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The ministry of presence in absence: Pastoring online in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Since time immemorial, pastoral ministry has been physically present in church buildings, homes and public places, providing face-to-face care and reassurance of God's love and accompaniment. The tragic outbreak and speedy spread of COVID-19 from China triggered unprecedented challenges, dramatically led to restrictive national lockdowns, closure of physical meetings, fundamentally unsettled routine ways of doing ministry and demanded total digitalisation of the gospel, which eventually rendered the ministry of physical presence absent. While doing ministry online seemed to have been working well in other countries, it has been a uniquely different trajectory in Zimbabwe predominantly because of financial, material, human incapacitation as well as cultural and other contextual factors. Scholarly research on online pastoral praxis in Zimbabwe is scanty. Applying Osmer's methodology, this study reviewed lived experiences and challenges of pastors in ministering virtually since the beginning of lockdowns early 2020 hitherto late 2021. It interrogated the ministry of presence and understanding of digitalisation. Amidst a plethora of social, political and economic drawbacks, this article unearthed erratic capability, affordability, availability, connectivity and feasibility of digitalised shepherding. Taking physical presence as incarnation of the triune God, demonstration of love, care and accompaniment as indispensable in pastoral ministry, this article stressed the significance of physical presence. However, considering the prevailing COVID-19 and contextual constrictions, it recommended that pastors should appreciate and submit their congregants to the ubiquitous and indispensable spiritual presence of God while redoubling efforts in ministering through contextually feasible ways until lockdowns end.

Contribution: This article provides a critical biblical and scholarly review and analysis of the ministry of presence during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. This will provoke pastors, churches and church bodies to rethink and reconsider progressive strategies towards contextually effective pastoral theology, ministry and ecclesiology in times of pandemics in the context of economic volatility.

Keywords: ministry of presence; pastoring; church online; COVID-19; digitalisation.

Introduction

Pastoral ministry has been physically present in ecclesial buildings, homes and public places, giving face-to-face care and reassurance of God's love and accompaniment. The catastrophic outbreak and swift spread of COVID-19 late 2019 from Wuhan, China (Zhu et al. 2020:1), triggered unprecedented challenges for congregations (Afolaranmi 2020:12), dramatically led to restrictive national lockdowns, closure of physical gatherings, fundamentally unsettled routine ways of doing ministry and demanded total digitalisation of the gospel, which eventually closed down the physical ministry of presence. Although doing ministry online seemed to have been working well in other countries, it has been a very different story in Zimbabwe. Amidst a plethora of social, political and economic drawbacks, this article discovered erratic capability, affordability, availability, connectivity and feasibility of digitalised shepherding. Applying Osmer's (2008) methodology that addresses four questions –'What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond?' through descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative and pragmatic engagements, coupled with relevant literature, this study reviewed lived experiences and challenges of pastors in ministering virtually since the beginning of lockdowns early 2020 up to late 2021. Although multiple studies have been done about pastoring online in other countries, the ministry of presence is an ongoing challenge in the poverty-stricken Zimbabwean context. Thus, the article commences by providing a brief background of the Zimbabwean scene from the outbreak of COVID-19 hitherto late 2021, and the relevant issues rooted in it. Thereafter, it will outline the introduction of lockdowns and how the church

responded. The following section will give a structured overview of the discussion of challenges encountered in pastoring online in Zimbabwe. Subsequently, a conceptual delineation of the ministry of presence will be done. The succeeding section will explore the meaning of digitalisation. Once that is done, the article concludes that physical presence is the viable incarnation of the invisible presence of God in Zimbabwe, which can, however, not be pursued in the prevailing context of COVID-19 restrictions; hence pastors should do what they can to utilise contextually sustainable media while appreciating and submitting themselves and their congregations to the everlasting presence of God until the end of lockdowns.

Overview background of the study

After the breaking of troubling news about the rapid spread of coronavirus around neighbouring countries, the Zimbabwean government introduced lockdowns, closed borders and restricted gatherings in line with World Health Organization (WHO) precautionary measures from March 2020 (Mavhunga 2020).

Since then, Zimbabwe has been seized with a series of lockdowns and varying restrictions in correspondence with fluctuating rates of infections and deaths from time to time. In response to lockdown measures, some sectors shut down operations completely and adopted a wait-and-see approach, others locked their physical offices and embraced digitalisation to continue working remotely, while few special service providers remained physically operational from their usual workplaces (Chaora 2020:12–13).

When churches turned online in Zimbabwe

Traditionally, the digital and theological worlds appeared distant from each other and were kept like separate compartments of life for decades (Bogle 2020:8). However, as Garner (2013:254) asserts, the Internet had to be conceptualised as a valuable tool to reach people with the gospel beyond physical barriers. Regardless of any assumed or experienced challenges, the Internet should be utilised to accomplish the Great Commission (derived from Mt 20:18–20) in any environment (Huston 2006). With the same considerations, when the Zimbabwean government instructed churches to stop gathering, pastors were forced to adopt digitalisation as an alternative means to continue executing their work under prevailing restrictive conditions.

Zimbabwe's main daily newspaper, The Herald, reported (2021b) that some churches such as Heartfelt International Ministries (HIM), Guta RaMwari and United Congregational churches had resorted to social media (like Facebook and WhatsApp) to conduct services.

A number of other churches attempted to use WhatsApp messenger and Facebook to post sermons, facilitate discussions, meetings and related programs with audio, visual and written content in harmonising attempts to augment their communication and services delivery.

Recently, the government of Zimbabwe allowed churches to reopen (up to a maximum of 100 people) for only those who have been vaccinated. The church found that impractical, arguing that she is biblically accommodating and not discriminative. Besides that, millions of Zimbabweans have not yet been vaccinated because of various factors such as health conditions, age, inadequacy and slow uptake, coupled with fears of ineffectiveness and unguaranteed safety of the vaccines.

According to WHO's statistics about Zimbabwean vaccination, only 5 044 188 Zimbabweans got vaccinated as of 21 September 2021. Meanwhile, the World Population Review (2021) says that Zimbabwe currently has a population of 15 148 403 people. While some churches opened for the vaccinated in accordance with the government regulation, very few managed to gather (The Herald 2021c). The majority of churches did not reopen, some continued digitally (NewsDay 2021) and others kept working from home. Some of the digitally disconnected churches held family services indoors while others shelved both.

Churches thus, somewhat, got dismembered.

As Jesus Christ came to the world, incarnated God, the Holy Spirit continues that embodiment through the church and Apostle Paul speaks of the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit (Floberg 2020:17–19). In view of that, the ministry of physical presence is believed to be fundamental for congregations and communities to uphold. Alongside the opinions of John Floberg, going virtual feels like being disembodied. It is, however, appreciated that presence should be conceptualised beyond physical to spiritual togetherness (Garner 2013:258–259).

Corrigan and Flanagan (2017:3–4) concurringly observe that churches wrestle about whether flesh-and-blood presence is needed for true Christian community. For them, presence is a mystery and manifestation of the invisible God, which is theologically drawn from the creation of human beings as physical, social and spiritual beings who need both physical and spiritual presence. They explain that God became flesh and blood in the form of Jesus Christ so as to provide a fuller revelation of God, and some parts of Christian rituals require the physicality of sacraments (e.g. baptism, Holy Communion) as integral parts of their community identity.

Presence is, therefore, a visible sign of invisible grace through which spiritual presence inspires and necessitates physical presence with others before God. While churches in Zimbabwe got physically disrupted, it was an opportunity for them to submit themselves to spiritual companionship to pave way for the Spirit of God to work freely in a person or situation without them possibly getting in the way. Thus, their physical absence became an opportunity for congregants to experience spiritual presence while they turned online. In attempts to operate digitally, churches, however, faced disturbing challenges mostly with regard to traditional embodiment and liturgical disruptions.

Traditional embodiment

As the COVID-19 pandemic prohibited congregants from meeting together publicly, many of them felt the inexplicable pain of social isolation. Having been used to meet, pray, sing, dance, share testimonies, prayer requests and the word of God together, being forbidden from physical meetings implied some dismembering. While pastors eventually ministered online and congregants could connect with them through WhatsApp, SMS and Facebook, the majority of congregants felt hurt as they got physically cut off from each other while others took it as a passing phase in which they needed to appreciate that they were all still membered as the body of Jesus Christ spiritually and could, sometimes, access ecclesial services online.

Conversely, as Tim Hutchings argues, the physically embodied spiritual community is irreplaceable, the Internet can seldom replace face-to-face human relationships and cannot be a substitute for physical fellowship and Christian community. He discredits digitalising, arguing that it makes Christianity superficial and centred on human preference, in which individuals choose when and how to connect and disconnect (Hutchings 2014:5–8). This is why Parish (2020:6) says that 'the transfer of the sacraments into the digital or virtual realm carries with it the potential to disembody the essence of Christianity so that it becomes a cacophony of information and observation and ceases to be a religion that is lived out within the human, physical community'.

It is established that online alternatives left churches based on access to a computer, smart phone or television instead of access to baptismal sacraments. Resultantly, most congregants felt their identities and beings challenged.

Resonating with the Zimbabwean experience of losing bodily togetherness, fellowship and worship, Challies (2014) says that:

> [C]yberspace promotes a digital disincarnation, encouraging users to leave their bodies behind and shed the limitations of presence by increasingly replacing the world of flesh and blood with an alternate world of bits and bytes. (p. 112)

Nevertheless, it is observed that disembodiment is both disadvantageous and advantageous to churches, because the historic Christian tradition holds that God became flesh and blood in Jesus Christ who ministered on earth in order to reveal God more fully; hence humanity is intentionally created as embodied and offered new life through a physical resurrection, while being disembodied by online media equally extends human abilities to network and communicate with others in new and powerful ways, depending on contextual variables (Garner 2013:260–261). The issue of disembodiment in the experiences of churches in Zimbabwe is thus both challenging and encouraging as congregants found themselves losing physical presence and concurrently got an opportunity to realise spiritual presence.

Liturgical disruptions

The outbreak of COVID-19 led to the suspension of liturgical services of churches in Zimbabwe.

Some long-standing traditions of worship, singing, dancing and laying of hands on the sick and those with different requests could not be done online and were later modified as restrictions got changed in accordance with government directives. The most widely used WhatsApp and SMS media only accommodated limited messages. Consequently, congregants missed several parts of their liturgical services that they traditionally used to have. In the same way that Chukwuma (2021:5) observed in Nigeria, most Zimbabwean churches stopped having handshakes with one another as a sign of greeting, welcoming and congratulating one another before and after services.

More so, rituals of baptism, Holy Communion, weddings and baby dedication were disrupted in Zimbabwean churches. In concurrence with Parish (2020:7), migration from physical presence to virtual presence disabled congregations from various rituals and their benefits. Agreeably, Parish (2020) adds that:

> [A]lthough church leaders have embraced the value and potential of this new connection between religion and social media, that embrace has not been imbued with a sense that this is a permanent relationship. (p. 6)

Helen Parish (2020) mentions the Roman Catholic church as an example of churches that have maintained that it is a necessary duty for the faithful to attend Mass on Sundays and other days of obligation, by being physically present in the church, arguing that 'the ability to watch Mass on screen, or listen to a radio broadcast, does not in usual circumstances constitute the fulfilment of that obligation and testimony of belonging in which the faithful people strengthen one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit'. According to her:

> [P]hysical presence in a church is easier to recognise in oneself and in others than virtual presence in an online congregation, in which the use of avatars, an inability to see or hear the presence of others, and the lost sense of touch can diminish that sense of fellowship. (p. 7)

In view of such conceptions, liturgical disruptions in Zimbabwe were distressing to congregations. To my agreement, Mathee (2018:218–221) argues that while ritual liturgical expression in cyberspace affects embodiment culturally, and otherwise, digitalisation should be appreciated and embraced to evolve in emerging contexts. It is accordingly viewed that Zimbabwean online encounters should be observed both negatively as they are and positively to enlighten congregations about positive sides of virtual ministry where they can develop, operate from and avoid getting stuck during times of lockdowns.

The challenges of pastoring online in Zimbabwe

When pastors engaged in ministering online in attempts to avoid total absence in times that physical meetings were forbidden, many could not sustain their presence because of

a number of challenges that were militating against them. This section, therefore, presents the economic crisis, lack of preparedness, material resources, lack of human resources, communication disruptions, cultural disturbances; technical constraints, high costs of data, electricity blackouts and congestion on online platforms as their main difficulties.

Economic crisis

The majority of congregations and pastors could not afford online ministry because of economic problems. Zimbabwe has been in a deepening economic crisis since the reign of the late Robert Gabriel Mugabe up to the military assisted rule (Cook 2017:1) of incumbent president Emmerson Mnangagwa in November 2017 to date (Masunungure & Bratton 2018:1).

The Zimbabwean economy has been disturbingly floundering as confirmed by increased dependence on primary commodities such as platinum, diamonds and gold; massive deindustrialisation and informalisation of the economy (Kanyenze, Chitambara & Tyson 2017:6–14). The country has also encountered low investment levels because of political volatility, and policy discrepancies that destabilised business confidence. Issues of flawed rule of law, command policies, weakening of public institutions, fiscal and debt mismanagement, corruption, heavy taxation, high inflation and high liquidity constraints ruined the Zimbabwean economy (Bhoroma 2021; Pasara & Garidzirai 2020:2). As a result, the majority of Zimbabweans have been subjected to abject poverty (Chingono 2021). In such an economic quagmire, congregations and pastors could not afford costs of attending online ministry.

Lack of preparedness

Regardless of aforementioned economic drawbacks, the COVID-19 pandemic demanded a quick move of operations to virtual modes. Globally, the process of moving the church online demanded research, budget, plans and expertise (Elbert 2020:12–14). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, the COVID-19 pandemic drew some human resources to quarantine centres, intensive care units (ICUs) and that wreaked havoc in processes of human resource mobilisation and development for the church to catch up with the digital demands. Such predicaments puzzlingly hard-pressed Zimbabwean denominations as material, human and financial resources got unsettled.

Lack of material resources

The 'new normal', socially-distanced context demanded a drastic approach to pastoral ministry, which costs digital resources such as smartphones, laptops, tablets, recording cameras; technical expertise, data, electricity and network. Because of limited capacities, few pastors from economically sound denominations engaged in live streaming and the bulk of them failed. This means that pastors could not massively execute their pastoral work online while physical meetings were suspended. It is, however, recommendable that pastors should utilise their limited resources and embrace any viable medium like SMS, which is conveniently accessible to the least resourced for short messages while

surrendering their congregations to the interminable spiritual presence until physical presence is fully restored.

Lack of human resources

While digitalisation required takers-in to adapt to a new speed, new efficiency and fresh ways of doing things in the workplace (Shibata 2021:19), very few pastors had adequate knowledge-based skills to use digital gadgets in ministry. A large number of pastors could not efficiently digitalise their ministries. Because of inadequate skill sets in the digitised vineyard, some pastors have been unable to come to terms with the pace of new technologies. A number of pastors, especially the elderly, and the less educated found it hard to cope with new technologies. Such a situation found pastoring online ill-resourced, inconsistent and inefficient in Zimbabwe.

Nonetheless, I propose that pastors who are unable to use new technologies could seek assistance from their congregations (and, if need arises, outside their churches) and make efforts to learn essential skills in order to keep themselves relevant and effective in their changing contexts.

Communication disruptions

Universally, the church is used to face-to-face communication of the gospel (Reimann 2017:70). While digital media could be useful to advance ecclesial and pastoral communication in Zimbabwe, migration from physical to online ministry precluded pastors' access to voice and body language that are innately integral parts of communication.

Unlike in other countries where online communication has wide fluidity, pragmatist usability and effectiveness than conventional communication as Yang (2021:82) views, the Zimbabwean context is affected by electrical, network and resources problems that weaken fluidity, usability, reliability and efficacy.

It is undebatable that without audible and visible signals, it is difficult to communicate clearly. Communication is enhanced by gestures, which aids speakers in formulating speech by retrieving elusive words from lexical memory, conveying information to listeners and enhancing listeners' comprehension (Byrne & Nuzum 2020:208; Driskell & Radtke 2015:446).

Digital communication appears static, disembodied and cannot fully convey gestures, tone and facial expressions, which enhances encoding and decoding of messages. Keeping in mind that human beings communicate well with gesticulations, migrating from physical to online presence disrupted such non-communicative functions of speakers and listeners' gestures for fruitful communication. Physical expressions are essential in accomplishing any communication, alongside silent reflection and deep listening as people share their personal issues and concerns during times of need, especially when bidding to communicate our emotions.

As Khroul (2021:202) detected in Russia, digitalisation created opportunities and challenges in communication for religious

institutions, pastors and congregants. The same applies to the Zimbabwean case. The adoption of digital ministry attracted a variety of information sources, led to a shift from interpersonal to digitally mediated communication. It is remarked that digital technologies came as a determining force, challenged hierarchical information filters and management of church secrets. So, as Victor Khroul (2021:202) noted in the Russian setting, 'digitalization became more liquid, more ambivalent and pluralistic in terms of values and practices'.

For few somewhat resourced Zimbabwean pastors who quickly encompassed digitalisation, keeping present online turned puzzling in face of digital gadgets' inadvertent loss of electrical power, network and incapacities of their congregants. It is, therefore, argued that pastors can adopt presence in absence – being absent physically, while submitting their congregations to the spiritual presence of God while they complementarily make use of any contextually viable medium like SMS until other media, and in-person meetings get feasible.

Cultural disturbances

Culturally, Zimbabweans value gathering physically in good and bad times, such as weddings, and funerals. Considering increasing coronavirus infections and resultant deaths, the Zimbabwean government regulated funerals, reduced number of mourners to 30 (The Herald 2021a), recently relaxed to 100 (Xinhua News 2021) and decreed that those who die (of any cause) should not be taken home, corpses must not be viewed, but hurried and quickly buried under strict health protocols while limited attendants remain four meters away from the graveyard. While restricting funerals was intended to reduce viral infections as funerals were regarded as super spreaders, it clogged processes of grieving and closure.

In the predominant Zimbabwean Shona and most other local cultures, a typical funeral attracts 300 mourners or more. The body of the dead is traditionally taken home to allow families, relatives and friends to pay their last respects, shake hands, mourn, celebrate the life of the departed and have church service graced with comforting songs, dances and sermons before viewing the corpse and eventually attending burial (Dzinamarira 2021:1; Moyo & Mazvarirwofa 2021). It is thus discernible that the highly controlled and quickened burial of those who die during the COVID-19 pandemic aggravate pains and prolong closure to the grieving.

Mathee (2018:222–223) concurs that cyberspace and ritual liturgical expression in cyberspace are indeed areas of immense complexity. Although he argues that within these complexities lies the opportunity for a new and evolved ritual repertoire forged in the context of the late 20th century and continued in the 21st century because of high connectivity, formation and thriving of liminal communities on cyber space, in Zimbabwe, liturgy can be difficult to be flexible and porous because of poor connectivity and lack of required resources.

In realisation of the Zimbabwean contextual predicament, how could the sick and the grieving who lost their loved ones and had their funerals restricted and hurried feel the presence of their pastors online, especially when accessibility and connectivity remained problematic? The same applies to weddings and related events. Thus, ministering online encountered grave cultural challenges in Zimbabwe.

Technical constraints

Digitalisation in Zimbabwe has been often bedevilled by poor service delivery, technical faults, costly maintenance and upgrading of digital devices by service providers (Shibata 2021:21). Unlike in other countries, it has been common in Zimbabwe that service providers struggle to maintain their infrastructure and stay consistent because of deteriorating national economic haemorrhage. In the light of aforesaid issues, the online presence got inconsistent. In some cases and certain days, WhatsApp and Facebook got totally shelved in Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, SMS remained feasible for short messages.

High costs of data

A number of local pastors appreciated that the COVID-19 crisis created an opportunity for them to develop innovativeness and reach out to their congregants digitally. Unfortunately, digitalisation grew expensive as network providers kept raising their tariffs in attempts to keep their businesses viable in the unstable Zimbabwean economy. Lucky Mabhiza wrote that very few Zimbabweans embraced online worship services because of the high cost of data, lack of smartphones and lack of interest (Mabhiza 2021). Corresponding with the waning Zimbabwean economic situation, the biggest local telecommunication companies such as Econet Wireless and NetOne hike their tariffs almost every quarter. The upsurge of data tariffs automatically dismissed innumerable people from virtual services as they could not afford.

Practically, growing number of congregants have been left out of the church. Those who cannot afford smartphones, computers, electricity and data as well as others who are in remote areas completely without gadgets, power and connectivity gave up. However, those who have any kind of phones could be, **sometimes**, reached through SMS. Communication through SMS could never be reliable because of electrical power cuts.

Electricity blackouts

As reported by the Zimbabwe Independent Newspaper (28 February 2020), the supply of electricity in Zimbabwe has been erratic, costly and frequently hiked for the past decades (Mananavire 2020). The Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) has also been failing to provide enough electricity to the entire nation, effected load-shedding and that eventually threw the nation into arbitrary blackouts. Silas Luthingo Rusvingo revealed that Zimbabwe will grapple with power shortages until late

2022 when the country is projected to have enough energy supply. Currently, the disheartening power supply and demand statistics for Zimbabwe demand 2200 megawatts against a meagre power supply of 1300 megawatts, which signposts a frightening power deficit of 900 megawatts that can only be imported from neighbouring Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries such as South Africa and Mozambique when they have a surplus of power supply. Conversely, Zimbabwe struggles to finance power imports because of economic meltdown as confirmed by non-payment of some previous electricity debts (Rusvingo 2014:23).

As noted by Alhelou et al. (2019:16–17), intermittent electricity provision and outages disturb network provision, maintenance, information, communication and technological operations. In addition to that, electrical problems affect the recharging of digital gadgets. Such effects of electrical power problems have been intermittently faced in Zimbabwe. Thus, digitalised pastoral programs and services have been congruently disturbed by electricity and network problems.

Congestion on online platforms

Amidst swift digitalisation of various services in Zimbabwe as lockdowns grounded almost everything, multiplied number of people and organisations turned online to continue operating. The increase of people working digitally congested demand for electricity and network, which was already unreliable in Zimbabwe. While the collaboration of digitisation and digitalisation could renew ecclesiology and pastoral ministry, as mentioned before, the Zimbabwean national economic predicament distressed network and electricity providers to magnitudes that they struggled to efficiently deliver their services, so they interminably reviewed their charges in attempts to keep in business.

As both physical and online meetings got obstructed and, thus, erratic, the only most dependable presence is spiritual, hence the need to appreciate and submit to it.

Delineating the ministry of presence

The term presence is widely conceptualised in various ways. There are distinct but overlapping dimensions of spiritual and physical presence (Lombard & Jones 2006). Corrigan and Flanagan (2017:3–4) avow that presence is a mystery and manifestation of a sacramental unity of inner and outer realities. For them, human presence is a creative and turbulent sacrament, a visible sign of invisible grace. They explain that the mystery of presence never leaves us alone. Their views reflect that behind and beyond our images, words and thoughts show the presence of God who is always with us spiritually and invisibly.

The ministry of presence affirms that gospel ministers' physical presence among congregants encourages the hope for the future and comfort for the present, as well as fostering a realisation of the genuine spiritual presence and providence of God. It also provides opportunities for biblical servanthood as one ministers to the needs of one's people. Accordingly, the ministry of presence is both physical and spiritual (Tinsley 2012:14). Agreeably, Tinsley (2012:16) elucidates that the ministry of presence is a visible, physical partnership with the spiritual and invisible presence of God that brings calmness to chaos, victory over despair, comfort in loss and sufficiency in need. While Tinsley spoke in the context of the work of chaplains, the same applies to pastors as they practise the presence of God through prayers, rites, rituals, listening, share scriptures and acts of service.

Corrigan and Flanagan (2017:3–4) say that 'we need to hold the interior and exterior, visible and invisible, known and unknown, temporal and eternal together, in order to keep our balance'. So, the ministry of presence is in the companionship of people. There is, therefore, a need to balance physical presence with absence – to allow spiritual presence to flow while subsequently withdrawing physical presence. 'The rationale for such withdrawal is to pave the way for the Spirit of God to work freely in a person or situation without us potentially getting in the way. Thus, not only our presence but also our absence becomes a gift to others' (Corrigan & Flanagan 2017:3–4).

Presence as spiritual

According to Keeran (2017:2), presence is spiritual in the sense that unlike secular life that is disconnected from, and without awareness of God, sacred life is always conscious of God, sees everything and every moment in the context of the spiritual and says that 'the God of the universe who holds everything together is fully and personally present right here, right now'. In view of that, God is always present, always caring, always guiding and directing and nurturing, always eager to hear from you, always forgiving, always loving, always reaching out to you, always watching and waiting for you to turn to him, and when you do turn to God, he sings and rejoices over you.

Engaging Psalms 139, which says:

> Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. (vv. 7–10)

Keeran (2017:2) contends that presence is spiritual and always there irrespective of changing circumstances.

Concurringly, Davida Foy Crabtree (n.d.) stresses that it is necessary for pastors to, sometimes, be physically absent and allow the spiritual presence of God to have a way in the lives of congregants while keeping in touch with them online.

In the same perspective, Woodworth (2018) calls it the ministry of absence, which is 'the ministerial practice of creating space for God to minister to individuals directly,

without the aid of pastoral mediators'. He explicates that human physical presence provides a comfortable alternative to interactions with God, whose touch and voice are far less tangible. Additionally, he aptly says that 'the ministry of absence is the art of leaving, for the ability to be articulately absent, and most of all for a creative withdrawal'. It is observed that practising the ministry of absence is not refusing to be present, but strategically planned physical withdrawal for some time while always available online.

To my correspondence, Markus Bockmuehl clarifies spiritual presence from the continuing presence of Jesus Christ as God's invisible presence which believers encounter through dreams, visions and intangible manifestations in their daily lives. Drawing from the foregoing submissions, presence is realised both in physical and absence dimensions when human beings interact and leave each other while the triune God remains present spiritually (Bockmuehl 2017:59–60).

It is conclusively comprehensible that physical and spiritual absence and presence complement each other and can be virtually mediated. However, as Gergen (2002:4) perceives, online mediation 'is profoundly disrespectful of tradition, established order and hierarchy'. As previously discussed under the section of challenges of pastoring online in Zimbabwe, digitalising ministry clashed with traditional, cultural and liturgical order. Befittingly, when physical presence is restricted, it appears timely for pastors to attend to the ever available and effective spiritual presence in any context.

Presence as physical

Presence is also understood as being there physically. Sarah Butler (2004) shares a touching story that illustrates presence as physical. She visited someone named Patti who was in an intensive care unit. When Sarah Butler (2004) arrived, Patti had already been pronounced dead. Patti had suffered an inexplicable spontaneous bleeding of the spinal column. After a while, Patti attempted to scream to the doctor that she was alive, but she couldn't force out the words. Sarah Butler (2004) felt helpless, hopeless and wanted to flee from the scene. However, she managed to ask:

> 'Patti, I am so sorry. What can I do for you?' With a beseeching moan, Patti replied, 'Love me, and just love me!' Gratefully, Sarah sighed and answered, 'That I can do'. (p. 13)

Patti's desperate need for some demonstration of love through being there physically rightly portrays the ministry of physical presence. In the ensuing days, Sarah Butler (2004) just sat with Patti, allowing her presence to be the incarnation and reassurance of God's love. In a thought-provoking book titled 'Between Man and Man', Martin Buber impeccably says that when two people are close, together, they silently break each other's loneliness and communication happens sacramentally, without words, which he calls 'mystical shared silence' (Buber 2004:4–5).

Sonny Guild relates a similar story that further illuminates presence as physical. He says that a woman named Mary called him early morning at 4 AM, telling him that her husband of 30 years had died. Sonny quickly dressed up and went to be with Mary. He does not recall what he said, but vividly remembers that he prayed, and just mourned with her (Guild 1992:1). According to him, being physically present is more important than sharing words online. She explains that when heartbroken, or in any problematic situation, knowing that I am not alone, that someone cares and is with me, physically, is transforming. Sonny Guild clarifies that pastoral ministry is a call to participate in the lives of others. This article subscribes to such standpoint that pastoral ministry commits to give others a personal bodily presence. For Sonny Guild (1992:1), being more concerned with being present in people's lives than words makes ministry more transforming and meaningful.

Submissions of Guild (1992) reveal that God modelled the ministry of physical presence for us. He says that God does not always minister to humanity by words, but shows concern for fellowship, making His presence known and felt by participating in our lives. It is discernible that the world has become too individualised and isolated; people now work with machines more than fellow human beings and many of us are left to deal with life issues on our own; hence Guild's (1992:4) perspective that words alone cannot help, but being there for each other makes a transformative difference. Agreeably, the ministry of physical presence is such kind of care that is delivered through the person of the pastor, in a supremely relational manner. While relations and togetherness can be realised spiritually, it can only be visibly showcased by bodily presence. In the middle of current multiple effects of COVID-19 such as loss of financial and material possessions in fighting the pandemic, loss of lives and resultant trauma, fleshly pastoral presence occupies a transforming place in the overall recovery process of the infected, bereaved and the affected. Physical presence incarnates a theology of accompaniment in which pastors accompany congregants, face-to-face, in their day-to-day living experiences.

Holm (2009:29) finds the presence physical, involving deep connection based on mutuality and reciprocity with a potential for transposing both chaplains and the visited. His opinion relatedly applies to pastoral presence, mutually transforming pastors and congregants through bodily fellowship, engagements and accompaniment. Viewpoints of Holm take the ministry of presence from its internalist sense, the 'I–You' relationship in which one is physically present to the other in ways that are totally relational. Concurringly, in their book titled, 'I and Thou', Jewish philosopher Martin Buber and Walter Kaufmann believe that the Hebrew name for God, Yahweh, is best translated as 'I am present' (Buber & Kaufmann 1970:26). Drawing from that conception, they argue that when 'You and I' are in relation, fellowship and when we are physically present to and with each other, God is present. They further submit that when you and I confront, encounter and keep with each other, God is, and keeps present and encounters with us (Buber & Kaufmann 1970:28).

Observing lessons from the ministry of chaplaincy by Holm (2009:30), when pastors meet their parishioners physically, God presents Himself. Holm also irradiates physical presence from the Biblical meeting of disciples with Jesus Christ on the Emmaus road (Lk 24:13–35). He underlines the relational philosophy of being present for each other, deep connection with an awareness of the other towards becoming better and greater than their extant situation. Neil Holm stresses a process of engagement, becoming present, attention, listening and accompaniment as the heart of the ministry of presence. I agree with Holm (2009:41) that physical presence is one means by which takers-in collaborate with God to complete creation, assist the personal awareness, growth and understanding of the other person. While Holm hinged his submissions on chaplaincy, this article employs them on pastoral ministry, arguing that physical presence accomplishes discipleship by accompanying congregants in their journey to maturity in Jesus Christ.

Graham Redding's book, *Pastoral Care Handbook*, underscores that organisationally, visiting and being together with others sets a network of care that builds community, cultivates a sense of belonging and encourages personal involvement. He argues that such togetherness determines how much people support and contribute to the life of an organisation. His reflection proposes that churches that neglect physical presence eventually struggle with fragmentation and declining membership (Redding 2012:22). Theologically, Graham Redding contends that as human beings are made in the image of the Triune God, they are physically relational. For him, the quality of human relationships has a direct bearing on our holistic well-being. Graham Redding points out that Archbishop Desmond Tutu once declared that a person is a person only through other persons (Redding 2012:23), hence the priceless value and need for physical presence.

In his PhD thesis titled 'Presence and Shame in Pastoral Care and Counselling', Neil Pembroke presents physical presence as a fundamental concept of engagement and commitment. He takes engagement with reference to participation. For him, participation has an inter-subjective focus of being in life when one discovers depth with others. Neil Pembroke states that if one is going to establish a dimension of depth in oneself, s/he must engage in contemplation, a high form of participation (Pembroke 1999:50–78). According to him, contemplation is a kind of 'in gathered-ness' in which one establishes 'togetherness' with the reality confronting oneself with others. Neil Pembroke further talks of communion, availability, sincerity, constancy and fidelity as being genuinely present to, and with others. He accentuates that the components of physical presence are belonging to Jesus Christ, belonging to oneself and belonging to fellow human beings. His submission is embedded in love.

Considering above-mentioned perspectives, this article locates physical presence in direct correspondence with the love of God through Jesus Christ who commands his followers to exhibit their love by demonstrating love for each other, because love is of God, hence everyone who loves is of God, and knows God, because God is love (1 Jn 4:7–8).

More so, other scholars discover physical presence from trinity. Through his book titled 'Renewing Pastoral Practice: Trinitarian Perspectives on Pastoral Care and Counselling', Neil Pembroke adds that physical participation in each other's life is a Trinitarian virtue. He describes God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as indwelling and interpenetrating one another so completely that we can never intelligibly speak of one without involving, at least implicitly, the other two as well (Pembroke 2006:72–74). According to him, the three exist in a dynamic interrelationship with one another, giving to and receiving from one another what they most properly are. Learning from his proposal, such a virtue of participation and fellowship is crucial in visible pastoral ministry. Neil Pembroke complementarily mentions empathy as critical, expounding that it establishes a communion that mitigates 'the metaphysical aloneness of the other'. Pembroke (2006:73) advances a thesis that empathetic communion is foregrounded at the level of imagination. For him, empathy is construed in terms of focusing inwards in which one uses one's own feelings as a point of contact with what the other is experiencing. That way, when one senses despair in the other, one turns to one's own experiences to realise that feeling. He asserts that empathy is essentially projecting into the experience of the other through imagination (Pembroke 2006:74). In other words, it is interpreted as an imaginative projection. His observations puts to light that empathy is an active, searching quality of entering the other's world. Therefore, such entering in the other's world requires maintenance of interpersonal boundaries. It is through such imaginative projection that physically partaking in others' experiences becomes imperative and conceivable.

John Coleman opines that pastoral ministry is a concrete, functional and active service that advances the kingdom of God through physical pastoral presence (Coleman n.d.: 9–10). Monica Coleman buttresses that conception, arguing that ministry demands showing up and sticking around, doing face-to-face visitations, demonstrating togetherness and fellowship (Coleman 2011:2).

Pastors in Zimbabwe traditionally exercise the ministry of presence through visiting congregants at home, hospitals, workplaces, businesses as well as attending funerals, weddings, parties and related events. It is appreciated that such visits create conducive grounds and environment for life-bearing fellowship, sharing of the gospel and just being physically together, reflecting the incarnation and reassurance of God's love and accompaniment with brethren in good and bad times. Because the visitations, attention and participation with believers' lives got circumscribed by lockdowns, this article argues that the ministry of physical presence was rendered absent by swift shifts to digitalisation. Because ministering online has been highly problematic in Zimbabwe, it is pertinent for pastors to take lockdown times as indicative reminders of the permanently pivotal, invisible yet life-

bearing spiritual presence of God, and lead their congregations to bow to it.

Biblical conceptualisation of the ministry of presence

The ministry of presence is modelled by God as reflected throughout the Bible. The Bible indicates that God had concern for His fellowship, making His presence known and participating in human lives (Guild 1992:2). Accordingly, God demonstrated from before the ultimate revelation of Jesus Christ and eventual fellowship through Jesus Christ that He personally gave Himself to His people. This is why, the presence of God was realised and experienced throughout the Old and the New Testament as He acted in human lives, responded to their needs, delivered them from bondage, ailments and showed Himself up amidst people. Thus, we read of the presence and work of God with Israel, for example, when He released Israelites from Egyptian bondage to their promised land. According to Guild (1992:5), when Israel recounted her faith, it was always in terms of Yahweh's redemptive handiwork in her midst. God's presence was a religious dichotomy. That is, God was both transcendent and personally present to Israel. This is the mystery and paradox of the story. While preserving His transcendence, God stepped into the realm of human experience and ministered to the needs of His people. He chose to be in their midst because there was no other way for their needs to be addressed. It was precisely because

God was both transcendent and personally present that redemptive possibilities were brought about for Israel.

The presence of God was also showcased through Jesus Christ. As the Bible speaks of Jesus Christ as Immanuel – 'which means God with us' (Is 7:14, Mt 1:22–23). God drew and remained near His people as he participated in their lives in flesh. God made His presence known as He consistently responded to their needs. God delved in a redemptive mission. Isaiah wrote about it (Is 61:1–2), and Jesus applied it to himself (Lk 4):

> The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (vv. 18–19)

This was the best way to address the needs of humanity beyond spiritual presence.

Furthermore, the presence of God is also demonstrated through the Holy Spirit. When Jesus Christ was leaving the earth, he promised that he would not leave disciples alone, but would ask God to send the Holy Spirit to live with and in human beings – and that demonstrated the Trinitarian presence (Jn 14:16–18). The Holy Spirit, thus, shows the presence of God in the lives of believers, which also echoed through the following scriptures:

- 1 Corinthians 3:16, 'Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?'
- 1 Corinthians 6:

  > Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? (v. 19)

- 2 Corinthians 6:

  > Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, 'I will dwell in them and walk among them; And I will be their God, and they shall be My people'. (v. 16)

- Ezekiel 36:27, 'I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances';
- Isaiah 63:

  > Then His people remembered the days of old, of Moses. Where is He who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of His flock? Where is He who put His Holy Spirit in the midst of them. (v. 11)

- 2 Timothy 1:14, 'Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you'.

Bockmuehl (2017:46) adds the following Bible verses and stresses that they are indicative of the spiritual presence of God.

> It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:20)

- And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' (Gal 4:6)
- Do you not realise that Jesus Christ is in you? (2 Corinthians 13:5; cf. Romans 8:10)
- The Lord is near (Phil 4:5)
- How great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col 1:27)
- For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3)
- I pray that … Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith (Eph 3:16–17).

For Bockmuehl (2017:48–50), such spiritual (physically absent) presence shaped the everyday lives and gatherings of Paul's churches. Accordingly, the Pauline theme of presence deploys strikingly concrete imagery of the body of Christ, which inspires participation and identification with the present Christ in places like Romans 12:3–8, 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 as well Eucharistic texts like 1 Corinthians 10:16–17; 11:23–7; 12:27. When believers are 'in Christ', it suggests a sense of being located in Jesus Christ as introduced at baptism when the baptised die and rise with him (Rm 6:1–11, Col 2:12–13, Eph 2:5). Thus, the body of Christ invokes the presence of Jesus Christ upon the gathering of the Church.

The spiritual presence is, therefore, depersonalised, invisible and intangible, hence the need for physical presence for accompaniment.

Just as Jesus Christ also ministered to humanity physically when he came on earth, contemporary ministers of the gospel should do the same. Pastors are called to be with and walk alongside those dealing with pain, suffering and grief. In other words, the indwelling presence of God and ministerial presence of pastors work synergistically to effectuate divine presence. When pastors avail themselves physically, God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and Holy Spirit serves lives through them.

It is further enlightening to note narrative examples of the Samaritan woman's meeting with Jesus Christ at the well (Jn 4), Nicodemus (Jn 3) and the case of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Ac 8). They depict physical presence as enlightening and transforming. When Jesus Christ faced His greatest test and got overwhelmed (Mk 14:32–42), He asked Peter, James and John to go to a mountain with Him. He requested them to stay and keep watching. Jesus Christ needed their physical presence. According to Guild (1992:4), such physical presence is one of the most powerful and meaningful ways that we can minister through, to people who are overwhelmed by any issues. With such stories in mind, knowing that someone is present at your critical need helps more than words. As Guild further expounds (Guild 1992:4), the presence of a Christian has a great meaning beyond just having another body in the room. When Christians express their care and love for one another by being present, they express the love of Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that believers are the body of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 12:27). As members of the Christian community and priests of God (1 Pt 4:9; Rv 1:6), we incarnate the triune loving, caring, gracious, compassionate and empathetic God by being present for each other.

The Bible gives an enlightening conversation of Jesus Christ and Simon Peter about the ministry of presence through shepherding (Jn 21:15–17). Jesus Christ asked Simon Peter after a breakfast:

> 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' Peter said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you'. Jesus Christ responded, 'Feed my lambs'. A second time Jesus Christ said to Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter said, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you'. Jesus Christ said to him, 'Tend my sheep'. He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you'. Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep'. (vv. 15–17)

Understanding that the act of tendering sheep demands physical presence, the emphasis of Jesus Christ that if Simon Peter loved him, he should take care of His sheep gives supreme value and endorsement to physical shepherding. Throughout the Old and the New Testament, it is discernible that God always gave His presence to His people. Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit demonstrated the same, hence the need for clerics to exhibit presence in their current contexts.

Understanding digitalisation

Digitalisation is presently massively omnipresent and seems to be one of the influential forces behind countless scientific, social or business developments, especially after the outbreak of coronavirus that restricted physical interactions.

While it has garnered burgeoning attention and become a global buzzword (Mentsiev et al. 2020:2960; Ulbrich et al. 2021:10), digitalisation has been closely associated, confused and interchangeably used with digitisation in a broad range of literature (Brennen & Kreiss 2014).

It must be clarified that although generally highly assimilated, digitalisation and digitisation are two poles apart and not interchangeable.

Daniel Schallmo and Christopher Williams note that scholars across disciplines employ the term digitisation with reference to the technical process of converting streams of analogue information into digital bits of 1s and 0s with discrete and discontinuous values (Schallmo & Williams 2018:6). Researchers across different fields delimit digitisation to the transformation of some types of analogue or physical artefact into a digital artefact. Examples of digitisation can be taking a photograph and turning it into a digital photograph or scanning a paper document and saving it as a digital document (e.g. as PDF) (Gupta 2020). Thus, in simpler terms, digitisation is about converting something non-digital into a digital representation or artefact. It should be acknowledged that digitisation adds new capabilities to non-digital artefacts by making them programmable, addressable, sensible, communicable, memorable, traceable and associable.

Youngjin Yoo clarifies that when digitisation leads to a reconfiguration of underlying socio-technical relationship between producers and users, we call it digitalisation (Yoo 2010:7). Laura Schelenz and Kerstin Schopp concurrently find digitalisation advancing the value of information and the communication through ICT (Schelenz & Schopp 2018:1413). Historically, digitalisation is traced back to the 1950s alongside developments of computers as the action or process of digitising, the conversion of analogue data (expressly in later use of images, videos and text) into digital forms (Schumacher, Sihn & Erol 2016:1).

It is argued that the first modern use of the term 'digitalization' in combination with 'computerization' appeared later in a 1971 essay published in the North American Review by Robert Wachal (1971; Brennen & Kreiss 2014). Scott Brennen and Daniel Kreiss explain that the review discusses social implications of the 'digitalization of society' in the context of considering objections to, and potentials for, computer-assisted humanities research. Since that time, writing about digitalisation developed into colossal literature. Progressively, digitalisation grew to the inclusion of the structuring of diverse domains of social life around digital communication and media infrastructures (Brennen & Kreiss 2014). In that respect, digitalisation can be comprehended as the adoption and increase of computerised technology.

Ulbrich et al. (2021:10–12) conceptualise digitalisation as a societal transformation process that uses ubiquitous digital technologies to connect ever larger social spaces. They elaborate that digitalisation enables multiple social and economic interactions for simultaneous reception, analysis and manipulation of digital data and resultantly influences individual and collective behaviours significantly.

Digitalisation also leverages digital technologies and digitised data. It boosts productivity and efficiency while reducing labour costs (Gupta 2020). While agreeing to the reduction of workforce and corresponding costs, digitalisation is also conceptualised as isolating people away from each other, thus Alaimo and Kallinikos (2017:22) talk of 'computed sociality', meaning that the embracement of digitalisation promotes remote work and downgrades physical engagements. Although digitalisation augments programming, addressing, sensing, communicating, tracing, memorising and developing non-digital artefacts (Yoo 2010:7), as well as facilitating information and communication technological advancements (Schelenz & Schopp 2018:1413), numerous scholars like Mentsiev et al. (2020:2960–2961), Urbach and Roglinger (2019:1), Parviainen et al. (2017:64), Schumacher et al. (2016) and Gorensek and Kohont (2019) appreciate that digitalisation also affects the connectivity of individuals and organisations. Their views sound contextually relevant in that, for example, when people attend church services, and related programs online, having been used to face-to-face meetings, they somewhat enjoy the convenience of digital engagement and simultaneously feel disembodied and disengaged. While appreciating virtual meetings, Zimbabweans have been craving for physical presence, which is contextually viable in Zimbabwe.

Despite various challenges faced in Zimbabwe, digitalisation enhances online engagements. Pastors should, therefore, keep pursuing it, while fully submitting congregations to the ubiquitous presence of God in the context of COVID–19.

Conclusion

This article examined the ministry of presence in the context of COVID-19 and digitalisation in Zimbabwe. The study depicted the criticality of presence in pastoring as a Trinitarian virtue that is well demonstrated by God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit's indwelling and interpenetrating of one another and subsequent deployment of the church for the continuity of divine fellowship. Applying Osmer's (2008) methodology, it addressed challenges of pastoring online in Zimbabwe. Unlike in resourceful countries where ministerial presence is somewhat realised through modern digital media, the Zimbabwean setting differs because of economic capriciousness, cultural factors, lack of human, material and financial resources as well as other factors. In light of physicality as incarnation of the triune God, demonstration of love, care and accompaniment as indispensable in pastoral ministry, especially in the context of traumatic social, economic, political and health challenges exacerbated by COVID-19, which left many bereaved, grieved and uncertain of what tomorrow holds, this article relayed that

physical pastoral presence is essentially life-bearing. However, against the prevailing COVID-19 and contextual restrictions, pastors ought to appreciate spiritual presence, apply presence in absence, utilise circumstantially commonly accessible and affordable media while submitting themselves and their churches to God's undying and always guarantee presence until physical gatherings resume.

Acknowledgements

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