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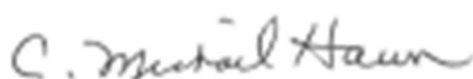
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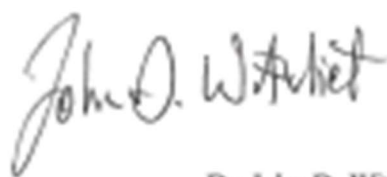
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THE BLESSED ASSEMBLY:
IRREPLACEABLE PHYSICAL CO-PRESENCE IN WORSHIP AND
HEALTHY HYBRIDITY REIMAGINED AFTER THE PANDEMIC IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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IRREPLACEABLE PHYSICAL CO-PRESENCE IN WORSHIP AND
HEALTHY HYBRIDITY REIMAGINED AFTER THE PANDEMIC IN THE DIGITAL AGE

A Thesis Present to the Graduate Faculty of Perkins School of Theology

Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Pastoral Music

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
DEDICATION	viii
ABSTRACT	ix
INTRODUCTION	1
My Social Location	2
The New Normal	3
Methodology	5
CHAPTER 1	7
Potential of Online Worship	8
Perils of Online Worship	16
On the Personal Level	17
1. Promotion of self-centeredness and individualistic behavior	17
2. Individual worship experience	19
3. Laziness and distraction	22
4. Loss of meaning and expression	27
5. Audience mode of the online worshippers	29
6. Consumerism versus commitment	32
On the Congregational Level	35
1. Investment, resources, and maintenance	35
2. The platform for online worship	36
3. Limitation on pastoral care and relationship building	40
4. Second-class worshippers	41
5. Preparing and taking communion at home	43
6. Further issues	44
The Crossroads for Reflection and Renewal	44
CHAPTER 2	46
As Faithful Stewards	46
“The Three Brothers” of Virtual Space	53
The Secret Hot Spring	55
CHAPTER 3	58
Choosing the Good Portion	58
Psychophysiological Research on Worship	60

Liturgical and Ritual Studies	65
Environment and Formation	68
Tension between Self and Community	73
The Singing Assembly	79
Acknowledging the Benefits of In-Person Worship	85
CHAPTER 4	86
Wisdom from the Workplace Scenarios	87
Experts' Views on Hybridity	91
The Hybridity for Churches Reimagined: A Time for In-person and A Time for Online ..	92
The Renewal of Worship	101
1. Educating on the meaningful corporate worship acts and their importance	103
2. Singing for transformation	105
3. Bible reading and preaching	106
4. Giving as symbolic action in worship	107
5. Unified actions to build stronger connection among the participants	108
6. Refurbish and remodel architecture and interior design for formation	109
7. Treasure everyone's contribution of their unique gifts and talents	110
8. Serving the community	111
9. Avoid the use of smart devices in worship	112
The Pastoral Care for the Online Worshippers	113
Advice for Joining Online Worship	116
The Trio Digital Detox Practice: Worship Service, Sabbath, and Retreat versus the "Three Brothers" ..	118
Conclusion	120
GLOSSARY	122
REFERENCES	124

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my professor and mentor, Dr. Daniel Law for his teaching, modelling, inspiration, and passion on worship and music ministries. He has enlightened me on how to envision and pastor a blessed assembly.

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The Blessed Assembly:
Irreplaceable Physical Co-presence in Worship and
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ABSTRACT

Because of the unprecedented and unexpected force of the pandemic since 2020, most churches around the world have experienced some sort of online worship during the lock down of their own cities or the mandated closure of the church buildings. For many people, online worship seems to be an equivalent, if not better, alternative for gathering together—a physical co-presence in worship—even after the pandemic has ended. As necessary and vital as online worship experiences have been for Christians during the pandemic, the witness of the church from Pentecost throughout Christian history indicates that gathered worship in physical spaces is irreplaceable for faith formation and the embodiment of the Christian community. Seeing, hearing, reciting, singing, and moving with others while offering praise, confession, intercession, thanksgiving, dedication, and receiving God's Word in a physical space are unifying worship acts indeed. Week after week, the worship actions are stamped and sealed in our memory, shaping us to live as God's people together. This thesis explores

and analyzes the potential and perils of online worship, our pastoral response to the hybrid life, the benefits of in-person embodied worship, and also the wisdom from the hybridity of the workplace so as to suggest a reimagined healthy hybridity for worship and the other ministries of the church. Nine aspects of corporate worship are advocated for the renewal of worship. Advice for pastoral care for online worshippers, guidelines for joining online worship, and a Trio Digital Detox practice are also highlighted at the end.

INTRODUCTION

SURVIVING THE PANDEMIC

“Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care.”

(Ps 95:6–7a, NIV)

Since the first generation of believers of Christ in the New Testament, Christians have become witnesses as local assemblies gathering together regularly for the worship of God, devoting themselves to meeting for God’s Word, fellowship, bread-breaking, and prayer with glad and sincere hearts. (Acts 2:42–46, NIV) They also let the message of Christ dwell among them richly as they teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in their hearts. (Col 3:16, NIV)

Seeing, hearing, reciting, singing, bread-breaking, and moving with others as manifestations, including offering praise, confession, thanksgiving, dedication, and receiving God’s Word in a shared physical space, are unifying worship acts. Week after week, these actions are stamped and sealed in our memory, shaping us to live as God’s people together. It is not something being merely performed and observed but experienced first-hand. We cannot hide from each other, nor should anyone be the center of attention. With the breath and life given to us by the gracious God Himself, we express and

confess all our religious emotions and actions as Christians unified in spirit, time, and place. God is among us simultaneously to receive our worship and offerings, dialogue with us as a community, bless our spiritual journey, and renew us through our unified corporate worship.

My Social Location

I currently reside and serve in Hong Kong as pastor of Anabas Ministry, an organization for worship renewal, and guest instructor in worship at seminaries in both Hong Kong and Thailand. My home church, North Point Alliance Church, is a mega church with more than ten worship services every week. I attend the morning worship on Saturday and am responsible for training the choir for that worship service. I served as a worship pastor in Hong Kong for several years after my graduation at Calvin Theological Seminary. In 2017, I founded Anabas Ministry and started to work as a freelancer for worship related ministries including consultancy work. I have been training worship leaders, preaching in worship services, and coaching Bible readers in different churches in the past years. Therefore, I am grateful that there have been many opportunities for me to worship with brothers and sisters from different denominations, and to learn and share ideas on worship with them.

Nearly all the Hong Kong churches were forced to offer online worship since the start of the pandemic. After some period, some people started to feel anxious and skeptical about online worship while others became accustomed to it and appreciated this arrangement. As will be discussed in Chapter 1, Hong Kong is a city with a high level of congestion. Most people lived in crowded small flats and not all family members are Christians, but even so, people may still find virtual worship

options appealing amidst their busy schedules. There had not been enough time to reflect and react pastorally before the churches responded to the many changes imposed by the pandemic. It is from this experience that I felt the need to discern what practices congregations might consider, given this new normal, and how churches could carry on faithful and transformational habits in worship and other ministries so as to glorify God and be a faithful witness of the Gospel.

The New Normal

Because of the unprecedented and unexpected force of the pandemic since 2020, most churches worldwide have experienced some version of online worship during the city's lockdown or mandated closure of the church buildings.¹ Through digital devices and different online platforms with a few clicks on the screen or device, many Christians have tasted the experience, for the first time, of staying at home, maybe wearing pajamas, joining the worship of their home church or even several other churches “from all over the world.”² Many pastoral leaders have led worship and preached sermons with the help of cameras and digital devices from their homes or to empty pews in the church building for the first time, too. Whereas live streaming worship services is not a novel invention, virtual experiences have become so normative during the pandemic that, for many Christians, digitally mediated worship may seem equivalent, or a good enough alternative, if not

¹ Yvette Lau, “Unavoidable On-line Worship?” *Anabas Ministry* (posted February 16, 2020). http://anabasministry.org/?option=com_content&view=article&id=42&Itemid=213#English (accessed July 11, 2021).

² Michelle Boorstein, “Vaccines Push the Question: Are You Going Back to Church?” *The Washington Post* (posted June 6, 2021). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/06/06/church-mass-pandemic-dispensation-lifted/?utm> (accessed June 14, 2022).

better than physically co-present worship even when the threat of spreading the virus has diminished.

This may be evidenced by a report by the Pew Research Center released in March 2023 that 22 percent of Christians said that they watch online services more often than before the pandemic.³

While it is incontestable that many people appreciate this breakthrough of online connections, it also arouses discussions and debates on whether the hybridity of physical co-presence and online worship services should become the usual practice for most of the churches in a post-pandemic future, even if not totally going virtual.⁴ There are reasonable concerns about safeguarding and upholding the nature and essence of corporate worship, nourishing and forming Christian spirituality, and engaging worshippers in conversations about the possible long-term effects of normalizing hybridity. To make wise decisions, church leaders, more than ever, need to engage in discussions concerning the meaning, design, and theology of Christian worship to provide an unshakable foundation for any decisions. Undoubtedly, their discernment of digital technology's long-term and potential impact on individual worshippers and the worshipping community is desperately desired. The congregation's reflection on pastorally appropriate and biblically based responses to the "new normal" during this challenging time is also pressingly needed.

³ Rachel Pfeiffer, "Online Church Attendance Retains Some of Its Pandemic Boost," *Christianity Today* (posted April 7, 2023). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/april/online-worship-pandemic-digital-church-attendance-pew-minis.html> (accessed January 24, 2024).

⁴ For example, the megachurch Potter's House Denver has "made virtual services its only options—for good." Megan Fowler, "The Potter's House Denver Sells Property, Goes Virtual," *Christianity Today* (posted January 10, 2022). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/january/potters-house-denver-sells-property-goes-virtual.html> (accessed October 27, 2022).

Methodology

For this thesis, I will begin by investigating and examining the effects of online worship, including the possibilities, potential dangers, and other related issues. The increased prevalence of online worship and the sophistication of its presentation after the outbreak of COVID-19 requires incorporating the disciplines of theology, liturgy, spirituality, sociology, psychology, media studies, and performance studies to evaluate its impact. And then I will substantiate the ubiquitous reality of a hybrid life during the digital connection era. I will propose the necessity of “digital detox” for all. For the gathered Christian worshiping community, the best and optimal antidote for the spread of ubiquitous digital connections is a liturgical digital detox. As online worship may become prevalent and be regarded as equivalent to physical co-presence in worship even as the pandemic subsides, the following chapters will unfold possible answers to this core question: How can in-person liturgy provide a digital detox for Christians during a time when our digital connections have been unprecedentedly boosted by new online habits and ways of doing things? The reasons for this question are grounded in the nature and understanding of the gathered worshiping community and honoring God’s design of humanity created in God’s image (*imago Dei*). We will see how intentionally being together as Christ’s Body and singing together benefits all. Finally, I will propose informed digital detox worship strategies gleaned from the remote work scenarios during the pandemic. Drawing upon these, I will rethink and reimagine the positioning of in-person, co-present worship and a healthy hybridity for worshiping congregations. I will promote embodied and active participation by reflecting on the pre-pandemic practices and learnings emerging from the pandemic.

I will offer suggestions on strengthening the in-person corporate experience in our worship services in the emerging post-pandemic time for the body of Christ. Finally, I will explore how to live a flourishing life by participating in the detox trio: in-person worship, Sabbath observance, and retreat.

The methodology that informs this document includes up-to-date readings from experts and scholars in liturgy/worship, theology, psychology, performance studies, technology, education, neurology, sociology, media, and business, including Albert Borgmann, Andrew Dyole, Craig Mueller, David DeSteno, David Sax, Heidi Campbell, Jay Kim, John Witvliet, Jonathan Leeman, Marcell Silva Steuernagel, Neil Postman, Pete Phillips, Sherry Turkle, Teresa Berger, W. David O. Taylor, and many more, for input on the various issues concerned.

CHAPTER 1

POTENTIALS AND PERILS OF ONLINE WORSHIP

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Rom 12:2, NIV)

“Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” (1 Thess 5:21, KJV)

While the public health concerns and lockdown policies have compelled many churches to go virtual, after tasting online worship at home, some people have been inspired and delighted by novelty of this new experience and the discovery of linking with others through virtual space. In teaching worship at the Bethel Bible Seminary in Hong Kong in the recent years, I have devoted one whole lesson for the discussion on online worship in the worship courses I taught in 2021 and 2023 because it had become such prevalent practice and experience for all Christians ever since 2020.¹ I asked my students to reflect on the comparison of in-person worship gathering and online worship, and also to brainstorm both the advantages and disadvantages of the latter for individuals, churches, and others. There came many different ideas and let me glean some insights from their thoughts on the advantages of online worship here.

¹ Thanks to my 33 and 14 students in the Worship class 2021 and 2023 respectively at Bethel Bible Seminary (<https://www.bethelbibleseminary.hk/en/>) for their participation in the reflection and brainstorming sessions.

Potential of Online Worship

Convenience is certainly one recurring strong point since one only needs to have a smart phone or a smart device and secure a moderately stable Wi-Fi network to worship literally in everywhere at any time, if the worship service has been uploaded onto the internet. This is also backed by the results of a Pew Research Center Survey conducted in November, 2022, in which the top reason for watching online services is not “fear of catching or spreading any illness” but “convenience.”² In this case, a bonus thing is that there will be no transportation costs incurred, be it the bus fare or gas cost for vehicles, if we do not have to leave our current location which is usually our own home. Relating to this, no travelling may also mean no parking needed for the drivers. Car pool arrangement will not be necessary anymore.

Some worshippers also find that online worship brings them more freedom in various ways, and most obviously, freedom of time management. With no designated time for worship, we can shuffle and rearrange all our other activities so that they fit our personal priorities, schedules, appointments, responsibilities, and chore tasks. Even if we have missed the service time of our own church, we will not be at a loss since there are still millions of worship service videos out there on the internet.

Therefore, many Christians consider the online worship option as not a merely convenient, but also timesaving, flexible, and freeing personal experience amidst their busy daily schedules. Another

² According to the survey, out of six possible reasons offered in the survey, the most commonly chosen is convenience. More than four-in-ten regular watchers (43%) say convenience is a major reason they watch services on screens. And around three-quarters of viewers (74%) say convenience is either a major or minor reason for viewing services virtually. See Michelle Faverio, Justin Nortey, Jeff Diamant, and Gregory A. Smith, “Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular,” *Pew Research Center* (posted June 2, 2023). <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/06/02/online-religious-services-appeal-to-many-americans-but-going-in-person-remains-more-popular/> (accessed January 11, 2024).

obvious benefit is that one can stay in bed for much longer time on Sunday mornings until the church organist plays the first note of the prelude, or when the praise team goes up the stage and welcomes all to join. Practically, one can join worship from the bed, the couch, or the chair in pajamas, even breaking the daily routine of brushing the teeth and combing the hair before starting a new day's activities. If one has decided to watch the video later in the day or even another day, they can enjoy a sound sleep for as long as they desire without any pressure. Another freedom of time management is that one can worship via the screen, and simultaneously doing other things with their bodies and hands, for example, having breakfast, refilling coffee, cooking dinner, doing yoga, sweeping the floor, lying on the bed, taking care of kids, or even taking a shower.

Some Christians originally attend in-person worship services only once or twice a month. However, when there is an online option, they may become more stable and regular.³ In addition, some brothers and sisters may be the only Christian in the household and it seems to be a golden chance for the non-believer family members to know more about what the believer does on every Sunday in the church.⁴ Ideally, they can also listen to the message of Christ through songs and sermons with the believer. Not only that the family members may not complain about their being away from home on Sundays, they can even spend more family time together. Besides benefitting the

³ Edie Gross, "People in the Pews: Who's Missing, Who's Hiding, Who's Comfortable on the Couch?" *Faith and Leadership* (posted January 24, 2023). <https://faithandleadership.com/people-the-pews-whos-missing-whos-hiding-whos-comfortable-the-couch> (accessed January 29, 2024).

⁴ The single-Christian-in-a-household situation is very common in my context. According to the *Wikipedia*, "as of 2022, there were about 1.3 million Christians in Hong Kong (16% of the total population)." "Christianity in Hong Kong," *Wikipedia* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Hong_Kong (accessed January 8, 2024).

family household setting, digitally mediated worship also becomes a great way to invite non-believer friends to join the worship services because it is almost costless and easier to send a link to anyone with a smartphone. In this way, the threshold is extremely low for the non-believers to join the worship and listen to the message.

With more freedom comes more choices. One will not be bound by a designated worship space at a designated time but can gain access to another local church in town, or a church in another country in another continent. Worshippers can choose to attend worship services of a different denomination from their own or even from another faith tradition. One can also mix and match the worship service content by joining the praise and worship part in one church and then switch to another church for the moving sermon as they deem more favorable. This also implies that the worshippers can leave or exit the worship services at any time as they choose to. Furthermore, when one feels that the sermon of their own church is not substantial or sufficient enough to feed their spiritual appetite, they can shop and search for more solid spiritual food elsewhere in the vast sea of online worship videos. In other words, one can decide to join as many different worship services as they like without leaving their comfortable homes. Moreover, one can adjust the volume of the videos and the size of the images to fit to one's context. One can even decide the suitable room temperature when they worship.⁵

In some seasons of the year, when there may be a typhoon or a snow storm signal being hoisted,

⁵ As compared to the air-conditioned environment in the church settings which is out of the control of the individual worshippers.

online worship ensures people to worship without the need to travel and be exposed to potential threats due to severe weather. And in case of traffic accidents or other incidents in which the main roads are blocked or the service of the railways is halted, we can still worship without needing to be stuck in the traffic jams or being affected by any labor strikes. From the stance of the church leadership, there is no need to cancel worship services in case of severe weather or catastrophic events happening within the local district anymore.

For the Christians who want to revisit the sermon in a particular worship service, they can easily find the video and listen to it, or even re-experience the whole service for more contemplation and reflection on the sermonic message. Since the videos also show the image of the preacher versus the voice-only version, it may be more motivating and engaging for some viewers. Besides, for worshippers and worship leaders alike, they can learn more about the worship styles and patterns of churches within their own denomination, or of different denominations by browsing or viewing their worship videos without stepping into their sanctuaries.

Moreover, diverse groups of people surprisingly find that they have significantly benefitted from digitally mediated worship services and are able to engage or reconnect with their churches in this new way. The spectrum of the different groups is definitely wide-ranging. The first one that comes to our minds may be people who are sick, hospitalized, physically disabled, having sleep disorder, homebound, shut-ins, and immunocompromised due to their physical limitation and weaknesses. To certain extent, the digital access option during the pandemic may mean to remove at

least some inequities that have prevented people from safely gathering though not all, considering the resource-deprived individuals.⁶ At the same time, those who are taking intensive care of these needy people can also be benefitted from the digitally mediated worship since they do not need to struggle for finding substitute caretakers when they leave home for worship. The second category goes to those who are temporarily out of town for vacations, visiting their relatives and friends overseas, or on business trips. There are also those who have just been relocated due to work or study, serving in the military, displaced, or immigrated to another country. For those far away from their home church, online worship seems to provide a magic tie between the worshippers and the brothers and sisters in the home church despite they can only see the faces of the leaders and pastors but not the congregants on the screen most of the time. Especially for those who are leaving their home church for an extensive period or for good, they may feel a certain kind of connection with their home church at least emotionally instead of an abrupt cut off if they can still join the online worship services of their home church.⁷ Furthermore, there are people who need to work on shifts on weekends and Sundays. And there are people deprived of any transportation if no one would help them on certain Sundays.

Undoubtedly, online worship services also create new opportunities to reach people, whether

⁶ Heidi Campbell, "Technological Hesitancy and Digital Reluctance Can Be Barriers to Digital Justice," *Faith and Leadership* (posted August 22, 2023). <https://faithandleadership.com/technological-hesitancy-and-digital-reluctance-can-be-barriers-digital-justice> (accessed January 4, 2024).

⁷ My friends who have emigrated to other countries in the mass migration wave in the recent few years in Hong Kong have expressed that even if they have found a local church to settle down in the foreign country, that church cannot replace the Hong Kong church to a vast extent and so they will still view the online worship of their church in Hong Kong, at least for the time being.

they be believers, faith-seekers, church-seekers, or non-believers near and far. The internet presence of the worship service videos seems to be “the new front door” which welcomes the new comers who may gradually become members or “the back pews” where the hesitant can come and have a taste of the church’s spirit before they start to build any relationships or make any commitments.⁸ This serves as an alternative way for many churches to evangelize and outreach people.

The last category includes those who had unfortunately been hurt or abused in the church and need to take a break for healing or counselling, and those who are experiencing religious persecution.⁹ For some, attending church services has long seemed like only building castles in the air. But now, thanks to digitally mediated worship possibilities, it has all come true.¹⁰ And that is why when the issue of ending online worship services is being proposed as the pandemic threat has seemed to be subsiding gradually, some people oppose with disappointment that some members who have been included by online worship connection will miserably be re-marginalized.¹¹

On the other hand, worshipping communities celebrate their first-time connection with people far and near with excitement when their worship videos can reach people even on the other side of the

⁸ Gross, “People in the Pews: Who’s Missing, Who’s Hiding, Who’s Comfortable on the Couch?”

⁹ Kenny Schmitt, “No Zoom Fatigue for Revived Baptist Church in Gaza,” *Christianity Today* (posted December 31, 2020). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/december-web-only/gaza-baptist-church-christmas-zoom-fatigue-revival.html> (accessed October 26, 2022).

¹⁰ Non-immersive digitally mediated worship options include but are not limited to worship services via Zoom, Facebook live, YouTube live, pre-recorded videos, livestreams with pre-recorded sections or partially pre-recorded sections, and embedded videos on church websites, etc. Mandatory church closures unavoidably entice solely online worshippers. However, if full closures are not enforced, more often, the videos capture the worship services with on-site congregants, i.e., broadcasting live worship services, rather than aiming solely at online worshippers. For churches considering a hybrid approach, this usually means that they will have on-site worship services and the worship services will be broadcasted simultaneously and/or recorded also for later viewing. This kind of hybridity is the subject of concern in this thesis.

¹¹ Shannon Dingle, “Quitting Online Church Is Abandoning the One for the 99,” *Religion News Service* (posted February 2, 2022). <https://religionnews.com/2022/02/02/quitting-online-church-is-abandoning-the-one-for-the-99/> (accessed January 4, 2024).

globe.¹² Though the church building has limited seating, online worship allows many more participants to join simultaneously. Instead of counting attendance with the number of people in the pews, attendance is now also measured by view counts of the uploaded videos. In fact, some people may propose that we do not need the physical church building anymore. In Hong Kong, one of the most densely populated cities in the world, since space is limited and costly, many smaller churches need to rent a tiny flat with a high price, and thus, exercising church planting is challenging in terms of space and cost.¹³ In this regard, online worship may seem to be a breakthrough because space is not a necessary and critical issue anymore. For those churches with several worship services due to limited space, online worship may seem to be a remedy for the separated worshipping body. This may also ease the pressure of the greater demand of the number of volunteers including but not limited to song leaders, praise-team members, instrumentalists, ushers, liturgists, and others when with the need for fewer worship services to be held on the same Lord's Day or on Saturdays and Lord's Days.¹⁴

Moreover, due to heavy dependence on the screen-only media to broadcast messages and facilitate the execution of worship services, many churches have noticeably raised their aesthetic sense and level for their visual arts presentation especially for the PowerPoint design for the projection of worship content. Short videos have been used more often than before in worship

¹² Bob Smietana and Elizabeth E. Evans, "Streaming Online Has Been a Boon for Churches, a Godsend for Isolated," *Religion News Service* (posted February 1, 2022). <https://religionnews.com/2022/02/01/streaming-online-has-been-a-boon-for-churches-a-godsend-for-isolated/> (accessed January 12, 2024).

¹³ "Hong Kong," *Wikipedia* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong (accessed January 4, 2024).

¹⁴ Many churches in my context may also hold worship services on Saturdays.

services at least in my own context.¹⁵ Churches have been learning and gaining experiences to express through visuals and arts. Live-streaming or video-shooting related equipment and sound systems have been upgraded or enhanced in the hope of producing more sophisticated images and sounds for the worship videos, too.

Though the pandemic has hard-pressed the churches to learn new technologies with steep learning curves, some people regard this as a necessary advancement in the digital age. They may even criticize those with technological hesitancy or digital reluctance to have hijacked the churches' use of digital media.¹⁶ Church digital marketing expert Thomas Costello views online church services as a golden opportunity for extra engagement potential and has listed out fourteen reasons to continue online worship services.¹⁷ In addition to the benefits already mentioned above, Costello notes that churches can stay connected with their online-only members, better connect with younger members who have more experience with online communication, increase online tithing with an ongoing online presence, create more engagement for online viewers when livestream is available, host special virtual events, encourage more regular worship attendance when counting both in-person and online worship for individuals, and make use of time and expense invested for online worship.¹⁸

¹⁵ My home church has started to include videos more often for sermon series introduction and announcements as far as its manpower allows.

¹⁶ Campbell, "Technological Hesitancy and Digital Reluctance Can Be Barriers to Digital Justice."

¹⁷ Thomas Costello, "14 Reasons to Continue with Online Church Services." *Reachright* (posted May 12, 2021). <https://reachrightstudios.com/continue-online-church-services/> (accessed January 4, 2024).

¹⁸ Costello, "14 Reasons To Continue With Online Church Services."

Perils of Online Worship

Thanks to the available technology in this era, we have survived through the unprecedented pandemic with a new way of executing and experiencing our worship service for many churches.

However, like the two faces of the same coin, there will not be solely the seemingly positive side but also the conceivable and undesirable side effects or chronic consequences that may unavoidably arise. What are these possible perils when we choose to engage ourselves in online worship as the sole means of joining worship for the long run? If the churches do not articulate the pros and cons of virtual worship, the digitally mediated version will seem to be an equivalent option to those gathering to worship in-person.¹⁹ Some churches may already have brainstormed how to “create worship spaces that encourage asynchronous participation” and see if liturgy can shift to accommodate simultaneous online/offline participation.²⁰ Though more people may prefer going to the worship service in person, at least at this stage, a substantial percentage of the worshipping body has no preference between the two options, has not missed in-person attendance, or prefer watching services online or on TV.²¹ The results of the Pew Research Center Survey (Nov 2022) shows that two-thirds of U.S. adults who regularly stream religious services online or watch them on TV say they are either “extremely satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the services they see.²² When it is

¹⁹ Many churches in my context now offer the worship service information with two options for people to choose from: in-person or live-stream.

²⁰ Lisa Hancock, “Worship Online: Digital and Embodied,” *Discipleship Ministries* (posted September 15, 2022). <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/worship-online-digital-and-embodied> (accessed January 12, 2024).

²¹ Faverio, Nortey, Diamant and Smith, “Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular.”

²² Faverio, Nortey, Diamant and Smith, “Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular.”

viewed as equivalent or replaceable, on-site attendance is predictable to be reduced. As one pastor in mainland China has expressed the decisive reason to discontinue the use of Zoom after the severe pandemic period, “As long as Zoom is permitted, people would find excuses not to come to the in-person church meetings.”²³ This may be what most pastors have experienced for their church members’ worship attendance, too.

On the Personal Level

1. Promotion of self-centeredness and individualistic behavior

The worry of the above-mentioned Chinese pastor is understandably valid because when the choice is in our hands, it means we are sitting in the driver’s seat. We can make decisions about our worship. Not only can we choose how to experience our worship, we can reshuffle all the things we need to do with new consideration and weight. We will most likely follow our personal preferences and become more self-centered given this new freedom. The consecration of a designated time every week will not be as high a priority as before. Worship and liturgy can become an on-demand item just like millions of other on-demand videos. The choice is totally at our own discretion. Not only the worship date and time can be floating and flexible, every part of the on-demand worship service experience

²³ Sean Cheng and Angela Lu Fulton, “Chinese Christians Use Zoom for Church. Their Government Is Making That Harder,” *Christianity Today* (posted November 30, 2023). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/november-web-only/zoom-difficulties-china-house-churches-ministry.html> (accessed January 4, 2024).

itself can be adapted according to one's desire. One can effortlessly shorten the worship service by selecting a certain part or several parts of a worship service to view by simply sliding the time bar of the video. The opt-in and out of the worship services will not be noticed and felt awkward as in the in-person services. One can also choose the speed of the video like watching tons of other videos in their daily lives, saving their time and getting the gist. In this regard, the worship services may not be considered as necessary, obligatory, and essential as before. Ironically, when something is here to stay, for example, the videos will not be removed within a short time, one may feel that it is not urgent or the priority for it will be comparatively lowered as something may deem to be more urgent and important. What is at stake here?

First, the freedom to worship at any time alone by oneself eliminates the multiple reactions and interactions that “mark up the meaning-making aspect of the liturgy itself.”²⁴ This may instill a version of worship that is self-contained and self-focused, without anyone to interact with. Secondly, as Prof. Mark Labberton has argued, “every dimension of self-centered living becomes endangered as we come to share God's self-giving heart” in our worship.²⁵ However, the worship service itself as presented with digital mediation seems to encourage and uphold an even more self-centered way of participation than in in-person settings. At the lowest threshold to enter into the discipline of self-giving—being willing to meet and gather with God's people—may be the first step of practicing

²⁴ C. Andrew Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy: Virtual Reality and Liturgical Theology in Conversation* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2021), 97 of 362 (Everand version).

²⁵ Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God's Call to Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 14.

denial to ourselves. (Matt 16:24, NIV) The action of showing up to church is to serve others because “to gather is to encourage” and this ministry is called “the ministry of attendance,” as coined by Matt Smethurst, editor at The Gospel Coalition, based on Hebrews 10:24–25.²⁶ Additionally, in some more radical cases, the pick-and-choose habit for spiritual elements from the online worship services one feels right for himself or herself may risk lacking the “correctives of a community and the wisdom embedded in a religious tradition.”²⁷ What is extremely alarming is that the worshippers may gradually become their own gods if it has gone too far.²⁸

2. Individual worship experience

While churches are well known for bringing people together in a physical venue where they can sing and pray alongside with each other, online worship experience may generate a starkly contrasting solitary experience for the viewer. According to the Pew Research Center Survey (Nov 2022), about half (51%) of those who regularly watch religious services online or on TV say they generally watch these services alone and 23% say “it depends.”²⁹ When people attend digitally mediated worship services, they become more inactive and many of them would stop participating in the worship acts they normally do when attending in person, such as praying out loud, reciting creeds and Scriptures,

²⁶ Matt Smethurst, “The Church Irreplaceable,” *Desiring God* (posted July 19, 2020). <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-church-irreplaceable> (accessed January 18, 2024).

²⁷ Craig M. Mueller, *Any Body There? Worship and Being Human in a Digital Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 124 of 225 (Everand version).

²⁸ Mueller, *Any Body There?* 125 of 225 (Everand version).

²⁹ Faverio, Nortey, Diamant and Smith, “Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular.”

singing, standing or kneeling.³⁰ And it is found that for those who continue to do what they normally would do at services in person, they are more likely to feel like active participants than those who do not participate in those kinds of actions.³¹ Moreover, for viewers who are not watching the services alone but with others, they are also more likely to feel connected to other virtual worshippers and to those who are worshipping at the same service in person though in general, in-person worshippers still have much stronger feelings of connection to others worshippers.³² Therefore, the solitary watching of the worship service may possibly undermine the whole experience of worship which is supposed to be communal and participatory. When the worshippers do not response with their bodies, or response with less bodily actions, they may risk gaining a lessened expressive and formative experience. For example, there will not be a genuine passing of peace with words heard and bodily gestures expressed and felt, and the worshippers may need to use extra imagination for the “gathered and sent” metaphor of God’s people since they did not physically gathered with others but only stay in the same place before and after the worship services. Moreover, it is natural for us to use a different tone and dynamic level in our voices according to the sensed physical and social distances between ourselves and others.³³ When we worship online alone in a small room, for example, we

³⁰ The Nov 2022 Pew Research Center Survey also finds that most regular viewers (61%) say that when they are watching services on a screen, they typically do not do things they would normally do when attending in person. See Faverio, Nortey, Diamant and Smith, “Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular.”

³¹ Faverio, Nortey, Diamant and Smith, “Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular.”

³² Faverio, Nortey, Diamant and Smith, “Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular.”

³³ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space, and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 15.

may not project our voice and raise our tones in singing or reciting creeds and prayers as we will do so in a sanctuary space since the space is relatively small and we are not with others.³⁴ It may appear to the worshipper that no matter what he or she will do before the screen, it will not add or subtract anything in the sanctuary and the one-way delivery of message and meaning may discourage the worshippers to participate. This weakened expression of faith and devotion may have long term and profound consequence on our spiritual formation.

In our worship, all of our bodily actions are supposedly to signify the “harmony between our spirits and bodies” and through those actions, we intentionally reorient ourselves to God “spiritually and bodily.”³⁵ Moreover, the solitary and physically isolated worship experience without any fellowship time with brothers and sisters in the church, when becoming a normal practice in a Christian’s life, may also risk contradicting and undermining the teaching of the metaphor of the Church as a body which enlightens us about the power and importance of communal Christian life (1 Cor 12:12, 21, 27, NIV). Solitary worshippers may gradually presume that God is “primarily present to us one-on-one, as individuals rather than as a community of believers.”³⁶ One more possible outcome is that although the worshippers seem to have connection with their church through online

³⁴ At least for the people in my context, our living space is generally small as housing is extremely costly. The average living space is only 16 square meter per capita. See “2021 Population Census,” *Census and Statistics Department, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region* <https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/scode600.html> (accessed March 12, 2024).

³⁵ Simeon Ximian Xu, “AI Can Preach and Sing. So Why Can’t It Worship God?” *Christianity Today* (posted August 25, 2022). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/august-web-only/artificial-intelligence-praise-worship-body-carbon.html> (accessed 11 January, 2024).

³⁶ Laura Turner, “Internet Church Isn’t Really Church,” *The New York Times* (posted December 15, 2018). <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/15/opinion/sunday/church-live-streaming-religion.html> (accessed January 18, 2024).

worship, they may still feel lonely paradoxically in case they do not have the chance to be physically present with the members of their social networks including the church.³⁷ This may also mean for the worshippers to only consume content on their own rather than requiring any involvements for a deep-rooted connectedness with the community.³⁸

Another practical issue is that it is natural and beneficial for the new worshippers to learn the behaviors and actions from the role models of other experienced worshippers. When the new online worshippers, or the “online-worship natives,” can only see the upper bodies of the liturgists or preachers most of the time from the screen, they will not have the same mentality and entrenchment for the worship actions as those who worship in person.³⁹ And instead of being shaped and formed by the totality and vibe of the worship space, online worshippers are molded by the images from the screen all through the worship experience.

3. Laziness and distraction

Convenience may also promote laziness to certain extent. If joining online worship means minimum preparation and use of time, and we treasure this as its strength, it may demand less the motivation of

³⁷ The rise of networked individualism may contribute to this paradox. See Barry Wellman, “Little Boxes, Glocalization, and Networked Individualism,” in Makoto Tanabe, Peter van den Besselaar, Toru Ishida. (eds) *Digital Cities II: Computational and Sociological Approaches. Digital Cities 2001. Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, vol 2362. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg. https://doi.org/10.1007/3-540-45636-8_2 (accessed January 24, 2024).

³⁸ Kate Shellnutt, “Why Church Can’t Be the Same after the Pandemic,” *Christianity Today* (posted June 21, 2021). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/july-august/church-after-covid-pandemic-trauma-tension-healing-together.html> (accessed January 31, 2024).

³⁹ For “online-worship natives,” I mean for those who have never worshipped in a sanctuary in person but have only worshipped by the online format from day one.

offering our best to God at the same time. It may speak of the contrary message against the sacrificial call from the cross of Christ. Rev. Justin Coleman, the senior pastor at University United Methodist Church, has even called online worship as “couch worship.”⁴⁰ If we are accustomed to a relaxed and comfortable posture, for example, lying on the couch or bed, and a laidback mood and spirit in joining online worship, it may also impact adversely the determined and demanding mind of following Christ. Such practices may pose a conflict with the submission of one’s will to Jesus’ command, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind.” (Luke 10:27, NIV) Adding to that, human’s habits, once formed, may not be reformed so easily. As Rev. Sarah Taylor Peck has shared, an 82-year-old longtime church member, who has not returned to the in-person worship, frankly admits to her that “he simply wasn’t getting dressed in the mornings anymore.”⁴¹ This is not unusual today. The routine of many worshippers has been altered and new priorities have emerged in most people’s lives after the pandemic period.

The smart devices we use for online worship are always contributing to our stress level by persistently raising levels of cortisol, the body’s key stress hormone.⁴² Maybe we do not consciously notice it, even when our phones are merely in sight, our cortisol levels are elevated and thus the

⁴⁰ Gross, “People in the Pews: Who’s Missing, Who’s Hiding, Who’s Comfortable on the Couch?”

⁴¹ Gross, “People in the Pews: Who’s Missing, Who’s Hiding, Who’s Comfortable on the Couch?”

⁴² Catherine Price, “Putting down Your Phone May Help You Live Longer,” *The New York Times* (posted April 24, 2019). <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/well/mind/putting-down-your-phone-may-help-you-live-longer.html> (accessed January 23, 2024).

anxiety to check the phone will be our body's normal reaction.⁴³ Nowadays, when we are engaging in a task or activity, we may at the same time be anxious and think that we are on the brink of missing something on our devices.⁴⁴ Using these devices to watch our worship services may mean that our mind and hearts cannot effortlessly pay full attention to the worship and thus risking more distractions during the whole worship services. That is why Doctorow states that the use of multi-function digital devices propel us into the "ecosystem of interruption technologies."⁴⁵

Moreover, when one worships online at home, the distraction level will be higher also because we will be prone to a familiar household environment to react to different needs and possible activities. One may even think he or she can multitask like they are having a Zoom video call or watching TV. However, the fact is that our brains can only process a single thing at a time and when we seem to be doing different tasks simultaneously, we actually are completely switching back and forth amid tasks.⁴⁶ Even if one is to read over the responses or write a comment in the chatroom while singing a song or listening to the sermon during an online worship, at that precise moment, they may not be able to sing the song or listen to the sermon with full attention, and will then miss the flow or content, and need to reengage later. Therefore, it is imaginable that when one is engaging

⁴³ Price, "Putting down Your Phone May Help You Live Longer."

⁴⁴ Brett McKay and Kate McKay, "The Complete Guide to Breaking Your Smartphone Habit," *Art of Manliness* (posted February 22, 2016, last updated July 2, 2023). <https://www.artofmanliness.com/character/habits/break-smartphone-habit/> (accessed January 25, 2024).

⁴⁵ Nicholas Carr quotes Cory Doctorow in Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2020), 91.

⁴⁶ Renuka Rayasam, "You Probably Suffer from Scattered Brain Syndrome," *BBC* (posted December 12, 2016). <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20161208-you-probably-suffer-from-scattered-brain-syndrome> (accessed January 25, 2024).

in other activities at the same time when worshipping online, the distraction and scattered attention will be more severe. Furthermore, in order to transform a space into a worship space, at least our behaviors and conduct should be “congruent with the otherworldliness of the space” in order to be “immersed in an aura of mystery and symbolic otherworldliness” so that our state of mind can afford some “nontrivial religious experience.”⁴⁷ Therefore, the multitasking behaviors and split attention while joining online worship before a screen may not help us to transform our space into a worship space and engender a profound religious experience.

Zoom videos, which are fatigue-causing due to loss of non-verbal cues, will drain more of our energy and exhaust our attention because our bodies cannot sense that we are actually together though our minds are together.⁴⁸ The two dimensional image on the screen will not allow us to accomplish the ideal grip on the communicative process in our in-person setting and so it will be more difficult for us to “perceive our conversation partners as part of a cohesive perceptive field” but only as “truncated” as “parts of a representation within another object of perception, the screen.”⁴⁹ Energy drainage, which may cause further distraction, is a problem, and any moment of silence during a Zoom time may make people feel anxious and unpleasant. According to a study by German academics, “delays on phone or conferencing systems shaped our views of people negatively: even

⁴⁷ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, anniversary ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 119.

⁴⁸ Manyu Jiang, “The Reason Zoom Calls Drain Your Energy,” *BBC* (posted April 23, 2020). <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200421-why-zoom-video-chats-are-so-exhausting> (accessed January 31, 2024).

⁴⁹ Michael Sacasas, “A Theory of Zoom Fatigue,” *The Convivial Society*, Dispatch, no.5 (posted April 21, 2020). <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/a-theory-of-zoom-fatigue> (accessed January 31, 2024).

delays of 1.2 seconds made people perceive the responder as less friendly or focused.”⁵⁰ Marissa Shuffler, an associate professor at Clemson University, who studies workplace wellbeing and teamwork effectiveness, has offered one more factor to note: when we are on camera, we will naturally be aware that we are being watched and need to behave to certain expectation.⁵¹ This can be energy draining and panicky, too. During a Zoom video time, as described by Michael Sacasas, “the usual ‘I’ in the ‘I-Thou’ relation” will somehow be changed to “an ‘I-Me-Thou’ relation” because we will be heeding our own images and the images of the other participants all the time.⁵² For some more extreme cases especially among young adults, people may feel anxious about their usually distorted appearance on the screen, complicated by the overwhelming edited and filtered images on social media, to a damaging impact level on their self-perception.⁵³ If we are having Zoom worship services, all these possible conditions may unavoidably affect the attention and concentration of the worshippers to various degrees.

The technical issue of digitally mediated worship can be recurrent and disturbing to certain extent. Since not every church can afford to have the most up-to-date equipment and hardware as television stations, the quality of the livestream, or prerecorded version of the worship services may not be satisfactory or up to professional level. On the other hand, since not every worshipper can afford to have a stable and strong WIFI and latest models of digital devices, the quality of the

⁵⁰ Jiang, “The Reason Zoom Calls Drain Your Energy.”

⁵¹ Jiang, “The Reason Zoom Calls Drain Your Energy.”

⁵² Sacasas, “A Theory of Zoom Fatigue.”

⁵³ Amit Katwala, “Zoom Dysmorphia Is Following People into the Real World,” *WIRED* (posted August 30, 2021). <https://www.wired.com/story/zoom-dysmorphia-the-real-world/> (accessed January 31, 2024).

worship services may be affected in various degrees, be it the half-second delay on Zoom, slow loading or buffering videos, the intermittent freeze of image due to instable WIFI, or the distortion in sound. All these may further contribute to the distraction for the worshippers.

4. Loss of meaning and expression

Although the online worshippers can see what is going on in the front part of the sanctuary through the screen, different worship actions will lose certain meanings when one is not present in the sanctuary with others. Online worshippers will not be able to feel the powerful moving sound from the processional of the choirs. They will not be able to shake hands or hug others during the passing of peace and speak the blessing words to a fellow worshipper. They will not be able to walk down the aisle from the back to the front to the altar to receive the communion elements. The implication of the communion being taken at home alone may at least alter or diminish the communal aspect of the liturgical action, if not the theological aspect. Worshiping online will alter the act of giving or offering. From placing the checks, coins, or notes on the offering plate to autopay donation or other digital channels for donation, we may lose the physical reminder of sacrificing and offering as a response to God every week. As Daniel Darling, director of Southwestern Seminary's Land Center for Cultural Engagement, has reflected, "we might be reducing the act of giving to a mere transaction. Do we lose the sacred rhythms of giving, such an important of worship from Old Testament to New, when the offering becomes something we do in between buying printer cartridges

on Amazon and scrolling through Instagram?”⁵⁴ He proposes that there is something to the act of giving physically. It is certainly an act of worship from which springs more gratitude and obedience for all Christians though we may need renewed symbolic ways to ritualize giving even those transactions that are made digitally.⁵⁵ Moreover, one can no longer sense the needs of others and offer help easily because they are not in sight any more. And there will be no chance to talk to anyone during the time before and after worship. Though the chat box may be a possible place to offer exchanges of a few words, it is not a place for deeper or more personal sharing and discussion.

Another concern is the inevitable loss of non-verbal language and cues when we worship via the digital mediated version. Not only that we cannot see the whole environment with congregations performing worship acts, usually, we can merely see the upper part of the bodies of the worship leaders and preachers, their physically apparent emotions and non-verbal cues may be easily diminished if not totally lost. Research by Robson shows that approximately 60–80% of our face-to-face communication is non-verbal language, and these cues “bring energy and motional nuance to our message.”⁵⁶ Essentially, face-to-face communication is definitely the richest medium according to Media Richness Theory (MRT), which has been developed by Richard Daft and Robert Lengel in 1986.⁵⁷ This theory supposes the content of a message and the communication medium should be a

⁵⁴ Daniel Darling, “What Happens When Apps Replace the Offering Plate?” *Christianity Today* (posted September 28, 2021). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2021/fall/apps-replace-offering-plate-giving-corporate-worship.html> (accessed January 11, 2024).

⁵⁵ Darling, “What Happens When Apps Replace the Offering Plate?”

⁵⁶ David Robson, “The Digital Body Language Cues You Send—or Don't Send.” *BBC* (posted June 24, 2021). <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210617-the-digital-body-language-cues-you-send-or-dont-send> (accessed January 18, 2024).

⁵⁷ Nina Jablonski, “Media Richness,” in “2017: What Scientific Term or Concept Ought to Be More Widely Known?”

good fit for ultimate effectiveness. It is imaginable that in an online worship setting, the diminishment of the meaning of the message will be more acute than in an in-person setting. Besides the possible communication loss from the leading side, since most online worshippers may only sit, or even lie down, when they are watching the worship services, they may start to be affected by this kind of “soul only” worship, as coined by Prof. David Taylor, which “prioritizes the invisible activities of the heart and mind over and against the visible activities of the body.”⁵⁸

5. Audience mode of the online worshippers

Online worshippers may unconsciously be drawn into a passive audience mode when they are solely watching worship services. It is common for the churches to use the word “watch” for the online worship in their announcements or on their websites. The word “watch” indicates a similar audienceship as watching TV or YouTube videos. According to the results of the Pew Research Center Survey (Nov 2022), 32% of the regular viewers say they feel they are watching “without truly being an active participant” and 42% say they feel being both active and inactive at different times while watching.⁵⁹ In this case, they are easily prone to experiencing worship as purely a performance of others. Or maybe they will put even more emphasis on the sermon because their

Edge (posted January 1, 2017). <https://www.edge.org/response-detail/27212> (accessed June 21, 2022).

⁵⁸ W. David O. Taylor, “Hymns and Neurons: How Worship Rewires Our Brains and Bonds Us Together,” *Christianity Today* (posted August 29, 2022). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/august-web-only/worship-church-music-hymns-brains-bond-together.html> (accessed February 27, 2024).

⁵⁹ Faverio, Nortey, Diamant and Smith, “Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular.”

default mode is to receive something from the performance. Moreover, everything they will hear from the livestream or pre-recorded videos is digitally mediated, and that means technically speaking, they are most likely to hear the “signal” but not what has deemed to be the “noise,” the more authentic environment and emotions, when the sounds are being processed.⁶⁰ This may further emphasize the audience mode of the worshippers. Since the cameras usually focus on the leaders but not the congregants, this may reinforce the audience mode as the screen images resemble other TV shows and entertainment programs. Moreover, since people are so accustomed to watching films and dramas with their devices, it may even become difficult for them to differentiate an online worship video from a Netflix series.⁶¹ The danger of this levelling is that something originally should bring us enchantment and transcendence becomes entertainment and performance which may distance us from sacredness instead of giving us access to it.⁶²

One other possible undesirable result of the audience mode is that watching the worship services of different churches may unintentionally cause the viewers to compare the different worship services at all levels including the sermon messages, songs selection, music presentation and leadership, musical skills, IT and technical support merely through worship videos and screens. Unavoidably, the comments and comparisons may be biased and un-informed. The online

⁶⁰ Eli Gottlieb, “Analog Faith in a Digital Age,” *Religion and Politics* (posted March 17, 2021). <https://religionandpolitics.org/2021/03/17/analog-faith-in-a-digital-age/> (accessed January 12, 2024).

⁶¹ Janet Adamy, “Churches Changed during the Pandemic and Many Aren’t Going back,” *The Wall Street Journal* (posted November 12, 2021). <https://www.wsj.com/articles/church-pandemic-covid-online-11636728162> (accessed January 16, 2024).

⁶² Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 122.

worshippers may also choose to watch worship services with the celebrity pastors or any preachers they feel fond of and thus shifting their focus when they worship. Both pastors and worshippers may forget the uniqueness of their own community and watching many worship videos fuels comparisons among congregations.⁶³ On the other hand, in order to have comparable sound quality for recordings or to secure sound perfection online, churches have used Auto-Tune or other pitch-correction software for their singers in the worship services.⁶⁴ This practice also impacts the online worship experience to be one of watching a performance since there may not be sounds from the congregation but only the leaders or the band with perfectly tuned music. Adding to the passivity of the viewers, the remoteness of watching online worship services may also diminish the “power and majesty of certain rituals” because they were not originally designed to work in any remote situations.⁶⁵ Taking music as an example. Initially the congregation was to sing together as the primary choir in the worship service, so that they are supposed to co-create and re-create the music together, not to consume the music.⁶⁶ In any event, if we are only an audience or listener, we will expect enjoying good shows and stirring messages but not attend to our duty and responsibility to participate as a gathered congregation.⁶⁷ The mentality of the online worshippers is that “their

⁶³ Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 53.

⁶⁴ Bob Smietana, “For Church Worship Teams, Auto-Tune Covers a Multitude of Sins. Especially Online,” *The Washington Post* (posted June 23, 2023). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2023/06/23/church-worship-teams-auto-tune-covers-multitude-sins-especially-online/> (accessed January 12, 2024).

⁶⁵ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “What Science Can Tell Us about the Benefits of Religion,” *The Washington Post* (posted October 5, 2021). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/10/05/science-benefits-religion/> (accessed January 12, 2024).

⁶⁶ Andy Crouch quoted by Jay Kim. See Kim, *Analog Church*, 65.

⁶⁷ Kenneth Reid, “Why Can’t I Just Go To Church Online?” *Relevant* (posted October 11, 2017). <https://relevantmagazine.com/faith/church/why-cant-i-just-go-to-church-online/> (accessed January 31, 2024).

presence doesn't matter" especially when one is worshiping with a megachurch congregation.⁶⁸ For Dr. Richard Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, when Christians have the nobody-notice mentality and thinks the online option is as good as the onsite one, they probably misjudge the importance of their presence, underrate the power of the Holy Spirit residing within them, and also cannot know what God wants to do through them and for them if they had shown up.⁶⁹ In the worst-case scenario, we may be merely receiving "spiritual data" if our bodies are inactively relaxing at home for online worship.⁷⁰

6. Consumerism versus commitment

Tish Harrison Warren, an Anglican priest, worries that "offering both online and in-person services risks turning Sunday worship into a consumer experience."⁷¹ And this view is also echoed by Jeff Reed of theChurch.Digital who indicates that if the online church is not influencing the offline life and relationships of the worshippers, then the online world is only producing consumers.⁷² The influence may be partially reflected in the service and volunteering for the church. According to the Pew Research Center Survey (Nov 2022), nearly 40% of the virtual viewers watch services from two

⁶⁸ Lillian Kwon, "Why Go to Church When You Can Watch Online?" *The Christian Post* (posted June 7, 2012). <https://www.christianpost.com/news/why-go-to-church-when-you-can-watch-online.html> (accessed January 31, 2024).

⁶⁹ Kwon, "Why Go to Church When You Can Watch Online?"

⁷⁰ W. David O. Taylor, *A Body of Praise: Understanding the Role of Our Physical Bodies in Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023), 3.

⁷¹ Smietana and Evans, "Streaming Online Has Been a Boon for Churches, a Godsend for Isolated."

⁷² Rachel Pfeiffer, "Online Church Attendance Retains Some of Its Pandemic Boost," *Christianity Today* (posted April 7, 2023). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/april/online-worship-pandemic-digital-church-attendance-pew-minis.html> (accessed March 14, 2024).

or more congregations and only 26% of regular viewers say they exclusively watch services offered by the house of worship they generally attend.⁷³ In fact, about one-in-five typically watch services offered by a different house of worship while about the same number of worshippers watch both the services from their home church as well as other congregations.⁷⁴ Interestingly, the second major reason for viewing online worship is that the worshippers are able to watch services that are far from their home.⁷⁵ In this case, it will probably discourage any face-to-face meetings because of the long physical distance. If they only join online worship services, then relationships are difficult to develop and pastoral care is not expected because the only indicator of the attendance may be the view count for the churches to notice.

Not merely the attendance should be an important issue, engagement and volunteering should be even a more critical issue for the church members. According to Scott Thumma, the principal researcher for the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) study and director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, who led the study, “churches that focus on growing through virtual worship will find that engagement will lag behind churches that focus on growing through in-person attendance.”⁷⁶ On the other hand, Thumma has found that congregations that have healthy

⁷³ Faverio, Nortey, Diamant and Smith, “Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular.”

⁷⁴ Faverio, Nortey, Diamant and Smith, “Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular.”

⁷⁵ Faverio, Nortey, Diamant and Smith, “Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular.”

⁷⁶ Shari Finnell, “Church Attendance Is Still Evolving in a Post-pandemic World,” *Faith & Leadership* (posted August 8, 2023). <https://faithandleadership.com/church-attendance-still-evolving-post-pandemic-world> (accessed January 16, 2024).

numbers of people attending services and programs in person are more likely to receive robust giving and call for robust volunteering, and will have many more devoted people.⁷⁷ This may also be because it is practically easier for pastors to invite someone to serve by face-to-face invitation than asking someone exclusively worshipping online to serve even if they have not forgotten the online church members. And in a survey on the impact of the pandemic on America's churches conducted in 2023, the results show that "in congregations where there are more virtual worshippers than in-person worshippers, the median per capita giving was \$1,053. In congregations where most of the attendees are in person and few are virtual, giving was \$2,479 per capita."⁷⁸ This result validates our concern about the engagement and the commitment of the virtual worshippers. And it is not surprising because it is found in a survey that "the *more* people are online, the *less* their sense of belonging to an online community."⁷⁹ There is also a danger of an illusion of companionship that it can exist without the expectation of friendship and intimacy.⁸⁰ In any case, it is undesirable that more and more Christians are becoming or on the verge of becoming "tasters or connoisseurs of churches."⁸¹ Maybe it is time for us to reflect on the nature of the kind of fragmented connection

⁷⁷ Finnell, "Church Attendance Is Still Evolving in a Post-pandemic World."

⁷⁸ Bob Smietana, "Giving Is Up at Churches and People Are Back, but Clergy Are Still Thinking about Quitting," *Religion News Service* (posted September 5, 2023). <https://religionnews.com/2023/09/05/giving-is-up-at-churches-and-people-are-back-but-clergy-are-thinking-about-quitting/> (accessed January 18, 2024).

⁷⁹ Wellman, "Little Boxes, Glocalization, and Networked Individualism," in Makoto Tanabe, Peter van den Besselaar, Toru Ishida. (eds) *Digital Cities II: Computational and Sociological Approaches*. Digital Cities 2001. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 2362. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg. Original emphasis.

⁸⁰ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 7.

⁸¹ As quoted by Mia Staub, the warning by C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* where the devil writes to his protégé, "Surely you know that if a man can't be cured of churchgoing, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighborhood looking for the church that 'suits' him until he becomes a taster or connoisseur of churches." See Mia Staub, "Don't Let Yourself Be 'Cured of Churchgoing,'" *Christianity Today* (posted January 9, 2024). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2024/january-web-only/gen-z-faith-college-search-attendance-stats-cured-of-church.html> (accessed January 25, 2024).

fostered by online opportunities and the long-term consequences on the unity, engagement, and commitment for a community.

On the Congregational Level

1. Investment, resources, and maintenance

For most churches, even if they have resolved to add an online option for the worship services, they will still need to face other challenges including inquiring the technological knowledge and skills, costs incurred for installing related software and hardware, calculating extra staffing hours, recruiting volunteers, coaching related personnel, reflecting on the ministry philosophy for the online appearance of the church.⁸² All of these involve investment, manpower, maintenance, planning, coordination, and expertise to certain extent. For smaller churches, the burden may all be added onto the shoulders of the senior pastor or a few volunteers. This may also contribute in less noticeable ways to clergy feeling burnout and considering leaving the church and ministry altogether in the post-pandemic time.⁸³ And in order to maintain online worship services, in-person worship may be affected in some contexts. For example, a camera and other equipment will be placed in the front of

⁸² Pfeiffer, "Online Church Attendance Retains Some of Its Pandemic Boost."

⁸³ According to a nationwide survey in 2023 in US, "those thinking of quitting the ministry entirely were more likely to be pastors of smaller churches and those who work solo, compared with those on larger staffs and at larger churches." See Peter Smith, "US Pastors Struggle with Post-pandemic Burnout. Survey Shows Half Considered Quitting Since 2020," *AP News* (posted January 11, 2024). <https://apnews.com/article/christian-clergy-burnout-pandemic-survey-24ee46327438ff46b074d234ffe2f58c> (accessed January 25, 2024).

the sanctuary and making the front part appear like a production house. Some churches have simplified the worship order and content to make the online worshippers feeling more engaged.

2. The platform for online worship

One of the ways to livestream worship services is through social media platforms. Facebook is one of the most popular choices. However, as Bonnie Kristian, editorial director of ideas and books at *Christianity Today*, has proposed that the medium itself will “meaningfully reframe or outright change the message. . . by trivializing it and pulling our attention away.”⁸⁴ One of the perils is the disorientation when the worship services have to “compete for our attention with the insane memes, political screeds, and endless scroll of frivolity we encounter at the same time and place on Facebook.”⁸⁵ Our testimony of faith will then be put on the same level with “Vote for this candidate,” “Buy this shirt,” and “Get likes for sharing this meme.”⁸⁶ Why is that so? The platform itself is designed for “triviality and distraction” and “helping advertisers and platforms profit in the ‘attention economy.’”⁸⁷ In fact, according to Neil Postman, an educator and media theorist, “the main message of the screen itself is a continual promise of entertainment” which is “against the idea that introspection or spiritual transcendence is desirable in its presence.”⁸⁸ This is so because only

⁸⁴ Bonnie Kristian, “Why Church Shouldn’t Just Be on Facebook,” *Christianity Today* (posted October 6, 2021). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/october-web-only/social-media-attention-church-shouldnt-just-be-on-facebook.html> (accessed January 18, 2024).

⁸⁵ Kristian, “Why Church Shouldn’t Just Be on Facebook.”

⁸⁶ Kristian, “Why Church Shouldn’t Just Be on Facebook.”

⁸⁷ Kristian, “Why Church Shouldn’t Just Be on Facebook.”

⁸⁸ Though for Postman, the screen is the television but the screens of our devices are even more multi-functional including a television. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 120.

by one click or scroll, people will be seeing commercials, secular messages and events, and even anti-Christian messages. When Postman suggests that TV screens is strongly biased toward “a psychology of secularism” and they are “so saturated with our memories of profane events,” maybe we can also reflect on the difficulties for us to recreate our screens, whether they be our TV screens or screens of our digital devices, as a frame for sacred events, too.⁸⁹ In the worst scenario, one views profane contents, even pornography or hate speech contents, on the same device with which one joins online worship. What will be the implication and theological reflection on the spiritual formation for the worshipper?

Because of the sharp increase in the use of the platform since the pandemic period, however, Meta (formerly the Facebook Company) is escalating formal partnerships with faith groups and thus will definitely influence the future of religious experience.⁹⁰ In this respect, when the pastors and leaders use the social media as the platform for worship live stream, it should not be without any legitimate concerns. As commercial enterprises, the social media platforms will prioritize decisions for generating maximum income from advertisements though superficially, they seem to aim at promote connection among people. Though churches heavily depend on or consider partnering with Facebook, the goals of the two parties will be understandably and ultimately different at the onset. While the churches’ goal is engaging people to worship God with all their hearts and minds, and be

⁸⁹ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 119.

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Dias, “Facebook’s Next Target: The Religious Experience,” *The New York Times* (posted July 25, 2021, updated June 22, 2023). <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/25/us/facebook-church.html> (accessed January 18, 2024).

renewed spiritually, Facebook's marketing experts' aim may be placing relevant advertisements into the eyes of the users when they enter the virtual sanctuary on their platforms.⁹¹ Facebook even proposes to show advertisements during video streams if the churches have no objection when partnering for more features.⁹² Besides maximizing advertisement possibilities, Facebook also claims the copyright of the new products which have been co-developed with the participating churches. Furthermore, Facebook provides monetization features for the churches to gain new revenue streams in which, for example, one pays for receiving exclusive messages from the bishop.⁹³ To pay for exclusive spiritual benefits within the church setting may sound somewhat like the buying of indulgences during the pre-Reformation period for one's spiritual benefit. Though these practices may encourage a steady source of traffic and revenue for Facebook, churches need to rethink seriously the positioning and theological implication for whatever they are doing on the social media platforms. After all, the platforms have their own agendas in providing the services which will make people to respond in a certain way.⁹⁴

When people share some of their most intimate life situations with their spiritual communities on the platform, "the potential for Facebook to gather valuable user information creates 'enormous' concerns", said Sarah Lane Ritchie, a lecturer in theology and science at the University of

⁹¹ When the digital cluelessness 84-year-old US Senator Orin Hatch asked Mark Zuckerberg, "How do you sustain a business model in which users don't pay for your service?" in 2018, Zuckerberg's answer was "Senator, we run ads." See Nicholas Agar, "Why Creative Workers Should Go with Our Guts about ChatGPT," *ABC* (posted January 31, 2023). <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/why-creative-workers-should-be-worried-about-chatgpt/101913046> (accessed January 17, 2024).

⁹² Dias, "Facebook's Next Target: The Religious Experience."

⁹³ Dias, "Facebook's Next Target: The Religious Experience."

⁹⁴ Sax, *The Future is Analog*, 232.

Edinburgh.⁹⁵ Not only does Facebook gather data from its own users, the corporation also actively explores opportunities and buys “granular data about the content” from other faith-based for-profit apps.⁹⁶ In addition to privacy concerns, church leaders need to remember that the platforms are not guaranteed to be permanent. They can threaten to block users or pull content at any time if there are policies or situations not favoring their business goals.⁹⁷ Elizabeth Dias notes that “it is dangerous to have your community anchored ‘on a tech platform that is susceptible to all the whims of politics and culture and congressional hearings.’”⁹⁸ Commercial corporations are not likely to care too much about moral codes and, as a Facebook spokeswoman has frankly admitted, the data Facebook collected from faith groups will be handled the same way as that of other users only, and that “nondisclosure agreements will be standard process for all partners involved in product development.”⁹⁹ Even if it is not about privacy, ethics, and other commercial and political considerations, we are always under the manipulation of the social media platforms. The design of the interface of the social media, which changes occasionally according to the corporate primacies, “mediate(s) how we relate to the kinds of culture that we consume through apps.”¹⁰⁰ Thus users will

⁹⁵ Dias, “Facebook’s Next Target: The Religious Experience.”

⁹⁶ Kameelah Mu’Min Rashad, Alex Jones, Heidi A. Campbell, and Emily Baker-White, “What We Can Learn about Privacy from Faith-based Apps,” *npr* (posted February 10, 2022). <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/10/1079944694/what-we-can-learn-about-privacy-from-faith-based-apps> (accessed January 18, 2024).

⁹⁷ Naomi Nix and Cristiano Lima-Strong, “Meta Threatens to Block News in California over Journalism Bill,” *The Washington Post* (posted May 31, 2023). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/05/31/meta-california-news-bill/> (accessed January 12, 2024).

⁹⁸ Dias, “Facebook’s Next Target: The Religious Experience.”

⁹⁹ Dias, “Facebook’s Next Target: The Religious Experience.”

¹⁰⁰ Kyle Chaka, “Why Twitter’s New Interface Makes Us Mad,” *The New Yorker* (posted August 19, 2021). <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/how-social-media-redesigns-manipulate-us> (accessed January 29, 2024).

be subject to the subtle formation of social media platforms and the values they espouse when using these platforms. Congregations risk that users will be formed in ways contrary to or that hinder Christian formation.

If churches decide to exclusively depend on certain platforms, for example, Facebook, to engage their members in the church life, they may also have excluded some church members who decide not to join any social media platforms for a variety of reasons.¹⁰¹ Should the church leaders allow that freedom for their church members? What rationale guides church leaders in exposing congregants as targets of the social media's advertisement or other possible influences when they attend online worship services?

3. Limitation on pastoral care and relationship building

Some pastors may be afraid that if they do not have a vigorous presence online, they will miss “the front door access” that people have to get into their church.¹⁰² This may be partially true. However, for churches using, for example, YouTube Channels, as the online worship platform, the pastors may not have access to data for those who have been worshiping with the congregation. Though online services may have connected with some people, pastoral care and relationship is not guaranteed

¹⁰¹ Some churches may require the church members to be Facebook users in order to view the livestream worship services because the video is not open to public.

¹⁰² Tess Schoonhoven, “Pandemic Prompts Churches to Consider Permanent Changes,” *Baptist Standard* (posted September 8, 2020). <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/baptists/pandemic-prompts-churches-to-consider-permanent-changes/> (accessed January 17, 2024).

naturally. Pastors will be aware of some unknown participants but receive no further information beyond the view counts, number of likes, occasional comments, and the cold analysis of viewing behavior of those using by the platform. Even if the view count indicates more than a million viewers, what is next? Can these people really can get into the church via the online “front door access” and be pastored in the way that God has intended for church leaders: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be?” (1 Pet 5:2) In case a brother or sister is connected with a pastor in another country, due to cultural difference, pastoral care and advice still may not be relevant and appropriate to certain extent. Not only is pastoral care an issue, but the preaching quality of the online pastors, may face severe challenges if they largely aim at maximizing the rating of their viewers. This may be because of the assumption of many television preachers: “you can get your share of the audience only by offering people something they want.”¹⁰³ So even if they have discerned the needs of the congregation, online pastors’ messages may need to be very user-friendly, more trivial and light-hearted, and promote prosperity and celebrities so that people will not too easily turn off their devices or switch to other channels.

4. Second-class worshippers

On a practical level, it is more difficult and challenging for the church leaders to actually

¹⁰³ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 121.

welcome the online worshippers besides saying a few lines of welcome note to them or type a few words on the chat box because the online viewers cannot be seen at all, especially in the case of livestreaming video on YouTube. Will the online worship option create a group of second-class worshippers within the same church though the viewers may not care or aware of? It is found that in the working scenario, there exists a problem of “Us” versus “Them” when there is only limited synchronous availability, conflicting goals and responsibilities, and uneven communication channels in partially distributed teams.¹⁰⁴ Generally speaking, this is a situation in which the “co-located members tend to treat one another as a preferential ‘Us’ versus treating distant members as the outsiders, ‘Them.’”¹⁰⁵ Thus, the congregation may develop a “two-track system of insiders and outsiders.”¹⁰⁶ This is undoubtedly not a desirable sign for the teaching and promotion of the unity of the church as a family or body.

This Us (insider) vs. Them (outsider) mentality may lead to an ironic situation in which appears that a connection is being established between the online worshipper and the church, but, in reality, leads to a disconnection because for the viewer, the worship experience is like looking at a magic crystal ball: you can see what is happening in the actual sanctuary, however, no one realizes you are there and cannot listen to what you are saying or singing. What one does will not contribute to or

¹⁰⁴ Robin Privman, Starr Roxanne Hiltz, and Yiran Wang, “In-Group (Us) versus Out-Group (Them) Dynamics and Effectiveness in Partially Distributed Teams,” *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 56, no. 1(2013): 33–49. <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/6457434> (accessed January 18, 2024).

¹⁰⁵ Privman, Hiltz, and Wang, “In-Group (Us) versus Out-Group (Them) Dynamics and Effectiveness in Partially Distributed Teams.”

¹⁰⁶ Kate Morgan, “Why In-person Workers May Be More Likely to Get Promoted.” *BBC* (posted March 8, 2021). <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210305-why-in-person-workers-may-be-more-likely-to-get-promoted> (accessed January 18, 2024).

impact anything happening in the sanctuary. It may be possibly true for the online worshipper to have a kind of lonely feeling after pressing the stop or pause icon on the screen when the worship is over. To certain extent, we may need to reflect whether we are encouraging more marginalized, unnoticed, and dispensable worshippers.

5. Preparing and taking communion at home

Though not all denominations favor worshippers taking communion elements at home by themselves, even for the churches which allow their members to do so, this may not guarantee a smooth sailing for all. Church leaders may not be thoughtful enough theologically and logistically to handle the communion for the online worshippers and they can only take care of the on-site worshippers to receive the communion. Maybe they assume the online worshippers at home will eagerly prepare the communion elements in advance and everything will be alright.¹⁰⁷ However, the fact is that many of the online worshippers may not be aware of the communion part in advance or they do not care to join this part as preparation is needed. Should they pause the video and prepare the elements, if they have something similar to the elements at home, and come back to the video or should they just follow the words of the leaders and join this part with their spirits? Many different scenario questions and concerns have also been asked by the online worshippers when coming to the

¹⁰⁷ The situation may be ironic. Even if churches provide a communion element set and the members receive it in advance, for those who decide to join online worship, will they spare a trip to go back to the church to get the communion set in advance? That may be a question.

question of preparing and taking the elements by themselves at home.¹⁰⁸ The reality and logistics is much more complicated than we can imagine indeed. Can the church leaders provide theologically sound answers to the online worshippers for their concerns?

6. Further issues

In some parts of the world where Christianity is under surveillance to various degrees, the worship videos may be viewed or alleged to be evidence for accusation later. This may lead to a possible peril of self-censorship to certain extent which is unfavorable for the proclamation of the biblical truth and teaching. There is also the privacy issue since worship leaders may share about the health situations and other life situations of their members, sometimes with photos, for intercessory prayers and this information will actually be disclosed to anyone in the world who has access to the platform rather than only to the congregation.

The Crossroads for Reflection and Renewal

Before the pandemic, the younger generation have already been feeling that the generation before them is “fixated on ‘production’” in worship instead of the transformation to live out worship commitments.¹⁰⁹ The advent of unavoidable online worship for nearly all churches during the

¹⁰⁸ I have heard of questions concerning the preparation and execution of the communion as these: Can I save a corner of the slice of bread from the breakfast for communion? Can I use coke instead of grape juice? What if I drop the bread to the floor? What if my dog also wants to eat the bread with me? What kind of bread should I use? And many more.

¹⁰⁹ Joan Huyser-Honig and Constance Cherry, “Constance Cherry on Competing Metaphors for Worship,” *Calvin Institute of Christian Worship* (posted February 15, 2019). <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource->

pandemic has tremendously forced worship services into giving more attention to the production dimensions including the quality of sound systems and image projection, and the audience experience via the screen. At the same time, most churches realized they need to simplify or adjust their worship orders, practices, and content, neglecting sufficient time for any theological reflection on the impact of the pandemic experience. Some changes may have already been staying since then even though in-person worship has been resumed.¹¹⁰ A need for fundamental worship renewal for churches to examine the changes made to their worship since the pandemic. This assessment concerns not only the upgrading of hardware, but the theological reflection and renewal also needs to take place in order to avoid a more intense fixation on the production of the worship services.

Michael Sacasas, a technological critic, has wisely compiled a set of questions for reflection on our relationship to various technologies and devices. We need to meditate on at least one of those questions: “What practices will the use of this technology (digitally mediated worship) displace?”¹¹¹

Or as the New Testament Professor Wesley Hill has rephrased it: “What might we lose and what might we tacitly encourage others to lose, forget or marginalize?”¹¹²

[library/constance-cherry-on-competing-metaphors-for-worship/](#) (accessed January 17, 2024).

¹¹⁰ For example, my home church has reduced the singing time to only one song before the sermon and up till now when I am writing this thesis in 2024, this practice is still being executed.

¹¹¹ Michael Sacasas, “The Questions Concerning Technology,” *The Convivial Society* 2, no.11 (posted June 5, 2021). <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/the-questions-concerning-technology#details> (accessed January 18, 2024).

¹¹² Wesley Hill, “Hard-Copy Bibles Aren’t Just Nostalgic,” *Christianity Today* (posted September 20, 2021). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/september-web-only/wesley-hill-why-i-bring-my-bible-to-church.html> (accessed January 18, 2024).

CHAPTER 2

PASTORAL RESPONSES TO THE HYBRID LIFE

“The medium, or process, of our time—electric technology—is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and reevaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted.”¹

Marshall McLuhan

As Faithful Stewards

It is evident in the New Testament that we are all called to be “faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Pet 4:10, NIV) and “to find out what pleases the Lord” (Eph 5:10, NIV).

Therefore, it is of utmost importance for us to discern the possible outcomes and impacts of the new situations and circumstances when we enter the period of the so-called “new normal.” We must refocus on our ultimate goal, beware of the potential hindrances to avoid, and “make the most of every opportunity” (Eph 5:16a, NIV). Church leaders need to demonstrate their thoughtful discernment on related matters and strive for “simply being awake and having a nose for what is going on beneath the surfaces, and having a sense for the more fitting response to it.”² This also means that pastors need to be open to give “a fair hearing” but not “a blanket endorsement” for any

¹ Themediumisthemessge.com, <https://www.themediumisthemessage.com/the-medium-or-process-of-our-time-electric-technology-is-reshaping-and-restructuring-patterns-of-social-interdependence-and-every-aspect-of-our-personal-life-it-is-forcing/> (accessed July 11, 2021).

² Lewis Smedes quoted in John Witvliet, *Worship seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 178.

innovation or new practice.³ Should we go for online worship experiences merely because they are available and convenient, or should we strive for on-site worship opportunities while we can do so? Should we even bother about the issue at all?

The late Anglican priest Thomas McKenzie pointed out that internet technology can “encourage people to stay physically apart even when it is unnecessary.”⁴ He proposes that one cannot participate fully in the body of Christ online. However, these platforms or mediums may seem to impress people that it is possible.⁵ Every congregant should urgently discern what it means to participate in the corporate worship services with one’s best capabilities and resources to actually “make the most of every opportunity.”⁶ Although online worship experiences are not unfamiliar for many Christians, since the outbreak of the global pandemic in 2020, worshipping together with fellow Christians in a designated space at a designated time is still something uniquely to be treasured and cannot be replicated online. The gathered assembly has always been a distinctive mark of the Christian community and a part of our Christian heritage since the disciples met on Pentecost (Acts 2:1, NIV).

On the one hand, we are unlikely to return to the pre-pandemic lifestyle in all aspects of our lives, and thus, we must embrace the inauguration of the “new normal” with wisdom and

³ Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 271.

⁴ Holly Meyer and David Crary, “New Prayer Tool for Facebook Groups Draws Praise and Doubts,” *Christianity Today* (posted August 12, 2021). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/august/facebook-prayer-request-tool-christian-church-groups.html> (accessed June 29, 2022).

⁵ Meyer and Crary, “New Prayer Tool for Facebook Groups Draws Praise and Doubts.”

⁶ This may mean different decisions for different people, especially when we refer to the broad spectrum of groups of people I have tallied in Chapter 1.

watchfulness. To avoid being criticized for expressing “digital reluctance,”⁷ clergy and church leaders may well brainstorm and experiment with more creative and innovative ways to experience church activities, establish communication and outreach channels, and hold meetings that use digital technology as we learn to live with the changing pandemic situation.

On the other hand, when one studies thoroughly the nature and purpose of the gathered assembly of God’s people for the worship of God, individuals may be convinced that it is genuinely irreplaceable or cannot be replicated in other formats or mediums. The totality and complexity of the worship experience when the community is physically co-present cannot be achieved virtually, especially when it comprises different “schemas” at all levels.⁸ To participate in in-person worship involves maintaining all the intersecting “schemas” present in the spatiotemporal occasion—the worship service—in which “transcending meaning is actualized” and that the “liturgical moment is a kind of convergence of physical space as well as spiritual space.”⁹ A digitally mediated reality will never offer us the entirety of the event because what one receives will always be mediated.¹⁰ That means all the originally intersecting schemas will vary somewhat. Educator and media theorist Neil Postman has been voicing similar concerns. He notes that “it is naïve to suppose that something that

⁷ Heidi Campbell and Mandy Jordan, “The Digital Divide, Digital Reluctance and Its Impact on Pandemic Churches,” *OAKTrust* (posted April 26, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.21423/digitaldividepandemicchurches> (accessed June 14, 2022).

⁸ Doyle quotes Arbib and Hesse who suggest that there is much more to reality. They consider reality a network of units called “schemas,” which they define as a type of “unit of interaction with, or representation of, the world, that is partial and approximate.” Doyle further explains that “we have schemas to represent all levels of our experience at all levels of abstraction.” And according to the theory, “human beings...receive reality through complex webs of schema sending and receiving that take place within conversations, relationship, and interactions.” C. Andrew Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy: Virtual Reality and Liturgical Theology in Conversation* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2021), 74 of 362 (Everand version).

⁹ Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy*, 105 of 362 (Everand version).

¹⁰ Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy*, 57 of 362 (Everand version).

has been expressed in one form can be expressed in another without significantly changing its meaning, texture or value.”¹¹ Notably, gathered worship in physical spaces is irreplaceable for faith formation and the embodiment of the gathering Christian faith community because the environment is so “manifold and rich that no digital version can emulate and simulate and duplicate it.”¹²

No one will deny that we live in a multisite reality where aspects of online and offline culture merge into a unique context for all.¹³ Standing at the turning point during the pandemic, the choices we make for our congregations’ worship life will undeniably form us for many years to come.¹⁴ The age-old discussion between the church and technology has come to yet another significant intersection. Tish Harrison Warren, an Anglican Church in North America priest and award-winning author, has boldly argued that an “emergency pastoral response should not become a regular part of the life of the church.”¹⁵ In the same line of argument, Matt Smethurst, managing editor of The Gospel Coalition, has also proposed that a “prosthetic limb is generally better than no limb” when there is no choice. Not only should we “be slow to gripe about technology, we should also be slow to settle for it—particularly when it comes to church.”¹⁶ It is true that while technology may reshape

¹¹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, anniversary ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 117.

¹² Sax quotes Borgmann, an expert on the effects of modern digital technology on the soul. David Sax, *The Future is Analog: How to Create a More Human World* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2022), 252.

¹³ Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture (Engaging Culture)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 134 of 298 (Everand version).

¹⁴ Joanne Mercer, “Live-streams in the Digital Desert: Reflections on Parish Transitions into the Digital Age,” in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (College Station, TX: Digital Religion Publications, 2020), 22.

¹⁵ Bob Smietana and Elizabeth E. Evans, “Streaming Online Has Been a Boon for Churches, a Godsend for Isolated,” *Religion News Service* (posted February 1, 2022). <https://religionnews.com/2022/02/01/streaming-online-has-been-a-boon-for-churches-a-godsend-for-isolated/> (accessed June 23, 2022).

¹⁶ Matt Smethurst, “The Church Irreplaceable: Why God’s People Must Gather,” *Desiring God* (posted July 19, 2020). <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-church-irreplaceable> (accessed June 14, 2022).

our understanding of God if pushed to an extreme, it may also help us to respond to God. It would be unwise to assume only perils, but no promises come with new technology. However, we must be careful that “technology and its results are so much with us that, like the air we breathe, their presence and effects go unnoticed and unanalyzed.”¹⁷ As French sociologist and lay theologian Jacques Ellul has pointed out, though technology can bring some benefits to humankind, every “beneficial” technological development includes unanticipated negative implications that offset the benefits.¹⁸

Furthermore, when we consider our relationship with technology, we have to recognize its nature, as Reformed educator David Smith has suggested, and that it is not simply a tool—a means to an end—but that our digital devices, as we use them, will shape us over time.¹⁹ This view echoes what media prophet Marshall McLuhan foretold in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter that we are forced to reassess and review everything, from our thoughts to our actions to our institutions, which were formerly taken for granted. Smith rightly observes that the adoption of smartphones has reconfigured our ease of talking to others at a distance, but also “our levels of distraction, our parenting, our sleep habits, our awareness of the people around us, our posture, and our stress levels.”²⁰ I believe we must add our worship experience and our church life to that list for it to be an authentic statement for the Christian community today. We have to be aware that how we are all

¹⁷ Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 68 of 298 (Everand version).

¹⁸ Jacques Ellul cited in Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 64 of 298 (Everand version).

¹⁹ David Smith, “Digital Learning: How Is It Shaping Our Families?” *BioLogos* (posted April 14, 2020). <https://biologos.org/articles/digital-learning-how-is-it-shaping-our-families> (accessed June 14, 2022).

²⁰ Smith, “Digital Learning.”

being shaped by technology is mostly unforeseen or unimagined.

At the same time, we must investigate what screens of all kinds are doing and will do to our humanity if we are alarmed enough for our humanness and spiritual well-being.²¹ We must be mindful that we reap what we sow (Gal 6:7, NIV). It is logical and reasonable that religious communities rank communal and spiritual values above technological affordances or advantages to relate to and preserve their beliefs and mission.²² In a cautionary sense, Neil Postman has emphasized that “each medium . . . makes possible a unique mode of discourse by providing a new orientation for thought, for expression, for sensibility.”²³ The precautionary principle works well regarding this concern: “Indication of harm, not proof of harm, is our call to action.”²⁴ In working out a more healthy and balanced relationship with technology, Peter Phillips, a professor in Digital Theology, strongly counsels that we should “shape technology to make it conform to our standards and to the image of the Church we want to present” and, to get the key message of the faith across faithfully, we need to be watchful for every form of the media.²⁵ It is noteworthy that all the reflective thoughts and beneficial practices around technology usage should be “a focus of shared deliberation in Christian communities” rather than “a matter of individual heroics.”²⁶ With this kind

²¹ Teresa Berger, *@ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (Liturgy, Worship and Society Series) (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 107.

²² Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 164 of 298 (Everand version).

²³ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 10.

²⁴ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 6.

²⁵ Oleksiy Gordeev, “Peter M. Phillips: ‘The Idea of Digital Theology is to Look at Both Digital Culture and Theology and Ask How One Speaks to the Other,’” *Religious Information Service of Ukraine* (posted March 30, 2020). https://risu.ua/en/peter-m-phillips-quot-the-idea-of-digital-theology-is-to-look-at-both-digital-culture-and-theology-and-ask-how-one-speaks-to-the-other-quot_n103546 (accessed July 11, 2021).

²⁶ Smith, “Digital Learning.”

of deliberate reflection and discernment, we can live out the calling of being faithful stewards of God's kingdom and making the most of every opportunity. As Pastor Jay Kim wisely suggested, we should recognize and utilize online platforms for what they are—"a helpful digital means to a greater incarnational end."²⁷ And that is also the direction that Sherry Turkle, a social scientist and licensed clinical psychologist, desires to show and exhort us to "redesign technology and change how we bring it into our lives."²⁸ This view calls for a reflective use of digital technology "guided by an assessment of its effect on our physical and spiritual health."²⁹

Our lives have become significantly more efficient and convenient than in previous decades as technology has been doing a remarkable job in assisting us to perform numerous tasks and chores, ranging from comprehensive smartphone apps to web services. After all, as Sacasas has summarized Jacque Ellul's definition of *technique*, technology can be described as an inexorable urge to enhance all human experience for efficiency.³⁰ Remarkably, we learned to do so many life tasks at home through smartphones, screens, and computers related to work, school, social life, church, entertainment, physical exercise, and shopping during the bizarre time of the pandemic. However, we must be cautious that the internet promises "an endless assortment of online and virtual substitutes for real things and experiences because they're deemed more efficient and convenient."³¹ If the

²⁷ Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 97.

²⁸ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 7.

²⁹ Sax, *The Future is Analog*, 252.

³⁰ Michael Sacasas, "The One Best Way Is a Trap," *The Convivial Society* 4, no.9 (posted May 22, 2023). <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/the-one-best-way> (accessed January 24, 2024).

³¹ Kim, *Analog Church*, 173–174.

substitution is solely because of efficiency and convenience, then there may be a chance that we will miss out on something essential when engaging in those digital experiences.

Another feature of the digital world is that we become targets for all kinds of advertisements and opinions whenever and wherever we leave our digital footprints. Every notification, alert, update, text, or news flash, regardless of its origin, intrudes on our lives and gives us a sense of being urgent.³² Not only do advertisements employ strategies indicating extreme urgency to hook our attention and prompt our immediate responses, social media platforms hire top experts to keep people's active engagement as much as possible.³³ However, with all of the digital enticements, we may be unaware that we are paying a high price for all the advancements brought forth by the digital age "when values aren't held accountable, they turn vicious."³⁴

"The Three Brothers" of Virtual Space

Jay Kim has astutely pointed out how the benefits of the digital age have become liabilities:

The *speed* of the digital age has made us *impatient*.

The *choices* of the digital age have made us *shallow*.

The *individualism* of the digital age has made us *isolated*.³⁵

Just imagine we are the Christian, the pilgrim in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a classic Christian devotional text by John Bunyan. On the journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City,

³² Craig M. Mueller, *Any Body There? Worship and Being Human in a Digital Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 83 of 225 (Everand version).

³³ This is technically called "attention engineering." Brett McKay. "The Value of Deep Work in the Age of Distraction" the one hundred and sixty eighth episode in the podcast *The Art of Manliness* (posted January 12, 2016, last updated September 28, 2021). <https://www.artofmanliness.com/character/behavior/podcast-168-the-value-of-deep-work-in-the-age-of-distraction/> (accessed December 10, 2022).

³⁴ Kim, *Analog Church*, 16.

³⁵ Kim, *Analog Church*, 16. Original emphases.

Christian, the protagonist, encounters many challenging figures whose names reflect their personalities and dispositions, good or bad. To further vivify our imagination, I want to add three more characters to that list as inspired by Kim: the “Three Brothers”— Impatience, Shallowness, and Isolation—from the Virtual Space. These Three Brothers will always be around Christians, trying to entice the pilgrim to be impatient, shallow, and isolated.

Undeniably, these three characteristics of the digital age are having adverse and undesirable effects on us all. However, they are either going unobserved or deliberately being disregarded by the church. From Kim’s point of view, it is “catalyzing a dangerous shift in our ecclesiology.”³⁶ Since the medium has its own message, it would be unwise if we assumed in the first place that digital media or the internet is benign or even neutral technology without any discernment.³⁷ These Three Brothers—Impatience, Shallow, and Isolation from Virtual Space—are eager to lure us away from the narrow road of discipleship, which in all the way requires our patience, depth, and community. No wonder David Smith warns us that “what at first looks like a tool has a habit of gradually turning into an environment in which our lives are refashioned.”³⁸ One evidence of this claim is advocated by Nina Jablonski, a biological anthropologist and paleobiologist, who states that people now like to opt for “leaner modes of communication because they have been socialized inadequately in richer

³⁶ Kim, *Analog Church*, 23.

³⁷ David Clough, “The Message of the Medium: The Challenge of the Internet to the Church and Other Communities,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 13, no. 2 (2000): 100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/095394680001300206> (accessed April 13, 2024).

³⁸ David Smith, “Technology, Formation and the Lure of Easy Answers,” *Faith and Leadership* (posted August 10, 2021). <https://faithandleadership.com/technology-formation-and-the-lure-easy-answers> (accessed June 14, 2022).

ones and are functionally ignorant of the concept of media richness.”³⁹ Examples include people preferring text messages to phone calls or face-to-face interactions. This development is not astounding; surveys demonstrate that the more time people spend texting, the greater the chance they will “lose practice in the empathic arts—learning to make eye contact, listen, and attend to others.”⁴⁰ In this digital age, we are even tempted to organize our lives so that we do not have to intermingle with others.⁴¹

Borrowing another metaphor, our lives can be compared to plant growth. We can see the parable of a tree that will yield its fruit in season for the person who delights in the law of the LORD and meditates on His law day and night in Psalm 1, which acts as an opening gate for entering the “literary sanctuary in the Scripture.”⁴² And Jesus Himself wants us to remember that He is the vine, and we are the branches that will bear much fruit when we abide with Him (John 15:5, NIV). Both the journey and the growth of the plants require slowness and patience. What can be helpful for us to live a flourishing life as authentic human beings with patience, depth, and community before God in this fast-paced and rapidly digitalized world?

The Secret Hot Spring

In an evocative scene in the Japanese Drama called 《着飾る恋には理由があつて》 (*Why I Dress*

³⁹ Nina Jablonski, “Media Richness,” in “2017: What Scientific Term or Concept Ought to Be More Widely Known?” *Edge* (posted January 1, 2017). <https://www.edge.org/response-detail/27212> (accessed June 21, 2022).

⁴⁰ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversations*, 7.

⁴¹ Noah Robertson, “Too Busy for Church? There’s An App for That,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (posted July 29, 2019). <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2019/0729/Too-busy-for-church-There-s-an-app-for-that> (accessed January 25, 2024).

⁴² Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 12.

Up for Love),⁴³ the main female character Mashiba works for a home décor company where she runs the social media page of the company which has successfully accumulated over 100,000 followers. Daily, she busily dresses up, puts on makeup, posts, and manages her social media accounts with constant connectivity. During a trip with her new friends who share the same luxury apartment, the main male character, Fujime, brings her to a secret hot spring with *Rotenburo*⁴⁴ and tells her she will enjoy a “digital detox.” What does he mean? Traditionally, when taking a hot spring bath, one must first wash and then enter the stewing hot water while nude. Undoubtedly, no phones nor screens will be expected or permitted. One merely needs to soak up the goodness of the mineral-rich water, breathe with gratitude the life-giving air, and be stunned by the awe-inspiring natural scenery before one’s eyes. One has nothing particular to *do*; transformation and healing naturally follow. This is impossible to replicate online or at home.

The story continues that some strange wind has blown away her beautiful (working) dress to the river next to the hot spring, and she will have to wear some casual but holiday-mood-fitting clothing that Fujime bought for her after the hot spring bath. This scene powerfully brings out the message: the digital detox has been doing its work—Mashiba has been rejuvenated by cutting off from constant digital connectivity and being fully aware of the goodness of soaking in the hot spring water in the *Rotenburo*. This transformational experience, reinforced through the portrayal of the change of

⁴³ *Why I Dress Up for Love* (2021), *Asianwiki*, https://asianwiki.com/Why_I_Dress_Up_For_Love (accessed July 12, 2021).

⁴⁴ An open-air hot-spring bath amid beautiful landscapes.

garment, is vividly insightful and inspiring for all.

To a certain extent, we are all like Mashiba. As Sherry Turkle has pointed out, we are so habituated to an unceasing feed of connection, information, and entertainment that “we are forever elsewhere.”⁴⁵ In the same light, Pete Phillips also suggests in an article on digital addiction that we have become addicted to checking all kinds of notifications and posts all day long and, thus, need certain times to do something without our devices to “cleanse our mind.”⁴⁶ He further advocates that participating in creative arts and crafts, a pleasant walk in nature, or other mindful practices can renew and rejuvenate. For non-Christians, these activities may be the best options for a digital detox already. Nevertheless, we, as Christians, are privileged to have our unique and precious way of experiencing the digital detox—the best way to detox is to soak up the goodness of the gathered Body of Christ, breathe with gratitude the life-giving air with the worshiping community, and be stunned by the awe-inspiring liturgical space and environment before one’s eyes.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 4.

⁴⁶ Pete Phillips, “Addicted?” *Premier Digital* (posted June 1, 2022). <https://www.premierdigital.info/post/addicted> (accessed June 14, 2022).

⁴⁷ Just as one who soaks up the goodness of the mineral-rich water, breathes with gratitude the life-giving air, and be stunned by the awe-inspiring natural scenery before one’s eyes in the *Rotenburo*.

CHAPTER 3

THE BENEFITS OF IN-PERSON EMBODIED WORSHIP

“For what you have done I will always praise you
in the presence of your faithful people.
And I will hope in your name,
for your name is good.”
(Ps 52:9, NIV)

Choosing the Good Portion¹

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Christians have the privilege of joining assembled worship in person to experience a weekly journey of transformation while, at the same time, undergoing digital detox in this modern digital age. Though technology presents challenges, it can bring significant benefits. Though some may say—“‘I have the right to do anything,’—not everything is beneficial. ‘I have the right to do anything’—but I will not be mastered by anything.” (1 Cor 6:12, NIV) Others may say—“‘I have the right to do anything’—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.” (1 Cor 10:23b–24, NIV) As we live in the highly hybrid reality, having a digital detox for the people of God may be deemed beneficial, constructive, or even needed to set us free for more important things in life. Eugene Peterson notes, “Worship is the time and place that we assign for deliberate attentiveness to God—not because He’s confined to time and

¹ The comment that Jesus made to Mary who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to His teaching in Luke 10:42 (ESV) is that she had chosen the good portion, which would not be taken away from her. I am using this phrase for those who have tried their best and chosen to attend in-person worship with deliberate attentiveness to God as choosing the good portion.

space, but because our self-importance is so insidiously relentless that if we don't deliberately interrupt ourselves regularly, we have no chances of attending to Him at all at other times and in other places."² Therefore, the problem is not God's confinement and limitation, but our constant divided and distracted attention. If before the digital age, Christians needed this kind of "deliberate attentiveness to God," how much more do we need them to be with the gathered assembly since the introduction and proliferation of the internet and all its related applications in our lives? The deliberate attentiveness to God of the people of God as a worship community amid the business and constant digital connection is undoubtedly a choice of the "good portion" (Luke 10:42, ESV), which pleases God. Liturgical theologian John Witvliet proposes that our regular worship acts as a means to train and form us as Christ's followers through our practice of piety in a disciplined and patterned way.³ If we acknowledge and desire this process of formation, then we need to be disciplined and pay effort to attend and participate in our worship and be aware that "The Three Brothers" of Virtual Space mentioned in the previous chapter may plot to lure us into going astray on the journey of our pilgrimage. In-person worship demands our whole being when we participate whole-bodily and wholeheartedly with others.

Not only do we need our corporate worship as a detox and antidote desperately in the present time, but more importantly, we are purposefully made and designed to worship God as human beings

² Eugene Peterson quoted in Craig M. Mueller, *Any Body There? Worship and Being Human in a Digital Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 189 of 225 (Everand version).

³ John Witvliet, *Worship seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 299.

in a community in the same space and time if we are to live a flourishing and fruitful life. In this chapter, I will explore how our biological and physical bodies, as God’s incredible design, fearfully and wonderfully made in the *Imago Dei*, work and react uniquely when we participate in corporate worship. I aim to acknowledge why it is beneficial and constructive for humans to worship in person with others in the best way possible—thus wisely choosing the “good portion.” I will look at the implications of psychophysiological research, the findings in liturgical and ritual studies, the powerful shaping of architecture and environment, the tension between self and community, and finally the unique transformation of a singing assembly for a fuller picture of the different aspects relating to the benefits of in-person worship.

Psychophysiological Research on Worship

The Bible, especially in the Book of Psalms, the worship book of the Israelites, has rich descriptions of bodily worship activities and actions, including but not limited to the following:

- entering His gates and courts (Ps 100:4, NIV),
- coming and bowing down (Ps 5:7, NIV),
- singing and playing the harp and lyre (Ps 33:1–3, NIV),
- kneeling (Ps 95:6, NIV),
- lifting up hands (Ps 134:2, NIV),
- clapping hands (Ps 47:1, NIV),
- dancing (Ps 149:3, NIV),
- speaking in praise of the Lord (Ps 145:21, NIV),
- telling of God’s wonderful deeds (Ps 9:1, NIV),
- sacrificing with shouts of joy (Ps 27:6, NIV),
- gazing on the beauty of the Lord (Ps 27:4, NIV),
- confessing transgressions to the Lord (Ps 32:5, NIV),
- exclaiming with one’s whole being (Ps 35:10, NIV), and

- shouting to God with cries of joy (Ps 47:1, NIV).

All these are embodied and expressive ritual behaviors involving movements, voices, sounds made by our bodies, musical skills and gestures with our hands and bodies, and actions that manifest our emotions, vision, and whole beings.⁴

Our created bodies concretely and uniquely react and function when we come together as a community face to face. This point is emerging as important in different lines of recent scientific research as below. These insightful results will expectantly enlighten us more of the benefits of performing worship acts together.

Psychologist David DeSteno, speaking in an interview relating to his scientific research on rituals, notes that when people perform tasks like reciting something and moving in unity, their feelings for each other will be more compassionate and connected. Especially for the rituals surrounding grief and loss, these actions can alleviate feelings of loneliness. Rituals function best in their design when the ritual performers are in the presence of other individuals but not in an isolated context. When we gather, our synchronized breathing influences our heart rate, leveraging our minds and bodies.⁵

Research examining the relationship between religious activities and blood pressure in community-dwelling older adults indicates that senior adults who attend religious services more

⁴ Though online worship is still embodied worship, however, it is participated more often by an individual worshipper away from other worshippers in a location not originally designed for corporate worship. This chapter aims at discussing corporate physically co-present worship in a liturgical space setting.

⁵ David DeSteno interviewed by Sarah Pulliam Bailey, see Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “What Science Can Tell Us about the Benefits of Religion,” *The Washington Post* (posted October 5, 2021).
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/10/05/science-benefits-religion/> (accessed June 1, 2023).

regularly have lower blood pressure than those who attend less regularly, a result achieved only for those attending religious services and private religious activities but not for religious media.⁶ This finding may give us at least a rough impression, though limitations may apply, that attending in-person religious services is different from watching religious TV. In fact, they are two distinct experiences which demand vastly different ways of engagement.

Furthermore, a number of large-scale and professionally designed research studies show that religious service attendance is “associated with greater longevity, less depression, less suicide, less smoking, less substance abuse, better cancer and cardiovascular-disease survival, less divorce, greater social support, greater meaning in life, greater life satisfaction, more volunteering, and greater civic engagement.”⁷ These studies have been led by clinicians and social scientists such as Harold Koenig, Byron Johnson, Ellen Idler, David Williams, Robert Putnam, David Campbell, and W. Bradford Wilcox, along with Tyler J. VanderWeele and the researchers at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University. Moreover, when children attend religious service regularly, they are more likely to be shielded from “the ‘big three’ dangers of adolescence: depression, substance abuse, and premature sexual activity,” and those who joined the church when they were young are likely to be more happy, forgiving, have a stronger sense of mission and purpose, and more willing to serve as

⁶ Harold G. Koenig, Linda K. George, Judith C. Hays, David B. Larson, Harvey J. Cohen, and Dan G. Blazer, “The Relationship between Religious Activities and Blood Pressure in Older Adults,” *The International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine*, 28, no. 2 (1998): 189–213, <https://doi.org/10.2190/75JM-J234-5JKN-4DQD> (accessed February 3, 2023).

⁷ More results and evidence can be found in Tyler J. Vanderweele and Brendan Case, “Empty Pews Are an American Public Health Crisis,” *Christianity Today* (posted October 19, 2021). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/november/church-empty-pews-are-american-public-health-crisis.html> (accessed February 10, 2023).

volunteers when they grow up.⁸ Studies provided by VanderWeele and Brendan Case at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, suggest that attending worship services has some profound positive impact on us. At the same time, they cautiously note that having a positive impact differs from proclaiming a “prosperity gospel.” The bold headline of their article makes an alarming assertion: “Empty Pews Are an American Public Health Crisis.”⁹ The research by these two scholars suggests that it is the regular “service attendance specifically, rather than private practices or self-assessed religiosity or spirituality, most powerfully predicts health.”¹⁰ Their findings do not consider online worship and all kinds of digital and personal engagement as equals because they believe that “none is likely to be a fully adequate replacement to the in-person meetings and community.”¹¹ The complex data indicates clearly that communal worship experiences enhancement of health and well-being. At the same time, solitary spirituality will not provide equal benefits for participants.¹²

In addition to these critical findings, Ryan Burge, a scholar of religion and politics and a Baptist pastor, proposes that there solid and multitude of findings showing that church attendance brings improvement in mental health, generation of feelings of tolerance, and provision of opportunities for people to volunteer in their communities through the lens of social science. Furthermore, these findings demonstrate that church attendance brings about another positive outcome: interpersonal

⁸ Vanderweele and Case, “Empty Pews Are an American Public Health Crisis.”

⁹ Vanderweele and Case, “Empty Pews Are an American Public Health Crisis.”

¹⁰ Vanderweele and Case, “Empty Pews Are an American Public Health Crisis.”

¹¹ Vanderweele and Case, “Empty Pews Are an American Public Health Crisis.”

¹² Vanderweele and Case, “Empty Pews Are an American Public Health Crisis.”

trust.¹³ He laments that “church used to be a great way to interact with folks who were different than you” but now, “houses of worship have become monocultures,” and “there is not a whole lot of mixing anymore on a Sunday morning” in the United States. Thus, church attendance does contribute to interpersonal trust.

How about our brains and bodies? Our brains are “wired in the real world and designed to use body cues and all this other subtle stuff in order to process and communicate,” according to Dr. Michael Bohan, the director of Microsoft’s Human Factors Engineering Lab.¹⁴ Thus, we communicate best with each other when we meet face to face.

Furthermore, Dr. Andrew Newberg, a physician and neuroscientist who studies religious experiences, also asserts that from what the experts have found out about how the brain works when we are together with other people, there exists a kind of resonance among the gathered group, and this supports that the brain is “designed to be social.”¹⁵ He proposes that though worshiping online may be a spiritually and sociologically gratifying experience, people may still feel there is more to be desired beyond online worship deep in their hearts.¹⁶

This assertion is further supported by Dr. Harold Koenig, a psychiatrist and the director of Duke

¹³ Ryan explains that this type of trust is simple and it is the idea that we can have some assurances that random strangers are not out to get us. Scholars have defined it as “The confidence in another person (or between two persons) and a willingness to be vulnerable to him or her (or to each other).” Ryan Burge, “Church Attendance Used to Drive up Trust: It Doesn’t Anymore,” *Religion Unplugged* (posted September 12, 2023). <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2023/9/7/church-attendance-used-to-drive-up-trust-it-doesnt-anymore> (accessed November 10, 2023).

¹⁴ Kate Morgan, “Is There an Antidote to ‘Digital Intensity’?” *BBC* (posted April 26, 2021). <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210423-is-there-an-antidote-to-digital-intensity> (accessed February 9, 2023).

¹⁵ Mya Jaradat, “These Churches Are Done with Buildings. Here’s Why,” *Deseret News* (posted July 18, 2021). <https://www.deseret.com/faith/2021/7/18/22575707/are-churches-done-with-buildings-online-virtual-worship-congregations-covid-19-pandemic> (accessed February 10, 2023).

¹⁶ Jaradat, “These Churches Are Done with Buildings. Here’s Why.”

University's Center for Spirituality, Theology, and Health, that participating in in-person group worship activates the circuitry in the brain's reward pathway in which neurotransmitters like serotonin, epinephrine, and dopamine are likely involved.¹⁷ He explains that research has shown that group activity may lead to physiological changes that create a warm feeling. Therefore, this metaphorical warmth caused by being with others "has a physiological basis."¹⁸

In the same light, Paul Zak, citing an unattributed study from the University of Iowa, notes that even a simple handshake helps us to create bonds by the release of oxytocin in the brain so that trust can be built between strangers and sustain co-operation between the involving parties.¹⁹

Liturgical and Ritual Studies

Indisputably, we humans are physical, sensory creatures, and therefore, what we need are physical, sensory reminders and realities to flourish and be alive.²⁰ Everything we see, hear, smell, touch, speak, and do before, around, and after the worship experience makes that moment "distinct and sacred from the other times and spaces of the week."²¹ The ritual practices in worship, whether highly structured or more spontaneous, certainly "write theology and identity into and onto our bodies."²² James Fowler, a Professor of Theology and Human Development, even argues that

¹⁷ Jaradat, "These Churches Are Done with Buildings. Here's Why."

¹⁸ Jaradat, "These Churches Are Done with Buildings. Here's Why."

¹⁹ Natasha Frost, "Will Business Travel Ever Be the Same?" *BBC* (posted August 5, 2020). <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200731-how-coronavirus-will-change-business-travel> (accessed January 16, 2024).

²⁰ Kim, *Analog Church*, 174.

²¹ David Sax, *The Future is Analog: How to Create a More Human World* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2022), 246.

²² E. Byron Anderson, "Liturgy: Writing Faith in the Body," *Liturgical Ministry* 20, no. 4 (2011): 172.

“through liturgy and sacrament . . . we are involved in the *kinesthetics*—the sensory embodied experience—of faith.”²³ Irenaeus, a second-century early church patriarch, reminds us that our bodies are “fully alive in the Spirit-ed company of other bodies who have gathered to worship God as Christ’s own body.”²⁴ It is then not accurate when some people mistakenly consider that the primary purpose of attending a worship service is for the sermon, which draws primarily on intellectual energy and strength, similar to attending a lecture or seminar and acquiring knowledge.²⁵ Therefore, they may find that hearing a sermon virtually at their leisure is adequate when choosing between attending in-person worship and being alone. However, they will have missed that the worshiping assembly, as defined by liturgical theologian Gordon W. Lathrop, is “a gathering together of participating persons” that “constitutes the most basic symbol of Christian worship.”²⁶ Lathrop’s perspective is echoed by Jonathan Leeman, the editorial director for 9Marks ministry, who advocates that “what *makes* a church a church, among other things, is that its members all meet together on Sunday—minus anyone who is sick, traveling, homebound, or otherwise unable to attend.”²⁷ Similarly, Witvliet’s liturgical vision indicates that “worship begins when we leave our individual residences and ‘process’ . . . to a common meeting place.”²⁸ To a large extent, meeting together can

²³ Anderson, “Liturgy,” 172. Original emphasis.

²⁴ Irenaeus cited in W. David O. Taylor, *A Body of Praise: Understanding the Role of Our Physical Bodies in Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023), 5.

²⁵ In my own context, there are many Christians who will say they go to church to “hear the sermon” (聽道) on Sunday, rather than saying they go to worship God.

²⁶ Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 21.

²⁷ Although there are worship services meeting on the other days in the week, but his main point is still valid. Jonathan Leeman, *One Assembly: Rethinking the Multisite and Multiservice Church Models* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 111 of 229 (Everand version). Original emphasis.

²⁸ Witvliet, *Worship seeking Understanding*, 297.

be seen as an essential and non-negotiable part of corporate worship gatherings.

Christians who only care about hearing the sermon also fail to see that bodily participation in liturgical actions will foster our knowledge of God with or without our notice. We even “learn to be Christian by participating fully with others who are incarnating the life of love and justice which Christ revealed and which the church continues as the sacrament of Christ.”²⁹ Besides strengthening our knowledge of God by meeting other Christians, Mueller also considers that the liturgy we participate in highlights the meaning of being human because our bodies and the earth will be connected more deeply. We will get a strong sense of purpose and mission in our daily lives.³⁰ Therefore, it is not just hearing the sermon or singing some songs but participating in the worship experience with whole-bodied engagement that enables transformation and formation.

Liturgical theologian E. Bryon Anderson suggests further that we share bodily memories in ritual practices as a community, and the creation of social memory forms us. He stresses that “written and constantly refreshed by rite and ritual, bodily habit—the habit of liturgy—disposes us to act in the world in particular ways, in particular patterns.”³¹ What we do together with our body in the whole worship service—through gestures, postures, nonverbal actions, words, singing, movements, and interactions with fellow worshippers—writes something meaningful and vital “*on* the body and *in* bodily memory.”³² Michael Sacasas, associate director of the Christian Study Center of

²⁹ Robert Browning and Roy Reed, quoted by Anderson in “Liturgy,” 172.

³⁰ Mueller, *Any Body There?* 12 of 225 (Everand version).

³¹ Anderson, “Liturgy,” 176.

³² Anderson, “Liturgy,” 176. Original emphases.

Gainesville, Florida, takes this idea one step further, proposing that the embodied, habitual, and ritual practices in our worship exercise influential formative power over time explicitly or implicitly upon not only the mind but also the bodies and hearts of the worshippers.³³ Notably, according to Marshall McLuhan's golden rule, "the medium is the message," the regular patterns that form our liturgies nevertheless have the same formative power as the explicit messages offered in any homily or sermon. However, many attendees place the most value on the sermon.³⁴ Through all the repeated bodily worship acts over time, we even "gain a body knowledge of our identity as the true Body of Christ."³⁵ Thus, several authors from various disciplines testify why in-person, embodied actions in communal worship are richly formative. The unified actions of a community of worshippers write meanings and create social memory in each worshipper's body, mind, and heart.

Environment and Formation

During the prime pandemic period from 2020 to 2022, international travel was restricted substantially in many countries. According to a study of the practice of staycations during the COVID-19 pandemic from conversations on Twitter and analysis of Internet search trends, many people had a strong interest in spending staycations, especially at the hotels in their local districts, to achieve "a psychological distance away from home."³⁶ Hong Kong, where I reside, was found on

³³ Michael Sacasas, "Taking Stock of Our Technological Liturgies," *The Convivial Society*, 3, no.15 (posted September 15, 2022). <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/taking-stock-of-our-technological#details> (accessed May 4, 2023).

³⁴ Sacasas, "Taking Stock of Our Technological Liturgies."

³⁵ Taylor, *A Body of Praise*, 22.

³⁶ Babajide Abubakr Muritala, Ana-Beatriz Hernández-Lara, and Maria-Victoria Sánchez-Rebull, "COVID-19 Staycations and the Implications for Leisure Travel," *Heliyon* 8, no. 10 (2022): e10867, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e10867> (accessed May 10, 2023).

social media to be the most popular location among the top twenty destinations, having the most keyword searches for “staycation” or relating to “staycation.” This is unsurprising as the city is well-known for its dense population. One of the most significant reasons for hotel staycations is the need for a different environment and a change of mood and mind where we are free to behave differently. This behavior has been interpreted by the Construal Level Theory which is the theory behind the notion of psychological distance and the construal levels for objects and events.³⁷ From the implications obtained from the above-mentioned study of staycations and the interpretations by the Construal Level Theory, the staycation experience helps us to build a mental construal to be liberated from daily life and routine. Likewise, the sanctuary worship with others may also achieve psychological distance away from our daily and earthly tasks and routines so as to help us to transcend the present and to more concretely generate high-level construal for our identity as heavenly pilgrims and worshippers. While God has commanded His people to gather and worship Him regularly, we can see that there are definite benefits for them to do so. Interpreting the Construal Level Theory, online worship for most of the people may not be as sufficient as in-person worship in terms of achieving the same construal level by the individuals. The venue for the online worshippers, be it their homes or cafés, will be far from the sanctuary worship and resulting in the increase of the

³⁷ “Construal level theory (CLT) is a theory in social psychology that describes the relation between psychological distance and the extent to which people’s thinking (e.g., about objects and events) is abstract or concrete. The core idea of CLT is that the more distant an object is from the individual, the more abstract it will be thought of, while the closer the object is, the more concretely it will be thought of. In CLT, psychological distance is defined on several dimensions—temporal, spatial, social and hypothetical distance being considered most important.” See “Construal Level Theory,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Construal_level_theory (accessed January 17, 2024).

spatial distance and thus, the psychological distance, even when they are engaging in the same activity. After all, enjoying a delivery of a hotel high tea set at one's home will definitely be different from dining at the hotel café at all levels, be it the dress-up, the journey to the hotel, the expectation and excitement all along the journey, the interaction with the hotel concierge and restaurant staff, the deliberate decorated dining space, the thoughtful background music, the unique aroma of the hotel, the presence of the other hotel guests, the pace of the serving of the tea set, the cutlery and tableware which are different from our owns, the liturgy of dining, and many more. And in case the temporal dimension is also altered, the psychological distance may be even farther away.³⁸ The farther the distance, the less engagement will be expected.

McLuhan advocates that “environments are not passive wrappings but are, rather, active processes which are invisible.”³⁹ When we perform liturgical actions in the worship space, the architecture and worship environment shape us in specific ways without our notice. In the same light, the Minnesota essayist Paul Gruchow has suggested that the sense of place in memory will have its ongoing efficacy in our lives. The place where we “inhabit” has “entered the continuum of our lives” and affects us as a “habit” continuously.⁴⁰ Gruchow suggests that the inhabitation of a place connects with one's identity and memory. Thus, I propose that the worship environment, where we regularly perform liturgical actions, functioning as our spiritual home, enters the continuum of our

³⁸ For example, a worshipper decides to watch the worship video at a different time from the livestream time.

³⁹ As cited by Keith Anderson in *The Digital Cathedral: Networked Ministry in a Wireless World* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), Location 2699.

⁴⁰ As cited in Anderson, “Liturgy,” 175.

spiritual and worship lives and continuously affects us—mind, body, and heart. Although Christians constantly affirm that the church is not the building itself, the brick and mortar, but the people who follow Christ and His teachings, thoughtful and theologically fitting designs of the worship space and environment will still be beneficial and constructive for heightening our awareness of the presence of God, supporting our identity and calling as Christians.

In a chapter about architectural space and awareness, the late originator of humanistic geography, Yi-Fu Tuan, thoroughly explains that, from the early days, architectural space can affect the people who dwell in it and can cultivate human feeling and perception.⁴¹ Moreover, he stresses that “the built environment clarifies social roles and relations” and “architecture ‘teaches.’”⁴² The specialness of the architectural space or built environment can provide an experience for the dwellers and edify people’s mindfulness and conception of reality.⁴³ Though architectural space and interior design are silent, they speak volumes and shape us continuously in unique and powerful ways. That is also why liturgical theologian W. David O. Taylor has emphasized that different seating arrangements reinforce different ideas about “ecclesial identity by the manner in which our physical bodies are oriented to one another.”⁴⁴ Ethnomusicologist Marcell Silva Steuernagel also notes that “through a variety of means, from architecture to interior design to narratives, congregations demarcate the boundaries of the space within which special activity is performed.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space, and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 102.

⁴² Tuan, *Space and Place*, 102.

⁴³ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 110.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *A Body of Praise*, 105.

⁴⁵ Marcell Silva Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 135.

In light of the specialness mentioned above of our liturgical space, I propose that the corporate worship space designed to highlight and reinforce our identity as Christ's followers and the specialness of our worship acts will have a different effect on us when compared to online worship in one's home or environments built for other purposes, no matter how large the screen we have before us or how realistic and powerful the sound system may be.⁴⁶ The experience we gain will be significantly different when we worship, sing, pray, hear the sermon, breathe, be silent, and move together in the designated worship space.

One reason that worshipping in the same space is so powerful is that a place can only achieve concrete reality when we can have a total experience of it is by all our senses and with our mind that is active and reflective.⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that in face-to-face conversation, we are constantly searching for an optimal hold on the communicative process; even when digesting the meanings of the words we hear, we are still exercising our fuller perceptive capabilities in reading the all-surrounding environment.⁴⁸ This is why Sacasas suggests that "each person becomes a part of a field of communication," both in conversation and in non-verbal expressions.⁴⁹ When attending online worship at home, our concrete reality will be our room with a screen showing an image of part of the sanctuary. Thus, the concrete reality is not the liturgical space; our room and this home-with-screen

⁴⁶ For home churches, it will also be beneficial to have simple Christian symbols, e.g., a cross, Bible, flowers, and candles, to define their sacred space for Christian identity and mission. In cases of unavoidable situations in which one cannot worship in a sanctuary, for example, a cave, when being persecuted, I believe God will grant us special grace when we wholeheartedly worship Him.

⁴⁷ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 18.

⁴⁸ Michael Sacasas, "A Theory of Zoom Fatigue," *The Convivial Society*, Dispatch no.5 (posted on April 21, 2020). <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/a-theory-of-zoom-fatigue> (accessed May 7, 2023).

⁴⁹ Sacasas, "A Theory of Zoom Fatigue."

environment will never be the same as the liturgical space we experience in person. As Newberg has also explained, even seeing the Vatican, which initially will cause people to have some special feeling because of its splendor, through a screen “does not pack the same neurological punch, in part because other sensory cues, like smell, are missing.”⁵⁰ The effect on us, due to the design of our brain, will be different, and any online worship, regardless of its quality, likely cannot have the same deep and thorough effect on us as in-person church does.⁵¹ Transformation will always call for our whole-bodied presence with experience and participation.⁵²

Tension between Self and Community

As we travel the path of discernment and awareness, we need to examine the meaning of being human when the digital world may, to an extent, steer us into disembodiment and fragmentation. In a world that fosters increasing isolation and individualism, worshiping in a community is a distinctive experience. As Mueller has suggested, “participating in the same bodily rituals with others provides a countercultural understanding of self,” a transformation and change of orientation will arise when the whole assembly faces the profound truths of the human condition and our shared vulnerability before God and the world.⁵³ Popular Christian author Philip Yancey has shared from his worship experience that the worshiping community, called by God and assembled of a unique mixture of people from all walks of life, from “infants to grandparents, unemployed and executives, immigrants

⁵⁰ Jaradat, “These Churches Are Done with Buildings. Here’s Why.”

⁵¹ Jaradat, “These Churches Are Done with Buildings. Here’s Why.”

⁵² Kim, *Analog Church*, 69.

⁵³ Mueller, *Any Body There?* 174 of 225 (Everand version).

and blue bloods,” is nowhere else to be found except in in-person worship settings.⁵⁴ This mixed context will enable interactions among people with different political views and economic backgrounds to have remarkable opportunities to “learn about others, build bridges, generate social capital, and all kinds of good things.”⁵⁵ Attending worship as an assembly then may be the first step toward loving our neighbors as we share a space with people different from us.⁵⁶ In a certain way, we will more likely be genuinely worshipping God, loving our neighbors, and journeying together in faith into an uncertain future when we meet and worship together.

Through the lens of performance studies, an emerging discipline pioneered by Richard Schechner and Diana Taylor in recent decades, we can say that all participants are performing “community.”⁵⁷ Therefore, they can and will do different actions and gestures, which may seem out of place when doing the same in other places and at other times. This may explain why a home-alone participant of online worship may feel odd even to stand up to sing a hymn or to recite the Lord’s Prayer since they are not with the performing community in a shared physical space. An out-of-place feeling hovers over us when we perform communal worship acts alone in our domestic settings. To a certain extent, this reflects that when we gather to perform liturgy, we are simultaneously performing “specialness” together.⁵⁸ As William McNeill, the late American historian, describes it, “for

⁵⁴ Philip Yancey, “Why In-Person Church Will Never Go Out of Style,” *Christianity Today* (posted June 10, 2022). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/june-web-only/covid-19-in-person-church-attendance-pandemic-trends-online.html> (accessed May 4, 2023).

⁵⁵ Burge, “Church Attendance Used To Drive Up Trust: It Doesn’t Anymore.”

⁵⁶ Lee Beach cited in Yancey, “Why In-Person Church Will Never Go Out of Style.”

⁵⁷ Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 142.

⁵⁸ Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 140.

liturgical traditions, shared bodily worship fundamentally involves the experience of bodies

‘marching in time’. . . whereas for charismatic traditions the experience of bodies ‘improvising in time.’”⁵⁹

Another aspect of being a community is our communing with each other. The digital age has amplified our ability to communicate but caused us to lose our capacity for communing. Thus, Kim is aware that communing is primarily about the “exchange of presence” which can only be done in analog.⁶⁰ Kim has envisioned an “*analog* approach to worship,” which is about “trust built on a shared life in the community, a sense of belonging, and shared experiences which usher us into transcendent worship experiences that transform us into the people of God together.”⁶¹ As the late philosopher of technology Albert Borgmann has observed in communal celebrations, people “encounter one another in the depths of their being” because, in all the related actions, they are “definite persons.”⁶² We know ourselves by daring to interact with the natural world and others.⁶³ To commune, therefore, may also signify our willingness to surpass our differences and incompatibility, to gather and be devoted to sharing a portion of our lives and vitalities with a designated people in a designated place at a designated time, like a family.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ William McNeill cited in Taylor, *A Body of Praise*, 121.

⁶⁰ Kim, *Analog Church*, 108–109. Kim uses the word “analog” to describe in-person worship. Though his analogy is correct, to avoid confusion with analog technology used to transmit a video signal, I will use the term “in-person” throughout the rest of this thesis except when quoting Kim or other scholars directly.

⁶¹ Kim, *Analog Church*, 60. Original emphasis.

⁶² Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 67 of 221 (Everand version).

⁶³ C. Andrew Dyole, *Embodied Liturgy: Virtual Reality and Liturgical Theology in Conversation* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2021), 92 of 362 (Everand version).

⁶⁴ Kim, *Analog Church*, 107.

Why is this sharing of space so important for human beings? French sociologist Émile Durkheim has distinguished the wonderful thing that happens when a group of people come together and participate in the same action as “collective effervescence.”⁶⁵ It means that as humans, we have a fundamental need and yearning deep in our design to be part of a crowd or community and experience all the things that follow.⁶⁶ Organizational psychologist Adam Grant has pinpointed collective effervescence as “the specific joy we had all been deprived of, when we were forced to do the things we typically enjoy in groups . . . at home, alone” during the critical pandemic time with lockdowns and other pandemic-related measures.⁶⁷ Canadian journalist David Sax also recalls the magic of cultural experiences where a relationship was built among the participants from the moment they were seated in the same venue and experiencing everything happening together to the end of the event.⁶⁸ Sax claims this is the critical element of the shared unpredictability of all great cultural performances, an unpredictability incompatible with the digital version.⁶⁹ If a cultural event can engender that magic urge for an in-person experience, how much more should our worship be replicated in its shared participation and experience during a particular consecrated time and place? The gathered assembly is dedicated to offering worship to God with our fellow worshippers, allowing us to feel the magic urge for an in-person experience. Indeed, the collective effervescence

⁶⁵ According to Durkheim, a community or society may at times come together and simultaneously communicate the same thought and participate in the same action. Such an event then causes collective effervescence which excites individuals and serves to unify the group. “Collective Effervescence,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_effervescence (accessed January 20, 2023).

⁶⁶ Sax, *The Future is Analog*, 178.

⁶⁷ Adam Grant quoted in Sax, *The Future is Analog*, 178–179.

⁶⁸ Sax, *The Future is Analog*, 169–170.

⁶⁹ Sax, *The Future is Analog*, 170.

we have experienced during in-person worship became a hallmark we missed when we were deprived of it during the pandemic. For Christians, as Martin Luther King Jr. has preached, “worship at its best is a social experience in which people from all levels of life come together to affirm their oneness and unity under God.”⁷⁰

In addition to our deep yearning to be in a community, when we participate in the liturgy, we are, in fact, “participating in the mutual act of being ‘recognized.’”⁷¹ We need to be with other worshippers. C. Andrew Doyle, an Episcopal Bishop, considers this deliberate bringing of our narrative together with the narrative of others as “intentionality mak[ing] the liturgical language of the moment.”⁷² The presence of each other is essential for us, especially in worship, to experience transformation and draw closer to God. Doyle notes that despite the omnipresence of God, revelatory meaning can only be made by us when we are physically in the same place.⁷³ So, for our collective benefit, we gather to make meaning of our worship in partnership with our brothers and sisters.

This is particularly true when it comes to the Holy Communion. Anglican Studies professor Andrew McGowan has described the Eucharist as a meal that necessitates the community to come together and share the meal: “the body eaten is focused communally rather than individually, finding the Savior’s presence in the corporate consumption rather than the elements taken in isolation.”⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Martin Luther King Jr. quoted in Kelsey Kramer McGinnis, “Why It Feels So Disappointing to Sing to the Lord a Remote Song,” *Christianity Today* (posted March 5, 2021). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/march-web-only/remote-worship-covid-congregational-singing-church-online.html> (accessed February 13, 2023).

⁷¹ Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy*, 97 of 362 (Everand version).

⁷² Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy*, 97 of 362 (Everand version).

⁷³ Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy*, 171 of 362 (Everand version).

⁷⁴ Andrew McGowan, quoted by Kim in *Analog Church*, 177.

The countercultural reminder here is that we are a people of God as the body of Christ to learn to love one another and journey together to witness Christ, but not individual lonely Christians.

Along this line of thinking, Doyle believes that gathering together is indispensable for human flourishing and that *Agape* should not be applied individually.⁷⁵ He finds support from Charles Taylor's view that engaging in the environment of one another's physical and personal presence prompts a deeper intimacy that accords with the Eucharistic act. When we hold to our Eucharistic theology, we remember that we are not meant for individual success but mutual flourishing.⁷⁶ It is always a shared meal. The gathered community hopefully might let us see "the face of Christ in one another" and "the restorative power of ritual, dignity, and beauty."⁷⁷ Moreover, Doyle suggests that liturgical space can become transformational, especially regarding our vulnerability, when we share the same space with others.⁷⁸ For him, to demote liturgy-making to individuals in private spaces is "to undo the purpose of liturgical creation space itself by limiting the Christian gathering's power to transform."⁷⁹ He reasons that "liturgy holds that space is not a product of human consciousness, but a recognition of our creatureliness amid creation. Liturgical space undermines our buffered self by relocating us in what we will call 'creation space.'"⁸⁰ This indeed echoes the Pauline exhortation "to seek the good of others" instead of "our own good." (1 Cor 10:24, NIV) Doyle agrees with Rowan Williams that individual worshippers are not participating to receive something from others but are

⁷⁵ Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy*, 148 of 362 (Everand version).

⁷⁶ Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy*, 147 of 362 (Everand version).

⁷⁷ Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy*, 31 of 362 (Everand version).

⁷⁸ Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy*, 164 of 362 (Everand version).

⁷⁹ Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy*, 164 of 362 (Everand version).

⁸⁰ Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy*, 163 of 362 (Everand version).

sacrificing something of themselves for the broader worshiping community.⁸¹ It is when we can have this kind of awareness then we will truly treasure the unique occasion of communal gathering for the other's good to show our love and service for our fellow worshippers. Participating in in-person corporate worship is categorically an act of love.

The Singing Assembly

We will now explore another facet of the worshiping community—the singing assembly. One of the recognizable characteristics in almost all Christian worship services is congregational singing. And part of the transformative power in congregational singing comes from its embodied physicality in the assembly of God's people.

As proposed by Steuernagel, “repeated participation in church music in this space/time, this chronotope, causes congregants to *become* a community, a special group of people.”⁸² One needs to be present. The ability to sing with the breath that God has given us is one of His greatest gifts for human beings. Our bodies are musical instruments. It is logical and reasonable for humans to use this incredible gift to honor God as instructed in both Testaments. Not only is the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament a songbook of the Israelites to sing in corporate worship, but the New Testament also admonishes every worshipper to sing to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.⁸³ Kim has voiced that we experience the fullest power of music when we create music together, which is

⁸¹ Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy*, 118 of 362 (Everand version).

⁸² Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 141. Original emphasis.

⁸³ Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16.

“wired into our very DNA,” as scientific research has revealed.⁸⁴ Evidence cited earlier indicates that we flourish physically and emotionally when singing or creating music together. An unimagined benefit—relational connection—is also fostered when we sing together.⁸⁵ This view is also supported by ethnomusicologist Monique Ingalls, who asserts that participating in music-making together will ignite a powerful sense of community and strengthen social bonds.⁸⁶

Another aspect of the corporate nature of the singing assembly is portrayed inspiringly by

Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing, and you, as a member of the Church, may share in its song. Thus all singing together that is right must serve to widen our spiritual horizon, make us see our little company as a member of the great Christian Church on earth, and help us willingly and gladly to join our singing, be it feeble or good, to the song of the Church.⁸⁷

This view is especially crucial in this self-focused and individualistic digital age. When Christians gather together and sing in worship, we are constantly reminded of something greater than ourselves through the congregational singing act and the meaning of the lyrics. Bonhoeffer has also advocated that the reason for congregational singing is simply that it is possible for the worshippers “to speak and pray the same Word at the same time; in other words, because here they can unite in the Word.”⁸⁸

Not only is our united singing the church’s singing, but the field of performance studies also suggests that our singing is “performing faith.”⁸⁹ Steuernagel considers everything being done or

⁸⁴ Kim, *Analog Church*, 65.

⁸⁵ Kim, *Analog Church*, 65.

⁸⁶ McGinnis, “Why It Feels So Disappointing to Sing to the Lord a Remote Song.”

⁸⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 61.

⁸⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 59.

⁸⁹ Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 162.

“performed” about corporate worship, including showing up at church, is instrumental to “performing faith: the connection between belief and the externalizing of this belief in tangible form.”⁹⁰ It is a witness of the faith community among the non-believers beyond the church’s walls in the world, a performance of Christian faith in tangible form. Steuernagel emphasizes that worshiping communities design their own space with music, which is discrete from the world and thus characterizes a unique soundscape.⁹¹ From another angle, Steuernagel suggests the distinctiveness of singing in church music is “the need to hear, to feel, the voice of the other as an actualization of the body of Christ through the sonic and visual performances of the community.”⁹² Thus, as the church’s voice, the singing assembly technically designates a space for witnessing and reinforcing their unique identity through their corporate singing within the particular time/space environment.

What happens to our bodies when we sing together? W. David O. Taylor has argued that God has not designed human beings to worship merely through our immaterial spirits, hearts, and minds but “in and through our physical bodies to form us wholly into Christ’s body.”⁹³ He claims that this is the way God’s Spirit has purposefully created us to experience corporate worship.⁹⁴ Citing related to hymn singing and neurons, he states that scientific evidence supports the distinctive power of communal song and shows us how our bodies respond when we sing in worship together. One

⁹⁰ Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 162.

⁹¹ Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 137.

⁹² Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 78.

⁹³ W. David O. Taylor, “Hymns and Neurons: How Worship Rewires Our Brains and Bonds Us Together,” *Christianity Today* (posted August 29, 2022). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/august-web-only/worship-church-music-hymns-brains-bond-together.html> (accessed February 10, 2023).

⁹⁴ Taylor, “Hymns and Neurons.”

related phenomenon is mutual entrainment which happens when “people entrain to one another, with music acting as coupling factor. Independent rhythmic processes create shared experiences of sensory data,” and “our brains and bodies become coupled to others.”⁹⁵ This frequently happens in worship, especially when we sing together. Another phenomenon is that there will be “interactional synchrony” when people mirror each other’s bodily and vocal movements.⁹⁶ Quoting cognitive scientist William Benzon, Taylor suggests that “when two people are making music together, and really listening to what each is doing, they are sharing in the same pattern of neural activity.”⁹⁷ According to Benzon, “What makes this sonic communion possible is that all these physically distinct nervous systems are cut from the same mold, and all are attuned to the same patterns of sound.”⁹⁸ Scientists have proven that when we sing together at full volume, neural activation shared among listeners in key emotional areas will be evoked. The surge of endorphins and a release of oxytocin will lead to “a heightened sense of ‘fellow feeling,’ a deepening of ‘social bonds,’ a loss of self-protective ‘boundaries,’ and an increased sense of ‘feeling felt by another,’ meaning a sense of empathy.”⁹⁹ When examined under the scientific theory of Hebb’s axiom— “neurons that fire together wire together”—worshippers who sing together become attached to one another both neurologically and physiologically, in addition to connecting with affection and relation.¹⁰⁰ Taylor

⁹⁵ Nathan Myrick, quoted in Taylor, “Hymns and Neurons.”

⁹⁶ For more details on “interactional synchrony,” see Stefanie Hoehl, Merle Fairhurst, and Annett Schirmer, “Interactional Synchrony: Signals, Mechanisms and Benefits,” *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 16, no. 1–2 (2021): 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsaa024> (accessed February 13, 2023).

⁹⁷ William Benzon, quoted in Taylor, “Hymns and Neurons.”

⁹⁸ William Benzon, quoted in Taylor, “Hymns and Neurons.”

⁹⁹ Taylor, “Hymns and Neurons.”

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, “Hymns and Neurons.”

believes that the experience of entrainment “reminds us that our bodies can form Christlikeness in us in uniquely physical ways,” while the experience of interactional synchrony helps us to forge bonds “across all kinds of cultural divides: familial, ethnic, liturgical, and so on.”¹⁰¹ This echoes what researchers have found; even if we do not know the singer next to us, group singing will powerfully make people feel included, connected, and positively affected besides endorphin release.¹⁰²

Therefore, singing next to someone we do not know in a liturgical space is still more beneficial than singing alone at home to the screen. Indeed, the Psalms remind us that we are designed to sing together as a people and a body. A digitally mediated worship experience may not be able to mediate the same effect, not just because there may be the usual half-second delay but, more importantly, because we are not directly accessible to one another.¹⁰³

The insights from ethnomusicologist Nathan Myrick reinforce the need for the singing assembly: “congregational singing . . . represents a uniquely meaningful part of church gatherings because it engages three distinct realms of experience: the physical, the emotional, and the relational.”¹⁰⁴ Kelsey Kramer McGinnis further explains Myrick’s view below:

Corporate worship involves physical closeness and participation, whether through singing or some other movement. It often evokes emotion, whether in response to a lyric, series of sounds, memory, or association. It forms and reinforces relationships within the congregation and between leaders and the congregants. This relational dimension extends to our understanding of

¹⁰¹ Taylor, “Hymns and Neurons.”

¹⁰² This is particularly true for group singing as researched by Daniel Weinstein, Jacques Launay, Eiluned Pearce, Robin I.M. Dunbar, and Lauren Stewart, “Singing and Social Bonding: Changes in Connectivity and Pain Threshold as a Function of Group Size,” *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 37, no. 2 (2016): 152–158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2015.10.002> (accessed May 4, 2023).

¹⁰³ Taylor, “Hymns and Neurons.”

¹⁰⁴ Nathan Myrick, quoted in McGinnis, “Why It Feels So Disappointing to Sing to the Lord a Remote Song.”

corporate singing as an act of communication with God.¹⁰⁵

Since corporate worship should occur frequently and regularly, repetition on different levels, including music, movements, words, gestures, and recurring festivals, is vital in identity building and meaning unveiling.¹⁰⁶ One's sense of commitment and belonging to a community takes time to be nurtured. Repetition is how rites and rituals write meanings in our body and memory, continually forming us. When one repeats a song with the same worshiping community over time, the connection of this worshipper with the community will already be deeper in different ways. Hopefully, the worshiping body will benefit from a well-balanced and thoughtfully repeated repertoire of their hymns of life, enabling a deeper faith and mission. This may not be achieved when an individual joins random worship services sporadically out of curiosity, convenience, and freedom. It is a bundled package for growth rather than a fragmentary experience in the moment.

In addition, there is still another facet of the singing assembly. When Steuernagel interviewed Jamie McGregor, the Worship and Arts Pastor of the University Baptist Church Waco, McGregor proposed a concept of "surrogacy of presence" employing church music: "whereby those who are there for worship might also be engaging in the music in lieu of those who are not able to be present on a given Sunday, but who are still part of the community."¹⁰⁷ This beautiful surrogacy is possible because we are worshiping God, though not solely in singing. Engaging speech-act theory, we acknowledge that worshippers are not merely singing but also praising, praying, thanksgiving,

¹⁰⁵ McGinnis, "Why It Feels So Disappointing to Sing to the Lord a Remote Song."

¹⁰⁶ Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 123.

¹⁰⁷ Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 85.

lamenting, vowing, blessing, confessing, or responding through music and lyrics.¹⁰⁸ For McGregor, “these absentees are woven into the ritual process of the congregation’s rehearsal, from week to week, or the liturgy.”¹⁰⁹

Acknowledging the Benefits of In-Person Worship

In order to present a fuller portrait of the benefits of in-person worship, I have examined the findings of psychophysiological research, insights from liturgical studies, the shaping influence of architecture and environment, the tension between self and community, and the unique transformative power of the singing assembly. Scholars from many disciplines describe salient aspects of embodied, in-person engagement, including many dimensions of experience that are beneficial and virtuous from a theological and pastoral perspective. God’s design of our bodies, minds, and hearts seems to point to the direction that in-person corporate worship has ultimately more beneficial and constructive consequences for the worshipping community. Our whole being reacts distinctively when participating in in-person worship. When we choose how to attend a worship service, in-person or online, may we choose the “good portion” with substantially informed confidence for the glory of God and for our own best offerings.

¹⁰⁸In the philosophy of language and linguistics, a speech act is something expressed by an individual that not only presents information but performs an action as well. “Speech Act,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speech_act (accessed February 2, 2023).

¹⁰⁹ Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 85.

CHAPTER 4

REIMAGINING HYBRIDITY FOR THE WORK OF GOD'S PEOPLE

“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore,
they are before the throne of God
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne
will shelter them with his presence.” (Rev 7:1, 4–15, NIV)

As Heidi Campbell suggests that the most pressing question facing larger churches is what a true hybrid church should look like.¹¹⁰ This demands reflection and reviewing technological best practices for carrying out varied ministries. A research finding shows that in the U.S., churches are still using technology in the post-pandemic time and most of them are still “doing some form of hybrid ministry, whether it’s just [streaming] services or hosting an online Bible study or religious education offerings.”¹¹¹ After the pandemic period, while some churches dropped the online streaming of their worship though many churches kept the online option with the in-person worship. Other churches continue to offer completely virtual worship on alternate Sundays in 2024.¹¹² Some congregations have launched digitally mediated worship and ministries though their stated goal is to

¹¹⁰ Heidi Campbell cited in Shari Finnell, “Larger Churches Have Had an Easier, More Successful Transition to Using Technology after the Pandemic,” *Faith and Leadership* (posted November 28, 2023). <https://faithandleadership.com/larger-churches-have-had-easier-more-successful-transition-using-technology-after-the-pandemic> (accessed January 4, 2024).

¹¹¹ Finnell, “Larger Churches Have Had an Easier, More Successful Transition to Using Technology after the Pandemic.”

¹¹² For example, The Church at the Well in Memphis, Tennessee. See Darren Sands, “Black Pastors See Popular Easter Services as an Opportunity to Rebuild In-person Worship Attendance,” *The Associated Press* (posted March 28, 2024). <https://apnews.com/article/easter-black-protestants-church-attendance-2b21b03863bc6be6c4b364a92f7fe094> (accessed April 3, 2024).

encourage the people to transition from online to face-to-face engagement and that everyone in the online community will become a member of a physical group.¹¹³

On the one hand, worship is the work of the Holy Spirit, and on the other hand, to an extensive extent, liturgy can also be defined as the work and labor performed by God's people. Frank Senn, liturgist and pastor, regards "liturgy is a public work performed out of the world, but also before the world."¹¹⁴ Enlightened by this, I will revisit and reimagine the possible hybridity of in-person and online worship by referencing the wisdom and best practices from workplace research findings. I will also propose some practices for the renewal of in-person worship, the pastoral care for online worshippers, advices for online worshippers, and a "Digital Detox Trio" to equip Christians to remain faithful and wise on the journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City in face of the constant enticement from "The Three Brothers."

Wisdom from the Workplace Scenarios

While Christians were experiencing online worship, many people also worked from home in various degrees, too. However, several decades before the outbreak of COVID, as early as 1985, some companies had already been experimenting with working from home. Since work has been a central part of people's lives, many experts and researchers have seriously dived into the issue to analyze

¹¹³ For example, The Saddleback Church. See Shari Finnell, "Learning from Saddleback, Veteran of Online Church," *Faith & Leadership* (posted May 16, 2023). <https://faithandleadership.com/learning-saddleback-veteran-online-church> (accessed April 4, 2024).

¹¹⁴ Frank Senn cited in Marcell Silva Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 102.

and find out the optimal model for both the organizations and the workers to flourish. Their findings may shed some light on implementing hybridity in worship.

Robin Dunbar, Emeritus Professor of Experimental Psychology of the University of Oxford, admits that thinking from a personal view, work from home may have some benefits but there are sound reasons that it can only last for a short time. He states that the work place and business involve social interaction fundamentally and without face-to-face engagement, and causal chats during coffee breaks, it may bring friction to the work environment. And teams may be affected by losing focus, sense of belonging, and commitment to the company and its goals and visions. Dunbar also notes that recent graduates who have moved to a new city working in a new environment need to find friends and organize social events. They have responded to surveys expressing that they come to work to see their friends.¹¹⁵ Some millennial employees have expressed that “they want to work with and learn from their older peers.”¹¹⁶ The “heartbeat” of the workplace which is composed by endless “serendipitous encounters” and “the creativity that comes from spontaneous collaboration; the trust and relationships that are built through countless and unsaid small gestures and interactions.”¹¹⁷ As Nicholas Bloom, a Stanford University economics professor with expertise in

¹¹⁵ Robin Dunbar, “Is Remote Working Overhyped?” in Philippa Fogarty, Simon Frantz, Javier Hirschfeld, Sarah Keating, Emmanuel Lafont, Bryan Lufkin, Rachel Mishael, Visvak Ponnayolu, Maddy Savage, and Meredith Turits, “Coronavirus: How the World of Work May Change Forever,” *BBC* (posted October 26, 2020). <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201023-coronavirus-how-will-the-pandemic-change-the-way-we-work> (accessed March 21, 2024).

¹¹⁶ Yuki Noguchi, “Some Employers Are Rethinking Telework, Citing a Need for Better Collaboration,” *NPR* (posted July 11, 2017). <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2017/07/11/535398716/some-employers-are-rethinking-telework-citing-a-need-for-better-collaboration> (accessed April 4, 2024).

¹¹⁷ Vaibhav Gujral, “What about the ‘Heartbeat’ of the Office?” in Fogarty, Frantz, Hirschfeld, Keating, Lafont, Lufkin, Mishael, Ponnayolu, Savage, and Turits, “Coronavirus: How the World of Work May Change Forever.”

remote work, has found out in interviews, two main reasons for fewer remote workers to be promoted are that they “did not develop relationships and managerial skills as readily or did not have the opportunity to demonstrate those skills.” Moreover, the decision makers, if having no facetime with remote workers, will simply forget and ignore them totally.¹¹⁸

Surprisingly, Google’s staff have been all along expected and required to work in the office both before and after the pandemic period. In 2013, Patrick Pichette, chief financial officer of Google, publicly addressed that though the company had promoted people to work from anywhere at any time via their app, their own staff were expected to work in the office together because it was “really important,” and he believed that there was “something magical about sharing meals. . . spending the time together. . . noodling on ideas.” He admitted that the company treasured these magic moments as “immensely important in the development of their company, of their own personal development and [of] building much stronger communities.”¹¹⁹ Ten years later, in June 2023, Google announced that performance reviews would be considerably affected by extended unexplained nonappearances from the office and their employees were rarely approved to work from home because Google wanted to “see Googlers connecting and collaborating in person,” as explained by Ryan Lamont, a company spokesman.¹²⁰ According to Google CEO Sundar Pichai, when all the employees are in the

¹¹⁸ Kate Morgan, “Why In-person Workers May Be More Likely to Get Promoted,” *BBC* (posted March 8, 2021). <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210305-why-in-person-workers-may-be-more-likely-to-get-promoted> (accessed March 25, 2024).

¹¹⁹ Ben Grubb, “Do as We Say, Not as We Do: Googlers Don't Telecommute,” *The Sydney Morning Herald* (posted February 19, 2013). <https://www.smh.com.au/technology/do-as-we-say-not-as-we-do-googlers-dont-telecommute-20130219-2eo8w.html> (accessed March 27, 2024).

¹²⁰ Emma Goldberg, “Return to Office Enters the Desperation Phase,” *The New York Times* (posted June 20, 2023). <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/20/business/return-to-office-remote-work.html> (accessed March 27, 2024).

office, the company expects it will be “purposeful” with “meetings, collaborating with colleagues in other divisions, conducting brainstorming sessions, meeting with clients and vendors, and community building.”¹²¹

Apart from Google, there are more companies that “publicly pulled back on telecommuting over the past decade,” and among them, Yahoo’s managerial staff “forced employees back to the offices in 2013” and the company’s memo wrote, “some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions, meeting new people and impromptu team meetings.”¹²² Companies have found that “the downsides of remote working at scale came to outweigh the positives.” In fact, “the sense of belonging, common purpose, and shared identity that inspires all of us to do our best work gets lost” for the virtual workers.¹²³ They may also feel disconnected from the team without those times for building “deeper, more collaborative relationships with colleagues.”¹²⁴ On the contrary, the presence of the workers in the workplace strongly demonstrates “their commitment to their job, their team, and their organization” as found by Ioana C. Cristea, a Zürich-based remote-work expert, to a point where even promotion will be noticeably influenced.¹²⁵ And surprisingly, when it comes to

¹²¹ Jack Kelly, “Twitter Employees Can Work from Home ‘Forever’ or ‘Wherever You Feel Most Productive and Creative,’” *Forbes* (posted March 5, 2022). <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2022/03/05/twitter-employees-can-work-from-home-forever-or-whenever-you-feel-most-productive-and-creative/?sh=40f728615e44> (accessed April 4, 2024).

¹²² David Streitfeld, “The Long, Unhappy History of Working from Home,” *The New York Times* (posted June 29, 2020, updated January 4, 2021). <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/technology/working-from-home-failure.html> (accessed March 28, 2024).

¹²³ Aaron De Smet, and Mihir Mysore, “Reimagining the Postpandemic Workforce,” *McKinsey Quarterly* (posted July 7, 2020). <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/reimagining-the-postpandemic-workforce> (accessed April 4, 2024).

¹²⁴ Bryan Lufkin, “The Case against Hybrid Work,” *BBC* (August 11, 2021). <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210806-the-case-against-hybrid-work> (accessed April 5, 2024).

¹²⁵ A 2019 paper Iona C. Cristea co-authored showed that “being observed by others while at work resulted in positive outcomes for employees ‘because it is a strong signal of their commitment to their job, their team and their organization.’” See Morgan, “Why In-person Workers May Be More Likely to Get Promoted.”

meeting their employees' "spiritual needs," even the corporations in the Silicon Valley will endeavor to organize "onsite, in-person activities."¹²⁶

Experts' Views on Hybridity

When experts propose the most ideal hybridity for the workplace, they seem to share a common insight: for both the organization and the workers to work well and flourish in various aspects, all workers would be in the office on the same days rather than randomly choosing whatever days for work from home according to their own interests, preferences, and priorities. After all, experts have warned that "being anything less than extremely careful with how hybrid is structured and rolled out across companies could spell disaster."¹²⁷ Organizational design researcher Marco Minervini advocates this kind of equalization to minimize the possible division entrenched by the mingled model which will affect collaboration and unity as reliable evidence shows.¹²⁸ Besides, remote work expert Bloom advocates that the same two days of remote work for all staff, including the managers, will be the most advantageous arrangement for all in the long run if hybridity is desired.¹²⁹ He also believes that in doing so, concerted and individual work can be balanced while the workers can commute less to be less stressful.¹³⁰ Bloom has also reflected on his conversations and research and

¹²⁶ Dorcas Cheng-tozun, "The Gods of 'Techtopia' Giveth, and They Taketh away," *Christianity Today* (posted April 4, 2022). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/march-web-only/work-pray-code-carolyn-chen-silicon-valley.html> (accessed April 4, 2024).

¹²⁷ Lufkin, "The Case against Hybrid Work."

¹²⁸ Marco Minervini quoted in Christine Ro, "Why the Future of Work Might Be 'Hybrid,'" *BBC* (posted August 31, 2020). <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200824-why-the-future-of-work-might-be-hybrid> (accessed March 25, 2024).

¹²⁹ Morgan, "Why In-person Workers May Be More Likely to Get Promoted."

¹³⁰ Nicholas Bloom quoted in Ro, "Why the Future of Work Might Be 'Hybrid.'"

promotes that “working from home should be part time” because “it is hard to be creative at a distance. . . hard to be inspired and motivated at home, and employee loyalty is strained without social interaction” though one may have a “honeymoon” period in the short run.¹³¹

The Hybridity for Churches Reimagined: A Time for In-person and A Time for Online

The wisdom we have gained from the workplace scenario is that first, we have to discern and identify there are something which will be best if we can assemble, collaborate, and work together. As the Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard has developed a worship model depicting the relationship between God, the worship leaders, and the congregation as in a dramatic performance, the dramatic presentation itself by nature is a kind of collective labor which requires onsite collaboration and participation by all attendees.¹³² As Marcell Steuernagel has proposed, “presence, the first mode of engagement, is accompanied by participatory expectations” and one is then logically to “engage with the liturgy, to yield to the narrative.”¹³³ In our worship, when we are present together, we come with expectation to work together with one another. It is never a me time and solitude spiritual practice. We have concrete and collaborative works to do for God and for each other as the body of Christ indeed. So the corporate worship needs every members to show up onsite for the best collaboration just as the workers need to be in the office on the same days.

¹³¹ Nicholas Bloom, “How Working from Home Works out,” *Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, Stanford University* (posted June 1, 2020). <https://siepr.stanford.edu/publications/policy-brief/how-working-home-works-out> (accessed March 27, 2024).

¹³² Joel Dorman, “Who is the ‘Star’ in the Theater of Worship?” *Life Meets Theology* (posted September 5, 2012). <https://lifemeetstheology.com/2012/09/05/who-is-the-star-in-the-theater-of-worship/> (accessed April 3, 2024).

¹³³ Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 75.

As Michael Sacasas has disputed, “digital culture is defined precisely by the fact that it exhibits no discernible temporal rhythm, and many of our social disorders, from the deprivations of private life to the disintegration of public life and the apparent stagnation of culture, stem from this fact.” Digital technology permits our activities to be “desynchronized” and prompts our daily lives and culture to be in a more individualistic and “stochastic” style.¹³⁴ Worshipers can best witness their faith by still honoring the Creator and Lord of time with a designated worship time with a worshiping community. This also forms an important part of our countercultural spiritual discipline as we try to live a life with God as our utmost priority as instructed by the Great Commandment to love God and our neighbors, and Jesus’ new command to love one another. In order to learn to love our neighbors and one another, we firstly need to interact with others. Laura Turner, a San Francisco-based writer, has advocated a countercultural awareness of the temptation of this age that people are more comfortable not interacting with others and she warns that “putting church on our phones can be a dangerous thing” in this respect. She even counter-proposes that Christians should review their time schedule to be less busy and attend church but not to choose online worship because of busyness.¹³⁵ After all, how we use our time and resources will profoundly reflect our values and priorities.

It is constructive to be reminded that “the ministry of church isn’t just about Scripture and

¹³⁴ Michael Sacasas, “Whose Time? Which Temporality?” *The Convivial Society*, 4, no.4 (posted March 14, 2023). <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/whose-time-which-temporality> (accessed April 5, 2024).

¹³⁵ Noah Robertson, “Too Busy for Church? There’s an App for That,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (posted July 29, 2019). <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2019/0729/Too-busy-for-church-There-s-an-app-for-that> (accessed April 5, 2024).

gospel. It's reminding people how to do life together, how to show up together" and attending church requires discipline as muscles not in use will weaken when time goes by.¹³⁶ Maybe "showing up" now is a desperately needed spiritual discipline for us all before we can talk about and practice "sacrifice" for anyone. If Jesus did not show up and dwell among us, then it is not possible for Him to give Himself to us. (John 1:14, Gal 2:20, NIV) It may be enticing to stay behind the screen so as to avoid the vulnerability instilled by the "eye to eye" interaction with others.¹³⁷ However, as author on excellence and mental health Brad Stulberg has advised, "If we commit to certain people and activities, if we feel an obligation to show up for them, then it's likely that we will, indeed, show up. And showing up repeatedly is what creates community."¹³⁸

Undoubtedly, the mandatory lockdown and social distance measures have forced churches to ignite their innovations to connect with their members and continue to offer teaching and pastoral care for them. It has been challenging for the church leaders as they have to discern a whole new paradigm for the church ministries. Currently, many churches are engaging hybridity for worship in a free pattern and people can choose whether they will attend in-person worship or online worship in real time, or prerecorded online worship according to one's preferences, schedules, priorities, and situations.

¹³⁶ Rev. Sarah Taylor Peck cited in Edie Gross, "People in the Pews: Who's Missing, Who's Hiding, Who's Comfortable on the Couch?" *Faith & Leadership* (posted January 24, 2023) <https://faithandleadership.com/people-the-pews-whos-missing-whos-hiding-whos-comfortable-the-couch> (accessed April 5, 2024).

¹³⁷ Michael Sacasas, "Eye to Eye," *The Convivial Society* (posted June 5, 2023). <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/whose-time-which-temporality> (accessed April 7, 2024).

¹³⁸ Brad Stulberg, "For People to Really Know Us, We Need to Show Up," *The New York Times* (posted May 20, 2023). <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/20/opinion/the-case-for-obligation.html> (accessed April 7, 2024).

In some cases, some pandemic-inspired practices may be continued, further refined, or used sporadically so the past innovated efforts and incurred resources will not be totally idled or wasted. For example, occasionally, churches can hold pandemic-prompted programs like outdoor worship services, online worship during severe weather, videos of homebound members for their testimonies, online prayer meetings, recorded videos for teaching, Zoom meetings, devotions, and briefing of church's matters, Zoom classes on weekdays, occasional intergenerational worship, and many more.¹³⁹ That means digital means of outreach, connection, communication, and engagement can be wisely used as an extension and supplement to the in-person worship time.¹⁴⁰ Congregations may provide a related link upon request so that they can track online participation and provide pastoral care for the members in need or follow up with the visitors.¹⁴¹ Keeping in touch with online worshippers is one of the wisest practices, clearly indicating that online worship is not for everyone to freely join, and at the same time, pastoral care and visitations can be carried out by the leaders afterwards.

Some people believe that the digital space offers a vital platform for evangelism. However, it is worthwhile to rethink the whole idea of using worship as an evangelistic tool as its first priority and consideration. The worship service, if designed with biblical vision with theological foundations,

¹³⁹ Some of the ideas in this list are from Mya Jaradat, "COVID-19 Innovations Will Make Lasting Impact on America's Churches," *Deseret News* (posted June 26, 2021). <https://www.deseret.com/faith/2021/6/26/22526405/covid-19-pandemic-innovations-will-make-permanent-change-americas-churches-outdoor-worship/> (accessed March 28, 2024).

¹⁴⁰ Finnell, "Learning from Saddleback, Veteran of Online Church."

¹⁴¹ Collin Hansen, "What We Lose When We Livestream Church," *The New York Times* (posted August 8, 2021). <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/08/opinion/covid-church-livestream.html> (accessed April 5, 2024).

will powerfully witness the gospel and honor God to its fullest because that is following God's design and His will. However, if any worship service is designed mainly to please and satisfy human will and desires—for example, people want to be entertained and design a worship service that bases its design on entertainment elements and considerations—worship then shifts its gravity from God's will to human convenience. God demands His covenanted people, who have clean hands and a pure heart, do not trust in idols or swear by false gods, and seek His face to worship Him (Ps 24: 4, 6, NIV) because worship is principally an encounter between God and God's covenanted people.

Since more churches have been connecting with new people beyond their local districts via their online presence, they should also reflect on the practicality of providing holistic pastoral care for this group of people. Tim Keller wrote in his Facebook post that megachurches are “poor places for formation and pastoral care.” The church that he founded in 1989 resolved to divide into three congregations when he retired in 2017. Keller is concerned that “megachurches tend to draw people from great distances who are not geographically close enough to participate in community building, discipleship, and local ministry to the neighborhood of the church.”¹⁴² Inability to attend in person will not enable them to participate in community building, discipleship, and local ministry to the neighborhood of the church no matter how vibrant and frequent the online connection is. Rachel Pfeiffer asks other questions: “Does the church's budget need a line item so a pastor can fly out of town to conduct a funeral for a member who worshipped online? Should the church prepare ready-

¹⁴² Dan Foster, “Why Mega Churches Don't Work,” *Medium* (posted May 12, 2023). <https://medium.com/backyard-theology/why-mega-churches-dont-work-6a689c02aace> (accessed April 3, 2024).

made care packages to send to faraway members who are sick or grieving? And what about baptisms?”¹⁴³

On the other hand, there are churches which have launched dedicated online campuses for small groups as micro-churches to meet in people’s homes and watched the online worship together.¹⁴⁴ The original goal is to reconstruct an in-person environment of corporate worship for the digital worship service and help people not to consume worship but connected in small group for discipleship, however, the worship needs to be trimmed and modified substantially as the church wants to “give an honest service that actually makes sense to that particular environment or platform.”¹⁴⁵ The new environment or platform will determine what worship order and content will be maintained, eliminated, or rearranged, but not the theological, biblical, or pastoral concerns as priorities. Leaders may want to reflect on how to convert in-person rituals to online spaces. However, this is a vivid example of how change in the medium affects the original message, content, flow, and design. In the worst scenario, worship may be reduced to a biblical lecture requiring minimal physical participation in the process. When a sermon is detached from an in-person corporate worship service context, or cropped out as an independent item, the nature of it may be altered from “witnessing” to “watching,” as Kim has argued.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Rev. Dr. Katie Hays cited in Gross, “People in the Pews: Who’s Missing, Who’s Hiding, Who’s Comfortable on the Couch?”

¹⁴⁴ For example, the Sandals Church Anywhere is “an opportunity for a group to meet in person, but they’re not near a Sandals Church location.” See Rachel Pfeiffer, “Online Church Attendance Retains Some of Its Pandemic Boost,” *Christianity Today* (posted April 7, 2023). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/april/online-worship-pandemic-digital-church-attendance-pew-minis.html> (accessed April 3, 2024).

¹⁴⁵ Pfeiffer, “Online Church Attendance Retains Some of Its Pandemic Boost.”

¹⁴⁶ Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL:

Now is an important time for church leaders to discern and readapt technology with Christian wisdom for sustainable spiritual well-beings, flourishing, and growth. According to Tristan Harris, cofounder of the Center for Humane Technology, a former Google design ethicist, he is aware that “technology often tears apart our common reality and truth, constantly shreds our attention, or causes us to feel isolated.”¹⁴⁷ However, it is hopeful that we learned the lessons of the digital experience from the pandemic and will navigate ourselves into a future “where digital technology actually elevates the most valuable parts of the analog world rather than replacing them.”¹⁴⁸ When considering the potentials and perils of online worship (Chapter 1), the uniqueness of in-person and co-present worship and its benefits (Chapter 3), and also the wisdom gleaned from the workplace experts as mentioned above, I propose that the in-person corporate worship will remain the healthiest forum for cultivating Christian ritual practices for worship, witness, nourishment, and formation. Though people may covet the breakdown of boundaries as much as possible for their own freedom and convenience, as Sacasas has remarked, “certain limits are good” and “they’re not meant to be transgressed because they are the conditions of our flourishing as human beings. We have to identify what those limits are and find that living within them, for the sake of ourselves, the environment, and community, is fundamentally life giving.”¹⁴⁹ In light of this, leaders must fully inform congregations, making them aware of the difference between in-person and online worship before

InterVarsity Press, 2020), 67.

¹⁴⁷ Kim, *Analog Church*, 134.

¹⁴⁸ David Sax, *The Future is Analog: How to Create a More Human World* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2022), 13.

¹⁴⁹ Sacasas cited in Sax, *The Future is Analog*, 247.

they make relative choices, expecting that the church as a body, rather than individuals, will advance

God's Kingdom and witness the Gospel among non-believers. The following table will exhibit my

reimagined hybridity for different ministries of the church listing some examples.

**REIMAGINED DEFFERENT COMBINATION OF MODES
SUGGESTED FOR VARIOUS MINISTRIES OF THE CHURCH**

	Synchrony & Co-presence	Synchrony & Dispersed Presence	Synchrony & Dispersed Online Presence	Asynchrony & Dispersed Presence	Asynchrony & Dispersed Online Presence
Corporate Worship	In-person worship as first priority for all worshippers Pre-worship rehearsal for all to prepare for the worship In-person briefings or discussions on the sermon message after worship Occasional outdoor worship	-	Examples: Groups in satellite locations joining livestream worship; Severe weather or catastrophic incident in town; Livestream worship primarily for worshippers with special needs; follow-up actions (e.g. home visits and communion)	Example: Follow-up reflection questions or key points printed on bulletin for further contemplation	Recorded worship video in case of unavoidable situations; Follow-up reflection questions or key points via church's app or other digital platforms for further contemplation
Special prayers	In-person special prayer meetings	All members pray at a designated time no matter where they are	Example: YouTube livestream for all to join at different locations	Example: Prayer chain arrangement	Recorded videos
Sunday School or other learning groups / seminars	In-person Sunday school classes before or after worship services	Related parties reading the same materials at a designated time	Example: Zoom classes if the speaker is not local or the class is held on weekdays	Example: Studying or reading the materials at home	Recorded videos
Fellowship / groups	Male groups / female groups / mission groups /	-	Even if the groups meet online primarily,	Example: Phone calls; home visits	Example: Instant messages sent

	small groups / fellowship groups meeting in-person regularly		it will be beneficial to meet in-person occasionally		via online platforms; emails
Church Meetings	In-person deacons meetings / committee meetings / Annual General Meetings	-	Example: Zoom meetings on weekdays or when some attendees are not in town; even if the meetings are held online primarily, it will be beneficial to meet in-person occasionally	Example: Preparing and reading the related materials before the meeting	Example: Instant messages sent via online platforms; emails
Local Outreach	All sorts of in-person classes, seminars, activities, and events	-	Various classes, seminars, activities, and events via online platforms and resources	Example: printed materials, leaflets, and letters sent via distribution and mail; phone calls; home visits	Example: printed materials, leaflets, and letters sent via digital channels Various pre-recorded classes, seminars, activities, and events
Global Mission	Various in-person prayer meetings, testimony sharing meetings, missionary debrief, classes, seminars, activities, and events	Example: Members pray for a particular missionary / groups of people at a designated time no matter where they are	Prayer meetings, testimony sharing meetings, missionary debrief, classes, seminars, activities, and events via online platforms and resources (in case information is not sensitive)	Example: Members or missionary caring groups praying for, writing letters and cards to, and sending parcels to overseas missionaries; phone calls; home visits	Example: Recorded videos of prayer meetings, testimony sharing meetings, missionary debrief, classes, seminars, activities, and events via online platforms and resources (in case information is not sensitive)

Personal Spirituality	-	-	Example: Scheduled and spontaneous devotional, retreat, meditation with online programs and resources	Example: Scheduled and spontaneous devotional, Sabbath, retreat, private prayer, meditation	Example: Scheduled and spontaneous devotional, retreat, meditation with online programs and resources
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We are doing theology constantly as we make decisions and act out those decisions.¹⁵⁰

Therefore, in the midst of unprecedented challenges and trials of the time, church leaders may continue to navigate a way forward by reflecting on the calling, purpose, mission, and use of resources of their church as a local church at a designated place so as to nurture and equip Christ's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. (Eph 4:12, NIV)¹⁵¹

The Renewal of Worship

Thanks to the digital technology, we have access to a wider variety of worship resources including hearing inspiring sermons from well-known preachers, watching worship song videos, and donating to various mission causes and churches solely by using our phones. However, attending worship is more than doing these actions individually in isolation as audience. Church leaders have to reflect on and enhance the transformational participation which people cannot "download" from their couch.¹⁵²

Kim has pastorally urged church leaders that they "must be thoughtful and creative in designing

¹⁵⁰ Kim, *Analog Church*, 163.

¹⁵¹ Though there are churches completely online, I could find no evidence that indicates that online churches can fully carry out the mission and service of a church as Christ's witness as there are some fundamental insufficiency such as never a gathered communion, and even never exactly knowing who the congregants are since only a view count may indicate their joining, or user names on YouTube chat box are seen, or only avatars with nicknames may appear.

¹⁵² Kenneth Reid, "Why Can't I Just Go to Church Online?" *Relevant* (posted October 11, 2017).
<https://relevantmagazine.com/faith/church/why-cant-i-just-go-to-church-online/> (accessed April 5, 2024).

gathering spaces and opportunities that invite people to put down their screens and show up with their whole selves. The church must recapture the art of gathering by inviting people in a compelling way to gather as real people in real places in real time, in order to experience real transformation.”¹⁵³

Everything that we can see, hear, feel, taste, smell, and sense in worship will form us as Christians and worshippers. As the Anglican Priest Tish Harrison Warren has suggested, for all of us in the digital age, especially for the digital natives, we need the “analog wonders of skin, handshakes, hugs, bread and wine, faces, names and spontaneous conversation” that actually can intrigue people and keep them to go to church. At the same time, we are then constantly reminded how to be human creatures, created by God, with physical bodies which have limitations.¹⁵⁴ In order to plan meaningful in-person worship experience, congregations need to employ pastoral staff for designing and implementing worship orders providing pastoral care and training for various skills needed by worship leaders, educating congregants on the meaning of worship, and creating a culture of hospitality for new comers.¹⁵⁵

As advised by philosopher James K. A. Smith, “for the sake of the community of practitioners, worship planners and leaders need to take on the responsibility for the reflexive evaluation of our practices in order to ensure that the imaginative coherences of worship are consistent with the vision

¹⁵³ Kim, *Analog Church*, 116.

¹⁵⁴ Tish Harrison Warren, “Why Churches Should Drop Their Online Services,” *The New York Times* (posted January 30, 2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/30/opinion/church-online-services-covid.html> (accessed March 22, 2024).

¹⁵⁵ In my own context, most of the churches do not have a pastoral staff mainly responsible for worship and so the planning and implementation of the worship services, the pastoral care for volunteers, and the education of the theology of worship for the congregation is very limited and insufficient.

of God's kingdom to which we are being habituated."¹⁵⁶ Why is this important? Because we need to make sure we are heading at the right direction at all times. In his book *Atomic Habits*, James Clear has given us a very noteworthy example of flying from Los Angeles to New York City. If the pilot makes a small alteration of 3.5 degrees south, the plane would eventually land in Washington, DC, instead of New York City.¹⁵⁷ A small deviation from the right path may be hardly noticeable in the beginning. However, if we are not alert and attentive enough to safeguard the right route and direction, we will end up arriving elsewhere but not where we intend to be. With the findings in the previous chapter on the benefits of in-person worship, below are nine points that I offer as guidelines for worship renewal that may enhance the in-person experience and encounter between God and His covenanted people. This list is not exhaustive, in any sense.

1. Educating on the meaningful corporate worship acts and their importance

As reported in a survey, growing numbers of people consider church attendance optional. The competition for one church may no longer be another church, but "kids' sports schedules, [one's] work schedule, self-interest around travel, and all those other kinds of things."¹⁵⁸ This may due in part to their inadequate knowledge of the meaning of worship and God's demand for His

¹⁵⁶ James K. A. Smith cited in W. David O. Taylor, *A Body of Praise: Understanding the Role of Our Physical Bodies in Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023), 156.

¹⁵⁷ Mikael Haji, "Atomic Habits by James Clear—Review and Summary," *Medium* (posted August 9, 2020). <https://mikaelhaji.medium.com/atomic-habits-by-james-clear-e20f0eb0be4c> (accessed April 8, 2024).

¹⁵⁸ Hannah McClellan, "Pastors Wonder about Church Members Who Never Came Back Post-Pandemic," *Christianity Today* (posted September 26, 2023). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/september/covid-study-church-attendance-change-pews-people.html> (accessed April 4, 2024).

people as charged in the Great Commandment. (Matt 22:36–40) Moreover, when some worshippers, especially youngsters, complain that worship is boring, it may be because they do not grasp the genuine meaning of worship. According to Erin Westgate, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Florida, boredom is “defined by an inability to pay attention either because a task is too hard, too easy or simply doesn’t feel meaningful to us in the moment.”¹⁵⁹ In order for worshippers to not merely participate in the procedure of worship but to acknowledge the death and life matters approached in worship, Witvliet has counselled the leaders to let the worshippers “enter into its purposes and meaning.” And he opines that “worship-oriented reflection and training need to be an enriching part of congregational life” and “one of the primary goals of a church education program should be to prepare us for honest and deep participation in worship.”¹⁶⁰ Assuming the worship services are thoroughly planned and led, I suggest that when worshippers are educated and informed about their identities and responsibilities, expected participation, and the meanings behind our worship design and actions, then they can fully acknowledge, concentrate and be absorbed in the performing of the worship acts with all their bodies, minds, and hearts from the beginning till the end of worship and see worship as a weekly encounter with God and His people.

¹⁵⁹ Sara Harrison, “How Boredom Can Be a Force for Good or Bad,” *BBC* (posted February 17, 2021). <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210216-how-boredom-can-be-a-force-for-good-or-bad> (accessed March 21, 2024).

¹⁶⁰ John Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 300–301.

2. Singing for transformation

One of the most obvious points of participation for congregants is singing the same words in the same spirit as the primary choir in the sanctuary. The recent development of bands and electronic instruments employed by churches, when not in proper and sensible control and adjustment, may easily lead to a dynamic level that is not designed for group singing except band singers with microphones. Worship leaders need to be pastoral and sensible in leading the congregation because the congregation, not the leaders, are the primary choir in the worship. Anything that will barricade and discourage congregational singing from the bottom of their hearts should be carefully discerned and eliminated as much as possible. As W. David O. Taylor has contended that “the Spirit produces the ‘one-body’ life of the church, not despite or beyond our bodies, but rather in and through our physical selves. The Spirit takes our corporate song and binds us corporeally in ways that are irreducible and deeply transformative.”¹⁶¹ And it seems that nothing can outcompete resounding singing in the live corporate worship space because what the digital devices can offer is only “what’s going into the microphones and coming out of their computer speakers.”¹⁶² I propose that the crucial element is to find ways to encourage and support each congregant to sing, not with half-hearted murmur of the lyrics, but with passion and volume and

¹⁶¹ W. David O. Taylor, “Hymns and Neurons: How Worship Rewires Our Brains and Bonds Us Together,” *Christianity Today* (posted August 29, 2022). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/august-web-only/worship-church-music-hymns-brains-bond-together.html> (accessed March 27, 2024).

¹⁶² Bob Stmietana, “For Church Worship Teams, Auto-Tune Covers a Multitude of Sins. Especially Online,” *The Washington Post* (posted June 23, 2023). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2023/06/23/church-worship-teams-auto-tune-covers-multitude-sins-especially-online/> (accessed April 7, 2024).

to mindfully produce the voice of the church corporately.

3. Bible reading and preaching

Bible reading in worship should receive more priority. In Hong Kong, some pastors omit or limit the reading of Scripture in order to promote a more causal and friendly atmosphere. This may be, in part, because the sermon is topical and not supported by a primary biblical text. Because worship is a dialogue between God and His people, it is logical and anticipated for the people of God to listen to God's Word being read. In fact, from my own experiences, listening to well-prepared and thoughtful Scripture reading can be impressive, inspiring, and edifying.¹⁶³

Regarding preaching, Pete Phillips, director of the Codec Research Centre for Digital Theology at Durham University, states that smartphones and social media are changing how people practice their religion, and that "technology has shaped religious people themselves and changed their behavior." Reading the Bible on smartphones has changed our perception and sense of the Scripture. Studies show that reading texts on screens will be interpreted more literally than reading texts in books. Furthermore, it is more difficult to acknowledge the aesthetic features of a text when read on screens, a medium that results in a flat reading like the

¹⁶³ I experienced dramatic reading of the Scripture the first time when I attended the annual Calvin Symposium on Worship held by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship more than a decade ago when I was studying worship at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids. And I myself have coached Bible readers groups for different churches in the past years. Both the readers and the congregants appreciate the care and attention given to the readings, allowing them to hear God's word presented thoughtfully attentive way.

“*Wikipedia*.”¹⁶⁴ Many Christians select the Bible verses which appeal more to them through digital engagement. Worshippers may be more selective in choosing Bible verses to read. Even pastors may be tempted to only repeatedly preach on certain sections of the Bible either because those sections seem to be easier to understand and inspire responsive actions, or the worship is designed for evangelical purposes mainly so that more challenging Scriptures are totally avoided. Therefore, pastors and preachers need to offer their best, more than ever, to safeguard that the entirety of God’s word will be read and delivered with its fullest meaning as the living Word, the Word of life, instead of fragmented and selected verses according to human choices. Following the liturgical year may be a wise practice in this regard. Jay Kim proposes that, “a sermon is a transcendent act intended to transform us, and transformation demands participation—not simply a detached, isolated response after the fact, but actual participation in the moment.” The process of receiving Scripture is a two-way communication in real time between the “communicator” and the “community” and in its undivided totality, there are “speaking, listening, delivering, receiving, responding—and it involves everyone in the room.”¹⁶⁵

4. Giving as symbolic action in worship

Despite an increasing use of digital channels of offerings after the pandemic period, it may be

¹⁶⁴ Pete Phillips quoted by Chris Stokel-Walker, “How Smartphones and Social Media Are Changing Christianity,” *BBC* (posted February 23, 2017). <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170222-how-smartphones-and-social-media-are-changing-religion> (accessed March 22, 2024).

¹⁶⁵ Kim, *Analog Church*, 68.

unwise if the churches simply consider digital giving is enough and remove the offering as a part of worship. The point is not the offering of some money to the church, but to express our joy, gratitude, and surrender during the dialogue with God in worship. As Daniel Darling, director of Southwestern Seminary's Land Center for Cultural Engagement reflects, the "rhythms of giving—the passing of the plate, the invitations to generosity, the scriptural texts that urge us toward holding our treasures loosely"—and every action related to the offering is both the reminder and witness of deeper meanings. He proposes that we can "find symbolic ways to incorporate the practice of generosity in weekly worship services to ritualize giving even those transactions that are made digitally."¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, I suggest that churches consider collecting other tangible items that reflect their mission such as food for the church's or local food bank regularly in order to keep the sacred rhythm of giving visible: remember God's abundant provision and the needs of others.

5. Unified actions to build stronger connection among the participants

We have discussed that the unified actions can help to strengthen the sense of connection and community in previous chapters. To authentically and abundantly worship God with our bodies for the formation of "Christlikeness in us," worship leaders can plan meaningful worship acts

¹⁶⁶ Daniel Darling, "What Happens When Apps Replace the Offering Plate?" *Christianity Today Pastors Special Issue* (Fall 2021). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2021/fall/apps-replace-offering-plate-giving-corporate-worship.html> (accessed March 20, 2024).

with the use and involvement of “postures, gestures, movements. . . senses of sight, scent, sound, taste, touch. . . spontaneous and prescriptive activities” for the fullest participation of the worshippers with their bodies.¹⁶⁷ Some leaders regard standing up as an inconvenience and avoid inviting the congregation to stand. Thus they limit the opportunity for worshippers to express their joy, surrender their lives to Christ, or offer tribute to their Creator as a part of the liturgical dialogue by using their bodies. These actions imprint in their liturgical memory and strengthen their faith. Though some people due to age, disability, or infirmity cannot stand or cannot stand for an extensive time, pastors can explore the use of more inclusive language such as “please rise in body or in spirit” to signify the unity of the gathered community in action.¹⁶⁸ Other gestures should be explored in addition to standing.

6. Refurbish and remodel architecture and interior design for formation

The liturgical space itself can communicate profound and powerful messages if thoughtfully designed and arranged. As Taylor has discerned, “no building is neutral, no design is neutral, and no seating arrangement in a worship space is ever neutral. Every seating arrangement reinforces certain ideas about ecclesial identity by the manner in which our physical bodies are oriented to

¹⁶⁷ W. David O. Taylor, “A Body of Praise: Understanding the Role of Our Physical Bodies in Worship,” *Baker Publishing Group*. <http://bakerpublishinggroup.com/books/a-body-of-praise/405200> (accessed March 21, 2024).

¹⁶⁸ As suggested by the keynote speaker Barbara J. Newman in “Day-long Conference on Universal Design for Worship,” *Calvin Institute of Christian Worship* (posted September 17, 2016). <https://worship.calvin.edu/news-events/news/day-long-conference-on-universal-design-for-worship/> (accessed April 8 April, 2024).

one another.”¹⁶⁹ In addition to the seating arrangement, everything we see in a worship space—including the altar, pulpit, communion elements, walls, to screens, ceiling, lighting, and other design details such as special furniture, and the placement of musical instruments—needs our deliberate care and wise discernment for the benefits of the worshippers to inspire their imagination and calling as God’s people who are foreigners and strangers on the earth and travelling on their pilgrimage. (Heb 11:13, NIV) Though congregations can commission artists to create beautiful and meaningful artworks for the sanctuary, communal art created by the worshippers are also precious for a memorable participation in the community worship life.

7. Treasure everyone’s contribution of their unique gifts and talents

In addition to communal artworks, there are many more ways for the church members to contribute to the work of the people. The Bible summons us that each of us should use whatever gift we have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. (1 Pet 4:10, NIV) While every individual is gifted by God with unique skills, capacities, and passions, church leaders can conduct a thorough audit of talents and abilities among their congregation, including, but not limited to varied arts and crafts, music, dance, language, visual arts, design, and theater. When all these gifts and unique abilities are identified, developed, and summoned alongside with biblical teaching and pastoral encouragement, individuals may

¹⁶⁹ Taylor, *A Body of Praise*, 105.

contribute their gifts and offerings in worship according to creative designs built on solid theological ground and biblical vision. These offerings will not only enrich gathered worship and bless the whole worshipping community but will also make people feel embraced and engaged.¹⁷⁰

8. Serving the community

Craig Mueller has pointed out that “in the midst of community, our self-centered lives are disrupted as we gather around a gospel message that speaks of the lowly and poor lifted up, and the hungry filled with good things. The words of the *Magnificat*—the song of Mary—move us from selfies to a community of faith that serves the world.”¹⁷¹ As a countercultural practice, we respond to God’s calling, gather together, and through everything we do together meaningfully in our worship, hopefully we are challenged and renewed as a community so that we can be the salt and light to serve our community and the world. (Matt 5:13–16) This is the transformative journey we look forward to each time we worship together. Church-initiated services in the community in various forms are important for the witness of the Christ indeed.

¹⁷⁰ Pamela King, “Rethinking Traditional Church for a Modern Age,” *Thrive Center* (posted August 1, 2022). <https://thrivecenter.org/rethinking-traditional-church-for-a-modern-age/> (accessed April 4, 2024).

¹⁷¹ Craig M. Mueller, *Any Body There? Worship and Being Human in a Digital Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 171 of 225 (Everand version).

9. Avoid the use of smart devices in worship

Avoiding smart devices may sound awkward to propose this in the digital age. However, research by Ward, Duke, Gneezy, and Bos indicates that the mere presence of the smart phones may bring distraction to all by limiting the cognitive capacity of the phone owners and imposing a “brain drain” which can only be cured by “defined and protected periods of separation” of the phones from the owners.¹⁷² Moreover, “many experts believe that we are developing behavioral addictions to our phones” due to phone-induced influence of our dopamine systems and prolonged period of phone-induced cortisol spikes are even more worrying for our health. David Greenfield, professor of clinical psychiatry at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine and founder of the Center for Internet and Technology Addiction, indicates that our cortisol levels are raised when our phone is “in sight or nearby,” says. He explains that it is a “stress response” and the stress to check will be recurrent thus leading to “chronically elevated cortisol levels.”¹⁷³ We cannot be fully present in an immediate task because of the temptation to check the phone in case we miss something.¹⁷⁴

In order to reduce distractions and stress to check the phone, I propose that churches advise

¹⁷² Adrian F. Ward, Kristen Duke, Ayelet Gneezy, and Maarten W. Bos, “Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One’s Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity,” *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 2, no. 2 (2017): 140–154. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/691462#1st_rflR (accessed March 21, 2024).

¹⁷³ David Greenfield cited by Christine Price, “Putting down Your Phone May Help You Live Longer,” *The New York Times* (posted April 24, 2019). <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/well/mind/putting-down-your-phone-may-help-you-live-longer.html> (accessed March 28, 2024).

¹⁷⁴ Brett McKay, and Kate McKay, “The Complete Guide to Breaking Your Smartphone Habit,” *The Art of Manliness* (posted February 22, 2016, updated July 2, 2023). <https://www.artofmanliness.com/character/habits/break-smartphone-habit/> (accessed April 4, 2024).

worshippers to turn off their phones, or switch them to quiet mode, and put them away.

Furthermore, worship leaders should avoid actively asking or requiring the worshippers to take out their phones and use them during the worship services in order to receive their full concentration and increased available cognitive capacity.¹⁷⁵ This may be a preliminary practice for a “digital Sabbath” which can help breaking the vicious cycle of stress and check which causes the prolonged high cortisol and anxiety level.¹⁷⁶ We should not ignore the impact of distraction on us because it is found in one study that it may need approximately twenty-five minutes for us to resume fully to our original activity after an interruption.¹⁷⁷ Putting away phones may not be practical by someone who has been heavily dependent on the smart device for reading the Bible or making notes. This topic is worth further consideration and reflection for one’s fuller participation in worship and physical and mental health.

The Pastoral Care for the Online Worshippers

In addition to offering thoughtful and pastoral participation guidelines for the online worshippers who have no choices but to attend the worship service online due to various physical, practical and

¹⁷⁵ For example, some churches may ask the worshippers to scan a QR code on the PowerPoint or make a digital payment during the worship services. In case for the digital bulletin for the worship order or details, do we really want the worshippers to refer to the small screen of the phone all the time during the worship? Of course, there are worshippers who frequently look at and use their phones during worship and what they do is not related to worship. In these cases they may need to be educated about the appropriate behavior and attitude for worship. Useful QR codes, including the QR codes for offerings, may be displayed in the lobby or any other easily accessible area for the scanning before and after the worship services.

¹⁷⁶ While Christine Price suggests that “a 24-hour ‘digital Sabbath’ can be surprisingly soothing, but even just leaving your phone behind when you get lunch is a step in the right direction,” I propose that not looking at the phone during the in-person worship is a preliminary version of the “digital Sabbath.” See Price, “Putting down Your Phone May Help You Live Longer.”

¹⁷⁷ Kristin Wong, “How Long It Takes to Get back on Track after a Distraction,” *Lifehacker* (posted July 29, 2015). <https://lifehacker.com/how-long-it-takes-to-get-back-on-track-after-a-distract-1720708353> (accessed April 4, 2024).

understandable reasons, pastors, church leaders, and designated members may make phone calls and visit them regularly in-person for communion and care. As we have already discussed in previous chapters, face-to-face communication is the richest and best way of communication. Our presence is invaluable and irreplaceable. Paul has exhorted, leaders should keep watch over themselves and *all* the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made their overseers and be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28, NIV). Leaders should not be satisfied that their members have been connected solely by online worship because the connection offered by online worship is never the same as a physical co-presence gathering. Online service should not be deemed as a permit for the churches to neglect the ministry of visiting homebound members or other kinds of visits.¹⁷⁸ The home visits will definitely be helpful to smooth out the “in-group and out-group dynamics” in hybrid congregation to certain extent.¹⁷⁹ The Apostle John has expressed to fellow Christians that “I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.” (2 John 1:12, NIV) Here, he discerns that meeting face-to-face is different from writing to convey messages; in-person encounters may foster more complete joy for the meeting parties. Furthermore, as John Witvliet has proposed that after livestreaming a worship service, the church can actively engage the online

¹⁷⁸ A reader’s response to Tish Harrison Warren’s newsletter “Why Churches Should Drop Their Online Services” posted on January 30, 2022. See Tish Harrison Warren, “7 Thoughtful Reader Responses on Ending Online Church,” *The New York Times* (posted February 6, 2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/06/opinion/online-church-services-readers.html> (accessed April 4, 2024).

¹⁷⁹ This concept has been introduced in the previous chapter. While work from home will create in-groups and out-groups, I suggest that hybrid congregation will also create this kind of dynamics.

worshippers by “a Zoom chat, an email exchange, or a phone call” afterwards for deeper participation.¹⁸⁰

Others may prefer joining online rather than in-person even though they have a choice. Perhaps we need to evaluate how we ourselves survived through the pandemic with our online worship experience. For those of us who have attended church long before the pandemic, we may have lived off the memories of our past experience to survive though virtual gatherings are acceptable for a time. When I reflect on my own experience, I drew on all of my related memories—past in-person worship experiences, faith, and imagination—to participate in online worship and all these have helped me to at least behave better and know what is expected for participation in a worship service. However, for most of the online worship natives, some of whom may be non-believers, the worship service may be no more than another YouTube video on their smart device. What they experience is biased and based on an audience perspective only. They deserve a chance to participate in an in-person worship assembly in order to taste, sense, and find out the difference between an online worship experience and a co-presence worship encounter. This is crucial because as Marshall McLuhan has warned us that finally a medium’s content counts less than the medium itself in shaping how we think and act, and “the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts”, but they “alter patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.”¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Shari Finnell, “Long-term Adoption of Hybrid Services Represents a Major Shift from the Traditional Church Model,” *Faith & Leadership* (posted April 18, 2023). <https://faithandleadership.com/long-term-adoption-hybrid-services-represents-major-shift-the-traditional-church-model> (accessed March 28, 2024).

¹⁸¹ Marshall McLuhan cited in Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2020), 3.

Another issue that causes confusion is the uncertainty of how the online worshippers will prepare and receive communion even the local church's sacramental theology acknowledges individual worshippers to partake of the elements at home. Originally, Christians gathered together in one place to receive the Holy Spirit in the formation of the church. (Acts 2:1, NIV) Meeting together, worshiping God, and sharing meals regularly became distinctive marks of Christian identity. (Acts 2:46, NIV) Even if the church views the communion taken at another physical location as valid, online worshippers may not remember to prepare the bread and juice in advance and partake in them during the online worship. A prolonged period or irregular schedule of not receiving the communion may be of adverse consequence on the spirituality of online worshippers. To receive communion does not carry as full a meaning for those who are separated from the body of Christ. The self-sustained process will not be the same as demonstrated by Jesus with the four significant actions: take, give thanks, break, and give (Matt 15:36) We do not know the long-term impact on the spiritual formation of worshippers and their concept of community and unity who take communion at home for a prolonged period. This deserves further theological reflection, discernment, and examination. The church should seize the opportunity to educate and encourage those who are able to join in-person worship to come to the church and worship with others in the co-present space for a deeper and fuller participation.

Advice for Joining Online Worship

For those needing to attend online worship for a variety of reasons, including limitations posed by

their physical situation and environment, the worshipper can still engage in a more participatory and attentive experience. First, the worshipper may shower and change clothes to disassociate with sleep and rest. This not only relaxes them, but prepares them mentally.¹⁸² Second, the worshipper may engage more fully in the ritual of the community by joining the worship at the same time as he or she would normally do when attending the in-person worship as a routine. Furthermore, designating a separate area dedicated to worship with simple symbols of faith—a small cross, a Bible, a lit candle, a small table cloth, appropriate communion elements, and/or flowers, to remind oneself of the sacredness of the space at the moment—further prepares the worshipper for the experience.¹⁸³ Third, if resources allow, a larger the screen will be the better for concentration and focus during worship. If smartphones are not in use in worship, one can turn it off, switch it to silent or do not disturb mode, and placed at enough physical distance so as not to be distracting.¹⁸⁴ Fourth, participate in all the worship acts, for example, singing, saying “amen,” reciting creeds, and other responses. Follow the bodily movement instructions, for example, standing up, sitting down, or putting hands together for prayers, and synchronize the movements with the in-person worshippers for more connection and unity. Fifth, in case one’s church offers any of the post-online worship arrangements, be it Zoom chats or feedbacks and reflections via different ways, the worshipper can seize these opportunities to

¹⁸² I am applying the mentality of work from home here since we are doing the work of God’s people. Eleanor Lawrie & Sara Parry, “Coronavirus: Five Ways to Work Well from Home,” *BBC* (posted March 17, 2020). <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51868894> (accessed March 25, 2024).

¹⁸³ Again, this is helpful in the work from home scenario and I believe worshippers will be benefitted by the boundaries set to counter the temptation of treating worship with less priority as discussed in the previous chapters. See Lawrie & Parry, “Coronavirus: Five Ways to Work Well from Home.”

¹⁸⁴ Sarah Kessler, and Bernhard Warner, “Rethinking the ‘Digital Detox,’” *The New York Times* (posted February 18, 2023). <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/18/business/dealbook/digital-detox-social-media.html> (accessed April 4, 2024).

deepen the engagement and participation with the worshiping community. Sixth, if participating asynchronously, one should avoid selecting or sampling only parts of the worship service or accelerate the speed of the video.

In the long run, if physical and practical conditions permit, one should consider attending worship services in-person. One can also join other church activities or service groups, for example, Bible study group, men's and women's groups, fellowship, prayer meetings, visitation team, or many others for a more in-depth connection and relationship building with other church members.

The Trio Digital Detox Practice: Worship Service, Sabbath, and Retreat versus the “Three Brothers”

Regular participation in in-person worship whenever possible, honoring the Sabbath, and scheduling regular retreats according to spiritual needs and the Christian calendar will be three powerful detox practices for us to counter the adverse impacts of the “Three Brothers”—Impatience, Shallowness, and Isolation—from the Virtual Space. Though the meaning and practice of Sabbath is not the main theme of this thesis, I will highlight some important themes of Sabbath theology and its benefits for us.

Candler School of Theology Old Testament scholar Ryan Bonfiglio defines Sabbath as “a part of our very identity as created beings, created in the image of God” and “the first thing God calls holy.” He even suggests that Christian leaders will be benefited from practicing “holiness of

inefficiency.”¹⁸⁵ Besides, the commandment related to Sabbath is the only commandment in the Ten Commandments which starts with “remember.” (Exod 20:8, NIV) This positive commandment directs us to a wellspring of life and sustainability. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes in his book “The Sabbath” that “Jews did not build great cathedrals in space. Their great accomplishment was a cathedral in time—the *Shabbat*, or 24-hour period of rest.”¹⁸⁶ He also writes that “There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”¹⁸⁷ Sacasas supports the Sabbath practice because he considers that the “liturgical orderings of time and space” can bestow one with “rest, solitude, or a more humane pacing of our experience and draw our attention to higher things.”¹⁸⁸ Not only that Sabbath is a commandment from God, it is also a wisdom for the survival and flourishing of Christians in the challenging and complicated age of unrest and upheavals. It is beneficial that a Sabbath—be it “a day, a week-long retreat, or even a few minutes of unplugging—is detachment from the gods of technology, and offers a paradoxical hope for human progress and development.” Worship, as Mueller envisions, is a spiritual practice which “can ground us in the present, provide meaning amid our restlessness, and bring us back to our identity as children of God.”¹⁸⁹ Even though we may not

¹⁸⁵ Ryan Bonfiglio quoted in Gretchen E. Ziegenhals, “Singing the Life-giving Song of Exhalation,” *Faith & Leadership* (posted June 25, 2019). <https://faithandleadership.com/singing-the-life-giving-song-exhalation> (accessed March 22, 2024).

¹⁸⁶ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel cited in Yonat Shimron, “A New Documentary Takes a Deep Dive into the Ancient and Modern Practice of Sabbath,” *Religion News Service* (posted May 22, 2023). <https://religionnews.com/2023/05/22/a-new-documentary-takes-a-deep-dive-into-the-timeless-relevance-of-sabbath/> (accessed March 22, 2024).

¹⁸⁷ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel cited in Mueller, *Any Body There?* 89 of 225 (Everand version).

¹⁸⁸ Sax, *The Future is Analog*, 247.

¹⁸⁹ Mueller, *Any Body There?* 89 of 225 (Everand version).

be keeping the Sabbath like the Jews, the essence of keeping the Sabbath is worth pondering and practicing for every Christian. We can develop a rule of life with deliberate countercultural and transformative practices which are beneficial to our spiritual growth and well-being. How can we be more attuned to holiness and godliness in our pilgrimage and walk of faith? How can we consecrate designated times regularly for our worship and rest before God?

Conclusion

In Jesus' parables, after the man had found the hidden treasure in a field and the merchant had found the fine pearls, they sold all that they had to buy the field and the pearl of great value. (Matt 13:44–45) In our daily lives, there are meetings, ceremonies, activities, and even entertainment events we do not want to miss in-person, lest we will regret it. We will also give no second thought to decline any live-stream version or a video format of them if we have a choice to do so. Will all of us who are Christians show an even more fervent zeal and passion for our in-person corporate worship, our liturgical work as God's people, our transformative spiritual journey, our communal dialogue with God, and our enthusing encounter with God than any of these human events and meetings? It is my earnest hope that when we have recognized the uniqueness and significance of in-person embodied worship, like the treasure and the precious pearl, we will also offer our best and overcome all hurdles to attend and participate in gatherings of the body of Christ. All for God's glory and our personal and communal spiritual formation.

The Church of Christ in every age,
beset by change but Spirit-led,
must claim and test its heritage
and keep on rising from the dead.¹⁹⁰

Fred Pratt Green

¹⁹⁰ © 1968. Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188.

GLOSSARY

Analog worship

See In-person worship.

Asynchronous worship

People joining the same worship service at different times with the same worship video. The worship service may be livestreamed with an onsite congregation.

Corporate Christian worship

A Christian community worshiping together weekly in a liturgical space with prayers, songs, sermons, Holy Communion, and other worshipful acts.

Digital (online worship) natives

People who have joined online worship from the first day of their worshiping life and have never or seldom joined any in-person worship services.

Digital detox (trio)

During a digital detox, people refrain themselves from using and engaging in smart devices so that they can focus on social interaction in the physical world without distractions. Christians can experience the best digital detox by participating in in-person worship services, observing Sabbath, and practicing retreats to achieve a spiritual digital detox trio.

Digital Sabbath

Digital Sabbath is a practice of intentionally and habitually disengaging from all technology/devices and social media aiming at enhancing social connectedness, relieving stress, and fostering mindfulness.

Digitally mediated worship

Worship presented with the assistance of digital technology via a screen of a smart device as a livestreamed video or prerecorded video is digitally mediated and captured by cameras.

Embodied worship

As embodied creatures, we bring our whole selves, lives, bodies, gestures, and sensations to worship God instead of merely using logic, understanding, and knowledge to do so. Although joining an online worship is also an embodied experience, it is different from joining in-person worship because digitally mediated worship disconnects our senses and context from the onsite environment and participants.

Hybrid worship

Any services conducted partially in person and partially online are hybrid worship services. Hybrid worship involves recording and uploading or livestreaming a worship service to an online platform to reach people outside the walls of the sanctuary.

In-person worship

In-person worship involves the face-to-face gathering of God's people in a brick-and-mortar worship space in real time.

Online worship

People can join online worship via a digital platform, for example, Zoom, Facebook, YouTube, websites of churches, apps of churches, and others, with their smart devices with screens, either in real time for a livestreamed service or any time for a prerecorded service.

Physically co-present worship

People assembled together to worship God with fellow worshippers in a physical worship space.

Social media platforms

Social media platforms are online platforms that allow users to produce and share content and be connected in social networking. Examples of major platforms include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and many more. The platforms use algorithms to calculate and to rank the content that users see in their feeds and to target users with relevant advertisements.

Synchronous worship

With synchronous worship, worshippers join the same worship service in different locations at the same time with digital mediation. Some worshippers may be gathering in a physical building while others may be joining via smart devices from different locations by themselves.

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