



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

**AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF VIRTUAL WORSHIP:
EXPLORING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN CYBERSPACE**

by

KUDAKWASHE CHIZHANDE

A thesis submitted in fulfilment for the degree
Magister Artium (Digital Culture and Media)
in the

SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

FEBRUARY 2024

Supervisor: Dr Karli Brittz

PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

I, CHIZHANDE KUDAKWASHE, Student number 21822493, make the following declaration:

Declaration

1. I understand what plagiarism entails and am aware of the University's policy in this regard.
2. I declare that this thesis is my own, original work. Where someone else's work was used (whether from a printed source, the Internet, or any other source) due acknowledgement was given and reference was made according to departmental requirements.
3. I did not make use of another student's previous work and submit it as my own.
4. I did not allow and will not allow anyone to copy my work with the intention of presenting it as his or her own work.

Signature  Date: 26/02/2024

ABSTRACT

Technology has revolutionised the traditional concept of worship and impacted the understanding of spirituality. The rise of the internet and digital technologies has revolutionised how individuals interact with each other and their surroundings, including religious spaces. This autoethnographic exploration delves into the experience of virtual worship and how the digital revolution is transforming spiritual experiences. Based on my personal experiences and observations, I have investigated the world of virtual worship and discovered the unique religious experiences it offers in cyberspace. It also reveals the potential for technology to facilitate religious experiences through virtual sacred spaces and discusses the possibility of these online experiences replacing worship in physical reality. I have discovered that virtual worship provides advantages such as connecting with a global community of believers and the convenience of participating in religious activities from the comfort of their own homes. However, there are also possible drawbacks, including a lack of intimacy and connection with the physical world.

This exploration highlights the intricate and evolving relationship between technology and spirituality and how virtual worship shapes our religious experiences. The study contends that virtual worship cannot substitute offline gatherings, but that online and offline spiritual practices can be used since they are vital in their different capacities. Furthermore, the study emphasises that while virtual worship experiences hold immense value as they allow flexibility and accessibility, they may lack some embodied aspects of worship, such as physical presence and shared space. Overall, this autoethnographic exploration provides valuable insights into how virtual worship experiences impact religious practice and suggests that digital technologies could complement physical worship spaces rather than replace them entirely. Thus, the study expands on the scholarship of digital culture and virtual worship by considering an autoethnographic experience of the phenomenon.

Key terms: virtual worship, sacred spaces, immersion, offline gathering, autoethnography.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For the making of the person who went into the crafting of this thesis, I thank my parents, Judy & Tinos Chizhande, who always encouraged me but never pressured me along the educational pathway, and all my teachers, including Dr Oswelled Ureke, Dr Nyasha Mapuwei and Mrs Ndawana—all from Midlands State University.

Thanks to Dr Karli Brittz, my supervisor, for her sharpness of insight, sense of humour, and support in alerting me to many leads I would have otherwise not discovered.

I am grateful for Dr Innocent Chizhande, my brother and mentor, who adopted me and helped me reach greater heights in the path of education. I also want to thank Tryness Chizhande, Irvine Chizhande, Enock Chizhande, Dephine Chizhande and their children for their unwavering support that goes beyond the call of duty in my career.

Thank you to all the friends who have affirmed and challenged me, among them Sybil du Preez, Dr Gerald du Preez, Karabo Mokwa, Catherine Kabutu-Njekwa, Otieno Mkandawire, Brian Manyimo, Dr Dave Clyde Spencer and Mavis Mweemba. Each of you holds a special place in my heart despite the disorderly sequence to which I subjected your names. Thank you to Gershon Naidoo and Effort Bhebe for always being the brothers I needed and always being willing to help me when needed.

Thank you to my colleagues and workmates who helped me in every suitable way, not forgetting Portia Khanyi Ndinisa, who enrolled me on an aerobics class that helped relieve stress and boost my physical well-being. Much appreciation also goes to the Southern Africa Union Conference for their financial support for the whole period of study.

Last, I thank my beloved wife, Bongekile ka-Madlala Chizhande, for her support, prayers and love, as she was always available to listen to my most uncomfortable fears.

Most of all, I thank my great God, Who recklessly entrusts Himself to human language and because of Whom both wonder and worship are possible. Amen.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the three most important groups of people in my life: my family, my colleagues, and my wife.

My family, thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement throughout my academic journey. Your love and belief in me have been my driving force, and I would not be where I am today without you.

To my colleagues, thank you for the countless stimulating conversations and valuable feedback and for making my time in the programme memorable. Your presence has made this journey all the more enjoyable and fulfilling.

Finally, to my wife, thank you for your unceasing love, patience, and understanding. You have been my rock and my inspiration. Your unwavering support and encouragement have been invaluable, and I cannot thank you enough. This thesis is dedicated to you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLAGIARISM DECLARATION	<i>ii</i>
ABSTRACT.....	<i>iii</i>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	<i>iv</i>
DEDICATION	<i>v</i>
LIST OF FIGURES	<i>ix</i>
GLOSSARY.....	<i>x</i>
CHAPTER 1.....	<i>1</i>
INTRODUCTION	<i>1</i>
1.1 The Research Problem	<i>2</i>
1.2 Background and Introduction to the Study	<i>3</i>
1.2.1 <i>Sacred Places and Spaces</i>	<i>3</i>
1.2.2 <i>Sacred Place and the Digital</i>	<i>7</i>
1.2.3 <i>Defining Virtual Worship</i>	<i>10</i>
1.2.4 <i>Sacred Space Online: The Case of the Seventh-day Adventist Church</i>	<i>12</i>
1.3 Objectives of the study	<i>15</i>
1.4 Significance of the Study.....	<i>15</i>
1.5 Limitations of the Study.....	<i>16</i>
1.6 Chapter Outline.....	<i>16</i>
1.7 Conclusion.....	<i>17</i>
CHAPTER 2.....	<i>19</i>
SPIRITUAL SOJOURNS: UNVEILING THE DIGITAL DEVOTION	<i>19</i>
2.1 Religious Broadcasting’s Evolution and Digital Media’s Impact On Practices.....	<i>19</i>
2.1.2 <i>The Evolution of the Digital Religion and Its Impacts On Traditional Religious Practices</i>	<i>26</i>
2.1.3 <i>‘Online Church’ or ‘Church Online’.....</i>	<i><u>27</u></i>
2.1.3.1 <i>Online Churches and Sacred Spaces in South Africa</i>	<i>29</i>
2.2 Conclusion.....	<i>32</i>

CHAPTER 3.....	34
VIRTUAL WORSHIP SPACES: DESIGNING FOR MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES.....	34
3.1 Heim on Immersion.....	35
3.1.1 <i>Embodiment in Virtual Reality Technology.....</i>	36
3.1.2 <i>Virtual Reality Creates a Strong Sense of Presence.....</i>	37
3.1.3 <i>How Real are Virtual Experiences ?.....</i>	38
3.1.4 <i>Technology as An Extension of Human Existence.....</i>	42
3.2 Philip Sheldrake on Sacred Spaces.....	46
3.2.1 <i>Counting on What Is Familiar and Known.....</i>	47
3.2.2 <i>Spaces Designated for Healing and Reconciliation.....</i>	<u>48</u>
3.2.3 <i>Any Space Can Become Sacralised.....</i>	53
3.2.4 <i>Sheldrake on the Home.....</i>	56
3.3 An Overview of Tim Hutchings.....	59
3.4 Tim Hutchings on the Creation of the Online Church.....	60
3.4.1 <i>Exploring the Creative Revolutionising Possibilities of Virtual Architecture.....</i>	61
3.4.2 <i>Virtual Worship as a Tool for Innovation and Connection.....</i>	63
3.4.3 <i>Combining Virtual and Physical Worship Gatherings.....</i>	66
3.5 Discussion.....	70
3.6 Conclusion.....	74
CHAPTER 4.....	75
PILGRIMAGE THROUGH PIXELS.....	75
4.1 Understanding Autoethnography.....	75
4.2 The Role of the Researcher.....	79
4.3 The Virtual Worship Service.....	80
4.4 Face-to-face worship.....	83
4.5 Turning Home into a Shrine.....	85
4.6 Space is Everywhere.....	92
4.7 Social Media Gadgets in Physical Church Versus Worship in Fluid Spaces.....	98
4.8 Conclusion.....	109
CHAPTER 5.....	<u>110</u>

CONCLUSION	<u>110</u>
5.1 Introduction	<u>110</u>
5.2 Summary of Findings.....	<u>110</u>
5.3 Contribution of the Study	<u>115</u>
5.4 Limitations of study and suggestions for further studies	<u>115</u>
5.5 Conclusions	<u>116</u>
BIBLIOGRAPHY	<u>118</u>

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A poster promoting the first online programme. Photograph by the author, 2020	....87
Figure 2: The use of various technological gadgets in virtual worship. Photograph by the author, 2020	.....93
Figure 3: The comment. Section of the livestream showing integration. Screenshot by the author, 2021	.....94
Figure 4: Screenshot showing level of engagement, 4 April 2020	.....96
Figure 5: Screenshot of comments of the livestream, 11 April 2020	.....97
Figure 6: The YouVersion Bible App, screenshot by the author, 2023	.....101
Figure 7: The page showing Facebook insights, screenshot by the author, 2021	.....102
Figure 8: Screenshot of messages typed by the administrator, screenshot by author, 2021	..104
Figure 9: Screenshot of King Goodwill Zwelithini, screenshot by the author, 2021	.....106
Figure 10: Comment of one the viewers, screenshot by the author, 2021	.....107
Figure 11: Comment of viewer appreciating quality of the videos, screenshot by the author, 2021	.....107

GLOSSARY

Term	Definition
Seventh-day Adventist Church	Is an evangelical church in the protestant tradition known for observing Saturday as the biblical Sabbath and for anticipating and proclaiming the soon coming of Jesus Christ.
District	Local churches within a specific area are organised into a district.
Conference	Local districts within a specific area, state, province, or territory are organised into a conference.
Union	Conferences within a larger territory as multiple regions or borders of a country are organised into a union conference.
Director	Is a person whom church members select to lead a specific department for a particular period within a conference or union.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During a global pandemic characterised by limited interactions, my engagement with virtual worship services came to the fore. As a regular churchgoer, attending virtual worship services was something other than what I expected to do. Nevertheless, given the circumstances, it was necessary. Initially hesitant about the possibility of replicating the essential tenets and spirit of in-person worship experiences online, I was surprised by how unique and fulfilling it was. My experience featured virtual conferencing as a central feature that allowed me to participate comfortably from home.

I opened a link to a virtual Facebook church after I logged into my Facebook account for access. The service started with a welcoming message from the clergy followed by prayers and soulful singing, both sharing the collective essence of spiritual expression amidst participants congregated on this platform. The platform manager for the day announced that we should put our devices on “do not disturb” mode which silence all incoming calls, texts and notifications. A sense of togetherness permeated the virtual worship service despite being physically apart. I felt immersed in the message to such an extent that the distance barrier did not matter, making me feel like I was in the physical church building. The preacher then took the podium and started preaching to us. The pastor's message of solace and optimism particularly resonated with me, as it reminded me that others were facing similar struggles throughout the pandemic.

Following the sermon, we joined with other believers on Zoom in reflection and prayer, allowing us to form meaningful connections with fellow worshippers even from afar. Despite the unprecedented circumstances brought upon by the COVID lockdown, I found attending virtual worship services a beneficial experience overall. While it differed greatly from my prior experiences attending church in person, I still felt connected to fellow believers, and a sense of community was established. During this time of uncertainty and isolation, it provided comfort and helped me maintain my faith.

This personal experience prompted an enquiry into virtual worship's potential, characteristics and understanding. Throughout this study, I aim to elaborate on the blurred boundaries between virtual and offline worship by further exploring my experience in relation to existing literature.

1.1 The Research Problem

In contemporary society—where human behaviour, routines, rituals and culture become increasingly digital—the sacred realm has become mediated and immersed within technology. This study is situated at the intersection between the sacred and the digital. It seeks to explore the intricacies of religious worship in a virtual space, or as Teresa Berger (2018, xiii) explains, "What it means to seek God among pixels."

Alongside history and the development of society, sacred spaces have evolved and taken on many different forms, from the natural world to carefully curated architectural temples, churches and cathedrals. Similarly, worship within these spaces has emerged and unfolded in many ways. Liturgy, devotion, and religious practices have also shifted to a digital realm in postmodern society even though religion has always been mediated through text, manuscript, preaching and printed books. However, liturgy has become immersed into the online realm through virtual worship, online services and religious-oriented mobile applications. As virtual worship becomes increasingly popular, exploring and engaging with such experiences is crucial to understanding the significance of worship in the online realm. Moreover, mapping and critically thinking through sacred digital occurrences can help navigate the technological age of liturgical practices.

This study focuses on the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church in the South African context, reflecting on how churchgoing evangelised virtually during the lockdown period. The methodology involves autoethnographic research, allowing the researcher to engage in introspection and leverage their personal experiences in coordinating and participating in virtual worship practices. The autoethnography experiences are related to the hermeneutic reading of literature concerning virtual worship following leading theorists Tim Hutchings (2017) on the creation of church online, Philip Sheldrake (2001) on sacred spaces and Michael Heim's (1993) concept of immersion into the digital realm. Thus, the present study explores the sacred domain of virtual worship, aiming to shed light on the significance of online liturgy as a means of spiritual practice in contemporary times. Additionally, the study explores the

notions of immersion, transcendence, and virtual space in relation to virtual worship. Ultimately, the study shows what online liturgy and the sacred realm entail, if and how online worship differs from offline worship, and what it means to practice faith within digital culture.

1.2 Background and Introduction to the Study

1.2.1 Sacred Places and Spaces

Religious organisations are currently assessing the impact of modern communication techniques, particularly digital and mobile technologies, on their customary worship practices. The presence of new technology alters established practices for a community, specifically concerning religious purposes. Smartphones are one example of a technology that religious groups respond to, integrating applications, social media and streaming services as a device for spiritual practices. The study argues that religious groups do not outrightly embrace or dismiss modern communication tools within their practice; rather, they engage in a multifaceted negotiation process guided by their traditions and fundamental beliefs. This research study focuses on an autoethnographic exploration of this negotiation with technologies resulting in worship in a virtual realm.

According to Hoover and Clark (2002, 91), a sacred space is a ritual space, location or significant space of negotiated contests. Philip Sheldrake (2007) argues that humans create sacred spaces in the quest for places of divine manifestations, transcendence and power, while other spaces signify a sense of the sacred in their architecture. Sacred spaces bridge the sacred and the profane, transforming everyday human actions into sacred acts (Eliade 1959). Different spaces can obtain a sacred nature, including natural places (mountains, rivers) and manufactured structures (temples, churches) due to sacred objects (Coomans et al. 2012). Weir (2009) believes that sacredness strengthens when the space becomes a meeting place for generations. In this way, the church, in its own right, is a symbol of the human and divine meeting place, mirroring the universe's sacredness as the holy temple of God (Brown 2004, 239). Therefore, sacred space can be interpreted in many different ways, focusing mainly on an intersection between the sacred and the human in a particular place.

In religious locations, understanding the importance of space and place is essential. Cresswell (2005, 7) explains that although space is a physical region, place holds a more significant value

as a meaningful location that shapes our understanding and interpretation of the world. In this way, a place becomes a way of being, shapes the self and becomes a means of relating to the world (Cresswell 2009, 16). The term "sense of place" was coined to describe people's emotional and personal connection to a location, including spiritual connection (Cresswell 2005, 132). In other words, a sense of place can also be a spiritual connection between humans and place. Historical examples, such as cave paintings, demonstrate the intentional recognition of the connection between humans and their surroundings and how certain locations can influence spiritual encounters (Sheldrake 2007). Shackley (2001) furthers this notion by identifying the "spirit of the place" as a place's unique sacred atmosphere, which can greatly impact the religious experiences of those who visit. Therefore, comprehending the differentiation between space and place for religious locations is vital, as it can greatly enhance our appreciation and comprehension of the spiritual significance of these sites.

Thus, the notion of space and place can closely intertwine with spirituality. According to Reed's (1992) definition of spirituality, the tendency to make meaning between people and transpersonal relationships empowers one to transcend through the mind. He notes that spirituality can be a tool to facilitate meaningful connections between individuals and transpersonal relationships that empower people to transcend through the mind. Virtual spaces and online communities can allow people to connect with others who share similar beliefs and engage in spiritual practices that may not be accessible to them physically. Similarly, Sheldrake (2001) asserts that technology can significantly impact our attachment to physical places and, therefore, the formation of our individual and spiritual selves. As people spend more time in virtual spaces, they may become detached from the physical world, potentially weakening their sense of attachment to physical places. The detachment from physical places could profoundly impact individuals' spiritual experiences as they may be less likely to form a connection with the physical environment. Hence, computer generated appliances enable users to have immersive experiences that simulate physical spaces. Therefore, Sheldrake (2001) and Reed (1992) highlight the potential of technology to facilitate meaningful connections and the need to explore the potential negative impact of technology on our attachment to physical places and how it affects our spiritual experiences.

The notion of sacred places holds significant importance in religious practices globally. It pertains to identifying specific locations as sites of divine worship where individuals seek to connect with the divine (Coomans et al. 2012). The act of labelling a place as sacred implies a

sense of reputation and reverence, which instills a feeling of respect and holiness among the followers of that religion (Wasilewska 2010). Nevertheless, the aspect that renders a place sacred is not solely its physical attributes but the emotions it evokes within individuals (Otto 1958). Emotions play a crucial role in defining a sacred location, and the mental state of each individual is unique, implying that their experience of a sacred place will vary. The unique experience renders a place sacred and holds immense significance and meaning for the adherents of a particular religion. It is noteworthy that holy locations are created and discerned from ordinary places. The significance of a place is not natural but is attributed to it by individuals. Thus, a place is not inherently spiritual but can acquire a transcendent quality through communal interpretation and connection. Burke (1990) states that a sacred space experience branches from the most profound emotion the mind can feel, making a place sacred. In essence, the connection between the individual and the divine can create a sense of holiness and significance rather than just the physical attributes of the location itself.

Mircea Eliade has established the structuralist, postmodern and more-than-representational approaches to sacred spaces in the book *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959). He revealed the distinction between the sacred and the secular as two separate spaces; sacred spaces are saturated with deep spiritual significance associated with divine experiences, while secular space is unstructured and devoid of divine essence.

The postmodernism theory is critiqued by Eliade (1959) who argue that secular space lacks any inherent significance or power that can affect individuals and society meaningfully. Instead, Chidester and Linenthal (1995) suggest that any space can become sacred. This view contrasts the traditional understanding of the dichotomy between sacred and secular spaces, often seen as fluid, situational, and socially constructed. Chidester and Linenthal (1995) further elaborate on this perspective by explaining how sacred and secular spaces are not fixed categories but are context-dependent and subject to change over time. It can mean that a space once considered sacred may be deemed secular in a different context. However, Yorgason and Dora (2009) offer a different perspective that challenges the traditional understanding of sacredness. They argue that the notion of sacredness is also socially constructed and does not have unique or independent qualities that differentiate it from the profane (Nixon 2019). In other words, the concept of sacredness is not predetermined by any inherent qualities of the physical space itself. However, it is rather shaped by social and cultural factors that vary across different societies and contexts. Eade and Sallnow (1991) and Holloway (2003) are among

other scholars who have also critiqued the traditional view of sacredness and secularism. They argue that the distinction between the two is less clear-cut than it is often portrayed and that the boundaries between them are often blurred and contested (Nixon, 2019). Hence, the concept of sacredness and its relationship to physical space remains a topic of ongoing debate among scholars.

Sacred spaces hold a unique and special place in various cultures worldwide. The more-than-representational approach, is defined as spaces that are set apart from mundane spaces due to their connection with the transcendent, a complex and multi-layered concept (Nixon 2019). This approach rejects postmodernism and structuralist approaches and emphasises the importance of a more representational approach (Eliade 1959). The more-than-representational approach involves using emotions, feelings, and performances to create a sacred atmosphere in a space. Under the more-than-representational approach, sacralisation is not static but continually evolving, meaning that any space, be it a church, tourist site, or museum, can be transformed into a sacred space (Nixon 2019). The recognition of this attribute is an essential aspect of this approach. Notably, Dora (2011, 2018) Dewsbury (2009) and Finlayson (2012) are leading voices in this field. Therefore, the more-than-representational approach offers a unique perspective on sacred spaces, emphasising their importance in various cultures worldwide. It acknowledges the dynamic and ongoing process of sacralisation and the critical role of emotions, feelings, and performances in creating a sacred atmosphere.

The study of sacred spaces through the more-than-representational approach considers both structuralist and postmodern perspectives. It recognises that sacred spaces are exceptional and cannot be fully explained or understood by language or scientific analysis alone. The sacredness of space is founded on the complexities of the transcendent, a multi-layered concept that is difficult to define (Meagher 2016). Additionally, this approach acknowledges that the sacredness of a space is not solely based on its physical or material properties but also on the emotions, feelings, and performances that occur within it. Moreover, the more-than-representational approach, according to (Meagher 2016), emphasises that any space has the potential to become sacred through affect, emotion, and performance. Even tourist sites and museums can be instilled with sacredness through human interactions and experiences. The approach recognises that the sacredness of space is not inherent but rather a result of human interaction and interpretation. Also, Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2004) view the more-than-representational approach views sacred spaces as dynamic and continually evolving; they are

not fixed or static phenomena but lived experiences shaped by human interactions, emotions, and experiences. As a result, the integrity of space has multiple factors that affect it, including cultural, social, and historical contexts, and may change over time.

From another perspective, the gathering of believers is urged to adopt innovative and creative approaches to practice the gospel by transforming spaces previously used for entertainment into places of worship (Nixon 2019). This transformational process enables the creation of a sacred environment that draws on shared past experiences and historical significance (Muster 2016). The leaders of a gathering of believers play a crucial role in creating space for the congregation, accounting for their personal past experiences and current changes in a theological context (Thiessen and McAlpine 2013). Furthermore, Mahrt (2016) and Lang (2014) argue that sacred spaces manifest the church's beauty and theology that transcends academic boundaries and facilitates the construction of churches based on theology (Nixon 2019). Despite these arguments, the current debates have failed to address the critical issues regarding sacred spaces and geographic trends towards addressing emotions and feelings, ultimately resulting in a disconnect between university circles and religious authorities.

1.2.2 Sacred Place and the Digital

As mentioned, following the turn of the digital age, where society has become predominantly driven by technological development, spirituality and sacred places have also become entangled with the digital realm. Moving place and space to the digital has led to new phenomena such as virtual space and cyberspace. Ettliger (2007) defines *virtual space* as a visible space humans experience through technology. In virtual space, we share space through images with a non-physical existence, yet there is still a direct encounter with a physical object of a particular kind, albeit digital. More so, cyberspace pertains to a distinct technological realm linked to computer networks that have no physical boundaries and are not limited by geography. It is a platform for interactions between humans and computers (Hamelink 2003).

Just as space and place intertwine with the digital, sacred spaces and rituals also entangle with the digital realm. Campbell (2013) notes that observing the emergence of virtual worship spaces created by certain groups to supplement or substitute traditional religious practices is of great interest. Tibetan Buddhists are said to have been the pioneers in acknowledging the internet as a sacred space, where they have recreated spiritual rituals in a digital environment

(Zaleski 1997). Additionally, Techno-pagans have been known to consecrate websites and blogs as automated platforms (Decker 2014). Campbell (2012, 27) describes such digital religions as the progression of online religious practices, as witnessed in the latest cyber churches connected to virtual and physical environments. During the COVID-19 lockdown, Pope Francis was preaching in St. Peter's Square despite the restrictions and heartening to witness how media technology has revolutionised how we practice religion (Evolvi 2022). It highlighted how digital solutions have transformed the practice of religion. Not only has this increased accessibility to religious observance, it has also enabled people to engage with their faith at an intensified personal level ensuring believers can maintain their spiritual connection even when physically distanced.

The ever-evolving world of digital technology can foster religious camaraderie or weaken traditional religious practices. According to *The Unknown God of the Internet*, written by O'Leary and Brasher (1996), social media platforms provide a new space for religions to spread their message and maintain their religious atmosphere (Campbell and Vitullo 2016). In 1998, Cobb introduced the concept of a "theology of cyberspace," which explores how the social media platforms influences and shapes our understanding of the divine. Zukowski (2002) proposed that the gathering of believers should modify its catechetical approach to effectively communicate with the people in the realm of cyberspace as Facebook and YouTube's influence on society continues to expand. Considering Zukowski's proposal, how technology shapes our perception of space and place provides valuable insight for a gathering of believers to navigate the theological implications of social media platforms increasing influence (Campbell and Vitullo 2016).

The emergence of digital technology has brought about a new concept in the Christian tradition, wherein churches using this technology are referred to as "churches without walls" (Campbell 2005, 111). The First Church of Cyberspace and St. Pixels are notable examples of such churches, having established a strong online presence. St. Pixels held weekly services in a multi-user environment for three months in 2004 (Hutchings 2013). Worshippers could participate in these online services through computer avatars synchronised with other users, allowing for a sense of community and togetherness, even in a digital space. Additionally, religious rituals can be adapted to suit the medium, expanding the reach and accessibility of these services to people anywhere in the world (Campbell 2016). St. Pixel's religious communities engage in online activity through Facebook and in-person gatherings, allowing

participants to connect physically (Hutchings 2013). Utilising the same digital space to worship, discuss, and share their missionary goals allows these communities to extend their reach and connect with people without access to the church buildings.

Studies on online religious communities reflect how members and digital representations construct actions and patterns in the virtual realm. The rise of virtual communities as adapted by Campbell and Vitullo (2016) has led to a redefinition of what community means, with studies by Armfield Hilbert (2003) highlighting the potential challenges religious institutions face in adopting digital technology. For example, there are concerns that online communications could replace traditional churches with virtual alternatives. However, Campbell and Vitullo (2016) empathises with the positive connections between online and offline communities, revealing the concept of the "networked community" and paving the way for a study on connected individuals (Wellman 2001). Additionally, studies have shown that active religious users of the social media platforms are also active participants in their offline faith communities (Arasa et al. 2010, 39). As a result, religious communities are shaping and adapting to technological platforms based on their values, patterns and moral economy.

In light of the paradigm shift of spaces and places becoming digital, cyberspaces can also become sacred spaces. As per the findings of the Cyber church report by the Barna Research Group in 2001, over 100 million individuals in the United States uses social media platforms as a significant source for their religious practices. The Pew Foundations Cyber-Faith Report highlights the increasing popularity of "religious surfers" who seek spiritual information online to connect with others on their faith journey (Larsen 2001) with activities including listening to teachings, reading devotionals and purchasing spiritual products. Hoover, Clarke and Rainie (2004) agree that seeking religious content forms the base of dominance in online religious activities. Therefore, sacred worship and rituals exist online within diverse online worship spaces, such as the emergence of cyber churches. In these digital places, sacred places link electronically with members to reproduce the traditional experience of the church. As per Brasher's (2001) research findings, observing religious activities online, including the Passover and Holy Communion, is gaining momentum. The benefits of this trend include the opportunity for individuals to experience the essence of sacred time and presence within the comfort and privacy of their homes. Thus, religious observance and customs have experienced a resurgence in digital domains through various means.

1.2.3 Defining Virtual Worship

An example of how spirituality surfaces in digital space is through the concept of virtual worship. Virtual worship brings together followers of a particular faith through video and audio streams and written messages to gather a church community over Facebook and YouTube (Anderson 1991). This results in an intersection of people from diverse cultural spheres with a common goal of experiencing church in the comfort of their homes (Kim 2020). The essence of this study lies in the phenomenon of virtual worship that takes place within online spaces. More so, Anderson (1991) adds that the gathering of believers in virtual worship is labelled an imagined community in that people are drawn closer virtually through sacred ceremony in fellowship. The study explores the sacred space of virtual worship to understand liturgy online and its significance as a religious practice in the digital age.

Addo (2020) states that virtual worship empowers believers to choose the teaching they want to consume. Scholars argue that due to the COVID pandemic, virtual worship became the only choice of evangelism for churchgoers (Dzokoto 2021, 335-347). The Pew Research Centre conducted a study and found that virtual worship is more appealing to people since it is always available and holds a sense of anonymity (Clark and Rainie 2004). Furthermore, people tend to utilise online worship for personal reasons rather than solely for religious purposes to complement their in-person church experiences (Clark and Rainie 2004). Hence, physical gatherings require more flexibility to offer alternative services, resulting in an apparent structure restricting congregants from choosing their preferred teaching. Therefore, on the other hand, virtual worship provides the necessary flexibility to customise spiritual experiences to one's preferences.

Despite social media platforms being always available for members, virtual worship insists that gatherings of believers are reaching an entirely new audience, extending evangelism (Hutchings 2017). *The Church of Fools*, *i-Church*, *St. Pixels* and the *Anglican Cathedral of Second Life* and *Life Church Online* were established to evangelise. Campbell (2010, 138-139) presents two distinct perspectives on the discourse of evangelism, both of which are grounded in Christian traditions. The first approach entails equipping evangelists with effective techniques to persuade others, such as using digital media by Life Church Online to connect with Christian volunteers and educate users about church discourse (Hutchings 2017). Campbell's second perspective regards Facebook and other social media platforms as a mission

field where evangelists must learn to interact with the online community. Pam Smith, the pastor of i-Church, posits that the launch of Church of Fools and i-Church signifies a novel frontier for online spiritual practice.

Research on virtual worship also focuses on generating meaningful ritual experiences. Hill-Smith (2009) emphasized the importance of participatory engagement through physical involvement as online interaction should not merely be a passive experience constrained by the digital barrier of the computer interface. Rather, virtual participation could be enhanced by incorporating elements that promote active involvement of the user's body and physical presence to create a more fully immersive and impactful experience. A comparative study of three virtual world churches observed a lack of ritual innovation in an online video environment (Wynne-Jones 2010). Therefore, with virtual worship, one can have more flexibility to customise their spiritual experiences according to their preferences, something that might fall short in the physical realm.

The notion of embodied experiences brings out a different turn to virtual worship. As Christopher Hill (2012, 7) notes, a hybrid event model in which a portion of attendees gather in-person while others participate virtually can serve as an effective alternative format. Specifically, Hill (2012) advocated for an approach where a primary congregation assembles at a physical location and their gathering is complemented simultaneously by others joining remotely through digital means. This reveals an adapted form of ritual wherein virtual and online capabilities connect an otherwise dispersed fellowship back to a centralized actual ritual area. Such a modified design utilises modern technology to link worshippers separated by physical distance yet united in shared spiritual practice. In this study, virtual worship should arguably adopt practices native to online cultures.

In 2004, the Church of Fools was an example of virtual worship, which later shifted to a forum-based site and eventually became St. Pixels in 2006 (Hutchings 2010). In 2011, the community was relocated and hosted entirely on Facebook, where they launched an application for worship services and chat conversations (Hutchings 2017). Broadcasting services on a social network platform allowed a wider reach, as 600 million Facebook users could access the church from their pocket devices (Lifeway Research 2011). However, the application had to close in November 2015 due to changing expectations and interests in the digital world. According to

Howe (2011), the church needed to be on Facebook as many people spend most of their time in this virtual space (Hutchings 2010).

I-Church is an online Christian community affiliated with the Diocese of Oxford, of which the homepage has yet to be updated since 2010. However, new prayers and links are added periodically (Hutchings 2017). The church holds weekly prayer services in a chatroom and has three main sections on its website: the Courtyard, Blogs, and Community (Smith 2015). The Courtyard has discussion forums for prayer and social conversations, the Blogs section is for discussing theology and social issues, and the community is a private forum for prayer and spiritual direction. Considering recent developments, various denominations have been encouraging churches to broadcast their services online, with the promise of new sacred applications that are both accessible and user-friendly in order to reach a wider audience.

1.2.4 Sacred Space Online: The Case of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

A particular example of how religious rituals have been entwined in digital spaces is the case of the SDA church in South Africa. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the SDA church needed to adapt to an altered form of online worship during the nationwide lockdown. The shift to online worship brought many challenges and opportunities to liturgical practices. The media department had to turn to broadcast services and social media channels like Facebook and YouTube. Members searching for religious content and experiences created temporary sacred spaces of worship, turning private houses into places of online worship. Nonetheless, some SDA church communities lacked the technical abilities to transition into the online realm effectively. The media technical team provided crucial assistance in enabling sub-organisations to adjust their weekly services to the online platform due to COVID-19 and lockdown constraints. The church leaders had to discuss and assess the implications of transitioning to virtual platforms basing that the use of digital technology was only limited to projectors, and screens in the local church. Although the pandemic caused challenges in the observance of rituals and other offline practices, moving online meant adapting to new ways of transmitting a sense of the sacred via virtual space.

As the lockdown took effect, the church had to devise ways to reach church members in their homes. In light of the above, the media team had to lead the conferences in streaming church services online. Facebook live-streaming services and YouTube premieres were the media of

broadcasting for the services, which constituted an opening prayer, congregational music, sermon, and closing prayer, all on the church's Facebook page and YouTube channel. During the first three weeks of streaming services, the Facebook page had a consistent live audience of 1,500 people, rising to 6,000 a few hours later. The media team managed to stream the services because the researcher had already utilised the expertise and technology before the pandemic. Many broadcasting cameras, a readily furnished television studio, and the necessary editing software were incorporated to produce high-quality services.

The high organisation encouraged the local churches in the South African territory to think of ways to evangelise their constituency. The SAU Communication Director met with the conference communication directors to encourage them to start something different. I did the follow-up focusing on the technical possibilities. The sub-organisations started streaming in April 2020, giving the members various services they wish to watch. Zoom services were assimilated into worship as the producers sought ways to make the worship experience livelier. The church had to buy a license for a full Zoom account to enable long hours of streaming, recording, and sharing on Facebook.

The conference got an opportunity to share sacred experiences through a local television station, giving the church a slot during prime time during the weekend. As the word of the opportunity moved, the SDA church members would tune in to have a live service on television, thereby increasing the programme's viewership. Another local sub-organisation had an opportunity of another local station for one of the major languages in South Africa. The church used these spaces effectively in the sense of nurturing, and various viewers attest to that notion. WhatsApp churches also enhanced the worship experience by sharing posters, extracts from sermons, and prayer points.

I would schedule the week for all programmes and sermons in line at the start of the week. It would be followed by setting up the sets, cameras, lighting, and talent prepared for the show. As all the necessary things are in hand, the recording would start mostly with two or three cameras in the studio. After the recording, I would copy the footage from the cards into the relevant drives as required. Editing would follow the producer's needs and the script. At the same time as editing, a poster would be created for the event and posted on Facebook and Twitter. After the final video, a teaser video of the most powerful points will be created and posted on social media platforms to create hype. Similarly, a video is uploaded on YouTube to

be premiered simultaneously whilst the event will be live on the Facebook page. As the programme starts on Facebook, viewers' comments are received, included, and works of affirmation for the media department to create such good content. When the event is made live, those subscribed to the channel will receive notifications of the event before it even starts, and they can watch it as it starts. Viewers sometimes report a problem, either video or audio, requiring the media team to respond rapidly. At the end of the event, the viewers are notified through a comment and wished blessings in their endeavours.

Several theories are noted in the above case study by the researcher. Due to the pandemic restrictions, many have turned to virtual platforms for worship instead of traditional in-person gatherings. This shift has allowed for new ways of expressing spiritual significance in the digital realm. Virtual worship has been adopted as a way of assembling, bringing out one theory of the study. In this case, virtual worship refers to using digital facets of technology to spread the gospel and evangelise church members. The SDA church congregants in South Africa participated in virtual worship since they could not replace face-to-face gatherings. In light of the above, the social platforms turned into sacred spaces through the sacralisation of the mediums through the way people use these platforms to communicate, share information and connect with others. Hence, social media platforms have become a vital part of modern-day culture and people treat it with the same reverence as they would treat it with the same reverence as they would a religious ceremony or a sacred place.

In addition, the sacralisation of the digital medium enabled the conversion of homes into places of worship. As viewers received worship services through the medium, the home turned into a worship place, revealing the aspects of embodiment in the digital. As much as real church gatherings require manifestation, the digital involves embodiment. Bringing the concept of immersion into perspective, some church members revealed that they feel more immersed in virtual services than in real gatherings. Thus, virtual services enhance greater immersion.

Sacred spaces have evolved and taken many forms as religion has been mediated through texts and manuscripts, it continues to be mediated in the present day through digital media. The study focuses on the above-outlined shift from offline to online virtual worship, concentrating on digital and sacred centres to make sense of the digital church experience. In particular, the study focuses on an autoethnographic point of view, exploring the case study of the SDA church in South Africa.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Through an autoethnographic study of the experiences of virtual worship, the study aims to:

- Examine how online and virtual worship differ from offline, in-person worship.
- Investigate how I embraced virtual worship as a typical part of my spiritual practice.
- Explore the possible disadvantages of virtual worship and how it might have hampered the church's evangelism and spiritual growth.
- Investigate how the South African SDA church creates a sacred space for the congregation members using digital technology.
- Consider the effects of using such a digital technology to mediate sacred spaces.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study of virtual worship and its impact on religious experiences is an emerging and crucial area of research, especially in a world where technology plays an increasingly significant role in shaping human interactions and practices. This autoethnographic study aims to delve into cyberspace to understand how virtual worship settings affect the religious experience and how individuals negotiate their spiritual connections in this digital context. The significance of this study lies in its potential to shed light on the evolving nature of religious practices in the digital age, helping religious institutions and communities to adapt and cater to the needs of their congregants effectively. The study is relevant because it enhances understanding digital religious practices, offering an in-depth, personal perspective of religious experiences in cyberspace. It will also explore the challenges, benefits and complexities of participating in virtual worship, providing valuable insights into how technology influences and shapes spiritual connections. More so, the research carries considerable weight in that it studies religious institutions' adaptation to the digital era through understanding how congregants interact with virtual worship platforms, preferences, and the impact on the sense of community and belonging that can assist religious leaders in creating more inclusive and engaging virtual worship experiences. The study also identifies ethical considerations in virtual worship by identifying and addressing potential ethical dilemmas, such as privacy and misinformation, that may impact participants in virtual worship settings. By acknowledging and mitigating these challenges, religious communities can ensure a safer and more supportive digital environment for their congregants. The autoethnographic approach to exploring virtual worship experiences adds a valuable contribution to the fields of cyberspace and digital sociology. This study can

enrich existing literature by providing first-hand accounts of individuals' experiences, thoughts, and emotions in virtual worship. Therefore, the study's significance lies in its potential to inform religious customs, foster interfaith dialogue, address ethical concerns and contribute to the fields of digital sociology. Ultimately, this research aims to facilitate a deeper understanding of how virtual worship impacts individuals' spiritual connections, enriching our understanding of the complex relationship between technology and religion.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study have some forms of limitations. The main drawback of applying these findings to a wider audience is the approach utilised to gather the information: autoethnography. This method involves revealing the researcher's emotions and ideas, necessitating openness and a desire for self-exposure. This weakness poses ethical dilemmas that may be challenging for the researcher to tackle, rendering autoethnography a complicated technique. Essentially, the researcher's predispositions and preconceptions stem from ingrained knowledge and faith in their community. The second limitation concerns the issues with research samples and selection. In the study, the research sample was the SDA church in a South African context, thus making it difficult for the researcher to study all facets of the organisation. At the same time, the church workers are deployed in different locations. Another limitation of the study is the lack of previous research on virtual worship in the SDA church in South Africa. Therefore, as with many research undertakings, the methodology employed in the present study is not unresponsive to certain inherent limitations.

1.6 Chapter Outline

Chapter one has set the stage for the study, providing a brief overview of the research topic, its motivation, and its significance, outlining the research questions the study aims to answer. Chapter two explores existing research, focusing on how people incorporate media into their daily lives and the connection between virtual and physical spaces. It further delves into the distinction between solely online churches and those supported by physical sacred spaces for evangelism and outreach. The chapter examines the digital transformation of spirituality and highlights the need for further research in the unique and diverse landscape of South Africa. The third chapter unpacks various theoretical perspectives relevant to the study, such as Tim Hutchings's online church, Philip Sheldrake's sacred spaces, and Michael Heim's levels of immersion. These concepts are used to understand the phenomenon of virtual worship. The

fourth chapter of the study comprehensively explains the research design and methodology, including the underlying rationale behind the selected approach. It also addresses the limitations and ethical considerations of the study. The data collected during the research process regarding the research questions and theoretical framework is presented and analysed. The last chapter presents a thorough overview of the findings concerning the current literature and theoretical frameworks. It explores the implications of the findings for both theory and practice. A summary of the research, its main findings, and contributions highlighting the potential avenues for future research is presented.

1.7 Conclusion

Virtual worship has emerged as a significant phenomenon, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The introductory chapter provides a glimpse into virtual worship's unique experiences and adaptations within the context of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church in South Africa. From the research conducted, it is evident that virtual worship presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, it offers accessibility, anonymity, and the ability to choose teachings, bridging geographical and physical barriers. The virtual space can create a sense of immersion and sacredness, enabling individuals to connect with their spirituality from their homes.

However, the chapter also highlights certain limitations and challenges associated with virtual worship. One of the key challenges is the potential loss of embodied experiences and ritual innovation integral to in-person worship. Traditional worship practices' physicality and communal nature may be partially replicated in virtual settings. Additionally, a virtual worship environment may weaken the attachment to physical places and rituals. In response to the obstacles brought about by the pandemic, the SDA church in South Africa adjusted its approach and welcomed the use of virtual platforms. Through live streaming services on Facebook, YouTube, and TV, they transformed homes into places of worship. This adaptation allowed congregants to engage in virtual worship while adhering to social distancing measures.

In conclusion, the introductory chapter sheds light on the evolving landscape of virtual worship and its implications for religious experiences. It emphasizes the need for further research to understand the dynamics of virtual worship and its impact on spiritual connections and religious institutions. As we delve deeper into subsequent chapters, we will explore existing

research, theoretical perspectives, and the research design that underpins the study, aiming to develop a thorough comprehension of virtual worship in the context of the SDA church in South Africa.

CHAPTER 2

SPIRITUAL SOJOURNS: UNVEILING DIGITAL DEVOTION

In the age of rapid technological advancement, the intersection of spirituality and the digital world has profoundly transformed how we seek and experience spiritual connections. This Chapter delves deeper into the convergence between the sacred and the technological, offering new dimensions to spiritual quests. As ancient traditions meet modern innovation, this exploration delves into the evolving landscape of virtual spiritual spaces.

The previous Chapter gives light on the evolving landscape of virtual worship and its implications for religious experiences. The following chapter presents literature on an in-depth theoretical exploration of virtual worship focusing on creating sacred space, the notion of online Church and immersion to understand the experience and significance of seeking spirituality in the digital realm. The first section of the chapter unpacks a brief history of religious broadcasting, how it started and how it developed during the years followed by the evolution of the digital Church. The third and last sections will explore sacred spaces and online churches, focusing on the South African context.

The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for creative solutions, which led to churches operating through pre-recorded or live-streamed church services via the Internet. Regrettably, several churches adopted virtual worship considering the impact of using a new medium on the presentation of their services. They did not establish any limits or guidelines on how to conduct virtual worship, which could have affected the delivery of their services. Discovering the attempts, how they were received, what was learned, and the implications of the findings for future online and in-person services concerning the theoretical exploration of online Church, virtual worship, and sacred spaces are used to explore these findings in this research study. This section seeks to ground this research within other relevant research on digitally mediated sacred spaces.

2.1 Religious Broadcasting's Evolution and Digital Media's Impact on Practices

Religious institutions have long leveraged media platforms to broadcast their traditions and practices. The history of religious broadcasting can be traced back to the early days of radio and television. Religious radio broadcasting was prevalent in the early 20th century, with

churches or religious organisations owning many stations (Neuendorf et al. 1987). For instance, the Greater New York Federation of Churches began weekly broadcasts of the National Radio Pulpit in 1924, marking a significant moment in religious radio history (Ellens 1924). However, the rise of commercial broadcasting in the mid-1920s and the Radio Act of 1927 brought in stricter standards of operation, leading to a decline in religious broadcasters (Neuendorf et al., 1987).

The emergence of religious television during the early 1960s provided an effective platform for established mainline churches to fulfil their public service responsibility (Neuendorf et al., 1987). By offering significant time for religious programming without charge, these churches could reach a much wider audience, promoting their message and values (Curtis 1978, 21). On the other hand, missionaries were required to purchase airtime, creating a significant financial burden. More recently, religious broadcasting has expanded to media platforms, enabling churches to connect with a broader audience more cost-effectively, expanding their reach and impact (Neuendorf et al. 1987). It has led to diversifying spiritual programming to attract a larger audience and offset expenses.

The age of cable and satellite broadcasting followed and proliferated the increase of digital media and the internet established by individual entrepreneurs, such as the Scotland *Web Church* and Germany's Graffam-Minkus (Hutchings 2017). However, the concept of church-by-media initiatives has been introduced previously. Church-by-media refers to the use of media such as radio, television, and the internet to reach individuals who are unable to attend in-person religious services. The Unitarian Universalists have been practising it for decades; as far back as the 1960s, Unitarians and Universalists collaborated to create the Church of Large Fellowship, an innovative church that offered a variety of resources to its members. These resources included a correspondence course, a library of sermon tapes, and a free phone line for those seeking guidance (Hutchings 2017, 16). In this digital age, the Church of Large Fellowship has embraced technology. It encourages its members to join its virtual community, partake in online classes, watch live talk shows, or engage in worship services through streaming or chat rooms (Hutchings 2017). The evolution of church-by-media initiatives has allowed for a wider reach and greater accessibility to religious practices and teachings, creating a robust virtual resident sharing the same values and beliefs.

When television was first introduced as a medium for religious broadcasting, it faced criticism for its potential negative impact on local churches (Neuendorf et al. 1988, 17). One criticism was that television would reduce the number of contributions made to local churches, as people would choose to watch religious services on television rather than attending in-person and making donations. Their conclusions about the political aspects of religious broadcasting were not inclusive because of the changing spiritual climate at the time of the study. Therefore, many conservative religious broadcasters were engaged in significant offline religious activities.

Interestingly, the exploration of religion and television suffered the same challenges encountered by the emergence of online worship services (Hadden and Swann 1981). Additionally, Armstrong (1979) summarises that television was assumed to have been degrading the liturgical practices done in local churches as much as online churches would. More research must be conducted into religious television, resulting in a challenge to comprehend its extent, appeal and influence fully. The type of programming is prone to be misunderstood and subject to misconceptions to a greater degree than other genres (Neuendorf et al. 1987, 26). In this regard, online worship suffers from some of the same challenges.

The emergence of the Internet in 1990 and the World Wide Web revolutionised how people access information and connect with others. Jones (in Hutchings 2017 37), notes that with increased accessibility, people could access graphics, texts, and online communities, leading to the emergence of online churches. The First Church of Cyberspace was established in 1994 by a Presbyterian minister from New Jersey named Charles Henderson, offering congregation access to music, multimedia, and online Bible through discussion forums and a 24-hour chatroom (Hutchings 2017). Partenia, established in the mid-1990s, was another example of a virtual church that garnered a worldwide following, communicating in seven languages (Hutchings 2017, 13). These early online churches were considered significant milestones in the evolution of church-by-media initiatives, creating new global opportunities for sharing religious practices and teachings.

The Yoido Full Gospel Church in South Korea is widely recognised for its adoption of technology to promote growth and evangelism (Hutchings 2017). With a staggering membership of over 800,000 individuals and many pastors, YFGC implemented satellite technology and the Internet to livestream their religious services in the mid-1990s (Kim 2007). In 2001, Pastor David Yonggi Cho and Rick Warren of Saddleback Church held a meeting to

discuss the future of Christian ministry. They planned to leverage cyberspace technologies to reach millions of households and create a new global religious empire (Hutchings 2017). Today, Hutchings (2017) notes that Yoido pastors consider online broadcasting a valuable tool for spreading Christianity in countries where it may not have a strong presence. Using the internet, they aim to enhance existing ministry efforts and expand missionary work to new territories while respecting and supporting local churches.

According to Ramo (1996), online religion was first documented in an article published by Time Magazine titled "*Discovering God through the Internet*," which highlights the use of websites and chatrooms to bring diverse groups together. He argues that computer-mediated communication can enhance understanding between religious factions, reduce hierarchical structures, and amplify underrepresented perspectives. The intersection of technology and religion is a promising realm that promotes equal representation of different perspectives. Ramo refers to Jacques Gaillot¹ who is amazed at the freedom the church enjoys due to the absence of a central governing body on the internet (Ramo 1996). However, as religious practices shift, theological concerns arise about whether the concept of God can be understood differently in a networked age (Hutchings 2017). As a result, careful reflection and discernment from religious leaders and practitioners is needed as they navigate the evolving landscape of digital culture.

The impact of social media platforms on Christian churches was the subject of discussion in a journal called *Praktische Theologie* in 1990 and 1996 (Hutchings 2017). The journal shed light on the appointment of Melaine Graffam-Minkus, the first online pastor in the Bavarian state church. Congregants were taken aback by her online presence, which resulted in an uptick in individuals seeking her guidance, engaging in discussions, and making theological inquiries. Her appointment was a significant departure from the traditional ways of practising the church, as the internet became a medium for reaching out to people, and it was no longer just about preaching in front of a congregation (Hutchings 2017). In 1998, St. Bonifatius, a German church, received support from three Catholic dioceses to create an online platform for

¹ French Catholics closely monitor controversial bishop Jacques Gaillot's online activities. Gaillot, exiled by the Pope to an abandoned diocese in 1995 for his liberal social views, has created a virtual diocese. Liberated from church hierarchy, he marvels: "On the Internet there is no question of someone imposing rules on the way people communicate," he says. "The Net has no center from which will can be applied" (Ramo 1996, 3).

communication between individuals and a diverse group of chaplains from various religious orders. The initiative allowed the church to connect with people from different parts of the world, creating a sense of community among people who would not meet each other in the future (Hutchings 2017). In addition, a group with a charismatic vibe gathered virtually to conduct weekly prayers, emulating the style of real-life prayer. The prayer leaders perceived the act as a customary ritual rather than a change in the power dynamic. The gathering demonstrated that social media platforms could be utilised for spiritual purposes and not solely for socialising.

Despite the relatively limited participation in online churches in the past, the number of active cyber churches had risen to 34 by March 2000 (Hutchings 2017). In 1998, George Barna predicted that millions of US Christians would abandon physical churches for virtual ones, but this prediction did not come true until 2014 when two online churches were launched in the UK - Church of Fools and i-Church (Hutchings 2017). Church of Fools, funded by the Methodist Council of Great Britain, opened its virtual doors in May 2014, while i-Church was launched in August as part of the Church of England's Oxford Diocese. The funding and support by the Methodist Church established religious institutions indicated the growing acceptance and recognition of cyber churches as a viable and legitimate form of religious practice (Hutchings 2017). As more individuals embrace the convenience and accessibility of virtual worship, cyber churches may become an increasingly mainstream option for religious practice.

Alpha Church was established in 1998 by Methodist minister Patricia Walker in the United States. Over time, the church has evolved into a non-denominational community primarily serving disabled Christians (Hutchings 2017). The church offered a range of digital resources, including daily updates through blog posts, sermons, and worship services available for streaming or download. Of particular note are the contributions of two paraplegic young men who offer unique, valuable perspectives on what resonates with them visually, spiritually, and practically (Hutchings 2017). He adds that Alpha Church has effectively leveraged the power of the Internet to reach individuals who may not be able to attend traditional church services and encourages members to embrace this digital approach to worship (Hutchings 2017). One of the ways Alpha Church makes worship accessible to visitors is through recorded videos that allow individuals to participate in the sacred ritual of holy communion while eating and drinking at their computer screens.

The use of mediated church services in South Africa has a long history dating back to the early 20th century. The history of mediated church services played an important role in South Africa. One of the earliest examples was radio broadcasts of church services beginning in the 1920s (Rosenthal 1974, 6). The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa started experimenting with radio broadcasts to reach congregations in remote areas. By the 1930s, many major churches regularly broadcast their services on radio stations nationwide (Meyer 1971, 16). The technology enabled individuals living in remote regions or those who couldn't attend church due to sickness or disability to engage in religious activities in person.

From the 1950s onwards, television broadcasts of church services became more common (Cross 1996, 2). The SABC, South Africa's public broadcaster, began regularly broadcasting church services on Sunday mornings (BCCSA 2005). It further expanded the reach of mediated church services, allowing people across different regions to tune into the same televised service. However, television broadcasts were still limited by the availability of TV sets at the time. In the early days of apartheid, politicians argued that television posed a "spiritual threat" and used religion as a reason to ban it from the country (BCCSA 2013, 3). When television was introduced in 1971, it was allowed under very strict rules to express Christian values and help strengthen religious life in South Africa (Scharnick-Udemas 2017, 270).

After the end of apartheid and the beginning of democracy, the government introduced a new Religious Broadcasting Policy in 2003 that aimed to represent different faiths found in South Africa (SABC Editorial Policy 2003, 45). However, this policy was criticized by some groups for favouring Christianity over other religions and not giving all faiths equal time on public airwaves. Some also argued that it was insensitive to the diversity of religions in the country and marginalized African traditional religions.

While the political systems changed from apartheid to democracy, religion has consistently been used by the state to shape how broadcasting develops and what values it promotes in South Africa (Scharnick-Udemans 2017, 276). The apartheid government and later democratic governments tried to present religion on television to promote national unity and the nation's building (Scharnick-Udemans 2016, 120). However, not all religious groups felt this accurately represented the diversity of faiths in the country.

In the 21st century, the internet has become an important medium for mediated church services propelled by live streaming, which allows congregations to broadcast services online in real time (Kim 2020, 92). Churches also maintain websites with archived sermons and multimedia religious content. During the COVID-19 pandemic 2020, many churches relied entirely on online services due to restrictions on in-person gatherings (Kim 2020, 93). This crisis accelerated the adoption of internet-based mediated worship in South Africa.

The proliferation of social media platforms and the advent of digital media have led to virtual communities where individuals from diverse backgrounds engage in frequent online interactions (Hutchings 2010). Investigations into the traits of these communities have revealed the significance of digital media in shaping our social lives. Several publications, including *Religion on the Internet* (Hadden and Cowan 2000), *Religion Online* (Dawson and Cowan 2004), and *Religion and Cyberspace* (Hójsgaard and Warburg 2005), have profoundly impacted the field by exploring the characteristics of digital communities and the range of people who engage in online interactions. Of note are two publications authored by Campbell. His book on Christian email networks titled *Exploring Religious Community Online* (2005) delves into how technological advancements have made it possible for people to easily find and communicate with others with the same religious beliefs.

Similarly, his investigation into how Christian, Muslim, and Jewish groups in the book *When Religion Meets New Media* (2010) shape new media highlights the potential of digital media to influence our beliefs in unforeseen ways (Hutchings 2010). In addition to these publications, several others have focused on the impact of the internet on faith, including *Religion* (2002) and the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* have dedicated issues exploring the intersection of religion and digital media. Furthermore, publications such as *Online: the Heidelberg Journal of Religions* and Hips (2009), who wrote *The Internet and Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*, suggest that despite technological advancements, the core message of faith remains unchanged, and technology has the potential to influence our beliefs in unforeseen ways (Hutchings 2010b). The history of religious broadcasting, which became prevalent for almost a century, provides insights into the evolution of the digital church as a new way of experiencing the church. As technology advances, it is crucial to explore the potential of digital media to shape our religious beliefs and practices.

2.1.2 The Evolution of the Digital Religion and Its Impacts on Traditional Religious Practices

When delving into a discussion of the digital church evolution, the internet saw the development of various experimental online church communities (Donnelly 2016). Some were stand-alone, non-geographic or non-physically established communities that existed only online (Smith 2015). Others were extensions of existing offline ministries into the online realm.

From a more general view, the emerging field of scholarship known as digital religion studies begins by outlining four main areas of research (Campbell and Evolvi 2020). The initial surge began during the 1990s and aimed to explain the emerging occurrences of internet-based faith. In the early 2000s, during the second wave, scholars began to develop the concept of digital religion, looking at it through historical and social lenses (Hutchings 2017). The third wave started in the late 2000s, examining the connection between online and offline settings.

Campbell (2006) describes the fourth wave of research on digital religion, which focuses on how people incorporate media into their everyday lives and examines the connections between virtual and physical spaces. To further elaborate on Campbell's ideas, his work has been extremely influential in shaping the discussion around the impact of technology on religious experiences. He examines the complex relationships between digital platforms and the tangible world, providing valuable insights into how the virtual realm interacts with and enriches religious practices. Moreover, Campbell's (2006) research is crucial for understanding the contemporary religious landscape, where technology plays an increasingly important role. By analysing how people navigate the intersection of media and spirituality, he offers a nuanced understanding of how digital spaces complement and influence traditional religious practices. Campbell's work remains essential for comprehending the evolving nature of religious engagements in the digital age. His seminal research is a source of inspiration and guidance for researchers exploring the dynamic interplay between digital technologies and religious expression, ensuring that his contributions endure and shape the future of scholarship. By exploring how users interact with technology as part of their journey, researchers can garner valuable insights into how digital devotion shapes individuals, as this understanding may aid in creating more meaningful experiences and better support for users in their pursuit of digital fondness.

Some of the earliest works note that these early participation attempts were text-based, some interactive, and others provided information like prayer requests (Helland 2005). Others offered rituals or liturgies like Holy Communion or special services (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 744). One of the online experiments was a net magazine called shipoffools.com, which evolved in 2003 (Kluver and Chen 2008). The next phase of this work came as Church of Fools, and the virtual reality versions was launched in May 2004. The experiment was well received as it allowed members to join, create avatars and interact with each other and the environment. In 2006, the church moved to new software and changed to St. Pixels, operating up to 2012 as the church moved to Facebook (Howe 2011). The virtual world began with a case study of St. Pixels and Church Online, part of Lifechurch TV, a megachurch based in Oklahoma (Hutchings 2012). This ministry is similar to traditional televangelism; however, it benefits from significantly reduced broadcast costs and additional online features. The model also affords them international exposure, which they accomplish with the assistance of volunteer translators.

The evolution of religion and social media platforms share several similarities regarding their growth patterns. As social media platforms evolved and enthusiasts were excited about every innovation, there was often an accompanying religious response (Hutchings 2017). For example, when virtual communities like Second Life came as the next great thing, there was an attempt to use this platform for religious purposes (Jacobs 2007). As some of these platforms and services waned, so did their religious use of them. New avenues opened, and further attempts were made to exploit them for religious purposes (Gelfgren and Hutchings 2014). Religious groups have approached cyberspace where previous media platforms were closed and used in this respect. While all these media are different, they have all been used to promote and share religious and spiritual interests. After delving into the evolution of the digital church in this section, it is prudent to move to the Church Online/Online Church section, focusing on how churches use technology to broaden their audience reach and establish connections with individuals who may not have the opportunity to attend in-person services.

2.1.3 'Online Church' or 'Church Online'

In a follow-up article to his earlier ethnographic study of the online church, Hutchings (2010) writes that most online churches are in decline or closed. For example, the Church of Fools closed in 2016. Some archives are available online, but the community no longer holds active

events (Campbell 2010, 138). Virtual worlds and online churches are highlighted as numerous and diverse, with varying connections to offline institutions, arguing for a need to analyse different expressions of church online (Hutchings 2017). Second Life, owned by the Anglican Cathedral, remains where it was, although the site and church have been simplified. It no longer has a Bishop, operating now with a lay pastor. Does this decline raise questions about whether the Internet has left these churches behind, or perhaps there was something fundamentally wrong with the idea in the first place? Without the physical presence and personal interactions that traditional, offline churches provide, many online churches have struggled to form the deep bonds and sustained relationships that people seek from their religious community. This suggests that while cyberspace opened new possibilities for religious expression, the limitations of online interactions and virtual worlds may ultimately prevent them from satisfying fundamental human needs for spiritual connection.

Facebook, YouTube, and other media platforms reflect an attractive and emerging mission field, especially for a younger demographic (Boulton 2015). Millions of Americans turn to the digital to connect with God and pursue faith matters (Barna 2001). Often viewed as extensions of existing ministries, many churches provide live-streaming options for their services and other online activities. Life Church (previously Lifechurch.tv) notes that while online church seems to be declining, church online appears to be growing (Hutchings 2017). Online churches are internet-based Christian communities that are solely online. The online churches include the Church of Fools, i-Church, St. Pixels, and Life Church, which are funded by prominent religious organisations. Helland (2005) asserts that online churches reproduce their offline traditional structures, symbols, and practices. Duplicating non-digital equivalents implies a potential conflict and contest between the tangible and virtual domains.

Church Online pertains to the availability of online churches supported by physical sacred space, mostly for evangelism and outreach. Hutchings (2017) states that the church online puts ritual in its rightful place, that is, in the spiritual world. In a scholarly article, Hutchings (2017) delves into the complex role of missionaries within the digital landscape, specifically in virtual environments such as Second Life and related platforms. He discovered that people who participate in online religious activities are already involved in some spiritual life (Hutchings 2010). They were often close to participating in an online community that met their needs but was unavailable near their home. Freedom to engage people, regardless of geographic location,

seems to be one of the potential strengths of online churches and forces existing religious groups to add an online component to their ministries.

2.1.3.1 Online Churches and Sacred Spaces in South Africa

The SDA Church's official television station, Hope Channel, became an online church for church members in South Africa. Hope Channel uses a variety of online platforms to evangelize and spread the gospel in South Africa. Their website, hopechannel.org, serves as the hub for all their activities, containing a wealth of inspirational and educational Christian content, including Bible studies, sermons, videos, and articles.

Hope Channel is a Christian-based lifestyle television network launched on October 10, 2003, owned by the Seventh-day Adventist church headquartered in Indianapolis, America. The station can be watched via satellite, pay TV, mobile devices and the internet (Office of Archives and Statistics 2019). It operates globally with 44 branches, each providing content contextualized to the language and culture. Hope Channel maintains a robust online presence on social media platforms, with its Facebook page having over 352k followers. It posts daily inspirational messages, prayers, and live-stream events. Their YouTube channel has over 150,000 subscribers, and they upload sermons, testimonies, and gospel music videos (Office of Archives and Statistics 2019).

Hope Channel shares inspiring Bible verses, photos, and short videos on Instagram for their younger audience. They have amassed over 100,000 followers on Instagram. All their social media platforms provide links to their website for those seeking more in-depth Christian resources.² Hope Channel also uses radio and television to spread the gospel in South Africa. However, their online evangelism seems more effective in reaching the younger, more internet-connected population. Their websites and social media channels provide an always-on, interactive platform where they can instantly connect with their audience and spread the gospel's good news (SDA Encyclopaedia 1966). In response to the pandemic and the closing down of churches, Hope Channel launched a program titled Hope at Home, which is an in-

² "Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2022), 342 – 342.

depth and interactive Bible study (Hope Channel 2024). In the first four months, the program featured over 150 participants in over 50 hours of programming focusing on the stay-at-home worship experience.

In South Africa, there is a Pentecostal church named Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG) which has grown rapidly since its formation in 2010, largely due to its embrace of television evangelism. The church is led by self-proclaimed prophet Shepherd Bushiri, also known as Major 1 (Bushiri 2024). ECG began using television as an evangelism tool from its early days, with Bushiri hosting a weekly TV show on the Christian channel LESEDI. The show helped spread Bushiri's message and grow the church's following, particularly among disadvantaged communities in South Africa (Bushiri 2024). As ECG's popularity increased, Bushiri launched his television station, ECG TV, in 2013.

ECG TV broadcasts Bushiri's large church services live and various programs featuring Bushiri preaching, providing spiritual guidance, and performing what he calls "miracles" (Bushiri 2024). This round-the-clock TV presence has allowed Bushiri to reach a national audience and spread his ministry beyond physical church locations. ECG TV's programming is mostly in English and South African languages like Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho, making it accessible to a broad cross-section of the South African public. ECG TV's growth has been rapid. It started as a low-budget community station but has expanded to become a major Christian network in South Africa, broadcasting via satellite and streaming online (Bushiri 2024.) The station now claims to reach over 30 million people across Sub-Saharan Africa. However, Bushiri and ECG have also faced controversies over fraud and money laundering allegations, which Bushiri denies.

Considering the study, ECG TV evangelism has driven the church's explosive growth under Shepherd Bushiri's leadership through leveraging television and digital media. Bushiri has been able to spread his message and ministry to a national and regional audience, though questions remain regarding his ministry's practices.

The development of TV evangelism and digital media has been instrumental in the growth of Alleluia Ministries, led by South African pastor Alph Lukau. The ministry's use of television, social media, and online streaming has enabled it to reach a large audience both within South Africa and globally (Alleluia Ministries 2023). Alleluia Ministries began broadcasting Lukau's

sermons and healing services on local South African television stations in the early 2000s. This allowed the ministry to gain a national following and attract more attendees to their services in person (Alleluia Ministries 2023) As digital media and high-speed internet became more widespread in South Africa, Alleluia Ministries expanded its online presence through websites, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and mobile apps.

Lukau's powerful oratory style and dramatic healing services, which feature claims of raising the dead, made for compelling television and viral video content. Videos of Alleluia Ministries' services posted on YouTube often receive millions of views from audiences across the African continent and diaspora (Alleluia Ministries 2023). Social media platforms allow the ministry to promote its events, spread teachings, and foster community among its followers. The global reach of Alleluia Ministries' digital media presence has enabled the ministry to expand beyond South Africa. Lukau now regularly conducts crusades in countries like Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Alleluia Ministries 2023). The ministry's use of TV and online streaming also allows them to broadcast services live to followers worldwide.

Henceforth, Alleluia Ministries' embrace of television evangelism and new digital technologies has been instrumental in growing the ministry's national and international influence. While controversies surround some of Lukau's claims and practices, there is no denying that skilful media use has enabled Alleluia Ministries to spread its message to a vast audience.

In *Religion and the Theology* from South Africa, Mhandu and Ojong (2021) explore offline liturgical practices in Durban. The role of missionaries in virtual environments, such as Second Life, is explored in depth by Hutchings (2017). The study discovered that new sacred spaces emerged within the digital realm, where congregants streamed live services from their homes. However, not all members of Pentecostal churches were able to adapt to this form of worship easily due to technical difficulties. Mhandu and Ojong (2021) argue that Pentecostal churches in Durban responded positively to the closure of physical churches by embracing online and virtual forms of prayer.

There needs to be more information about examining virtual worship in South Africa through autoethnography. Mhandu (2020) performed an autoethnography analysis of Pentecostal churches in Durban, which responded favourably to the shutdown of physical churches by transitioning to virtual platforms. As a member of the Pentecostal church, Mhandu associated

himself with the church's virtual services as it evangelises its members. The results gathered from the study revealed that congregants were not used to this way of attending church, and because of that, the clergy had to do more to spiritualise and sanctify the virtual worship services. A set of rules was implemented, teaching congregants to better experience the connection using gadgets that technically allow virtual service streaming. Henceforth, this is the only literature on the nature of virtual worship done in an autoethnography way. The research gap I seek to explore in this research is through an autoethnographic study focusing on the impacts of virtual worship in the SDA Church in South Africa, bringing into sacred perspective spaces in the digital creation of virtual churches and the level of immersion by congregants.

2.2 Conclusion

The chapter provides an overview of the study's context, emphasising the significance of understanding sacred spaces and the practice of liturgy online in the context of the digital age. I have delved into a comprehensive theoretical exploration of virtual worship, focusing on creating sacred spaces, the emergence of online churches, and the immersive experience of seeking spirituality in the digital realm. The historical overview of religious broadcasting, highlighting the emergence of online churches and the shift towards digitising religious practices, was examined first. The section moved on to the history of mediated church services in South Africa from the radio, television and then the internet. The ongoing discourse centres on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on online religious services, emphasising the significance of innovative approaches and assessing the ramifications and benefits for both virtual and in-person congregations. The chapter then discusses the evolution of the digital church, examining various experimental online church communities that have emerged over time. The concept of digital religion studies is introduced, focusing on the fourth wave of research, which explores how people incorporate media into their daily lives and the connection between virtual and physical spaces. The next section examines the notion of “Online Church” and “Church Online”, which explored the distinction between solely online churches and those supported by physical sacred spaces for evangelism and outreach. Examples of online churches are provided, demonstrating their evolution and impact on religious practices. The chapter then shifts its focus to explore online churches and sacred spaces in South Africa, particularly within the context of the SDA Church. More so, focus is laid on South African churches like ECG, Alleluia Ministries and Hope Channel have leveraged television and digital media to grow their

followers and influence. Autoethnography is highlighted as a valuable approach to examining virtual worship experiences and the level of immersion among congregants in the SDA Church in South Africa. Overall, the chapter offers an overview of the digital transformation of spirituality, highlighting the emergence of virtual worship spaces and the dynamic interplay between technology and religious experiences. I emphasises the importance of further research, particularly within the unique and diverse landscape of South Africa, to understand and contextualise the evolution of virtual churches and their impact on spiritual practices.

CHAPTER 3

VIRTUAL WORSHIP SPACES: DESIGNED FOR MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES

The concept of virtual worship spaces: designing for meaningful experiences entails. The creation of digital environments that can provide individuals with a platform to engage in religious practices and connect with spirituality in a virtual setting. The primary objective is to design virtual spaces that offer a sense of significance and connection akin to physical worship spaces. The use of technology can serve as an aid to enhance the experience, thereby making it accessible to people who may not be able to attend in-person gatherings.

This chapter will discuss the concept of virtual reality and its potential impact on spirituality, focusing on Heim, Sheldrake and Hutchings, who argue for a balanced approach to virtual and physical worship as a way to maximise the benefits of technology while preserving the spiritual, connection at the core of religious practices.

The previous chapter examined the history of the mediality of religious practices, which involves exploring how these practices have been conveyed and mediated through various forms of media over time. It included using communication technologies such as radio, television, and social media platforms. Through this examination, one gains a deeper understanding of how religious institutions have adapted to technological changes and how technology has affected the communication, experience, and interpretation of religious beliefs and practices. Such an investigation has provided valuable insights into the relationship between religion and technology, illuminating how technology impacts religious practices and beliefs and vice versa.

The first section will delve into Michael Heim (1993), who delved into virtual reality and cyberspace, emphasizing that virtual experiences can significantly influence emotions. However, their authenticity is contingent on the user's perception; he argued that technology must be cautiously approached as an extension of human existence. In his work, Heim will highlight the potential of virtual reality and underscores the need to navigate its impact on human experiences carefully.

The chapter will explore how humans create such spaces and how they pertain to virtual worship. Sheldrake's work expands the traditional concept of sacred and physical worship spaces to encompass digital spaces where individuals seek and experience spirituality. His insights help contextualize the creation and perception of sacred spaces within the digital realm, providing a framework to comprehend the meaningfulness of virtual worship experiences. Following Sheldrake's ideas, the chapter will look at Tim Hutchings's (2017) theory on the online church, how we experience it, and its future. Hutchings's research provides a foundational understanding of how religious communities embrace digital platforms to create virtual congregations and worship spaces. His work explores the complexities of religious engagement in virtual environments, including Second Life and related platforms. By delving into people's experiences participating in online religious activities, Hutchings sheds light on how virtual worship complements and enhances traditional religious practices. His insights into the interaction between believers and virtual church communities offer valuable context for understanding the immersive dimensions of virtual worship experiences.

Combining these three scholars' works provides a robust foundation for an autoethnographic exploration of virtual worship. By incorporating insights from Hutchings on online church, Sheldrake on sacred spaces, Heim on immersion, and other relevant scholars in the study gains a perspective on religious experience in cyberspace. Together, these concepts offer valuable tools for the autoethnographic researcher to delve into their own experiences and interactions with virtual worship, exploring how digital technologies shape spiritual connections and how believers navigate the intersection of the sacred and the technological in the digital devolution of spirituality.

3.1 Heim on Immersion

Michael Heim (1943 – 2012) was a prominent philosopher and media theorist who contributed extensively to technology, communication, and virtual reality. Heim's ideas were shaped by his interest in the intersection of technology and culture, and he believed that how we interact with technology has a profound impact on our understanding of the world around us. One of Heim's most notable contributions was his concept of cyberspace, which he defined as a "realm of electronic communication created by the convergence of computer and telecommunication technologies" (1993,73). Virtual reality, in retrospect, can be defined as an immersive and interactive computer-generated representation of the real world (Heim 1998). He argued that

the emergence of cyberspace brought about significant changes in our perception of reality, as it contradicted conventional ideas about the limitations of physical space and time. More so, he explored the concept of virtual reality, which he saw as a potential tool for enhancing the human experience. He believed that virtual reality technologies could create immersive experiences, allowing individuals to explore new worlds and perspectives (Heim 1998). By and large, Heim's contributions to the fields of technology and communication have had a lasting impact on our understanding of the impact of technology has been long-lasting in terms of shaping our perception of how it shapes the world. His ideas remain relevant today, and his work remains an important reference point for scholars interested in the intersection of technology and culture.

The phenomenon of immersion, as explored by Heim's book *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (1993), goes beyond the physical presence in a particular environment. In his view, true immersion involves complete mental and emotional engagement with the virtual environment (Heim 1993). The user must let go of preconceptions and expectations and focus on the experience (Heim 1993). The concept of immersion centres around complete cognitive absorption, where the boundary between reality and virtuality becomes indistinct. In order to attain this state, an individual must wilfully relinquish their scepticism and disbelief, much like suspending disbelief when watching a film or experiencing art. As a result, immersion removes the person from their current location to a virtual site in space.

3.1.1 Embodiment in Virtual Reality Technology

Immersion theory holds that virtual reality can only immerse the user if an element of 'presence' exists. It highlights the importance of creating a sense of realism and engagement for users in virtual reality experiences. Numerous individuals perceive the sensation of complete immersion in a computer-generated environment as an essential component of the complete virtual reality encounter (Heim 1998, 17-19). Borrowing from Psocka (1995), Heim (1998) states that the key factor in ensuring a superior virtual reality system lies in providing an immersive experience that accurately replicates the sensation of being present within the digital environment. Virtual reality can trigger both active and passive responses, resulting in a sense of pervasive distribution that can be quite potent. One may perceive a mental extension beyond the physical confines of their body, reaching into the digital world that surrounds them when fully engaged in an electronic space. Adding to Heim, Schnell (2023, 43) alludes that it

is not what we do that enables us to receive communion or being embodied but rather our belief in God's promise. In other words, creating virtual worlds offers a unique opportunity for users to engage with a fully immersive and sensory experience within an artificial environment (Heim 1988, 89). Individuals are then allowed to deeply involve themselves in an artificial realm of crafting virtual worlds, permitting their cognitive faculties to traverse within the computer matrix. At the same time, mortal forms remain motionless and input positional data (Heim 1988, 134). Hence, the degree of realism is limitless and transitions into an imitation of reality when virtual worlds are identical to the real worlds, and users primarily have passive experiences equivalent to narcotic delusions (Heim 1993, 134). The above idea reveals that immersion can happen either in physical spaces or virtual spaces as long as the congregants believe in the power of a deity.

When considering Heim's literature, it may prove advantageous to bear in mind that the logic of a non-physical entity is predicated upon synthetic linguistics that exists independently from the language, communication, and expressions commonly utilised in day-to-day discourse (Heim 1993, 94). In particular, human knowledge aspires to know things like a spiritual or infinite human understands them without delays or sequential steps that limit a deity's comprehension of things (Heim 1993, 95). The capabilities of hypertext are consistently impressive, as it provides a highly immersive and expeditious experience for users. The technology permits individuals to make intuitive connections and leaps in their thinking without the limitations of a linear or sequential thought process. For this reason, Heim (1993, 100) argues that the quality of human encounters narrows, and bodily contact is an option in cyberspace as people can live their own lives without ever meeting physically. Therefore, the computer frequently eliminates the need to directly respond to what occurs between humans because participation becomes voluntary without human involvement. Hence, Heim determines that electronic life can convert primary bodily presence into telepresence. After focusing on the embodiment of technology, it is progressive to move on to the idea of virtual reality creating a strong sense of presence.

3.1.2 Virtual Reality Creates a Strong Sense of Presence

It is important to note that Heim (1988, 6) considers that utilising virtual reality has profound perception and encounter of various stimuli. These technological devices can transport us to alternate locations by separating our senses, fostering an unparalleled immersive experience

(Heim 1988, 7). Modern computer devices can manipulate perspectives, providing users with a highly personalised and interactive experience. Moreover, information intensity posits that digital environments can offer unique qualities, such as telepresence, that signify a high level of intelligent behaviour. For this reason, he reflects that digital spaces are defined by dynamic and organic interactions, non-hierarchical gatherings, and communities that establish their norms, rules and forms of entertainment (Heim 1988, 160). The notion above goes hand in glove with Sheldrake's notion of sacred spaces where any place can become sacralised and become a holy place of meeting with a God.

A key philosophical aspect of immersion by Heim (1997) is that virtual reality can create laboratory settings that can be easily modified and controlled compared to real-world research facilities. Despite all criticism and a century of technological advancement, Heim (1993, 122) argues that the essence of virtual reality is in the highest calibre of art that may modify and redeem our perception of reality. Computers enable interactive virtual reality systems, enabling the artist to promote better participation and lower indifference and couch-potato syndrome (Heim 1993, 126). Since virtual reality predisposes toward manipulation, he contends that creating a more responsive environment encourages users to be open to all signals and empathise with others (Heim 1993, 126). Thus, Hutchings (2017) links calling for sacred spaces to be interactive and grasp the attention of the individuals, thereby enabling a full-body immersion. In this manner, virtual reality sacred spaces are open and free of modification to capture the individual's emotions, thereby moving to the next part of the reality of virtual experiences.

3.1.3 How Real are Virtual Experiences?

Michael Heim contends that although these experiences may not be tangible in the physical world, they can profoundly impact our emotions and perceptions. He maintains that virtual experiences have the potential to expand our understanding of reality and can be just as valid as physical experiences. In essence, it is the individual's responsibility to determine the reality and value of their experiences, whether in the virtual or physical realm.

Virtual reality is a technologically advanced medium that allows individuals to engage with electronic simulations, thereby augmenting the perception of authenticity. Individuals' interest in the computer desktop, which contains trash, reveals our disposition as we treat it as though

it were virtually available (Heim 1993, 115). In the same notion, he argues that virtually, realism does not refer to photorealistic delusion but rather to realistic performances in which work and play create new entities. For Heim (1988, 89) virtual reality is an interactive computer-generated simulation that provides a highly immersive representation of reality. In retrospect, a world is a complete set where humans can interact (Heim 1988, 222). It is reasonable to deduce that while we interact with digital remnants on our computer systems, it appears authentic within our concentration on assigned duties. However, it would not be deemed anything other than virtual refuse. Considering the above, Heim posits that virtual experiences possess a degree of realism due to their capacity to engage with individuals. As such, the role of interaction is critical in this particular phenomenon.

One key philosophical aspect of the realness of virtual experiences in Heim's (1993) terms is the notion that virtual reality is a critical, practice-based, conscious communication process. He argues that virtual reality technology creates immersive experiences by enabling complete physical involvement, making it ideal for artists to create engaging content (Darnov 2023). Traditional art forms struggle with audience engagement, whereas virtual reality presents an opportunity for a controlled blend of active participation and passive observation. Virtual reality technology does not seek to recreate the physical world or depend on its accuracy (Heim 1998, 89). Rather, it provides a distinct and interactive environment that simulates genuine experiences in a lifelike manner. The human body can be viewed as a complex input mechanism, with the eyes serving as stereo input devices and the neck acting as an advanced gimbal for manoeuvring stereo sensors. In this scenario, non-first-person entities must be able to evoke emotional responses and touch the users (Darnov 2023). Here, he argues that virtual entities have become important and significant parts of our lives as they can function and interact with us just like real entities (Heim 1988, 44). Following this line of thought, Heim establishes that the human factor takes centre stage other than technology's influence on the audience that the audience makes virtual experiences real experiences.

Heim's (1993) argument on the realness of virtual experiences is based on the concept of full-body immersion in virtual reality. According to Heim (1993, 125) full bodily immersion involves complete submersion into a fictional world created through digital or conventional media and is a crucial aspect of virtual reality. This kind of immersion can enhance an individual's physical and sensory abilities by enabling them to mentally detach from their physical perspective, perceiving their physical self from an external vantage point, much like

controlling a virtual marionette (Heim 1998, 178). Heim posits that visuality plays a vital role in creating deeply immersive cyber experiences that mark the current peripheral epistemology of humans. In this view, cognitive vision has become increasingly sophisticated with electronic tracking and other advancements in technology and aesthetics (Heim 1998, 179). Its heightened perception enables rapid detection of changes in the surrounding environment, providing significant advantages in a wide range of industries. By fully immersing ourselves, we can effectively engage with virtual objects and attain a comprehensive sensory experience of diverse environments (Heim 1988, 196). In expressing the significant impact of deeply interconnected cutting-edge technology, it is necessary to utilise imagery that accurately portrays a hyper-realistic environment that has undergone a significant transformation. In essence, Heim argues that virtual reality can provide a real and transformative experience that challenges preconceived notions and expands the user's understanding of the virtual world.

Throughout his work, Heim's (1993) notion of trying to define virtual experiences' realness lies in the idea of immersion in virtual reality. The experience of full immersion in virtual reality can be seen as a state in which the user's physical presence is dislocated from the artificial environment, a concept known as total immersion, which is highly valued in the virtual reality industry (Heim 1988, 18). The essence of virtual reality is an immersive simulation that takes solace within networks and leads to an immersion into artificial worlds that might augment one's reality. Total immersion in virtual reality is when the user's physical presence appears to be fully engaged in the artificial environment, with everything in that world's cyberspace having some connection to the proposed reality (Heim 1988, 19). This experience creates a sense of complete separation from the outside physical space. In light of this above notion, the individual in a virtual environment is laid with virtual reality gadgets to manipulate objects perceived in the artificial environment, leading to illusion. For Heim (1993), immersion enables individuals to be fully present in sensory immersion in a virtual environment with the help of computer-generated animations. Virtual reality refers to sensory immersion in a virtual environment where audio or video sensations from the real world are supplemented with computer-generated sensations (Heim 1993, 112). Therefore, Heim observes that virtual worship experiences aim to engage the senses and promote a sense of physical balance throughout the body.

Heim (1993) posits that the authenticity of virtual reality is contingent upon its ability to produce real-world effects despite not being objectively real. The notion of realness is evident

in that their realness is through the experiences humans may experience in the virtual realm. The term virtual spans the chasm between officially unified reality and what we now refer to as a further level of artificial accretions (Heim 1993). He notes that we experience reality in virtual space as physical and natural (Heim 1993, 132). In this scenario, the high-level realism in virtual spaces is more advanced than the simulation, which evokes virtual reality. In turn, the effectiveness of virtual reality lies in its ability to replicate real-life encounters despite their objective reality. It implies that the virtual world can provide a substitute environment that incorporates emotional experiences while substituting natural ones. Following this thought, virtual reality technology has advanced to produce encounters nearly indistinguishable from real life, effectively creating a substitute environment that can elicit emotional responses.

Heim's (1993) concept of the shortcomings of virtual experiences centres around the idea of telepresence in virtual reality. The notion of telepresence highlights the significance of being present in a remote location. However, their senses are aware of the happenings in their primary world and can use their hands for control. In other words, the telepresence definition of virtual reality neatly exempts the imaginary world of art, arithmetic and entertainment. One can allude that the underlying concept of telepresence is to provide users with a sense of physical presence in a distant location. The church has always been a virtual body in some ways through the letters read aloud to congregants. Thompson (2023, 19) adds that the letters written by Paul on the vision of the church as the body of Christ emphasizes caring for those who suffer and are weak. More so, Pitt (2023, 40) concurs that virtual liturgies can still provide a substantially real presence through digital tools looking at the example of Paul's letters and the heavenly choir as forms of virtual presence within liturgy. Of note, without a human presence in person, robotic telepresence allows for real-time human effectiveness at a location in the real world (Heim 1993, 216).

Additionally, Heim (1993, 125) argues that cyberspace is a realm where individuals should view things from different perspectives since virtual reality, as an immersive environment, is conducive to introspection. The home concept is critical to virtual reality, where the user feels a sense of belonging and security. Here, Heim (1993) argues that home pages on internet websites represent a departure from the virtual reality experience as our computer is central to our connection to the outside world; thus, it should provide comfort and familiarity akin to home. In this sense, virtual reality can fully immerse users, resulting in a seamless experience where the boundaries between the real and the virtual blur; adopting a trans-human attitude

challenges preconceived notions and expands the user's understanding of the virtual world (Heim 1998). However, Heim ascertains that the meaning of virtual experience as real or fake is a topic of debate and disagreement propelling us to move to the next section of technology as an extension of human existence.

3.1.4. Technology as An Extension of Human Existence

One crucial aspect to consider is the philosophical notion of metaphysics, which recognises the existence of a conflict between humans and technology (Heim 1997). This notion suggests that technology should not be seen as an evil of the 20th century but rather as an essential aspect of our existence that requires careful consideration. In this study, immersion can apply to the precepts concerning religion in a virtual worship scenario. More so, he focuses on the risk of computerised information access, where the fake reality world could gradually erode our perception of the real world's resistance (Heim 1993, 144). For this reason, individuals have evolved a mindset that considers, reflects and digests information carefully and methodically due to real-world opposition. Here, he is concerned that this technology may accelerate the development of the human intellect, but it must be used cautiously (Heim 1993, 144). Kohler (2023, 34) notes texts of Lutheran documents that affirm that congregations should provide communion for those who are unable to attend in-person opening a possibility for digital sharing. In addition, Heim (1997) argues that with the power of computers to help us organise, standardise and typify, we will become unable to think critically. Considering the above, Heim determines that there are potential biases in virtual environments and simulations, as they can influence our understanding of the world as it is an extension of human existence.

Technology integration within virtual reality has engendered a mutually beneficial dynamic between content producers and their respective audiences (Heim 1988, 75). It has led to a dissolution of traditional boundaries between sender, receiver, and producer and viewer. In this scenario, the immersion type allows us to feel as if we perceive graphic entities and move freely in the virtual realm (Heim 1988, 103) as virtual space is immersive and allows interaction with other virtual objects. Heim (1988, 123) adds that my sense of presence within that space is amplified as I perceive myself as a representative within a virtual environment. Interestingly, in a digital environment, the sensation of presence is intensified when an individual can partake in activities from a remote location and engage with items by visually observing and physically manipulating them through hand gestures. Sigmon (2023, 15) draws on Martin Luther's views

on accessibility of communion, arguing that as long as participants hear the words of institution and receive the elements in faith, the sacraments are valid accelerating the possibility of meaningful online communion. Also, Thompson (2023, 20) adds that offering communion can provide spiritual gifts for those isolated or unable to attend in-person. By and large, virtual reality has proven to be immersive and interactive. It allows individuals to experience a sense of presence within their virtual bodies, creating a powerful mental extension beyond the physical body as they become fully engaged within a digital environment.

Another key aspect of Heim's (1988) concept concerning virtual reality is that cyberspace is unnatural because it is a genuine human invention. The above statement relates to the study of humans as the centre of creating sacred spaces, as Sheldrake (2014) alluded to, since any place can become sacralised as they seek a connection with God. The individual is the key in the virtual worship space as they become fully immersed in the virtual services, not because of the technology used but because of the desire of the individual to seek a higher being. In addition, he argues that computer animations have achieved a remarkable level of realism thanks to high-quality sound systems, shared textures and luminous lighting (Heim 1988, 110). The precision and attention to detail in these animations are comparable to intricate engravings, showcasing the impressive capabilities of modern technology. In particular, virtual systems are pivotal in helping people to simulate themselves under assumptions given to a computerised model through successive iterations and uncertainties that are virtually reduced before they actualise and make their decisions real. Sigmon (2023, 17) alludes to the notion that online worship is real rather than embodied since we live in an x-reality where the virtual and physical are blended. The ritual and the physical presence should be seen on a continuum not as binary opposites. Kohler (2023, 35) asserts that an incarnational theology should embrace virtual presence as real presence especially in reaching out the suffering and ill. It is precisely then that computers can only do little with interaction, as books, radios, and television leave consumers as passive receivers (Heim 1997). Henceforth, the nexus of social media platforms and the human factor merges through interaction to form active receivers and listeners.

Virtual reality can revolutionise how we interact with the world and enhance our daily experiences, creating a symbiotic relationship between humans and technology (Heim 1997). Its potential is vast and exciting for the future of technology and human development. The notion of the world transcends a mere collection of static objects; rather, it represents a dynamic interconnection among them facilitated by verbal communication (Heim 1988, 90). As such,

the world actively utilises these objects rather than passively accumulating them. Here, the study links that the body is aware of its existence through its senses and thoughts; real events would result from those virtual ones. Thereby, virtual reality is no longer output but is a reality lived through virtual reality tools. For example, creating a virtual world involves connecting dynamic components through language, deepening our understanding of ourselves and expanding our perspective (Heim 1988, 98). Virtual worlds can captivate and influence us but also provide a means of returning to ourselves and expanding our awareness. Notably, the digital world does not re-create the real world but is workable, which parallels and accumulates the primary world (Heim 1988, 138). Therefore, virtual reality tools enable lived reality to materialise, because the imagination is not cut off from consequence as people are shaped by what they are immersed in and imagine.

Contributing to the philosophical discussion, Heim (1997) mentions a link between virtual worship and the participants who come together to form accepted norms of engagement. Virtual realms can facilitate the development of novel methods of communal creation and sharing of imagined objects and experiences, devoid of reliance on real-world language or references, akin to the concept of a telephone (Heim 1988, 116). Since developing a new layer of reality requires our best effort, interest, and creativity, especially given that technology and reality are starting to combine, it should not surprise when virtual reality becomes contentious and elusive (Heim 1993, 117). In turn, a segment of the population believes that participating in online worship does not provide the same fulfilment as in-person worship (Mhandu 2020). This sentiment may be attributed to detachment and the lack of social scrutiny, historically a crucial component of religious practices. Virtual reality technology can negatively affect our health, leading to symptoms like jet lag and flight simulator sickness (Heim 1993, 130). This disruption can be worsened by spending much time in virtual reality and not being physically present in the real world. Before using virtual reality, we should consider how it could affect our well-being.

Consequently, virtual now refers to any computer phenomenon from virtual universities to libraries. It denotes a non-formal reality that exists in contrast to hardware space yet functions as though genuine. Hence, as cyberspace is a product of human innovation, assessing how it can either enhance or detract from the spiritual encounter is crucial. Therefore, the accessibility of religious texts and teachings online and the potential for immersive virtual environments can all contribute to a more meaningful worship experience.

Heim (1997) believes technology is a double-edged sword that requires careful consideration when embraced. He considers that technology should be cautiously approached throughout his work as it traps us in a web of presumptions (Heim 1988, 78). His work highlights the importance of approaching technology cautiously and considering its potential impact on our well-being. In this scenario, Heim (1988, 78) argues that using sound enables the creation of an environmental envelope that takes the body into a bubble in which many individuals are elated in creating their own sound space. For this reason, Heim (1988, 79) focuses on recording technology, allowing audiences to create their own musical experiences and integrate music into their daily lives. As a result, technology acts as an extension of human existence. Exploring the reality of virtual experiences invites us to analyse how these experiences intersect with cultural norms and individual identities. Heim's concept of immersion underscores the potential for virtual environments to shape personal narratives and perceptions. Hence, examining the reality of these experiences prompts us to consider how they contribute to the construction of cultural meanings and individual identities. Therefore, it is prudent to discuss virtual experiences in the precinct of virtual worship.

The above section has revealed that virtual reality (VR) technologies have gained increasing attention as they offer a unique opportunity to experience highly immersive environments. Heim adds that these environments can be designed to transport users to artificial spaces, which can be otherwise difficult to access. However, despite the potential of creating a sense of presence and realism, virtual experiences may need more authenticity than physical ones. One of the key limitations of telepresence in virtual reality is the lack of actual human presence, which can restrict full bodily immersion in the virtual environment. It is important to note that the reality of virtual experiences depends on the individual's perspective and engagement with the experience. These experiences can profoundly impact emotions and perceptions, but their authenticity is subject to the user's perception. Therefore, it is essential to consider the limitations and potential biases of virtual experiences when assessing their impact on users. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that technology should not be viewed as inherently good or bad but rather as an extension of human existence that must be carefully considered due to its potential effects on cognition. The biases and limitations of technology must be recognized and addressed to ensure its benefits are maximized while minimizing its potential negative consequences. After considering the above ideas from Heim, it is necessary to move to Sheldrake's concept of sacred spaces in that it serves as a reminder that technology should

be used in service of human flourishing rather than simply as a means of consumption or distraction.

3.2 Philip Sheldrake on Sacred Spaces

Philip Sheldrake is a renowned scholar in sacred spaces whose work has contributed significantly to our understanding of the concept. Sheldrake has delved into the deep meaning and significance of sacred spaces in various religious traditions and how these concepts can be adapted to modern digital spaces. In his seminal work, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity*, he explores the role of physical locations as sacred spaces in different religious traditions (Sheldrake 2001). He investigates the connections between place, memory and identity, shedding light on the profound influence of sacred spaces on believers' spiritual experiences and practices. Sheldrake (2010), in *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology and Social Practice*, discusses the historical and sociological aspects of sacred spaces, exploring how these sites have evolved and shaped the spiritual practices of communities. He emphasises the need for a nuanced understanding of spirituality and its connection to tangible places. Also, in his book *Placing the Sacred: Transcendence and the City* (2007), Sheldrake provides an overview of spirituality's development throughout history, focusing on sacred spaces and their pivotal role in the evolution of human consciousness and religious expression. In *Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction* (2012), Sheldrake addresses the growing trend of online churches and virtual religious communities, examining how the concept of sacred spaces can be translated into the digital realm. He contemplates the significance of virtual spaces in fostering religious experiences and expression of faith in the contemporary era.

Sheldrake's exploration of sacred spaces becomes particularly relevant and essential in creating online churches by Tim Hutchings and similar developments. As technology continues shaping how we interact and engage with spirituality, understanding the essence and significance of sacred spaces in digital environments becomes critical. In religious traditions, sacred spaces have always been rooted in a tangible, physical location. However, the advent of online churches challenges traditional notions, opening new possibilities for spiritual connection and community-building. His insights help us navigate this evolving landscape by contemplating how these virtual spaces can become meaningful and transformative for religious practitioners. Understanding the role of sacred spaces in the digital age can provide valuable guidance in ensuring that the essence and integrity of religious practices are preserved while embracing the

potential benefits of technology in fostering spiritual growth and global interconnectedness. Sheldrake's research paves the way for a thoughtful integration of traditional spirituality with the digital realm, emphasising the importance of intentional design and respectful adaptation to ensure the authenticity and sanctity of online religious experiences.

3.2.1 Counting on What Is Familiar and Known

In Sheldrake's (2012) view, searching for spirituality involves a quest for the sacred. The pursuit is focused on developing the immaterial aspects of existence, providing an alternative means for self-discovery and understanding the ultimate significance of life. It is worth noting that spirituality primarily emphasises the inner experience rather than the external experience. He observes that certain mystical experiences dissolve the distinction between the human self and the divine (Sheldrake 2012, 97). Additionally, Schnell (2023, 42) states that people get to interpret and act on their discernment of belonging as a sacrament by invitation of the Lord, which assists guests in deciding whether they wish to accept the Lord's invitation. Online and in-person, thus, can convey various exclusions or belonging. Johnsen (2023, 53) states that Facebook is perceived as a social medium that allows people to represent their religious identities and core values in new ways to the public. On the other hand, Campbell (2010) and Lovheim (2016) argue about the availability of multiple connections between an institution online and offline. In contrast, others involve a fusion with a God without negating or absorbing the individual self. He further underscores that spirituality consists of a revelation of divine truth and a shift in consciousness, which introduces new knowledge and includes an emotional component of love. Sheldrake believes that spirituality provides an alternative means for self-discovery and understanding the ultimate significance of life.

Notably, Sheldrake (2001) proposed a connection between physical locations and their significance with the mind and the spirit, resulting in a complex and intricate relationship between them. Specifically, he emphasised that sacred spaces possess both a physical and symbolic meaning and that our comprehension of these sites can be subject to interpretation. He argues that few other cultural categories provide a clear picture of the world as a place that significantly impacts how people act, think and organise their lives and relationships (Sheldrake 2001, 7). Here, Sheldrake (2001) argues that the body perceives space first through its senses, and we become what we are, social beings through our body's reaction to our environment. Johnsen (2023, 54) alludes that Facebook has been able to provide support to

people more than they might do in face-to-face encounters. He adds that Facebook emerges as a hybridised third space where Scandinavian churches pursue new logic and forms of meaning to retain their contested position in secular societies. His theory aligns with the perspective of Couclelis and Gale (1986), who assert that virtual worlds lack physical spaces and merely consist of perceptual and cognitive spaces within the user's mind. Following this line of thought, Sheldrake posits that sacred spaces possess both physical and symbolic meaning, and they closely mimic the physical world and enhance our understanding of reality.

The topic of online worship has generated a range of opinions, particularly regarding its safety. While some researchers, such as Sheldrake (2001), advocate for certain benefits of online worship, Hutchings (2017) presents a diverging perspective. According to Hutchings, individuals may experience a greater sense of safety when participating in online worship due to the absence of social pressure. They do not feel as attached to the online community as they would to an in-person congregation and, therefore, do not feel the same level of judgement from others online. This lack of social pressure may foster a sense of comfort and security for those who prefer to worship online, enabling them to engage in their spiritual practices without feeling scrutinised or evaluated by others (Hutchings 2017). According to Johnsen (2023, 56), the church of Norway gave space for the pandemic as something that has altered daily life and is part of a secular society that is not holy. Sigmon (2023, 15) critiques online, stating that virtual assembly is not the assembly, nor the bread and wine that one set out in front of the computer screen, the holy supper of the body and blood of Christ. Cartledge (2022, 34) states that the internet has become a heterogenisation of ideas where every voice is a minority, and the speed has become a locus of religious authority. Additionally, using social media platforms can lead to expectations around immediacy and has become transactional, like online shopping. By and large, the choice between online and in-person worship depends on individual preferences and circumstances. Hence, it is essential to consider all perspectives while making a decision that aligns with one's beliefs and values. At this very point, it will be prudent to move on to the concept spaces designated for healing and reconciliation as it creates safe and inclusive spaces that foster empathy and understanding.

3.2.2 Spaces Designated for Healing and Reconciliation

In his writing, Sheldrake's (2014) idea of spirituality and sacred spaces is that urban centres play a significant part in positively and negatively moulding the human psyche. Thus, humans

must consider how the Christian community contributes to their growth. He reveals that the city is a sacred and holy place, not just in churches but also in the wider environment of the streets (Sheldrake 2014, 69). The idea of living with citizens living in harmony was seen by Raedts (1990, 145) as a path to a God, and Sheldrake (2014, 70) aligns with this perspective, highlighting the significance of spirituality and sacred spaces. As Christians, it is our responsibility to be mindful of how cities impact the human psyche and to prioritise the creation of sanctified spaces within urban environments. Ultimately, our goal should be to craft urban space that appeals aesthetically and enriches our spiritual lives, offering an image of celestial Jerusalem (Sheldrake 2014). Hence, Sheldrake reflects that it is important for Christians to contribute to the development of our cities by creating spaces.

It is worth noting that the sacred realm of urban environments has undergone expansion to encompass city streets in its reality (Sheldrake 2000). He argues that cities expand the idea that life can be terrifying by offering a space for individuals to experience the different stages of life, fostering a sense of community, and cultivating meaningful connections (Sheldrake 2006, 109). Also, the urban areas can allow for direct access to spiritual encounters. Here, he points out that due to the population of people in a city, the sacredness or desire to experience a God is felt. A decent town requires a dynamic civil society, provides opportunity and tends to attract wealth, allowing people to realise their ambitions (Sheldrake 2006, 109). Henceforth, it is evident that Sheldrake establishes that the sacredness of the city depends on the liturgies involved and the individual's sacralisation of places.

In addition, Sheldrake (2014), in *The Spiritual City*, ascertains that the city is sacred. The concept of paradise has shifted from being inspired by natural environments to being influenced by cultural factors, particularly in metropolitan settings (Sheldrake 2014, 64). This shift can be attributed to the interest of urban residents who find this imagery compelling. The reason is that the vast spaces of ancient religious buildings were interpreted as acts of worship in and of themselves, and entering them would transport one from the psychological and spiritual realm into a transcendent realm. It would be erroneous to assert that the architectural design of churches and mosques is exclusively determined by their religious purpose as places of worship and ceremonial activities (Sheldrake 2014, 129). He adds that to optimise efficiency, an urban centre may adopt a spiritual ethos that prioritises and fosters the reverence of individuals and their potential for spiritual development. Therefore, Sheldrake determines that the city's sacredness lies in promoting human potential and enlightenment.

A crucial aspect of sacred spaces is how we utilise space to reflect our values (Sheldrake 2001, 87). In other words, the theory of space should be a monolithic hypothesis that recognises the interconnectedness of the physical, mental and social domains added by Hartford and Leonard (2006) that virtual world space is three-dimensional within the container of place exists. The concept of space is influenced by the behaviours and interactions of those who inhabit it (Sheldrake 2001, 87). He adds that the actions of individuals within the space and their interactions with others influence the general outlook and comprehension of the surroundings. Sigmon (2023, 16) alludes to the disappearing x-reality that moves fluidly across the virtual to in-person spectrum, where the digital is just a differently mediated way of being real. In this scenario, Sheldrake (2001) argues that places include human storylines and recollections engrained in the location, as we should consider places to be writings with multiple layers of meanings. In this sense, the analysis of the physical environment, recollection, and people present in a particular moment has provided novel prospects for comprehending the hermeneutics of a location (Sheldrake 2006, 108). More so, due to the greater influence and involvement in various interconnections with other cities, cities have always established diverse societies and places of creativity and innovation. It is prudent that Sheldrake and Sigmon ascertain that the devotion done in places is vital to fulfilling experiences and individual value.

Stemming from the concepts of sacred spaces, Sheldrake (2012) reveals that spirituality extends beyond the walls of religion into the workspace. Sheldrake (2012, 149) makes a strong and relevant argument that work holds a significant spiritual value. Many companies understand the importance of incorporating spirituality into the workplace. By promoting activities such as meditation, prayer meetings, and access to spiritual literature in the library, companies can encourage a collaborative and ethical approach toward work that upholds individual integrity. It, in turn, can lead to enhanced employee performance, morale, and overall job satisfaction, thereby creating a sacred space that fosters purpose and attracts talented and innovative employees (Sheldrake 2012, 150). In summary, integrating spirituality into the workplace is an effective approach that can enhance productivity and inspire employees. Thus, Sheldrake learns that extending spirituality into the workplace has increased productivity and improved employee morale and inspiration.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework about creating sacred spaces in the workplace helps individuals connect with their aspirations and potential, giving them the motivation and clarity to pursue their goals with discernment (Sheldrake 2012). This spiritual intelligence can enhance job satisfaction, performance, and morale, increasing organisational productivity and innovation. It is important to recognise that this connection to the imaginary world of potential and aspiration can provide individuals with the energy they need to continue on their path into the future. The city is ideally individualistic and centred on the person and needs to be left open instead of predetermined by planners and policymakers, helping to promote inclusion and participation, encouraging diversity and enabling creative thinking and performance rather than regulating and restricting (Sheldrake 2012, 179). More so, he adds that the notion that work is a fundamental right includes the belief that it should come with dignity, fair living conditions and adequate remuneration (2010, 152). In light of the above, Sheldrake asserts that spirituality is crucial in seeking creative thinking and unregulated involvement.

Regan (2002, 196)³ argues for separating mental discipline and an organised spiritual lifestyle linked with Sheldrake (2014). He espouses the importance of creating sanctified spaces and promoting spirituality within urban environments, which can contribute to the city's overall development. As Christians, we must prioritise these elements to craft aesthetically pleasing and spirituality-enriching urban spaces, as understood in the hymns that emphasise the significance of collective identity and individual contributions. More importantly, the notion that universities are sacred spaces comes out in Sheldrake's (2014, 72) key points, and teachers lend a sacred quality to city life. In European universities, there was a shift in gaining knowledge from rural to urban areas, shifting economics and political power from agricultural production to the fast-growing pattern of corporate business in cities (Sheldrake 2014, 73). He added that spirituality was no longer based on religious centres devoted to the quest for a divine way of life. Hence, the city's institutions and universities focused on learning and teaching. Therefore, as members of the Christian faith, we can work towards creating creatively pleasing and sacred cities, thereby reflecting our collective identity. One of the most interesting thoughts from Sheldrake (2012) is that social interaction and active citizenship are forms of spiritual practice. Studies have indicated that many young and intellectually curious individuals opt for

³Thomas Aquinas was a theologian and philosopher in the 13th century who lived in Italy. His writings focused on the importance of mental discipline and an organised spiritual lifestyle for leading a virtuous life. He believed that by training the mind to focus on the right things and following certain practices and rituals, people could more easily achieve the life they wanted.

more conservative religious practices to pursue traditional religious beliefs. He argues that social capital pertains to the connections within and between people's social networks and the shared ideas that emerge from these connections, which increase individual and group productivity (Sheldrake 2012, 214). With this accession, Sheldrake (2012, 215) admits that spiritual intelligence is a term that is closely related to spiritual capital in that it seeks to offer an equivalent spiritual to the importance of the intellect and emotions in human flourishing by allowing us to access our innermost meanings and greatest intentions better. Individuals visit a sacred space as a pilgrimage for a more enhanced spiritual enhancement. Of note, visiting Varanasi and bathing in the Ganges River can be considered a sacred submission to God, particularly for Hindus who believe in it. Thus, Sheldrake establishes that spiritual practice allows us to access our innermost intentions better.

Notably, Sheldrake (2001) calls for a space of reconciliation that invites all inhabitants to make space for the other, moving over social and spiritual in making space for everyone to transform into something new. Here, he asserts that a place of reconciliation does not homogenise people or the environment but creates space for a diversity of human voices to participate (Sheldrake 2001, 68). In *Spaces for the Sacred*, he argues that mystics, especially but not exclusively women, were often confined in tightly enclosed or policed places (Sheldrake 2001, 131). Also, mystics create intermediary spaces where oppositions such as sacred and secular are places in dialogue and transformation. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, De Certeau's (1984) framework highlights the significance of everyday practices and the individual's ability to subvert dominant power structures through these practices.⁴ He argues that even in seemingly powerless situations, individuals have the agency to resist and create their meanings and interpretations within a larger cultural context. These designated locations provided a segregated haven, furnishing a confined space for distinct interpretations of meaning that diverged from the public and religious sphere of the church (Sheldrake 2001, 25). Additionally, the rapport viewers experience during virtual worship with the person on the screen since relationships online are not tied to any tangible artefacts. As a result, virtual worship spaces of

⁴De Certeau's framework (1984) states that spaces are not homogenous and can be classified into two types, "places" and "spaces." Places are locations with a fixed identity and a clear function, such as churches or libraries. On the other hand, spaces are open to interpretation and allow for individual expression and creativity. This framework emphasises the importance of understanding different spaces' cultural and social significance and how they are used for reconciliation and other purposes. Sheldrake's concept of sacred spaces recognizes that individuals attribute meaning and significance to certain places based on their beliefs, practices, and experiences.

reconciliation are vital and should be left unregulated whilst assessing the creation of a new community free from hindrances.

3.2.3 Any Space Can Become Sacralised

The notion of space is in a perpetual state of change, continuously progressing and never reaching a static or finished state (Sheldrake 2005). In other words, "a place is associated with principles and ethics that suggest a sense of self-identity regarding a larger social framework of people" (Sheldrake 2014, 118). Through this understanding, we can see how our sense of self is shaped by the spaces we inhabit and the interactions that occur within them. Cartledge (2022, 41) notes that God can be present to people via the internet through the holy spirit and yet can be strangely absent simultaneously and over time, as God's experiences are never permanent but always changing. Thus, Sheldrake and Cartledge establish that spaces are always under construction as they come in different places in the congregants' homes.

Taking a cue from Sheldrake (2001), sacred spaces uniquely impeded a crucial narrative. It emphasises the significance of the history linked to a space and its impact on moulding our identities within a broader societal framework. A place can be characterised as a tangible space that serves as a repository of historical events, imparting a sense of connection and coherence to past and present happenings. Such sites serve as poignant reminders of the past, providing a tangible reminder of the events that have shaped our world (Brueggemann 2018). It is also where utterances demonstrating individuality have been spoken, and vows and pledges exchanged. One can allude that specific narratives in sacred spaces are key in creating and defining these places. As articulated by Sheldrake (2014, 120), the human yearning for a particular geographical location transcends mere biological considerations which extend beyond our ancestral roots or familiar connections. According to Otto (1958), the emotional experience associated with a sacred space plays a significant role in governing it. The experience encountered in the place matters such that sacred spaces constructed from different places, either profane or secular, carry a very important significance for religious adherents. The expansive nature of space serves as a powerful reminder that authentic humanity cannot be attained through avoidance of duties, reverence of connections, escapism, or pursuit of ambiguous liberties (Sheldrake 2004, 118). Therefore, sacred spaces are formed and constructed through individual interpretation and relationship, thus transcendent.

Sheldrake's (2002) key point regarding space is that space has the potential to be sacred and can serve as a mediator between the physical and spiritual worlds. Hence, space can become sacred through sacralisation, which combines emotional and shared experiences. Similarly, he argues that sacredness strengthens when the place becomes a meeting place for generations (Sheldrake 2002). Humans create sacred spaces in the quest for places of divine manifestation, which bridges the sacred and profane, transforming everyday human actions into sacred acts (Sheldrake 2007). Instead, each space possesses the potential to hold significant value and eagerly awaits the opportunity to establish a connection that can serve as a conduit for the divine. Cones (2020, 24) alludes that congregants on Zoom noted that what we are doing online seems to reconfigure what we have and modify it to produce a new pattern of prayer and find it nourishing. He adds that congregants were eager to continue this form of prayer even after the COVID pandemic passed as it has become the people's work, in which they are free to try new roles they might not try in person. Intriguingly, Goringe (2023, 10) shares Sheldrake's viewpoint regarding the importance of sacred spaces. Both authors assert that while the bible may not necessarily be the direct word of God, it possesses a similar power to the therapeutic waters of the Bethesda pool. This force is attributed to the events, community, and memories associated with sacred spaces, which can influence our sense of self within a larger societal framework. Hence, Sheldrake and Cones ascertain that the relationship between the sacred and humans is crucial and explore it through building spaces in purported profane spaces.

The theory of sacred spaces by Sheldrake (2012) delves into the notion that human beings can achieve divinity through various means, such as worship, philosophy, and work. His viewpoint underscores the significance of social engagement and civic participation as profound practices of spirituality. Furthermore, the emphasis on the importance of humanitarian aid, rural development, youth movements and education are crucial in pursuing universal freedom. He reflects on Ignatius's introduction of discernment⁵ to distinguish between productive and unproductive divine impulses (Koenig 2014). Sheldrake's (2012) theory primarily emphasises breaking free from limiting urges and making intelligent life decisions consistent with our

⁵Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), introduced the concept of discernment as a fundamental aspect of the spiritual life. Discernment in the Ignatian context refers to seeking and understanding God's will in one's life and making decisions according to that divine guidance. It involves prayerful reflection, examining one's desires and motivations, and seeking a deeper understanding of God's desires for the individual (Koenig 2014).

profound reality. In this light, individuals encounter divinity and the power of a god through their daily routines, elevating them to the status of divine and sacred beings.

During a talk at Cambridge University, Sheldrake (2004) posits that chronologies hold significant importance in religious and non-religious settings and can provide valuable perspectives on how Christian traditions can foster constructive conversations regarding urban environments. In this scenario, a distinct and designated location, instead of a sheer geographical point, is a crucial catalyst for fostering meaningful and active engagement with one's immediate surroundings (Sheldrake 2014, 121). Such an engagement involves establishing and nurturing interconnections between individuals and their natural environment and between individuals. He states that a place is more than just its physical features; it is about how people interact and think about that environment. The above notion reveals that place definitions are tied to active engagement in the current intent of spaces. Kohler (2023, 32) alludes that to avoid using virtual presence to avoid in-person interaction, we must consider the virtual and physical worlds as interconnected rather than mutually exclusive options. By recognizing that the two worlds are continuous with each other, we can ensure that they do not compete and not as either option. Throughout history, the idea of sacredness has evolved, and its meaning has been shaped by academic theories that define a specific context (Sheldrake 2014, 128). Holiness in the Christian context is believed to be a divine gift and a revelation of the existence of a higher power (Sheldrake 2014, 129). It is intriguing to ponder the potential contributions of theological and spiritual traditions towards broadening one's sense of place. For this reason, Sheldrake and Kohler establish a distinctive viewpoint of the world and can unveil profound insights into the true essence of existence.

According to Sheldrake (2001), places cannot rely on a singular judgement, individual bias, or group assumptions to establish a sense of place. The narrative is integral to this process. He believes space is a battleground where political forces clash, shaping our identities (Sheldrake 2001, 135). More so, space is a product of interconnectedness, recognising that it is formed through interactions that can occur globally or personally (Massey 2005). By comprehending the diverse ways space is conceptualised, we can enhance our understanding of its impact on our personal and professional development. Sigmon (2023, 16) states that congregations returning to the buildings after the COVID pandemic aim towards greater participation and sacramental awareness, addressing the idea that all physical assemblies in one building are not necessarily flawlessly worshipping God. Also, a location holds a deeper significance beyond

its physicality or societal construction. It is because the individuals that populate it imbue it with a unique and meaningful essence (Sheldrake 2014, 1). After delving into the concept of any space becoming sacralised, it would be prudent to move on to the concept of the home, as it provides insights into how the home can function as a place of spiritual significance.

3.2.4 Sheldrake on the Home

By 2025, approximately three-quarters of the global population will reside in urban areas (Sheldrake 2014). This trend towards urbanisation highlights a growing desire for individuals to seek spiritual sanctuaries within these environments. Due to greater mobility and the cycle of life, global influence and involvement with other cities have always established a diverse society and places of creativity and innovation that is the home (Sheldrake 2014, 109). What is more intriguing is the home-bound concept that argues that participation in virtual services requires spaces and ties for worship, which reveals that private practices and family spaces are permeable in changing household to church and vice versa. According to Sheldrake (2001), those who work from home and rely on information-based livelihoods believe that humans will always desire to extend beyond their homes and establish a sense of community. In line with the above train of thought, he establishes that the physical place of worship does not necessarily dwell in the historical place but the space of encounter with a powerful God. The home theme is important in virtual worship because it emphasises the significance of the home as a sacred space for individuals and families.

It is of paramount importance that the home holds a special significance as it is a place where we can experience genuine comfort and security. It is a sanctuary where we can drop our guard and be authentic, free from the need to put on any façade or pretence (Sheldrake 2014). The aspect of the home is particularly relevant in the context of an autoethnography study as it is where we can delve into our personal experiences and emotions without the fear of being judged or criticised. Retamoza (2023, 9) asserts that during the pandemic, the home becomes a sanctuary where people can connect with their faith and spirituality online. By providing a safe and accepting environment, the home allows us to engage in honest self-reflection, which is crucial for personal growth and development. According to the theory of Sheldrake, a home is much more than a mere physical structure providing shelter; rather, it is a place of emotional and psychological importance laden with memories and experiences. He postulates that homes possess a unique energy or spirit that can significantly impact the well-being of their

inhabitants. More so, he suggests that homes contain an inherent intelligence capable of adapting to the needs of those within their walls. Sheldrake emphasises the importance of cultivating a positive and harmonious home environment in promoting personal growth and overall well-being.

Exploring the significant geographical features of a home is crucial as this task allows individuals to explore various theoretical aspects, including sensory and temporal elements, and gain a better understanding of the home's importance as a haven of safety and comfort (Sheldrake 2012). On top of that, a home is important because it is a private place that provides protection and comfort from the outside world. It is a sacred place that holds high regard for security and safety. It is worth noting that the home can be conceptualised as a space where elements of both secular and religious practices coexist, as proposed by Rumsey (2017). The concept builds upon Sheldrake's (2012) insights into the critical geographies of the home; by delving into the sensory and temporal aspects of the home, one can gain a deeper understanding of its importance as a secure and comfortable sanctuary. He argues that private spaces are where humans are truly themselves (Sheldrake 2012, 222). Seppala (2022, 111) alludes that online worship participants are restricted to a limited range of sensory inputs, resulting in an incomplete awareness. It can lead to worshipping partial or distorted aspects of reality rather than a more complete and holistic experience. Hence, Sheldrake (2014) mentions that the home being a sacred area signifies a changing trend towards the belief that personal spaces reflect a new type of individuality and a location where people are most authentic (Sheldrake 2014). The concept of sacred spaces links our communities, belief systems, aspirations and creativity. As a result, Sheldrake determines that a home is a private place where humans are most to themselves, and what happens there reflects their most truthful ambitions.

In addition, Sheldrake (2014, 82) points out that the home has become a place where the sacred is increasingly found as it has moved away from public spaces and into the personal and private realms of religious buildings and domestic homes. The home represents our desire for a place that provides meaningful connections with the natural elements of the seasons and, ultimately, a location that allows access to the sacred about life it is sacred. Retamoza (2023, 9) reveals that the pastor encouraged people to participate in the communion online of eating and drinking in their homes through livestreams, leading to having more friends and family who were dispersed. As people worship on Zoom, God can mediate himself however God chooses, including people in church and their homes through bread and wine; hence, he cannot limit the

presence of God in the eucharist (Schnell 2023, 42). Johnsen (2023, 65) notes that the devotions with pastors at home filming themselves during the pandemic make the production appear authentic, combined with an expressive emotional grammar so that users recognise and appreciate the devotions as their faiths. Thus, the sacred reflects a place apart from the outside public world, bringing it to the home as a private space free of the world's evils (Sheldrake 2014, 83). For this reason, scholars emphasise that participation in virtual services from home gives another meaning that encompasses religious and secular functions. Henceforth, the home is a place that provides meaningful connections to individuals. In the context of this study, creating a respectful and sacred environment for virtual worship in the home is crucial for meaningful engagement in this study.

Considering all the above, Philip Sheldrake's research delves into the significance of physical and virtual sacred spaces and their impact on religious experiences and practices. Sheldrake asserts that sacred spaces have physical and symbolic meanings and can significantly influence human behaviour and thinking. In his work, he emphasizes that physical sacred spaces are rooted in physical locations and are experienced through the senses, thus possessing and interacting with tangible presence. In contrast, virtual sacred spaces exist in the digital realm and are experienced through technology. Although they lack physicality, they can facilitate spiritual growth through intentional design and meaningful interactions. Sheldrake's definition of sacred spaces revolves around their significance and meaning and includes physical and virtual spaces. These spaces can shape religious experiences and practices, providing a sense of connection, spirituality, and transcendence. According to Sheldrake, narratives and memories are integral in shaping sacred spaces. While physical attributes play a role, sacred spaces are defined by the stories, rituals, and collective memories associated with them. The sacralization of spaces, which renders them sacred and meaningful to individuals and communities, is largely influenced by narrative traditions and collective memories. After revealing these philosophical underpinnings of Sheldrake, it is prudent to move to Tim Hutchings's concept of creating online churches as it builds on Sheldrake's concept of online churches, emphasising the importance of intentional design and meaningful interactions in creating online religious experiences.

3.3 An Overview of Tim Hutchings

An esteemed scholar, Tim Hutchings has significantly contributed to the understanding of online religion and virtual worship experiences. Through his extensive research, he has explored the dynamic interplay between digital and religious practices, revealing how individuals engage with spirituality in the virtual realm. Hutchings's work has laid the foundation for comprehending the significance of the internet as a platform for religious engagement, transforming traditional notions of religious practice and communal expression. One of his seminal articles, *Religion in Cyber Space: Religious Communication on the Internet* (2006), scrutinises how internet technologies reshape religious practices and facilitate communication within virtual religious communities. This investigation highlights the multifaceted nature of online religious groups and how believers embrace the digital revolution. In his article, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* (2005), Hutchings focuses on Christian email networks and forming religious communities in online spaces. Through this research, he delves into how digital platforms foster communication between devotees, creating a collective feeling of belonging and understanding how digital exchanges shape spiritual encounters.

Hutchings's (2007) research examines the intricate relationship between religion and the social media platforms, emphasising the development of digital religious communities and the re-evaluation of technology's influence on spiritual experiences. His work provides insights into the complex interplay between digital technology and religious expression. Additionally, Hutchings's investigation of "Online Belief" (2011) delves into how individuals incorporate digital mediums into their spiritual pathways. From consuming religious materials to engaging in virtual encounters, this research offers insight into the nexus of technology and spirituality, shedding light on how digital tools reshape the terrain of religious beliefs and practices. In totality, Hutchings's investigations have been instrumental in increasing knowledge of internet religious practices and digital worship rituals. His research provides a detailed understanding of how digital innovation merges with spirituality, including a comprehensive investigation of immersive virtual worship and the developing nature of religious engagement during the digital revolution. Through his scholarly work, Tim Hutchings has enriched the field of digital religion studies, offering valuable perspectives on the evolving landscape of online worship and its impact on contemporary religious experiences.

3.4 Tim Hutchings on the Creation of the Online Church

According to Hutchings (2010), an online church is a virtual space where people share spiritual practices such as praying, often to an extent that is not always possible in the physical realm. This virtual space allows people to participate in spiritual experiences and connect with others who share their beliefs, regardless of physical location or other barriers. It offers a sense of inclusivity and support that can be hard to find in traditional face-to-face worship. According to Hutchings (2010), the main argument in favour of virtual worship is that it creates an inclusive environment where people who prefer to connect with others online can feel comfortable and welcome. This perspective emphasizes the importance of providing a virtual space for those who may not feel included or able to participate in traditional physical worship settings. Here, Hutchings (2010,63) aligns with Jenkins (2004,100), creator of the online church that the online realm is akin to a town that requires a place for practicing religion and spirituality even though it is not a physical space.

For this reason, Jenkins's online church focuses on enhancing the ability to translate church practices online, seeking visitor feedback, and evaluating the feasibility of virtual worship. Participating in spiritual practices, like prayer, within a secure and inviting online setting can be uplifting and empowering, fostering a stronger connection with one's faith and promoting an improved sense of well-being. In essence, online churches provide a platform for individuals to foster their spirituality and build meaningful connections with others who share their beliefs, regardless of geographical limitations.

The emergence and prevalence of virtual religious communities is not an isolated phenomenon but a tangible reflection of how conventional religious institutions adapt to the ever-changing dynamics and demands of the digital age. According to Hutchings (2010), the rise and operation of virtual religious congregations can be linked to the creation and administration of traditional religious organisations with brick-and-mortar structures. Donaldson (2009, 105) aligns with Hutchings (2010) and suggests that replicating the familiar in virtual religious communities is a theological choice made in response to the belief that a dominant force was present on the internet, such as LifeChurch.tv. In this view, creating online churches requires combining conventional and innovative elements to achieve a meaningful and engaging religious experience. These may involve traditional liturgical elements such as prayers, hymns

and scripture reading, as well as new and innovative elements such as interactive discussions, online prayer rooms and virtual communion services. Additionally, Jacobs (2007, 120) and Robinson-Neal (2008, 228) argue that the reliance on the familiar is shown on the website, architecture and liturgies. Hutchings's (2010, 14) research highlights the possibility of participating in sacramental practices such as communion, baptism, confession, and absolution through virtual worship. For instance, pastors may invite viewers to participate in the sacrament of communion in online worship from the comfort of their homes, underscoring the significance of intentional design and meaningful interactions in creating online religious experiences.

3.4.1 Exploring the Creative Revolutionising Possibilities of Virtual Architecture

Guided by Hutchings, the theory of creating an online church examined how virtual churches are created as they come from human needs for a place of divine connection. It is not a standalone phenomenon but a response to traditional religious institutions' changing dynamics and needs in the digital age. This section draws attention to virtual churches that act as a tool for innovation and connection, expand our horizons, and are receptive to fresh perspectives and new concepts. Aboy (2023, 259) notes that translation preferences, programs and events are subject to personalisation since the need for the online church is to gain more views and attain positive feedback, which leads to Christians omitting the truth and obliging though they find it palatable. By maximising the use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, the congregants contribute to the new evangelisation that the gospels' infinite richness can be expressed in various forms that have the potential to touch the minds and hearts of all (Aboy 2023, 253). It is prudent not to use online worship to decelerate making buildings more accessible since churches do not decide for someone, and one would prefer what is comfortable to them even if it is online (Schnell 2023, 46). Similarly, social media platforms allow for a personalised and individualistic religion (Dein and Watts 2023, 192). Subang (2023, 34) adds that online worship is about ourselves and not the community because one chooses their friends and places where they find news which fits their preferences. If any person goes against them, they unfollow or delete them. Hence, online worship is a personal choice, and while it offers a divine connection for some, it may only be suitable for some as it is about oneself and not the community.

Hutchings (2010) suggests that virtual worship is like an engaging website but may not be considered a church. Many online communities view it as a social activity for fun rather than actual church membership. It is the same for i-Church members who see their community as a gathering of like-minded people but not a true church. Hutchings (2010, 129) believes that an online church would lack an essential aspect of a true church without a web pastor. Therefore, an online church must have sacredness and communion elements to be considered a real church instead of just a leisure activity. The efficacy of virtual religious exoticness has long been discussed, with some questioning their ability to replicate the impact of in-person events truly. Internet services could help people keep their relationships with God, but cannot be considered worship but an instrument to help personal devotion or physical worship (Kim 2018, 95). While some contend that online ceremonies fail to capture the essence of physical gatherings, it is possible to view mediums such as radio and television as capable of inducing a sense of presence in their audience, resulting in a feeling of physical presence (Hutchings 2015, 115). When it comes to online religious experiences, it is important to consider them within the framework of an actual physical faith community. As online churches evolve, the challenge of effectively translating offline practices to virtual spaces, such as communion and baptism, will undoubtedly be a significant obstacle to overcome.

At the start of i-Church, Hutchings (2010) stated that certain individuals had reported successful experiences with prayer while utilising online platforms, leading them to reflect upon the notion that divine intervention may extend even to computer-mediated communication. By the time of Hutchings's research, multiple groups would gather online at a designated time to facilitate more comprehensive church member engagement. Thompson (2023, 21) emphasises the importance of acknowledging the involvement of our bodies in virtual worship through our computers. It is possible to gather with other participants of the online assembly who are also embodied through virtual means. Dein and Watts (2023, 192) suggest that virtual masses hold the potential to strengthen the faith of church-goers and that consecration can occur even at a distance. He adds that since the Holy Spirit is not confined to a particular place, the priest can consecrate bread and wine in a different location. There is expected to be a significant decline of 20% in the number of individuals who will return to in-person worship after the pandemic, and it seems likely that a prolonged period of virtual worship will result in reduced physical attendance (Dein and Watts, 2023, 205). Hutchings (2010, 119) argues that text in virtual worship was more effective and relatable than audio alone. According to Hutchings (2010), virtual spaces enhance worship freedom as members

are more honest and can share spiritual encounters more freely. As we continue to adapt to new technologies and modes of communication, it is important to remain open to the possibilities and opportunities of virtual worship.

Another key aspect of Hutchings's (2010) online churches is that virtual architecture is active and responsible for moods and practices of what happens in the spaces it creates. Comprehending space as an outcome of social interaction involves a multifaceted process encompassing tangible architectural features, cognitive constructs, and customary routines (Nunes 2006, 299). In this view, virtual architecture is a social construction to suit the needs of the perceived members, even though sometimes that dream may seem controlling and aggressive. Additionally, in an interview with Hutchings (2010, 203), Mark Brown argued that the cathedrals' architecture was not friendly to the visitor, leaving questions about why they created it in that style. According to Hutchings (2010), online architecture is to be user-friendly so that members and visitors can experience the cathedral at full capacity. Following this line of thought, Hutchings establishes a key need for creating virtual architecture in the simplest way possible for members.

3.4.2 Virtual Worship as a Tool for Innovation and Connection

Hutchings (2017) argues that the primary objective of creating online churches is to create a unique community that meets the particular requirements of its members. During the pandemic, Aboy (2023, 256) alludes that the virtual world has become an embodiment of the world through charitable efforts undertaken by church organisations to provide financial aid to those affected. The Holy Father has also acknowledged the virtual world as a space for authentic sharing and listening, enabling digital natives to revitalise parish websites and engage with the community. The internet is commonly seen as a virtual realm where individuals have the freedom to create online identities, which are often considered separate and alternative from their real-life identities (Johnsen 2023, 54). Kohler (2023, 33) suggests that if individuals do not attend church, they should reach out to them wherever they are, and the power of God's grace knows no bounds. It emphasises the significant role that community and connectedness play in spirituality, irrespective of the form, method, or practice. Therefore, coming together in a place of worship is a religious obligation and a means to fulfil one's inherent human need for belongingness and social interaction.

One crucial element of virtual worship by Hutchings (2010) is that it has evoked mixed feelings among Christians, particularly concerning the effective incorporation of technology while maintaining a spiritual connection. The ambiguity has resulted in many opinions and perspectives within the Christian community, further emphasising the intricacies of assimilating technology into religious practices. One concern raised is the potential for weakening the observance of the Christian Sabbath. According to Hutchings (2010), prolonged online worship may result in people taking Sunday as a Christian Sabbath less seriously, leading to its deterioration. As per Lochhead's (1997, 5) findings, the digital platform can bring people together during a crisis, regardless of location or religious affiliation. The church's core message remains constant, but the methods of communication and interaction are evolving due to technological advancements (Hutchings 2010, 239). Therefore, in line with this thought, it is crucial to strike a balance that leverages technology's benefits while preserving the spiritual connection at the core of religious practices.

Hutchings (2017) uncovered that initial studies on virtual worship suggest that the utilisation of an online church can effectively prioritise the ritual in its appropriate private place. The online religious community refers to establishing and nurturing relationships through social networks that serve a common purpose (Dein and Watts 2023, 192). Facebook and YouTube have allowed people to access religious texts, teachings and discussions from anywhere. Those who may not have had access to such resources before can now learn about God and connect with others who share their beliefs. As Kim (2020) reminds us, the incredible speed and reach have allowed the internet to open new opportunities for people to explore their beliefs, connect with others and seek answers to their questions. It reminds us of Berger (2018), who revealed that social media platforms provide access to various religious resources, including sacred texts, sermons and teachings from various traditions. Thus, cyberspace has opened new opportunities for individuals to connect with others and has impacted traditional religious practices.

The above wealth of information allows people to explore different beliefs and perspectives and deepen their understanding of their faith. I often read the Bible online, listen to sermons from the church pastor and engage in discussions with other believers worldwide in the e-realm, namely the spiritual realm. The virtual community has significantly contributed to fulfilling Christian liturgical practices, thereby establishing itself as a legitimate community (Smith 2015). The massive connectivity of cyberspace created a whole new meaning for the

word community, giving us a new context for executing religious practices. Aboy (2023, 259) suggests that virtual communities are no less real than physical ones as they shift the principles of community development, making it more fluid and faster-moving in a broader environment. Digital tools can improve the mission of caring and enable greater participation and contribution to the church's life, particularly for individuals who cannot attend in person due to physical limitations (Thompson 2023, 21). More so, Christians and Pentecostals love TV and social media platforms. They have made it part of their religious separation definition since the Holy Spirit uses cyberspace as a point of contact (Cartledge 2022, 32). Similarly, the internet has created new ways of being together online, calling for a reviewed definition of the word church (Campbell 2006, 107). According to Hutchings (2010), internet-mediated communication can be as significant as the local faith community, showing that such groups engage real people with real-life concerns. Cones (2020, 24) asserts that streaming Zoom services on Facebook provides a slow alternative way of participation, less interactive than Zoom but more public than in-person church gatherings. Following this line of thought, Hutchings presents the possibility of demonstrating that the church can embody a modern, youthful and pertinent approach.

In retrospect, Hutchings (2010) identifies a tension between familiarity and originality concerning virtual space. The participants in the online church took on leadership positions with little skill, talent and creativity due to being familiar with the traditional church (Hutchings 2010, 289). Hutchings adds that focusing on the familiar is not good for participants looking for an alternative to the local church gatherings (2010, 289). There is a tradition of expectation, an exhortation of God to act using pastors by laying hands, even on the TV screen as a point of contact; thus, using the computer screen is simply an extension of the logic of technological mediation (Cartledge 2022, 37). Achieving the optimal equilibrium between familiarity and originality is key to creating an immersive virtual environment that evokes strong emotional responses. On the other hand, recreating what is familiar passes in tradition and spiritual effect, but in the online realm, if one wants to adopt new practices, there needs to be space for creativity and change because it is also a new form of practice. Henceforth, such an endeavour requires meticulous attention to detail, but the result can be remarkable.

Based on Hutchings's (2010) theory, our inclination to rely on the familiar may hinder our ability to generate innovative and creative ideas. It is plausible that we must expand our horizons and be receptive to fresh perspectives and new concepts. The church leaders

thoughtfully incorporated traditional worship elements into the activity, ensuring it aligned with participants' pre-existing norms and expectations (Hutchings 2010). This approach allowed participants to anticipate the experience and respond appropriately, ultimately fostering a sense of ease and comfort throughout the event. Thompson (2023, 22) reveals that there has been controversy around online communion. He suggests it is best conducted through synchronous platforms like Zoom, where participants can gather in real-time and interact during the service. They encourage the pastors to preside over the communion table in real-time during the online liturgy rather than record the eucharistic portion of the service. Recording it may lead to misunderstanding or misuse and not uphold its intended communal nature. He adds that online worship is an essential aspect of ministering to everyone, not just those who can attend in-person worship, with the goal being to encourage those who may be staying at home for convenience to stay engaged (Thompson 2023, 22). Hutchings (2010) argues that traditional worship and ritual performance have worked for Christian and Hindu websites as members could expect the usual. In light of the above scholars, it is diplomatic to create a worship experience that is both familiar and innovative to the individual, catering to the needs and expectations of all participants, whether online or in person.

3.4.3 Combining Virtual and Physical Worship Gatherings

One of Hutchings's (2010) key points regarding the creation of online churches is that the advent of online churches has brought forth a novel approach towards practising Christianity. An increasing number of individuals seeking spiritual growth seek support systems and communities, utilizing virtual and in-person resources and engagements to aid them in their journey. According to Wellman's (2002, 322), cyberspace is often seen as a distinct part of people's daily experiences, creating a sense of division from other aspects of life due to the sin of particularism. One observes that individuals who do not feel disconnected from their daily routines may view virtual church services as a replacement for physically attending their local church. It is imperative to note that virtual worship should focus on personality, a development that can only be achieved through face-to-face interactions (Hyatt 2009, 330). The absence of such interactions in online churches can cause a lack of connection and community for the churchgoer. More so, cyberspace is more than a repository for information but a space for interpersonal interaction facilitating a sense of co-presence (Dein and Watts 2023, 195). Pitt (2023, 37) adds that virtual liturgy via Zoom is a legitimate and meaningful alternative to in-person gatherings. Therefore, Hutchings believes online churches and physical gatherings are

to merge and work as a unit since some offline practices cannot happen online. In light of the above, Hutchings establishes a key need for online churches to be part of a new form of Christianity online with offline gatherings.

In *Creating Church Online*, Hutchings's (2010) exploration brings the fusion of online and real gatherings as a key fundamental in creating virtual churches. Kim (2018, 93) alludes that virtual worship can provide the same benefits as physical church services, including communion, baptism, offering and sermons. It allows for greater accessibility to sermons, enabling those who cannot attend in-person worship to watch as they are accessible anytime through personal mobile devices and computers. Schnell (2023, 44) states that the practices of prayer and worship that occur through digital means are linked to physicality and materiality. Despite being enabled by technology, these practices cannot be separated from the physical body and the material world. Virtual and physical presence are at par in that the mere pixels on a screen cannot replace the tangible authenticity of physical locations. (Kohler 2023, 32). Based on the scholars above, the integration of technology into religious practices should complement physicality and materiality to create a more inclusive and accessible spiritual experience that does not replace the importance of physical gatherings.

It is worth highlighting that the concept of online church, as expounded by Hutchings (2010), is not intended to replace physical church gatherings. Online worship is a resource that supplements local attendance by giving more insights and answers to questions not asked in the local church (Clark et al. 2004, 92). The digital presence does not replicate the physical presence; instead, it creates an electronic representation of that presence through electronically generated voice production (Pitt 2023, 40). Hutchings (2010, 144) argues that one distinction between online and offline settings, as evidenced in the Morley chapels,⁶ is the attendance of worship online while doing other activities. At the same time, local church gatherings display an embodied display of attention. Hutchings (2010) argues that the online church is like a doorway leading to local gatherings since good services complement the second local touch.

⁶ The Morley chapels have established a notable affiliation with virtual worship facilitated by Hutchings, which has been met with considerable acclaim from members of the Morley community. They have commended Hutchings for his astute ability to conduct virtual worship, enabling them to engage in other activities without feeling distracted or guilty. His understanding of the demands of contemporary life and the significance of achieving a balance between work, family, and spiritual practices has been greatly appreciated. Members can seamlessly participate in the Morley faith community through virtual worship services while carrying out daily tasks such as cooking, laundry, or work-related assignments. The Morley chapels and Hutchings have collaborated and devised.

According to Hutchings (2010, 78), meeting online needs a complement to face-to-face gatherings as it helps to fill in the picture portrayed online, reassuring of strengthening already made relationships. Also, Christians come together for worship on Sundays and in morning and evening prayers, funerals, and the home. This allows virtual gatherings to supplement Sunday gatherings (Kohler 2023, 32). Following this line of thought, Hutchings establishes a connection and a supplementary role of online churches to local church gatherings.

Hutchings (2010) notes that the initial Christian response to online religion was based on assumptions about the importance of face-to-face gatherings rather than solid empirical evidence. This philosophical aspect highlights the need for a balanced approach to online worship and the importance of complementing it with real-life gatherings to cultivate deeper relationships and a sense of belonging. According to Hutchings (2010), there is a visible correlation between individuals who participate in online worship and those who engage in religious practices offline, as this finding contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of online worship. At the beginning of the first church of cyberspace, the church created a virtual community via a chatroom that was open 24/7. Within this digital space, members could participate in daily services, browse through various images, enjoy music, and engage in a multimedia online Bible study (Hutchings 2010, 9). The various faith communities need leadership that could utilise both the physical meetings in worship services and the virtual environment to establish the feelings of being a community and the accompanying idea of aliveness (Kruger 2021, 3). Notably, Jenkins (2008, 110) establishes that one effective way to connect with fellow members online is by shaking hands with invisible entities. Hence, we emphasise the significance of fostering genuine relationships despite the geographical barriers between individuals. Kruger (2021, 7) adds that a majority of 60% of the participants in a survey believe that churches should enhance their virtual or digital presence to cater to those who opt to be a part of the faith community through online platforms. Moreover, continuing to offer holy communion online should be considered, as it presents a new avenue for individuals who participate in virtual worship to connect with those who attend in person (Thompson 2023, 23). Henceforth, online worship should be viewed as a supplementary resource that complements local attendance and the importance of cultivating genuine relationships through virtual and physical means.

In addition, for a body to become one, it is necessary for all individuals to be physically present and not simply online (Hyatt 2009, 333). This idea complements Hutchings's (2010, 277)

emphasis on accessibility and convenience for worship while highlighting the value of in-person participation for building a sense of community and unity. Here, Hutchings (2010, 278) calls for a redefinition of the virtual world as it is misleading and conveys a sense of un-reality or replaces it with a more suitable one. Virtual worlds are spaces real people create to interact through technology mediums as in the real world. Accordingly, virtual spaces are man's doings; hence, they should not differentiate between real life and online relations. Following this thought, Hutchings confirms that the online and physical work together to provide virtual worship practices.

Hutchings's (2017) notion of virtual churches is that the Church of Fool's participants carried on conversation through text-based forums, revealing the importance of online worship complementing face-to-face gatherings. It is worth noting that, according to research conducted by Hutchings (2010), physical gatherings in worship play a significant role in establishing connections that may be lacking in virtual communication. Furthermore, attending web-based worship service over the weekend may prove insufficient and should be complemented by participating in a life group⁷ to cultivate deeper relationships (Hutchings 2010, 261). More so, some members of online churches may prefer smaller groups for more profound discussions in real-life congregations. Second Life's virtual reality churches enable members to participate through avatars, forming strong bonds that lead to in-person meetings (Cartledge 2022, 45). He contends that it is unjustifiable to assume that the merging of virtual and physical communities is a universal feature of online communities, and that online and offline churches remain distinct entities. Estes (2009) argues that virtual churches may have negative effects due to their promotion of a simplified and self-centred version of Christianity that does not necessitate challenging interpersonal interactions. While online worship is undoubtedly crucial, it must be considered a supplement to a real-world gathering to satisfy an individual's intrinsic human need for a sense of belonging and social interaction. Therefore, Hutchings establishes that online worship is vital but must complement an in-person gathering.

After that, the creative possibilities of virtual architecture have been explored and be user-friendly for members and visitors to experience the cathedral at full capacity. In other words,

⁷ A life group is a small group of individuals that meet regularly to discuss and reflect on their spiritual journey, as well as to support one another in prayer and action. They can be formed both in-person and online and can be a valuable tool for virtual worship practices.

the possibility of virtual architecture considers that an online church must have sacredness and communion elements to be considered a real church instead of just a leisure activity.

Considering the above, the emergence of online churches has provided an inclusive environment for individuals unable to participate in traditional worship. As argued by Hutchings, virtual churches offer a sense of community and support through spiritual practices such as prayer. However, it should be acknowledged that online churches may lack some of the essential aspects of genuine churches, including physical presence and meaningful interactions. As such, it is imperative to recognize that virtual worship can only partially replace the impact of in-person gatherings. The study explores the possibilities of virtual architecture in online churches, emphasizing the importance of creating user-friendly virtual spaces while retaining sacred elements. Although virtual worship can foster spirituality and connections, it may promote a simplified and self-centred form of Christianity. Therefore, it is essential to balance virtual and physical worship, as highlighted by Hutchings. While online worship can supplement in-person gatherings, more is needed to replace the significance of face-to-face interactions in building a sense of community.

3.5 Discussion

Based on various theorists' perspectives, Tim Hutchings's argument about creating online churches is particularly relevant in the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Hutchings (2017), computer-mediated communication is an excellent medium for teaching and connecting people, which is essential in these challenging times. Additionally, virtual churches should be embraced because they accommodate those who find comfort online. In unpacking online churches, we have also discovered that virtual worship can be a tool for innovation and connection. By expanding our horizons and being receptive to fresh perspectives and new concepts, we can enhance our virtual worship experience. Hutchings' philosophy aligns with Heim's (1993) argument that immersion involves complete mental and emotional engagement with the virtual environment. To fully engage with the experience, users must let go of preconceptions and expectations. Heim (1993, 126) adds that virtual reality allows manipulating viewpoints, providing users with highly personalised experiences. Hence, these theories now fit together to frame an understanding of virtual worship; by embracing the potential of virtual worship, we can create meaningful connections and engage with our faith in new and innovative ways.

In studying the role of virtual worship, the tremendous potential of digital platforms to unite people during times of crisis comes to the fore, irrespective of their geographical location or religious affiliation. According to Hutchings (2017), it is imperative to leverage new methods of evangelisation through the Internet to reach more individuals, particularly in regions like South Africa, where many seek faith-based guidance online. Hutchings (2017) further observes that online churches can serve as an ideal secondary touchpoint for individuals previously influenced by physical churches. Interestingly, Sheldrake (2001) concurs with Hutchings's findings and proposes that physical places of worship play a crucial role in creating sacred spaces. It then could explain why congregants are more inclined to follow an online church that has some connection to a physical church they have previously attended. Even though online viewers may already be part of the church community, they may still seek a secondary touchpoint to deepen their faith and connection to a community they have already experienced in a physical church setting. Furthermore, Hutchings (2010, 78) emphasises that online gatherings should supplement face-to-face meetings as they provide a more comprehensive picture of the online portrayal. These theories create a better understanding of the significance of virtual worship in contemporary society and how it can complement traditional church experiences.

In reviewing Hutchings's (2017) conclusion on virtual churches, it seems that online worship can complement face-to-face gatherings by merging virtual and physical worship. It is important to note that online church should not replace physical church gatherings but instead should work as a complement (Hutchings 2010). This idea coincides with Heim's (1993, 108) claim that virtual reality technology thrives in embodiment since people can exist in a virtual world without ever meeting physically. Virtual reality systems are designed to provide an immersive experience that accurately mimics the sensation of being in a virtual church (Heim, 1998). It allows individuals to engage with computer matrix and create artificial realms to craft virtual worlds and immerse themselves in them. More so, Hutchings (2010) adds that online gatherings and physical gatherings are to merge and work as a unit since some offline activities like Holy Communion and baptism cannot be done online. Consequently, immersion should occur in physical spaces that lead to full-body immersion, and both virtual and physical worship experiences should complement each other. Applying these concepts to autoethnographic reading leads to a better understanding of how virtual worship can complement and enhance physical worship experiences.

The literature demonstrates that the theories of Sheldrake, Hutchings, and Heim can be useful in understanding and exploring the phenomenon of virtual worship. Sheldrake's (2001, 131) ideas about creating sacred spaces that accommodate diverse voices and promote reconciliation resonate with me. Hutchings (2010, 144) builds on this by pointing out that virtual worship offers more flexibility and allows individuals to engage in other activities while participating. Heim's (1993, 126) perspective on virtual reality is also valuable, as it highlights the potential for creating personalised experiences that promote empathy and openness. He adds that cyberspace contains alternate universes as virtual reality can also be a place of introspection (Heim 1988). Intriguingly, both Hutchings and Heim emphasise the importance of interactive sacred spaces that fully immerse the individual. Henceforth, these theories all emphasise creating responsive and emotionally engaging virtual sacred spaces. Using these insights, I plan to apply them to inform my auto-ethnographical reading and develop a deeper understanding of virtual worship and its potential for promoting inclusivity and connection.

In the endeavour to comprehend the concept of virtual worship, Sheldrake's discourse on sacred spaces proves to be highly perceptive. He posits that any space can attain sacredness when it serves as a conduit for the spiritual realm, as humans establish sacred spaces in their pursuit of divine manifestation (Sheldrake 2002; 2007). Notably, these spaces are not solely determined by individual discernment or bias but rather a battleground in which political forces shape our identities (Sheldrake 2001). It aligns with the notion that spaces are constantly evolving, particularly in congregants' homes where virtual worship is frequently conducted. Heim (1988, 110) also concurs with this idea, asserting that cyberspace is a genuine human invention that has spawned a novel relationship between humans and technology. Through virtual reality, the body has become cognizant of its existence via sensory perception and cognition, rendering it a reality experienced through virtual reality tools. As such, technology has become an extension of human existence, creating an environment that envelops individuals and enables them to experience elation. These theories were applied to this autoethnographic study to comprehend virtual worship better as sacred spaces were created at home. Upon careful analysis of the theories proposed by Hutchings and Sheldrake and Heim's perspective on virtual reality, a comprehensive understanding of the approach that should be taken towards virtual worship was gained. It is imperative to create a user-friendly virtual space that caters to the needs of members and visitors, as highlighted by Hutchings (2010), to enable them to experience the cathedral fully.

Moreover, Sheldrake (2014) suggests that their religious purpose should exclusively determine the architecture of virtual spaces, emphasising the significance of the concept of space, which heavily influences the behaviours and interactions of those who inhabit it. This notion applies to physical spaces such as the city, streets, and work environments, which have become sacred places attracting talented and innovative employees. In addition, Heim's (1988) theory on virtual reality intensifying the sensation of presence when individuals engage through visually observing the tools resonates with my understanding of the subject. The study sought to better understand virtual worship and its impact on individuals by applying these theories.

Virtual worship has recently emerged as a topic of interest, prompting reflection on the significance of sacred spaces. Sheldrake's (2012) assertion regarding the importance of the home as a safe environment for exploration and self-expression resonates with me. Public spaces have lost relevance, so the home has become increasingly sacred. Heim (1993) supports this notion by highlighting the significance of technology as an extension of human existence, enabling us to process and assimilate information meticulously. Virtual reality presents an opportunity for a fusion of active participation and passive observation, thereby creating a controlled environment for worship. In contemporary society, virtual entities play an integral role in our daily lives, functioning and interacting with us like real entities. How virtual worship can facilitate profound and meaningful experiences for individuals was explored through an autoethnographic lens.

After extensive research on various theorists' perspectives regarding virtual worship, a comprehensive understanding of this subject was developed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Tim Hutchings' argument on creating online churches emphasises the importance of computer-mediated communication in teaching and connecting people. Hutchings' philosophy aligns well with Heim's argument on immersion, which involves complete mental and emotional engagement with the virtual environment, allowing for the manipulation of viewpoints and the provision of highly personalised experiences. Additionally, Sheldrake's discourse on sacred spaces and the significance of the home as a safe environment for exploration and self-expression resonates with the researcher. By applying these theories, the study strives better to understand virtual worship and its impact on individuals while promoting inclusivity and connection in virtual sacred spaces. It is imperative to create user-friendly virtual spaces that cater to the needs of members and visitors, and virtual worship should complement physical gatherings rather than replace them.

3.6 Conclusion

The concept of virtual reality and cyberspace has been explored by Heim, who argues that the impact of virtual experiences on emotions is profound; however, their authenticity is contingent on the user's perception. He further asserts that technology should be cautiously employed as an extension of human existence. Similarly, Sheldrake examines the notion of physical and virtual sacred spaces, emphasizing the role of narratives and memories in shaping them. While physical spaces have an inherent connection with tangible presence, virtual spaces can facilitate spiritual growth through intentional design. As such, any space can be sacralised through individual interpretation and relationships. Hutchings investigates the creation of online churches, highlighting their inclusive environment and noting their potential lack of essential aspects of real churches, such as physical presence. He emphasizes the necessity of balancing virtual and physical worship and notes that online worship can supplement but not replace in-person gatherings. Creative virtual architecture can facilitate the creation of user-friendly online church spaces. In summary, the works mentioned above emphasize the potential of virtual worship in fostering spirituality and connections. However, it is crucial to recognize its limitations compared to in-person gatherings. Thus, a balanced approach combining virtual and physical worship can maximize the benefits of technology while preserving the spiritual connection at the core of religious practices. Henceforth, it is sensible to move on to the self-reflective exploration, exploring the researcher's experiences with the varied aspects of virtual worship.

CHAPTER 4

PILGRIMAGE THROUGH PIXELS

The previous chapter has delved into the various perspectives of theorists concerning virtual reality and cyberspace in religious practices and has been explored by various scholars, including Michael Heim, Philip Sheldrake and Tim Hutchings. The chapter has examined the scholar's work and their insights into the potential of virtual worship in fostering spirituality and connections. While virtual spaces can facilitate spiritual growth through intentional design, their authenticity depends on the user's perception. The scholars mentioned above emphasise the necessity of a balanced approach combining virtual and physical worship to maximise the benefits of technology while preserving the spiritual connection at the core of religious practices. The next step is to explore personal experiences with virtual worship, as it is essential to examine how people perceive and interact with these virtual spaces in practice.

This chapter reveals the pilgrimage through pixels, which refers to a journey or sacred place undertaken for religious or spiritual reasons and involves a sense of devotion, self-discovery and reflection. The term pixels denotes the smallest units of a digital image displayed on a screen, which might be used metaphorically to represent the digital realm, implying that the pilgrimages happen in virtual spaces. In this chapter, I will explore a journey of self-exploration and introspection in a digital or virtual space. The journey will involve reflecting on personal experiences considered sacred or deeply meaningful and then analysing these experiences within a larger cultural and spiritual framework. The study will first look at the understanding of autoethnography, followed by the role of the researcher, the virtual worship service and face-to-face worship. The research will then turn home into a shrine, followed by space everywhere and social media gadgets in physical church versus worship virtually in fluid spaces.

4.1 Understanding Autoethnography

As already noted, this research study adopts the autoethnography approach, which shares similarities with ethnography while exhibiting some differences (Chang 2008, 48-49). Autoethnography is a unique method of ethnographic research that involves gathering data through the researcher's involvement within the group under scrutiny. The approach relies heavily on the researcher's personal experiences as the primary data, complemented by varying degrees of interviews with group members or examination of cultural artefacts (Chang 2008,

49). The ultimate goal of autoethnography is to acquire knowledge of the social group under study, which is achieved through in-depth analysis and interpretation of the collected data (Ellis et al. 2011, 46). One of the strengths of autoethnography is that it employs personal experiences to help illustrate cultural experiences, providing a more intimate and nuanced understanding of the social group. The approach allows researchers to examine the intricate and complex aspects of the group's existence, including its beliefs, values, and practices (Chang and Boyd 2011). By placing the researcher at the centre of the investigation, autoethnography provides a unique perspective on the group under study, which is difficult to achieve through other ethnographic approaches.

Autoethnographic reports provide intimate and nuanced insights into social groups by focusing on the researcher's personal experiences within the group. Writing in the first person and including personal details help to illustrate cultural experiences and provide a richer understanding of the group (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 65). However, autoethnographic reports must be contextualised within broader social and cultural contexts to ensure their validity and accuracy. Critics argue that autoethnography may not reflect objective truth due to its heavy reliance on personal experiences as the primary data (Skipp 2010). However, high-quality autoethnography can offer unique insights into specific cultures that other research methods might overlook. Researchers must balance personal experiences and contextual analysis to ensure their research's validity. By acknowledging their biases and reflecting on their positionality within the group, researchers can better understand the social group under study (Collinson 2013). Patten (2014) asserts that first-person accounts written in the form of stories are compelling for readers and allow them to become co-participants in the narrative. Autoethnography offers readers a unique opportunity to engage with research morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Hence, this study employs autoethnography because of its enormous potential to develop knowledge using personal narratives.

Autoethnography is a research methodology combining two distinct components: ethnographic and auto. Ethnographic research involves studying human cultures and societies through fieldwork and participant observation (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Autoethnography, conversely, is grounded in the researcher's personal experience, serving as the foundation for research. Employing personal experience as a starting point, autoethnography provides a unique perspective on the research topic often absent in other research approaches (Raudenbush 1994).

Also, autoethnography adds significant detail to qualitative research that often relies on an observer's viewpoint since the observer is an integral part of the subculture being studied within autoethnography (Van Maanen 1995). This approach is particularly useful when studying subcultures that are difficult to access or need to be better understood. One of these significant components of autoethnography is the exploration of lived experiences, which involves reflecting on practical actions and everyday life through written text (Raudenbush 1994). Through lived experience research, researchers can explore how individuals within a particular subculture navigate their everyday lives and make sense of their experiences. The primary aim of autoethnography is to stimulate readers to reflect on their experiences alongside the researchers. By offering a personal account, autoethnography provides an in-depth exploration of intent, focus, and vision, thereby enriching readers' understanding of the research area (Skipp 2010). A personal account offers an excavation of intent, focus, and vision that can enhance readers' comprehension of the research topic. Therefore, autoethnography is a rich and valuable research methodology that offers a unique perspective on human cultures and societies.

The autoethnographic approach has recently gained considerable attention. It is closely related to the phenomenology and hermeneutics approaches, which emphasise the importance of subjective experiences and interpretation of those experiences. Phenomenology, in particular, rejects scientific realism, which holds that empirical sciences have a privileged position in knowledge production (Schwandt 2001). Instead, the objective is to explore and depict the personal encounters of the investigator on a day-to-day basis, scrutinising the encounters that an individual faces. The approach seeks to understand the individual's perception of the world rather than a universal truth.

Additionally, Dethloff (2007) notes that the phenomenological approach offers insight that illuminates experience without constructing a theory of explanation. The approach gives the researcher a better chance of comprehending the fundamental essence of the encounter, which is often overlooked in other research methods. Therefore, the phenomenological approach is a valuable tool for researchers who seek to understand the subjective way people perceive their encounters and the significance they give to them.

Hermeneutics and autoethnography are essential for comprehending the significance of human experiences within their cultural and social contexts (Rose 2021). Hermeneutics, which focuses on interpreting meaning to uncover the significance behind a given experience, is

complemented by autoethnography, a research methodology that seeks to understand and interpret personal experiences within a particular subculture (Ellis and Bochner 2001). The value of autoethnography lies in its ability to provide a more authentic representation of personal experiences than an outside ethnographer could achieve. As it is conducted by insiders to the subculture, they obtain a deeper understanding of the cultural and social contexts that shape their experiences (Rose 2021). Through research and writing, autoethnography connects personal experiences to the larger cultural context, offering a more detailed and nuanced description of the phenomenon under investigation (Rose 2021).

On the other hand, hermeneutics aims to analyse texts within their cultural and historical contexts to extract meaning. While the approach differs from autoethnography, both methodologies aim to interpret and extract meaning from human experiences. Through integrating these methodologies, researchers can better understand how cultural and social factors impact our lives (Reed-Danahay 1997). The combination of hermeneutics and autoethnography can provide a more comprehensive view of human experiences (Rose 2021). By analysing personal experiences within their cultural and historical contexts, researchers can uncover the significance behind a given experience and its broader implications for society (Raudenbush 1994). Hence, hermeneutics delivers a useful understanding of how cultural and social factors shape our lives and the experiences of those around us.

Documenting personal experiences through storytelling has a deep-rooted history in the literature. Sharing stories has always been a valuable asset for humans; a tradition passed down through generations in oral and written forms. According to Clandinin and Connelly (1994), institutions such as schools and churches can benefit greatly from incorporating storytelling, as humans are natural storytellers. Additionally, Wolcott (1994) argues that qualitative researchers must possess storytelling skills, which sets them apart. An autobiography allows the reader to connect personal experiences with theoretical perspectives, as suggested by Raudenbush (1994).

Furthermore, autoethnography is a helpful tool for self-reflectively examining principalship and administration. Therefore, by combining different approaches, such as autoethnography and hermeneutics, we can better understand how cultural and social factors shape our lives. Storytelling and self-reflection are powerful tools for understanding ourselves and the world around us.

Autoethnography is a research methodology that examines personal experiences within cultural and social contexts. It involves introspection and identifying key details and can contest dominant forms of representation and power, allowing marginalised voices to be heard (Dethloff 2007). Autoethnography can provide a more detailed and nuanced description of the phenomenon under investigation by linking personal experiences to the broader cultural context. Integrating hermeneutics and autoethnography methodologies can help to analyse personal experiences within their cultural and historical contexts, uncovering the significance behind a given experience and its broader implications for society (Dethloff 2007).

4.2 The Role of the Researcher

This section talks about the author's experiences in the media industry as a media personality and producer for multiple SDA organisations, bringing a wealth of experience in managing training and contributing to virtual worship discourse.

In my first workplace, I was responsible for video shooting, editing, and managing social media platforms at a major conference. After that, I moved to a television broadcaster, where I did vision mixing, editing and management of social platforms, which gave me a footing at my current employment, where I also train media personnel of various countries in Southern Africa so that they reach the masses. The extensive experience has equipped me with the necessary skills to face and overcome various scripting, pre-production, post-production and social media management challenges. As a qualified videographer with an Honours in Media and Society Studies from Midlands State University, Zimbabwe, I was involved in video shooting, editing, streaming and uploading files, which are essential in the autoethnographic account, adding to the discourse on virtual worship. As established in the previous chapters, my point of view is informed by Sheldrake's (2002) assertion that any space can attain sacredness when it serves as a conduit for the spiritual realm since humans establish sacred spaces in their pursuit of divine manifestation. Notably, spaces are not determined solely by individual discernment or bias but rather a battleground in which political forces shape identities. This study targets the SDA church, stimulating my sensibilities regarding virtual worship and demonstrating how religious gathering issues play out in complicated ways.

4.3 The Virtual Worship Service

Reflecting on my previous work experience, I recognise its profound impact on my growth and development as a media practitioner. At 27, I was appointed as a Senior Video Editor. Despite being relatively new to the religious sector, my colleagues were supportive and instrumental in my professional and personal growth. During my tenure, I gained a deeper appreciation for the role of social media platforms in fostering spiritual encounters. The advancement in technology has provided people with the chance to explore and gain knowledge about God while also connecting with similar-minded individuals across the globe. The cyberspace vast expanse has provided unparalleled access to religious texts, teachings, and discussions with fellow believers. As a Video Producer in my current role, I specialise in creating content tailored to the church's needs, including sermons, Bible study lessons, children's songs, and game shows. Social media platforms have enabled people to explore and experience diverse religious resources, enabling them to deepen their understanding of our faith. I am an avid reader of the Bible online, listen to church pastor's sermons, and engage in discussions with other believers worldwide. Social media has opened up new avenues to explore personal beliefs, connect with others, and find answers to questions. The previous work experience I acquired is valuable for my professional growth and development; thus, I am thrilled to continue exploring the endless possibilities of cyberspace in people's spiritual journeys.

Moving to a different province can be an intimidating experience, especially when trying to adapt to a new environment. The challenges of such a move can be overwhelming and may even lead to mental health issues. Thankfully, Facebook and Instagram have enabled people to come together and build online communities with others who have shared experiences. These communities can be incredibly helpful in aiding the transition process, as they allow individuals to connect with their faraway church and speak their language, making the adjustment process more manageable. According to Sheldrake (2001), human stories and recollections are imprinted in a particular moment, providing a unique opportunity to understand the hermeneutics of a place. The concept of space is heavily influenced by the behaviours and interactions of those who inhabit it, as shown by Hutchings's (2010) research, which demonstrated that church members in Second Life felt safe and involved in virtual churches just as they would in offline churches. Dein and Watts (2023, 192) allude to the notion that an online religious community is the building and maintenance of relationships through social networks that facilitate a common purpose. Therefore, Dein and Watts (2023) link with

Hutchings and are relevant in this notion of online religious communities facilitating relationships through social networks is relevant in this narration as it highlights the importance of building and maintaining connections even through online means when trying to adapt to a new environment.

More so, social media platforms allow individuals to connect with those who share their faith and form online communities that provide the support necessary to fare and thrive. Johnsen (2023, 53) notes that Facebook is regarded as social platform that provides individuals with the chance to express and showcase their religious identities. As a member of a virtual church, I have benefited from being part of an online community. By means of this, a bond was established with individuals who had comparable experiences bestowing a feeling of inclusion despite distant from a brick-and-mortar church. Being part of a virtual community helped to manage the changes brought about by the researcher's relocation and has made the adjustment process more manageable. Thus, the ideas above emphasise the importance of social media platforms in facilitating connections based on shared faith which can provide individuals with the necessary support to navigate through life's transitions and challenges.

As a committed church member, I experienced that faith is essential as I relied on virtual worship to guide my spiritual journey and stay connected with a community. As part of the church's media department, the researcher helped expand the pastors' reach to members' homes through Facebook and YouTube. Hutchings' (2010) account mentions that certain individuals have reported outcomes about praying on online platforms. This led me to ponder about the potential for divine intervention to extend to computer-mediated communication. Virtual spaces have also made it easier for members to share their spiritual encounters candidly, leading to greater worship freedom. During these difficult times, the support of pastors is more crucial than ever, and their online presence has been a source of comfort. The pandemic has forced people to use virtual mediums to connect with their faith, as it remains a primary way they stay connected to their church and practice faith and communion (Retamoza 2023, 9). I have been engaged through engaging in Bible study discussions, private chat groups, and liturgical practices. I found comfort in having access to a spiritual leader at certain convenient times, which enabled me to navigate life's challenges with greater peace. This convenience has fostered a stronger sense of faith and connection to their religious community, promoting emotional well-being and resilience. As Kim (2020) suggests, life's challenges can lead individuals to seek a higher power beyond themselves, and having a spiritual leader available

for help and counselling is a valuable resource. In summary, the availability of online religious services allows individuals to uphold their spiritual connection with their beliefs and congregation, particularly during challenging periods.

The capacity to establish meaningful connections with individuals from various regions of the world without needing physical travel is a remarkable feature. Virtual worship services are an incredible way to develop authentic relationships with individuals from different cultures and backgrounds. One youth session that stood out for me was through a Facebook livestream that focused on the SDA youth community in South Africa when I was completely captivated by one member who shared his professional aspirations and had a comprehensive worldview that resonated with mine. They discussed youth empowerment projects and shared notes on insights to their conversation. After the service, I contacted the person, and we engaged in some chat, which led me to remember their face as we attended the same media school. From there, we established a bond that grew stronger over time. As Hutchings (2010) points out, cyberspace has made it possible for genuine relationships to be formed online, even though they may not have met in person, resonating with my own experience. It shows that true friendships can emerge from the most unexpected sources. Of course, it ultimately depends on the individuals involved and their willingness to nurture those relationships. However, it is truly amazing how social media and online forums have made it possible for us to connect with others in previously inconceivable ways.

Religious institutions have connected with individuals who may have yet to be able to attend face-to-face gatherings due to geographical limitations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was in quarantine due to symptoms indicative of the disease. Despite feeling isolated and disconnected from the outside world, I was grateful for the opportunity to connect with peers through virtual conversations and participate in virtual church services, enhancing my sense of faith, as alluded to by Dein and Watts (2023, 192). Based on Hutchings's (2017) insights, virtual churches have enabled people from different countries to connect easily with their colleagues and family members. This experience has helped me to strengthen my faith and become even more devoted to attending virtual services. From my experience, I have witnessed the positive impact of virtual religious services in extending the reach of religious organisations and promoting inclusivity by enabling individuals unable to attend in-person gatherings, such as those with disabilities or those living far away, to feel welcomed and connected to the community. As Dein and Watts (2023) note, a drop of about 20% is expected after the pandemic

of the people who will return to worship, seeming likely that a prolonged period of virtual worship will result in lower in-person attendance. In short, the scholars' perspectives complement this study and help to provide a broader understanding of the impact of virtual religious services.

During the pandemic, I noticed a positive impact on charitable initiatives within religious institutions. The churches have been going above and beyond to help their members who require financial, social, and spiritual assistance, which has been truly inspiring, as Kim (2020) noted. I learned about Meals On Wheels Community Services South Africa (MOWCS). I was impressed by their innovative use of technology to coordinate and execute their food donation projects with greater ease and efficiency. MOWCS enhanced their database of donors worldwide and accepted various forms of donation, from debit orders to cash deposits and even food donations from individuals and big companies. Throughout the pandemic, MOWCS distributed more than 100 food parcels at least once a week for over two years, a remarkable achievement. Aboy (2023, 256) concurs that church organisations led charitable initiatives to provide financial assistance to those affected, embodying the word of God in their actions during the pandemic. Hence, the availability of online religious services has provided religious organisations with a means to adapt to the changing environment and maintain their relevance in a space that is becoming more reliant on digital technology.

4.4 Face-to-face worship

My experience during the pandemic time was lonely since I was alone, but I appreciated the opportunity to connect virtually with my church community. I would wake up in the morning, shower, have breakfast, and eat whilst opening the link for the virtual church service. Through Facebook, we could attend church services; through Zoom, we could access Bible study sessions, personal prayers and youth programmes. The virtual experience differed from in-person worship, but it felt like we were part of a community. During prayer sessions, I would close my eyes, kneel when told to do so and type Amen when I felt a point hitting home. At the end of the sermon, the preacher would encourage people to choose and commit to doing something to make the gospel go far and wide, and we would raise our hands online with emojis. Sharing posters and links for the next services on WhatsApp was a custom that encouraged family worship. Borrowing from Hutchings (2010), communion and praying are pivotal elements that stock the offline church together, creating a bond between individuals

and making them feel part of something larger than themselves. Hence, in-person worship can be a powerful tool for encouraging family worship by removing the need to dress up and leave the house, making offline worship more accessible and convenient for a family.

As someone who practices faith at home, I appreciate the importance of gathering with fellow members of their faith community. While they find personal satisfaction in their religious practices, they recognise the value of cultivating a sense of togetherness and fellowship. Sheldrake (2001) suggests that a home is where we are most ourselves, agreeing with my observations that it is a centre between the private and the public. In my experiences with my faith community, I have shared stories about my upbringing, struggles during the pandemic, and triumphs achieved through social media at my workplace. When the church recently opened its doors after the COVID-19 pandemic, I found it easier to relay my fears of the future, financial struggles, and spiritual growth through face-to-face interactions. These interactions allowed my fellow members to see my facial expressions, hear the sound of my voice, and feel my presence, which became a powerful source of comfort and strength. Hutchings (2010) emphasises the validity of face-to-face gatherings, as some liturgical practices like baptism and Holy Communion cannot be done online. Therefore, many Christians received communion for a year after amid the collective effervescence of singing and moving together (Miller 2022, 37). Through these in-person gatherings, I could also engage with my faith in tangible ways through rituals and traditions that are deeply meaningful to faith community members, such as baptism and communion service. Hence, I appreciate the importance of individual religious practices and communal gatherings in cultivating a fulfilling spiritual life.

In light of being someone who has experienced attending church after the pandemic, I can attest that there is an undeniable collective energy and intention created when congregants are all in one place for a common goal. Miller (2022, 38) notes that the church precedes the individual, and to be a Christian, one must belong to a church. The church leaders play a crucial role in enabling this creation by enforcing a conducive environment for worship that is reverend, quiet, enables fellowship and is holy. I have witnessed the implementation of certain rules in my church, such as switching off or putting cell phones on silent, separating mothers with children into a separate room, and having everyone seated except the person on the pulpit in front. These rules are implemented to help create and maintain the sacred space necessary for the desired outcome. As Sheldrake (2007) suggests, sacred spaces are created by humans as they seek a place for divine manifestation, transcendence, and power. During the sermon, a piano is played

to help people focus on the preacher and create an environment that feels holy and powerful. Being in this place allowed me to feel a sense of belonging and support essential for spiritual growth. It is not just about the spoken words but the sensory engagement in the physical space. During offline worship, one can smell the incense, hear the music and chatter from other church members, and fully engage one's senses, lacking in the virtual worship experience, where I only see images on a screen. Therefore, being in a church setting creates a unique energy and intention that cannot be replicated online.

The pleasure of being in a physical building has been a great way to disconnect from technology, whether for an hour, a day, or even a week. It has allowed me to reconnect with myself and my faith. Subang (2023, 31) notes that there is a problem of distraction for bible reading, prayer and meditation, which are challenged by switching on phones and letting oneself be carried away by what one sees. He adds that 47% of our minds wander when we are feeling depressed or stressed; thus, meditation and spending time alone make us more socially active. I have found that being in the church building has been especially helpful, as it provides a quiet place to reflect on important issues like love and how it impacts my life. During the pandemic, I found that being in the physical church helped me be more open to the situation and figure out how to overcome it. Borrowing from Hutchings (2010), the physical church plays a significant role in establishing connections, building relationships, and ensuring accountability. It was amazing how much clearer my thoughts became when not constantly bombarded with notifications and distractions. I could focus on what truly matters in life for survival; however, I did experience the opposite side of this scenario. We depend highly on technology for many facets of our lives, and being away from it may reveal a sense of boredom and depression. In this light, in collaboration with online worship, offline worship allows members to reflect on life's important virtues, as taking a break from technology and being present in a physical space can be incredibly beneficial for our mental and spiritual well-being.

4.5 Turning Home into a Shrine

I began working at the Southern Africa Union (SAU) in 2019 after transitioning from a different area of the media industry. My prior experience involved television production, vision mixing, and live DVD productions. However, upon joining SAU Media, I had to shift my focus towards church production, including sermon coverage, Bible study lessons, live-streaming, and social media management. As a video editor/producer for the church headquarters, I was

responsible for planning, executing, and delivering shoots. When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, I did not initially experience concern about self-isolating for twelve weeks, as I had previously endured prolonged periods of isolation due to my research. Such periods of isolation had previously been accompanied by mild depression, although I did not experience this during the current crisis. When the lockdown was officially announced, I had already been home for a few days due to intermittent strikes in the Free State province and persistent video shoots by MOWCS that required fieldwork. My line manager allowed me to work from home until the fears of the virus subsided, which meant I could avoid the cold mornings of Bloemfontein.

On 20 March 2020, the church leader issued a press release announcing the closure of church gatherings following the government's health regulations. The announcement was released on social media, along with video files, to inform church members and stakeholders. Following consultation with my line manager, I advised that the church could initiate online devotion to enable members to worship from the comfort of their homes. The idea involved creating Bible-based video footage and audio recordings aligned with the church's core doctrines. The concept presented by Hutchings (2010), as exemplified by the request of the Anglican Bishop for the church to help a disaster-stricken community, highlights the potential of digital platforms to bring people together in times of crisis, irrespective of their location or religious beliefs. The author concurs with Hutchings (2010) that the church must modify its approach to evangelising the modern masses before the whole generation is lost. On 27 March 2020, a Friday, the closure of churches meant that members could not attend church gatherings on the Sabbath. I contacted one of the pastors in the morning to help deliver an uplifting sermon to the church constituency. The pastor agreed, and I went to the office, packed my gear, proceeded to the church where the recording would take place, and arrived before the pastor set up. Upon arrival, the pastor expressed curiosity, stating that it was unusual to preach to an empty church, assuming the audience was listening and engaging with them. I responded by indicating that this was the "new normal" until the situation improved, and the pastor needed to pretend that the audience existed in his mind by focusing their eyes on the lens. I hit the record button, and the pastor delivered the sermon with dazzling brilliance. Since members were still grappling with the pandemic, I organised a medical doctor who is also a member to give a health talk on what to do during this period. Afterwards, I rushed back to my workstation to copy the footage and commenced editing, including designing posters, inserting graphics, balancing the sound, and posting the content on social media. (Figure 1).



Figure 1: A poster promoting the first online programme, 2020. Photograph by the author.

After completing the editing of the 45-minute video, I informed my line manager and colleagues about the availability of the online church service on social media. My colleagues expressed interest in having the service every Sabbath, and I agreed to provide it. I was confident in my ability to stream the service, having been familiar with the software for a long time and having had over 1.5k live viewers during the streaming, making it the only church body providing a Sabbath programme to the entire constituency of the church's territory. This event showcases the power of computers to alter the viewer's perspective, as Heim (1988) noted. I link this to virtual reality, which can create a visual environment that can accommodate various sensory modalities, allowing people to experience mediated contexts as though they were real. Aboy (2023, 250) concurs that by making the most of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, we can help spread the gospel in ways that resonate with people's

hearts and minds, allowing the infinite richness of the message to be expressed and embraced by all. With eight territorial offices under the SAU, I had to ensure that the streaming was successful and glitch-free, as an example to other bodies conducting online services. The service was engaging, providing a place of divine manifestation, as Sheldrake (2001) alluded to, with good music and a well-designed service for the whole family. The above suggests that virtual worship through online churches can successfully reach a wider audience.

Nevertheless, converting one's home into a place of worship can be challenging since tasks are often associated with location, making it difficult to establish spatial and temporal boundaries between home and church. According to Heim (1988), a home provides meaningful connections to individuals, making virtual services from the home more appealing as it encompasses both religious and secular functions. Although virtual services offer convenience, they require a commitment of time, and individuals may find themselves producing and putting together programmes for the audience. Sigmon (2023, 13) alludes that those who choose to remain home and join online services do so through consumer preferences, which are a matter of physical, social and spiritual well-being. While some may do this voluntarily, I may view it as work since the church employs me. On the other hand, some congregants blame the user at home for multi-tasking during virtual worship, as it never occurs in the conventional assembly within the four walls of a building (Sigmon 2023, 16). Hence, the ideology can sometimes blur the line between working and serving in the church's programmes, making joining virtual services from home a commitment that should be taken seriously. Nonetheless, many are grateful for the opportunity to worship in this way.

The rapid transformation and the need to work and worship from home have heightened anxiety for some people. Preparing video services for church members while working full-time from home can be overwhelming and challenging. However, individuals have adapted to various communication methods, such as emails, to ensure efficient collaboration. Despite the challenges associated with virtual meetings, maintaining eye contact through the webcam and screen remains a crucial aspect of effective communication. According to Heim (1993), virtual reality devices can isolate an individual's senses to create the sensation of being transported to a different location, promoting immersion. Interestingly, virtual mass devices can enhance the congregant's sense of faith, and consecration can happen at a distance (Dein and Watts 2023, 192). I agree with Thompson (2023, 21) that we should seriously consider that our bodies are

involved and engaged in worship streamed through our computers. It is impossible to gather with the embodied participants of the assembly online.

The home space has become increasingly important for many families and individuals as it provides a refuge from daily stresses and a means to connect with their faith community. The shift has transformed the traditional idea of the church, which was once solely a physical entity, into something that is now portable and accessible from anywhere. Sheldrake (2001) notes that homebound worship necessitates space and time as private practices become more permeable in changing household scenarios. I agree with Retamoza (2023, 9) that the pastor encouraged people to participate in communion online, eating and drinking in their homes through the livestream, and they started to get friends and family who were dispersed. In addition, congregations provide for communion of the sick and homebound to tend and nourish those who cannot be physically present (Kohler 2023, 32). Some members have expressed that the virtual church has become more personalised, as individuals can choose to attend a service from the comfort of their own home rather than a generic physical building. Hutchings (2010) has shown that online worship extends prayer life and enables a sense of God's holy presence. Hence, the shift towards virtual church services has transformed the traditional idea of the church into something that is now portable and accessible from anywhere.

The broader understanding of the home as a sacred and safe haven for individuals has been the subject of academic inquiry in recent times. Sheldrake (2001) articulated the concept of the home space becoming sacralised, where rituals and practices are performed to create a sense of comfort and security. The idea that any place can become sacralised and holy because it seeks a connection with God is central to this understanding. The process of sacralising the home requires the audience to be committed and fully devoted to the service and to practice liturgical rituals such as worship and praise. Dein and Watts (2023) allude that any space has the potential to connect people and move them into a place of sacredness. During the pandemic, the scripture edified congregants only through live streaming, which allowed them to practice faith and communion anywhere they may (Retamoza 2023). Individuals who place great importance on their personal space create an environment that reflects their values and personality, with designated areas for activities such as reading and meditation. Sacralisation is not limited to physical spaces, as evidenced by my experience as a video editor who created a place of worship in my flat designated for worship. In light of that, Kruger (2021) alludes that for most people, more than 80% during the pandemic has provided valuable insights on

redefining the church's identity in the online environment. The home was transformed into a sacred worship space through editing and streaming video episodes, providing an alternative to traditional physical church spaces.

The place of worship in the home was identified as a quiet and peaceful location where an individual could focus on meditation and prayer without distractions. I sought a suitable table on Takealot that could accommodate a laptop. I deliberately chose wooden decorations of Bible verses, a Lord's Prayer, and a candle for sacraments and confession services. In order to maintain a sense of calmness and simplicity, I kept the place clean and uncluttered. My line manager suggested incorporating organic components, such as plants and flowers, into the surroundings to establish a connection with nature and the universe. Hutchings's (2010) works reveal that the virtual world can entice individuals to leave behind their physical bodies and immerse themselves in a digital realm composed of digital information. According to Hutchings, people may become so engrossed in virtual environments that they detach from their physical reality, choosing to exist predominantly or even exclusively in the digital world. Dein and Watts (2023) assert that virtual reality does not replace in-person but complements it. Cartledge (2022, 45) adds that it is unfair to assume that virtual churches are entered only through avatars but that online and offline churches no longer apply but are one. As a Christian, I added the Bible on the left side of the table, which worked as a reference when the preacher said a verse for the day. Therefore, it is crucial to balance utilising technology to enhance our spiritual experiences and maintaining a connection with the physical world.

Additionally, I added gospel music to the service before and after the service to connect to God and to be emotionally and spiritually connected. The connection to the services was a doorway to receiving heaven's blessings. With the availability of the elements on the table, the place looked and felt sacred and acted like a real church setting. Adding as many elements as needed in their virtual space makes it different from a physical space.

The home is often regarded as a physical location representing a space where individuals can express their religion and engage in spiritual practices while serving as a place for daily activities and interactions with the people and culture around them. According to Sheldrake's (2014) perspective, a home is a sacred space where people can truly be themselves, free from external pressures and expectations. It is where individuals' truest ambitions are reflected as they create a space that reflects their innermost desires and values. This concept highlights the

significance of having a safe and private space to be oneself truly. Interestingly, Dein and Watts (2023) reveal that the home is where individuals' true ambitions are reflected as they create a state that reflects their innermost desires and values. During a Facebook live on the SAU platform, a member mentioned that attending church at home enabled them to open up to their fellow congregation members, aided by being at home. The home is often viewed as a sanctuary from the outside world where people can seek solace and comfort in their faith rituals. In the same vein, the home often serves as a refuge from the stresses of daily life by offering a safe and familiar environment where one can retreat to recharge and find solace.

A home is commonly perceived as a physical location where individuals can express their religion and engage in spiritual practices. It is also a sanctuary for daily activities and interactions with people and culture. According to Sheldrake's (2014) perspective, a home is considered a sacred space where people can truly be themselves, free from external pressures and expectations. The concept highlights the significance of having a safe and private space to be oneself truly. Of note, Schnell (2023) notes that when individuals worship at home, God can manifest himself through the bread and wine used in the Eucharist, implying that individuals can have a meaningful religious experience at home. During a recent Facebook live session on the SAU platform, a member mentioned that attending church at home enabled them to open up to their fellow congregation members in a way they could not have done in a physical church setting. The virtual platform allowed members to share their deepest secrets, which made them feel better in that community.

Virtual spaces are known for their remarkable adaptability, offering individuals a profound understanding of themselves and their surroundings. As Hutchings (2017) noted, fluid environments present abundant learning and personal growth potential through various interactive simulations, immersive experiences, and virtual tours. Kruger (2021) alludes that worship is where participants learn to listen to God as surgical actions function as life-changing arrows that should penetrate everyday life. I recounted attending my church's online gatherings for Bible study and worship at a specific time over virtual services, either late in the evening or early in the morning. The regular meetings continued every week, ensuring I scheduled all the video programmes. The gatherings created a bond between the subject and the congregants, forming close relationships akin to an extended family. Hutchings (2010) notes that social media platforms can create genuine relationships online, even without meeting in person. More so, online worship is vital to ministering to all, not only those able to attend in person, because

they want to encourage those staying out to return to active participation in the embodied life and participate when others are gathered in person (Thompson 2023). Through the online church community, the congregants shared moments of happiness and hardships, forming a strong connection with each other. Therefore, the ongoing evolution of technology is expected to enhance our exploration and comprehension of the world, and the potential for virtual spaces to offer personal growth and social connection is significant.

4.6 Space is Everywhere

On a Saturday morning, I woke up tired and drained from a week-long work schedule. Upon waking, I checked the time and realised it was time to prepare for the day. However, upon checking the geyser, I realised I had forgotten to switch it on, which meant I would have to take a cold shower. I was not accustomed to cold showers and was aware of my allergy triggers once exposed to cold water, so I had to devise an alternative. I went to the kitchen, boiled water, and attempted to bathe using the cold water tap. However, I realised I was experiencing water rationing at that moment. Given these circumstances, I decided to attend a virtual church. I faced several challenges that day, but as a producer, I had to attend and stream the church service. Virtual churches were growing in popularity due to their flexibility, and I found solace in my home, which became my place of worship for the day.

Virtual services have gained popularity as an alternative mode of religious worship. They offer a more convenient and flexible approach to worship, which can be easily adapted to accommodate the schedules and preferences of a broader range of attendees. I used software that enables streaming through an office desktop, allowing individuals to connect to virtual services from any location using a more stable and backed-up internet connection. It provides a reliable means of streaming, making it the favoured method for many people. Furthermore, the versatility of virtual services has led to the realisation that any space can be sanctified into a place of worship if the necessary technology infrastructure is available to facilitate virtual worship. (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The use of various technological gadgets in virtual worship, 2020. Photograph by the author.

The image in Figure 4.2 was captured during a work assignment in Gqeberha, Port Elizabeth, on a Saturday morning at approximately 11:20 a.m. The photograph depicts the extensive use of various technological devices in virtual spaces, emphasising the need for technical sophistication to demonstrate advancements in this field. The scene captures a streaming service on a Facebook page controlled by a laptop used to initiate, respond to comments, and terminate the stream. A mobile phone is used as a reference monitor to view the stream as a viewer and observe the number of viewers who tuned in, indicating the effectiveness of the service. Notably, the audio from the mobile phone was connected to the car stereo system using Bluetooth to provide a clearer and more balanced sound, similar to the audience's listening experience. The fusion and integration of technology demonstrate the extent to which technological advancements have progressed and continue to evolve. The photograph was taken using an iPad, a storage device for future reference and enhancement, whilst the vehicle transformed into a sacred space for the duration of the service, parked along the seaside.

Put another way, a sacred place is a space of contest that can be sacralised to become a place of worship (Sheldrake 2007). The implication is that a location that was once a site for competition can be transformed into a place of worship through various ritualistic practices and

ceremonies. Sacralisation involves imbuing a space with a spiritual significance, which can lead to a sacred atmosphere that imbues worshippers with a sense of reverence and awe. Cartledge (2022, 41) notes that God can be present to us anywhere, even via cyberspace through the Holy Spirit, alluding to the fact that experiences are never permanent but always changing. It is prudent that any space can be sacralised, even online platforms. In trying to validate and harmonise myself with the virtual services and audiences, I saw that audiences were typing about where they were streaming from in the comment section. Hence, the places where the people were streaming from made me relax and excited simultaneously, knowing that I was not alone in an awkward position (Figure 3).

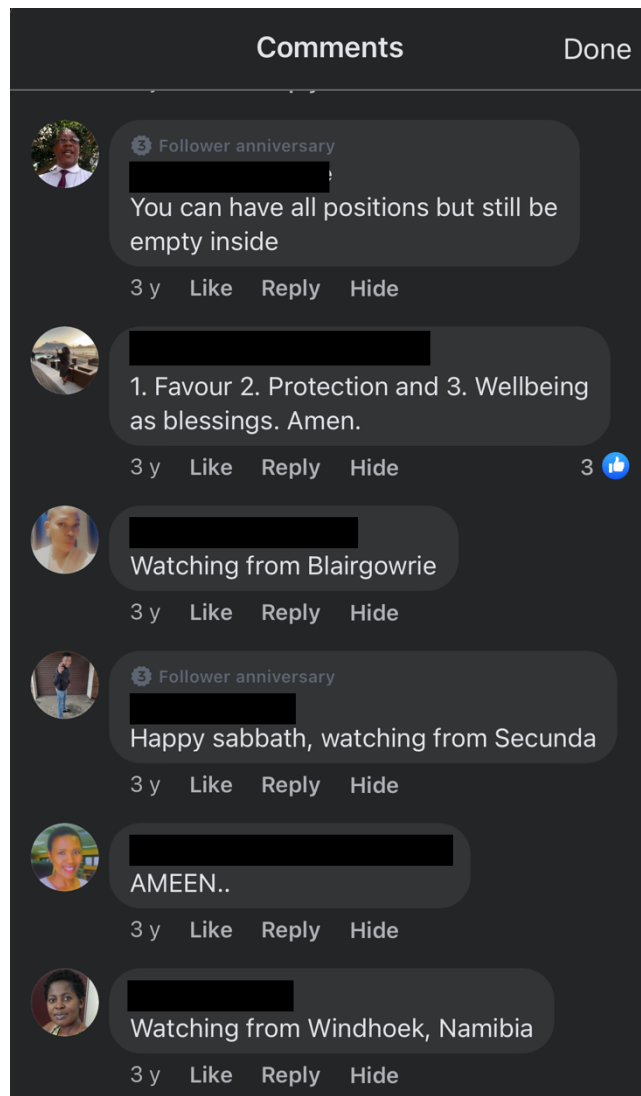


Figure 3: The comment section of the livestream showing integration, 2021. Screenshot by the author.

Some members stated that they attended the service in the comfort of their beds, others on the couches, and others were busy making breakfast in the kitchen. I noted that this would help some audiences who were not accustomed to attending services in the home. Additionally, I was pleased that my line manager applauded the engagement since it showed the congregation that any place is a space that can be turned into a place of worship.

The unwavering sense of community and steadfast commitment to faith is a clear indication of the character of this congregation, which highlights the members' dedication to their spiritual growth and development as well as their support for one another on their collective journey of faith. The devotion demonstrated by congregation members in attending virtual services at the designated time is remarkable, and their willingness to revisit the service later is equally noteworthy. In a study done in Potchefstroom, Kruger (2021) reported that most participants believe churches should enhance their virtual or digital presence to cater to those who prefer to participate in the faith community through online means. The virtual community managed to create a sense of attachment in people, as Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2004) point out, linking with Sheldrake (2001), who encouraged devotion and functioning as a space for socialising, affective and religious experiences. In this view, users interact with technology as a part of their journey, as this understanding assists in creating more meaningful experiences and better support for users in their pursuit of digital fondness. Subang (2023) reflects that technology's presence and progress indicate that God actively shapes human interactions and relationships. As the COVID pandemic started, the department had many viewers, especially in the first month, watching the live streams, garnering more than 1.5k live viewers online. However, it drastically dropped as people lost interest, and the data cost greatly affected their pockets. I was elated that the quality of the videos encouraged more people to share the live streams, and the content increased engagement. In this light, I encouraged individuals to share the videos to reach more people, acting as a way of evangelising the nation (Figure 4).

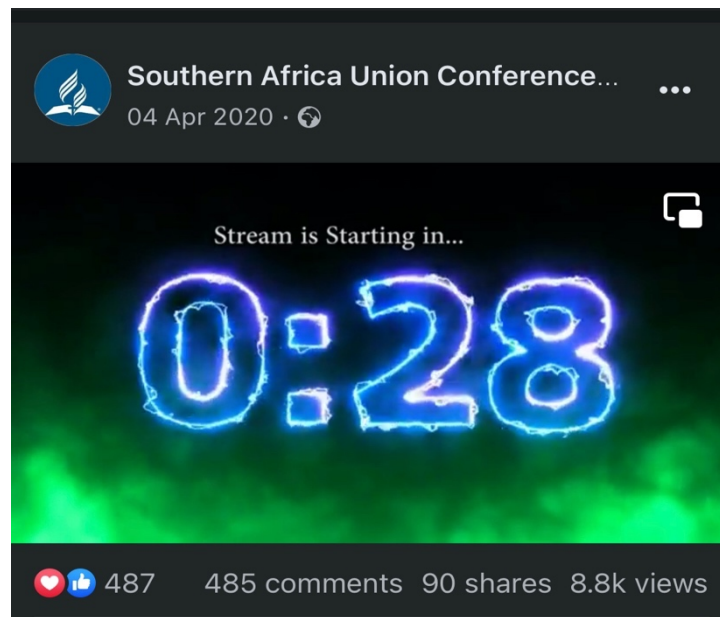


Figure 4: Screenshot showing level of engagement, 2020. Screenshot by the author.

On 11 April 2020, I had the pleasure of streaming a video online. It is of note that the video streamed included MOWCS, which garnered more comments and shares. The video featured a topic of giving that is close to my heart, giving and helping those in need during a difficult time, and I was thrilled to see that it had a significant amount of engagement in the form of comments and shares. The content was informative and struck a chord with many viewers, as evidenced by the interactions it received. Sheldrake (2014) views the place as encompassing more than just a physical location on an amp but a set of principles and ethics that are associated with that location. The principles and ethics therein form the basis of a community's identity and give individuals a sense of belonging. Aboy (2023) further elaborates that a virtual community is real since it shifts time-tested community development principles to a more fluid, broader and faster-moving environment. The above notion links with this study in that places are not just geographical locations but an integral part of people's social identity and how they interact with those around them virtually. It was heartening to see that so many individuals took a keen interest in the video, as the comments left by viewers were insightful and thought-provoking. I read through them with great interest. Some audiences attested to the notion that MOWCS was doing a good thing to help the needy and praised it as the most powerful department of the church during the pandemic (Figure 5).

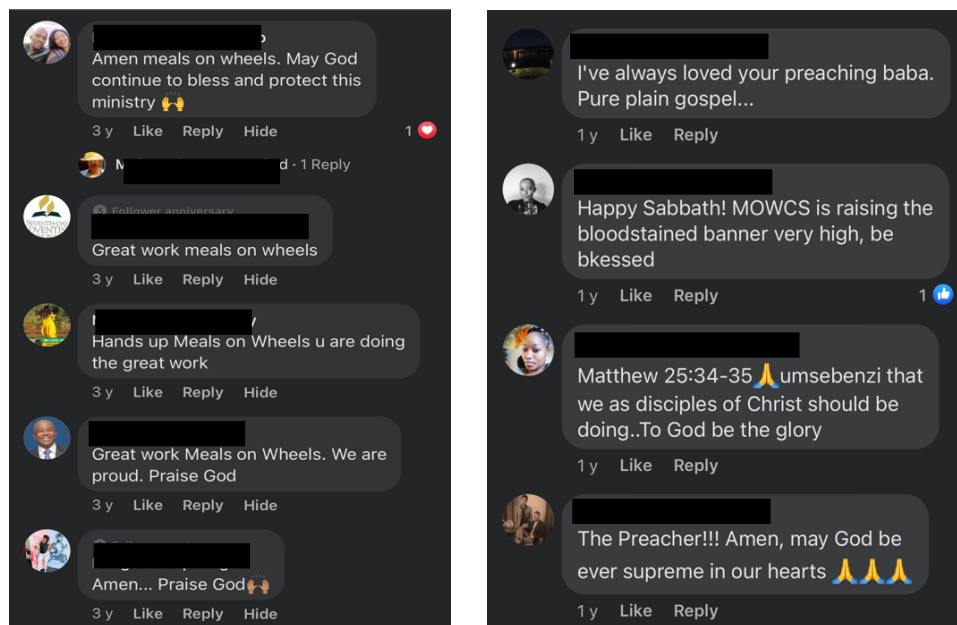


Figure 5: Screenshot of comments on the livestream of 11th April 2020 illustrating the impact of Meals on Wheels on needy communities, 2020. Screenshot by the author.

With the diverse needs of different communities, I was eager to begin live-streaming content for different ages and languages because it would reach more diverse audiences. In this way, virtual worship can be viewed as a fluid and dynamic practice that can better respond to its particular changing needs. In order to spread the word of the gospel to individuals in areas where it has little presence, it is crucial to utilise innovative techniques for evangelisation through social media platforms. I am reminded of Hutchings (2017), who echoes the adoption of new methods to reach a wider audience and make a meaningful impact. In the same vein, Cartledge (2022) reveals that many Pentecostals have not rejected the concrete expressions of the church but have embraced technology with vigour. The purpose is to make the message of faith available to anyone who desires it, regardless of their situation or location. By leveraging the power of technology, it can open new doors of opportunity and connect with people in previously impossible ways. Kohler (2023) notes that congregations offer support to the sick and homebound, providing them communion and nurturing those unable to attend in person. I noted that using different languages in the virtual services enabled and helped promote meaningful discussions and raise awareness of important issues affecting people, like depression and poverty, during the COVID pandemic. One of the livestreams was led by the church leader, and I believed it would have many viewers since he is good at inviting people to his services. The service was so engaging and uplifting that one member messaged us asking

for more information about life and death. I sent the links to the member, who confessed that it was the best transition he had ever felt, leading to a change of heart. The services were delivered in the leader's mother tongue, Afrikaans, revealing the diversity and practicality of virtual spaces. I encouraged members to embrace this challenge with open hearts and a steadfast commitment to spreading the good news to all willing to receive it.

In addition to the notion of fluid space, I have learned that attending a virtual service has become more accessible than ever. Regardless of physical location, virtually attending a religious service is now possible through live-streaming and virtual platforms. I noted that this has provided flexibility and convenience for individuals unable to attend in-person services for various reasons such as distance, health concerns or mobility limitations. One of the new ways of preaching is the Sunday devotionals and online gospel reflections, online concerts and programs, and podcasts tackling issues related to faith, religion and society (Aboy 2023). Moreover, attending virtual services allows individuals to connect with religious communities outside their local area, as I did with attending a service delivered in my mother tongue, Shona. Through his research, Hutchings (2007) shows us insights into the complex interplay between digital technology and religious expression. It has resulted in a broader sense of community and enhanced interfaith dialogues. In South Africa, virtual services have enabled religious leaders to connect with followers worldwide through interactive sessions and social media platforms such as Facebook, Zoom and Telegram. Therefore, virtual services have transformed how individuals engage with their religious or spiritual communities and expanded participation possibilities.

4.7 Social Media Gadgets in Physical Church Versus Worship in Fluid Spaces

Growing up in Zimbabwe was hard and limited in any aspect of life. When the church first employed my brother, he was given a district in Mrewa, northern Harare, in 2009, and the use of mobile phones was gaining traction. A few church members owned smartphones, which proved to be a sign of having worked for some years since the sim card was expensive, almost like buying a cow. I was one of the fortunate youths with a mobile phone and was respected since I ran a detergent business. During my initial visit to Mrewa Central church, I was requested to vacate the premises to utilise my phone to read the Bible whilst seated in the pews. The elders of the church communicated their belief that mobile devices were prohibited within the confines of the sanctuary and expressed scepticism regarding my motives for utilising the

device. As a result, I was asked to leave the premises. Years later, the church headquarters updated their media evangelism policy, including cell phone evangelism, trickling down to the local churches. It shocked me when I learned about this development based on where I come from and what I have encountered. I observed that the cell phone has enabled religion to reach individuals in their personal spaces, increasing religiosity.

In today's society, individuals commonly utilise their mobile devices for spiritual purposes, including taking photographs and using applications during religious services. The church's perspective on mobile phone usage has shifted, acknowledging that imposing restrictions would be akin to requesting individuals to remove a limb. The more liberal approach has facilitated the emergence of applications such as the SAU camp meeting App, Hope Channel TV App and Adventist World Radio SID, which cater to the needs of congregants. I concur with Zviadadze (2014), who suggests that increased religiosity has been expressed not only in traditional forms like baptism and church attendance but is now expressed through having a hymnal as a ringtone. Kim (2018) alludes that cyberspace is used in church for hymnals and announcements, emails and chat rooms to participate in bible study since gadgets are becoming more common. He adds that the computer and projectors are essential liturgical elements in the church to encounter biblical texts.

Virtual worship is often described as "fluid" because it allows for flexibility and adaptability regarding how individuals participate in religious services (Hutchings 2010). It reflects a significant departure from traditional forms of worship often tied to a specific physical location and time, representing a new way of engaging with religious or spiritual communities and transforming how individuals participate in religious services. Nevertheless, I have observed that a divine presence persists, and I find solace in practices that nourish my spiritual essence and maintain a connection to my faith and community. Schnell (2023) argues against the notion that communion can only happen in a physical building, reinforcing the notion of an ordained pastor as the only source of holiness and promise. The availability of certain liturgical practices encouraged me to experience worship anywhere I may be. I was captivated by Hutchings's (2010) literature, which piqued my curiosity about virtual worship. Hutchings (2010) posits that replicating customary fears of religious societies in the virtual realm is a conscious theological choice in response to the conviction that a potent force exists in cyberspace. One day, I studied how church members can attend church wherever they may be. It led to the You Version Bible app, an exceptional resource for those seeking to delve deeper into their faith

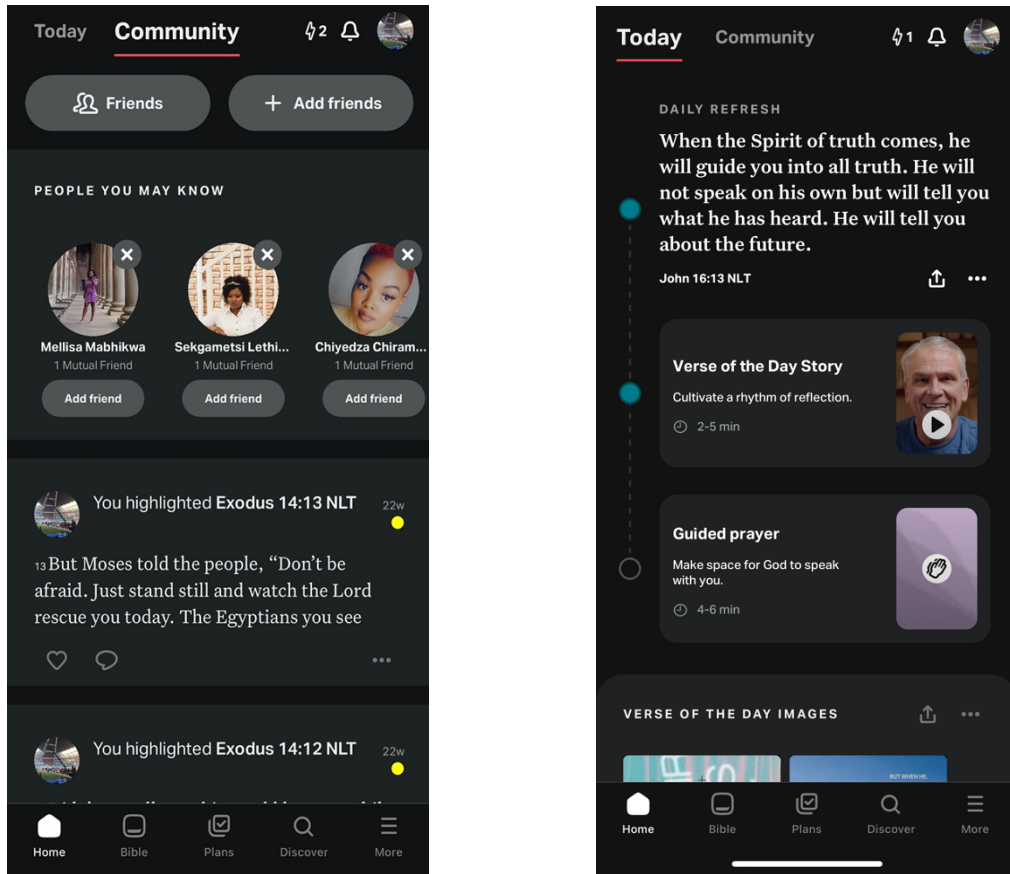


Figure 6: The YouVersion Bible App, 2023. Screenshot by author.

and scripture. The application is widely known for its user-friendly interface, making navigating and accessing an extensive library of translations and study materials easy. One of the most significant benefits of the app is the ability to connect with other believers by offering a platform for users to exchange their perspectives and participate in valuable conversations regarding the materials they have read. Whether on the go or in the comfort of their home, the YouVersion Bible app makes engaging with the Bible and growing in their spiritual journey simple and convenient (Figure 6).

The second image shows the community tab that allows users to connect with other believers and engage in meaningful discussions about their readings. This function is especially beneficial for those who want to enhance their comprehension of the Bible and connect with individuals who share similar beliefs.

As a result of virtual worship's adaptability and flexibility, it has brought a significant challenge of determining if someone was immersed in the service. It is a substantial concern for religious

leaders who rely on physical attendance records to track their congregation's engagement members to attend the service. During 2020, the virtual church would gather almost half of the congregation members to attend the service. I thought this was evangelism working to the merits of the church in propelling the gospel far and wide as we move towards the end of earth's history. As I checked the Facebook insights, it showed a reach of more than 40k views per week. I shared this information with my line manager, who encouraged me to keep doing what I did as it proved to work (Figure 7).

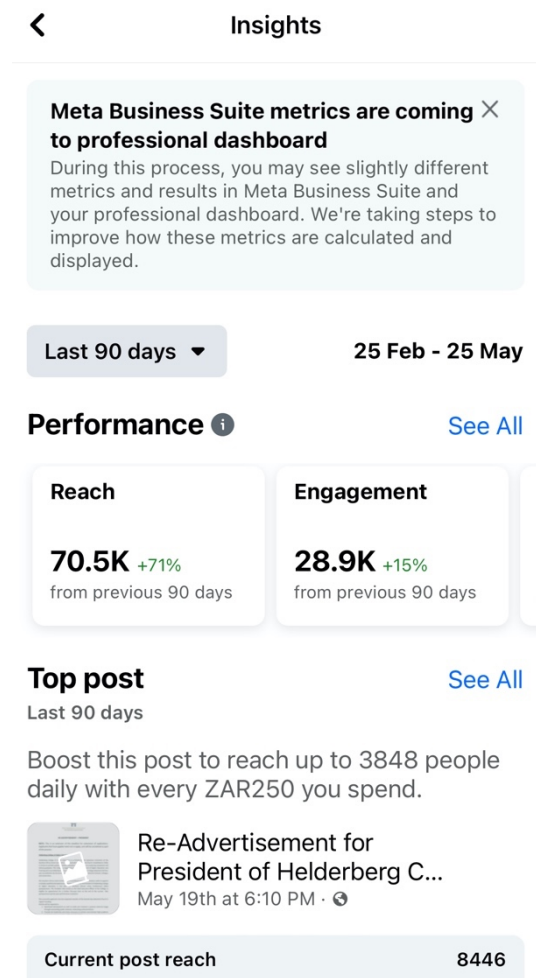


Figure 7: The page showing Facebook Insights, 2021. Screenshot by the author.

The picture is an insight tab into the Facebook page adapted from 25 February to 25 May 2021, showing how the post performed. Using insights has proven to be a valuable asset to virtual worship by providing information on engagement and reach. Utilising Facebook insights, the investigator obtained data regarding the most popular posts, audience demographics, and peak

engagement times. He noted that this information is vital for creating content and scheduling to better serve the virtual community's needs. Also, Facebook insights have been instrumental in evaluating the efficacy of advertising and promotional efforts, allowing adjustments to be made to the strategy. Thus, Facebook insights can be an indispensable tool for assessing virtual worship success and making informed decisions to bolster and expand the online presence.

It has been a lesson that I also adapted from other church social media platforms that streamed similar content, and the more they aired the programmes, the larger their audience grew. In putting it into perspective, I also need help concentrating on one live stream. Unfortunately, even though the service was exciting, the availability of noise caused a distraction. The noises were mostly from mobile phone notifications as they were the virtual service's source, and WhatsApp messages, phone calls, work emails, and text messages caused the distraction. I have experienced a lot of WhatsApp messages notifying me on my phone while I was in church, and I also got tempted to respond, which I considered. I allude to Sheldrake (2014) that a place is not only defined by its physical characteristics but also by how people interact with and perceive their surroundings. The definition of place is closely linked to how individuals engage and think about their space. Kim (2018) notes that digital worship can accomplish everything the typical church can accomplish, including communion and baptism, as long as the individual decides to be in the sacred space. There is a disappearing difference between the virtual and the real spectrum (Sigmon 2023). In contrast, the digital is just a differently mediated way of being real all because of the interaction and how they perceive their surroundings. I highlighted the importance of active engagement in shaping my understanding and definition of different places. In my scenario, many were technical messages alerting me of a problem on the live stream. As virtual worship continues to be the norm, it has become increasingly evident that religious leaders must explore new strategies for monitoring congregational engagement levels.

Active engagement with the content and community is crucial for a more fulfilling experience when joining a live stream. Simply tuning the device on, clicking the link, and joining can leave one feeling disconnected and disengaged. Of course, everyone has their own preferences and comfort levels, so it is important to find what works for each individual. Nevertheless, participating in the conversation and contributing to the community can help one get the most out of the experience. In the virtual services I used to live stream on Facebook, I encouraged members to comment and write what they liked most about the services and advise on their preferred programmes. Borrowing from Hutchings (1993), virtual reality refers to the

experience of being fully present in an artificial environment where the user's physical presence is disconnected from the real world. Heim (1988) notes that complete immersion is highly valued in the virtual reality industry, allowing users to fully engage with and experience artificial worlds that can enhance their reality. He adds that using specialised hardware and software allows an interactive environment to be experienced in various ways, including head-mounted displays, haptic feedback devices and other input systems. I concur with Kohler (2023), who presents a compelling case against digital presence being at par with physical presence, as the mere pixels on a screen cannot replace the tangible authenticity of physical locations. Dein and Watts (2023) add that virtual worship can strip the physical aspect of embodiment from the religious experience, rendering it as mere information conveyed through symbols and stories. This perspective emphasises the importance of embodying and practising the narratives of faith to live out one's beliefs truly. To my surprise, I found out that many live viewers would comment or react when they felt the message was powerful. It created a buffer blocking viewers from being uninterested in the service. Of note, Cartledge (2022) implies that creating an environment that promotes inclusivity, diversity, and open communication can help strengthen interactions and relationships in the digital realm. I would also type the powerful messages from the preacher, which also helped enhance engagement (Figure 8).

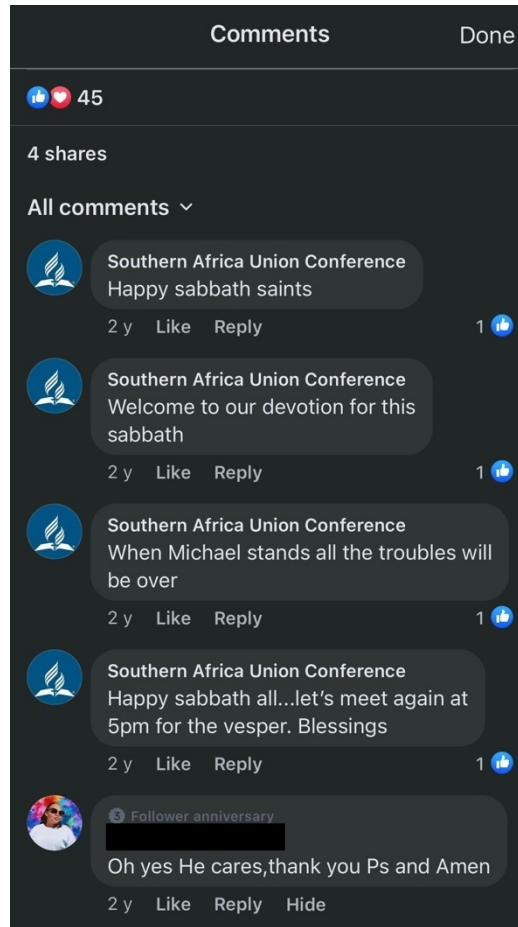


Figure 8: This picture shows the messages typed by the administrator, 2021. Screenshot by the author.

Facebook Live allows audiences to engage with each other and the content creator through a live chat feature, essentially a stream of messages and comments that viewers post while watching the live stream. In this section, viewers have been granted an efficient and direct means of communication with the creators, which fosters real-time interactions and feedback and enhances the overall immersive experiences. As a creator, I would actively respond to messages and inquiries, which initiated a sense of community and established a more personal relationship with my viewers. Thus, integrating Facebook messages in a live stream helped foster a more engaging and interactive virtual reality experience for all parties involved.

In virtual worship, it can be challenging to differentiate between a person fully present in a virtual church experience and one connected to a device. This ambiguity can make it easy to assume that distractions or interruptions may not matter as much because we cannot see the person's physical surroundings. However, it is essential to ensure that we provide the

experience the individual expects, regardless of whether they are physically present. Sigmon (2023) notes that ignoring online and hybrid worship practices is a failure to discern the body and be able to offer catechetical tools that improve the quality of assemblies online and hybrid, intentionality, ritual gestures and symbols. Recognising the importance of these practices can lead to increased engagement and foster a stronger sense of connection among individuals, their faith, and their community, even in physical separation. With the diverse population in South Africa, I noticed that most of them are more attracted to music, followed by others who follow certain preachers and motivational talks. After gathering this data, I returned to the drawing board and created services according to the audiences' needs. I got busy with the packaging and putting it together, encompassing the three most loved categories: motivation, music, and preaching (Figure 9). I planned the stream and marketed it on the Facebook page, and when it was streamed, it had more than 3k live viewers, which grew to more than 10k viewers in 9 hours. It became my all-time best programme, with more than 438 shares reaching over 107k audiences. In essence, Heim (1993) asserts that we should create an inclusive environment that accommodates different levels of engagement and participation, enhancing the overall worship experience for all. Thus, the intensity of interaction and information leads to a feeling of being mentally transported to a different place and state of mind.



Figure 9: An image of King Goodwill Zwelithini playing a keyboard, 2021. Screenshot by the author.

The video streamed on 17 May 2021 became my all-time best for streaming during the COVID-19 pandemic. The video consisted of the previous Zulu monarch, King Goodwill Zwelithini's words when he was alive as we celebrated the life of Queen Shiyiwe Mantfombi Dlamini Zulu, who passed away untimely after a short illness. It also showed the church's impact in the Zulu kingdom, and also present was the pastor who baptised the Queen into the faith, Pastor Mabena (pseudonym), who is so energetic and has a huge following because of his power. The church leader was the speaker of the evening service. In the same programme, Matthew and Friends (pseudonym) is a widely invited group in South Africa and one of the most loved groups; thus, people love his music and band. In addition, one of the oldest pastors in the church is included in the programme as he gave some wise words after visiting the Queen during her time of sickness. I noted that Heim (1988) and Sheldrake (2014) reveal that virtual worship has become increasingly reliant on individuals' engagement and desire to connect with their faith community, with technology facilitating this connection. Most individuals who participate in virtual worship services do so because of a sense of community and connections with their faith. In this light, it is important to establish an environment that promotes meaningful interactions to achieve a fulfilling virtual worship experience for all attendees. (Figure 10). This programme was the best because the Zulu nation is the largest monarch in Southern Africa, and most Zulu people shared this service even though they were not members of the church (Figure 11). The current King, Prince Misuzulu Zulu, was among the Amabutho who were praising and honouring the late Queen since there were allegations that he would be named the next King.

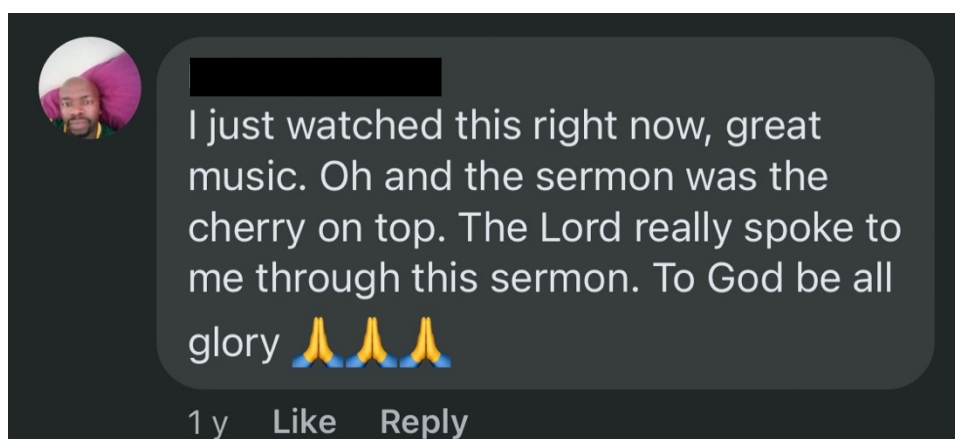


Figure 10: A comment of one of the viewers, 2021. Screenshot by author.

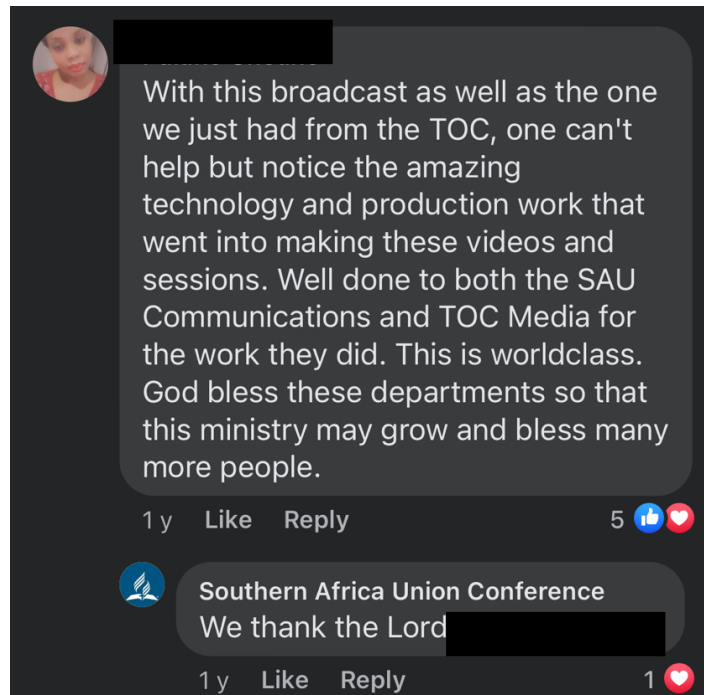


Figure 11: A comment of a viewer appreciating the quality of the videos done by the SAU Communication, 2021. Screenshot by the author.

Over time, I have observed a significant evolution in how churches operate, with technology playing a pivotal role. Incorporating a praise band has replaced the traditional use of an organ, and the once-exposed organ pipes are now obscured by a large screen that projects text images. While hymn books and Bibles are still available in the pews, they are less frequently utilised. Instead, many individuals use their smartphones to access scripture passages or make notes during the sermon. Audio formats and video recordings have superseded the use of old sermon tapes, and the subject occasionally uploads MP3s and videos onto the church website. In addition, the researcher utilises video clips to enhance sermons and is fortunate enough to receive greetings from missionaries across the globe as the church has a global presence. Social media gadgets have been vital in facilitating virtual attendance of religious services from anywhere worldwide, allowing flexibility and accessibility previously unthinkable. It is especially convenient for individuals with disabilities who are locked down at home or reside in locations with limited access to places of worship.

In 2021, my friend had to relocate to Australia to pursue studies, which led to a sense of uncertainty for the friend. My friend requested interesting sermons from my wide range of content to alleviate their concerns. On the initial day of March, my friend informed me through

social media that they had landed safely in Sydney. I planned to broadcast a service with my friend's favourite preacher the following weekend, and my friend expressed joy after receiving the streaming link, encouraging me to continue posting. The friend remains one of the most dedicated viewers of my streams a year later. The user's familiarity and relationship with the individual on the screen can significantly impact their digital religious experience. The idea underscores Heim's (1993) assertion that establishing rapport with users is crucial as it raises the likelihood of their engagement with digital content, leading to attaining their objectives. Kohler (2023) reflects that the gathered people of God also gather in digital spaces because they have common interests. This concept can be applied in virtual worship by creating customised and engaging digital experiences that foster the users' connection to their beliefs and community, ultimately enhancing their overall experience.

One of the notable features of worshipping in a virtual environment is the ability to bypass the temporal and financial constraints of physical attendance at a church. This approach enables worshippers to optimise their schedules and save money, freeing up more time to participate in other activities. Many physical churches are far apart in the Bloemfontein region, necessitating taxis that cost more than R50. Due to the absence of Uber, transportation in the city of Roses is expensive, except when using buses, which are only sometimes convenient. As a newcomer still settling in, I did not own a car, and attending each Sabbath church service would have cost more than R500 for a congregation less than 10km away. After considering my budget, I opted for an unlimited data plan from MTN at a lower cost and attended church services online. Sigmon (2023) alludes to the notion that one can question whether buying a car is more expensive than a cellphone, which makes going online so accessible in the contemporary assembly within the four walls of a building. Individuals increasingly use virtual church platforms for personal reasons instead of relying solely on traditional religious functions to supplement their physical gathering experiences.

Interestingly, the use of cell phones is allowed on a text basis but not calls. Using smartphones in a church is disruptive and disrespectful if not used appropriately. It has been noted during the service that a congregant takes a phone call or records certain moments of the service. While I was in church in 2022, it was time for the preacher, and the whole church was quiet in anticipation of the divine word. Out of nowhere, a loud ringtone came from one of the members, and the silence and moving of heads were astounding. The owner of the phone, one old lady, answered the call, and everyone was shocked; the preacher encouraged the church to

put the phones on silent. As the media team, we consulted with the pastor, and the congregants usually want to shoot a musical piece with their smartphones, which tends to distract the media and disturb other congregants. Whether individuals can detach themselves from their phones during church services is complex, as it is deeply tied to personal beliefs and priorities. Some people may believe that disconnecting from technology is essential to fully engage in the religious experience, while others may not consider it a significant issue and feel that technology can enhance their worship experiences. Henceforth, deciding to engage with one's phone usage in different settings is personal and should be carefully considered.

4.8 Conclusion

The chapter delved into my experiences participating in virtual worship services and live streams amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. As an individual employed in the media department of the Seventh-day Adventist church, I played a crucial role in facilitating online church programmes and services when physical gatherings were prohibited. Throughout the chapter, I have reflected on transforming homes into places of worship, leveraging various technological devices and social media platforms. I have highlighted several advantages of virtual worship, such as its flexibility, accessibility, and ability to reach a wider audience. Nonetheless, challenges, including potential distractions from devices and monitoring engagement levels, also come to the forefront. To address these challenges, I conducted experiments with different strategies, such as encouraging comments, typing messages, and delivering tailored content to meet the audience's specific needs. Through these endeavours, I realised that any space, be it one's home or vehicle, can be sanctified and transformed into a place of worship through rituals and liturgical practices.

Consequently, I conclude that while physical church gatherings offer distinct advantages, virtual worship has revolutionised how individuals connect with their faith and religious communities. Technology has been pivotal in shaping spiritual experiences and fostering more interactive worship environments. Nevertheless, the appropriate balance of device usage during religious services remains a matter of personal beliefs and priorities.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this explorative journey through virtual worship reflects on the narratives woven, the insights unearthed, and the dialogues sparked. This chapter symbolises the culmination of this expedition, which has traversed diverse landscapes of digital culture and media, plunging into the depths of the virtual world and its intersection with spirituality. It has traversed through uncharted territories, demystifying the concept of cyberspace worship and its role in contemporary society. The preceding chapters explored the contours of virtual worship, delving into various facets such as its history, growth, and impact on the religious experience. They have navigated its complexities and paradoxes, observed its potential and limitations, and understood its significance in the evolving digital landscape. This final leg summarises the findings, discusses their implications, and concludes. Further, recommendations are presented, grounded in the knowledge and insights gained to guide future research and practice in this intriguing sphere of virtual worship.

5.2 Summary of Findings

The study has unravelled the complex fabric of human spirituality by exploring the complex world of virtual worship. It has brought to light the enormous importance of building sacred spaces in the digital sphere. The research journeyed through the virtual landscapes, appreciating how these spaces transcend lines of code and pixels to become conduits for profound spiritual experiences. At the heart of the exploration lies the concept of virtual sacred spaces—supernatural sanctuaries that are logically designed to evoke a sense of the divine and facilitate communal worship in the online environment. These spaces, whether virtual cathedrals, temples, or shrines, enable individuals from across the globe to gather, connect, and partake in rituals that resonate with their beliefs. By curating these virtual environments, religious communities have tapped into the potential of technology to foster a sense of unity and shared experience.

However, the study has also shown that there are limitations to virtual worship. Experiencing the tangible elements of worship, such as sight, sound, touch, and scent, cannot be replicated

virtually. As Michael Heim (1988) notes, "The spiritual dimension of life cannot be reduced to information or communication." Nonetheless, virtual worship can complement physical gatherings meaningfully, as noted by Cartledge (2022). It can allow individuals to explore their spirituality outside of traditional religious institutions and allow those who cannot attend physical gatherings to participate in communal worship.

Furthermore, virtual sacred spaces can facilitate new forms of spiritual communities that are more fluid and diverse, not geographically bound. When considering the use of technology for virtual worship, it becomes evident that its potential to transform how people make spiritual connections is vast. However, it is equally important to balance virtual and physical worship and continue exploring the potential of virtual sacred spaces. By so doing, a more integrated and inclusive spiritual community can be created that resonates with the beliefs of individuals across the globe.

Exploring the concept of virtual worship demonstrates that the online church plays a critical and valuable role in this emerging landscape. This notion has been studied and analysed by distinguished theorists such as Michael Heim (1988), Philip Sheldrake (2001), Tim Hutchings (2010) and other recent scholars who have shed light on the significance of the virtual church in deepening spiritual journeys. Heim's (1988) exploration of cyberspace as an extension of the human experience aligns with the idea that the online church is a valuable tool for individuals to experience the divine. As he posits, cyberspace is not a separate reality but rather an extension of our reality, and the online church offers individuals a way to connect with their spirituality in this extended space. Philip Sheldrake (2001) concludes that the concept of sacred spaces is not limited to physical spaces but can also include symbolic and metaphorical spaces. He emphasises that sacred spaces are shaped by the beliefs, values and practices of a particular community and can be experienced in various forms such as natural landscapes, architecture and digital spaces. Likewise, Hutchings (2010) proposes that online church allows people to delve deeper into their beliefs without being constrained by physical factors such as time and location. By eliminating these obstacles, virtual worship becomes a space for personal reflection, communal engagement, and the formation of diverse connections. It provides a unique and accessible avenue for all individuals to connect with their spirituality.

Therefore, the emergence of the online church has sparked much contemplation and intrigue, and the insights of theorists like Heim (1988), Sheldrake (2001) and Hutchings (2010) have

illuminated the virtual worship landscape. It is important to acknowledge that virtual worship is not intended to replace physical gatherings but to complement them. Hence, it is essential to recognise the unique value that virtual worship provides in enriching spiritual journeys. When delving deeper into virtual worship, it becomes clear that the online church plays a vital role in this emerging landscape. Tim Hutchings (2010) believes that the online church offers a platform for religious individuals to explore their faith beyond the limitations of physical constraints like time and geography. He envisions virtual worship as a space for personal reflection, communal engagement, and the formation of diverse connections.

Similarly, Michael Heim's (1988) exploration of cyberspace as an extension of the human experience aligns with the idea that the online church provides a unique avenue for individuals to experience the divine. In summation, the emergence of the online church has sparked much contemplation and intrigue, and the insights of theorists Heim, Sheldrake, and Hutchings have illuminated the virtual worship landscape. It must be recognised that virtual worship is not a replacement for physical gatherings but rather a complementary avenue to enrich our spiritual journeys.

The journey through the digital landscape of spiritual experiences has underscored technology's essential role in enabling and enriching these encounters. The intricate relationship between the digital and the divine increasingly clarifies that technology is more than just a conduit but a catalyst, sparking profound interactions with the sacred. In many ways, this expedition has been guided by the theoretical perspectives of Philip Sheldrake (2001), whose work emphasises the transformative potential of technology in facilitating spiritual engagement. Sheldrake's (2001) explorations into the realm of sacred spaces, both physical and symbolic, have been a beacon for understanding the virtual world and its capabilities to foster spiritual connections. Sheldrake's (2001) perspective aligns with the concept that technology can broaden our capabilities and expand our reach of religious teachings and practices far beyond traditional boundaries. His insights have illuminated the exploration of the landscape of virtual worship, providing a theoretical framework to understand and interpret our observations. In traversing this digital terrain, it has been observed how the immersive capabilities of technology, ranging from virtual reality to live-streaming, have transformed how individuals experience and express their faith.

Digital tools have bridged geographical and temporal divides and opened new spiritual expression and exploration pathways. Virtual reality, with its ability to create perceptually real environments, has revolutionised the concept of sacred space. It has allowed for the creating of digital sanctuaries that closely mimic physical places of worship, offering individuals a feeling of ease and familiarity. Sheldrake's (2001) work suggests that when designed with intention and respect for the sanctity of religious experiences, these virtual spaces can become sacred in their own right. On the other hand, live streaming has facilitated real-time communal worship, enabling individuals to participate in religious services from the comfort of their homes. Despite physical distances, it has fostered a sense of community and belonging among individuals. Our journey has shown us that technology's role in virtual worship is not just about facilitating access to religious content but about creating immersive, interactive, and personalised experiences that allow individuals to connect with the divine in ways that resonate with them. Henceforth, it has profoundly altered the landscape of religious practice and spiritual exploration – a demonstration of the transformative power of technology.

After venturing into the dynamic world of virtual worship, we see the theme of communal connectivity standing tall as a fundamental pillar in our shared journey. The notion of an online church, the manifestation of virtual sacred spaces, and the advanced technological tools that support their existence collectively cultivate a sense of unity. The same unity is a beacon for individuals who may be physically scattered across the globe but are joined in their quest for spiritual fulfilment. Virtual sacred spaces are more than just digital representations of physical locations; they are transformative platforms where believers from diverse locations gather to participate in shared sacred rituals. Online platforms unite people despite physical distance, creating a united community based on shared beliefs. However, the role of these spaces continues after the rituals. The digital connections they foster extend beyond the ceremonies, paving the way for meaningful dialogues, engaging discussions, and cultivating a shared digital spiritual ecosystem. Through deliberate or impromptu exchanges, the participants strengthen their sense of belonging in the community, fostering an atmosphere of togetherness and common beliefs.

In peeling the layers of virtual worship, we see how the digital environment has become a crucible, melding together disparate individuals to forge a new sense of community. The coming together of individuals from various backgrounds, cultures, and locations to pursue shared spiritual growth through digital means forms a unique bond. It represents a novel unity

in the religious community. The bonds formed through virtual experiences shared by people not only enhance their spiritual growth but also give a new meaning to being a member of a religious community. Distance and geography no longer dictate the boundaries of a congregation. Instead, shared faith, common rituals, and mutual spiritual exploration have become the binding threads of these digital congregations. As we continue to explore and understand the intricacies of virtual worship, we find that the digital realm has become a catalyst for a new form of spiritual unity. Thus, the unity fostered through shared virtual experiences and interactions is a testament to the transformative power of technology in spirituality.

In standing at the precipice of our journey's conclusion, we take a moment to gather the threads of our exploration, weaving them into a coherent textile of understanding. The intricate ballet that unfolds between virtual worship, sacred digital spaces and the online church is illuminated by insights from thinkers such as Hutchings, Heim, and Sheldrake. Their collective wisdom emphasises that the virtual realm does not exist to supplant the tangible but rather to accompany it, enriching the spiritual journey with its distinct flavour. Each of these scholars offers a unique perspective that has helped shape our understanding of the digital religious landscape. Hutchings (2010) offers insights into how technology can effectively incorporate into religious practices without weakening the spiritual connection. Heim (1988) explores the concept of immersion, where complete mental and emotional engagement within the virtual environment can lead to highly personalised, empathetic experiences. Sheldrake (2001) emphasises the transformative potential of any space, including homes, being recognised as a safe environment for exploration and self-expression.

The path forward is vividly clear as we find ourselves at this crossroads. Our collective findings underscore the necessity for continuous dialogue between tradition and innovation, faith and technology. We are not abandoning old ways but enriching them with new possibilities. It is not about replacing physical with digital; it is about creating a harmonious, symbiotic relationship between the two. We leave behind a trail of recommendations, a metaphorical compass to guide future researchers and practitioners who embark on their odyssey through the unexplored digital dimensions of spirituality. The legacy of our expedition is not only in the conclusions we have drawn but also in the questions we have raised, the ideas we have sparked, and the potential we have uncovered. At the heart of this legacy is the transformative potential of virtual worship, a living demonstration of human creativity and resilience in facing

and embracing the challenges of the digital age. It demonstrates our collective ability to redefine the boundaries of the sacred to adapt our age-old spiritual practices to the rapidly changing digital landscape. The findings lead to the understanding that in the vast realm of the virtual, the sacred is not confined to physical spaces but can be found in connections forged, dialogues engaged in, and the shared experiences created.

5.3 Contribution of the Study

This study offers valuable insights that can benefit religious institutions adapting to the digital age. It sheds light on how congregants interact with virtual worship platforms, providing religious leaders with the tools they need to create more inclusive and engaging virtual worship experiences. It is especially important today when many people attend online worship to connect with their faith communities. Moreover, this study promotes interfaith dialogue and cultural understanding by highlighting commonalities and fostering respect, empathy, and cooperation among religious groups. It is a strong message highlighting how, regardless of our disparities, we are all connected by our shared humanity and a desire to connect with something greater than ourselves. Another crucial contribution of this study is its identification and addressing potential ethical dilemmas in virtual worship settings, such as privacy and misinformation. By acknowledging these challenges, religious communities can ensure a safer and more supportive digital environment for their congregants. The use of the autoethnographic approach in exploring virtual worship experiences adds a valuable contribution to the fields of cyberspace and digital sociology. The study's first-hand accounts of individuals' experiences, thoughts, and emotions in virtual worship enrich the existing literature and offer a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between technology and religion. Finally, the research aims to understand better how virtual worship impacts individuals' spiritual connections. The above could pave the way for further research and development in digital religion. Therefore, this study is a significant contribution to the field and has the potential to benefit religious communities and individuals alike.

5.4 Limitations of study and suggestions for further studies

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge that research has limitations. One of the principal limitations revolves around the data collection method, autoethnography. This approach involves the researcher unveiling their emotions and perspectives, necessitating an openness and willingness for self-exposure. While this method

can provide rich, personal insights, it also poses ethical dilemmas that can be challenging to navigate. For example, the researcher's vulnerability can expose them to potential harm, including emotional and psychological distress.

Moreover, the study's sample, which focused on the SDA church in a South African context, restricts the breadth of the investigation as church workers are deployed in different locations, exploring all facets of the organisation becomes challenging. Additionally, the study encountered limitations due to the lack of previous research on virtual worship within the SDA church in South Africa. Since autoethnography is a relatively new phenomenon, this was the first investigation in this context. Likewise, the potential for conflicts arising from cultural bias and other personal issues cannot be ignored. The researcher's background, upbringing, and societal conditioning have inevitably influenced their outlook and interpretation, which may have shaped the trajectory of the study.

In light of suggestions for further research, exploring the impact of virtual worship in other religious communities and geographical contexts would be beneficial. It would enable comparing experiences and provide a more comprehensive understanding of virtual worship's role across varying cultural and societal contexts. Further research could also delve deeper into resolving the technical issues associated with virtual worship. Understanding how to streamline user experiences in virtual worship settings will be crucial as technology advances. Additionally, longitudinal studies on the impact of virtual worship on the sense of community and spiritual connection over time could offer valuable insights. The research could help religious institutions adapt more effectively to digital worship and ensure the spiritual needs of their congregations are met. Lastly, future studies could examine the ethical considerations associated with virtual worship in more depth, such as privacy and misinformation, to ensure the safety and support of congregants in digital spaces. For example, research could investigate the potential for hackers to access personal information or disrupt virtual worship services. Understanding the ethical issues associated with virtual worship will help ensure that religious institutions provide safe and supportive digital spaces for their congregants.

5.5 Conclusions

In conclusion, it is imperative to underscore that while virtual worship presents a unique set of challenges, it concurrently offers an immensely promising avenue for spiritual engagement in

an era increasingly shaped by digital dynamics. The emerging realm of worship is poised to revolutionise how we connect with the divine, transcending traditional boundaries and extending its reach to individuals whose physical constraints or other limitations might have otherwise hindered their participation in conventional in-person services. One of the most remarkable attributes of virtual worship lies in its ability to forge a sense of community and connection, particularly in circumstances where physical gatherings are unfeasible or fraught with risks, such as during global pandemics or in regions affected by conflict. This capacity to maintain spiritual bonds, even in the face of adversity, underscores the profound significance of virtual worship as a beacon of continuity and unity during times of uncertainty. However, the benefits of virtual worship encompass more than just its accessibility and resilience. It empowers individuals with the agency to tailor their spiritual experiences in alignment with their personal preferences and needs. The above customisable approach to worship is a compelling draw for many, leaving them with a sense of autonomy and a personalised touch that may only sometimes be readily attainable in traditional worship settings.

Moreover, the charisma of online worship transcends demographics, becoming a potent tool for evangelism due to its wide-ranging appeal. However, it is essential to recognise that the effectiveness of virtual worship hinges not solely on the technology employed but rather on how it is harnessed. The design and construction of digital platforms dedicated to worship are paramount. The platforms must be carefully crafted with meticulous consideration for both functionality and the sanctity of the spiritual practices intended to facilitate. Navigating this delicate equilibrium requires a judicious balance. Technology must enhance spiritual experiences rather than detract from them. It is thus recommended that technology requires thorough deliberation of the design of user interfaces, the integration of features, and the overall atmosphere created by these platforms. The overarching aim could be in creating an environment that accommodates worship and actively encourages introspection, human connection, and spiritual maturation. In essence, the dawn of virtual worship heralds a new era of exciting possibilities. However, it necessitates a foundation built on reverence for the sacred, an unyielding commitment to inclusivity, and a moral approach to design. The successful fusion of these elements will determine the efficacy of spiritual practice in the digital age. By striking a harmonious chord between venerating tradition and embracing innovation, the way is paved for a future where the divine is accessible, transformative, and deeply meaningful, regardless of the digital canvas upon which it is painted.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aboy, Eugene D.. 2023. "Virtual Preaching: The New Evangelization in the New Normal." *Philippiniana Sacra* 58 (, no. 176: 251-66. . DOI: <http://doi.org/10.55997/2001pslviii176a1>.
- Addo, Gloria. 2020 "Worshipping on Zoom: A Digital Ethnographic Study of African Pentecostal Churches and Their Liturgical Practices During Covid-19," Master thesis. Malmö University. Spring 2020. <http://hdl.handle.net/2043/32677>.
- Alleluia Ministries. "Alleluia Ministries | Paster Alph Lukau | AMI | Bible Believing Christian Church," July 11, 2023. <https://www.alleluiaministries.com/>.
- Allen-Collinson, John. 2013. "Autoethnography as the Engagement of Self/Other, Self/Culture, Self/Politics, Selves/Futures." *Handbook of Autoethnography*, edited by Jones Stacy Holman, Adams, Tony E, and Ellis Carolyn, 281-299. California: Left Coast Press.
- Ainian, Alexander. 2005. The domestic and sacred space of Zagora in the context of the South Euboean Gulf. *Mediterranean Archaeology* 25, 119–136. <https://doi.org/10.2307/24653562>
- Allport, Gordon. W and Ross, James. M. 1967. Personal religious orientation and prejudice, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 5, 432-443.
- Anderson, David. 1991. "Graduate Students and the Local Church," *Adventist Review*, May 30, 14–15.
- Agnew, John. 1987. *Place and politics: The geographical mediation of state and society*. Boston: Allen and Unwin.
- Arasa, David., Catoni Laura, and Ruiz Lourdes. 2010. *Religious Internet Communication, Facts, Trends and Experiences in the Catholic Church*, Rome: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross.
- Armfield, Gregory G., and Holbert, Robert. L. 2003. The relationship between religiosity and Internet use. *Journal of Media and Religion* 2, 129–144.
- Armstrong, Bruce. 1979. *The Electric Church*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- Barna Group, 2001. "More Americans are seeking net-based faith experiences." Barna Update, May 21, 2001.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20130121083241/http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/48-more-americans-are-seeking-net-based-faith-experiences>>

BCCSA. 2005a. "Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa: L'Attitude." Online. January 12, 2005. <http://bccsa.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Case-No-44-2005.pdf>

BCCSA. 2013c. "Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa: Islamic Militants." Online: May 8, 2013. <http://bccsa.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/case-no-45-2013.pdf>

Berger, Teresa. 2018. *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*. New York: Routledge.

Boulton, Adam. 2015. "Applying data-driven learning to the web." In *Multiple Affordances of Language Corpora for Data-driven Learning*, 267-295. Amsterdam: John Benjamin's.

Brasher, Brenda. 2001. *Give Me that Online Religion*. San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass.

Brueggemann, Walter. 2018. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Brown, David. 2004. *God and Enchantment of Place, Reclaiming Human Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bullough, Richard V, Jr., and Pinnegar Sara. 2001. "Guidelines for quality in autobiographical forms of self-study." *Educational Researcher* 30(3), 13–22.

Burke, Craig. 1990. *Sacred Places*. San Francisco: Desert Rose Press.

Campbell, Heidi. 2005. *Exploring Religious Community Online. We Are One in the Network*. New York: Peter Lange.

Campbell, Heidi. 2006. "Religion and the Internet." *Communication Research Trends* 25, no. 1, (March): 3.
link.gale.com/apps/doc/A145983341/AONE?u=anon~b3c99967&sid=googleScholar&xid=c108011a.

Campbell, Heidi. 2010. *When Religion Meets New Media*. Abington: Routledge.

Campbell, Heidi. 2012. *When Religion Meets New Media*. London: Routledge.

Campbell, Heidi A. 2012. "From avatars to reincarnation: The Ascension Epoch and the future of Christian theology." In *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture*, edited by Choeng Peter, 67–79. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Campbell, Heidi A. 2013. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. New York: Routledge.

Campbell, Heidi A., and Forrest Rule. 2016. "The Practice of Digital Religion." In *Handbuch Soziale Praktiken und Digitale Alltagswelten*, edited by Friese Hansjorg, Nolden Michael and Schreiter Markus, 50-51. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-08460-8_38-1.

Campbell, Heidi and Alessandra Vitullo. 2016. "Assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religion studies." *Church, Communication and Culture* 1, no. 1: 73–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181301>.

Campbell, Heidi and Evolvi Giulia. 2020. "Contextualising current digital religion research on emerging technologies." *Human Behaviour and Emerging Technologies* 2, 10. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332967951>.

Campbell, Heidi A. 2012. "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 64–93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41348770>.

Cartledge, Mark J. 2022. "Virtual Mediation of the Holy Spirit: Prospects for Digital Pentecostalism." Equinox Publishing, *PentecoStudies* (online), 30–50. <http://doi.org/10.1558/pent.19914>.

- Chang, Heewon. 2008. *Autoethnography as a method*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.
- Chang, Heewon. and Boyd Douglas. 2011. *Spirituality In Higher Education: Autoethnographic*. California: Left Coast Press.
- Castells, Manuel. 2014. *The Impact of the Internet on Society: A Global Perspective Technology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Chidester, David and Linenthal Edward. 1995. *American Sacred Space*. 1st ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Clandinin, Jean D., and Connelly Michael, F. 1994. "Personal experience methods." In *Qualitative research*, edited by Dinzen Norman and Lincoln Yvonna, 413–427. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Cobb, John. 1998. *Cybergrace: The Search for God in the Digital World*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Collinson, John. 2013. "Autoethnography is the engagement of self/other, self/culture, self/politics, and selves/futures." In *Handbook of Autoethnography*, edited by Holman Stacey, Adams Tony, and Ellis Carolyn, 281–299. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.
- Cones, Bryan. 2020. "How Do We Gather Now? What We've Lost-And-Gained-Through Virtual Worship." *Christian Century*, August 26, 22–24.
- Coomans, Tom., De Dijn Herman and Maeyer, Jan D. 2012. *Understanding Sacred Places*. KADOC St: Lewen University Press.
- Couclelis, Helen., and Gale Ned. 1986. "Space and Spaces," *Human Geography* 68, no. 1, (Winter): 1-12.
- Creswell, John D., Welch William T, Taylor Shelley E, Sherman David K, Gruenewald Tara L and Mann Thomas. 2005. "Affirmation of personal values buffers neuroendocrine and psychological stress responses." *Psychological Science* 16, 846-851.

Cross, Andrew R., and Thompson Philip E. 2020. *Baptist Sacramentalism 3*. London: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Crouch, Clive. 2003. *Spaces and Places*, Nedlands: Edith Cowan University.

Curtis, Arthur K.. 1978. A New Apostasy? Eternity Magazine. September: 21, 1978.
<https://documents.adventistarchives.org/SSQ/SS19780701-03.pdf>.

Darnov, Doron. 2023. "Inscription: Virtual (Hyper)Reality and the Observing Subject ."– *The Comparative Literature Undergraduate Journal* (Spring): 2023. <https://ucbcluj.org/d/>.

Dawson, Lorne and Cowan Douglas E. 2004. *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. London: Routledge.

Dawson, Lorne. 2005. "The mediation of religious experience in cyberspace," In *Religion & Cyberspace*, edited by Hojsgaard Mikael and Warburg Margit, 15-37. London: Routledge.

De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. London: University of California Press.

Decker, Anthony. 2014. *Dashomancy, or curating, the magical experience: Remediations of pagan spirituality and sacred space*, Eugene: Randall V. Mills Achieves of Northwest Folklore: University of Oregon.

Dein, Simon and Fraser Watts. "Religious Worship Online: A Qualitative Study of Two Sunday Ritual Services." *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 45, no. 2 (2023): 191–209.

Dethloff, Carl Henry. 2007. "A Principal in Transition: An Autoethnography." 2007. Online: <https://core.ac.uk/download/4271803.pdf>.

Dewsbury, Jonathan D and Cloke Paul. 2009. "Spiritual Landscape: Existence, Performance and Immanence." *Social & Cultural Geography*, 10: 695–711.

Donnelly, Brian. 2016. "Kirk will consider online baptisms." *Herald of Scotland*, May 17, 2016. <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14496669>.

[Kirk_to_introduce_online_baptism_in_bid_to_boost_membership/>](http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14496669)

Dora, Della V.. 2011. "Engaging sacred space: Experiments in the field." *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 35, (2): 163–184. <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue3/>.

Dora, Della V.. 2018. "Intra saccular geographies: Making, unmaking and remaking sacred space." *Progress in Human Geography* 42 (1): 44–71.
<http://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2010.523682>

Durkheim, Emile. 1995. *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, New York: The Free Press.

Dzokoto, Vincent A. 2021. "Ban of Religious Gatherings During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Impact on Christian Church Leaders' Well-Being in Ghana." *Pastoral Psychology*. 70, 335–347.

Eade, John and Sallnow Michael J. 1991. "Contesting Pilgrimage: Current Views and Future Directions." *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 15 (3): Berghan Books.

Eliade, Mircea. 1959. "The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion." *Harcourt Entertainment into Spaces of Worship Space and Culture*. 20(4): 429-440.

Ellens, Harold J. (1974) *Models of Religious Broadcasting*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Ellis, Carolyn, and Bochner Arthur. 2000. "Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Dinzen Norman and Lincoln Yvonna, 733–768. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Ellis, Carolyn. 1995. *Final Negotiations*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Ellis, Carolyn., Adams Tony and Bochner Arthur. 2011. "Autoethnography: An Overview. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research." 12.
<https://10.2307/23032294>.

Estes, Douglas. 2009. "SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World."

<https://books.google.co.za/books?id=a9-1bdvTXiUC>.

Etta, Aaron. 2015. "Pub Congregations, Coffee House Communities, Tall-Steeple Churches, and Sacred Space: The Missional Church Movement and Architecture." *Missiology* 43, (4), 373–384.

Ettlinger, Orianna. 2007. *In Search of Architecture in Ritual Space: An Introduction to The Virtual Space Theory*, Slovenia: University of Ljubljana.

Finlayson, James . 2005. *Habermas: A very short introduction*, New York: Oxford University.

Gelfgren, Stina and Hutchings Tim. 2014. "The Virtual Construction of the Sacred Representation and Fantasy in the Architecture of Second Life Churches." *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 27, (1): 59–73.

Gentry, Ronald H. 1984. Broadcast Religion: When Does It Raise Fairness Doctrine Issues? *Journal of Broadcasting* 3 (Winter): 261–272.

Gokariksell, Banu. 2009. "Beyond the officially sacred: Religion, secularism, and the body in the production of subjectivity." *Social and Cultural Geography* 10 (2009): 657–674.

Gorringe, Tim. 2023. "Sacred Place and Sacred Places." *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Religion*. Oxford. January 27, 2023

[.https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-794](https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-794).

Hadden, Jeffrey and Swann Charles, E. 1981. *Prime-Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism*, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Hadden, Jeffrey. K and Cowan, Douglas. 2000. *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*. London: JAI Press.

Hamelink, Cees J. 2003. "Cyberspace and Access to Information, In The Lebanese UNESCO Commission." *Ethics of Science and Technology* 4, (2003): 98–115.

Hartford, Stephen and Leonard, Paul. 2006. "Place, Space and Time: Contextualising Workplace Subjectivities," *Organization Studies* 27, 657–676.

Heim, Michael. 1987. *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Heim, Michael. 1988. "The Sound of Being's Body." *Man and World: An International Philosophical Review* 21, no 1.

Heim, Michael. 1993. *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heim, Michael. 1997. *The Art of Virtual Reality, In Intelligent Environments*, North-Holland: Oxford University Press.

Heim, Michael. 1998. *Virtual Realism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Helland, Christopher. 2005. "Online Religion as Lived Religion. Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet." *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1: 1–16.

Herring, David. 2008. "Towards Sacrament in Cyberspace." In *A Sociology of Religious Emotion*, edited by Campbell Heidi, 193-209. Epworth Review.

Hill-Smith, Connie. 2009. "Cyberpilgrimage: A Study of Authenticity, Presence and Meaning in Online Pilgrimage Experiences." *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, (Summer) .[http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art21\(2\)-Cyberpilgrimage.html](http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art21(2)-Cyberpilgrimage.html).

Hipps, Shane. 2009. *Flickering Pixels*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Højsgaard Mikael and Warburg, Margit (2005): *Religion in Cyberspace*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group.

Ho, Karen. 2013. "The Ethics and Politics of Virtuality and Indexicality." *The Handbook of Global Media and Communication Policy*, 415–434). Wiley-Blackwell.

Holloway, Jonathan. 2003. "Make believe: spiritual practice, embodiment and sacred space." *Journal Environment and Planning A* 35, 1: 1961-1974.

Hoover, Steward M, and Clark Lynn S. 2002. "Practising Religion In the Age of the Media: Exploration in Media, Religion and Culture." New York: Columbia University Press.

Hoover, Steward M., and Clark Rainie, Lee. 2004: "Faith Online, Pew Internet & American Life Project." 2004. http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2004/PIP_Faith_Online_2004.pdf.

Howe, Christopher. 2010. "Space, Place and an exploration of term hyperlocal." Curious Catherine's Blog. August 30 2010. <http://curiouscatherine.wordpress.com/2010/08/30/space-place-and-an-exploration-of-the-term-hyperlocal/>.

Hutchings, Tim. 2017. *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media*. New York: Routledge.

Hutchings, Tim. 2010. "Creating Church Online: An Ethnographic Study of Five Internet-Based Christian Communities." Durham University. Unpublished PhD Thesis.

Hutchings, Tim. 2010. "The Internet and the Church: An Introduction: The Expository Times." 122, 1: 11–19. <https://DOI:10.1177/0014524610377955>.

Hutchings, Tim. 2015 "Creating Church Online: Networks and Collectives in Contemporary Impressions of Religious Settings." *Environment and Behaviour* 48, 8: 1030-1048.

Hyatt, Bryan. 2009. "Virtual Church in STILL a Bad Idea." Online. October 27, 2009. http://www.outofur.com/archieves/2009/10/why_virtual_chu.html.

Jacobs, Stephen. 2007. "Virtually Sacred: The Performance of Asynchronous Cyber-Rituals in Online Religious Community." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12 (2): 14.

Jenkins, Simon Paul. 2008. "Rituals and Pixels. Experiments in Online Church." *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3 (2008): 3.

Jenkins, Henry. 2004. "The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877904040603>.

Jones, Stevens G. 1995. *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated communication and community*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Johnsen, Elisabeth T. 2020. "Ecclesial Online Identities during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Scandinavian Majority Churches on Facebook, Christmas 2020." *Nordic Journal for the Study of Religion*, 59, no.1 (2023): 53-78. <https://DOI:10.33356/temenos.121371>.

Kalay, Yehuda and Marx John. (2005)." Architecture and the Internet: Designing Places in Cyberspace." *First Monday*. June, 4, 2005. <https://10.5210/fm.v0i0.1563>.

Kim, Justin .. 2020. *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places and Things in the Digital Age*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press.

Kim, Jonghyun. 2022. "Virtual Worship Service and Physical Worship Service on Spiritual Formation." *Australian Journal of Liturgy* 16, no. 2 (2022): 92–101.

Kim, Kirsteen. 2007. "Ethereal Christianity: Reading Korean mega-church websites." *Studies in World Christianity*, 13(3): 208–224.

<http://ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=27984900&site=ehost-live>

Kluver, Randy and Chen Yu-liang. 2008. "The Church Of Fools: Virtual Ritual and Material Faith." *Heidelberg Journal of Religion on the Internet*, 3(1). <https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/8292/>.

Koenig, Elisabeth. 2014. "Discernment." *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, edited by Leeming David, 502-507. Boston: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-6086-2_171.

Kohler, Kristian C. 2023. "Virtual Communion: Assembly, Digital Space and Eucharistic Celebration." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 50, no. 1 (2023): 31–35.

Kruger, Francois P. 2021. "Descriptive Empirical Perspectives on Participants' Attitudes on Virtual Worship Services Kindle an Ineluctable Revisiting of Ecclesial Assumptions in a Post-Pandemic World." *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 77(4): a7125. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.7125>.

Lang, Uwe. 2014. What Makes Architecture "Sacred"? *Logos*. 17(4): 44-64. https://www.pdcnet.org/logos/content/logos_2014_0017_0004_0044_0064.

Larsen, Einhart. 2001. "CyberFaith: How Americans pursue religion online." *Pew Internet and American Life Project*, December 23, 2001. <http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=53>.

LifeWay Research. 2011. "Protestant churches' use of social media." *LifeWay Research*. https://s3.amazonaws.com/bhpub/edoc/DOC_ProtestantChurchesUseofSocialMedia.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=1FAF154W9TVZ6M3REZG2&Expires=2092151705&Signature=5OG5oV0duJ0sgw0Tptm9zdjxexs%3D.

Lochhead, David. 1997. *Shifting Realities : Information Technology and the Church*. Chicago: WCC Publications.

Mahrt, William. 2016. Place: "Sacrality and beauty in church architecture." *Sacred Music*, 24.

Massey, Doreen. 2005. *For Space*, London: SAGE.

Mazumdar, Sudeshna and Mazumdar Sipra. 2004. "Religion and place attachment: A study of sacred places." *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 24: 385-397.

Meagher, Benjamin R. 2016. "Perceiving Sacred Space: Religious Orientation Moderates Impressions of Religious Settings." *Environment and Behavior*, 48(8): 1030–1048.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916515581626>.

Mhandu, Joram and Ojong Victor. 2021. "COVID-19 and the South African Pentecostal Landscape: Historic Shift from Offline Liturgical Practice to Online Platforms." *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 34 (2): (2021) DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2021/v34n2a5>.

Miller, Lizette Larson. 2022. "Reality of Presence in Virtually Mediated Sacramentality: Has Sacramental Theology Sustained Us?" *Anglican Theological Review* 104, no. 1 (2022): 37–53. DOI: <http://10.1177/00033286211060329>.

Muster, Jenna. 2017. "From Silver Screen to Sacred Home: Transforming Places of Entertainment into Spaces of Worship." *Space and Culture*. 20(4): 429-440.
<http://doi.org/10.1177/1206331217720074>

Nechvatal, Joseph. 1999. "Immersive Ideas/Critical Distances: A Study of the Affinity Between Artistic Ideologies Based On Virtual Reality & Previous Immersive Idioms." UK: University of wales College.

Neuendorf, Kimberley A., Abelman Roberta I and Kalis Paul. (1987). "The History and Social Impact of Religious Broadcasting." Lecture presented at the Annual Meeting of Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. San Antonio: Texas.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED284229.pdf>

Nixon, Brendan I . 2019. "Engaging Sacred Space and Experiencing God in the Mountains: A Study of the Non-Traditional Worship Environment of Mountain Cathedrals, An Ecumenical Meetup Group Based in Albuquerque." New Mexico. 2019.
<https://core.ac.uk/download/223359780.pdf>.

Nunes, Mark. 2006. *Cyberspaces Of Everyday Life*. London: University of Minnesota Press.

O'Driscoll, Patricia. 1984. "New Pray TV Mixes God." *Game Shows U.S.A.* Today, January 30: 1-2D.

O'Leary, Stephen D. 1996. "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64: 781–808.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/LXIV.4.781>.

Otto, Rudolf. 1958. "The Idea of the Holy." *Planning D: Society and Space*. New York: Oxford University Press 31, (6): 1062–1075. <https://doi:10.1068/d7912>.

Patten, John T. 2004. "Navigating unfamiliar territory: Autoethnography of a first-year elementary school principal." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Utah: University of Utah.

Phillips, Deborah. C. 1987. "Validity in qualitative research: Why the worry about warrant will not wane." *Education and Urban Society*, 20(1): 9–24.

Pinar, William. 1988. "Whole, bright, deep with understanding: Issues in qualitative research and autobiographical method." In *Contemporary curriculum discourses*, edited by Pinar Walter F, 134–153. Scottsdale: Gorsuch Scarisbrick Publishers.

Pitt, David A. 2023. "Real Presence? Foundations for a Virtually Gathered Assembly." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 50, no. 1 (2023): 36–41.

Pole, Sarah. 2010. "Emotions and affect in recent human geography" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, 35 (520).

Pspotka, Joseph. 1995. "Immersive Tutoring Systems" *U.S Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences Report*. <http://205.130.63.7/fov2.html>.

Raedts, Peter. 1990. "The Medieval city as a holy place," In *Omnes Circumadstantes: Contributions towards a History of the Role of the People in the Liturgy*, edited by Caspers Charles and Schneiders Marc, 144. Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij.

Ramo, Joshua C. 1996. "Finding God On the Web," TIME. December 16, 1996.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,985700.html>.

Raudenbush, Charles. A. (1994). "Improvisation: An autobiography of my first year as an administrator." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Kansas: university of Kansas.

Reed, Pamela G. 1992. "An emerging paradigm for the investigation of spirituality in nursing." *Research in Nursing and Health* 15: 349–357.

Reed-Danahay, D. 1997. *Auto/Ethnography*. New York: Berg Press.

Regan, Richard J. 2002. *Thomas Aquinas: On Law, Morality & Politics*. 2nd edition. Ireland: Hackett Publishing Company Inc.

Retamoza, Manuel, J. 2023. "Christ is Present in Ordinary Things." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 50, no. 1 (2023): 5–9.

Robinson-Neal, Andree'. 2008. "Enhancing the Spiritual Relationship: The Impact of Virtual Worship on the Real World Church Experience." *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3 (2008): 6.

Rose, Jason Daniel. 2021. "Student Self-Harm: The Impact on an Elementary School Principal's Leadership." 2021. <https://core.ac.uk/download/519831696.pdf>.

Rumsey, Alan. (2017), *Parish: An Anglican Theology of Place*. London: SCM.

Scharnick-Udemans, Lee-Shae Salma. 2017. "A Historical and Critical Overview of Religion and Public Broadcasting in South Africa." *Journal for the Study of Religion* 30, no. 2 (2017): 257-280. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2017/v30n2a11>.

Schnell, Jan. 2023. "What Constitutes the Gathered Eucharistic Assembly?" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 50, no. 1 (2023): 42–47.

Schroeder, Ralph, Heather Nick and Lee Roy M. 1998. "The Sacred and the Virtual: Religion in Multi-User Virtual Reality." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 4(2).

<http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1998.tb00092.x>.

Schwandt, T. A. 2001. *Dictionary of Qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Seppala, Serafim. 2022. "A Sacred Cyberspace? Towards the Ontology of Virtual Worship." no. 1 (2022): 105–122. <https://DOI:10.2478/ress-2023>.

Shackley, Myra. 2001. *Managing Sacred Sites: Service Provision and Visitor Experience*. London: Continuum.

Sheldrake, Philip. 2001. *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity*. London: SCM.

Sheldrake, Philip. 2005. *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. (ed.) London: SCM Press.

Sheldrake, Philip. 2006. *Spirituality: A Brief History*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Sheldrake, P. 2007. "Placing The Sacred: Transcendence and the City." *Literature & Theology* 21(3): 243–58.

Sheldrake, Philip. 2010. *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology and Social Practice*. New York: Paulist Press.

Sheldrake, Philip. 2012. *Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sheldrake, Philip. 2014. *The Spiritual City: Theology, Spirituality and the Urban*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Sigmon, Casey T. 2023. "Failure to Discern the Online/Hybrid Body: A Captivity of the Eucharist." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 50, no. 1 (2023): 13–18.

Silverstone, Roger and Haddon Leslie. 1996 “Design and the Domestication of ICTs: Technical Change and Everyday Life.” *Communicating by Design: The Politics of Information and Communication Technologies*, edited by Silverstone Roger and Mansell Robin. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Skipp, Tracy John. 2010. "Nowhere Man: Autoethnographic Reflections on Identity, Family, and Leadership." <https://core.ac.uk/download/151575256.pdf>.

Smith, Pam. 2015. *Online Mission and Ministry: A Theological and Practical Guide*. London: SPCK.

Stanley, Liz. 1993. On auto/biography in sociology. *Sociology*, 27(1): 41–52.

Subang, Jemon Laguna. 2023. "Why Should Believers Gather Together? A Theological and Exegetical Examination of Hebrews 10: 24-25 in View of the Nature, Purpose and Future of the Church." *AJPS* 26, no. 2 (August 2023): 29-59.

Tapley, Elizabeth, 2003 "Book Review: Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity, by Philip Sheldrake." *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* 21(1): 135–137. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2458/jerae.5010>.

Tierney, William G. 1998. Life history's history: Subjects foretold. *Qualitative Inquiry* 4: 49-70.

Thiessen, Joel and McAlpine Bruce. 2013. “Sacred space: Function and mission from a sociological and theological perspective.” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 13(2): 133-146.

Thrift, Nigel and Dewsbury, Derek J. 2000. “Dead Geographies-And How to Make Them Live.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18: 411–432, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1068/d1804ed>.

Tse, Justin. 2014. "Grounded theologies: Religion' and the 'secular' in human geography." *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (2): 201–220.

Van Manen, Max. 1990. *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Van Maanen, John. 1995. *Representations in Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Wasilewska, Ewa. 2010. "Teaching and Learning Guide for Sacred Space in the Ancient Near East." *Religion Compass*, 4(4): 263–270. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2009.00211.x>

Weir, David. 2009. Liminality, sacred space and the Diwan. In *Sacred Space: Interdisciplinary Perspectives Within Contemporary Contexts*, edited by Brie Steve, Daggers Jenny and Torevell David, 39-54. Cambridge Scholars Press.

Wellman, Barry. 2001. "Physical Place and Cyberspace: The rise of Personalised Networking." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25(2).

Wolcott, Harry F. 1994. *Transforming Qualitative Data: Description, Analysis, and Interpretation*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Woods, Orlando. 2013. "Converting houses into churches: The mobility, Fission, and sacred networks of evangelical house churches in Sri Lanka." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31, (6): 1062- 1075. https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/2424.

Wynne-Jones, Tim G., Maguire Doyle R, and Colter, Eileen. 2010. *Click One Novel Ten Authors*. New York: Arthur A. Levine Books.

Yorgason, Ethan and Dora Viola. 2009. Geography, religion, and emerging paradigms: problematising the dialogue, *Social & Cultural Geography* 10 (6): 629-637.

Zaleski, Jeffrey P. 1997. *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology Is Changing Our Spiritual Lives*. San Francisco: HarperCollins

Zukowski, Angela and Babin Patricia. 2002. *The Gospel in Cyberspace: Nurturing faith in the Internet Age*. Chicago: Loyola Press

Zviadadze, Sophio 2014. "Religion, National Culture, and Human Rights in Georgia." In *Religion and Human Rights: an International Perspective*, edited by Ziebertz Hans-Georg and Cripic Gorana. Wiesbaden: Springer.