



ONLINE CHURCH “COMMUNITY” AND THE GREAT COMMISSION IN A COVID-19-DEFINED SOCIETY: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND MISSIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Isaac Boaheng (PhD, MTh, MDiv, BSc)

Lecturer, Christian Service University College, Kumasi (Ghana)
Research Fellow University of the Free State, South Africa
Adjunct Academic, South African Theological Seminary, South Africa
Bible Translator, Bible Society of Ghana
Ordained Minister, The Methodist Church Ghana

David Abubekr (PhD student)

Asbury Theological Seminary, Kentucky
Commissioned Minister, The Methodist Church Ghana

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ABSTRACT: *The traditional way of conducting church service is being challenged in the face of the COVID-19 global pandemic. This essay ponders the reality of worship as a digitally mediated experience and its effect on the church's mission. The church's adaptability to current trends is crucial to its survival and relevance, especially under present realities. The online church community is not a new phenomenon in ecclesiology, but one that has become urgent to embrace and adopt because of the prevailing circumstances. The internet and online worship services present both opportunities and challenges for “mission.” For effective online ministry, the mission should be culturally relevant and biblically faithful. Therefore, the church will need to explore utilizing anthropological tools in its missiological praxis. This study draws on ethnographic observation and analysis of three different online church communities and interrogates how these churches fulfil the Great Commission. The authors contend that the church should let the two sides of the Great Commission, scope and substance, inform their missiological practices online using the relevant anthropological tools. The study contributes to the ongoing scholarly discussions on digital ecclesiology: its nature, challenges, strategies and prospects.*

KEYWORDS: Anthropological, Church, community, Great Commission, Online



INTRODUCTION

The rapidly evolving technological era, especially the internet surge, has impacted human interaction and how the human community is organized and structured. Over the years, human-oriented service and product entities have attempted to collate a typology of their community of followers online. Particularly, in the period of a global pandemic, churches are painstakingly pursuing their online community members—both current and prospective. The question has been how effective the church can become in its fulfilment of the Great Commission online. “We welcome all of you to today's service, whether you are with us on-site or online!” This cliché has become the general rhetoric for many contemporary churches before the actual take-off during worship service. A single service with two different sets of audiences—in-person and online—has become the new normal in many churches today because of the limitation placed on physical meetings.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in December 2019 as a Wuhan problem and later became a global crisis, has prompted the institution of various health protocols, prominent among them being observance of social distancing, regular washing of hands with soap under running water, the mandatory wearing of nose masks, "mandatory" COVID-19 vaccination, among others. The pandemic has affected every aspect of human life, including, religious, social, economic, health and political dimensions. For this research, the impact of the pandemic on the Christian community, particularly how churches carry out the Great Commission amidst the pandemic, is of utmost significance. Pastors and church leaders continue to grapple with what it means to "minister online and to lead digitally mediated worship" (Campbell, 2020, p. 7). The COVID-19 and its attendant issues have restricted in-person services and thus impelled churches to scramble for a place in the virtual space on the internet. Various activism in the light of the development includes live streaming services, sermons uploaded on YouTube and Facebook, and an avalanche of podcasts and videos shared on social media.

For some time now, the acceptability of online worship services has been an issue of contention. On the one hand, modern technology in fulfilling the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations is considered a step in the right direction because technology makes it possible to reach a large audience within a relatively short time. On the other hand, online services seem unacceptable because of the absence of physical meetings, which is considered a key requirement for effective Christian fellowship and discipleship. Increasing interest in the subject has prompted this research which explores how anthropological tools can be utilized to frame the appropriate missiological methods to organize online church communities as the church seeks to fulfil the Great Commission in a COVID-19-defined world. Many of the churches observed online seem to fulfil one aspect of the Great Commission, and there is a need to think about incorporating “make disciples” into their online presence.

The study will first interrogate the idea of an “online community” from an anthropological perspective based on the Christian Community model presented in the early church (cf. Acts 2:42-44). The paper then will explore the two-fold dimensions of “scope and substance” embedded in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. Next, this research examines the online activism of three different denominations; namely, The International House of Prayer (IHOP), a Pentecostal/Charismatic 24/7 online prayer ministry, Trinity Hill United Methodist Church, an evangelical denomination, and the historic St. Paul Catholic Church. These different strands of Christian denominations were chosen to help the researchers ascertain how different Christian groups approach their holistic ministries online. Finally, the study explores



which aspects of ecclesiology can be incorporated into an online service. What are the missional implications of this new and not so new phenomenon of the “online church community”? The study concluded with Rynkiewicz (2008, p.70) that “the interplay between anthropology and missiology must continue.”

The Great Commission

The Christian Church exists to join “God in his mission” (or fulfil the Great Commission) by making disciples of all nations (cf. Matt. 28:19-20 and its parallels) (Wright, 2010, p. 23). The Great Commission as a theme runs through all the Gospels; the cumulative emphasis of Jesus' commands to his disciples was to reach out and make disciples of others. Mark's gospel ends on the note, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation, whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:15-16). Luke ends his gospel by recording the words of Jesus “that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations” he then begins the book of Acts by recording Jesus' instructions to wait and be endued with power to be His witnesses (Luke 24:47, Acts 1:8). The Great Commission is the means by which God forms his spiritual community and makes them conform to the likeness of Christ. As churches move online, it is essential to reflect on two issues that may affect theology and practice in an online church community: communication and community, proximity and presence, or scope and substance. The Great Commission, if pursued as Jesus intended, fulfils these two concerns. Our analysis of the Great Commission will draw mainly on David Bauer's work.

Universal Mission (v. 19)

According to Bauer (2019, p.242), the Great Commission is, “in a sense, the climax to the climax,” the whole gospel of Matthew is structured in a way to prepare us for the Great Commission. Christian work should be informed by this meeting the resurrected Lord had with his disciples in he gave the Commission. Bauer (2019) analysed verse 19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,” the theme of universal mission. The mission's basis is on Jesus' gained authority “therefore” (*οὖν*) indicates explicitly that Jesus' authority is the cause, or ground, for the disciples' activity. Bauer is convinced that Christians have been victorious in “mission” over the years due to the “authority” and “presence” (“I am with you always”) of Jesus himself in mission. The statistics of people searching for religious content amidst the pandemic are at an all-time high. The church must take strategic steps to take advantage of the situation.

The scope of this discipling work is all nations (*πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*). Acts 1:8 reiterates this scope in Jesus' discourse with his disciples just before His ascension; they were to spread the gospel to the “ends of the earth.” This was an improvement on an earlier instruction; they had been instructed to reach out to Israel (Matt. 10:6). Bauer (2019) argues that the use of the word *ἔθνη*, often translated as “Nations or Gentiles”, shows the expansion of the mandate. He adds, *ἔθνος* does signify “nation” here; it indicates a concern for “ethnographic” entities (discrete culturally cohesive groups) and thereby “suggests the necessity of taking seriously the ethnic character of those who will be evangelized, in other words, cross-cultural communication of the gospel” (Bauer, 2019, p.253). Bauer (2019) again contends that all nations fulfil the promise made to Abraham. Matthew often referred to Jesus as the “son of Abraham,” so he then becomes the channel through whom “all the nations of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3; 18:18 22:18). The rapid expansion of the gospel has been the subject of many scholarly works, and various



reasons have been attributed to it; major among them is missionary work (Hiebert, 2006, p. 289). In these times of a global pandemic, there is "mediamorphosis of faith" in which "new modalities of perception and expression of religious beliefs and practices begin to arise in the digital environment, thanks to the publicizing of religious elements and the accessibility to such elements by numerous inter-agents, everywhere and at any time" many people are logging and accessing faith content more than ever (Campbell, 2020, p.75).

Thanks to the Internet, the scope of the Great Commission is being reached at a faster rate. The internet gives access to countries that are not missionary accessible; people access Christian messages through digital channels. Although the printing of Christian literature, translation, vernacularisations and missionary activity helped in the spread, these methods are still being carried out. However, the internet has come to give the mission another impetus (Walls, 2009, p.72). The church's presence online has made it possible for people whose work schedules do not allow in-person attendance to services to access the services online. The scope and the spread of the Great Commission are indeed aided by the gospel moving online.

The "Substance" of the Mandate

The second part of the Great Commission that concerns us is what Bauer calls the "substance" of the mandate; to "make disciples." Bauer used the grammar and its etymology to prove this theme as central to the command. The Greek imperative of the verb to make disciples (*μαθητεύσατε*) makes Christian mission a crucial task. Bauer infers from Matthew's usage of the term to suggest that "disciples are to make disciples of others in the same way that Jesus made disciples of them throughout the Gospel" (Bauer, 2019, p.252). It may be added that the substance is actualizing the incarnational side of the mission, rooting the believer's life in all places. The researchers' observation and disappointment with the eight-week experience at IHOP was the lack of intentionality in discipling worshippers as they participated in their online services. The live services and archive messages were always available, but the missing human interaction made the IHOP experience unpleasant.

Wilson and Peterson (2002, p.462) observe that "the realization has grown that though online communication may happen faster, over larger distances, and may bring about the reformulation of some existing power relationships, the rapid and fundamental transformations of society that some foresaw have not come to pass." Therefore, just being online as a church does not automatically guarantee the achievement of set targets of making disciples. It is evident that online communities are fulfilling the "scope" side of the Great Commission by making it possible to reach "all nations." However, the imperative in the Great Commission is to make disciples.

Bauer again adds that "substance" in the Great Commission includes "the message" or content shared in discipleship making. content and not technology make people stay after a while. The church is Globalized in its theologizing, so there must be a balance of universal theological truths with local theologies online (Ott & Netland, 2006, p.157-165). Local context is vital in framing how Christians live, and the internet space must be seen in the same light. The Great Commission includes instructions to teach everything Jesus taught, underscoring the need to engage online audiences. The messages preached online must be biblically faithful and culturally relevant.



Online Communities

The virtual space has been a key object of study in recent years. Various reasons have been put forward as to how groups organize themselves online. Some have been organized to “further particular political agendas or bring together dispersed members of familial or ethnic groups, or they might be organized around commodity consumption or multinational” (Wilson & Peterson, 20002, p.449). Now churches have also become active participants in the virtual space; these groups often identify themselves as a “community.” Community is also a basic, indispensable means that anthropologists use to study people. “Community” had been defined as “an independent collectivity of individuals living permanently in a geographically limited area and characterized by a given culture” (Langness, 2005, p.290). Earlier studies described communities using Robert Redfield’s categories; they were “small, isolated and illiterate, homogeneous, had a strong sense of group solidarity, no full-time specialists, nature was described as humanlike, the groupings depended on status and roles, relationships were familial, incentives for work were noneconomical, controls of actions were informal, and many others” (Langness, 2005, p.146-147). Anthropology and other social sciences have gone through different phases of development, and certain aspects of how “community” has been viewed and have also changed. One of the earlier shifts was seeing communities as “geographically limited.” This made the communities bound; communities are not as bound as researchers used to think. Then there was the idea of the “modern society” in academia. It was characterized by breaking down traditional indigenous authorities (such as the village and family) and individual freedom with its attendant characteristics of individual rights trumping social allegiances, especially in the West.

Globalization, postmodernity, and now social media have changed the way people worldwide organize and build “community.” Online Community has been seen as a “social artefact of the Internet era” (Campbell, 2020, p.2). In academia, there have been many discussions on these changes. The study seeks to unravel the validity of identifying virtual audiences or groups with the term “community.” Should we identify some marks of physical communities and then ascertain if they can be found online? Yuan (2013) describes relationships in the online community as voluntary, fluid, and ephemeral. She observes, “members of virtual communities speak of mutual respect and caring but demur at the notion of true closeness ... the metaphor of ‘community’ in cyberspace is one of convenient togetherness without real responsibility” (Yuan (2013, p665). The above traits of communities make its study very difficult: “media, the often elusive and ambiguous constructions of individual and collective identities mediated by these technologies, and the problem of gaining an ontological footing within rapidly obsolescing technologies” (Wilson & Peterson, 2002, p.451). Yuan (2013), however, observes that online communities have similar structures as physical communities. The term “network” has come to denote an amorphous, temporal and fluid social construction. Yuan (2013, p.668) states again “the Internet enables sociality without the constraints of locality, thus helping to transform communal relations into loose networks.” Online communities are simply fluid aggregates of such networked individuals, incidences of “networked individualism.” She supports the idea of “online community” operates as a “model of social organization” in a specific socio-historical context. Online communities are also seen to be a “speech/ language community”—a common language shared among online users fits into Yuan's “family-oriented identity categories,” which is also characteristic of physical communities ((Yuan, 2013, p.674). Another important positive aspect of online connection is that there are no barriers to joining or discrimination that may exist in physical societies. Yuan and other researchers acknowledge



the tremendous impact the internet has on society; however, she warns, it is critical “to nurture a healthy scepticism toward narrow conceptions of progress and rationality” in the online phenomena (Yuan, 2013, p.676). However, from what has been discussed, the online community phenomenon has been seen to share important similarities with other types of human experiences, and it is amenable to relatively conventional anthropological concepts and assumptions. Therefore, it is safe to describe a church's online audience as a “community.” It follows that such communities can also be studied to inform missiological practices. However, the church should not see its online worship attendees as only connected individuals. They should rather see them as being a “network of solidarity [that] requires mutual listening and dialogue, based on the responsible use of language” (Campbell, 2020, p.45).

Online Church Communities are growing, and it has been projected to keep growing in the post-COVID-19 society. Rainer (2020, n.p) presents some of his findings after studying hundreds of online services. A summary of Rainer’s findings on the reality of the growing Online Church Communities is presented below:

- Any church can have digital worship services with technology today. He notes, “Facebook Live is the most common option, and it is free for the church that uses it.” Any church with an internet connection can use it.
- Some churches are reporting a decline in physical attendance as they provide virtual attendance venues.
- Churches are reporting mixed results about 'giving' among virtual attenders. Though the information is anecdotal for now, church leaders report some pretty decent offerings among the virtual attendees if they give them the opportunity to give. But they are also reporting a decline in per capita giving when a member shifts from physical attendance to virtual.
- This issue will be generational to some degree. Millennials and, even more so, Gen Z see virtual communities as real communities. Therefore, some of them cannot understand why churches cannot have vibrant virtual communities in lieu of being physically present.

The above findings prove the church's necessity of keeping their physical and virtual presence in mind and in tension in their missiological formulation, especially in targeting to fulfil the Great Commission of our Lord.

Acts 2:42-47 Model of Discipleship

In the book of Acts, the church’s activities portray crucial practices that shaped their community and helped maintain their growth. Unquestionably, the landscape of Christianity in the first century conspicuously continues to shed light on our understanding of the Christian mission both in theory and praxis. The text under consideration gives an insider's view of some of the practices that shaped the church and how that can inform how online community churches can effectively fulfil the Great Commission in virtual spaces. Acts 2:42 describes the four practices that characterized the first Christians; namely, teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. Most scholars recognize these four elements in the community life of the early church. These characteristics are expanded on in the subsequent verses in the segment. In his commentary on Acts, Keener (2012) aptly comments on this segment in comparison with



the “scope and substance” described earlier in this study. He states, “As comparisons of evangelistic claims and church growth reports reveal today, it is possible to have many ‘converts’ in meetings yet a lack of social reinforcement for, and perseverance in, their new faith afterwards. Luke underlines the point that the outpouring of the Spirit produced not simply short-term numbers but long-term results” (Keener, 2012, p.1000). For Keener, just having the numbers responding to the gospel call or showing up online does not necessarily translate into effectiveness, so Luke in this segment presents the necessary unity, which is a “reversal of Babel,” (cg. Gen. 11) and the other elements necessary for effective mission.

Apostle’s teaching represented in the “speeches” recorded in the book of Acts shows the link to Jesus and some of his teachings recorded in the gospels “to emphasize the continuity between the mission of Jesus and his church” (Keener, 2012, p.1002). The online church community continues this tradition by providing space for sharing the gospel content through preaching, teaching, and liturgy. Prayers as a practice among the early Christians is also being practised online. The online church community provides avenues that allow Christians to commune with God.

To draw attention to a neglected aspect of the online church community, we will examine the concept of *κοινωνία*, often translated as fellowship. We argue that *κοινωνία* will prove to be an effective tool that can aid online church communities to further the Great Commission mandate. We are convinced that fellowship provides the right atmosphere to pursue discipleship. The Greek word *κοινωνία* has the following nuances; partnership, sharing with others (Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13; Heb 13:16), sacrificial sharing (Acts 2:44–45) (note *κοινά*, 2:44) fellowship (Keener, 2012, p.1003). Ben Witherington, however, argues against translating it as fellowship could be missing the point because to him “fellowship is the result of sharing in common; it is not the *κοινωνία* itself” (Witherington, 1998, p.160). Witherington’s argument leads us to conclude that real fellowship only happens after *koinonia*; churches online can claim to have fellowship with the physical churches if there are active participation and sharing. However, Keener follows Bruce and Stott to insist that the sequence and context in which Luke presents the word gives it a spiritual dimension since it was used only after the Day of Pentecost. For instance, Stott points out, “for there was no *κοινωνία* before the Holy Spirit came, (Stott, 2011, p.97). Keener’s explanation of Luke’s usage of *κοινωνία* as highlighting the Spirit’s empowerment is sound (Keener, 2012, p.1003). Overall, the essence of the word’s usage is to depict a community whose members meet each other’s needs through the Holy Spirit’s empowerment. However, since the Holy Spirit is everywhere and lives in every believer, he can connect believers virtually and spiritually and empower them for ministry. The online church community following the model of Acts 2:42-47 will need to reconsider how to fulfil this communal aspect in the church’s online community. If the church is serious about fulfilling the Great Commission online, then the model of communal living must be taken seriously by actively engaging its physical and virtual participants. The Holy Spirit’s empowerment will enable the church to fulfil both the scope and substance of the online church community.

Ethnographic Observation: An Analysis of three Online Church Communities

The study of online communities has been the subject of study among anthropologists, even though some have suggested that online communities’ ephemeral nature makes it challenging to study. However, culturalist Yuan and anthropologists Wilson and Peterson prove through their articles that anthropology is better suited to study online communities to inform



theologians in formulating the correct biblical theology for online worship. Ethnographic participant-observation was done to observe some online church communities. Such an ethnographic observation will confirm or nullify the researchers' assumption with a greater degree of certainty that online church communities fulfil only one aspect of the Great Commission. Campbell, an expert in researching virtual communities, has suggested that researchers should focus on "authority, authenticity, identity, community, and ritual for churches to be effective online (Campbell, 2012). Therefore, we limit the discussion to the themes of 'community and ritual' in observing the three online church communities under study.

The International House of Prayer (IHOP) claims to be "an evangelical missions organization that is committed to praying for the release of the fullness of God's power and purpose, as we actively win the lost, heal the sick, feed the poor, make disciples, and impact every sphere of society. Our vision is to work in relationship with the wider Body of Christ to engage in the Great Commission, as we seek to walk out the two great commandments to love God and people" (International House of Prayer, n.d, online article). IHOP has over 20 related ministries connected to its 24/7 prayer room ministry. Of these ministries, at least five pertain directly to gospel missions, a university that trains and shapes its volunteers. They hope to continue the 24/7, non-stop night and day worship and intercession until the return of Jesus. The organization aligns its model to the biblical imagery of David's tabernacle, as detailed in the book of 1 Chronicle, highlighting the unique vision of 24/7 non-stop worship and intercession.

After eight-week ethnographic research on IHOP, the researchers came out with mixed feelings. Even though the online fellowship was always enjoyable to connect with people all over the world 24/7, there was still a sense of something missing in the way church service and Christian ministry were conducted online. For the eight weeks of participant observation of IHOP, nobody from the organization reached out to ascertain how participants were utilizing materials and content been shared online. The observation was also supported by three previous members of IHOP who had experienced it in person and had stopped fellowshipping online. The researchers then repeated the participant observation ethnography on two other church platforms. The researchers signed up to Trinity Hill UMC and the historic St. Paul Catholic Church to observe how different denominations utilize their online church community space. The following is a discussion of the observations made during the two churches' observations compared with observations made during the eight-week observer study of IHOP to enable us to draw some comparisons of the online worship experience, especially as online communities seek to fulfil the Great Commission online.

Websites and Social Media Spaces

All the three churches had their websites up to date and running, with information about programs for the upcoming week. The websites also had links to information on the churches' leadership and links to how online participants can give their offerings. As Rainer's observation noted earlier, Facebook live was the most common media platform these churches patronize for their online presence. All the churches had links to a social media account to live-stream their services. IHOP had more than one social media account. Trinity Hill and St. Paul Catholic church had only Facebook accounts for their live streaming. Only IHOP had live services running 24/7; the other two were live only when they had in-person services. One could access archived messages of previous sermons or services from their social media handles or links on their websites. The Catholic church services were observed to be highly liturgical, and they did not display screen prompts to guide in the singing of the songs or prayers. IHOP and Trinity



Hill showed lyrics of songs or prayers during their services. The researchers struggled to follow the catholic services online. Still, it is observed that all three services assume the people who log into the accounts are already members or familiar with their liturgy or worship style.

The aesthetics remained the same throughout the two weeks the researchers observed for IHOP and St. Paul Catholic Church; Trinity Hill had an addition of Christmas décor after the first week. The language used in their Livestream mainly was in English, St. Paul Catholic Church sometimes used Spanish, and IHOP had a link on their website to a global prayer room where other languages are used in the services. The St. Paul Catholic Church always has a male father leading the liturgy and preaching. It was observed at Trinity Hill that the male pastor always preached, but people of different gender and race led the praise-singing and scripture reading. IHOP always had diverse leaders in their band, leading different people of both genders also led preaching and prayer.

Online Participants and Reactions

The researchers had to log in to their social media handles to observe interactions between online participants. It was observed that all the Livestream sessions of all three churches had online and in-person participation. For IHOP, online participants ranged between 200 and 500 during the day and between 100 and 170 at night. The other two churches had fewer people watching online live, but people always watched the services. The day with the highest participation was Sunday. It was impossible to ascertain the people groups' dynamics online since only their usernames were displayed on the handles. The observation of all three churches proved they all had an online presence, but not much was done to win more members into their respective churches. After the initial greeting and acknowledging all participants, the common conversations excluded those online, except for IHOP, who once in a while invited people “all over the world” to pray on some special prayer concern they were dealing with at that particular time.

For genuine discipleship to take place in the online church community, it is vital for ministries online to invest in technology that allows for real-time communication. This is what Campbell had in mind when she said that the times “calls on all of us to invest in relationships and to affirm the interpersonal nature of our humanity, including in and through the network” (Campbell, 2020, p.7). The investment she calls for maybe churches to invest more in interactive technologies that allow for real-time communications. For instance, it was observed that Trinity Hill UMC and St. Paul Catholic Church had weekly Bible Study and Catechetical Classes, respectively, via zoom conference call. This platform and others like it allow interactions in real-time, which helps the experience be close to the in-person worship experience. Such interactive technologies are essential because they help leaders check non-participation and gain much-needed feedback from their online participants. Dialogue and feedback are critical in communication, which is possible through this media. Again, it was observed that all three churches were not intentionally reaching out to anyone utilizing their online content. Trinity Hill reported weekly attendance by picking the number of people who viewed their content during the week. The church has constantly augmented its translation and tract ministries with an in-person missionary to help guide understanding. It is easy to choose content over connection. Churches should know it takes both to fulfil the Great Commission. Content is essential, but connection is imperative. The church must intentionally create spaces where people can feel safe to open up and learn.



Communicating Truth

For the substance of the Christian message to stay relevant, it needs to be communicated in ways consistent with what is pertaining in a particular era. Globalization and its attendant issues have turned the world into a global village; with the internet and virtual spaces, it has become crucial for Christians to be conversant with how the truth of God's word is shared. Tienou rightly observed, "The church has become kerygmatically universal but is still theologically provincial" (cited in Ott & Netland, 2006, p.38). The church's proclamation needs to reflect the universal and local nature of the church; this is the glocal nature of proclamation. The internet space allows the church to reach the world faster than any time before; the church must seize the opportunity. With the internet and online church community projected to keep growing, the church must find ways of effectively communicating the timeless gospel message online. Kraft (1999, p.3) suggests that the church's communication models should be "God's Model for Communication." He insists "we are commanded not to monologue his Word but to communicate it as effectively as possible" (Kraft, 1999, p.3). Kraft (1999, p.3, 7) expatiates on how God communicates, "God communicates and not only perform, but God also wants to be understood, God seeks a response from hearers, God is receptor oriented" and adds "dynamic equivalence" to God's method of communication which should inform today's mission. Kraft's "receptor-oriented" and "dynamic equivalence" as effective means of communicating the gospel online is crucial to the present discussion.

Receptor oriented: in communicating the gospel, Kraft acknowledges three elements; the communicator, the message, and the receptor, the communicator's message will be hugely affected by what he focuses on; the message or the receptor. Although he states, "a receptor-oriented communicator ...is careful to bend every effort to meet the receptors where they are," the observations from the three online services showed that online participants were not factored in the message delivery (Kraft, 1999, p.7). Kraft suggests a five-step process for receptor-oriented communication: first, understand them, second, empathize with them, thirdly identify with the receptors, fourth, participate in the life of the people we are trying to reach, and the fifth step is self-exposure. If the online church community is bent on making disciples with their online followers, these steps are crucial to follow. Kraft's dynamic equivalence again has the recipients in mind; in our case, the online participants, the "church like a contemporary translation, should impress the uninitiated observer as an original production in the contemporary culture, not as a badly fitted import from somewhere else" (Engen, Whiteman & Woodberry, 2008, p.83-84). Most of the services observed assumed the online members knew about how the service should flow, but if Kraft's suggestion is to be taken seriously, pastors online should innovate to share the gospel in that space.

Hiebert also discusses the postmodern phenomenon of deconstruction; he suggests that missiological communication can employ instrumentalist epistemology (cited in Engen, Whiteman & Woodberry, 2008); cultural and cultural contexts shape human knowledge. Objective theologizing must have the contexts in view and inform how we theologize; it helps us contextualize. "Communication and Bible translation to be receptor oriented measured not by what the speaker says, but by what the receptor hears and understands" (Engen, Whiteman & Woodberry, 2008, p.17). For example, the researchers observed that of all three churches, only one had their in-person people in mind when delivering sermons. Certain local jokes were shared during the observed services, which were inappropriate for a global audience because only a particular group could get those jokes. Our contention is that when planning for live-



streamed church services, the selection of songs and preaching styles should reflect a wider audience than what the pastor envisages or sees in the room.

Another concept that also gained popularity in postmodernism was critical realism; it can be adopted by those who will communicate the gospel. “Critical realists hold the objective truths but recognize that humans understand it in their contexts” (Engen, Whiteman & Woodberry, 2008, p.21). The implications are that the one communicating must believe the truth and then seek others to commit to the truths he is sharing. This is crucial, especially in the online church context; the internet is flooded with so many different options that preachers who take advantage of internet spaces must come from a place of conviction. Critical realism is a humbling concept; the missionary does not go into conversations thinking they are superior to any other person. Instead, the missionary evaluates himself with the truth of God’s word and makes sure he aligns with its truths. This is the only way to be “bold witnesses of what we have experienced to what we have experienced and know” (Engen, Whiteman & Woodberry, 2008, p.22).

What can be transported online?

The churches observed are sacramental; they are one of the markers of Christian identity. With the pandemic and other attendant issues, one of the questions engaging scholars of ecclesiology is what aspects of the sacraments can be transported online. Another significant question often posed in such discourses is whether online mediated worship is termed “real”? Can foundational sacraments like the Eucharist or even the imposition of ash on Ash-Wednesday service be observed effectively online? Unfortunately, there is no robust theology of the sacraments administered online; it has been left to the individual minister's preference. As the church grapples to formulate a theology for incorporating online services, the sacraments must be given preference, as it seems to be the hottest issue being discussed in the online church discourse in academia.

The sacramental presence of Christ continues wherever Christians have gathered to worship. Campbell and Garner (2016, p.45) argue that “Our connection may be limited (and I am arguing that it is a limitation) to the Livestream edition of those masses in a thousand YouTube channels, but that does not void our connection to the presence of Christ, for the Eucharistic presence is what anchors the presence of the Divine.” It is argued that Eucharistic Christ unites all things into communion. In the face of our being sequestered from the sacraments as live events, we who have in the past partaken of the Body of Christ should now be turned by the Eucharistic presence into that event that “unite[s] all human beings in a communion of love,” even if we have to do it as avatars” (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p.46). The celebration of the sacraments should be seen as the presence of Christ present even as we break the bread. Other sacraments like baptism and others are mostly left out of the discourse; we believe there should be a way of having those in person if it is possible or having a “representative” of the church to do it on behalf of the church wherever one finds himself/herself. For example, the Methodist Church in South Africa can have the Presbyterian Church in Congo baptise some of their members in Congo on behalf of the Methodist Church. There is however the need to continue discursing around this and other issues to have a permanent solution to the challenges posed in a virtual setting. It is important to note that online services are as effective as in-person if we can open up and take those services seriously and plan to make disciples of Christ. It should also be noted that the online participants are diverse. Therefore, online church communities should focus on universally acknowledged activities instead of local or denominational



liturgical practices. An emphasis on the content of messages should be prioritized above liturgical differences.

Missiological Implications and Conclusions

Jesus's commandment to go and make disciples of all nations is still a good call to motivate Christians to join God in his mission. The methods we choose as we pursue the mission should lead us to meet the scope and substance of the Great Commission. The dynamic nature of online community participants requires anthropologists to employ requisite skills in exegeting cultures and patterns to help missiologists formulate their missional plans.

The internet presents a wonderful opportunity to learn to fulfil the Great Commission, but this must be done with a model that seeks to disciple all present in service or the church community. The dynamics of online church activism are fluid and still evolving. The initial scare of the COVID-19 pandemic is fading. Although, as noted, church service and participation will not go back to the old ways, online and in-person church audiences will persist; how is the church positioning itself to take advantage of this enormous opportunity presented to us? Further research should be conducted to ascertain people's motivation to join services online.

This study explored the proliferation of online church communities and ascertained if their activism embodied all aspects of the Great Commission's enterprise effectively. This paper held the view that the indispensable pursuit of Christian ministry is to join God in his mission. As postulated by Bauer, the two crucial dimensions of the Great Commission are scope and substance. The internet is a great boon for the 21st century, creating avenues to reach many people in different contexts with the gospel at a swifter rate. The internet's efficacy has been seen in the conversion of people who live in countries where missionary activity has been banned; house churches are growing in Asia and other parts of the world through access to the gospel content. It will almost suffice to designate a church's virtual audience as a community due to certain traits and characteristics common to online and physical communities. The researchers observed three different churches for this study to analyse how they utilize their online media spaces to fulfil the Great Commission. The authors contend that the church should let the two sides of the Great Commission, scope and substance, inform their missiological practices online using the relevant anthropological tools. The study contributes to the ongoing scholarly discussions on digital ecclesiology: its nature, challenges, strategies and prospects.

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