

Being church in the era of 'homo digitalis'

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This article discusses practical ecclesiology, which reflects on the church of the 21st century from historical, empirical, hermeneutical and strategic perspectives. We live in the era of digital revolutions and 'homo digitalis'. Virtual reality has radically altered the way we work, play, shop, study, keep in touch with friends and family, meet new people and express ourselves. For many, it is the only reality. This new reality raises many questions: Will it accelerate the ecclesial crisis of our time? Does it create opportunities to speak of God? How does it impact on our understanding of the church? A relevant, contemporary ecclesiology needs to address these questions.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Since the 15th century, a number of scientific discoveries and technological inventions have challenged all preconceived ideas of God and the universe. The impact of technology and the relation between faith (church) and reason (science) have often been discussed. It is no different at the beginning of the 21st century. The digital evolution is challenging churches all around the world to reflect on the human condition, faith as well as the nature and calling of the church within a radically new context. This contribution reflects on the interface between technology and theology in the era of 'homo digitalis'.

Keywords: homo digitalis; history of technology; network theory; ecclesiology; cyberworld.

Introduction

We live in a society where God has been replaced with air-conditioning, insurance, medical aid and good manners. Many churches in the reformed tradition are dying. It seems as if theology has become an exercise in futility.

Is this too pessimistic? If we look at the statistics of reformed churches, the extent of the crisis becomes clear. In 1947, 17.1% of the Dutch population indicated that they did not belong to any church; in 1979, this figure rose to 27%, and by 1993, it reached 52% (Heitink 1993:14). It is expected that by 2020, only 4% of the Dutch population will still be members of the PKN (De Roest & Stoppels 2007:12). In South Africa, Dutch reformed churches experience a massive decline in membership. During the last three decades, the young adults membership declined by more than 50% (see Dreyer 2016:146–153). Research conducted by the Barna Group in the USA revealed that 40% of young people between the ages of 16 and 29 describe themselves as 'unchristian' (see Kinnaman 2007:15). The main reason for their 'de-conversion' is their perception that the church is an outdated institution which serves no purpose and lacks integrity. Churches, even those that are ostensibly growing, are in fact contributing to a growing perception that Christianity had lost the plot somewhere.

Since the turn of the millennium, many theologians articulated a sense of crisis. Guder (2000) writes:

The reformed tradition emphasizes that the church once reformed is always in the process of being reformed according to the Word of God. The phrase '*ecclesia reformata secundum verbi Dei semper reformanda*' is used a great deal in North Atlantic reformed circles these days, probably because of the crisis in which most of these churches find themselves. (p. 150)

In '*Liquid Church*', Ward (2002:13) comes to the conclusion that the church is part and parcel of the crisis. Niemandt (2007:38) is also of the opinion that the church is creating its own crisis. The church itself is the reason why so many people are leaving the church. Not only are they leaving the church, they become a-religious. The current ecclesial configuration has become problematic.

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Heitink's analysis is even more radical in his foreword to *Een kerk met karakter* (Heitink 2007:20–21):

Het gaat niet goed met de kerk. Als in onze tijd niet een ingrijpende heroriëntatie plaatsvindt, is het met de kerk als instituut in ons land menselijkerwijs gesproken binnen enkele generaties voorbij. (p. 20)

and

[O]k zelf beoordeel ik de huidige toestand van de kerk als ernstig. Het gaat hier om wellicht de zwaarste crisis in de geschiedenis van de kerk in West-Europa sinds zijn ontstaan. (p. 21)

The church is in need of radical transformation.

Stanley Hauerwas (2013:ix–xi) writes in *'Approaching the end'* about the end of the church as we know it: 'The end that the church is approaching, or at least some churches may be approaching, is quite literally death'. One of the main reasons for the approaching death of the church is consumerism, which is a clear indication that many churches lack a fundamental understanding of what it means to be a church (see also Volf 1998:6). Hauerwas is of the opinion that death is the price churches will pay because they became slaves of materialism, social acceptability and growth at all costs. Death is the result when the churches cease to be churches with integrity.

The 'crisis' of the church has much to do with changing contexts. Being church in the 21st century is much different than being church in the 1st century CE. Very often, the early church is idealised as a norm of how the church of the 21st century should function (see, for instance, Hirsch 2006; Viola & Barna 2008). However, the unlimited diversity in ecclesial forms and expression raises the question whether we can still speak of 'the church' and to what extent the New Testament metaphors and ecclesiology is still applicable. Is the Bible really still normative, when we speak about being church in the 21st century?

To complicate matters further, the arrival of the digital era and *'homo digitalis'* seems to be the final nail in the church's coffin. Is the digital era the end of the church as we know it, or does it open up new possibilities of being church? Even if we believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ could transcend every change and revolution in the history of mankind, could we say the same of the church?

The era of *homo digitalis* challenges us to re-imagine the church and develop an ecclesiology which would assist churches to be churches with integrity at the start of the 3rd millennium. This contribution is an attempt to reflect on some issues which could be important in the development of a relevant, contextual and practical ecclesiology. It is an open-ended engagement with issues such as network theory, history of technology, the impact of the digital revolution on human existence and being church in the digital era (see Joubert 2018).

Networks

Since the 1960s, the basics of network theory have found a place in anthropology and historical research. 'Social' network theory treats society as a web of overlapping relationships, with friendships, patronage connections and alliances as the links and people as the nodes. Networks are often regarded as something which developed with the creation of the World Wide Web. The early church, however, is an example of how social networks had always been a basic part of human existence. It is just the nature of networks which changed through the centuries. In the 21st century, social networks multiplied exponentially via various internet-based platforms.

According to Castells (2000:164), networks are made up of lines of communication that connect a series of nodes or hubs. The nodes represent individuals, organisations or communication systems. This means that information and decision-making are not localised, but reside in a 'process' (Ward 2002:42). This is not only true for the current society dominated by communication networks but also for all societies. There have always been lines of communication connecting individuals and groups together. This results in a 'liquid' society (Bauman 2000; Ward 2002). Ward contends that the church of the future will be much less institutionalised and hierarchical, functioning as open, liquid communication networks.

According to Schor (2009:494), the social network theory has been fruitfully applied to the dynamics of contained groups or the place of individuals in society. The network theory led to the conclusion that almost all converts to modern religious groups have friendships or familial bonds with existing members. In the early church, the system of patronage, which functioned within well-structured networks, contributed to its fast growth.

Various network models help us to understand how (for instance) the early church functioned and had the ability to preach the Gospel over vast areas. Travelling teachers, healers and merchants were important in the dissemination of Christian beliefs. In villages, towns and cities, groups of Christians gathered, receiving travelling teachers with hospitality. These travellers brought news, maybe money, to assist the local Christians and to carry news and contributions to the next group of Christians. Where there were no Christian communities, these teachers and healers would stay and establish a small group of Christians. The way the early Christians were interconnected and communicated via travelling teachers, healers and letters is very much a communication network which functioned on an informal basis, but with time on a more formal basis. The bishop and Christian congregation in a certain area would function as a 'node', a point of reference and support, sending out and assisting teachers to travel further. It meant that even very small groups of Christians could be reached.

During the last two decades, the world, societies and humanity in general entered a networked reality:

Reality is no longer only a physical space. Geographical and political divisions do not have the final say. Non-geographical cyber reality now sets the pace (and the tone!), because digital technologies have succeeded in putting the entire world in touch with each other 24/7. (Joubert 2018:4)

The daily life of people is characterised by connectivity. The internet, computer networks, social media, television and radio networks and cell phones are part and parcel of our daily existence, hyper-connectivity and networked society. It is not possible for the majority of people, even in remote areas, not to be connected in some way. People are connected to total strangers, with whom they never had any physical contact. People connect via networks in virtual reality. For many, virtual reality and digital connectedness had become more important than any physical reality or relationships.

The impact of this on the church in its traditional form is obvious. It creates unprecedented opportunities in terms of communication. The ability to communicate with millions of people via digital platforms could facilitate the sharing of the gospel. On the other hand, we should also take note of the ever-changing form of networks and, as a result, of society. The world is not static. Joubert (2018) articulates this 'liquidity' as follows:

Over the past two decades, South Africa has experienced seismic and systemic shifts from apartheid to post-apartheid, colonialism to post-colonialism, modernism to post-modernism, Christendom to post-Christendom and currently from non-liquid modernity to liquid modernity. (p. 1)

As a result, social institutions (including the church) are unable to maintain their traditional or historical form indefinitely.

The question is whether churches have the ability to adapt to changing and fluid realities; on the other hand, whether they should?

Technology

A second issue we need to consider is the impact of technology. The history of technology has been described extensively (see Williams 2004:433). Ever since Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) proved that the sun is at the centre of our planetary system, a flood of scientific discoveries and technological inventions challenged all preconceived ideas of God and the universe.

From a historical perspective, it is clear that 'technology can only yield its promise in the framework of cultural, organizational and institutional transformations' (Castells 2004:41–42). A networked society is determined by context (Williams 2004:434). Historical research has shown that social relationships are deeply imbedded in technological relationships, which can differ from context to context. Technological change deeply influences historical change and vice versa. The question of the relationship between

technological change and historical change is a fundamental problem in historical theory.

The interrelatedness between technology and history can be demonstrated with one example. The Industrial Revolution (1760–1840) fundamentally changed the course of history and the way society functions. The Industrial Revolution was driven by technological advances. The impact it had on an agrarian society as well as the church was tremendous. The church had no adequate response to the changes taking place. This leads to the question: Did the people leave the church, or did the church leave the people? The church's ability to respond timeously and adequately to radical changes in society is almost non-existent. With the accelerating speed with which change is taking place in the digital era, the question remains: *Will the church be able to respond or adapt?*

Human history can be regarded as a 'long march of progress under the guidance of reason' (Castells 2004:42). This 'faith' in 'progress' hails digital technology as the climax of human progress. However, it is also clear that unbridled technology could precipitate major disasters and evil; for instance, the development of the atom bomb and the annihilation of millions of people during the Second World War. The technologically advanced 20th century had been the evillest of all centuries. Since the First World War, approximately 220 million people were butchered in countless wars and ethnic cleansings, using weapons of mass destruction. All this was made possible by technology, communication networks, powerful computers and satellites. Digital technology enriches humanity in terms of communication and daily life; it also created an environment in which crime, human trafficking, sexual slavery, political extremism and de-humanising isolation flourish.

Homo digitalis

In the current academic discourse, the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' is often mentioned. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is predominantly shaped by digitisation and networking. Klaus Schwab, founder and chairman of the World Economic Forum, is of the opinion that it *will change not only what we do but also who we are*. It will affect our identity, our sense of privacy, our notions of ownership, our consumption patterns, the time we devote to work and leisure, how we develop our careers, cultivate our skills, meet people and nurture relationships (Schwab 2016:1). Since the Stone Age 8000 years ago gave way to the Bronze Age and Iron Age, humanity had been exposed to accelerating change. In the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the primary tools in human hands are no longer made from stone, bronze or iron, but rather silicone. How does this change our understanding of humanity? For some, humanity has moved past *homo sapiens* to *homo digitalis* (see Saxberg 2015).

How do individual human beings fit into the Fourth Industrial Revolution? In Christian theology, the individual had always been important. On the first pages of the Bible,

we read that human beings had been created in the image of God. Each human being may live as an authentic and free individual in the presence of God (Van Niftrik 1948:172). The autobiographical '*Confessiones*' of Augustine is a prime example of the individual soul struggling with the question of salvation (see Barth 1957:307). Since Augustine formulated the prayer '*Domine Jesu, noverrim me, noverrim te*' [Lord Jesus, let me know me and let me know thee], the individual believer's self-knowledge and knowledge of God had been closely interrelated. Anselm's '*fides quaerens intellectum*' and Calvin's '*Tota, fere sapientiae nostrae summa, quae vera demum ac solida sapientia censeri debeat, duabus partibus constat, Dei cognitione et nostri*' (Inst. I.1/1; Calvin 1559) build on this prayer of Augustine. It had been exemplified in the theology of Schleiermacher, although Barth criticised Schleiermacher for his overemphasis of the individual's religious experience as a source of knowledge of God (Barth 1946:400–401, 1957:38–43).

In recent times, the term *homo digitalis* had been used in a wide variety of contexts. In the *Handelingen Nederlandse Juristen-Vereniging* (see Moerel et al. 2016), we find extensive research on the legal implications of *homo digitalis* in terms of the protection of the individual's privacy, human rights, etc.

Extensive sociological research was conducted by Kent University and published (2009) as the 'Digital Anthropology Report'. The report distinguishes between 'six tribes of *homo digitalis*': the Digital Extroverts (9%), the Timid Technophobes (23%), the Social Secretaries (13%), the First Lifers (12%), the E-ager Beavers (29%) and the Web Boomers (8%). The report comes to the conclusion that some tribes of *homo digitalis* will disappear, others will emerge. As technology develops, it will affect social behaviour. It is quite possible that a technological elite will emerge; people who developed a certain competency to use digital resources to its utmost potential – for instance, Bitcoin. Being part of the digital elite will dictate one's success and status. Digital technology will increasingly become an integral part of people's work and social lives. On-the-go internet via mobile devices affects activities such as shopping or eating out, with increased interaction with others in the same area. However, scepticism towards technology will continue, so it is conceivable that digital 'refuseniks' will emerge. This group might even take a moral stance against the pervasive intrusion into private life.

Joubert (2018) also speaks of 'tribes':

Previously, when geography used to be important, such tribes had to be local and rather one-dimensional in terms of identity, but now that the Internet has eliminated geography there are tribes everywhere, as well as groups of individuals that simultaneously belong to such groups and to official religious institutions. However, being part of a tribe is not the point; it is about being part of a tribe that has become a movement of Jesus followers where people are energised, transformed, connected, leveraged and equipped to embody the right type of impact in their respective realities. (p. 4)

In the field of psychology and neuroscience (see Montag & Diefenbach 2018), *homo digitalis* is receiving more and more attention. The reason:

Mankind is on the verge for a big leap forward towards new kinds of societal living forms. In June 2017, about 50% of the current world population had access to the Internet. Considering that it is only a bit more than 25 years since the programming of the first website by Tim Berners-Lee, it is of unprecedented event how digital worlds have shaped our societies. From nearly everywhere, we can access online worlds via small technological devices such as the smartphone – made popular in 2007 by Apple's Steve Jobs. (p. 1)

The human population passed the 7 billion mark a few years ago. This means 3.5 billion people are using computers, smart phones and the internet. It resulted in fundamental shifts in self-reflection, self-presentation, the fragmentation of everyday life, changes to the structure and functioning of the human brain, emotional needs, well-being, happiness and social interaction.

Research has shown (see Montag & Diefenbach 2018:3) that digital devices become an extension of the self and even of the body. The computer mouse had become an extension of the hand. The virtual objects seen on the screen of a laptop became reality. For many, it is the only reality. People migrate from a world where social contact is determined by physical presence to a virtual world where social contact is delineated by what appears on a screen. Negative comments on social media are experienced as physically and emotionally painful. Even sexual relationships flourish in a virtual reality because it is reality.

The phenomenon of 'selfies' maybe a striking example of what is happening in society. Montag and Diefenbach (2018) state:

According to a poll with 3000 people, among those aged 18–24, every third picture taken is a selfie. An obvious question is how such an intensive concern with portraying oneself affects values in our society, or may be associated with personality traits such as narcissism. In fact, the current discussion in and outside academia about the value and consequences of selfies is quite diverse. While some highlight the value of selfies as a new material for creative work and the enhanced possibilities to convey emotions, or as a trigger for self-study and self-observation, others are primarily concerned about negative consequences related to the excessive self-presentation and people's obsession for taking the perfect selfie – such as decreased mindfulness, focusing on photographing oneself rather than what is happening around us and the needs of others, causing conflict in relationships, fostering body dissatisfaction, narcissistic behavior, or in general a superficial world, with the selfie as 'a prototype of expressive inauthenticity'. (p. 4)

Another effect of living connected is the inability to lead a life where it is impossible to allocate time to work, play, social interaction and spirituality. Constant connectivity means that work intrudes into family life, because the office is as close as the laptop which is used to watch a movie. Conversely, the constant interruptions via smartphone during office result in

a marked loss of productivity. 'Cell phone addiction' is not an urban legend, it is a reality. Research had shown that 40% of users spend at least the last 10 min of each day before going to sleep on their cell phones, and they are probably not reading the Bible on their cell phones, although they could if they wanted to.

Another aspect of which we should be aware is the fact that the use of digital technology alters the shape and structure of the brain. Montag and Diefenbach (2018) refer to extensive research that had been conducted, for instance, on gamers, showing that:

[O]ne hour [per day] of gaming of a well-known massive multi-player online role play game (MMORPG) over the time course of six weeks led to reduction of gray matter volume in the left orbitofrontal cortex, a brain region known to play a role in motivational and emotion regulation processes. (pp. 9–10)

The use of Facebook and other social media not only changed the physical appearance of the brain but could also result in adverse emotional side effects.

Emotional side effects could be summarised as follows (Montag & Diefenbach 2018):

First, diverse content exists on the world wide web to fulfil our digital needs, at least at first sight. Humans can act out their PLAYful tendencies by playing Internet games, they can choose to follow sexual desires by the consumption of online pornography or searching for a real mate via digital platforms such as Tinder or similar dating channels (LUST). The need for being CARED for might be provided by self-help groups dealing with countless topics speaking to nearly everyone in need. Clearly, all this is accompanied by SEEKING activity, providing energy to follow these activities (it is the 'Go Get It' system energizing us). On the other side, negative effects can also be stimulated by interactions with online worlds. A FEAR response might be elicited by both viewing gruesome content on video channel platforms, but also in a total different area of digital developments, outlined as follows: For many, the technological progress happens at a too quick pace and humans FEAR to not be able to hold up with these developments. With the rapid development of artificial intelligence, tremendous efforts will be in need to be invested to hold a tight grip on FEAR responses towards a faster and faster developing society. The emotion of SADNESS also has been shown to play an important role in the interaction of digital worlds. (p. 11)

Homo digitalis is also receiving attention in *theology*. Louw (2017) describes the evolving reality of *homo digitalis* as follows:

Human beings become focused on the beyond of cyberspace, networking webpages, the liminality between the seen and the unseen, and the mysticism of interface. The facelessness of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and WhatsApp become a secure hiding place for a meta-physics of psychic curiosity online. This world of *homo digitalis* shapes a digital profile with options for new kind of anonymity with the facelessness of 'smart mobs' – the so-called empire of the multitude or an interconnectivity through and from singularity. (p. 5)

He then continues to describe the impact of cyberspace on spirituality and the need for a theology which is focused on life as it presents itself.

Being church in the cyberworld

Considering the rapid historical change driven by new technologies, the impact of a network culture and digital connectedness (but at the same time emotional disconnectedness) on the human condition, the virtual reality people live in and the cognitive and emotional side effects of it all – how do all these factors impact on spirituality in general and more specifically, being church in the 21st century?

In terms of religious experience and being church, the most obvious and visible effect of the digital revolution had been changes in worship and liturgy (see, for instance, Barnard, Cilliers & Wepener 2014; Labuschagne 2014; Matthee 2018). Current theological reflection on worship and liturgy engages with issues such as rituals, contextual experience, liminality, fluidity, solidity, community, God as liminal, liturgical experience, using cyberspace as a space for community and celebration (Barnard et al. 2014:1–8). Even sacraments are celebrated online. The cyberworld has cemeteries too.

The *meta*-realm of cyberspace brought about a revolution in religious experiences (Louw 2017:5). The locality of the digital reality is at the same time 'nowhere' and at the same time 'everywhere'. At least 3.5 billion people became travellers through time and space. The digital technology created millions of citizens of the cyberworld. Facebook has more citizens than any physical country on earth, including China, and a larger annual budget than most countries.

What are the challenges facing the church?

Reader (2008:1) warns against the danger of 'zombie categories' or concepts that are no longer relevant to a person living in the cyberworld. A major challenge facing practical theology, and theology in general as well as the church, is the re-interpretation of traditional categories. Reader (2008:6) calls it a 'hermeneutical model of pastoral engagement' within life events.

Louw (2017:8) suggests that the way forward will be determined by the ability of theology and the church to foster a 'reflexive spirituality'. This will be a huge challenge to the traditional ministry and being church. Louw (2017) continues:

Rather than the traditional clerical paradigm, denominational demarcations and a selective morality, the focus on everyday life issues leads to what can be called an 'operative ecclesiology' and a practical theology of habitus. (p. 8)

Theology becomes *fides quaerens vivendi* [faith seeking for a way of authentic life in the presence of God].

'Operative ecclesiology' implies being church within real contexts. It reflects on the nature and mission of the church

not purely from dogmatic or historical perspectives, but also from a practical perspective, taking real life into consideration – hence a ‘practical ecclesiology’. In operative (or practical) ecclesiology, the emphasis shifts from the ‘pomp and glory of the cathedral to the public of the market place – public settings as *locus theologicus*’ (Louw 2017:8).

Such a radical departure from traditional categories will obviously receive much opposition. But one must remember a basic principle in management: No organisation can be managed on the basis of an idealised past or future. Any organisation (including the church) is served best when current realities and contexts are taken seriously. For too long, the past was idealised and the future regarded with unfounded optimism or pessimism.

On the other hand, tradition still has value and a real place in the future, precisely because we live with such diversity around us. In many cities around the globe, the more traditional churches are making a strong comeback. Many studies show that millennials (the group born just before the turn of the millennium and most familiar with communications, media and digital technology) feel unconnected to any sort of faith. At the same time, studies show that many of them are moving to churches which are more traditional, reverent and decidedly uncool. Information from the Barna Group reflects this desire for the church tradition. More than 40% of those 18-to-29-year-olds indicated a desire for a more traditional faith, rather than a modern version of Christianity. Younger generations get lost when the church tries to cater to them.¹

One of the fundamental criticisms of millennials against the church is a loss of integrity. What they require of the church is ‘to be church’. This sounds very familiar. Karl Barth was one such theologian who helped the church to understand that ecclesial integrity has primarily to do with the correlation between the essential nature of the church and the manifestation of the church in everyday life. In brief, what the church is should become visible in what the church does from day to day. Barth’s sharp ecclesiological insight and criticism of the church is still relevant. The context might have changed, but the fundamental question remains: How can the church be the church with integrity? This is a question concerning the nature of the church with direct implications for the ethical behaviour and actions of the church (Bender 2005:5–7). The expression ‘the church must be church’ the first reference to ‘church’ has to do with the *credo ecclesiam*, the church we believe. The second has to do with the church that manifests empirically. If there is a discrepancy between the visible and invisible church, it calls for reformation according to the Word of God (Barth 1933:10–11). In other words, the continued reformation of the church is reformation according to the Word of God with the purpose to ‘be church’ in accordance with the Gospel and not the sort of renewal (*Erneuerung*) which people and politicians are expecting.

1. See <https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/>.

The challenge facing the church is to ‘be church’ (Busch 2004:246–247) and to ‘stay church’ as the body of Christ, the community of the Spirit and the people of God (cf. Bender 2005). To be a church with integrity means ‘to be church’, to make the invisible visible, to be what God meant it to be. Integrity implies a deep consciousness of the true nature of the church and continual reformation of the church to be what it is.

Some concluding observations

Every new generation has to face a new world. This was true for *homo erectus* and is still true for *homo digitalis* (see Saxberg 2015).

The necessity of developing a relevant and contemporary ecclesiology and ecclesial praxis is evident. The complexity of developing a practical ecclesiology is mind-boggling. How can churches give expression to the authentic nature of the church, take new realities and contexts seriously and find a way between tradition and renewal? What are the challenges and opportunities in terms of internet ministry? How could communities in the cyberworld become faith communities? What pastoral care and guidance could the church offer to victims of the cyberworld?

We are at the start of an exciting millennium with almost unlimited potential. Will the church be able to engage with these challenges, or will the church again leave people to struggle on their own, as in previous revolutions? It is often said that space is the new frontier that needs to be explored. Maybe there will a church on Mars someday. But first, the church needs to find a way into the cyberworld.

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