues for the church. Churches have grappled with ministering to their congregants in light of the changes in physical gatherings over the past two years. While the digital mode of ministry has strengthened the church's missional outreach, churches have struggled with two foundational questions: the nature and the mission of the church. This article engages the emerging research in digital ecclesiology from the lens of reformed ecclesiology – particularly using the ecclesiology of Berkhof and the Westminster Standards as interlocutors – and offers prospects and challenges for the church's ministry to digital natives in Africa. It argues that digital ecclesiology should not be perceived as a hindrance to the church or be blindly accepted. It should rather be critically engaged to delineate its prospects and challenges for the church's ministry. More specifically, this article argues that the digital mode of ministry enriches the church's missional calling as it reaches out to Africa's digital natives; expands the understanding of church as organism and invisible, and creates specific challenges for the church's ministry in terms of key concepts such as identity, authority, and community.

1. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE CHURCH IN AFRICA

In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the world. From its genesis, as a novel virus, it has emerged as a landmark second pandemic after the Spanish flu of 1918. With its beginning in Wuhan, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has touched every corner of the globe (Liu *et al.* 2020). Three years into the virus, various scholars have given due attention to the effect of the virus on issues as disparate as mental health, business start-ups, educational systems, and religious organisations. Within the Kenyan context, scholars at Daystar University have addressed what the post-COVID church context would be like, given the ongoing pandemic and its ramifications on the public health and technological landscape (Munyao 2022). These multidisciplinary perspectives unpack the role of the church in dealing with the sociological, developmental, and educational issues in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. This article focuses on the conversation on the interface between the church and the swelling reality of the digital context in which it finds itself, within the post-COVID-19 pandemic.

It is interesting to note that 2021 emerged as the year in which significant technological changes have touched the world. Cryptocurrencies, transhumanism, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Augmented Reality (AR) are part of the global conversation on what life within the “metaverse” will actually be like (Anderson 2021). Jun (2020) explores church planting for the Virtual Reality (VR) and how this creates both opportunities and challenges. By and large, he grounds his reflections on Hans Küng's ecclesiology that holds in tension the concept of church as form and church as essence (Jun 2020:1). Rather than taking an isolationist perspective, Jun (2020:7) observes that

if masons, architects and artists were needed to build physical spaces for worship in the past, we need coders and futurists to build this unprecedented style of church in the metaverse.

The implications for Christian life, and questions concerning what it means to be human and what the *telos* of the world is, are gaining traction in the discourse. What do these digital transformations mean for Christian life and the concept of being church? These broader conversations are the ever-widening boundaries for the discussion of church and the digital space. COVID-19 has functioned as a kind of accelerator for these conversations in wider culture. For the innovators and early adopters, it has created a momentum for widening the scope of ministry, while the late adopters of these technological changes have prolonged their responses on what these dynamic changes portend for the church.

While several churches, particularly within urban contexts, have integrated digital media as part of their ministries, some churches and church leaders have been antagonistic towards the place of technology in the church's spiritual mission. Nonetheless, with the closing of churches in Kenya on 13 March 2020, through the multi-phased approach, digital integration moved beyond a proposal to the only way of maintaining continuity in the church's ministry. In Kenya, between 22 May and 20 June 2020, Shahidi Africa conducted a survey to explore the church's response to the pandemic. The open survey examined 429 leaders, 33 counties, and 161 denominations in Kenya. Two major pastoral responses were opening new social media accounts or reactivating social media platforms that were dormant in the past (Shahidihub 2020:2). A follow-up survey in 2021, after churches had been reopened, revealed that a considerable number of churches continued with a hybrid version of ministry, with 57.59 per cent of leaders offering both online and in-person services (Shahidihub 2021:4). Although the online mode of ministry experienced some challenges, various strategies were offered to deal with the challenges. These sentiments are shared across other regions of the world and reveal the church's adaptability within the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its interaction with constitutional law and state mandates (Asamoah-Gyadu *et al.* 2020). It is evident that digital technology is an important factor in the church's ministry and mission. An interesting role has been the place of "digital natives" or young people who have been critical assets in the church's transition towards online ministry in the post-COVID-19 dynamic (Cloete 2020). Cloete (2020:29) views this development as a push towards a more intergenerational approach to the church's ministry, where members gain from the strengths of the different generations, thereby enriching the holistic ministry of the church as "body".

2. PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AS A FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This article approaches this conversation by using a practical theological methodology. First, the themes of this study, by their very nature, necessitate a practical theological framework. Whereas ecclesiology is a discipline of systematic theology, the role of digital technology in the transformation of the church's life and practice necessitates a mode of reflection that is suited to the strength of practical theology. In this instance, I make use of Ward's (2017:3-4) emphasis on moving beyond the academic guild's complexities, but rather, using vast material and its implication for the ongoing life of the church.

Secondly, this article aims to consider prospects and challenges, meaning that the theological reflection has as its end goal, practices and vantage points within the church's life that must be reconsidered.

Thirdly, my approach to theological reflection is always in context, as in Rowan Williams' words "in the middle of things" (Ward 2017:10). Thus, while this article takes up the emerging theories in digital ecclesiology, it reads them from within the theological tradition of reformed ecclesiology and offers reflections that should attend to the practice of the church's ministry to its young ones, particularly within an African context.

A further note on the relevance of a practical theological methodology is informed by the nature of this research. While the research engages theories of digital ecclesiology and reformed ecclesiology, it reads them from within the real-life context of the pandemic. Particularly, this research argues that practical experiences can be a site for theological reflection. With the pandemic having, by necessity, pushed the church partially or wholly into a digital mode of ministry, this research seeks to understand the digital aspect as a reality that requires theological reflection, and what this means for engaging the next generations who are native within this digital mode. As such, this research, as situated within practical theology, not only seeks to outline the contours of reformed and digital ecclesiologies, but it also takes seriously both the interpretive analysis that undergirds this task and the practice of God in the world through this digital moment (Graham 2013:150).

This article approaches this task, using Osmer's (2008) methodology that asks four key questions:

- The descriptive question: What is happening within the digital cultures in which the next generations are immersed?
- The interpretive question: Why is this happening?
- The normative question: What models of church do we have from either biblical precedence or theological tradition, in this case reformed ecclesiology?
- The pragmatic question: How does this inform the prospects and challenges of doing church among digitally native Africans?

The ensuing sections seek to respond to these four key questions. Section 3 responds to the first two questions, by noting the digital context that the pandemic has brought to the foreground, and explores the reason for this by engaging with the theories in digital ecclesiology. Section 4 responds to the third question, that is, how reformed ecclesiologies provide a mode of understanding the church, particularly considering the reflection on the nature and mission of the church. Section 5 synthesises the data, by considering prospects and challenges for ministry to the next generations.

3. DIGITAL ECCLESIOLOGY AND AFRICA'S DIGITAL NATIVES

The interaction of the church and the digital space has received recent attention over the past ten years within the field of digital ecclesiology. This budding field of interdisciplinary reflection has usually taken two varied approaches (Campbell 2020). The first approach explored the usefulness of digital modes of communication and tools within the practical ministry of the church. The second approach explored the impact, either positive or negative, on the church's role and mission. This article delves into this contemporary discussion that has been necessitated through the digital context of a post-COVID-19 world.

Exploring how the digital landscape has transformed religious life, different scholars unravel the impact on five major themes, namely ritual, identity, community, authority, and authenticity (Campbell 2013). Rituals within different religions function as physical actions that mediate the divine. The domain of ritual studies has engaged a multiplicity of views, but some regard rituals as either structured and formal, or spontaneous and personally constructed (Campbell 2013:27). In Christian theology, sacraments are forms of rituals in a broader sense. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated significant debate in terms of the validity of taking communion online. Is the practice of online communion valid? Do the members of the church have to be physically present, in order to participate in sacramental practices? The digital space has forced congregations to wrestle with such questions. Whereas sacramental theology may be viewed in a normative sense, uncommon circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic have brought hitherto unknown questions. Lovheim explores how the rise of social networks in the 2000s changed how people interact with media, moving from mere consumers to producers of content (Campbell 2013:44). In our 2022 context, young people no longer have to traverse the traditional initiatory rites in their journey towards adulthood. At the click of a button, they can develop content that significantly shapes the opinion of their followers. This brings to the fore issues such as privacy, virtual reality, and early success, which significantly shape the identity of digital natives nowadays. There is also a close link with the concept of authority, because, currently, young people can listen to a physical preacher at a Sunday service while checking out the sermon outline of a famous online preacher in another part of the world. I have had instances where, in my conversation with young people, someone remarked: "Yes, it reminds me of what Pastor Michael Todd was saying about relationships the other day".¹ All these factors are paramount for the church in the post-COVID-19 context.

1 Michael Todd is a famous African American preacher, who has a wide following on digital platforms. He is known for his contemporary preaching that speaks to the issues of young people.

The emerging research in this budding field is clearly correlative of the context of the digital natives in the world at large. Digital natives have been referred to as iGens (those who have grown up in the wake of Steve Job's i-Phone) and span three broad generational bands: millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), generation z (gen z) (born between 1997 and 2012), and generation alpha (gen A) (born in the early 2010s and mid-2020s) (Twenge 2017). These are three broad ways of construing the sociological markers of young people within generational thinking. As of 2022, the oldest millennial's age is 41 years and the youngest gen z's age is 10 years. While gen alpha is an evolving concept, these three groups share their digital adaptability, with the younger ages, even more exposed to various digital platforms at a younger age and with more complexity.

In terms of the sociocultural and economic issues, millennials in Kenya were part of the nation during its transition from a single-party- to a multi-party state; they experienced the effects of the Structural Adjustment Programmes and, together with the gen zs, they experienced the explosion of the internet – with the onset of e-mails in the 1980s, the worldwide web in the early 1990s, as well as social media networks and blogs such as LinkedIn and Facebook in the early 2000s (Palfrey & Gasser 2016).

Gen zs and Gen alphas are more familiar with video games and VR as well as a variety of consequential ethical issues that arise from being immersed in this new world. Some of these issues include cyberbullying, pornography, anonymity, and media manipulation (Ess 2017). In addition, the digital reality further complicates the issue of identity, with social media offering varied ways of self-representation for teenagers who may grapple with their self-image in a way that is uncommon for the “analogue age” (Palfrey & Gasser 2016:22). The implications of these for ministry to digital natives include issues in terms of pastoral care within the context of fragmented identity; nurturing fellowship within the context of anonymity and trans-national connectivity, as well as authoritative preaching within a context of digital influencers and the fall of religious institutions in a postmodern context (Ruso 2019:114).

Moving beyond challenges, this article also seeks to reshape an overly antagonistic stance to digital media, noting how technology has created a boon for the church – for example, the printing press as the catalytic factor for the Protestant reformation as well as the role of the internet in sermonic influences that have shaped the spiritual lives of young people. The role of technology in the life of the church can be viewed through the print culture that produced hymnals and biblical translations, to the role of radio and television in 1930s evangelism and 1960s televangelism (Asamoah-Gyadu *et al.* 2020, 217). As a part of youth culture, the narrative of media merits a deeper reflection rather than a simplistic rejection, as young people use media for positive uses, including good entertainment, educational progress, and spiritual growth (Ndereba 2021).

4. ASPECTS OF REFORMED ECCLESIOLOGY

It is clear that the global digital transformation is an ongoing process that requires much more consideration. Whereas digital ecclesiology is more geared towards the practical side of ecclesiology, it cannot escape the theological reflection on the nature of the church and its mission. In this section, I use a reformed perspective on the doctrine of the church, particularly engaging Berkhof and the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) to consider the biblical perspective on the nature and role of the church, as has been mediated through the reformed tradition. This approach aims to bring contemporary research on digital ecclesiology into mutual dialogue with the church's orthodox understanding of the church. Doing so will suggest that theological reflection best happens within the context of a particular context (digital culture), while reading the Bible through a particular theological tradition (theological context). This undergirds the point that there is no *tabula rasa* in theological reflection. By owning up to one's tradition, one is better able to address both the strengths and weaknesses that may arise in this mediation of cultural context and biblical-theological content.

4.1 The nature of the church

Louis Berkhof is chosen as a theologian, due to his enduring influence on reformed theology. In terms of his influence, his *Systematic theology* ranks second only to Calvin's *Institutes of Christian religion* as a formative systematic treatment of Christian doctrine in the reformed tradition. He was born in Emmen, in The Netherlands, and together with his family moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1882 (Calvin University Library 2022). He was a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary in 1900, and pastored Michigan First Christian Reformed Church in Allendale. He obtained a BD degree from Princeton in 1902 and then pastored the Oakdale Park Church in Grand Rapids. He joined the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary in 1906, becoming its President in 1931, and serving until 1944. Berkhof married Reka Dijkhuis in 1928, and their marriage was blessed with four children: Grace Meyer, William, Jean Stuk, and John. Later, in 1933, he married Dena Heyns-Joldersma who had two daughters, Joanne Heyns De Jong and Wilma Heyns Brouwer.

Berkhof's exposition of ecclesiology follows his exposition of the doctrine of the application of the work of redemption. Berkhof (2012:12) contrasts the Roman Catholic view that anchors its doctrine of God on the doctrine of the church, with the reformed view, which primarily considers the church as a "spiritual organism". Berkhof (2012:553) connects the doctrine of the church to the doctrine of Christ, when he categorically states that "there is no church apart from the redemptive work of Christ and from the renewing operations of the Holy Spirit". This article seeks to unpack the nature and mission of

the church from reformed ecclesiology, and how this may help the church navigate this digital moment.

To further explore the nature of the Church, reformed theologians have distinguished between the visible and the invisible aspects of the church (WCF 25.1). The invisible church is made up of all believers of Jesus Christ in space and time. Visible believers gather together in local churches that are distinct in geography, space, and time. Thus, this makes room for conceiving of those who belong in the invisible and the visible aspects of the church, while also making room for a dynamic understanding of the church's mission. Thus, the

Church forms a spiritual unity of which Christ is the divine Head ... and is destined to reflect the glory of God as manifested in the work of redemption (Berkhof 2012:565).

Another aspect of the church is the distinction between the church as organism, *apparitio* and the church as institution, *institutio* (Berkhof 2012:567). Berkhoff (2012:567) compares the concept of organism and institution, when he notes that, as an organism, the church is described as communion through the bonds of the Holy Spirit; as an institution, the church takes up particular organisational forms with various offices for administrative purposes. Never divorced from each other, the two concepts are mutually beneficent.

The Church as an institution or organization is a means to an end, and this is found in the Church as an organism, the community of believers (Berkhof 2012:567).

This means that church structure (or doctrine) for that matter is not an end in itself, but it is to serve God's redemptive purposes for his body. This distinction is helpful for us, particularly as we engage young people who have a disdain for structure and who are more dynamic in terms of authority structures. Both wisdom and sensitivity are required, particularly as we consider how digital cultures have created a fluid sense of definition for digital natives. The question remains: How do these distinctives inform our practical mission to digital natives?

4.2 The mission of the church

Within reformed ecclesiology, the mission of the church is viewed primarily in spiritual terms. For instance, Berkhof (2012:568) observes that the church as the Kingdom of God takes on an eschatological significance in its mission to establish

the rule of God ... in the hearts of sinners by the powerful regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit, insuring them of the inestimable blessings of salvation.

Likewise, the Westminster Confession (WCF 25.3) observes:

Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and does, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual.

While this “ultimate end” of the mission of the church is laudable, it can be said that, within reformed ecclesiology in Africa, reformed churches have contributed to the well-being of the communities. Whereas some scholars have rejected the relevance of social justice as a critical mission of the church, the context of Africa’s economies and societies cannot ignore ministry to “the least of these” – while gospel ministry is primary, so is the pursuit of justice and shalom as part of the church’s calling (DeYoung & Gilbert 2017). A number of African theologians in different Christian traditions have explored the relevance of ecclesiology within the African landscape of communalism, healthcare, and other cultural issues. Orobator (1996:269), for instance, observes that, while the origin of the church can be traced to the life of Jesus Christ, the New Testament provides principles of the church but there is a need for “creative imagination” in how that should function within the reality of African values such as community and kinship. Nyamiti (1990) also uses his “ancestor Christology” to conceive of the church as the body that has Christ as the chief ancestor, with believers being descendants of Christ and, therefore, connecting them to the tripartite church. As reformed ecclesiology emerged from within particular medieval excesses of Roman Catholic ecclesiology, ecclesiology within the contemporary African context must also engage the realities of the day that arise from digital cultures. Both the former and the latter are evidence of the need for contextualisation as we think of how Christian doctrine touches the everyday realities in diverse places. Thus, contemporary theological reflection must navigate the discourse between the church’s ministry and the implications of digital technologies, without carelessly transposing ecclesiology from one context to another (Campbell & Dyer 2022). Following the thesis that the COVID-19 pandemic is a Kairos moment, and if, as Mwambazambi (2011) claims, ecclesiology must follow missiology, then we must consider the implications of digital ecclesiology nowadays. Consequently, the above reflections raise questions: How can we discern God’s mission for the church in this digital post-COVID-19 context? What does this mean for Africa’s next generations? The following section unpacks what this is like among the lives of young people in Africa.

5. PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

The critical issues raised so far help orient the discussion of what church is like and what it is called to do within the context of digital natives. As those whose daily lives are part of digital reality, the church must continuously reflect on its nature and mission to, and with them. The conversation in terms of digital ecclesiology explores a wide range of issues, including how digital technology is changing concepts such as identity, authority, and community. On the other hand, we have noted how the nature of the church is timeless; yet its mission must be concrete within the lives of young people. In this section, we explore some prospects and challenges of the church in a digital and post-COVID-19 landscape.

Several prospects emerge from this research. First, the digital landscape provides an opportunity for the church for missional engagement of unengaged or disengaged youth. While religion plays a critical role in the lives of Africans, and particularly young people, there are pockets of non-religious youth in different parts of the continent. Since these youth may not come to the church, the digital space presents an opportunity for the church to go to them. This means that churches must design digital strategies that allow the ministry of the church to reach out to young people in the context of the digital world.

Secondly, digital ecclesiology, particularly within a post-COVID-19 context, expands the church's understanding as an organism *vis-à-vis* the concept of the church as institution. This research revealed that the vast majority of churches experienced drastic changes in their ministries, particularly with young people, especially in light of the digital transformations. While the dialogue is still an important one, it could be argued that the post-COVID-19 digital context allowed congregants to sample different liturgical orientations, worship spaces and preaching forms that differ from their backgrounds. By doing so, the thinking of the church has been expanded to consider the strengths of different denominations in a manner that fosters mutual fellowship and dialogue in a way that was not possible in the past. All these mean that the church has been united in many ways. The digital landscape creates an opportunity for churches to engage in common mission. In terms of practice, the researcher has participated in numerous conferences and in both academic and ecclesiastical fora that inform this last conclusion. In many ways, digital ecclesiology presents room for the Church's mission in the world.

In terms of challenges, various issues emerge from the context of digital media. First, while the digital landscape expands the idea of community, it also changes what exactly that means. In other words, while people can participate in various networks on the online space, they can do so in an individualistic, isolated, and consumeristic sense, that may hinder the ministry of the church.

For example, the church is called to participate in deeds of mercy and justice. While the digital space allows for people to contribute to the church's mission through online money platforms, the lack of physical immersion into the actual mercy ministry engagement takes away a particular concreteness that helps them discern God's call within particular sociocultural contexts.

Secondly, while the digital landscape expands the opportunity for online mentorship and discipleship, people still lose a life-on-life discipleship that fosters deep learning and understanding. For instance, in the Paul-Timothy model, the apostle commends Timothy to follow him based on what he has observed, seen, and heard. Since one of the primary ways of learning, particularly in youth ministry contexts, happens through observation, how might we engage this barrier in our youth ministry practice in the digital environment?

Lastly, while the digital habitat means that we have an appreciation of the invisible and organic church, what might this mean for the intertwined concepts of membership, church discipline, and sacramentology? As Campbell (2013:68) argues, the technological landscape has transformed place-based community to the concept of "networked individualism" where people derive their social and spiritual capital from their chosen networks rather than from an ecclesiastical institution.

This research reveals that the digital landscape presents critical points of interrogation for the nature and mission of the church. The research in digital ecclesiology helps us consider some of the salient issues. This article proposes that, as opposed to an isolationist or assimilationist approach to new media and technology, the Church be called to wise and discerning engagement with the digital landscape. These have been listed as prospects and challenges, by way of commendation and reflection, as we consider how God may still be at work within this Kairos moment.

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Keywords

Church and media

Digital ecclesiology

Digital natives

Gen Z

Trefwoorde

Kerk en media

Digitale ekklesiologie

Digitale inboorlinge

Gen Z