From Pews to Pixels: A Pandemic's Digital Paradox of Modest Corporate Church Engagement in a Predominantly Online Postmodern UK Society

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Sarah Elizabeth Taylor

Abstract

This thesis investigates how local churches in the UK navigated the shift into digital spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic, examining community life, ritual practices and leadership approaches within a media-driven society. Set against a backdrop of declining church attendance, growing secularism and widespread digital adoption, the research employs a practical theological methodology using Richard Osmer's pastoral cycle, enabling critical and constructive engagement with real-world complexities across pre-pandemic, mid-pandemic and post-pandemic contexts.

A literature review identifies existing *waves of scholarly inquiry* in digital ecclesiology, with this thesis extending the framework to include two additional waves that capture the rapid shifts in scholarship and church practice during and after the pandemic. Qualitative fieldwork conducted across 2021 to 2023 in a mixed-denominational context explores the interplay between online and offline practices, providing insight into how faith communities adapted rituals and maintained connection while navigating technological, theological and cultural tensions in a forced context.

Key findings suggest that a post-pandemic ecclesiology requires faith communities to develop an adaptive hybrid approach that incorporates digital and in-person practices, fosters embodied and sensory-rich rituals, and shifts leadership towards decentralised, relational and whole-person-centred models. The study demonstrates that theology extends beyond the *"why"* to engage deeply with the *"how"* and *"what"* of church practice, offering practical strategies for faith communities seeking to respond effectively within a rapidly evolving digital and cultural landscape. This project contributes to practical theology and digital ecclesiology and sits within the sixth wave of scholarly enquiry identified within this thesis, by offering insights that support faith communities in building resilient, missionally engaged practices for a post-pandemic, postdigital world.

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Declaration

None of the material contained in this thesis has been previously submitted for a degree in this or any other institution. The thesis is my own work.

Statement of Copyright

Acknowledgements

I want to start with thanking the participants, without whom this project simply would not have happened. They all welcomed me into their faith communities, and were willing to share their stories, even those of despair and grief. However, in amongst the heartache and isolation, God's light shone through his people, and I witnessed countless examples of them coming together and doing beautiful acts of service for people in their communities.

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To my children, I challenge you to fill your lives with learning and knowledge. The world is a big place, full of wonderful adventures. I'm passing the baton on to you as part of the next

generation. So go forth; learn at every opportunity, think critically and live passionately. You will live richer lives for it.

I also want to thank my father who passed away during the pandemic in July 2020. I was so proud to have him at my Masters graduation ceremony in November 2019, it is a special memory I hold dear. I knew in this project's infancy that he would not be at my doctoral graduation ceremony, but I have thought a lot about him throughout the process. So, this project is dedicated to my father, who always inspired me to be the best I could be. Thank you.

Finally, I want to thank the Lord, God Almighty. A few sentences will never give justice to the unconditional love, grace and mercy you continuously show me. Thank you for everything; what has been, was and what will be. For yours is the glory. Amen.

"Commit your way to the Lord, Trust also in Him, And He shall bring it to pass.
He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, And your justice as the noonday."

Psalm 37. 5-6 (NKJV)

Introduction

This journey has been one of patience and perseverance. What I anticipated taking me three years, has in fact taken me six.

One year of design, planning and onboarding participants (2020).

Three years of fieldwork coming alongside a group of local churches in the North of England and journeying with them through lockdowns, restrictions and emerging into a new post-pandemic world (2021-2023).

The final two years were spent collating, analysing, writing, and theorising, earnestly trying to do justice for the voices of this project (2024-2025).

It has been a long, twisty road full of personal challenges and heartache (including grieving the loss of my own father during the pandemic), whilst listening, observing and being present with leaders and congregations, in amidst of their own heartache and struggles in navigating the pandemic as a faith community.

My story started nine months before the pandemic; I had just completed my master's in applied theology in the summer of 2019 exploring whether digital media was a "friend or foe" for the Christian leader. However, I still had a thirst to delve deeper into how the local church could specifically engage digitally in an ever-increasing connected world, so in the Autumn of 2019, I commenced my doctoral journey. I began to explore designing a research project focusing on how Christian faith communities engage with digital platforms, and why. Then March 2020 happened. The UK went into its first lockdown, and the Church was forced to migrate online, completely disrupting the digital landscape across local churches up and down the country. In the face of a global pandemic, I had to re-evaluate my position and chart a new course. In the face of global uncertainty and fear, I saw an opportunity to explore how local churches would navigate this unprecedented and unique time in history. I had three aims: to capture their journey, share their voices and explore how this experience might shape post-pandemic church

life and everyday faith. This project emerged in response to the pandemic, evolving and being continually shaped by its unfolding context.

This thesis unfolds as a personal, reflexive narrative, drawing on both professional and ecclesial experiences that have shaped the focus of this project. The opening chapters provide a contextual overview of both the global and national digital landscapes pre-pandemic, highlighting high levels of digital engagement prior to lockdowns indicating widespread connectivity and accessibility. Alongside the rapid advancement of digital technology and its increasing impact on daily life, it also examines the UK's cultural and social landscape, noting significant shifts away from its pre-World War II Christian identity. This project charts the pre-pandemic digital and sociological landscape in which UK churches were situated, while its fieldwork took place during the early to post-pandemic period, spanning 2021 to 2023. The final stages of data collation and analysis were conducted within a post-pandemic context, 2024 onwards. From initial design through to the completion of analysis, this project has spanned six years, capturing the transition from pre-pandemic realities to the evolving post-pandemic landscape. It has been a rich and illuminating journey, providing deep insight into the inner workings of church life during this unprecedented period. Along the way, it has not only expanded my understanding of how faith communities navigate complexity but has also reaffirmed the significance of practical theology as a living, adaptive discipline rooted in real-world contexts. This journey has left me with a deeper appreciation for the resilience and creativity of local churches, and a commitment to continue exploring how faith communities can faithfully and courageously engage with a rapidly changing, digitally connected world.

Chapter 1 / Identifying the Reflexive and Contextual Landscape

1.1 A Reflexive Narrative

This project starts with my story. As the sole researcher of this project, it is a useful place to start, and arguably essential according to Zoë Bennett and others.

> *"There is no view from nowhere, no theology or research finding that does not have a human, with a context and perspective, behind or within it".*[1]

We all have specific historical and social contexts and to locate this project for the reader, I offer an overview of my experiences and observations that laid the foundations for this project many years ago. Vincent Miller's summary provides an accurate account of what I experienced both professionally and personally over the last 15 years.

> *"We live in a world where the internet and the World Wide Web have, in the matter of only two decades, shifted from being at the forefront of a new frontier of communication technology, to being for most people an incredibly unremarkable part of our culture and daily life".*[2]

The trajectories of my growing interests in digital media and ecclesiology have merged over recent years and the roles I have held professionally and voluntarily led me to where I am today. My professional background lies in the social sciences, and it was during this time that I became a Christian and joined a local Pentecostal church. During my infancy in faith, I served in various volunteer roles whilst growing and deepening my personal relationship with Christ. These experiences laid the foundations for my next career move of leading a Christian homeless charity. This role provided a rich professional environment that enabled research on multiple levels, including with service users, funders, and stakeholders. My family and I also relocated to a new town in the North to join a small local church supporting their youth group. At the time when my professional role was expanding, so too was my voluntary role within the local church. Over the years, I served within the children's and youth teams, the worship and media

[1] Zoë Bennett and others, *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology* (Routledge, 2018), p. 12.
[2] Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (SAGE Publications, 2011), p. 1.

teams, to more recently joining the senior leadership team. As my roles transitioned into having more of a strategic focus, I noticed the increasing role digital technology played in our everyday lives. From a personal perspective, I was also finding it increasingly difficult raising and parenting children who seemed fluent in the digital language. I would find myself trying to put in place guidelines, whilst trying to navigate the very platforms and technology myself. Fast forward fifteen years to where challenges had emerged across my professional, voluntary and personal environments. As a Christian, a mother, a church leader and employer it was important to me to understand the technological advancements that had become a part of everyday life. Professionally, I was navigating the challenges of having a diverse digitally literate workforce, who were at the same time trying to support their service users adapt to benefit services transferring online. As a charity working on the ground, digital poverty was also very real to us, coincided with mixed communication preferences of service users. This spectrum of digital skills, poverty and engagement was also mirrored in my local faith community, and as a leadership team we were trying to hold in tension engaging with new platforms and social media, whilst acknowledging and respecting congregation members who were more hesitant or did not have the means. Finally, over recent years witnessing the mental health impacts of social media on my children's and friends' identity, behaviour and self-esteem, and even my own became an increasing concern to me.

As my roles advanced in the local church, I also began to develop an interest in ecclesiology, with a particular focus on deconstructing what it means to *"be"* and *"do"* church. When leading the charity, part of my role involved visiting churches across different denominations. This opened my eyes to different theological practices and traditions, and I decided to pursue postgraduate education in theology, focusing on leadership and digital engagement. In hindsight, I was on a journey searching for answers, and the academic adventure I had embarked on provided me with both the space and freedom to explore this further. Nicholas M. Healy describes this as a natural transformative process: *"As theologians mature they may find that the concrete church as they experience it is not entirely consistent, either with Christianity as they have come to understand it, or with some aspects of the ecclesiological context in which they find themselves, or both".*[3] This project is a continuation of that process, exploring how the Church and digital media intertwine.

[3] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 40.

As a researcher, however, it is important to recognise that my positionality is shaped by my own ecclesial background and formation within the Pentecostal tradition. I approach this study not as a distant observer, but as someone whose theological imagination and practical experience have been moulded by Pentecostal worship, spirituality and ecclesiology. This perspective offers valuable insight into the lived experience of congregational life; however, it also presents limitations. My understanding of the church is inevitably influenced by my familiarity with Pentecostal structures, expectations and expressions of faith, which may differ from those of other Christian traditions. My interpretation of the data may be predisposed to notice elements that resonate with Pentecostal experience while overlooking aspects more prominent in other denominational contexts. To mitigate this, I aim to exercise reflexivity throughout the research process which I expand on in chapter three, making transparent the theological and experiential lenses through which I view the material, and engage critically with perspectives beyond my own. The intention is not to claim universal insight, but to acknowledge openly how my Pentecostal identity both enriches and constrains this study.

1.2 The Contextual Digital Pre-Pandemic Landscape

Emerging from the personal narrative outlined above is a discernible genre: a drama in which digital media and ecclesiology intersect within the context of a global pandemic. As the narrator of this unfolding narrative, it is essential to situate the discussion within the contextual digital landscape at the time of the project's early conception and design. The exploration of faith and religious practices during this unique historical moment is undertaken within contemporary material and social realities, making it critical to acknowledge these factors at the outset. [4] These realities not only shape the trajectory of the research but also guide the insights and revelations that have emerged throughout this study.

From a global perspective, digital advancement over the last 20 years has rapidly transformed how we live, work and connect. My generation still remembers a time before mobile telephones were widely available and would be categorised by Marc Prensky as *digital immigrants:* whereby we have learnt to adapt to the new digital landscape, compared to *digital natives* who

[4] Zoë Bennett and others, *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology* (Routledge, 2018), p. 12.

are fluent speakers of the digital language.[5] I purchased my first Nokia mobile telephone when I was 18 years old, when I had to keep track of how many text messages I sent, as you were charged per text and there was a word limit. In the space of 20 years, we have gone from a mobile device whose primary function was communication through voice call and basic text message with large unattractive aesthetics, to present day slim touchscreen devices that come in a variety of colours with a wide host of accessories. They now incorporate our calendars, pictures, banking, entertainment (gaming, music and streaming), act as navigational tools, facilitate keeping connected with family and friends, monitor our health and much more. In fact, Adam Greenfield refers to them as *"the universal, all-but-indispensable mediator of everyday life".*[6] As their capacity and functions had significantly increased, so had the uptake around the world pre-pandemic. Statistics taken from the Digital in 2018 Report produced by We Are Social and Hootsuite, show against the world population of 7.593 billion people, 4.021 billion people used the internet in 2018, 3.196 billion people were active social media users, and 5.135 billion people were unique mobile users.

"More than 3 billion people around the world now use social media each month, with 9 in 10 of those users accessing their chosen platforms via mobile devices."[7]

While this thesis later draws on more recent data in Chapter 5 to offer pre- and post-pandemic comparisons, the inclusion of pre-pandemic data remains valuable for setting the scene. These earlier statistics provide a global snapshot of connectivity and accessibility two years prior to the pandemic, establishing a contextual baseline against which the subsequent digital shifts within church practices can be understood. They also show a picture of growth: between 2017 to 2018 the number of Facebook users aged 65 and older had grown by nearly 20%.[8] Facebook continued to dominate around the world, being the leading social platform with 2,167 million monthly active users, with YouTube coming second with 1,500 million users and WhatsApp third with 1,300 million users. The use of social media platforms and messaging tools were continuing to expand around the world.

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[5] Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants", *On The Horizon*, Vol. 9, 5, (MCB University Press, 2001).
[6] Adam Greenfield, *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life* (Verso, 2018), p. 9.
[7] "Global Digital Report 2018", *We Are Social*, n.d., https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2018/01/global-digital-report-2018/ [accessed 5 July 2025].
[8] Ibid.

Compare these global statistics to a UK context and it paints a similar picture. In the UK, in 2018 only two years before the pandemic, research by Ofcom found that mobile telephones were used by 96% of adults, 80% being smartphones.[9] When broken down into categories, the two lowest groups were 65–74-year-olds and 75 and over, however, both were still surprisingly high, with 92% of 65–74-year-olds and 81% of 75 years old and over, using mobile telephones. This was higher than all other devices listed in the survey, including the second highest which was any type of TV, used by 94% of adults. The data suggests that from 2018 mobile telephones were the most accessed and used digital devices in the UK. Computers were listed as the third type of device used by 65% of adults, with tablets being a close fourth used by 59% of adults. This piece of research by Ofcom provides an enlightening picture of the digital devices being used across the UK leading up to the pandemic and suggests there was already a reasonable level of access, affordability and skill set across the population. The data also suggests a high level of connectivity and engagement with social media platforms, as four out of five internet users aged 16 and above, had a social media profile in 2018.[10] The older age categories revealed interesting insights, with 51% of 65–74-year-olds having a profile and 38% of over 75's having one. These categories saw increases from year-on-year uptake, suggesting there would have been additional users engaging by 2020 just before the pandemic.[11]

The global and national data leading up to the pandemic depicts an active and increasingly engaged digital landscape, marked by a steady rise in digital uptake across all age categories. This context is critical for understanding the environment pre-pandemic and setting the stage for this project in examining how churches would navigate the transition of religious practices

[9] Broken down further into age categories reveals the highest usage at 98% was 25–34-year-olds, with the lowest group being 75-year-olds and over at 26%. However, this age group smartphone use had seen significant increase from previous years; in 2013 it was 5%, in 2016 it was 15% and by 2018 it was 26%. These increases are mirrored in other age groups, such as 55–64-year-olds going from 59% smartphone use in 2016 to 71% in 2018-, and 65–74-year-olds going from 39% in 2016 to 47% in 2018. Taking these increases into consideration, it would be reasonable to assume between 2018 and 2020 leading up to the pandemic there were further increase uptake in smartphone use in the UK. These statistics are taken from "Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report 2019 – 30 May 2019", *Ofcom,* n.d., https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/adults/media-use-and-attitudes-2019/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2019-chart-pack.pdf?v=323964) [accessed 5 July 2025].

[10] Social Media platforms included Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp and Snapchat ("Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report 2019 – 30 May 2019", *Ofcom,* n.d., https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/adults/media-use-and-attitudes-2019/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2019-chart-pack.pdf?v=323964) [accessed 5 July 2025]).

[11] There are obvious nuances in the data that need to be taken into consideration, particularly around user uptake across the older age categories in light of ageing church congregations in the UK.

into online spaces. Notably, as individuals were already demonstrating heightened engagement with digital technologies and social media in their personal contexts, it raises compelling questions about how faith communities might adapt and respond within this digitally connected society.

1.3 The Contextual UK Church Pre-Pandemic Landscape

Alongside the digital landscape, it is equally important to consider the broader sociological context within the UK pre-pandemic: *"Britain is changing, but the legacies of the past remain deeply embedded in both the physical and cultural environment".*[12] Grace Davie's *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (2015) offers a comprehensive sociological analysis of the evolving religious landscape in 21st-century Britain leading up to the pandemic. Davie identifies key factors shaping contemporary religious life in Britain such as a shifting to selective engagement for special events such as weddings and christenings, a wider cultural move over the last 50 years from obligation to choice, and the impact of immigration where new faith communities have diversified Britain's religious landscape.[13] She describes a changing religious landscape linked to secular, social and cultural shifts and complexities. In *The Death of Christian Britain* (2009) Callum Brown argues these major cultural shifts began specifically in the 1960s, marking a move away from social and moral values rooted in Christianity.[14] He links this change to the breakdown of Britain's traditional cultural institutions and highlights key legislation from that era, such as reforms on abortion, sexuality, divorce and immigration alongside the rise of feminism as driving forces behind this transformation.

"The result has been that the generation that grew up in the sixties was more dissimilar to the generation of its parents than in any previous century. The moral metamorphosis directly affected the churches' domain… The range in changes in demography, personal relationships, political debate and moral concerns was so enormous that it did not so much as challenge the Christian churches as bypass them."[15]

[12] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, 2nd edn (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 4.
[13] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, 2nd edn (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 3, 4.
[14] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000,* 2nd edn (Routledge, 2009), p. 176–180.
[15] Ibid., p. 190.

Even though Davie recognises the important cultural and moral shifts that began during this period, she focuses on the 1980's with emerging markets and consumerism shifting attitudes from *"obligation to consumption",* opening the possibilities of religious participation as choice rather than social duty.[16] This is reflected by statistician Peter Brierley where he describes an increase in the different types of denominations across the UK.[17] In 1977 there were 97 denominations in the UK compared to 257 in 2017, representing a significant increase in the variety of Christian denominations over the last 40 years.[18] However, even though there has been an increase in denominational choice, church membership has continued to decline. For example, Brierley explains that church membership has declined from 10.6 million in 1930 to 5.5 million in 2010.[19] More recently, there has been a further 7% decline in church membership between 2012-2017, with the dominance of decline being across the major institutional denominations of Roman Catholics, Presbyterians and Anglicans. He also describes how the church is ageing across the UK.

"It is obvious that the English church has an ageing problem…This is because the number of young people in the church is decreasing at a very rapid rate – a 43% drop in those under 20 between 1980 and 2000 and a projected -45% drop between 2000 and 2020 (a decline of -2.9% per year)."[20]

These statistics are all part of a wider shift in belief across the UK pre-pandemic, with a poll by You Gov in December 2016 finding only 28% believed in either God or a spiritual power.[21] According to the same poll, it is the young who are most likely to be atheists, with 46% of the 18–24-year-olds saying there was no god. Clifford Hill affords the decline of Christianity across Britain towards several coinciding factors.[22] These include the boom of consumerism, the rise of religious pluralism, the introduction of Eastern religions and links to spiritualism,

[16] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, 2nd edn (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), p. 224.
[17] Peter Brierley, "Introduction: UK Church Statistics No 3: 2012-2017", *Brierley Consultancy,* n.d., https://www.brierleyconsultancy.co.uk/where-is-the-church-going [accessed 5 July 2025].
[18] Peter Brierley, "Introduction: UK Church Statistics No.4 2021 Edition", *Brierley Consultancy,* n.d., https://www.brierleyconsultancy.co.uk/where-is-the-church-going [accessed 5 July 2025].
[19] Peter Brierley, *Introduction: UK Christianity 2005-2015, Faith Survey*, n.d., https://faithsurvey.co.uk/download/csintro.pdf [accessed 5 July 2025].
[20] Peter Brierley, "The Ageing Church: UK Church Statistics No. 3 2012-2017", *Brierley Consultancy,* n.d., https://www.brierleyconsultancy.co.uk/where-is-the-church-going [accessed 5 July 2025].
[21] Clive D. Field, "*Counting Religion in Britain", British religion in Numbers, 1 January 2017,* https://www.brin.ac.uk/counting-religion-in-britain-december-2016/ [accessed 5 July 2025]
[22] Clifford Hill, *Towards the Dawn*, rev. edn (Issachar Ministries UK, 2020), p. 62-63.

and changes in the economy and demography of society. All of which have culminated to produce a seismic change in culture that Clifford claims has never been seen before in Britain.

These statistics illustrate a sobering landscape of declining church attendance and diminishing belief in God in the years preceding the pandemic. It is important to recognise the challenges and uncertainties church leaders were already negotiating prior to the onset of lockdowns. The British context was increasingly characterised by growing secularism, consumerism, moral ambiguity, religious pluralism and a cultural drift away from organised religion. This cultural shift coincided with rapid technological advancements, with mobile devices and digital platforms becoming deeply embedded in everyday life. The following chapter will explore how churches have approached digital engagement over the last four decades through a review of the literature, setting the stage for examining how faith communities navigated these trends once the pandemic accelerated the need for digital transition. By the time the pandemic arrived, much of the groundwork for the challenges faced by churches had already been established.

Chapter 2 / Mapping the Digital Theological Terrain

The previous chapter provided a digital overview of the pre-pandemic global and national landscape, highlighting the rise in connectivity and increasing levels of online engagement from an individual perspective. Building on that foundation, this chapter turns its focus to Christian faith communities, investigating whether the widespread adoption of digital technologies was mirrored within religious contexts pre-pandemic. This chapter undertakes a comprehensive literature review using the waves of scholarly inquiry framework, incorporating a tripartite dimensional approach to explore the theological justification for online church, the practical implementation of digital worship, and the nature of religious communication in digital spaces. It will identify three core areas of focus (community, rituals and leadership) in relation to early pandemic literature while recognising the emergence of a fifth wave within the framework. By critically examining key contributions to the field and mapping its development, the chapter will highlight major themes and theoretical approaches as they transition from apprehension to acceptance and integration. This approach will help identify gaps in current research, laying the groundwork for the central theological questions that will drive this study.

2.1 The Four Waves of Scholarly Inquiry

Before conducting a review of the research in the field, Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg's waves of scholarly inquiry initially adapted by Heidi A. Campbell and Mia Lövheim, is particularly helpful in providing a chronological structure for understanding the field's development over time.[23] Their approach identifies successive phases of research, each marked by distinct questions, methodologies, and theoretical concerns. Højsgaard and Margit identified the first two waves of inquiry, with Campbell and Lövheim expanding on wave three and Campbell and Evolvi developing wave four. In section 2.4 I identify a further fifth wave specifically in relation to the early pandemic and towards the end of the thesis in chapter 5 I propose a further sixth wave has emerged post-pandemic which is where this project finds its landing ground.[24] It is useful to break the research down in this way, as it provides a

[23] Heidi A. Campbell and Mia Lövheim, "Introduction: Rethinking the online-offline connection in the study of religion online", *Information, Communication & Society Journal*, 14:8 (2011)

[24] Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Jonas Kurlberg proposed a fifth wave in "Defining Digital Theology: Digital Humanities, Digital Religion and the Particular Work of the CODEC Research Centre and Network" *Open Theology*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2019, pp. 29-43. https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2019-0003 [accessed 3

chronological overview of how the field has matured and shifted in focus over the last four decades. The image below visually outlines the key shifts that have shaped the evolution of scholarly inquiry in this field up to the pandemic.

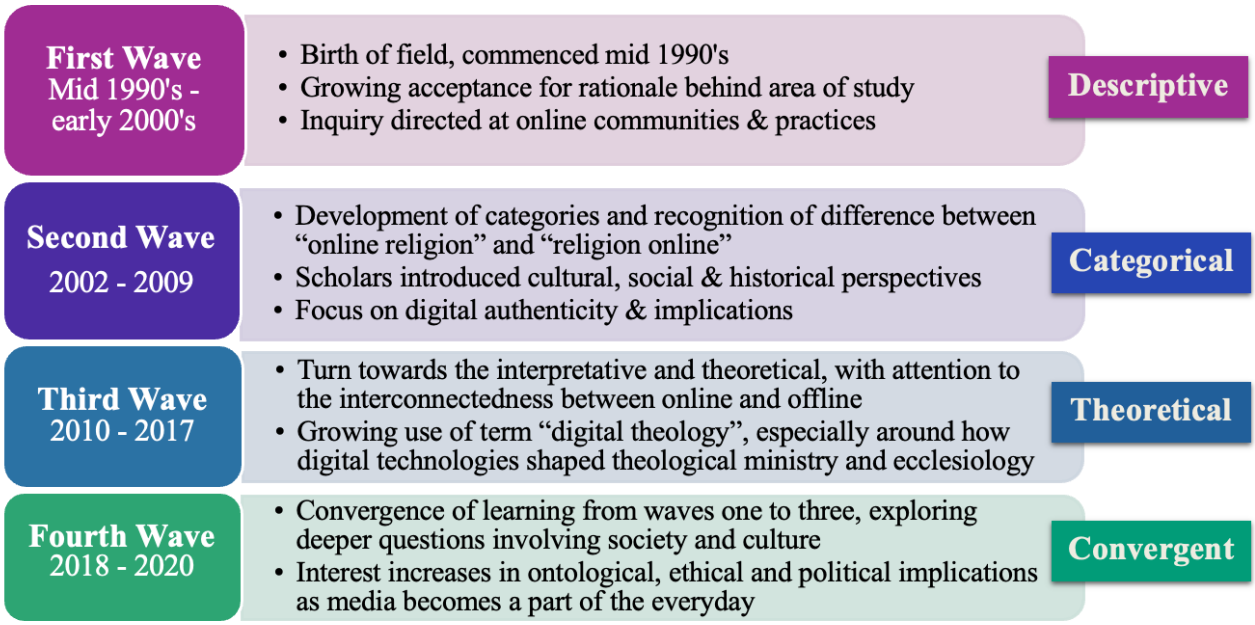

Figure 2.1. Adaptation of Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg's Waves of Scholarly Inquiry (2005)[25]

The first wave of research on the internet and religion according to Højsgaard and Margit appeared in the mid-1990s.[26] It was marked by a sense of enthusiasm, as scholars began exploring this emerging domain with a focus on descriptive research. Much of the work in this phase involved describing and cataloguing online religious expressions and mapping the presence of various faith communities on the internet. Researchers were primarily concerned with documenting what was happening online, driven by excitement about digital spaces as

December 2025]. However, this was not adopted due to the specific focus on digital theology, rather than continuing the chronological structure the previous waves had taken.

[25] The first to third waves were identified by Højsgaard and Warburg (2005), Campbell and Lövheim (2011) expanded on the third wave and the fourth wave was developed by Campbell and Evolvi (2019). Approximate dates have been added to each wave. Campbell and Brian Altenhofen went on to develop theme words for each wave which have also been incorporated into Figure 2.1 (Heidi A. Campbell and Brian Altenhofen. "Methodological Challenges, Innovations and Growing Pains in Digital Religion Research." In *Digital Methodologies in the Sociology of Religion,* edited by Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor and Suha Shakkour, 1–13. London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[26] Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, *Religion and Cyberspace* (Routledge, 2005), p. 1-2.

new frontiers for religious activity.[27] Pioneers such as Stephen O'Leary's *Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating religion on Computer Networks (1996)* is one of the earliest academic explorations of how digital environments can serve as platforms for religious communication and experience. In this work, O'Leary investigated how online forums and bulletin boards in the early internet era facilitated religious discussions, community-building, and ritual-like interactions. [28] His work helped lay the groundwork for later theories about online ritual, digital community, and the mediation of sacredness through technology.

The second wave introduced a more analytical orientation placed around the early 2000s, with scholars examining the structures and social dynamics of online religion, often by comparing digital practices to traditional offline counterparts. This phase involved deeper engagement with questions of ritual, identity and authority in online spaces, introducing cultural, social and historical perspectives. Despite Campbell characterising this second wave as a more realistic approach following the initial surge of interest, she emphasises its focus on the authenticity and broader implications of digital religious practices.[29] Højsgaard and Warburg, who developed the framework, positioned their book *Religion and Cyberspace* within this second wave, aiming to chart the progress of research in the field thus far. As they noted, *"...now that the phenomenon of religious communication in cyberspace, on the Internet, or through computer-mediated communication systems has been with us for some years, new insight should be gained by researching the subject again."* [30] They acknowledged that the field had evolved significantly since the first wave and was gaining academic recognition. Acknowledging this shift, Eileen Baker cautioned: *"What is, however, clear is that any student of religion – or, indeed, of contemporary society – will ignore this new variable at his or her peril."* [31]

The third wave is a natural evolvement moving towards theoretical and reflective inquiry rather than primarily descriptive analysis, integrating broader theoretical frameworks and concepts from other fields such as media studies. Campbell and Lövheim characterise this wave as

[27] Højsgaard and Margit cite key researchers who contributed to the first wave: Kinney 1995, Lochhead 1997, O'Leary 1996 and Zaleski 1997 (*Religion and Cyberspace*, Routledge, 2005, p. 2).
[28] Stephen O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks", in Lorne Dawson Douglas Cowan, *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (Routledge, 1996), p. 37–58.
[29] Heidi A. Campbell and Giulia Evolvi, "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies", *Human Behaviour and Emerging Technologies Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2019), p. 4.
[30] Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, *Religion and Cyberspace* (Routledge, 2005), p. 2.
[31] Eileen Barker, "Crossing the Boundary", in Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, *Religion and Cyberspace* (Routledge, 2005), p. 81.

focusing on the embeddedness of the internet in everyday life and the interconnectedness between the online and offline.[32] This wave addressed how digital technologies reconfigure fundamental religious categories and practices. Building on this model, Campbell expanded the scope of inquiry by advocating for a more embedded, interdisciplinary approach. Her concepts of the *"religious-social shaping of technology"* (RSST) and *"networked religion"* which will be looked at in more detail in the next section, emphasised how religious communities actively negotiate their engagement with digital media in ways that reflect their theological and institutional priorities. Campbell's contributions shifted focus from studying religion merely *on* the internet to examining *how* digital culture has become constitutive of contemporary religious life.

> *"Digital religion studies is a growing interdisciplinary area and field of research which seeks to explore the extent to which traditional religion practices are being adapted to digital environments and how aspects of digital culture are informing the life and patterns of offline religious groups."*[33]

Finally, there is a transition into Campbell and Lövheim's predicted fourth wave starting around 2017 which considers the ontological, ethical and political implications as digital media increasingly becomes part of our everyday lives. Campbell suggests it also explores issues of class, race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality.[34] This represents a more integrated and critically reflexive phase that builds on the previous three waves (descriptive, categorical and theoretical), by emphasising the embeddedness of digital religion within broader social, political and technological contexts. This wave moves beyond treating online religion as a distinct or novel phenomenon, instead exploring how digital practices are normalised, hybridised and inseparable from everyday religious life. It is less concerned with defining or legitimising online religion and more focused on understanding how religion operates within and is shaped by digital culture. This acceptance of digital practices within religious

[32] Heidi A. Campbell and Mia Lövheim (2011) cited in "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies", *Human Behaviour and Emerging Technologies Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2019), p. 4.
[33] Heidi A. Campbell (2013) cited in Heidi Campbell & Giulia Evolvi, "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies", *Human Behaviour and Emerging Technologies Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2019), p. 3.
[34] Heidi A. Campbell and Giulia Evolvi, "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies", *Human Behaviour and Emerging Technologies Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2019), p. 4.

communities and everyday life represented in the fourth wave, mirrors the earlier themes of high levels of engagement and connectivity leading up to the pandemic.

2.2 Employing a Tripartite Dimensional Framework

The waves of scholarly inquiry framework serves as a useful overview of digital religion, in tracking themes and the focus of research across the field. However, this section now delves into the detail, drawing on three key dimensions that have naturally evolved through the literature within waves one to four.

- The theological justification for online church *("why"),*
- The practical implementation of digital worship *("how")*
- The nature of religious communication in digital spaces *("what")*

This tripartite framework reflects the progression of both academic inquiry and ecclesial adaptation in response to technological change. As explored in the previous section, early research focused on the theological legitimacy of online religious practice, grappling with questions about presence, embodiment and the authenticity of virtual worship. As digital platforms became more widely accepted, attention shifted to the processes of enacting church online, such as exploring best practices for virtual liturgy, pastoral care and community-building in mediated environments. More recently, the focus has turned to content: what should be shared online, how faith is communicated across social media platforms and how digital storytelling shapes religious identity and engagement. However, while this section is organised into these three sections, it is important to clarify that this structuring does not suggest that theology is confined solely to the *"why"* questions. Rather, theology is deeply embedded across all levels of inquiry, informing and shaping both the practices (*"how"*) and the communicative forms (*"what"*) within the life of faith communities. For example, theology can speak into the modes of digital engagement, the design and facilitation of online worship, and the practices of community building in hybrid spaces. It can critique and guide practical implementation, interrogate methods of digital presence and undergird the relational and communicative dynamics within these spaces. In this way, the research maintains a holistic theological lens that ensures the exploration of digital church practices is not merely a technical or sociological exercise but is grounded in reflective, critical, and constructive theological interpretation.

- *Theological Justification ("Why")*

The literature reveals a clear progression from apprehension to acceptance to integration regarding digital technology within theological and ecclesial discourse, reflecting broader societal trends in the UK and globally.

Apprehension

Early secular and theological scholarly engagement with media technologies was marked by caution and anxiety, reflecting concerns about the hidden value systems and social disruptions embedded in new media. Raymond Williams' articulation of *technological determinism* where the idea that technologies shape and determine social change, set the stage for critiques by figures such as Jacques Ellul (*The Technological Society*), Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*), and Malcolm Muggeridge (*Christ and the Media*). [35] These scholars warned that the medium not only shapes but distorts content, with Postman summarising the concern: *"Technology is ideology".*[36] Vincent Miller notes that anxieties around the internet mirror earlier concerns about television, underscoring how new technologies consistently generate both optimism and fear. He suggests that this trail of thinking is not new: *"New technologies always breed anxiety about their consequences, and certainly the internet and mobile phones have bred both anxiety and optimism in their potential to shape the future".*[37] These apprehensions were not merely theoretical, they have also been echoed by technology leaders like Eric Schmidt, a previous Google Chairman, who highlighted the *"tremendous good and potentially dreadful evil"* of digital power.[38]

Acceptance

Gradually, a measured acceptance emerged, such as the *instrumentalist view*. This approach sees technology as a neutral tool, something that people use to achieve their goals without the tool itself influencing those goals or outcomes. In this view, technology is value-free and does not carry any inherent meaning. It is also seen as being under human control, serving whatever

[35] Raymond Williams (1990 [1975]), cited in Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (Sage, 2011), p. 3. Malcolm Muggeridge (1977) and Neil Postman (1985) both cited in Andrew Byers, *TheoMedia* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), p. 35.
[36] Neil Postman (1985) citied in Andrew Byers, *TheoMedia* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), p. 35.
[37] Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (Sage, 2011), p. 3.
[38] Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business* (John Murray Publishers, 2013), p. 3.

purpose the user intends, with social change being driven by how people choose to use technology, not by the technology itself. Andrew Byers draws on John Ferré's work who labels this approach as *"Media as Conduits",* explaining the ethical significance of a media form is contingent upon its application and the context in which it is employed.[39] Therefore, the overriding power and intention lies in the user. Byers provides examples of how these varying perspectives might shape how Christians engage with digital media.[40] For the instrumentalists, they come from a pragmatic stance, where mediums that spread the message are seen positively, and view technology's benefit as idealistic. At the other end of the spectrum, Byers explains that technological determinists argue the medium may carry the message, but that message must conform to the inherent values and constraints of the technology itself. Failing to acknowledge these influences can lead to a situation where, rather than us using technology, it begins to use us. Quentin J. Schultze, a communications scholar and theologian, falls into this accepting but cautionary category. His book *Habits of the High-Tech Heart* explores how digital technologies and the broader information age influence human character, relationships, and moral life. He argues that while technology offers great promise, he critiques the modern assumption that more information leads to better lives or more virtuous societies.[41] He labels this the *"myth of informationism"*, the belief that data and efficiency can replace wisdom, character, and moral discernment.

"Unless we learn informational moderation, our lives will consist of spending longer periods with larger databases, wider networks, and speedier messaging. Cyberculture offers us no means to rise above the entropic noise, no dwelling place to catch our breath, gather our wits, discern our course, and become more intrinsically moral people."[42]

Schultze advocates that while technology offers numerous benefits, it also poses significant challenges to our moral and spiritual well-being. He advocates for a discerning approach to technology, one that prioritises virtue and community over efficiency and information accumulation. Similarly, David Lochhead (1997) in *Shifting Realities: Information Technology and the Church,* addresses both the opportunities and challenges posed by digital technologies,

[39] John Ferré (2003) cited in Andrew Byers, *TheoMedia* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), p. 34.
[40] Andrew Byers, *TheoMedia* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), p. 34-36.
[41] Quentin J. Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart* (Baker Academic, 2002), p. 26.
[42] Ibid., p. 68.

urging the church to engage critically and constructively with the digital age.[43] Lochhead argues that information technology is reshaping the world in ways that profoundly affect individuals and communities, regardless of their direct engagement with technology. He emphasises the need for the church to understand and respond to these changes thoughtfully.

> *"Like it or not, our culture, our world, will be transformed by this information technology that has come upon us".*[44]

Lochhead's insistence that technology is transforming the world requires faith communities to move beyond seeing digital tools as neutral delivery mechanisms for worship and ministry. Instead, churches are called to critically discern the theological implications of digital practices, considering how these technologies shape community, discipleship and worship. His framework enables a nuanced analysis of the tensions between maintaining theological integrity and adapting to cultural and technological shifts, a theme central to this thesis. This phase reflects a shift from fear-driven disengagement to cautious utilisation, acknowledging both opportunities and risks.

Integration

Finally, the discourse transitions toward *integration*, reflecting the normalisation of digital technologies within theological reflection and practice. Antonio Spadaro's *Cybertheology* proposes that the internet is a new frontier for spiritual engagement, drawing on parallels with transformative past technologies. He defines *Cybertheology* as *"reflection on the thinkability of the faith in the light of the web's logic".*[45] While Spadaro affirms the transformative potential of the internet, his approach does not ignore the need for discernment. Rather, it builds upon the kind of critical foundation Lochhead provides, recognising that meaningful engagement with digital culture must be both theologically grounded and ethically aware. He argues that the internet has become an integral part of everyday life and should not be treated as separate from spiritual concerns. Spadaro draws parallels with earlier technologies such as the airplane, which expanded human understanding and access to the world, and the printing press, which

[43] David Lochhead, *Shifting Realities: Information Technology and the* Church (WCC Publications, 1997).
[44] David Lochhead, *Shifting Realities: Information Technology and the* Church (WCC Publications, 1997), p. 5.
[45] Antonio Spadaro, *Cybertheology* (Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 16.

transformed culture and the distribution of knowledge.[46] Each, he suggests, has enhanced our perception of ourselves and our world. In contrast, rather than drawing on past technology, Byers proposes that media originated with God, who used the spoken word as a medium to create the world.[47] His book revolves around two central themes, the first being that if God creates and uses media, then there exists a theological logic that can inform how we engage with and produce media today. The second theme Byers focuses on is that Christians are called to immerse themselves in media, but the primary media that should shape and saturate their lives are those that come from God.[48] Byers advocates for a renewed understanding of media shaped by Scripture and the overarching biblical narrative of redemption. His approach offers a theologically grounded framework, drawing deeply from biblical themes and situating media within a broader theological context. Similarly, Angela Williams Gorrell (2019) builds on this scriptural foundation by illustrating how Paul's epistles served as an extension of his physical ministry. She demonstrates that Paul strategically used the communication technologies of his time to further the gospel, emphasizing a continuity between historical and contemporary uses of media within the Christian tradition.[49]

Heidi A. Campbell has made substantial contributions over the past 25 years, including her expansion of Höjsgaard and Margit's framework of waves of scholarly inquiry discussed earlier. [50] In *Network Theology* (2016), co-authored with Stephen Garner, they employ a sociological perspective to examine society's shift from centralized, hierarchical structures to decentralized, networked forms that prioritize individual agency. [51] Using the metaphor of the network, the authors explore the dynamic interplay between theology and technology, emphasizing the importance of intentional and faithful Christian engagement with media. They argue that technology does more than facilitate religious practice, it actively shapes beliefs, behaviours, and community structures. As they assert, *"A networked theology requires that*

[46] Antonio Spadaro, *Cybertheology* (Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 8–9.
[47] Andrew Bryers, *TheoMedia* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), p. 8.
[48] Andrew Bryers, *TheoMedia* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), p. 223.
[49] Angela Williams Gorrell, *Always On* (Baker Academic, 2019), p. 50.
[50] Heidi A. Campbell and Sophia Osteen prepared two papers providing an overview of Campbell's research over the last 25 years: "Research Summaries and Lessons on Doing Religion and Church Online", *Oak Trust Library,* 23 March 2020, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/187806 and "Summarizing Heidi A. Campbell's Research on Religion and Church Online", *Oak Trust Library,* 1 April 2020, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/187820 [accessed 5 July 2025].
[51] Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology* (Baker Academic, 2016), p. 52.

Christians think deeply about technology and media… to think about the values, inherent character, and environments created by technology". [52]

The transition from apprehension to acceptance to integration illustrates how theological discourse has moved from suspicion to strategic incorporation of digital practices within ecclesiology, and from confined binary definitions of technological determinism and instrumentalism. It reveals a trajectory where early caution evolved into a call for discernment, ultimately leading to frameworks that embrace digital tools as integral to mission and community, provided they align with theological values. It is within this final framing that this project is situated, within a narrative of integration that does not ignore critical discernment, but builds upon it to explore embodied, connected and networked approaches for the Church in a media-driven age, with the aim of offering post-pandemic ecclesial strategies.

- *Practical Implication ("How")*

Having explored the shifting scholarly responses to digital media, the discussion now turns to the practical implications for ecclesial life, specifically *"how"* churches have engaged with digital platforms to *"do"* church online. As digital technologies have become embedded in everyday life, various models for online church have emerged, reflecting differing theological, pastoral, and technological priorities. These models range from replicating traditional worship in digital formats to more experimental and networked expressions of faith community. The following section will examine these diverse approaches, highlighting their underlying assumptions and practical applications.

Christopher Helland's foundational research (2005) introduced a widely cited conceptual framework distinguishing between *religion online* and *online religion*.[53] Religion online refers to a one-to-many model in which digital media serves primarily as a tool to disseminate information about offline religious life, such as posting sermons, advertising events or sharing theological content, without altering the fundamental structure of religious practice. Conversely, online religion encompasses interactive, many-to-many forms of engagement,

[52] Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology* (Baker Academic, 2016), p. 147.
[53] Christopher Helland, "Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet", *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet,* Vol. 1, Issue 1 (2005). His other foundational works include "Virtual Religion: Diaspora and the Reconfiguration of Religious Space" in Heidi A. Campbell, *Religion and the Internet: Digital Religion, Expression, and Authority* (Routledge, 2012).

wherein religious rituals, community-building and spiritual experiences take place entirely within digital environments. This latter model suggests a more immersive and participatory dynamic, in which users actively contribute to shaping their religious experiences online. While this binary was initially helpful in categorising early forms of digital religious expression, Helland later acknowledged that the distinction could not fully capture the nuanced and hybrid ways in which technology and religion intersect in contemporary practice. As digital platforms have become more integrated into everyday life, the boundaries between these two categories have become increasingly porous. Many religious communities now operate where elements of both models coexist.

Building on this evolving landscape, Campbell offers a more nuanced framework through her concept of the religious-social shaping of technology (RSST). She challenges deterministic views that see technology as either inherently positive or negative for religion. Instead, she argues that religious communities actively shape their engagement with digital media in ways informed by four key factors. The first factor is history and tradition, which ground technological decisions in longstanding ecclesial or denominational patterns. Core beliefs and practices is another factor, which Campbell explains determine theological boundaries and permissible uses of media. A third factor she describes is the negotiation process, wherein communities evaluate and interpret new technologies considering their values. The final factor is communal framing and discourse, which includes the shared language, stories, and interpretations that guide how technology is discussed and used within a faith context.[54] Through ethnographic research across various religious traditions, Campbell demonstrates the process of technological adoption is not merely a response to external innovation but is deeply shaped by internal theological and cultural logics and contexts. As such, RSST offers a flexible yet grounded approach for understanding how faith communities navigate the challenges and opportunities of the digital age.

In *Creating Church Online* (2017), Tim Hutchings offers a comprehensive analysis of five pioneering online church initiatives: Church of Fools, I-Church, St Pixels, the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life, and Church Online at LifeChurch.tv. His study draws upon Campbell's RSST framework alongside Stig Hjarvard's (2008) theory of *mediatization*.[55]

[54] Heidi A. Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (Routledge, 2010), p. 60-63.
[55] Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online* (Routledge, 2017), p. 203-218.

Hjarvard argues that all social institutions, including religion, increasingly adapt to the *"logic of the media",* a process whereby communication technologies influence not just how messages are delivered, but how institutions structure themselves and engage with the public.[56] Hutchings uses this dual theoretical lens of RSST and mediatization to critically evaluate how online churches both reflect and resist broader cultural trends driven by digital media. Building on these two frameworks, Hutchings proposes a new six-part model that he terms *Mediatized Religious Design* (MRD).[57] This model synthesises Campbell's emphasis on internal religious factors with Hjarvard's focus on media influence, offering a more holistic approach to analysing digital religious innovation. The components of the MRD framework include history and precedent, which considers how religious traditions influence digital adaptation. It also encompasses community values and practices, reflecting the internal theological norms and expectations that shape a faith community's engagement with media. Audience values and practices are examined to account for user behaviours and patterns of digital engagement within and beyond the community. The component of media logic addresses the structural and cultural norms inherent within digital platforms that shape how religious content is communicated and received. The framework also attends to negotiation and conflict, capturing the debates and adaptations that occur within communities as they encounter and integrate new technologies. Finally, communal framing and debate focuses on how media use is justified, discussed, and integrated within the faith community, illuminating the theological and cultural reasoning that underpins decisions around digital engagement. By combining theological sensibilities with sociological and media-theoretical insight, Hutchings' MRD model provides a valuable framework for understanding how digital churches are designed, negotiated and experienced.

Expanding the conversation further, Teresa Berger's *@ Worship* (2018) offers a specific perspective focusing on how liturgical practices are transformed through digital mediation. Rather than examining institutional models of online church, Berger explores how worship itself is being reimagined in digital contexts, emphasising the embodied, aesthetic, and ritual dimensions of the online experience. She argues that both online and offline worship have their own features and practices, yet when they converge, new forms of liturgical expression and community become possible.[58] This convergence does not result in a simple replication of

[56] Stig Hjarvard (2008) cited in Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online* (Routledge, 2017), p. 209.
[57] Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online* (Routledge, 2017), p. 217-218.
[58] Teresa Berger*, @ Worship* (Routledge, 2018), p. 102.

physical worship online; rather, it creates opportunities for the emergence of uniquely digital forms of participation, presence, and sacred space. In the concluding chapter of her study, Berger identifies five key characteristics of digitally mediated worship: fluid boundaries, multisensory engagement, ritual co-creativity, expanded notions of sacred space, and the reconfiguration of authority.[59] These features point to a creative reimagining of liturgy shaped by technology and the evolving expectations of digitally engaged worshippers. Berger also notes that her contribution remains one of the few within liturgical studies to seriously engage with digital mediation, observing that much of the field continues to prioritise the analysis of physical, place-based worship.[60] However, considering the COVID-19 pandemic, this gap is likely to narrow as digital worship becomes more embedded in ecclesial life. Nonetheless, identifying this lack of focused research remains valuable when formulating the project's research questions, as it highlights an area for further exploration.

An increasingly prominent area of research within the study of digital religion concerns the ways in *"how"* we use digital technology fosters a heightened focus on the self. Pete Ward (2020) argues that celebrity should be included as a key consideration in discussions surrounding media and religion.[61] He contends: *"When we consume media, we consume people, and these people are celebrities, or rather they are transformed into celebrities as they participate in processes of production, representation and consumption".*[62] In this framework, media participation itself becomes a mechanism through which individuals are elevated to celebrity status, regardless of traditional markers of fame. Ward further suggests that these *"mediated individuals"* hold significant influence, though not in isolation, rather audiences are also active participants in this process, engaging in interpretation, validation and dissemination. Ward engages with a range of theoretical approaches such as technological determinism, social constructionism, mediatization and Campbell's RSST framework. However, he advocates for a broader cultural studies approach, specifically applying the *circuit of culture* model as a comprehensive analytical tool.[63] This model includes five interrelated moments which each need to be passed through in a linear process: production, representation, consumption, identity

[59] Teresa Berger, *@ Worship* (Routledge, 2018), p. 105-107.
[60] Berger cites three recent examples in liturgical studies that focus on the physical church, with only minimal reference to new media and technologies (Teresa Berger, *@ Worship*, Routledge, 2018, p. 109-110).
[61] Pete Ward, *Celebrity Worship* (Routledge, 2020), p. 22.
[62] Ibid., p. 1.
[63] Ibid., p. 22.

and regulation. According to Ward, these dimensions offer a holistic means of understanding how media and religion intersect within contemporary culture. This perspective is particularly compelling when considered alongside the rise of social media platforms, reality television and influencer culture. Ward's contribution offers a timely lens for interpreting the evolving relationship between faith, media and the performative self in the digital era.

When examining the evolving approaches to *"how"* religious practice is mediated through digital technology, a progression can be observed. From broad structural and communal frameworks such as Campbell's RSST and Hutching's MRD, to Berger's exploration of digitally mediated liturgical practices, bringing attention to the nuanced ways worship itself is transformed in online contexts. More recently, Ward extends the conversation further by examining the role of mediated individuals and celebrity within digital religious spaces. Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate a widening and deepening of scholarly inquiry. However, these theories and concepts were primarily developed within contexts where digital engagement functioned as an optional, supplementary and exploratory component of church life. Prior to the pandemic, digital platforms were often utilised to extend existing ministries or to enhance communication, while the primary rhythms of worship, discipleship and community gathering remained rooted in physical spaces. This context significantly shaped the assumptions within the *"why"* and *"how"* literature, as churches could choose the extent, pace, and nature of their digital adoption according to their theological, cultural, and pastoral priorities. This starts to shape and develop the research questions, calling for a re-examining of these existing theories considering a context where digital engagement shifts from peripheral to central, compelling faith communities to explore how theological commitments and ecclesial practices are sustained, transformed, or contested in a fully digital ecclesiology during crisis.

- *Nature of Communication ("What")*

Having explored the *"why"* and *"how",* this section investigates pre-pandemic literature across the field focusing on *"what"* to share. As religious life increasingly moves into digital spaces, communities are confronted with complex decisions about representation, messaging and the boundaries between the sacred and the public. This involves more than simply broadcasting services or posting scripture; it requires thoughtful reflection on how digital platforms shape the meaning, reception and reach of religious content. The choices made around what to share, whether sermons, prayers, personal testimonies or everyday community life, carry theological,

pastoral, and ethical implications, especially considering the social landscape Christians and faith communicatees are navigating. The Bible Society (2018) in partnership with The Centre for Digital Theology (formerly Codec) conducted a survey for millennials (ages 18-35) to study Bible perceptions and engagement.[64] They found that 34% of Nones (those with no religion) saw sharing Bible verses on social media negatively, and 72% of Nones said Bible verses online did not make them want to learn about Christianity.[65] In 2019, Peter Phillips published a study examining the Bible verses most frequently shared on social media platforms. Drawing on data from 20 mobile and web-based applications collected between 2012 and 2019, his research identified a notable shift in the type of biblical content being circulated. Specifically, there was a movement away from doctrinal or propositional texts toward more therapeutic, emotionally resonant passages.[66] To analyse this trend, Phillips employed Abby Day's concept of *performative belief*, the idea that belief is often expressed through action rather than formal doctrine, and Christian Smith's framework of *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism* (MTD), which characterises a form of faith centred on personal well-being, moral niceness, and a distant but benevolent God.[67] Phillips' findings suggest that the most frequently engaged Bible verses reflect this MTD-style Christianity, marked by anthropocentric and emotionally affirming content. As he observes, *"a new ordinary canon is forming,"* shaped by millennial users who favour a constructive, emotionally supportive faith compatible with their roles as digital citizens in a globalised world.[68]

In the later waves of scholarly inquiry which are situated within the more recent approach of *integration,* we can draw on the work of Pam Smith, Meredith Gould and Deanna A. Thompson to find guidance on how churches might thoughtfully curate their digital content in ways that are pastorally responsible and theologically grounded. Pam Smith addresses the nature of digital ministry from a practical and theological standpoint. For Smith, what is shared online must reflect the integrity of the church's mission, not just serve as an echo of offline activity. Her work encourages faith communities to think theologically about online presence

[64] Bible Society & Codec, *Digital Millennials and the Bible* (Barna Group, 2018), p. 3.
[65] Bible Society & Codec, *Digital Millennials and the Bible* (Barna Group, 2018), p. 17-21.
[66] Peter Phillips, *The Bible, Social Media and Digital Culture* (Routledge, 2019), p. 88.
[67] Ibid., p. 1-5
[68] Ibid., p. 113.

emphasising that what is shared should foster community, invite participation and reflect Christ's presence.[69]

"... the difference between creating a website for people to find out about Christianity and an online community where people can experience Christian community could be likened to the difference between giving someone a copy of the Highway Code to learn about driving and offering to take him or her out in your car to practice."[70]

She offers examples of sharing prayer, worship and pastoral care online, highlighting that digital ministry is not just about content transmission but about cultivating sacred space. Thus, churches are encouraged to share material that deepens relational connection and spiritual engagement. Meredith Gould brings a communication-focused lens, arguing that faith communities must be intentional and authentic in what they post online.

""We need to use social media because everyone else uses it" is not a strategy"[71]

Rather than seeing digital platforms merely as announcement boards, Gould calls for churches to use social media to embody and share the gospel through relational storytelling, transparency and consistency. She advocates for content that reflects the church's voice and mission while also responding to the needs and rhythms of online audiences: *"In the world of church, quality social media content informs, educates, and inspires action that's Christ-centred and anchored in Gospel values".*[72] Gould's emphasis on tone, visual storytelling, and regular engagement suggests that "*how"* something is shared is as important as "*what"* is shared, inviting churches to discern whether their posts are performative, pastoral, or prophetic. Deanna A. Thompson offers a theological reflection on digital presence, particularly in contexts of pain and isolation. From her personal experience with illness and online support, Thompson argues that sharing online is not simply functional and that it can be an act of incarnational care.[73] She suggests that churches should not shy away from vulnerability in the content they share. Posts that reflect empathy and the reality of suffering can allow the digital church to become a space of healing

[69] Pam Smith, *Online Mission and Ministry* (SPCK Publishing, 2015), p. 101.
[70] Pam Smith, *Online Mission and Ministry* (SPCK Publishing, 2015), p. 87.
[71] Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel, 2*nd edn (Liturgical Press, 2013), p .40.
[72] Ibid., p. 54.
[73] Deanna A. Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ* (Abingdon Press, 2016), p. 53-73.

and connection. For Thompson, sharing the struggles and joys of the faith community can reflect the presence of Christ online.

> *"... the church has the potential to play a pivotal role in imagining and modelling what healthy and faithful engagement with digital tools looks like."*[74]

Taken together, these authors offer a multidimensional framework for discerning "*what"* to share online. Smith reminds us to prioritise community and theological integrity; Gould urges clarity, intentionality, and authenticity in communication; and Thompson highlights the pastoral and incarnational potential of digital sharing. For churches navigating the digital landscape, their collective insights point toward a model of digital ministry that is not only strategic but spiritually and relationally meaningful and authentic.

Leading up to the pandemic, a substantial body of literature which has been drawn on in this section, explored the *"why", "what"* and *"how"* of digital engagement, offering detailed frameworks for the implementation of online worship and examining the nature of religious communication within digital spaces. However, these theories and concepts were largely developed in contexts where digital engagement was optional, supplementary and often experimental, rather than the primary mode of connection. The pandemic, which forced churches to migrate all services online almost overnight, using digital platforms as the main connection tool for their communities, presents a unique testing ground for these frameworks. Critical theological research questions begin to emerge: How does the forced, rather than voluntary adoption of digital platforms reshape ecclesiological understandings? What theological insights emerge when digital becomes the default mode? Does the nature of digital embodiment during a crisis challenge prior theological assumptions? In this context, the pandemic becomes not only a case study but also a catalyst for refining and re-examining existing integration frameworks, demanding a deeper exploration of what it means to be the Church in a world where digital mediation becomes central to communal life.

2.3 Early Pandemic Revelations – An Emerging Fifth Wave

The onset of the pandemic marked a significant turning point in the field of digital religion, prompting what can be identified as a fifth wave of scholarly inquiry referred to earlier in this

[74] Deanna A. Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ* (Abingdon Press, 2016), p. 73.

chapter. Unlike previous phases that primarily focused on theory development, media adaptation and theological reflection, this new wave is characterised by urgent practice-based research responding to the rapid digital migration of worship and community life. From March 2020 scholars around the world began to document and analyse how faith communities adapted their rituals, communication and leadership structures under unprecedented conditions. Between the fourth wave and mid-pandemic there has been a quick succession of work published by scholars in the field in an attempt the capture what has been taking place. I would suggest a fifth wave of scholarly inquiry emerged, focusing on reaction and migration of faith communities moving into predominantly online spaces. Even though this project spans pandemic-wide, fieldwork will commence mid-pandemic. Therefore, it seems appropriate to review the additional insights and frameworks produced during the early pandemic, to continue to help shape the research questions.

Two particularly valuable contributions to this emerging body of research are the eBooks edited by Heidi A. Campbell (2020), *The Distanced Church* and *Religion in Quarantine*. The first of Campbell's edited eBooks, *The Distanced Church*, presents a timely collection of essays written by both scholars and practitioners who conducted real-time research as the pandemic unfolded.[75] Despite the urgency of the situation, these contributors rapidly gathered data and offered reflective insights on how churches adapted to digital spaces. Among the most influential contributions in this volume is Campbell's own analysis, in which she identifies three primary strategies used by religious groups engaging with technology during lockdown.[76] *Transfer* refers to efforts to replicate traditional in-person worship services in an online format, often streaming from an empty church building or a minister's home with minimal changes to the liturgy or delivery. *Translate* involves modifying the structure or presentation of worship to suit the online environment, for instance, transforming a home into a makeshift studio and adopting a talk-show format, where the minister introduces pre-recorded or live contributions from other participants, such as worship leaders or scripture readers. *Transform* goes a step further by rethinking the fundamental values and purpose of worship in a digital context. Churches using this strategy often adopt more conversational or dialogical

[75] *The Distanced Church,* ed. by Heidi A. Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/fcc63701-dc5d-4d8e-8ae8-2bb29cd4c513/content [accessed 5 July 2025]
[76] Ibid., p. 51-52.

approaches, such as fireside chats, where leaders engage authentically with their congregations and reflect openly on shared struggles. Campbell critiques the traditional broadcast-style model for its lack of interaction, advocating instead for the use of digital tools to foster engagement and deeper relational connection within faith communities. Yet, in a *Christianity & Communication Studies Network* (CCSN) webinar held on in May 2020, she acknowledged that not all churches have the same capacity to embrace transformation. She praised Bryony Taylor an Anglican priest in rural England, for adapting her digital approach considering her congregation's age and limited internet access.[77] Taylor's choices were shaped not just by vision but by pastoral sensitivity to the needs and limitations of her community. Campbell also observed that denominational background plays a role in determining which strategy a church adopts. More liturgically structured traditions, such as Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism, tended to rely on the transfer model, reflecting their preference for consistency and formality in worship. This insight suggests that while transformation may be an ideal in some contexts, it is not universally applicable. Effective digital ministry requires not only technological awareness but also theological discernment and a nuanced understanding of the community being served.

The second strategy proposed in *The Distanced Church* was by Peter Phillips. In his essay Phillips draws on Clayton M. Christensen's *Disruptive Innovation Theory* (1995) to propose a new model for understanding online church engagement, considering the pandemic. He critiques Helland's established dichotomy of *religion online* and *online religion* as no longer adequately reflective of the complexity and fluidity of current online church practices.[78] In response, Phillips introduces a three-phase model of enabling, extending and disrupting. The enabling phase closely mirrors Campbell's transfer strategy, where churches simply stream existing in-person services online with minimal adaptation. The extending phase parallels Campbell's translate strategy, as churches begin to enhance their digital presence through innovations such as online prayer stations, virtual coffee hours, and interactive worship formats. However, where Campbell's transform strategy focuses on how individual

[77] Christianity & Communication Studies Network, "Doing religion Online in a Time of Pandemic", Vimeo, 20 May 2020, https://www.theccsn.com/doing-religion-online-in-a-time-of-pandemic/ [accessed 5 July 2025].
[78] Peter Phillips, "Enabling, Extending, and Disrupting Religion in the Early COVID-19 Crisis" in *The Distanced Church,* ed. by Heidi A. Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p.71-73, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/fcc63701-dc5d-4d8e-8ae8-2bb29cd4c513/content [accessed 5 July 2025].

congregations rethink their values and practices, Phillips' disrupting phase addresses larger-scale structural and theological shifts. Disruption, in this context, refers to the point at which digital engagement challenges deeply held assumptions and institutional norms prompting strategic, theological and ecclesial reconsideration. This was notably evident in the lead-up to Easter 2020, when churches were forced to rethink traditional liturgical celebrations in online environments. Christensen's 2015 *Harvard Business Review* article *"What is Disruptive Innovation?"* outlines five key barriers to disruption: the momentum barrier, tech-implementation barrier, ecosystem barrier, new-technologies barrier, and business model barrier. [79] Under normal conditions, these barriers prevent widespread change, however, the early pandemic dramatically lowered all five barriers at once. Congregations overcame momentum barriers due to necessity; technological hurdles were addressed quickly with peer-to-peer support; the ecosystem shifted en masse to online platforms; existing technologies such as smartphones and laptops proved sufficient; and churches recognised the long-term cost efficiencies of digital operations. In this light, Phillips argues that COVID-19 created the ideal conditions for a disruptive innovation in church life. His framework provides a compelling tool for mapping the trajectory of digital church engagement and understanding how the crisis accelerated not just technological adoption, but deeper strategic and theological transformation.

Campbell drew on these essays in two webinars that took place in the early pandemic by identifying three key themes emerging from both pastors and scholars in response to the shift to online church during the pandemic.[80] Pastors observed that going online fundamentally changed the relationship between online and offline church, stressed the importance of maintaining personal connections despite social distancing, and highlighted the need to consider vulnerable groups when using digital platforms. Scholars, meanwhile, called for the crisis to prompt deeper reflection on the nature of church, emphasised the need for improved digital literacy, and expressed hope for a renewed, more thoughtful integration of digital media

[79] Clayton M. Christensen, Michael E. Raynor & Rory McDonald, "What is Disruptive Innovation?" in *The Harvard Business Review,* December Issue (2015), p. 3.
[80] Heidi A. Campbell shared these common themes in two webinars: The World Council of Churches, "Webinar on Churches' Ministry Online", YouTube, 29 April 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GgfTmqtqgyk [accessed 5 July 2025] and Christianity & Communication Studies Network, "Doing religion Online in a Time of Pandemic", Vimeo, 20 May 2020, https://www.theccsn.com/doing-religion-online-in-a-time-of-pandemic/ [accessed 5 July 2025].

within church life. These insights were especially useful during the early stages of the pandemic and acted as a springboard for further live research for scholars in the field.

The second eBook, *Religion in Quarantine*, is also a collection of essays, this time authored by professors and postgraduate students from Texas A&M University, where Campbell is based.[81] Unlike the more globally focused *The Distanced Church*, this volume offers a more academic and institutionally grounded perspective. Campbell draws on survey data from 1,500 American pastors collected in March and April 2020 to argue that Christianity, particularly in its institutional forms, has long been centred around events, particularly weekend worship services. The shift to digital platforms during the pandemic forced many faith communities to reassess their core functions and how to adapt them for online spaces. Despite this disruption, Campbell notes that most pastors continued to prioritise Sunday services, dedicating the bulk of their energy to replicating these events online. She points out that this emphasis on ritual gatherings is not new; scholars in fields such as the sociology of religion, and even denominational institutions, have historically used attendance at these services as a primary metric of religious engagement. As Campbell observes, *"The use of ritual events as the basis for determining community membership or investment defines community primarily in institutional and place-based terms."*[82] Even online, this pattern persists, with leaders often celebrating increased viewership rather than reimagining what digital community could look like, suggesting that while the medium has shifted, the event-focused mindset has largely remained unchanged. In his essay *Christian Corporeality*, Daniel R. Bare explores how the pandemic has both exposed and challenged Christianity's long-standing emphasis on embodiment.[83] He outlines three pivotal ways in which the crisis has brought this issue to the fore. First, the pandemic's confrontation with mortality has renewed an evangelistic urgency among some Christians, rooted in the tangible, embodied nature of human existence. Second, Bare points to the central role of the Eucharist in Christian practice. Despite theological

[81] *Religion in Quarantine,* ed. by Heidi A Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/06d37f61-4526-4a28-be5b-005c099606db/content [accessed 5 July 2025].
[82] Heidi A. Campbell, "Religion Embracing and Resisting Cultural Change in a Time of Social Distance", in *Religion in Quarantine,* ed. by Heidi A Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/06d37f61-4526-4a28-be5b-005c099606db/content [accessed 5 July 2025].
[83] Daniel R. Bare, "How Embodied is "the Body of Christ?" COVID-19 and Christian Corporeality", in *Religion in Quarantine,* ed. by Heidi A Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p. 36, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/06d37f61-4526-4a28-be5b-005c099606db/content [accessed 5 July 2025].

variations across denominations, Bare argues the sacrament remains a vital, embodied ritual that cannot be easily translated into digital form. Third, he highlights the theological concept of the Church as the *"body of Christ,"* insisting that authentic worship requires physical, communal presence drawing on 1 Corinthians 12. 14 *"the body does not consist of one member but of many"* in underscoring the corporate nature of Christian worship.[84] Bare concludes that churches with a doctrinal emphasis on corporeality are less likely to fully embrace online formats post-pandemic, whereas those with more flexible views of embodiment are more inclined to continue digital expressions of faith.

To conclude the collection of essays, Campbell outlines six key lessons drawn from the reflections and research presented.[85] First, she observes that adaptability varies among religious groups, with some finding it easier to transition to online platforms while others face greater challenges. Second, she notes that sacred rituals and holidays across all religious traditions have experienced significant disruption during the pandemic, prompting questions about continuity and adaptation. Third, the shift from offline to online worship invites critical reflection on the future of in-person religious gatherings and the implications for ecclesial identity. Fourth, she argues that flexible and innovative communities are better positioned to navigate both the current crisis and future changes, emphasising the value of openness to new modes of engagement. Fifth, the transformative potential of technology has become evident during the quarantine period, challenging prior underestimations by many religious groups. Finally, the lockdowns raise fundamental questions about embodied religion, highlighting the need to consider the extent to which religious practices depend on physical, in-person experiences for meaning and formation.

While the research and reflections conducted during the early stages of the pandemic will require further analysis in the future, the dedication and passion demonstrated by the authors and scholars in the field deserve recognition and praise. The valuable insights and frameworks developed over the past few decades by academics actively engaging with digital media have

[84] Daniel R. Bare, "How Embodied is "the Body of Christ?" COVID-19 and Christian Corporeality", in *Religion in Quarantine,* ed. by Heidi A Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p. 36, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/06d37f61-4526-4a28-be5b-005c099606db/content [accessed 5 July 2025], p. 37.
[85] Heidi A. Campbell, "Key Lessons from Religion in Quarantine", in *Religion in Quarantine,* ed. by Heidi A Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p.60, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/06d37f61-4526-4a28-be5b-005c099606db/content [accessed 5 July 2025].

provided essential foundations for religious communities to navigate a post-pandemic world. Hutchings encapsulates this sentiment well, stating, *"By studying the futures of the past, we can find hindsight's that help us make sense of the futures being offered to us today."*[86] Additionally, Nanda Perry's reflection on her faith community's experience celebrating Palm Sunday during lockdown offers a powerful perspective: *"If traditional communities like ours can adapt to sudden change, then the church is healthier and more resilient than we might have believed."*[87]

2.4 Identifying Areas of Focus – Community, Rituals and Leadership

The literature review across the five waves of scholarly inquiry reveals a focus on three core areas that consistently emerge across scholarship on digital religion: community, rituals and leadership. These themes not only structure much of the academic discourse but also reflect the practical concerns of faith communities navigating digital transformation. Community remains central, with scholars like Campbell and Thompson highlighting the ways in which digital media can deepen or reshape relational bonds among believers. Ritual, explored in detail by Berger, is shown to evolve through digital mediation, as traditional liturgical practices are reimagined in online formats. Leadership, however, plays a pivotal and often determining role in shaping how and whether a church engages with digital technology. Leaders have the capacity to act as gatekeepers, interpreters and cultural influencers either enabling innovation or reinforcing resistance. Their theological outlook and digital literacy can set the tone for their communities' engagement. As such, the literature underscores that leadership is not merely an operational factor but a theological and strategic one, significantly impacting the success and direction of digital ministry. Before beginning to formulate the research questions, the final part of this review will now look specifically at these three areas.

- *Community*

Over recent decades, as online churches have grown and experimented with digital platforms, there has been increasing debates around the nature and legitimacy of virtual communities. This conversation is not unique to theology, it intersects with broader sociological discourse,

[86] Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online (*Routledge, 2017), p. 9.
[87] Nanda Perry, "The Charism of Zoom Church" in *Religion in Quarantine,* ed. by Heidi A Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p. 29, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/06d37f61-4526-4a28-be5b-005c099606db/content [accessed 5 July 2025].

where the definition of *community* has long been contested. As Vincent Miller points out, *"the term 'community' is one of the fundamental concepts in sociological research and at the same time perhaps the most ill-defined".*[88] Miller draws attention to the foundational work of Ferdinand Tönnies (1955), who introduced two core sociological concepts: *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft*, often translated as "community", refers to social relationships that are face-to-face, close-knit, and rooted in kinship, place, and multi-layered social roles, such as a neighbour who is also a relative, friend, or local tradesperson.[89] By contrast, *Gesellschaft*, or "association," refers to more impersonal, individualistic, and utilitarian relationships, often based on voluntary participation and convenience. Miller highlights how these models have been disrupted by the forces of globalisation, technological advancement and the rise of individualism. Whereas community once implied physical proximity and shared history, by the late 20th century the term began to shift towards more abstract notions of belonging and identity.[90] As Miller observes, *"in its place rose a more calculated and instrumental individualism. Community had started to break down in the face of the individual".*[91] Theologians, too, have wrestled with how digital technologies reframe our understanding of community. In particular, the rise of virtual gatherings and online faith spaces has prompted reflection on whether digitally mediated relationships can fulfil the theological and relational depth traditionally associated with Christian community. The following section explores key theological concepts that have been used to interpret and respond to this shifting landscape.

Manuel Castells developed the concept of the *Networked Society* to describe the profound changes brought about by the Information Technology revolution.[92] In his work, he aimed to synthesise the interplay between various forces including cultural, social, political, economic and technological, arguing that these dynamics had reshaped the fabric of society. Castells observed a growing emphasis on information as a central force, brought about by the transformative power of digital technologies. One of his key arguments was that traditional social hierarchies were being replaced by a new *"network morphology,"* where networks

[88] Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), p. 184.
[89] Ferdinand Tönnies (1995) cited in Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), p. 185.
[90] Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), p. 186.
[91] Ibid., p. 187.
[92] Manuel Castells (1996/2000, 1997) cited in Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), p. 57-63.

became the dominant organisational structure.[93] He also introduced the idea of the *"space of flows,"* suggesting that in the networked age, relationships and activities are defined more by their connectivity and movement across digital and informational networks rather than by physical location or linear time.[94]

The concept of *Networked Individualism*, developed by J. Van Dijk (2004) and Barry Wellman (2002), explores how modern society has shifted towards more individualised forms of social organisation.[95] They argue that this trend has been driven by several factors, including the *"liberation of community"* from geographic constraints, increased physical mobility, and technological advancements that enable greater personal choice and connectivity. As a result, individuals are no longer bound to tightly knit, location-based communities but instead build and maintain diverse social networks that span broader distances, a phenomenon Wellman refers to as *"glocalisation".*[96] In this networked context, social relationships tend to become more specialised, with individuals connecting with others to fulfil specific roles or needs, rather than based on shared geography. Hutchings, drawing on Castells' work, argues that while the internet did not initiate the shift in social organisation, digital technologies have significantly intensified it.[97] As he notes, *"even a partial shift of significance from local communities to personalized social networks will have significant consequences for religious lives".*[98] Campbell and Garner extend this discussion by engaging with the work of Wellman and Van Dijk, highlighting a growing cultural emphasis on the individual, where community is increasingly shaped by personal choice and shared interests rather than geography.[99] They caution that this shift toward "*networked individualism"* will bring both moral and practical implications for how faith communities operate in digital spaces.

The early pandemic appears to have further accelerated this trend. Economist Jeanet Sinding Bentzen, in her discussion paper *In Crisis, We Pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 Pandemic*,

[93] Manuel Castells (1996/2000, 1997) cited in Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), p. 60.
[94] Ibid., p. 61.
[95] J. Van Dijk (2004) and Barry Wellman (2002) cited in Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), p. 199.
[96] Barry Wellman (2002) cited in Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), p. 199.
[97] Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online (*Routledge, 2017), p. 223.
[98] Ibid., p. 224.
[99] Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology* (Baker Academic, 2016), p. 56.

found that people tend to lean into their intrinsic religiosity, such as private practices like prayer and personal devotion, during times of crisis.[100] Conversely, in more stable periods, they often return to extrinsic expressions of faith, such as attending church services for social connection. This suggests that online faith communities during the pandemic may have met a deep personal and spiritual need, helping to explain the spike in online service viewership. Phillips writing for the Religion Media Centre, explores this increase in viewing figures and identifies a variety of contributing factors such as views counted after just three seconds, temporary visits from members of other churches, and friends or family tuning in to support someone involved in the service.[101]

These observations raise important questions: When does a viewer become part of the faith community? Should pastoral care extend to regular digital attendees? Are online viewers expected to contribute financially through tithes? Such questions force churches to reconsider their definitions of community. While some suggest that digital engagement represents the future of the Church, others note that the early pandemic has reignited place-based community values. Sociologist Karen Evans argues that, despite the rise of digital interaction, physical geographically rooted communities continue to be the default for many.[102] During the UK's first lockdown, for example, people connected locally in powerful ways: from VE Day front-garden celebrations to the Thursday night applause on your doorstep in support of the NHS.[103] Yet, these same individuals also turned to digital platforms to connect globally with those who shared their faith, hobbies, or lifestyles. In this hybrid reality, Campbell and Garner's metaphor of the network seems apt, reflecting a plural and flexible approach to community. Ultimately, the pandemic has reignited long-standing debates around what constitutes community. As churches look ahead, they must critically evaluate how digital and physical interactions shape faith communities, determining how best to minister, support and sustain meaningful connection in a post-pandemic world.

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[100] Jeanet Sinding Bentzen, "In Crisis, We Pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Centre for Economic Policy Research Discussion Paper,* No. DP14824 (2020), https://ssrn.com/abstract=3615587 [accessed 5 July 2025].
[101] Peter Phillips, "Is the Church Growing Online?", *Religion Media Centre,* 16 April 2020, https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/factsheets/is-the-church-growing-online/ [accessed 5 July 2025].
[102] Karen Evans, "Rethinking Community in the Digital Age" in Kate Orton-Johnson & Nick Prior, *Digital Sociology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 91-93.
[103] "Coronavirus: Postcard bid to help self-isolating neighbours", *BBC News,* 15 March 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cornwall-51880695 [accessed 5 July 2025].

- *Rituals*

One of the most widely debated aspects of Christian practice during the early pandemic was the adaptation of communion to an online format, particularly as much of the global Christian community found themselves celebrating Easter under lockdown in April 2020. In the lead-up to this significant liturgical moment, various denominations issued guidance and engaged in theological debate over whether the sacrament of communion could be viably administered and received through digital means. Both Peter Phillips and John Dyer contributed valuable overviews of these emerging discussions, outlining how different Christian traditions responded.[104] Figure 2, drawn from Dyer's article, offers a helpful visual comparison of these denominational positions and their theological approaches to digital communion.

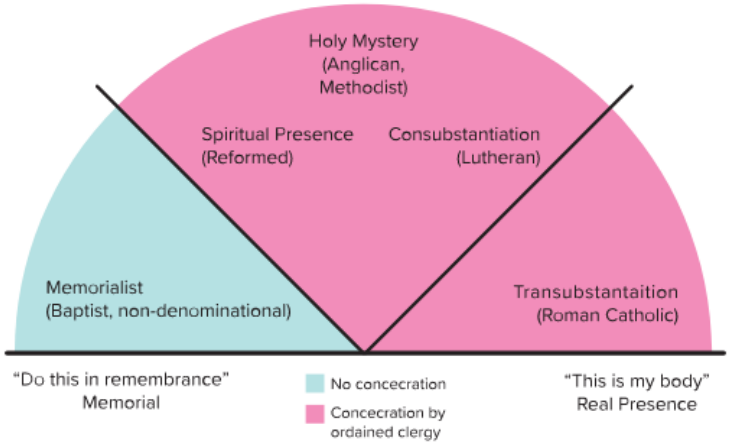

Figure 2.2. John Dyer's Simplified Range of Theological Views on Communion (2020) [105]

As Dyer notes, a key challenge in moving communion online lies in the requirement that the elements be consecrated by ordained clergy. This shift proved significantly easier for denominations that adhere to a memorialist theology, which views communion primarily as a symbolic act. Theologian Deanna A. Thompson reflects on this tension, acknowledging her earlier scepticism toward digital expressions of faith. However, her personal experience, particularly during her battle with cancer, led her to embrace the meaningful and real ways people can be virtually present to one another.

[104] Peter Phillips, "Bread and Wine Online? Resources and Liturgies for Online Communion", Medium, 4 April 2020, https://medium.com/@pmphillips/bread-and-wine-online-resources-and-liturgies-for-online-communion-34b80972a068) [accessed 5 July 2025] and John Dyer, "Digital Communion: History, Theology, and Practices", 23 March 2020, https://j.hn/digital-communion-summary-of-theology-practices/ [accessed 5 July 2025].
[105] Diagram taken from John Dyer's article: "Digital Communion: History, Theology, and Practices", 23 March 2020, https://j.hn/digital-communion-summary-of-theology-practices/ [accessed 5 July 2025].

"Just as it's possible to be in close physical proximity with others while simultaneously being absent mentally or spiritually, it's also possible to be virtually present... in profound, meaningful and real ways even when we're physically distant."[106]

In her blog, Thompson encourages believers to trust that God can be present in virtual spaces and that it is ultimately God who acts in the sacrament, regardless of the medium. The diversity in denominational responses to online communion illustrates Campbell's RSST framework, which highlights how a faith community's religious, social, and theological traditions influence its use or rejection of technology. In some cases, there was internal division with ministers defying denominational guidelines to offer online communion.[107] As Garner observed, such tensions raise questions about how much doctrinal authority denominations are willing to adapt in the face of technological change: *"It will be interesting to see how far denominations will flex around this, and if so, how that shapes the ongoing authority of church doctrine."*[108]

Another consideration is the transformation that occurs when rituals are mediated through digital platforms. Nadja Miczek's research into online religious environments identified three categories of change: transformation, invention and exclusion. Miczek suggests that content, structure and representation are all affected when rituals go digital.[109] Taking a broader view, Berger contends that God's grace is not confined to physical sacraments and that the key issue is not whether God is present in online communion, but whether the participant is truly present and engaged.[110] Still, the sensory and communal dimensions of physical worship can remain difficult to replicate online. Dyer raises important concerns about the sensory limitations of virtual worship, such as the absence of taste, smell, and shared physical presence.[111] The smell

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[106] Deana A. Thompson, "Christ is Really Present Virtually: A Proposal for Virtual Communion", *St. Olaf College,* 26 March 2020, https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion/ [accessed 5 July 2025].
[107] For example, Jonny Baker, "Share communion in your own home and resist the power of religious control", 10 April 2020, https://jonnybaker.blogs.com/jonnybaker/2020/04/share-communion-in-your-own-home-and-resist-the-power-of-religious-control.html [accessed 5 July 2025].
[108] Stephen Garner, "The Distances Church: Pragmatism, Creativity, and Rhythms of Life" in *The Distanced Church,* ed. by Heidi A. Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p. 56, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/fcc63701-dc5d-4d8e-8ae8-2bb29cd4c513/content [accessed 5 July 2025].
[109] Nadja Miczek, "Online Ritual in Virtual Worlds", *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, Vol. 3, Issue 1 (2008).
[110] Teresa Berger, *@ Worship* (Routledge, 2018), p. 94-95.
[111] John Dyer, "The Biggest Challenge for Churches at this Time" in *The Distanced Church,* ed. by Heidi A. Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p. 54, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/fcc63701-dc5d-4d8e-8ae8-2bb29cd4c513/content [accessed 5 July 2025].

of incense, the sound of corporate prayer, the taste of bread and wine, or the visual presence of a child worshipping, all contribute to embodied experiences that digital worship often lacks. Yet Thompson recounts tears streaming down her face during an online service, illustrating that virtual worship can still produce powerful, embodied moments of spiritual connection.[112] Rather than viewing physical and digital experiences as interchangeable, perhaps they should be seen as distinct but equally valuable expressions of faith. The debate over virtual communion reflects the broader complexities of translating longstanding Christian rituals into a digital context, a discussion that will likely persist well beyond the pandemic.

- *Leadership*

"Online religion is in some ways reminiscent of the Protestant Reformation, in that the Church and the priesthood are no longer considered an important intermediary between the people and their religious practice".[113]

The third key area of focus for the Church is leadership. During early lockdowns, traditional hierarchical structures within the Church, once seen as central to its identity, were significantly challenged. The debate around online communion is a clear example of this shift. As the pandemic encouraged individuals to turn inward and rely more on their intrinsic religiosity, many believers took responsibility for their own spiritual formation. Phillips described this in a Premier Digital webinar as *"a sense of holy devotion sweeping the land".*[114] Helland echoes Castells' view that the internet encourages networked interaction over centralised control, suggesting that the move online has further eroded traditional church hierarchies. COVID-19 has begun to act as a catalyst, accelerating this shift across religious communities.[115] While it remains to be seen whether this will lead to lasting structural change, digital platforms are now integral to the Church's future if it wants to remain relevant in a digitised global world. This

[112] Deana A. Thompson, "Christ is Really Present Virtually: A Proposal for Virtual Communion", *St. Olaf College,* 26 March 2020, https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion/ [accessed 5 July 2025].
[113] Christopher Helland, "Online Religion as Lived Religion", *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet,* Vol.1, Issue 1 (2005), p. 4.
[114] Peter Phillips, "Premier Digital Launches the Digital Church Webinar Series", *Premier Digital,* 6 May 2020, https://www.premierdigital.info/post/premier-digital-launches-the-digital-church-webinar-series [accessed 5 July 2025].
[115] Castells placed this corrosion down to the emerging culture of freedom, individual expression, entrepreneurialism and innovation that begun to rise out of the 1960's from the Silicon Valley IT Industry (Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture*, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011, p. 59).

new environment demands a re-evaluation of authority and leadership, one characterised by greater transparency, collaboration, and dialogue. Even before the pandemic, Campbell argued that *"offline religious authority does not resemble online religious authority".*[116] Drawing on Jon Anderson's 1999 work she identified three emerging types of religious authority in digital spaces: digital professionals (skilled in technology), digital spokespersons (who communicate religious messages online), and digital strategists (who develop online engagement approaches).[117] Essays in *The Distanced Church* highlight that many pastors now recognise the urgent need for digital training in ministerial preparation.[118] What once may have seemed unlikely, such as theological colleges partnering with YouTube influencers to inform their digital training curricula, now appears a possibility. This is supported by research into digital ministry skills conducted by Kyle Oliver, Stacey Williams-Duncan, and Elisabeth M. Kimball between 2015–2016.[119] Their Digital Literacies for Ministry Framework identifies key competencies needed for effective online ministry detailed below in Figure 2.3.

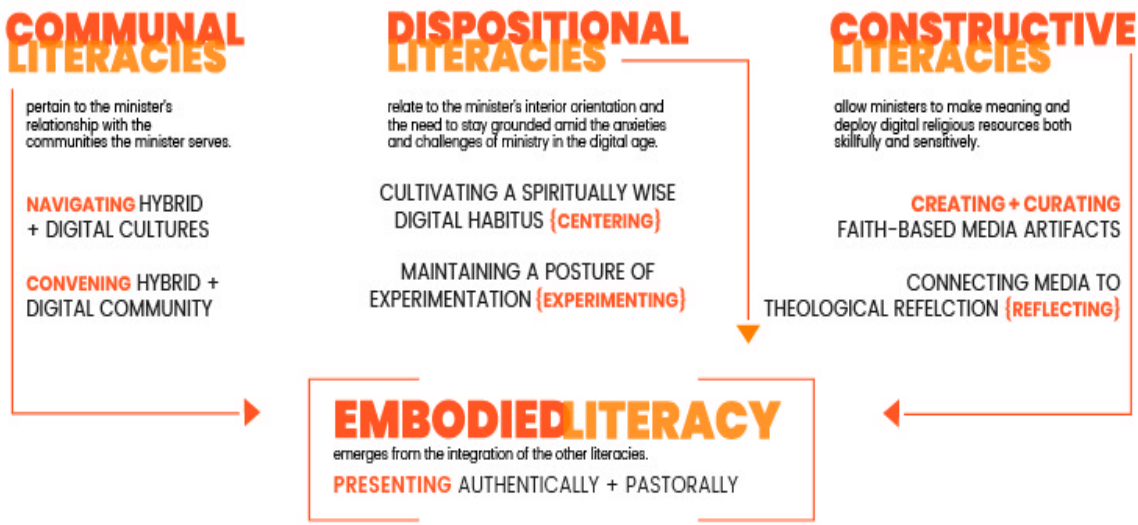

Figure 2.3 Digital Literacies for Ministry Framework

[116] Heidi Campbell and Sophia Osteen, "Summarizing Heidi A. Campbell's Research on Religion and Church Online", Oak *Trust Library,* 1 April 2020, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/187820 [accessed 5 July 2025].
[117] Heidi Campbell, "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies", *Human Behaviour and Emerging Technologies Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2019), p. 13.
[118] Albert Bogle on page 8, Arni Svanur Danielsson on page 11, John Floberg on page 17.
[119] Kyle Matthew Oliver, Stacy Williams-Duncan and Elisabeth M. Kimbell, "Digital Literacies for Ministry: A Qualitative Study of Theological Educators Preparing Students for New Media Engagement", *Ecclesial Practices Journal*, Vol. 7, Issue 1 (2020).

The framework identifies four interrelated areas of literacy that support effective and reflective digital practice. Communal Literacies focus on understanding and nurturing the relational and networked dimensions of ministry in digital spaces. This includes recognising how online interactions shape community identity, fostering belonging, and discerning how digital tools can extend communal care and connection. Dispositional Literacies address the attitudes, theological postures, and values that leaders bring to their use of technology in ministry. It emphasises reflective discernment, openness to experimentation, and the cultivation of humility and curiosity as leaders navigate digital contexts. Constructive Literacies focus on connecting media use to theological reflection and meaning making. It encourages leaders to interpret, critique, and align media practices with theological commitments, integrating digital engagement into the community's faith narratives and mission. Finally, Embodied Literacy emerges as a synthesis of the previous three, highlighting the need to integrate digital practices with the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of ministry. It recognises that digital ministry is not separate from embodied life but is deeply connected to how faith leaders and communities live out their calling in a holistic, incarnational way. Together, these literacies form a practical and reflective framework for leaders navigating the tensions and opportunities of digital ministry, supporting them in moving beyond merely using technology toward thoughtful, theologically grounded digital engagement that aligns with the mission and identity of their faith communities. As suggested for other theories earlier in this section, the early pandemic has provided a real-world test of their framework, affirmed its relevance and prompted refinement.

"Instead of understanding embodiment as an outcome of the other literacies, the crisis has caused us to view presenting authentically and pastorally online as the motivation for developing the other literacies".[120]

The researchers noted that rather than treating embodiment as a by-product of digital literacy, they now see authentic and pastoral online presence as the driving force behind all other competencies. In this way, while the early pandemic exposed the limitations of traditional

[120] Stacy Williams-Duncan and Kyle Matthew Oliver, "Reassessing Embodiment and Its Role in Developing Digital Literacies for Ministry", in *The Distanced Church,* ed. by Heidi A. Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p. 89, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/fcc63701-dc5d-4d8e-8ae8-2bb29cd4c513/content [accessed 5 July 2025].

authority models, it also clarified the digital skills and leadership qualities needed for the Church to thrive in a changing world.

2.5 Formulating the Research Questions

In the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, the field of digital religion experienced significant scholarly development with a transition from apprehension to acceptance to integration. Foundational research from figures like Campbell, Helland and Hutchings offered valuable theoretical frameworks for understanding how faith communities engage with digital media: *"...a bricolage of scholarship coming from different backgrounds and with diverse methodological preferences may very well indicate that the topic is maturing academically, and that it is maturing well".*[121] This body of work explored themes such as the shaping influence of technology, the boundaries between offline and online religious expression, and the mediatization of religious practice. More recent scholarship began to shift focus from broad theoretical analysis to integration offering practical guidance, particularly in terms of "*how"* and "*what"* to share online. Authors like Smith, Gould and Thompson contributed to this applied turn, offering tools for effective communication, digital pastoral care and theologically grounded engagement. As a result, by the time the pandemic forced churches to rapidly transition to online platforms, many faith communities were not starting from scratch; robust frameworks for shaping and implementing digital strategies across ministries were already available.

As identified earlier in the chapter, this research project is situated within the *integration* group of scholars, viewing digital technologies not as external additions but as integral to contemporary faith practices. The COVID-19 pandemic, which forced churches to migrate services online almost overnight, provides a unique testing ground for existing theories on digital ecclesiology, presenting an opportunity to refine and re-examine integration frameworks. While previous literature has explored the *"why," "what,"* and *"how"* of digital engagement, much of this scholarship emerged within contexts where digital participation was optional, supplementary, and often experimental, rather than the primary mode of connection.

[121] Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg, *Religion and Cyberspace* (Routledge, 2005), p .9.

In this context, critical theological research questions emerge, designed to explore how churches navigate this unprecedented shift and to examine what it means to be the Church when digital mediation becomes central to communal and spiritual life.

1. **How does the forced, rather than voluntary, adoption of digital platforms reshape ecclesiological understandings of gathered community, rituals, and pastoral presence?**
   Rationale: The pandemic context challenges prior assumptions that digital engagement is secondary, raising theological questions about presence, embodiment and authority in digital spaces.
2. **What theological insights arise when digital becomes the default mode of worship and relational connection rather than a supplementary extension of in-person ministry?**
   Rationale: This question seeks to understand how theology develops when online worship shifts from being an option to becoming the central modality of church life.
3. **How does the nature of digital embodiment during a crisis challenge theological assumptions about presence, participation, and community?**
   Rationale: Investigating embodiment in digital spaces during forced isolation offers insight into how digital participation is re-theologised in crisis.

Building upon these core theological questions, the practical direction of the research will explore how local churches have adapted during and after the pandemic, using the following questions to examine whether these adaptations will shape long-term ecclesial practices.

4. **Will churches attempt to return to pre-pandemic practices, both physically and digitally?**
   Rationale: To assess whether churches revert to old models or retain elements of digital practice post-pandemic.
5. **Will a new hybrid church model emerge, and what might it look like?**
   Rationale: To examine whether churches integrate digital and physical worship into a coherent hybrid ecclesiology.
6. **Can patterns be observed in how churches move throughout Campbell's *Transfer*, *Translate* and *Transform* strategy over time?**

Rationale: Using Campbell's framework to track how digital practices evolve from replication to contextual transformation within local churches.

Together, these questions will guide the investigation into how churches discern, adapt and embed digital practices into their ecclesiology, providing valuable insight into local church journeys as they balance digital and physical engagement in a post-pandemic world. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to post-pandemic scholarship by offering insights that can shape ecclesial strategies for integrating digital and physical practices in a changed world.

Chapter 3 / Charting a Course

This chapter outlines the methodology and methods that were employed within the research project and the rationale. Part 1 outlines the methodological approach underpinning this study, which sought to understand how local churches navigated the integration of digital and physical practices in a post-pandemic context. The project was situated within practical theology, allowing for a close engagement with the lived realities of faith communities while remaining attentive to theological reflection and ecclesial practice. To structure this inquiry, the study employed Richard Osmer's pastoral cycle, which offered a dynamic process to move from observing and interpreting local church practices to theological reflection and constructive proposals. This approach aligned with the project's aim to re-examine pre-pandemic scholarly concepts, generating insights that could inform post-pandemic ecclesial strategies and support churches as they discern faithful and sustainable pathways for worship and community in a digitally integrated world. It also details the empirical qualitative methods that were chosen to compliment Osmer's pastoral cycle, whist highlighting key ethical considerations. Part 2 offers an account of how these methods were implemented during fieldwork, assessing the effectiveness of data collection, and identify potential limitations for data analysis.

3.1 Research Methodology & Methods – Rationale

The core theological research questions guiding this study were:

1. **How does the forced, rather than voluntary, adoption of digital platforms reshape ecclesiological understandings of gathered community, rituals, and pastoral presence?**
2. **What theological insights arise when digital becomes the default mode of worship and relational connection rather than a supplementary extension of in-person ministry?**
3. **How does the nature of digital embodiment during a crisis challenge theological assumptions about presence, participation, and community?**

These questions demanded an approach that could hold together lived experience and theological reflection, examining how churches practically navigated digital integration while critically reflecting on the theological implications of these shifts. Practical theology enabled

the exploration of how faith communities discerned meaning, embodied theology, and adapted practices when digital engagement moved from being optional to essential which is outlined in the next section.

3.1.1 A Practical Theological Approach and The Pastoral Cycle

By seeking to capture a snapshot of this unprecedented moment in time, reflected through the experiences of individuals and communities, this project offered a unique opportunity to explore how people navigated a global pandemic through the lens of their everyday faith. However, like the continual movement of a merry-go-round, where did one begin? Rowan Williams advocates a starting point of *"in the middle of things",* to catch increasing glimpses of God's reality. [122] People are not fixed beings; the active mind is continually learning and processing its surroundings, especially when faced with new situations, such as a global pandemic. How each person perceived and reacted to this reality would be different, based on many factors, such as their history, culture, social networks, and personal experiences.[123] Virgina Braun and Victoria Clarke describe reality as a prism, only ever seeing partial glimpses.[124] This then raises the question is one perception of reality more valid than the other? Rather they are each unique and distinct, shaped by individual contexts, whilst still providing a glimpse of the universal reality. At the heart of this research was joining Ward and other theologians in saying "*here I am".[125]* However, to say these three words, it involved active participation and locating oneself in the very context that was being researched. It involved continual dialogue across the relevant disciplines, drawing on human experiences. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat suggest the starting point being human experience is what stands practical theology apart from other sub-disciplines.[126] At the heart of the core theological research questions were faith communities, who were *"in the middle of things".*

The first question examined how theological concepts of community and rituals were lived out when digital became the primary mode of gathering. Practical theology was best suited here

[122] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xii, cited in Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology* (Baker Academic, 2017), p. 10.
[123] Mark J. Cartledge offers an account of how we negotiate reality through five sources of our knowledge: perception, memory, reason, testimony and consciousness (*Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives*, Paternoster Press, 2003, p. 52).
[124] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research* (SAGE Publications, 2013), p. 28.
[125] Pete Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), p. 1-2.
[126] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (SCM Press, 2006), p. 5.

because it prioritised the lived practices of faith communities, seeing them as essential theological texts.

"Through close and disciplined attention to the theological expression of the Christian community a distinctive and authentic voice, or to be more accurate voices, can emerge".[127]

By engaging directly with churches' experiences during the pandemic, practical theology allowed for an analysis of how ecclesiology was reinterpreted in practice, rather than remaining a theoretical abstraction. It enabled the research to consider how beliefs about presence and gathered community were embodied, negotiated, and transformed in digital spaces. Ward suggests when Christians seek to live out a faithful Christian life within their communities and wider society, they are, in essence, engaging in practical theology.[128] As Christians, we participate in practical theology every day and being part of a faith community, the participants of the study were also actively doing practical theology. I therefore shared a common theological language with the participants, actively participating in a communal conversation about God. As they responded and navigated the pandemic through the lens of their faith, I shared in their journey.

The second question explored the theological meaning-making that occurs when digital worship is no longer optional but central. Practical theology seeks to understand theology as it emerges from lived experience, making it ideal for examining how faith communities reflected theologically on their transition to digital worship. It allowed the study to trace how theology was shaped by, and in turn shaped communities' practices during times of crisis, highlighting the mutual relationship between doctrine and lived reality. Practical theology was also well-suited for the third question which investigated how digital embodiment during the pandemic challenged or reshaped theological assumptions about presence and participation. Rather than treating embodiment as merely a doctrinal concept, practical theology allowed for an exploration of how digital participation was experienced and understood theologically, drawing on real practices and reflections from church communities informing broader theological discourse.

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[127] Helen Cameron and others (2010) cited in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*, ed. by Pete Ward and Knut Tveitreid, (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2022) p. 9.
[128] Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology* (Baker Academic, 2017), p. 14.

The project also weaved into the conversation multi-disciplines including but not limited to digital theology, new media, ecclesiology and sociology. Andrew Root states, *"I find it hard to call something practical theology that does not hold in some way to the multidisciplinary commitment".*[129] However, theology was the leading voice in the conversation because the project started from a position of theological enquiry. The aim was to discern what God might be teaching the local church through the pandemic, to identify any missed opportunities (online and onsite), and to consider the implications for faith communities in a post-pandemic society. To facilitate this theological dialogue Richard Osmer's pastoral cycle was used. [130] It provided a valuable and structured framework for addressing the research questions, enabling a theologically grounded and reflective approach to practice-based inquiry. The project worked through Osmer's pastoral cycle consisting of the descriptive-empirical task *(what is going on?),* the interpretative task *(why if this going on?),* the normative task *(what ought to be going on?)* and the pragmatic task *(how might we respond?).* However, Osmer argues his fourfold cycle is not original and much contemporary practical theology attends to the four tasks in some form or shape.[131] He also notes that although the historical roots of this reflective paradigm lie in the modern period, the interpretative model of practical theology did not fully develop until the 20th century. One reason he gives for this is the gradual decline of Western Christendom during this period.

"Religious, cultural, ethnic and lifestyle pluralism have become more pronounced. Religion has also become "deinstitutionalised", as denominational identities and structures have become less important."[132]

This seemed a fitting paradigm to use, considering Osmer's remarks mirrored the sociological and cultural shifts found in chapter one charting the pre-pandemic landscape proceeding this research project. More importantly the use of Osmer's pastoral cycle enabled the fieldwork to be utilised to its full potential, ensuring that the data gathered was systematically organised, interpreted through a multidisciplinary approach and critically examined through a theological lens. This project has already established its commitment to dialogue with other disciplines,

[129] Andrew Root, *Christopraxis* (Fortress Press, 2014), p. 272.
[130] Richard Osmer, *Practice Theology: An Introduction* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), p. 4-11.
[131] Richard Osmer, "Practical Theology: A Current International Perspective", *HTS Theological Studies Journal,* Vol. 67, (2011), p. 1.
[132] Ibid., p. 2.

including new media studies and the social sciences. This multidisciplinary conversation shaped the introductory chapters, particularly in charting the pre-pandemic landscape, and continued to inform discussions throughout the study. However, the specific adoption of Osmer's pastoral cycle was particularly compelling due to his theological move within the normative task, which directly assists in addressing the core theological questions identified in the previous chapter. The literature review in chapter two highlighted that at times other disciplines such as digital culture, new media, and the social sciences have had a louder voice over theology within the discourse. While these fields were crucial within the interpretative task, this project intentionally drew on Osmer's threefold approach to normativity consisting of theological interpretation, ethical reflection and good practice, to ensure theological engagement.[133] A central aim of this research was to re-examine and evaluate the pre-pandemic frameworks and theories considering the forced digital engagement necessitated by the pandemic. Consequently, as part of the normative task, the analysis re-engaged scholars' normative sources, including scripture and theological concepts, while also incorporating additional normative sources. The analysis also engaged ethical normative sources, such as UK legislation during the pandemic, exploring how churches navigated these regulations when they appeared to conflict with theological commitments to communal worship, the sharing of communion and the experience of the persecuted Church. Finally, associated with good practice, the analysis critically engaged with scholars and church practices situated within the integration group, aligning the insights with current digital and sociological trends to support churches in discerning faithful and sustainable pathways for worship and connection in a post-pandemic context.

Osmer's model was particularly suited to this research, as it encouraged practical theological engagement with real-world complexities, whilst encompassing the pluralistic, post-Christendom, post-modern, globalised world we now live in.[134] However, even though the pastoral cycle is widely respected in practical theology, it has not been without critique. Theologians Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman, for instance, argue that the cycle can appear to assume a theologically neutral stance at certain stages, as though researchers can suspend

[133] Richard Osmer, *Practice Theology: An Introduction* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), p. 161.
[134] Richard Osmer, "Practical Theology: A Current International Perspective", *HTS Theological Studies Journal,* Vol. 67 (2011), p. 2.

their theological perspective.[135] However, to counter this critique the Christian faith is not something that can be switched on and off, it becomes a part of a person's being, a way of living, making it both unlikely and undesirable to disengage the Christian theological lens through the research process. As Ward points out, the foundation of practical theology lies not in rigid method, but in the identity of the practitioner and their ongoing participation in the life and reflection of the faith community: *"So the starting point is not the method but the identity of the individual practitioner who is part of the community with its ongoing conversation about theology and practice".*[136] Our faith inherently shapes how we listen, interpret, and engage with communities. Osmer himself even explains theology is present prior to the normative task.[137] However, in outlining the four tasks of practical theology, Osmer recognises that the way these tasks are conceptualised and implemented varies among practical theologians.[138] To account for this diversity, he identifies four additional metatheoretical issues that he believes shape and determine how the four tasks are interpreted and applied in practice: the theory-praxis relationship, sources of justification, models of cross-disciplinary work and theological rationale. Root goes one step further to suggest epistemology should also be included in this frame.[139] In reflecting on Osmer's metatheoretical issues, I recognised the significance of my Pentecostal roots in shaping how I approached this study from the onset. For example, regarding sources of justification, I drew on scripture and the active presence of the Holy Spirit as central guiding authorities in discerning what ought to be happening within the church's digital and embodied practices. My normative framing was shaped by the Pentecost event, where the outpouring of the Spirit led to both transformative communal experience and performative action (Acts 2), catalysing a movement that blended spiritual encounter with practical witness in the world. [140] This perspective affirms that theological reflection is not merely an intellectual exercise but is deeply connected to lived experience, communal discernment, and Spirit-empowered action, aligning with a practical theological approach that

[135] Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman (2008) cited in Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology* (Baker Academic, 2017), p. 101-102.
[136] Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology* (Baker Academic, 2017), p. 102.
[137] Andrew Root, *Christopraxis* (Fortress Press, 2014), p. 25.
[138] Richard Osmer, "Practical Theology: A Current International Perspective", *HTS Theological Studies Journal,* Vol. 67 (2011), p. 2.
[139] Andrew Root, *Christopraxis* (Fortress Press, 2014), p. 25.
[140] There are similarities with Root's approach to the normative task discussed in *Christopraxis,* where he draws on Ray Anderson's perspective of having a Pentecostal starting point (Andrew Root, *Christopraxis* (Fortress Press, 2014), p. 26).

sought integration between faith, practice, and the ongoing work of God within contemporary contexts.

Osmer recognises that practical theologians will have different starting points and perspectives which will shape how the four tasks are applied. Through identifying the metaphysical issues he seeks to establish elements within the field that can serve as shared reference points, offering a sense of coherence within the increasingly pluralistic landscape of practical theology.[141] It is also important to recognise that although Osmer's pastoral cycle outlines a clear process, this project required a flexible and adaptive approach due to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic, the complexity of lived experience, and the extended timeframe the study encompassed. To effectively capture shifts and developments within church communities throughout and beyond the pandemic, fieldwork was conducted across multiple phases. As a result, the stages of Osmer's model, particularly the descriptive-empirical and interpretative, did not follow a strictly linear path but instead overlapped and recurred, which allowed for an evolving and responsive engagement with the data, whilst giving space for the Holy Spirit to move throughout the process.

3.1.2 Empirical Qualitative Research Methods

To address the core theological questions identified in this study and to fully engage with the heart of Osmer's first two tasks (the descriptive-empirical and interpretative) the project employed empirical methods as a critical component of its methodology. Keith F. Punch defines empirical as something that is observable: *"The essential idea is to use observable, real-world experience, evidence and information as the way of developing and testing ideas".* [142] Alan Bryman explains the term is used from a social science perspective to enforce the rigorous testing of ideas before they are considered knowledge.[143] A common critique raised against employing empirical approaches within theology is that God, as transcendent and unseen, cannot be directly observed, measured or recorded. However, within practical theology, there is a clear recognition that while God cannot be empirically captured in a reductive sense, we can nonetheless speak with confidence of God as an active, relational agent

[141] Richard Osmer, *Practice Theology: An Introduction* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), p. 141.
[142] Keith F Punch, *Introduction to Social Research* (SAGE Publications, 1998), p. 28.
[143] Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods,* 5th edn (Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 20.

who is present and at work within the lives of faith communities.[144] Empirical research, therefore, becomes a means of attending to the concrete practices, experiences and narratives through which communities discern and respond to the presence and action of God in their midst. This aligns with the understanding that God's activity is often mediated through human actions, communal worship and the shared interpretation of experience within the life of the Church. By observing how individuals and communities engage in practices of prayer, worship, rituals and digital gathering, empirical research allows us to trace the contours of lived faith and theological meaning-making as communities seek to respond faithfully to God's call in their specific contexts. The descriptive-empirical task therefore, required close attention to what was happening within the lived experiences of church communities as they navigated post-pandemic realities, and empirical research methods such as interviews and observations enabled a faithful capturing of these experiences. Similarly, the interpretative task called for discernment in why these phenomena were occurring, necessitating engagement with participants' perspectives, practices, and contexts to understand the deeper social, cultural, and theological meanings embedded within their responses. By using empirical methods, this project aimed not only to document church practices but to interpret them theologically, ensuring that the lived realities of faith communities informed and shaped the theological reflection central to practical theology. In doing so, the project sought to honour the voices of participants and situate its findings within the dynamic interplay between experience, context and theological meaning-making. This then made space for a qualitative approach to be employed using a combination of interviews and participant observation to capture the context and messiness of ecclesial communities and leave space for the Holy Spirit to move.

"Qualitative research takes seriously the notion that it is in the lives of communities and individuals that we find the natural environment for theology where it is energized by the work of the Spirit."[145]

[144] Pete Ward, "Theology and Qualitative Research: An Uneasy Relationship', in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*, ed. by Pete Ward and Knut Tveitreid, (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2022), p. 10-11.
[145] Ibid., p. 12.

- *Interviews*

In Osmer's description of the descriptive-empirical stage he outlines the practice of *priestly listening*: *"It reflects the nature of the congregation as a fellowship in which people listen to one another as a form of mutual support".*[146] Osmer relates this to the context of the church leader, however, it can be used within the interview process. He goes onto explain the importance of having an awareness of the congregation's real-life situations. This formed part of the induction process for the leaders, requesting an overview of the church social makeup. In addition, having lived through the pandemic and been involved in church leadership, I was able to offer an empathetic listening ear, as Osmer advocates talking less and listening more. Many participants were also familiar with an interview format, as they are one of the most familiar data collection tools used according to Braun and Clarke.[147] Their definition of interviewing is of a professional conversation with the aim of getting the interviewee to talk about their perspectives and experiences in relation to the chosen subject, capturing their language and concepts.[148] Despite them suggesting that face-to-face interviews are seen as superior to virtual interviews, the interviews were conducted via Zoom (or an alternative video meeting tool if requested by the participant) due to the global pandemic and ongoing lockdowns. However, they do also list benefits such as being more accessible, offering a more comfortable environment for sensitive topics, and participants feeling more empowered as they can reply in their own time.[149] When conducting the interviews, Kvale's (1996) principles were used, such as openness, gentleness, being ethically sensitive, remembering and structuring.[150] These principles aligned with Osmer's priestly listening ethos.

- *Participant Observation*

The second method used was participant observation. As part of the descriptive-empirical task Osmer advocates the spiritual practice of attending, of which he argues observation is crucial.[151] *"This provides direct access to this setting, rather than relying on the selective impressions of others".*[152] Swinton and Mowat outline the differences between direct and

[146] Richard Osmer, *Practice Theology: An Introduction* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), p. 35.
[147] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research* (SAGE Publications, 2013), p. 77.
[148] Ibid., p. 77. They explain that interviews are best suited for experience-related research projects.
[149] Ibid., p. 98.
[150] Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th edn (Oxford University Press: 2016), p. 473.
[151] Richard Osmer, *Practice Theology: An Introduction* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), p. 37-39.
[152] Ibid., p. 60.

participant observation, whereby direct does not participate in the setting and offers a more detached perspective.[153] However, this research aimed to be part of the social setting that was being observed, or as Ward describes it becoming part of the action.[154] Afterall, there is a role for the researcher to play, where Christ too can be revealed. Bård Norheim describes it as a gift for the researcher to uncover the presence of Christ through seeing and receiving.[155] On a practical level, observation enabled first-hand shared experiences with the participating faith communities. It allowed me to participate in their practices and share in their struggles or celebrations in the context of the pandemic, and be exposed to their espoused theology, along with behaviours and norms that was not revealed through the interview process. The aim was to fully engage with worship and discipleship focused activities (online and on-site) during the arranged observation window. These included mid-week and weekend services, bible studies and prayer meetings. It did not include activities such as youth groups, children's activities, and evangelistic ministries, due to the focus of the research and capacity. Notes were written after attending the activity, to enable full participation in the experience at the time and openness to the Holy Spirit, and to help facilitate a more organic immersion into the setting.

Prayer was used as a research practice within both the interview and participant observation methods process; to attune to the emotional, spiritual, and relational layers of the field, particularly within a faith-based context. James Butler argues that incorporating prayer into the research process can enhance its rigor, foster greater openness to critique, encourage honesty and cultivate a deeper sense of humility in practice.[156] In this study prayer helped cultivate reflexivity by encouraging moments of pause, humility and attentiveness to participants' lived experiences rather than relying solely on analytical interpretation. However, unlike Butler's emphasis on corporate prayer, in this study prayer was used only individually by the researcher prior to interviews and observations and quietly during, rather than collectively with the participating churches during meetings or visits. This approach was intentional, as it was important that the focus remained on the leader's experiences and participants' practices, with

[153] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (SCM Press, 2006), p. 223-234.
[154] Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology* (Baker Academic, 2017), p. 158.
[155] Bård Norheim, "The Presence of Christ in Qualitative Research: Four Models and An Epilogue" in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*, ed. by Pete Ward and Knut Tveitreid, (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2022), p. 516-517.
[156] James Butler, 'Prayer as a Research Practice?: What Corporate Practices of Prayer Disclose about Theological Action Research', *Ecclesial Practices,* 7.2 (2020), 256.

my role being that of an observer who was joining in rather than shaping or influencing their worship.

While the project aimed to illuminate the diverse facets of reality expressed and experienced by participants, further insights surfaced as the study progressed through the acquisition of additional empirical evidence detailed below.

Data Trawl	Digital data trawls of social media platforms, including views and likes
Text based	Church documents e.g., leaflets/ minutes/ attendance reports/ questionnaires
Digitally based	Videos/ images/ websites/ Facebook pages/ YouTube channels/ Zoom recordings/ blogs
Observation based	Field notes/ journal logs

Using a combination of interviews and participant observation, supported by data trawls, textual and digital literature, and visual materials, enabled a fuller identification and exploration of the *"four voices of theology"* evident among the participating leaders and church communities. The terminology of the four voices of theology developed by Helen Cameron et. al, was used as an analytical lens for interpreting the theological expressions of the churches involved.[157] Interviews allowed access to the *espoused* voice of how participants described and interpreted their beliefs, while participant observation provided insight into the *operant* voice as theology was enacted through practices, rituals and patterns of communal life. Data trawls and the analysis of written and digital texts (such as church websites, policy documents, liturgical resources and teaching materials) contributed evidence of both the *formal* and *normative* voices, revealing the theological frameworks, denominational expectations and inherited traditions that shaped thinking and behaviour. When viewed together, these methods made it possible to examine not only what the churches claimed theologically, but how theology was embodied, expressed and negotiated within their lived experience.

[157] Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeny & Clare Watkins, *Talking About God in Practice* (SCM Press, 2010), p. 53-56.

3.1.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Coding

"We imagine qualitative analysis as an adventure, and one that is typically messy and organic, complex and contested"[158]

As articulated in the previous section, the rationale for using interviews and participant observation was to gather rich qualitative data reflecting the lived experiences of individuals and communities in seeking the agency of God in their lives. Therefore, reflexive thematic analysis (TA), as outlined by Braun and Clarke, was selected as the most appropriate method for analysing this data. TA enabled an in-depth interpretation of participants' perceptions of reality, shaped by their unique social and cultural contexts. As Braun and Clarke explain, *"Participants bring you a located, interpreted reality (the data), which you then interpret via TA. This interpretation inescapably takes place through the lens of your cultural memberships".*[159] I recognised that my own identity as a white, middle-class female naturally shaped my interpretation of the data. Considering these cultural memberships, Braun and Clarke advocate regularly asking two important questions: *are there good grounds for what I'm claiming?* and *am I ignoring some inconvenient truths?*[160] These questions guided the coding and data analysis process, as did praying and discerning the Holy Spirit. Butler's notion of *"data discernment"* was used to frame the analytical process, emphasising a reflective and ethically attentive engagement with qualitative material rather than a purely technical exercise.[161] In the data discernment and coding process, prayer functioned as a reflective tool rather than an analytical method in itself. Before engaging with transcripts and field notes, moments of prayer were used to cultivate openness and attentiveness, with the aim of reducing the risk of approaching the material with preconceived expectations or rigid thematic structures. This practice encouraged a posture of stillness and receptivity, helping to slow the pace of interpretation and permit themes to surface gradually rather than being imposed too quickly. Prayer also served as a reminder to hold the data, and the lived experiences of

[158] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (SAGE Publications, 2022), p. xxvi.
[159] Ibid., p. 171.
[160] Ibid., p. 201.
[161] James Butler, 'Prayer as a Research Practice?: What Corporate Practices of Prayer Disclose about Theological Action Research', *Ecclesial Practices,* 7.2 (2020), 243.

participants, with care, dignity, and respect, thus supporting an ethical awareness throughout the analytical stages. However, the coding process remained grounded in established qualitative techniques; prayer did not determine or validate codes but instead supported a reflective stance. In this way, the analytical rigor of thematic coding was maintained, while prayer contributed to a more mindful and compassionate engagement with participants' narratives. This commitment to pairing spiritual attentiveness with methodological discipline aligns with broader expectations of discernment and interpretation in practical theology. Osmer promotes the use of wise judgement, encompassing a spectrum of thoughtfulness to theoretical interpretation during the interpretative stage of the pastoral cycle, emphasising that meaning making requires both sensitivity and critical distance. [162] From a social sciences perspective, Braun and Clarke similarly provide a framework for reflexive thematic analysis that facilitates data-connected interpretation, balancing researcher subjectivity with systematic analytical procedures. This is broken down into six stages: [163]

1. Familiarising yourself with the data
2. Coding
3. Generating initial themes
4. Developing and reviewing themes
5. Refining, defining, and naming themes
6. Writing up

This framework was appealing for two reasons. Firstly, because of the regular revisiting of the data set, and the reviewing and refining of themes. The research process was not linear, and this project required a framework that gave space for a messy and organic evolvement, that immersed itself in the data. Secondly, subjectivity drives the TA process: *"Viewing subjectivity as something valuable, rather than problematic, is a key aspect of a qualitative sensibility".*[164] It recognised the contextual, social and holistic nature of the participants and the researcher.

[162] Richard Osmer, *Practice Theology: An Introduction* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), p. 81-83.
[163] Ibid., p. 35-36.
[164] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (SAGE Publications, 2022), p. 12.

3.1.4 Ethical Considerations, Sampling and Limitations

Ethical approval for the project was sought and approved in October 2020. Within the application several issues were raised and solutions provided, as outlined in Appendix 1. Each leader was given a welcome pack which included a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 2) and Participant Consent Form (Appendix 3) to complete and return. These laid out the expectations of the project, data protection procedures and their right to withdraw from the project at any point.

To narrow down the potential sample population, a clear set of criteria was established to ensure the study remained focused and manageable while maintaining depth and richness of data. The research examined the Church within the UK, rather than on a global scale, to allow for a more contextually grounded and comprehensive picture of post-pandemic ecclesiological developments. The decision to focus on churches within a northern local authority was shaped by practical considerations of accessibility and the strong networks already established through my professional and voluntary roles, which facilitated trust, openness, and sustained engagement throughout the research process. The study was open to all denominations, with the aim of securing a sample group of approximately ten to fifteen leaders of local churches within this local authority. This decision aligned with the research questions, which sought to understand how churches were navigating the integration of digital and physical practices throughout the pandemic, and how factors such as denominational identity, leadership decisions and community values shaped each church's response to forced digital engagement. By including a diverse range of denominational backgrounds, the research was able to explore the extent to which theological frameworks around community, rituals and pastoral presence influenced, or reshaped, the shift to digital platforms during the pandemic. Furthermore, this diversity was intentional and methodologically significant, as it enabled the identification of both shared patterns and distinct contextual responses across varied ecclesial settings. This approach directly supported the aim of re-examining and refining integration frameworks within practical theology by situating theological reflection within the lived realities of diverse local churches. To develop the potential sample, an online data trawl was conducted to compile a comprehensive list of churches within the local authority, which ensured inclusivity across traditions, sizes and neighbourhood contexts. Following this, electronic invitations outlining the research aims and participation requirements was distributed, with follow-up communication to encourage participation and address any questions. This structured yet

flexible sampling strategy ensured that the study remained aligned with its core theological research questions while maintaining the practical feasibility required for rigorous empirical work within practical theology.

It was also important to identify potential limitations within the scope of the project, in the hope to mitigate against them where possible. The first and obvious limitation, was that the fieldwork was be conducted during a global pandemic. This involved working within national lockdowns and public health guidance. There was a hesitancy that a low response rate might be received, due to leaders stretched capacity, and therefore, invites were sent out to all the churches identified through the data trawl in the local authority as a mitigation tactic. In addition, to navigate the changing landscape, up to date community guidelines were obtained from church leaders in advance of visits. There was also a risk that leaders would portray themselves in the best possible light and only share partial answers during the interviews, which reinforced the use of participant observation. Bryman argues observation offers a more naturalistic setting, whereby interviews disrupts the natural flow of events for participants.[165] The observation method gave the opportunity to hold a mirror up against the content of the interviews. The focus of the interviews were a verbal account, whereas the observation was focused on behaviour and practices. The two together supported Osmer's descriptive-empirical task of *"what is going on?"* and offered a more nuanced understanding. Another limitation identified was researcher and participant bias: *"Each of us has been shaped by communities, traditions and ideas, theological and other. We have not come from nowhere…".*[166] I was mindful of the influence my Pentecostal background may have when visiting churches from other denominations. Rather than conceal or dismiss this aspect of my identity, I acknowledged and embraced it and reflected on it during my observation and notes. I was transparent with participants by including a brief overview of my background in the onboarding information pack. Reflexivity was a continuous practice throughout the research process from fieldwork to analysis and was integrated into the broader methodological approach, not as a limitation, but as a valuable part of the inquiry.

[165] Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 493.
[166] Zoe Bennett and others, *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology* (Routledge, 2018), p. 13.

"This is particularly important in research because, without reflexivity, we can fall into the trap of simply seeing what we expect to see and our conclusions then become predictable".[167]

Although prayer contributed to heightened reflexivity and sensitivity to the research context, several limitations became apparent. First, prayer risked introducing interpretive bias, as it could subtly predispose the researcher to view events through a theological lens or to search for meaning that aligned with personal beliefs rather than allowing themes to emerge inductively from the data. To mitigate this, prayer was complemented by a thematic analysis coding framework, supervisor debriefing and reflective journaling, which provided additional layers of critical distance and methodological rigor. Second, because prayer is a personal spiritual practice, it may not be uniformly compatible with all research environments or participants. Even in a church setting, individuals hold diverse theological views and personal boundaries around prayer; therefore, use of prayer was done privately, prior to interviews and observation, with the focus remaining firmly on participants' practices. Third, prayer could blur professional boundaries, making it difficult to separate the researcher's role from that of a worshipper or faith participant. Awareness of this risk, along with careful reflexive journaling, helped to maintain a conscious distinction between observation and participation. For these reasons, although prayer offered spiritual grounding and attentiveness, its use demanded deliberate mitigation strategies, ongoing reflexivity and transparency to ensure it enhanced, rather than constrained the integrity of the research process.

3.2 Research Methods – Practical Application

This section provides a retrospective description of how the chosen research methods were applied during fieldwork, offering an evaluation of the data collection process. An overview of the participants is given, and it assesses the success of the methods in gathering relevant and insightful information, considering how the data aligns with the research objectives. It also highlights any challenges or obstacles encountered during the fieldwork phase and discusses their potential impact on the data analysis process. Furthermore, the section identifies any limitations in the data collection methods and considers how these limitations might affect the broader conclusions and interpretations drawn from the research.

[167] Barbara Bassot (2016) cited in Zoe Bennett and others, *Research in Practical Theology* (Routledge, 2018), p. 41.

3.2.1 An Overview of Church Leaders and Faith Communities

The uptake from the invite responses was pleasantly surprising. The initial data trawl of churches revealed a possible 49 and 23 leaders.[168] All 49 churches were sent invite emails to accommodate for negative responses. Positive responses were received randomly from across the denominations, receiving a sign-up rate of 52% with 12 leaders agreeing to participate, who were responsible for 28 churches across the authority representing 57% of the local church-based population. Out of the 28 churches, 14 were closely observed, who in total had 1490 regular attenders before the pandemic.[169]

For anonymity, each leader was given a personal identifier code, which will be used throughout the remainder of the thesis. There was a diverse range in the leadership roles held across the participants, including a superintendent, reverend, lay leader, pastor, parish priest, deacon chair and diocese senior administrator. Out of the twelve leaders there were five males, six females and one non-binary who requested the use the pronouns they/them. In age order, two were 36-45, two were 46-55, five were 56-65, and three were over 65.

This study engaged a diverse sample of churches within a northern UK local authority, capturing a broad yet contextually grounded picture of post-pandemic ecclesial practice and digital engagement across Pentecostal, Anglican, Baptist, Catholic and Methodist traditions. The participating Pentecostal churches included leaders with varied levels of digital literacy, from a white male senior leader with over 25 years of experience (P1), overseeing a large, socially diverse congregation of around 250, to a female pastor in her late 50s serving a congregation of approximately 30 within a deprived housing estate (P2). One independent Pentecostal leader, a white female in her late forties (P3), had established a church in her local small town, actively using social media to express her faith and community work, while another Pentecostal church in a seaside resort was led by a white couple in their mid-sixties who had navigated a church split during the pandemic (P4), leading to a relocation and subsequent congregational regrowth among a primarily middle-class demographic.

[168] This process revealed churches pre-pandemic who already had an online presence. However, this varied substantially: some had several social media accounts, some had just a website, and some were just listed on a *"find a local church"* search page.
[169] Average figures of regular attendance was taken from their onboarding documents.

Within the Church of England, participants included a senior project manager, a white male in his late sixties (CE1a), well known for youth-focused initiatives within a church on a highly deprived housing estate, working alongside a middle-aged female reverend (CE1b) during the pandemic to manage onsite and online church, with the latter seeing a weekly online congregation averaging 190. Another participant was a middle-aged female incumbent on the outskirts of a small town (CE2), leading a small congregation predominantly over sixty, while a third Anglican participant was a middle-aged churchwarden and reader-in-training (CE3), co-leading an urban church in interregnum within a highly deprived area, maintaining active social media engagement while serving a congregation that included a transient, no-fixed-abode community alongside a committed electoral roll of around 50 members.

Baptist representation included a Ghanaian minister in his late thirties (B1), who had relocated with his family and was actively using social media to share scripture, leading a congregation of 60-70 in a seaside resort that had formed through the merger of a small Baptist church and a local independent Pentecostal church. Another Baptist participant, a white elderly male (B2), chaired a team of deacons overseeing a commuter church with a congregation of 150-180, primarily middle-class professionals, located on the edge of a deprived housing estate.

The Catholic parish was represented by a white middle-aged female senior administrator acting on behalf of the parish priest (CT1), digitally competent, overseeing three churches across a deprived estate, seaside resort, and small town with a combined average weekly attendance of 600, reflecting diverse age, social, and ethnic profiles, including weekly Polish masses.

Finally, Methodist participants included a white elderly male superintendent minister leading a circuit of thirteen churches with around 260 weekly congregants (M1), predominantly retired and middle-class, who used social media actively to share aspects of church life and faith. Another participant was a white middle-aged female voluntary senior leader from a Methodist church in an affluent surrounding village (M2), regularly using social media and serving a congregation of around 80, while a third participant, a middle-aged female (M3), led youth work within a church on a deprived housing estate, where the congregation, around 25-30 in regular attendance, included a mix of local low-income families and an actively involved leadership team using social media to promote church activities and social action projects.

By selecting churches that varied in size, denominational structure, leadership profiles, digital literacy and community demographics, the research was able to capture a nuanced understanding of both shared patterns and contextually specific adaptations within the local authority, contributing to a rich and layered exploration of emerging post-pandemic ecclesial practices within practical theology.

3.2.2 Qualitative Methods

The study was organised into four time periods, shown in Figure 3.1, that tracked the evolving experiences of churches over the course of the pandemic: pre, early, mid and post-pandemic.

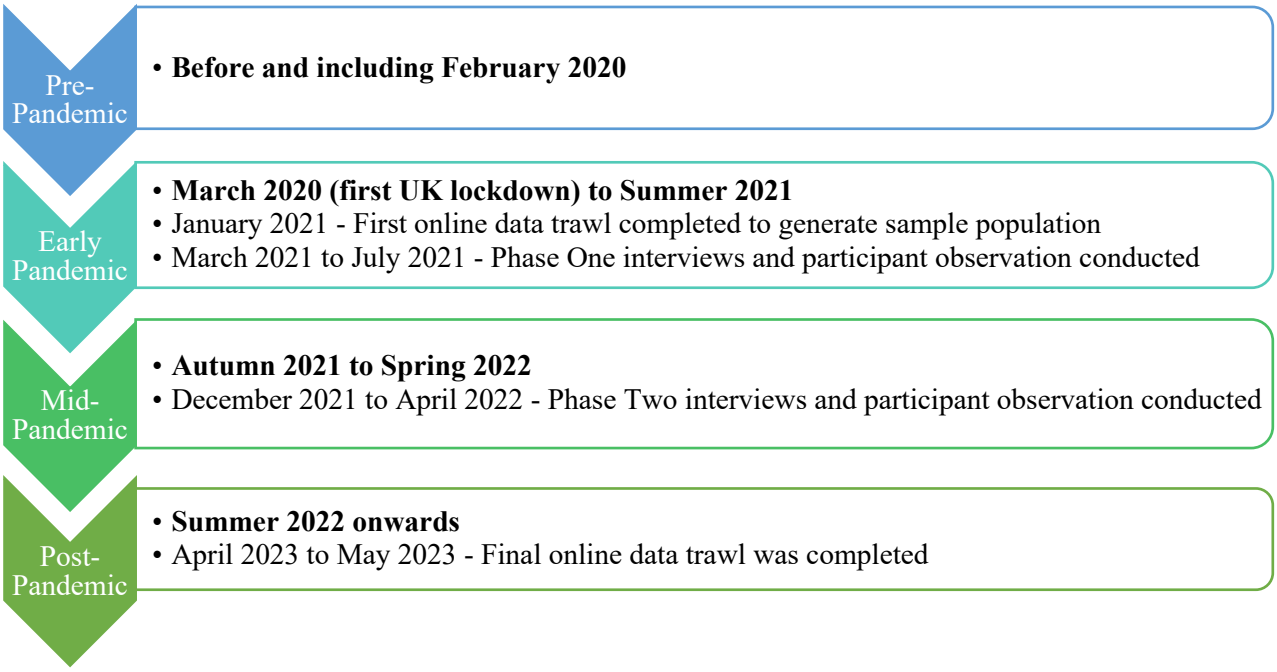


Figure 3.1 Pandemic Time Periods and Fieldwork Schedule

The pre-pandemic period referred to the time before March 2020 and represented the baseline against which later shifts could be understood. The early pandemic period, from March 2020 to summer 2021, included phase one fieldwork and captured the initial responses during national lockdowns and restrictions. Figure 3.2 overleaf, provided a useful timeline produced by the Institute of Government Analysis, charting the vast amount of government legislation and restrictions that were put in place across the UK between March 2020 to March 2021. [170]

[170] Institute for Government Analysis, "Timeline of UK coronavirus lockdowns, March 2020 to March 2021", https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-lockdown-web.pdf [accessed 7 July 2025]

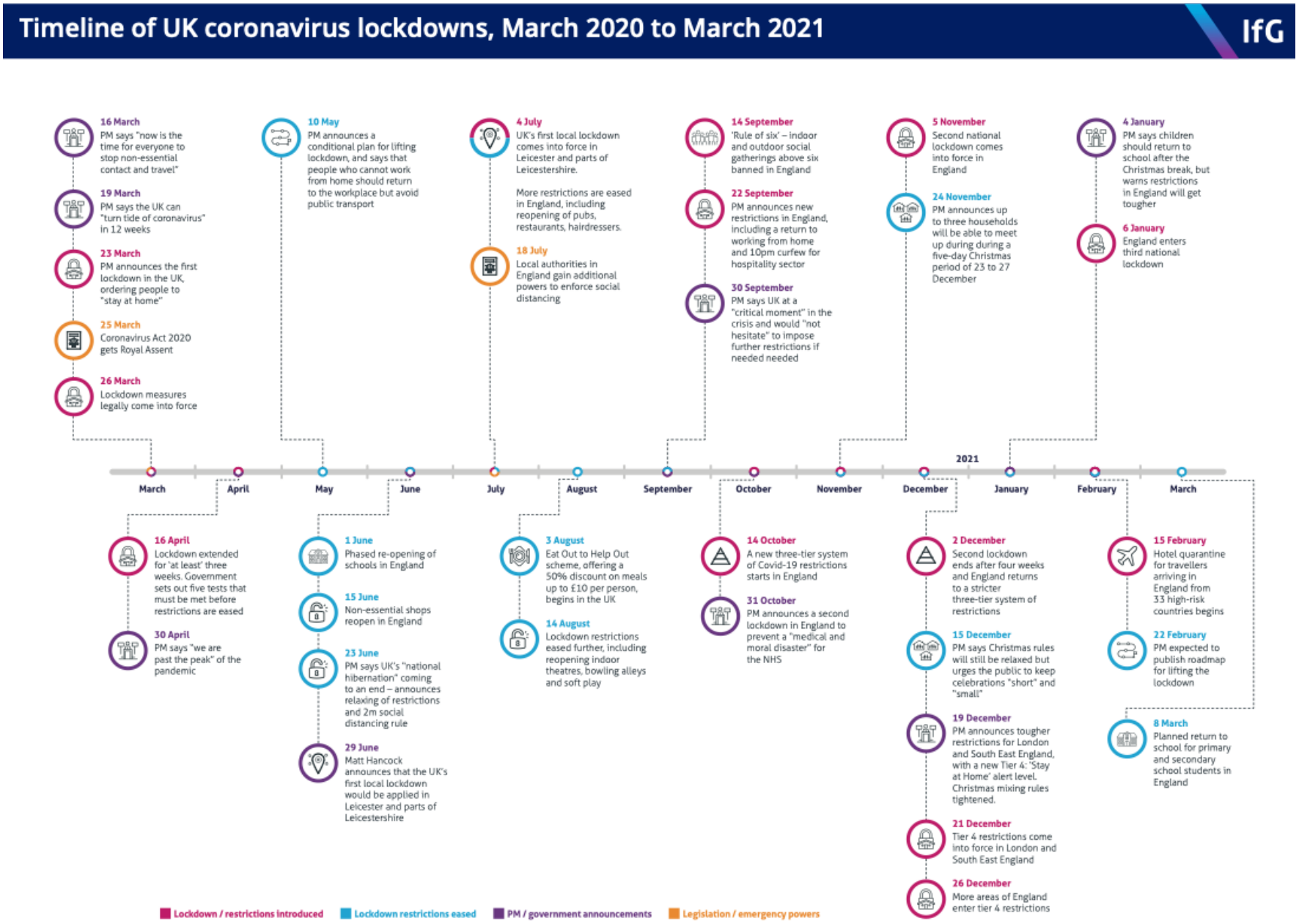


Figure 3.2 Timeline of UK Coronavirus Lockdowns – March 2020 to March 2021

The mid-pandemic period covered autumn 2021 to spring 2022 and included phase two fieldwork and the post-pandemic period, from summer 2022 onwards, included the final data trawl.

These time periods were chosen analytically because they aligned with distinct shifts in government restrictions, church behaviour, leadership demands and congregational engagement, enabling patterns of change, and the factors driving them, to be observed and compared over time.

- *The Interview Process*

Due to lockdowns the phase one interviews were conducted online by Zoom. By phase two, the UK had come out of lockdowns, but Zoom was used again for the interviews as churches were still monitoring infection rates. A format of semi-structured interviews was chosen, and a schedule of pre-determined questions (Appendix 4). The questions were drafted, based around the three core sub-themes of community, rituals and leadership, using a mix of open and closed questions. Before each interview, time in prayer was spent, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide both the conversation and my attention, cultivating a posture of openness and attentiveness to participants' words, behaviours and practices. This allowed me to engage thoughtfully and respectfully, remaining sensitive to the nuances of their experiences while maintaining a reflective awareness of my own responses. During the interviews there was a degree of flexibility, to allow scope to ask further questions on a particular point where needed. One hour was allocated per interview; a couple were just under, but most went over by fifteen minutes. A pilot interview was conducted for both phases and feedback was provided on the format and questions. At the beginning of each interview, the participant was welcomed and provided with an outline of the format. Consent was then sought to record the interviews for transcribing later. At the end of the interview, the participants were thanked and dates for the participant observation were arranged. Overall, 24 interviews were carried out, the details are listed in Appendix 5. After the interviews, the Zoom transcribe recording was used to copy and paste into a Word document. The interview was then replayed, correcting the Zoom transcripts where needed. Despite this process being extremely time-consuming, it proved valuable in facilitating immersion in the data and developing a deep familiarity with its content.

- *The Participant Observation Process*

For both phases participant observation was carried out after the interviews took place. In total fourteen churches were observed across sixty-seven visits, spending back-to-back weeks across the various churches. For each church, I tried to attend all the main events they had within a week, with a focus on weekend services, bible studies and prayer meetings. However, if there were other activities within their allocated week, I also tried to attend them. It required flexibility, as some of the events fell outside of their week, such as monthly or bi-weekly events. This meant conducting observation for 3-4 months at a time for each phase. However, I was eager to engage actively in the life of each church rather than remain a detached observer. All participating churches were welcoming, and my presence was introduced along with the purpose of my research, which encouraged individuals to approach me and share their personal experiences. Throughout both phases of fieldwork, the landscape remained fluid, with a range of worship formats in constant flux. When church buildings were closed, I attended services online, as this was the only option. As buildings gradually reopened, many churches continued to offer livestreamed or hybrid services. I chose to engage in the format most prominently promoted by each church's leadership and communication channels. Consequently, many observations took place onsite once in-person gatherings resumed, though I continued to review online content when available and made notes accordingly. Before each visit, I spent time in prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide my conversations and observations. In addition to these interactions, I was also able to gather textual evidence, such as printed materials, and handouts available during services. Throughout the visits, I aimed to engage with a holistic awareness, drawing on my physical senses, spiritual discernment, and reflective thought to inform my understanding of each setting.

During my visits I also conducted subtle approximate headcounts. During each visit, I intentionally refrained from taking research notes in the moment, allowing myself to fully immerse in the experience and blend in as *"one of them."* Regardless of denomination, I actively participated in worship, prayer and communion (where permitted), and listened attentively to the sermon taking mental and personal notes, much as I would when attending my own church. Upon returning home, I promptly typed up detailed observation notes while the experience was still fresh in my mind. I tried to monitor online views whilst attending online or if I had attended onsite, I would look at the online provision that day and note the

views. Tables found in Appendices 6 and 7 outline the number of visits to each church, the format in which they were attended, and any available online viewing data. During Phase One thirty-one services, bible studies and prayer meetings were attended. These consisted of twelve online (38.71%), eighteen onsite (58.06%) and one via telephone (3.23%). Ten out of thirty-one provided both online and onsite options (32.26%). In comparison, during Phase Two thirty-six services, bible studies and prayer meetings were attended. These consisted of five online (13.89%), thirty onsite (83.33%) and one via telephone (2.78%). Eleven out of thirty-three provided both online and onsite options (33.33%).[171] Together, the data detailed in the tables offer a valuable overview of hybrid provision and can feed into the data analysis process later in the thesis.

3.2.3 Additional Quantitative Methods

During the planning stage of the project, a qualitative approach was initially selected as the primary method of investigation. However, as the fieldwork progressed, opportunities arose to gather supplementary data through quantitative means. This additional data serves to support, triangulate and enrich the qualitative findings, while also helping to identify any anomalies or contrasting patterns. The main methods used to collect this quantitative data are described below.

- *Monitoring social media likes and views through data trawling*

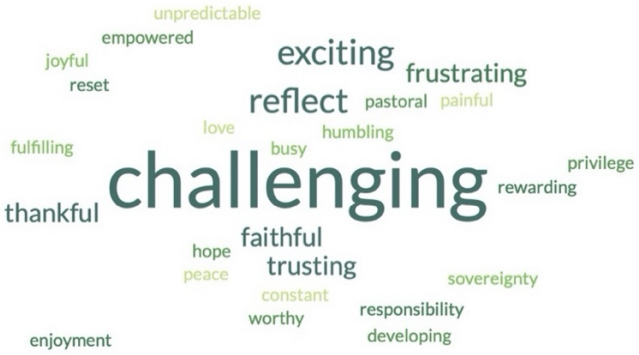
Throughout the fieldwork, online data trawls were conducted many times. This method was used to capture data such as social media views and comments, tracking themes and patterns across the church communities online presence, and their choice and style of platforms. It was first used to collate which online platforms were used by the churches pre-pandemic. This acted as a starting point, to which various data trawls could be compared, through phase one and phase two. A final data trawl was completed a year after the field work had finished to track and monitor progress or regression in their digital engagement and online presence. In using an empirical approach, it also paved the way for employing Campbell's transfer, translate and transform strategy, which was supported by the data trawl process, detailed in the literature

[171] It was not appropriate to offer online provision for three of the activities which is why the percentage is out of thirty-three instead of the thirty-six visits conducted.

review. This served as a measurement tool for the main weekend services, mapping changes through the course of the pandemic.

- *Interview word counts*

A list of interested words was compiled after the interviews had taken place. A word count was conducted for each interview in both phases to produce a tally of the most and least words referenced. The leaders had purposely not received the question schedule in advance, and I was inquisitive to found out what language and terminology they would use in the initial responses to questions, which might in turn offer additional insights.
During the phase one interviews, leaders were asked to nominate three words that represented their experience up to that point since the start of the pandemic. These were captured in the word cloud below.



3.2.4 Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Coding

An inductive prayerful approach was applied to the coding process, allowing the data itself to guide the development of themes. As detailed in section 3.1.3, Butler's approach of *"data discernment"* was used to frame the analytical coding process.[172] During the first phase, which was conducted in chronological order, semantic coding was used to draw out surface-level meanings directly from the participants' words. This approach produced a broad and detailed set of initial codes, to extrapolate surface level meaning. This then generated a base layer of codes from which to work.

[172] James Butler, 'Prayer as a Research Practice?: What Corporate Practices of Prayer Disclose about Theological Action Research', *Ecclesial Practices,* 7.2 (2020), 243.

Code	Description
Authority/ leadership	Leadership, structure, style
Change/ Compromise of rituals	Changes to communion, worship, funerals etc
Communication	Different mediums and platforms – social media
Community	Church community, local geographical community
Ecumenism	Working with other churches, partnerships
End Times	Revelations, signs of the end times
Fear	Fear of Covid, infection, dying
Fellowship	Tea and coffee, chatting, the peace, social activities
Finances	Tithes, giving, donations, income, furlough etc
Government/ Restrictions/ Regulations	Boris Johnson, government announcements, guidelines, public health mandates, track and trace
Love	Showing God's love, loving one another
Mental Health	Isolation, loneliness, depression
Opinions	Different opinions
Personal Circumstances	Own poor health, family situations etc
Physical Touch	Kissing/ hugging, visiting people over their garden gate, meeting in the garden
Science	Data, COVID infections, health and safety, risk assessments
Serving	People stepping up and volunteering/ serving
Skills	Technology/ health and safety/ cooking etc
Social Action	Community projects e.g., food banks
Vaccinations	COVID19 vaccines
Digital	Focus on digital engagement and using platforms/ technology for church activities
Onsite*	Focus on retuning to onsite activities

** Additional code added during Phase Two due to strong focus to returning to onsite*

Table 3.1 Semantic Codes and Descriptions

Before moving onto the secondary coding phase, the semantic codes were manually counted across both phase one and two interviews. This highlighted a clear indication of the theme categories moving forward.

- During phase one, the top three codes were **change, digital and leadership**; 92% had at least 2 of these three codes in their top three.

- During phase two, the top three codes slightly differed to **community, digital and leadership**; 76% had at least 2 of these codes in their top three.

The coding process was repeated multiple times, deliberately altering the order of the data with each round to avoid over-familiarity and ensure key insights were not overlooked. Throughout this process, memo notes and a coding diary was maintained, which proved valuable for comparing participant responses and identifying emerging patterns. This repetitive approach greatly supported the refinement of codes and enabled a shift toward a more latent coding strategy to uncover deeper, underlying meanings. Over time, the individual codes began to naturally cluster into broader thematic categories.

Leadership Category

Code	Description
Personal responsibility	Leader can only do so much Some members did not access resources or attend services
Change in how leaders are viewed	Leaders no longer seen as all-knowing Conflict/ managing different opinions
Balancing act	Trying to balance government guidance, theological convictions, and the congregations expectations Following the rules/ science
Weight of responsibility	Not having all the answers Feeling burdened
Personal challenges	Leaders having their own poor health, family commitments/ issues
Changing role	Loss of identity, frustration Health and safety/ risk assessment
Reactive leadership	Having to react, rather than plan
Focus on numbers	Attendance onsite of digital analytics
Prioritised connectedness	Focus on members being connected into the church

Church/ God Category

Code	Description
"It's different"	Digital encounter with God being inferior to face to face gathered church encounter
Blended models	Hybrid models emerging of providing dual formats
New onsite ministries	Focus on new face to face ministries
Cleanliness	To enter a building or be at the altar/ on the stage had to go through a cleaning ritual e.g., sanitising
Forced ritual re-negotiation	Changing the practices of traditional rituals e.g., communion/ worship/ prayer etc
Church resetting	The pandemic had initiated change
"Normality"	Return to pre-pandemic ways

Community Category

Code	Description
Changing community	Changing ecclesial community makeup due to people moving Changing attendance onsite v online
Supporting one another (internal community)	Coming together and helping one another Pastoral support
Supporting wider external community	Showing love and compassion to wider community through help and support e.g., shopping, social action projects Working ecumenically to help the local community
Individual resetting	Process of personal prioritisation People stepping down from pre-pandemic roles
Restricted fellowship	No or reduced fellowship e.g., refreshments after a service

Digital Category

Code	Description
Digital refinement	Adapting to new technologies/ mediums Refining digital techniques/ skills/ activities
Continuing traditions	Using digital to continue previous practices/ traditions
Digital investment	Investing in digital equipment
Experimental digital ministries	New experimental ministries specifically online e.g., blogs, children's provision
Digital hesitancy	Limitations with using digital Hesitant to use digital for activities e.g., safeguarding issues

The process of continual refinement and revisiting was especially helpful in developing themes. I was then able to narrow down these themes through utilising mind maps and identifying the overarching central concept theme of renegotiation in the face of forced digital communal engagement throughout the pandemic.

3.2.5 Reflecting on the Research Process

During the research process, one of the most striking aspects was how unexpectedly open the church leaders were during the interviews. While I had anticipated a certain level of formality or caution, many shared deeply personal reflections about their experiences, challenges and insights in ministry. Their willingness to speak candidly often gave the sessions a therapeutic quality, suggesting that the interviews were not only data-gathering exercises but also spaces for leaders to reflect and process their own pastoral practice. This openness enriched the data significantly, providing nuanced, contextually grounded insights that may not have emerged in

a more structured or impersonal setting. It also highlighted the relational nature of practical theology research, where trust and rapport can profoundly shape the quality of the data collected. However, this openness also meant that the interviews often overran, which in turn impacted the transcribing process, requiring additional time and careful attention to ensure accuracy and completeness.

Similarly, during visits to church communities, laity frequently engaged in informal conversations, offering their own experiences and perspectives. Although these discussions were not structured interviews, they provided valuable, complementary data that captured lived realities from multiple angles. These conversations were included in the observation notes, ensuring that these spontaneous reflections were preserved and could be incorporated into the analysis. This approach reinforced the importance of flexibility in practical theology research, where formal and informal data collection methods can work together to provide a richer, more holistic understanding of a faith community's life and practices. At the same time, managing these interactions alongside the formal interviews sometimes created practical challenges, as unplanned conversations could extend beyond anticipated timeframes, requiring careful organisation to ensure that all observations and reflections were accurately recorded and integrated into the overall dataset. It also raised a critical reflection point about researcher positionality: being present and approachable allowed participants to share more openly with me, but it required careful attention to ethical considerations and sensitivity to the ways in which my presence might influence their responses.

Overall, the research process highlighted both the opportunities and challenges inherent in practical theology fieldwork. The openness of participants, both leaders and laity, provided rich, nuanced data that went beyond what formal interviews alone might have captured, illustrating the value of relational engagement in research. At the same time, the extended and sometimes unpredictable nature of these interactions required careful management, both in terms of time and in ensuring that all data was accurately recorded and transcribed. In hindsight, allocating more structured time for interviews and informal conversations, or building in additional support for transcribing, might have eased these pressures and allowed for more focused reflection during data collection. Reflecting on these experiences emphasised the importance of flexibility, ethical attentiveness and relational sensitivity in practical theology research.

Chapter 4 / Navigating Unchartered Waters

This chapter undertakes Osmer's descriptive-empirical task by seeking to answer the core question, *"What is going on?"* within local churches during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with church leaders, participant observation and supporting quantitative insights, it offers a rich grounded account of how churches have navigated the challenges and opportunities of this period.

The data presents renegotiation as a central thematic concept visible across the churches' pandemic journey, particularly within the main three core areas: community, rituals and leadership. Each of these core areas will be explored in turn, further divided into sub-themes that together form a nuanced picture of how communities of faith experienced and responded to change during and beyond the pandemic. The main body of data is organised into three periods that track these transitions over time: early pandemic, mid-pandemic and post-pandemic. The early pandemic period includes phase one data from March 2020 to summer 2021, capturing the initial responses as churches engaged enthusiastically with social media and digital platforms to maintain congregational connection and sustain church activities. The mid-pandemic period, covering autumn 2021 to spring 2022, reflects emerging fatigue and frustration as churches sought to return to onsite activities while maintaining online provision. Finally, the post-pandemic period from summer 2022 onwards reveals a return to predominantly onsite practices, with online provision reduced to a simple broadcast model, signalling a partial reversion to pre-pandemic patterns. This descriptive work does not stand alone but serves as the foundation for the interpretive and normative tasks that follow in later chapters, where these findings are brought into conversation with theological frameworks and wider literature to explore what these developments might mean for the life, mission and identity of the church in a post-pandemic context.

4.1 Renegotiating Community

This section aims to examine the changing nature of the ecclesial community, with a particular focus on what it means to be community, and whether this is possible through social media platforms. It tracks the transition of individual lifestyle schedules, the concept of resetting and

personal responsibility which in turn impacts on the local church. It also looks at the notion of gathered church and what it means in an online and onsite context.

4.1.1 Definitions of a Christian Community

The theme of community was prevalent in the interviews across both time periods. The Coding Breakdown in Appendix 8 shows community came fourth place in phase one and second place in phase two. From the outset there were plural terminologies being used in reference to their church community, however, the word *community* itself was rarely used.[173] The few times it was mentioned, it was in reference to the surrounding geographical community.[174] Notably, the leader from P1 only used the term in their answer after I had used it in a question, and then reverted back to their usual language.[175] Common words used across the denominations when talking about their ecclesial communities included congregation, church, they, everybody, folk, and members. Several of the leaders used parishioners, circuit, and body of Christ.[176] However, the most common word used by all churches during both early and mid-pandemic was people.[177] It was often used to describe the actions and feelings of people in the congregations.[178] In tracking the terminology, it revealed a clear distinction between the faith community and the leadership. All the leaders except one, across all the interviews referred to themselves and the wider leadership as a collective *we*.[179] Even when there was only one leader, they still used *we*, to include those who carried out activities and functions or held other roles.[180] Whereas the members who were referred to as people had things done to or for them.

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[173] *Community* was not used at all in interviews with leaders from P2, P4, CE2 and B1. CT1 explained at the beginning of the Phase One Interview Transcript that maintaining community had been the biggest challenge but did not refer to it again (p. 1).

[174] P3, CE1, CE3, B2 and M1used the word *community*, but only in relation to the geographical community.

[175] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 8.

[176] P1 and B1 were the only leaders to use body of Christ, both of which were in Phase Two interviews. Within both Phase One and Phase Two Interviews the Catholic leader referred to parishioners and the Methodist Superintendent used the term circuit.

[177] Taken from Phase One and Two Interviews Transcripts P1-M1.

[178] Examples include P1 describing fear in the congregation about returning to onsite in the Phase Two Interview Transcript (p. 2), *"some people were still a bit nervous about the whole thing".* P4 explained how she stayed connected to her members during the early pandemic *"I am in contact with people all the time, on a regular basis"* (Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 4). CE3 used the term *people* when explaining members had expressed concern at being watched online taking communion, *"Because a couple of people felt quite weird and said they'd prefer it if people didn't watch them… we felt it was important to uphold that for people"* (Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 1).

[179] P2 referred to themselves as *I* rather than *we* in both their interviews.

[180] Taken from Phase One and Two Interview Transcripts P1-M1. Examples include *"we remind people"* (B2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6): *"people collect that on their way in and that's how we do that now" (*B2

There did not appear to be a change between the terminology used by leaders from early to mid-pandemic. However, there were differences between the early and mid-pandemic of *who* was included in their faith community. By the time phase one interviews were conducted in Spring 2021, churches had spent the last year navigating several lockdowns and transferred their main activities onto digital platforms. They had begun to gather a new or increased online following.[181] B1 explained the forced transition into a social media space meant they were ministering to more people than previously within the four walls of the church.[182] Some expressed excitement that they were being viewed from other countries.[183] However, some of these were often family members, ex-church members or already had a connection to the church.[184] Even though online viewings increased during this time, this did not translate into discussions around expanding their community. In fact, several questioned the validity of the views and the effect it was having on people's faith.

"...despite its growth I wonder if that translates into a living faith for those watching".[185]

"Online, there is so much unknown with online, who is actually engaging...unless people are actually typing comments and you actually know who it is who's typing, you have no idea who's watching you".[186]

There was also a fear from some leaders of their content being misunderstood in a live stream setting.

Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 5): *"we allowed people to come in everyday to do private prayer"* (CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 1): P4 describing some of their health and safety measures *"we put a box of face masks out in case people weren't aware of the change of guidance*" (P4 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 5).

[181] Likes and viewing figures taken from the Average Likes and Views Tracker showed an increase in online numbers during this time.

[182] B1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 10.

[183] CE3 explained how their father lives in Nigeria and since transitioning online, was now able to watch their services (Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 2). P4 explained they were seeing people from Australia, India, Africa, and America (Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6).

[184] The CT1 leader recounted a story of an elderly church member who would ring her daughter up who lived down south, just before mass started, so they could both watch it together online (CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 7). During a P1 Mid-Week Zoom discussion, a mother of young children explained her non-Christian parents were able to watch their grandchildren online in the Christmas special, whereas before they would not have attended (P1 Phase One Observation Notes from Mid-Week Zoom Group 4 May 2021, p. 2).

[185] CE1b Phase One Interview Schedule, p. 2.

[186] CE1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 16.

"I don't know if you remember the way I preach, I'm quite... I don't stick to what I've written... and I bounce things off the congregation where I sense there is a need... when you are bringing content online you need to be quite careful about certain remarks... it has to be refined... and my message is scripted for me..."[187]

The leaders did not consider online views in an equal light to the pre-pandemic faith community, for their practices portrayed online as being of lesser value, which came out in the observation. For example, the churches who had live streams or who were recording the Sunday services made occasional references to the online audience as part of the welcome and goodbyes, and sometimes during their prayers by adding *"our online community"* or *"those watching online".*[188] But it was at surface level and lacked depth and interaction. Notably, there was more online interaction with activities such as bible studies, prayer meetings or blogs.[189]

Throughout the early and mid-pandemic, the composition of community appeared to transition over time. During the first year of lockdowns in 2020, the focus was transferring the pre-pandemic community online and welcoming new viewers.

"I thank God the pandemic happened in 2020, rather than 1935, because we wouldn't have been able to maintain that community aspect. I'm thankful we've had the internet."[190]

There were some very moving expressions of community online, such as creating in-house worship compilation videos, a calendar of daily Christmas readings through December and social events on Zoom such as quiz nights.[191] Throughout this time, several leaders saw more members getting involved and contributing to the online experimentations.[192] However, in

[187] B1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[188] P1 Phase Two Observation Notes 30 January 2022, p. 2, and CT1 Phase One Observation Notes 29 June 2021, p. 2.
[189] I noticed a general theme that Bible studies and prayer meetings seemed to attract more online comments than the traditional online Sunday services.
[190] Group Leader, P1 Phase One Discussion Notes from Mid-Week Zoom Group 4 May 2021, p. 1
[191] B2 produced a compilation worship song that had over 3.6k views (B2 Digital Data Trawl Notes, p. 3). P2 held social events via Zoom such as quiz nights (Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 1).
[192] P1 explained how members in the church had been reading bedtime stories and recording them for their young children's group (Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 5). The leader at B1 ran an online weekly series based on the Psalms, whereby members would take it in turns to select a Psalm and record their reflections for five minutes, which would then be uploaded to the church social media page (Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3). Members also put together pre-recorded clips to create a daily online advent calendar for Christmas (p. 8).

2021 by the time phase one interviews and observations were conducted, restrictions were beginning to lift. Leaders were now faced with their communities split across different mediums: those who had returned to onsite activities and those who continued to access online. New online viewers were also welcomed but cautiously kept on the periphery.

"So, it's hard, when you're preaching in a church, you know, you can see people's reactions, you can see maybe God touching their life, but you know when you preach into the screen you haven't got a clue what's happening out there."[193]

When churches were allowed to open, leaders had to navigate not only restricted numbers within their buildings but also social distancing measures. Many churches used a booking-in system to manage onsite numbers.[194] Some leaders were uncomfortable with this, from a theological perspective of limiting people attending church, acting like a gatekeeper.

"There were a couple of occasions where I was standing at the door saying you cannot come to mass… I'm 99% over that now, there's still an element of I'm telling you, you can't come in and worship and receive the Blessed Sacrament".[195]

By the middle of the pandemic, the composition had changed again, to accommodate another renegotiation of restrictions, being sensitive to people's needs. However, this led to the community being further fragmented into different categories, as churches were left to decide their own way forward.

"We were conscious that some people were still a bit nervous about the whole thing and appreciate some social distancing. So, we have two sets, two types of seating now, what we call regular seating and socially distanced seating".[196]

He explained that *"we've attempted to do this both to keep people involved in the church, so they're not just observers, but they're participants as well".*

[193] P2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 8.

[194] These included online forms and ringing/ emailing the church to book a place. The following churches operated a booking-in system at some point during the early pandemic: P1, P2, CE2, B1, B2, CT1, M2 and M3.

[195] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 12.

[196] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 2.

"So, if you wanted to wear a mask, you should sit at the rear half of the church. And that worked a little, although people did not always do as they were told (laughing)".[197]

Leaders were having to regularly renegotiate their definition and practices of community, navigating digital platforms and changing restrictions, whilst trying to keep their original pre-pandemic faith community connected. There appeared to be an organic return of the faith community being tied to a physical building, the more restrictions reduced. It was also noticeable that as more people returned to onsite services, the focus on the online community decreased. Leaders were observed acknowledging the online community, but the focus was on the room.[198] The dominant drive during the middle of the pandemic was for their pre-pandemic faith community to return to onsite activities. B1 demonstrates the decision-making process many churches were experiencing mid-pandemic after government restrictions had lifted in July 2022.

"Yeah, well we had a discussion in August, because up to that point we'd been recording services, pre-recording them and issuing them on the Sunday. Alongside also having a service at the church. What we decided to do in August was to try and encourage people… we didn't really want to live stream. One reason was that we felt that what are we as a church? Are we an online church or are we a church in x (town name)? *And we didn't really want to pursue the online option at that stage."*[199]

[197] B2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 3.
[198] For example, during my observation at one of the Catholic churches where they live steamed, during my first visit early pandemic there was ongoing interaction with the online community throughout the service (Phase One Observation Notes 29 June 2021, p. 2). In contrast, when I revisited the same church mid-pandemic, I was unsure if the service was being live streamed as there was no interaction with it until halfway through the service, when a lady praying at the lectern referred to the online community in her prayer by saying *"and those online"* (Phase Two Observation Notes 2 March 2022, p. 1). The Father closed the service to include *"and those online",* but these were the only references made throughout the service. A few days later I visited one of their other Catholic churches, who had only recently had equipment installed to be able to live stream their services, and I noticed that a different lady who prayed at the front halfway through the service, included the online community in her prayer using the same language as the lady in the service a few days earlier. I suspect that it had become a standard line to include for those at the front, rather than becoming a natural practice (Phase Two Observation Notes 6 March 2022, p. 1).
[199] B2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 1.

By the time the final post-pandemic data trawl was conducted, churches had returned their focus primarily to onsite. Some maintained livestreaming but with minimal attention being paid to the online community.[200]

This section demonstrates that definitions of community within local churches during and beyond the pandemic were complex, fluid and often implicit, requiring continual renegotiation by leaders amid shifting restrictions and digital adaptations. Despite leaders rarely using the term *"community"* explicitly, preferring instead to use *"people," "congregation,"* and *"members",* their practices revealed an ongoing concern to sustain relational connections within their faith communities. The forced shift online enabled churches to maintain communal ties and extend their reach, yet leaders expressed uncertainty about the depth and authenticity of online engagement and were cautious about equating digital participation with embodied community. As restrictions eased, the composition of community further fragmented, with churches balancing the needs of those returning onsite with those remaining online while grappling with theological tensions around gathering and sacramental life. Over time, a reorientation toward physical gathering became evident, with online engagement becoming peripheral, reflecting a desire to re-anchor community within shared physical spaces while acknowledging the residual impact of digital experimentation. Overall, the data illustrates how leaders navigated the pandemic by continuously redefining community in practice, shaped by both pragmatic considerations and theological convictions.

4.1.2 Prioritising Connectedness

It is important to recognise that even though all the churches engaged with social media platforms to varying degrees throughout the pandemic, their focus remained on maintaining connection with their faith communities. Therefore, other communication mediums included postal, telephone, email and personal delivery were used interchangeably. All the participating churches used a variety of methods to keep connectivity intact and continue their activities in an adapted capacity. For example, the Methodist circuit used a telephone system called

[200] Churches that continued livestreaming post-pandemic were P1, P3, P4, CE3 and CT1. But interaction with the online community had diminished. For example, B1 had ceased any online provision (B1 Digital Trawl Notes, p. 5). P1 social media platforms had not posted for 5 months (P1 Digital Trawl Notes, p. 8) and CT1 no longer promoted their YouTube channel where parishioners could access the live stream via their website or Facebook page, almost as if to discourage the use of it (CT1 Digital Data Trawl Notes, p. 7).

Conferoo for some of their services and the Catholic leadership emailed over 300 newsletters and posted 73 of them out every week.[201] However, even with these numbers they recognised they would not be reaching their whole faith community: *"how do you get it to people if you don't know that they are there. I haven't got contacts for everyone"*[202]. M2 reinforced this by describing how difficult it was to engage with those who were already *"on the edge"* or categorised as sporadic attenders.[203] B1 created a church WhatsApp group to help stay connected, and then gently smiled as he explained some of the elderly congregation soon asked to be taken off it as all the notifications were too much.[204] B2 recalled how they had 10-12 households not online, so they created CD's and DVDs and dropped them off at their homes.[205]

Digital platforms were assessed as the most effective medium, however, there were three factors churches had to negotiate: the makeup of the congregation, the skillset of those in the church and of the leadership and available resources.[206] It is important to highlight that theological consideration did not form part of the decision-making process, it was purely based on practical perspectives. Across P1 – M5 early and mid-pandemic interviews only the B1 leader touched on their theological views for engaging with online provision.

"So, I like to stick with biblical partners, biblical principles but use 21st century tools, the internet whatever. The means can change, but not the message, the method can change, but not the message, keep the message as solid as Paul will preach it."[207]

A leader's own personal digital skills appeared to play an important role if they were the sole leader. The P2 leader is a good example of this.

[201] Conferoo turned out to be a successful tool that they extended its use from individual churches to a circuit wide service. M2 also used it for their Saturday prayer meeting, which was more well attended than their pre-pandemic onsite meeting (M2 Phase Two Interview Schedule, p. 1)
[202] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 19.
[203] M2 Phase One Interview Schedule, p. 2.
[204] B1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 7.
[205] B2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 4.
[206] For example, P2's decision considered the makeup of her congregation, with a mixture of elderly members and members from a deprived housing estate with limited access to online, plus her lack of digital skills (Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 1). B1 expressed gratitude that their church was blessed with people with digital skills *"It's all about those with the gifts have been able to use them, to get us through this period of time" (*B1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 2)
[207] B1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 16.

"Well, at the beginning, obviously, because I'm not that technical or didn't, couldn't do all the online stuff. So, I had to think quickly what to do. So, I worked out, you know, about having a service outline that everyone could follow in their house at the same time on a Sunday morning. And that's basically what we do, and at the time because, I couldn't do, er, didn't know Facebook or YouTube. I couldn't do anything like that, so I found a church that was doing a series. So, I typed the sermons out for people… We're all doing the same thing at the same time. Well, the problem is, that quite a few people in our church are not online. So, you've got to cater for those people, as well as those that are. So those that were online, could watch the video in their own houses. But for those not online, I typed out all the sermons, so that they were still doing the same stuff that we were..."[208]

Some leaders were very honest and transparent about their lack of online skills or even desire to learn more. *"I'm not clever enough to do that, that's not my forte. Neither's Zoom to be quite honest. Technology and me are not, not… I use it because I need it, but it doesn't float my boat, as it were."*[209] CE2 went onto explain that their congregation were elderly and not tech savvy, nor were they interested in tech; watching Songs of Praise on the TV was their limit.[210] During this timeframe, despite their own skills and abilities, many leaders recognised the value of digital platforms as a tool for keeping people, families and communities connected. As time went on churches tried to put in place more permanent online solutions through increasing their digital skills, recruiting digitally skilled volunteers within their church communities, and investing in more advanced digital technology and sound equipment. For example, the leader at CE2 sought the help of a couple of local priests who were able to do *"the techie bit for us".*[211] P1 purchased some new cameras and upgraded their PA booth, stating it was completely different to where they were as a church twelve months ago digitally.[212] However, there were several churches that continued to use their pre-pandemic digital strategy, to fit within their time and resources, such as P3 and P4. Both churches were already live streaming their services before the pandemic and were relatively "tech savvy" with both leaders having active social media accounts before lockdowns.[213] Despite being digitally active, these churches did not use

[208] P2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 1, 2.
[209] CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 2.
[210] Ibid., p. 6.
[211] Ibid., p. 2.
[212] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3.
[213] Taken from Church Digital Overview found in the previous chapter and from P3 Digital Data Trawl Notes, p. 1 and P4 Digital Data Trawl Notes, p. 1.

this period as an opportunity to experiment with new or creative forms of ministry. Instead, their level of digital engagement remained largely unchanged.

Leaders tried to encourage their congregations to take advantage of the online provision to stay connected, with several assisting them to access certain platforms or coordinating digitally savvy volunteers to help set members up.[214]

"In terms of going online, I know that there were a lot of people who normally would not have gone near the internet… I'll use one particular lady as an example. She's always shielded, she's very high risk, elderly and health issues high risk, and when we got the YouTube channel, she went into her kitchen and locked herself in her kitchen, while her son came in and set it up on her TV, so that she could watch it, sanitised all the remote controls and things like that, he then went out, so she could then come in and watch the Mass on YouTube on the television. So, the interaction between our parishioners and social media has increased dramatically." [215]

As lockdowns persisted and weeks stretched into months, people became more digitally proficient, and the quality of online church provision improved.[216] During lockdowns, time was available to experiment and to create. For example, B2 created similar worship compilations to the popular UK Blessing YouTube video. They also started a new children's online ministry, which could be likened to a Saturday morning live children's programme in a studio with puppets, games, and stories.[217] A couple of the churches were very creative, but these were larger churches who had congregation members with digital skills. For example, P1 had someone who had a degree in TV production, and P4 had a married couple with their own TV

[214] The worship leader from P1 explained how they had loaned iPads and paid for monthly data so families could stream the services online (Phase One Mid-Week Group Notes 4 May 2021, p. 2). B2 described several families not having internet access, which they overcame by providing DVD's of the recorded services (B2 Phase Interview Transcript, p. 4). CE3 explained when the schools were closed, and the government helped provide laptops and dongles it brought relief to their families living in poverty (CE3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6).
[215] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3.
[216] Taken from Church Digital Overview (Appendix 9) and P1 – M3 Digital Data Trawl Notes.
[217] B2 had led a puppet ministry for over 10 years, which was supported by volunteers. They already had key personnel and resources in place, in addition to highly skilled volunteers, such as a qualified sound engineer and worship leader who had been trained at a theatre school in London.

company.[218] At the other end of the spectrum, a few churches faced significant challenges with online provision. These congregations shared several common factors: they were predominantly elderly and small in number, the church leader often operated alone with minimal support, and there was limited digital knowledge or enthusiasm for engaging with technology.[219] Then there was a large cohort who found themselves in the middle of the spectrum, providing a reasonable quality live stream or pre-recorded services, prayer meetings and weekly posts such as blogs or thoughts for the day.[220] The two dominant digital platforms used were Facebook and YouTube across all participants.[221]

It was intriguing to observe that as the compositions of community transitioned, so did the mediums of connectedness. During the early pandemic most churches employed digital platforms as one of their main mediums to stay connected, however, they were not used in isolation. Many also used pre-existing networks or set new ones up across the church, to help facilitate connection. There was a strong pastoral theme that came out across the churches, with some churches designating people to oversee a group of people and keep in contact with them, either via phone, email, or visits across the garden gate.[222] This was to help identify when people were struggling, feeling isolated and needed additional support. The pastoral lead at P1 exclaimed *"I think we are on the edge of a mental health crisis".*[223] She explained there were people in the church who had never had a mental health problem but were now on the cusp because of fear.[224] But her and her team tried to encourage them to balance the risk and their mental wellbeing. There was a sense of togetherness, rallying around one another, to help the more vulnerable or shielding members of the church.[225]

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[218] P1 referred to these digital volunteers as pioneers (P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3). P4 explained a couple owned a local TV company, who were volunteering before the pandemic recording and live streaming the service (P4 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3).
[219] These churches were P2 and CE2 referred to earlier in this section.
[220] This cohort was made up of churches P3, CE1, CE3, B1, CT1 and M1-M3.
[221] Taken from Church Digital Overview (Appendix 9) and P1 – M3 Digital Data Trawl Notes.
[222] P1 set up connecting points, and everyone in the church was allocated one. The leaders of the connecting points would keep in contact with them via phone or digital mediums (P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 1, 2). CE3 explained *"So, you know, walking down the street, you know, while I'm walking the dog just past their house and having a chat over the garden fence. That's something that I've never needed to do before, but it's something that's became absolutely essential"* (CE3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 1). P3 described having better relationships with people, because she took the time to make doorstep deliveries and ring people (P3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 1).
[223] Pastoral Lead, P1 Phase Two Videocall Notes from 31 January 2022.
[224] During the early pandemic they needed to set up additional groups for those that required more intense support due to their mental health deteriorating (P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 2).
[225] Taken from Phase One Interview Transcripts P1 – M5.

As churches transitioned into the middle of the pandemic, the level of communication decreased across the mediums. This was evident in the data trawls, where the level of social media posts declined and blogs and thoughts of the day stopped.[226] P2 explained during the phase two interviews that she had stopped posting three thoughts a week on Facebook (as she had started to do during lockdowns).[227] When asked why, she explained that the church had started a new bible study on James onsite, and it focused on how people live in the church which she did not think would be relevant on Facebook as she saw it more as an evangelistic tool. She also felt that she had now got out of the habit. When I asked M1 in his mid-pandemic interview why he no longer posted regular blogs, he said *"I don't do much of that at all now, that's a time issue".*[228]

Creative and experimental online activities also decreased, as the focus returned to onsite attendance. For example, during early lockdowns B2 created an excellent online provision for children, mentioned earlier on in the chapter. However, rather than continue it online, they choose to transfer it onsite, opening it up to the local community, inviting them for a cooked meal before the *"live show".* This proved very successful, with over 100 children and parents from the local housing estate attending the bi-weekly events.[229] P1 also started a new social action ministry in response to people struggling to re-integrate into society after the lockdowns.[230] The group meets weekly and holds social events, and people from all walks of life attend, to help build their confidence and reduce isolation and loneliness. There appeared to be a shift in hands-on pastoral support provided between early and mid-pandemic. In the early pandemic, support was primarily provided online via groups, or through one-to-one telephone calls and doorstep visits. As restrictions were lifted in the middle of the pandemic, pastoral support transitioned into more mental health focused social action activities. Out of the desire to keep connected and pastorally look after one another, there came a wave of new

[226] Taken from Church Digital Overview found in Appendix 9.
[227] P2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[228] M1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 13.
[229] B2 Phase Two Observation Notes 11 February 2022, p. 1. I attended with my son, and I saw first-hand the community positively engaging with the church. Before the event started, we were invited to eat a meal that the church had put on. The dining hall was full of families from the local housing estate eating together. An elderly volunteer came and sat with me and my son. As I sat and watched her interact with my young son in conversation, I realised I had missed the generational interaction in church throughout the pandemic.
[230] P1 explained they had set up a weekly social group that was open to everyone, with the focus of helping people reintegrate back into society (P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 13). The pastoral lead described it as a place where people could be free to be what they were comfortable with: *"It's okay if people want to sit at a table in the corner with their mask on a tub of sanitiser"* (Phase Two Videocall Notes 31 January 2022, p. 2)

social action projects post pandemic. This support has extended into their local geographical communities, such as a community café, food and clothes banks and social events and groups.[231] Out of internal connectedness and pastoral care, came an external outpouring of sharing God's love through action.

This section demonstrates that despite varying levels of digital engagement, churches prioritised maintaining connection with their faith communities throughout the pandemic, utilising a blend of digital and non-digital communication methods, including post, phone calls, emails and doorstep deliveries. While digital platforms such as YouTube and Facebook emerged as effective tools for connectivity, their use was shaped by practical considerations, such as congregational demographics, leaders' digital skills and available resources, rather than theological reflections. Leaders' personal digital proficiency significantly influenced the nature and quality of online provision, with some churches rapidly developing creative and high-quality digital ministries, while others faced challenges due to technological limitations or a lack of capacity within ageing congregations. As the pandemic progressed, initial experimentation and high levels of online activity gradually decreased, with many churches shifting focus back to onsite gatherings as restrictions eased. This transition saw a reduction in online postings and experimental activities, with some innovative online ministries moving into onsite community-based formats, reflecting a desire to reconnect physically while addressing emerging mental health and social needs within and beyond congregations. The commitment to connectedness also drove an expansion of pastoral care, evolving from online and telephone support during lockdowns to hands-on social action initiatives post-pandemic, including community cafés, food banks, and social groups. This shift illustrates how churches, rooted in the desire to sustain internal connectedness, transitioned toward outward-focused service, expressing faith through tangible action within their local communities.

4.1.3 Personal Responsibility and Resetting

Even though there was a notable outpouring of pastoral care for those who remained connected to the church, some leaders, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic, expressed a subtle

[231] M3 set up a community café when people were allowed to meet in-between lockdowns to offer support and a warm environment (M3 Phase One Interview Schedule, p. 1). CE3 had started up a group for people struggling with addictions and a ladies club, for anybody that needed a safe space to sit and talk (CE3 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 2).

sense of frustration or disappointment toward those who chose not to engage with the online resources being offered.

"My job is to provide them with the meal and stuff, but it depends if they want to eat it"[232]

P3 explained that they try to encourage personal responsibility amongst their congregation in growing and deepening in their faith.[233] However, CT1 suspected that some people felt they did not have to because the church closures had come from the Pope himself.[234] The leaders were often surprised by the members of their congregation who had chosen to disconnect. They expected it from those on the fringe of the church whose attendance was ad-hoc, but there were some previously committed, regular attenders including families, who were not accessing the resources or staying connected, which disappointed them.[235] When asked why this might be, one reason was given consistently; that people had gotten out of the habit of worshipping regularly.[236] During mid-pandemic interviews, this disconnect had transitioned to incorporate those who watched online. The negative inferences associated with those choosing to stay at home and watch it online, came through strongly.

"Sometimes it's just easier when it's wet, windy, and horrible outside to sit in your PJs on your sofa and join in that way (laughing). Simple as that isn't it?"[237]

"But what's clicking around my mind is the people who haven't come back yet. What does that say about them? Do they find it okay online? Maybe they do."[238]

However, it is important to note that this did not include those who were still shielding, or people with ill health.[239] Online was seen as a positive tool for this group of people as a way to

[232] P2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 2.
[233] P3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 5.
[234] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3.
[235] CT1 explained it had been surprising to find some on the fringes that she would have thought not be involved had stepped up, whereas others who were involved pre-pandemic had disappointed her (CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 18).
[236] This was expressed by P1, P2, B2, CT1, M1 and M2 in their Phase One Interviews.
[237] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 7.
[238] B2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[239] This included those who were fearful. B2 explained that there was an apprehension to return, due to the proximity in the building, and those who had elderly parents did not want to pass anything onto them (B2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 7, 8). P1 had seen similar levels of fear within their congregation (P1 Phase Two

keep connected, which they previously had not been able to pre-pandemic.[240] Over time a dual narrative of online provision evolved: on the one hand it was a positive tool to facilitate those with disabilities and ongoing health conditions or changing work patterns to engage with the church, and on the other hand able bodied people who *chose* to watch online were increasingly seen in a negative light, implying a laziness, or questioning their faith. In discussing that members had a new schedule for their lives mid-pandemic and were choosing to watch online instead of attend in person, B2 hesitantly said *"I don't' want to preach a sermon here but surely, as a Christian, the first thing in your life is Jesus in your heart isn't it. That's what it's all about. It's not living for yourself, but I don't want to preach a sermon".*[241] P4 referred to scripture encouraging Christians to attend in person: *"That's what it says in the scriptures doesn't it, better meeting together, especially as the day of the Lord approaches. So, we would all probably prefer to stay in bed wouldn't we, but it's not the best thing for us or other people, is it?"*[242]

For the Catholic community, the narrative was directed by what the Pope allowed. During the mid-pandemic interview the leader explained that the current *"rule"* was that the Catholic community were obliged to attend mass once a week, because otherwise they would be in a state of sin.

"When the whole thing first started, a gentleman rang me and said I don't know what to do. He said my wife is very vulnerable, we've both got letters that we have to shield, but I have to come to mass, and I don't know what to do, I'm going to be in a state of sin. I said it's fine, because you are being prevented from coming through no fault of your own, you are not in a state of sin, and he said, "thank you, thank you", and you could just feel that he was so relieved..."[243]

Interview Transcript, p. 2, 7, 8, 13). During a visit to a mid-week bible study at P1's church, they discussed a couple who had become isolated and withdrawn over the last 2 years. The lady next to me said she realised people needed to be careful *"but at what point do you trust God and think when it's your time it's your time"* (P1 Phase Two Mid-Week Observation Notes 17 February 2022, p. 2).

[240] CE2 talked about a young lady in her 20's with a lot of health issues who was bedridden. The leader described online provision as her *"saving grace*", because up to that point the lady relied on the leader visiting her, whereas with online she felt she was part of the church again and could join in (CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 9). The M2 leader at an online Bible Study Mid-Week meeting expressed that it had given people the opportunity to join in, who perhaps due to health issues would not have been able to attend in person (M2 Phase One Mid-Week Bible Study Meeting Observation Notes 8 July 2021, p. 2).

[241] B2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 4.

[242] P4 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 5.

[243] CT1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 4.

It was also interesting to note that P1 explained more families returned onsite when provision for children was reinstated.[244] During a P1 Bible study group I attended, one of the mothers referred to the freedom her child felt watching it online at home.

"She dances to the songs, and I've found engages more. At home complete freedom. Whereas we went to physical church a few weeks ago and she was really shy and didn't want to get up".[245]

By the middle of the pandemic, leaders had noticed a resetting and change in members behaviour. B2 explained that people were now fitting church around their new life schedule.[246] P1 described it as people's lifestyle scheduling changing.[247] He expanded on this below.

"People have been out of things for 18 months, and taken the opportunity to step back or, you know, refocus and people's rhythms of life have changed… so now they will watch church later on, on a Sunday when they get home… or on a Monday or Tuesday, whatever it might be".[248]

"I think it'll be very much a blended mixed economy of things in terms of online physical gatherings, groups having the options to do all sorts of things like that… I think it'll be a lot more variety in terms of how people can connect in…"[249]

This theme was echoed across the interviews, which by the middle of the pandemic had led to people stepping down from their previous volunteer roles, such as helping with the children's work or youth team.[250] Leaders were seeing resetting affecting both members service in the

[244] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 4.
[245] P1 Phase One, Connect Group Observation Notes, p. 1.
[246] B2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 4.
[247] He had particularly seen a change in the young adults behaviour, ranging between 20–30-year-olds, who they weren't seeing as much physically, but they were connecting in through online in their own time (Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 6).
[248] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 5.
[249] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 16.
[250] P1 explained some of their historic teams had lost volunteers and they had found it challenging to recruit (P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 3). CE2 explained their PCC had dropped off, because one of their younger members had decided to go to theological college (CE2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 16). M1's lead

church and attendance. P1 explained that they were currently running at 45% of their historic Sunday numbers, because the choice of medium had expanded accommodating a change in attendance and viewer behaviour. He was not the only leader to point out a decline in onsite attendance numbers during the middle of the pandemic.[251] Leaders also tended to report online viewership and in-person attendance as separate figures, rather than combining them into an overall attendance count. This distinction further reinforced the perceived divide between online and onsite participation.

This section highlights how leaders noted frustration when members chose not to engage with online church, particularly among previously regular attenders who had fallen out of the habit. A dual narrative emerged: online provision was valued for those shielding or with health issues, but able-bodied members watching online were seen negatively, implying disengagement or laziness. Leaders observed a shift in members' life rhythms, with people fitting church around new schedules, watching services later in the week, and stepping back from volunteer roles. This resetting led to lower in-person attendance, reflecting how the pandemic reshaped patterns of participation within churches while reinforcing a perceived divide between online and onsite engagement.

4.1.4 God Moments

By the middle of the pandemic, the differences continued between online and onsite, in the language used when discussing the presence of God.

> *"There's been God moments online, but not the same when we meet together".*[252]

The consensus in the interviews and discussions held during visits, was that *"you can't beat meeting together".*[253] M2 explained *"We have encountered God, but it has taken more effort*

steward at M5 had stepped down and left the church due changes the Methodist Church had brought in at their annual conference towards same sex marriage (M1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 1).

[251] B2 explained their onsite numbers had not returned to pre-pandemic and the leadership were still trying to understand why (B2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 3). M1 explained most Methodist churches across the circuit were finding onsite attendance to be three quarters of what it was pre-pandemic (M1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 2).

[252] Group Leader, P1 Phase One Discussion Notes from Mid-Week Zoom Group 4 May 2021, p. 1

[253] P2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3.

and has not been the same on our own at home."[254] P1 described similar experiences: *"You hit moments where you just sense the presence of God that, obviously you don't get so readily sitting watching it on a screen, you know".*[255] A P1 congregation member described at a Mid-Week Bible Study that there had been *"God moments"* online, but they were not the same as when they met together.[256] When I specifically asked whether they experienced or encountered God online, leaders agreed it was possible, but the question was often interpreted differently. P2 argued that if God can speak through a donkey, he could speak through a digital platform.[257] She expanded to associate experiencing God online, through sowing seeds with the content in an evangelistic manner. However, she also linked it to personal responsibility, saying God was there for those that wanted Him. The leader from the Catholic community said unequivocally yes just from being online, but in her explanation, it was the interaction with the parish Father online who represented the encounter with God: *"occasionally he will glance at the camera, so everybody's included and in the written text, everybody's included".*[258] Similarly, onsite when people interacted with the stewards, she said they were encountering God, because the stewards had been moved by faith to open the church and welcome people. M1 also answered positively but said the experience and encounter was in different ways. He then went into depth about the feedback he received after a service, with those on Zoom providing more useful feedback rather than the usual *"the hymns were good".*[259] In contrast, B1 focused on the metaphysical. He felt theologically God is everywhere, but practically the physical gathering of his people released another level of his presence.[260] While leaders generally acknowledged a distinct difference in encountering God's presence onsite compared to online, several also shared personal experiences of sensing his presence through digital means, though notably, these were limited to moments of prayer and prophecy. [261]

[254] M2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3.
[255] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 7.
[256] P1 Phase One Observation Notes 4 May 2021, p. 1.
[257] P2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 8.
[258] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 10.
[259] M1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 7.
[260] B1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[261] B1 described a live stream Facebook prayer meeting. The leader had prayed, and later that day one of his friends had contacted him with a message from their friend who had watched the stream and felt a tangible manifestation of God's presence in their home (B1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6). P1 described being part of a Zoom prophecy meeting with another church in America. He described how he and his wife were put in a breakout room with people on the other side of the world, who did not know about their situation, yet they spoke directly into it (P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 13).

From a personal point of view, I found frequent technical hitches disrupted or distracted my focus during the online attendance, whether due to church's or my own digital equipment at home, which affected my overall experience. From people *"freezing"* mid-prayer, poor music sound quality, and people talking over each other, causing confusion.[262] In addition, I felt quite self-conscious, and easily found myself distracted by email notifications, social media alerts or my children interrupting; I found I lost focus easily.[263] Several people I spoke to felt this too. A lady from CE3 explained that she felt it easier to concentrate in church, because of all the distractions, such as washing that needed doing.[264] A lady from P2 described it as having a physical thing to do, incentivising it, rather than staying at home and getting distracted by the busyness of life.[265]

Even though many people I spoke to felt God could move through digital platforms, most people I spoke to on the topic, said meeting onsite was their preferred choice, and many of their answers were connected to physical human interaction. A leader from P2 stated *"Nothing is as good as meeting together… I have very much missed being able to sit next to people and to be able to talk together…encountering God freely as a group of believers has a different dynamic, which I have missed".*[266] During a visit to CE3 one of the congregation member's explained online was not the same as meeting in person. He preferred it when everyone can be in the room together learning. At first, he did not know what it was, but then decided it was the presence of the Holy Spirit that you felt when you met together, which he did not think you could experience online. Others agreed and proceeded to talk about how the presence of the Holy Spirit was felt during that morning's service.[267] During interviews CE1b declared *"Whilst online church has been an alternative, many miss human interaction… nothing replaces human relationships and time together with God."*[268] B2 expressed similar sentiments: *"…it's a totally*

[262] At a B1 Online Prayer Meeting there were technical issues at the start, and the leader was unable to sort his camera throughout the meeting (B1 Phase One Observation Notes 26 May 2021, p. 1). During a P2 Mid-Week Prayer Meeting on Zoom one of the leaders praying froze mid prayer due to poor internet connection (P2 Phase One Mid-Week Prayer Meeting Observation Notes 20 May 2021, p. 1). CE1's mid-week live stream reflection was paused due to technical difficulties, and it took a few minutes to come back, by which point I had missed an illustration he used (CE1 Mid-Week Livestream Observation Notes 14 May 2021, p. 1). I also found it difficult to focus during the telephone Conferoo service I attended, as people did not put their phones on mute and there was a lot of noise interference (M2 Phase One Conferoo Service Observation Notes on 1 August 2021, p. 1).
[263] P2 Phase One Mid-Week Prayer Meeting Observation Notes 20 May 2021, p. 1.
[264] CE3 Phase One Onsite Sunday Service Observation Notes on 18 July 2021, p. 3.
[265] P2 Phase One Observation Notes on 17 June 2021, p. 1.
[266] P2 Phase One Questionnaire, p. 2.
[267] CE3 Phase One Observation Notes on 18 July 2021, p. 3.
[268] CE1b Phase One Questionnaire, p. 2, 3.

different platform. You don't get the engagement; you don't get the interaction with people".[269] He explained that *"traditionally church is about community, church is about family. It's about interaction, you know… we can't do those things".*[270] Reflecting on my own lived experience after attending an onsite mid-week Bible study there was something special about us sharing the same physical environment together, praying and reading the Bible together, and being able to see people's body language.[271] I recognised that I was using different ratios of my senses in perceiving and making sense of the different environments. I was also acutely aware when online, that there was a physical screen between me and the other people I encountered. I too was associating there being something different between online and onsite, which was connected to the physical environment and human interaction in relation to doing church and experiencing God.

In summary, leaders and members acknowledged that while experiencing God online was possible, it felt notably different from onsite encounters. Many valued *"God moments"* online but found them less impactful than when meeting together physically, associating onsite gatherings with a deeper sense of God's presence and communal prayer. Technical issues and home distractions often disrupted online focus, leading many to prefer onsite worship for its embodied, relational aspects. Overall, leaders and congregants expressed that while digital platforms allowed continued connection, physical gatherings offered a unique spiritual dynamic that could not be fully replicated online.

4.2 Renegotiating Rituals and Practices

This section explores how traditional ecclesial rituals were reimagined and adapted throughout the pandemic, particularly during the shift to online worship in the early lockdowns and the gradual return to onsite gatherings under government restrictions. It examines how church communities navigated changes to their ritual practices, and considers the personal and communal impact of reducing, modifying, or suspending these rituals, as reflected in the participants' stories. It tracks the transition of moving the traditional Sunday service online, through applying Campbell's transfer, translate and transform strategy, and identifies how

[269] B2 Phase One Interview, p. 12.
[270] B1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 1.
[271] B2 Phase One Mid-Week Bible Study Notes 23 June 2021.

sacred the format has become to the Church. It concludes by highlighting the continued centrality of the weekend service and examining how the pandemic introduced a new ritual emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene within church practices.

4.2.1 From Cradle to Grave

During the early and mid-pandemic, a theme of forced ritual renegotiation came through strongly in the interviews and the observation, however, there were different elements to each. During the early pandemic, leaders were navigating the process of transitioning many of their traditional rituals online. This involved a renegotiation between digital and theological practices embedded in normative and operant theology, and a hierarchy system of ecclesial rituals began to emerge; those which were completely stopped and those which continued but adapted. None of the participating churches conducted baptisms or weddings during lockdowns when their physical church buildings were closed.[272] Weddings and baptisms that had already been booked months in advance were simply cancelled to be re-arranged when the building was open.[273] Funerals, however, were still conducted, but they were greatly reduced and scaled down. This included reading parishioners their last rites in the Catholic Community.

> *"So normally what they would do is use a special oil to anoint the person* (CT1 demonstrated by putting a finger on her forehead), *you're supposed to do it with a cottonwool bud, you can't physically touch them, you're supposed to put your hand on them when he's praying for them, but he's had to throw the prayers from a distance".*[274]

CT1 went on to recall an incident where the parish priest had to stand outside in the rain, as an elderly lady in her final hours had tested positive for Covid. The bedroom window was open an inch, and he projected the prayers and blessings towards the lady hoping she could hear. The leader concluded *"…it really has been a get in, get out, get it done, very, very quickly… but at least we've been able to do that".*[275] CE2 described funerals as *"horrific"* as there were no church services, and it was scaled back to graveside or the crematorium.[276] Common

[272] Taken from Phase One and Two Interview Transcripts P1-M1.
[273] CE2 explained how some of the children booked in for baptisms in the early lockdowns were now 18 months older (CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 10).
[274] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 9.
[275] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 9.
[276] CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 13.

practice pre-pandemic would be to meet with the family to offer support, pray with them and plan the funeral service. However, this was done using the telephone, email or zoom, which leaders found incredibly difficult, as they could not come alongside the family in their time of grief.[277] Despite this, stories from leaders who conducted funerals during lockdowns, revealed a raw, organic narrative stripping away unnecessary content and exposure for the family. CE2 told the story of a couple she had married in June 2019 who lived in a local village and were part of the farming community. The husband worked on his father's farm and during the beginning of the first lockdown in the spring of 2020, he got caught under the tractor and it hit the electric pylons. His father had been working over the brow of the hill and heard a bang. When he reached his son, he had passed away. CE2 was asked to conduct the funeral as she had overseen their wedding.

"So, we didn't get in the church, because we weren't allowed. And so, we arranged that he would be taken to the farm, he was put on the back of the tractor, would drive through the village on the tractor and I would meet them at the cemetery, and I would do the service at the cemetery. And so, we actually physically did everything that we wanted to do in there. And all his friends in their tractors, lined the road, so they did a guard of honour with all the tractors. I was in bits, absolutely in bits…. But afterwards his wife said, obviously nobody ever wants to be in this place, but she said the way we've done it, is actually the way he would've probably preferred, because although it's not what we thought we were going to have, or what we thought we wanted, it was a lot more intimate, it was a lot more personal, and she didn't need to think about everybody else".[278]

During early lockdowns, online technology was only used to liaise with the family in planning the funeral, whereas once church buildings had opened their doors, many of the churches live streamed funeral services at the family's request. CE2 recounted another story where a widow was taken into hospital with Covid the day before her husband's funeral.[279] The wife was adamant his service must go ahead, so CE2 printed out the service booklet and a family member live streamed it on their mobile phone so the widow could still watch the service.

[277] CE2 described conducting funerals as *"horrible"* (CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 13). M1 expressed how helpless he felt that he could not go and comfort in person (M1 Phase One Facebook Post from 17 July 2021).
[278] CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 13-14.
[279] Ibid., p. 15.

After restrictions lifted mid-pandemic, baptisms and weddings returned, with many churches now offering live streaming, as it made them more accessible to family and friends living far away or abroad. CE2 creatively used Zoom at a baptism, for a set of Godparents living in Thailand, where they joined in the readings and appeared on the photographs on laptop screens at the front of the church with the rest of the family and friends. However, leaders were still having to negotiate their normative theology with restrictions and health and safety.

"As far as baptisms are concerned when it comes to holding the baby over the font, I get the parents to do it. When it comes to marking them or making the sign of a cross with holy oil, I get the parents to do it as well. So, I don't physically touch the child."[280]

During the pandemic, church leaders had to renegotiate traditional rituals, shifting many practices online or adapting them due to restrictions. Weddings and baptisms were largely paused or postponed, while funerals continued in limited, scaled-down forms, often without the usual physical presence and support. Leaders described poignant and creative adaptations, such as conducting graveside funerals with community participation and using technology to include distant family members in ceremonies. As restrictions eased, baptisms and weddings resumed with ongoing adaptations like parents performing rites themselves to maintain safety. This period highlighted a tension between maintaining theological norms and adapting to health guidelines, forcing churches to find new ways to honour life's key rituals from *"cradle to grave."*

4.2.2 Body and Blood

The ritual of taking the sacrament of bread and wine was referred to using three different names across the denominations: Mass, Communion and the Eucharist.[281] Through observation and interviews, the difference between those that transferred the ritual online and those that did not, was based on the normative theological beliefs of the denomination and whether it needed to be consecrated by ordained clergy. Table 4.1 gives a practical overview of how each church navigated this ritual during the pandemic.[282] The table shows six faith communities transferred the ritual online and five chose not to, with two of those offering an alternative ritual. When

[280] CE2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 2.
[281] Taken from Phase One and Two Interview Transcripts P1-M1.
[282] Data collated from Phase One and Phase Two Interview Transcripts P1-M1.

onsite services were allowed to resume during the early pandemic, eight of the churches used disposable or metal cups to distribute the wine. However, those churches that would usually use a shared cup, such as Anglican and Catholic denominations, only distributed the wafer to the congregation (even though the priest would still include it in the ritual on the altar and take it). There were minimal changes observed during the middle of the pandemic, except one of the Anglican churches had started providing the shared cup.

ID	Practised Online Communion During Lockdowns	Early Pandemic Onsite Service	Mid-Pandemic Onsite Service
P1	Yes	Disposable cups all in one - wine and wafer	Disposable cups all in one - wine and wafer
P2	Theologically could, but chose not to due to some members missing out who were not online	Individual small metal cups with a bit of cracker	Individual small metal cups with a bit of cracker
P3	Yes	Disposable cups all in one - wine and wafer	Disposable cups all in one - wine and wafer
P4	Yes	Disposable cups all in one - wine and wafer	Disposable cups all in one - wine and wafer
CE1	Yes	Two disposable cups given per person, containing the separate elements of wafer and wine	Individual plastic cups with wafer
CE2	No	Wafer only, dropped into hands	Wafer only, dropped into hands
CE3	No	Wafer only	Using both elements, offered 2 shared cups: 1 where they could dip their wafer in, and 1 where they could take a sip[283]
B1	Yes	Disposable cups all in one - wine and wafer	Disposable cups all in one - wine and wafer
B2	Yes	Disposable cups all in one - wine and wafer or people could bring their own	Disposable cups all in one - wine and wafer or people could bring their own
CT1	No, replaced with Act of Spiritual Communion	Wafer distributed by Parish Priest in hand	Wafer distributed by Parish Priest and Deacon by hand[284]

[283] CE3 wanted to provide different options for their members, to empower them in making their own choice. The leader referred to the two options as *"tink or suck"*. They personally chose not to drink from the shared cup, but I noted they did have ongoing health issues (CE3 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 6).

[284] The parish priest offered those who preferred to receive Holy Communion on the tongue may do so, but they would need to go to him (taken from an email sent out by the Senior Administrator on behalf of the Parish Priest on 27 January 2022).

M1[285]	No, replaced by occasional Love Feast using juice and cake/ biscuit.	Throw away cups and wafers offered on a plate	Throw away cups and wafers offered on a plate

Table 4.1 Practical Overview of Communion Distribution

Those who held a memorialist theological stance, easily transferred it online during the early lockdowns. These were predominantly independent and Pentecostal churches. P3 explained someone had messaged her online after seeing the live stream and asked if they could use a packet of crisps and a pint of beer for communion.[286] It opened a conversation with the stranger about the act of communion and she explained to them that it was symbolic, and other elements could be used. P4 expressed similar beliefs stating that they had taught their congregation that they did not have to wait to come to church on a Sunday to partake in communion.[287] Not only was it symbolic, but they did not need it to be consecrated by ordained clergy. However, for those churches which aligned with the belief that the elements were Christ's real presence, such as transubstantiation or consubstantiation, it meant some members of faith communities did not receive Communion for over a year. This, coincided with the ongoing government restrictions and health and safety, meant those shielding and vulnerable went without across these churches.[288] Those that did receive it onsite when the churches reopened only received it in one kind, due to infection risks of sharing the common cup. For the participating churches, this ritual remains a cornerstone of the Christian faith; however, its practical expression had to be continually renegotiated. During lockdown, leaders were forced to navigate the tension between their theological convictions and the limitations of digital platforms. As churches reopened for onsite worship, additional negotiations emerged, this time with health and safety regulations, further shaping and, at times, constraining the ritual's full and intended expression. During observation at CE2 one of the members of the faith community shared with me that she had taken her first communion during today's service (which was over 18 months), and it was evident in her physical demeanour how moved she was.[289] This longevity of absence began to

[285] M1 gave an overview of what churches across the Methodist circuit were doing, based on national guidance, which was reinforced through interviews and observation with the individual Methodist churches. Only M5 had tried to do their own online version of Communion.
[286] P3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 4.
[287] P4 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 4.
[288] This included CE2, CE3, CT1 and M1-M3.
[289] CE2 Phase One Observation Notes 5 July 2021, p. 1.

affect people: *"I was gagging for communion, I'm so dependent on it."*[290] The leader at CE2 explained *"... the Eucharist, as sacramental as I am, watching it on screen doesn't fulfil me".*[291] Some church leaders, who were not ordained clergy, experienced confliction with this battle between their normative theology and restrictions, such as CE3.

"I think the most heart-breaking part was at the height of the pandemic, when all the churches were closed, when everyone was closed, I had one lady who was 76, who was dying. She'd been diagnosed as terminal. And I'd taken the walk with her through the whole journey, because she only came to faith eight years ago, and was baptised six, just under six years ago now, and her faith had become very, very important to her towards the end. So, I rightly or wrongly, I took the decision to carry on seeing her in her home while she was poorly… I'm probably admitting to breaking far too many rules here! But it was heart-breaking, because she kept asking me "Can you give me communion by extension, can you get me a priest to give it?" I couldn't find anybody who would give it to her. I couldn't find anybody who would go, and do it and that was heart-breaking because, I mean, when, when I had to call a priest for her, to have her last rites that was heart-breaking enough, but it was heart-breaking to know that she couldn't have that, that physical part of her faith that had become so important to her."[292]

CT1 explained when the UK went into lockdowns, the Extraordinary Ministers could no longer visit the sick and house bound and distribute the Blessed Sacrament, which meant these people had gone without Holy Communion for a long time.[293] However, she also explained that the Extraordinary Ministers used to take the weekly bulletins with them too and share news and updates about people and events in the church: *"so you never guess who I saw at church today"* or *"so and so was asking after you".* For this group of people, communion had become a form of fellowship and keeping connected with their faith community.

There were a couple of anomalies where churches deviated from their normative theology. M5 explained they had tried to instigate doing their own Easter service on Zoom with *"not*

[290] CE1 Phase One Observation Notes 12 May 2021, p. .2.
[291] CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 24.
[292] CE3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[293] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6.

communion as it normally is, but to help do our own communion".[294] She went onto explain that the superintendent had got wind of it and got involved in the service, doing a *"mock-up"* communion.

"…it wasn't a proper communion, it was some form of words, it wasn't a communion service, it was a, it was a…. how can I put it… (thoughtful thinking), it was a substitute for communion, and I think a lot of us thought it was a bit bizarre, you know, why can't you do this? My husband felt quite strongly about that, where does it say you can't do this? Where do the Methodists get this rule from? So, no we haven't had proper communion…"[295]

Another example was CE1, where during lockdowns in the early pandemic the online leader conducted the ritual on the church's Facebook page via live stream for others to participate in. When I revisited mid-pandemic and they had returned to onsite meetings, the leader explained he had broken the *"rules".*

"…with the communion we've sort of broken the rules. The Anglican Church makes a big fuss about the one cup. And those churches who have stuck to the rules have stopped giving wine altogether. But we've broken the rules in the sense we give wine but in a Baptist fashion you know, in the little glass. To be honest, I can't see any church going back to sharing a cup again, we're just too scared".[296]

By mid-pandemic churches were back meeting onsite as their dominant format, and Communion was being practiced to varying degrees. However, many of the Anglican and Catholic churches were still only taking the bread element, based on guidance from their national denominations, on the grounds of health and safety with drinking from a shared cup. *"We won't be doing that anytime soon because at the end of the day, I'm the one who has to finish the cup. And I'm not putting myself at risk."*[297] For this leader, health took priority over normative theology. This had become normalised over time, and CT1 even argued *"whether it's the body or the blood doesn't actually matter".*[298] Whereas the memorialist churches

[294] M5 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 12.
[295] Ibid., p. 12.
[296] CE1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 3.
[297] CE2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[298] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 8. I found it ironic during one of my mid-pandemic visits to the Catholic churches, that the lead scripture from their Sunday Message was from Matthew 4.4 where it reads *"We*

continued to use the all-in-one disposable cups with a wafer sealed on top during mid-pandemic. It was noticeable during the observation that the ritual of Communion had transitioned to be more individualistic, rather than a collective practice. Pre-pandemic some of the memorialist-based churches would have had a physical loaf or bun and a cup of wine and shared it around the congregation or broken into smaller groups, symbolic of the last supper, offering a more raw, organic version. However, this had been replaced by a more personal, individual practice, and it personally felt slightly commercialised with the plastic single use nature of the disposable containers.[299]

Leaders faced an interesting dilemma in their faith communities where only one element was distributed to its members, because as clergy, according to their normative theology and denominational directives, they could continue to take both elements.[300] However, several leaders choose to abstain in support of their faith communities.

"One thing I said I would never do, would be to have Eucharist until I was in the presence of everybody else, I wouldn't do it on behalf of. I would do it with them because it was important to me, you know, that I wasn't being privileged and they weren't…"[301]

The leader at CE3 chose to abstain from taking the wine element, standing in solidarity with those who could not take it.

"I had been given some communion and some wine that I could have used to take myself personally, this is nothing to do with church now, this is personally, but I chose not to because I wanted to stand in solidarity with the people who couldn't.
It didn't feel right, taking the communion myself at home personally,
when I knew other people couldn't take it."[302]

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do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from God's mouth". Yet only the bread element was being distributed to the Catholic community.

[299] When I visited B1 I was asked upon arrival in the foyer area if I was taking communion that morning. When I answered yes, I was given a disposable cup that included a wafer on top. They then proceeded to write my name on a list, which made me feel uncomfortable (B1 Phase Two Observation Notes 6 March 2022, p. 1).

[300] These were churches from the Anglican, Methodist and Catholic denominations.

[301] CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 2.

[302] CE3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6.

It was also surprising that one of the memorialist church leaders chose to wait until everyone could take communion onsite together, emphasising the collective communal nature of the ritual to them. *"It would cut a lot of our people out, you know… so it would only be those who are online who could take part in it, which is a bit sad really, so I haven't done anything like that online".*[303] Rather than those online having a Communion privilege, she chose to wait until onsite church resumed so all could partake in it.

During the pandemic, churches had to continually renegotiate how Communion (Mass, Eucharist) was practiced, balancing deeply held theological convictions with health and safety guidelines and digital limitations. Denominations with a memorialist theology easily moved Communion online using alternative elements, while those holding to real presence theology (e.g., Catholic) often suspended Communion or offered only the bread, leaving many unable to receive the sacrament for over a year. Churches adapted onsite practices with disposable cups or wafers, and shared cups were largely discontinued due to infection risk. This shift led to Communion becoming a more individualised practice, losing some of its communal and embodied aspects, with leaders and congregants expressing emotional strain over these changes. Some leaders abstained from taking wine themselves in solidarity with congregants, while others creatively navigated digital participation to maintain inclusion. Across contexts, Communion remained central to faith communities but was reshaped by pandemic restrictions, creating tension between upholding theological ideals and prioritising community health, while also exposing the sacrament's role as a means of connection, comfort and identity during a time of isolation.

4.2.3 Other Rituals

Throughout the pandemic other rituals and acts of worship were also affected, such as singing, praying, and sharing of the peace. This section will also examine practices of fellowship, many of which had taken on ritualistic significance within the weekly rhythms of faith communities. Activities such as sharing refreshments or engaging in conversation after services, though informal, were deeply embedded in the communal life of the church and reflected the community's espoused theology.

[303] P2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 4.

During lockdowns, some of these were adapted and transferred online, with mid-week Bible study groups and prayer meetings transferred onto Zoom. Some churches found attendance at these activities increased online: *"Its revolutionized how we do this group. Before the pandemic many of us had younger kids, not many could attend".*[304] Previously parents of young children would take it in turns to stay at home or babysit and with most groups being in the evenings it made them inaccessible to shift workers and those with poor health.[305] Leaders recognised the convenience, as they did not need to leave their home or pay travel expenses.[306] It was also noted that the format of the meetings did not divert away from their pre-pandemic programme.[307] The early pandemic was not used as an opportunity to experiment or be creative with these traditional types of meetings through digital platforms, it merely facilitated their continuation, including rituals like singing and praying.

"... it's trying to keep foundational things in place but recognizing that you know, you can't do them how you did them"[308]

However, several churches commented that they had been able to introduce more modern songs sooner. M1 explained that members had their eyes open to more modern music and CT1 explained that the pandemic had helped speed up the process of introducing more modern worship songs.[309] However, there were digital limitations which affected the ritualistic experience. For example, during online observation at a P1 mid-week group a worship song was played and everyone automatically muted their microphones, even though visually they were singing in their homes.[310] As I sat there in my study singing along to the song, I felt a sadness that I could not worship collectively as one voice with the other believers. There were other times during my observations where this was tried and was unsuccessful because the

[304] P1 Phase One Mid-Week Group Observation Notes 4 May 2021, p. 1. One of the leaders of the group went onto to explain that pre-pandemic its focus had been more on social activities, whereas Zoom had enabled the group to do more Bible studies.
[305] P3 explained one of their members struggled to get back from work in time for the prayer meeting onsite, whereas Zoom had reduced travel time and meant he could attend more meetings (P3 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 3). B2 suggested the increase in numbers could be to do with not having to travel in bad weather on dark nights (B2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3).
[306] P1 said his mileage had plummeted with not having to travel (P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 9). M1 explained *"my mileage for last year was something ridiculous like really low like 1200 miles, I normally do about four and a half thousand"* (B2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 10).
[307] Taken from Phase One and Two Observation Notes P1-M3. The format for both prayer and Bible study meetings were the same as pre-pandemic onsite meetings, they had simply been transferred online.
[308] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 11.
[309] M1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 5 and CT1 Phase One Observation Notes 29 June 2021, p. 3.
[310] P1 Phase One Mid-Week Group Observation Notes 4 May 2021.

software could not keep up with the multitude of voices; it had not been designed for collective worship.

With these types of Christian routine practices, it is important to recognise that they were not constrained by their normative theological beliefs like communion discussed above, yet they continued to use pre-pandemic formats. It was not until onsite meetings returned and restrictions were introduced that prohibited some of these rituals being carried out, that their importance in the articulation of one's faith became evident. Some people refused to attend on the basis that singing was not allowed. The worship leader at P1 explained *"To not sing is really hard. Many people won't come to gathered church because they can't sing. It has high value for them".*[311] Another lady in the group supported this and described it as *"...alien, it goes against the community".* During a group discussion at CE3 after the Sunday service, they all agreed that there was something different when they all sang together in church, but they were not able to articulate exactly what it was.[312] From a leaders perspective, CE2 expressed her struggle with not singing and how *"different"* the church was without it.[313] I also experienced the very real, emotive difference of not being able to sing during worship: *"In one song I really felt God's presence and I wanted to sing out my praise at the top of my voice but felt almost gagged… I felt my praise to God hit a ceiling I couldn't move past".* [314]

Even though singing was prohibited, churches still included worship songs or hymns in the service format, not deviating from their pre-pandemic formats. In fact, they tried to employ tactics to deter members from singing, from leaders announcing it at the front to it being included in the weekly guidance notices sent out via email to members. CT1 put up signs around the building and used their website homepage to list what could and could not be done, updating it as regulations changed.[315] However, the leader from CT1 expressed how she still found it difficult.

[311] P1 Phase One Mid-Week Meeting 4 May 2021, p. 2.
[312] CE3 Phase One Observation Notes 18 July 2021, p. 2.
[313] CE2 Phase One Observation Notes 20 June 2021, p. 3.
[314] P1 Phase One Observation Notes 13 June 2021, p. 3. I expanded in my observation notes that I did not feel connected to those in the same room as me. It facilitated my personal worship experience but there was a higher essence missing from not singing in unity and praising God with our voices in unison.
[315] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 5, 10.

"… and then we got going and I can't remember what the song was that we played, and I burst into song and went (CT1 put her hand across her mouth to illustrate her actions). *It was one of my favourites and I just did it without, you know like you walk around singing to yourself don't you, so it really is difficult."* [316]

She went onto to explain that not singing influenced the *"high"* they previously experienced when coming out of church, and that they did not get this as much. Other tactics included choosing recording tracks with backing singers, to give a fuller sound.[317] It made listening to the songs easier when not being able to sing. However, even though singing was not allowed, there were glimmers of creative worship. During a service observed at M3 during the early pandemic, the leader asked the congregation not to sing but encouraged people to worship in other ways.[318] During the worship songs, most people chose to stay seated with a handful standing. One lady chose to dance in worship at one side of the hall. It was quite moving, I felt like I was visually witnessing her communing with God through her physical movement, which in turn moved my own spirit. During the mid-pandemic as restrictions were withdrawn, churches were allowed to re-introduce singing as part of their worship. However, once again they had to renegotiate between their normative theology and health and safety: *"The great news of course, is that we can sing, and to facilitate this safely, we are now sitting in distanced rows in the main hall, and also windows are open to allow for airflow".*[319]

Another ritual that had to be renegotiated was prayer. During the early pandemic when churches were able to meet onsite again, the practice of praying together was restricted due to social distancing. For example, there were no laying of hands or anointing with oil which was common practice pre-pandemic for some denominations. P2 explained that she frequently used to instigate anointing people with oil pre-pandemic, however, she could now not remember the last time she had done it.[320] Fortunately, even though physical aspects of prayer were removed, the measures did not prevent the movement of the Holy Spirit. At an onsite visit to B1 during the early pandemic, during the prayer time a lady spoke out loud in tongues and another

[316] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 10.
[317] CT1 Phase One Observation Notes 29 June 2021, p. 1. During a visit to CT1 the first couple of songs were collective voices, creating the effect that people were singing.
[318] M3 Phase One Observation Notes 27 June 2021, p. 1.
[319] P2 Phase One Email from leader to congregation on guidance update, dated 30 July 2021.
[320] P2 Phase Two Observation Notes 23 January 2022, p. 2.

gentleman interpreted it.[321] There was also some onsite creative ways prayer was adapted, for example M3 set up a prayer text line during services.[322] Once churches were allowed to open their buildings, several of them extended their opening times to facilitate private prayer. These were the more traditional churches, such as Church of England and the Catholic community.[323] However, by mid-pandemic these churches were no longer offering this facility as the buildings were beginning to be used once again throughout the week for social action projects or hired by the community due to national restrictions lifting.[324] Physical aspects of prayer were also beginning to return by this point. During a visit to an onsite prayer meeting at P2, towards the end we split into pairs and prayed for each other. My partner moved her chair closer to mine and put her hand on my back whilst I was being prayed for. *"There was a tangible feeling of support and love felt through the touch of a fellow Christian – like the Holy Spirit in each of us connected. I hadn't realised how much I had missed that".*[325]

The churches also had to renegotiate the ritual of fellowship through the course of the pandemic. During the early pandemic when churches were closed several churches tried to replicate practices of fellowship online. For example, a couple of churches tried using break out rooms after the service on Zoom.[326] M2 had used the random selection feature, which had been received positively by members as they got to chat to people, they would not have normally pre-pandemic. There were also some creative ideas, such as meeting in their gardens whilst socially distancing, or another group met in their cars in a carpark and rolled the windows down.[327] When churches were allowed to commence onsite services, fellowship rituals had to be renegotiated with government restrictions.

[321] B1 Phase One Observations Notes 30 May 2021, p. 2.
[322] This encouraged both those onsite and online to use an anonymous medium for prayer requests (M3 Digital Data Trawl Notes, p. 2).
[323] All the Anglican and Catholic churches extended opening times for prayer, whereas this was not offered by Pentecostal or Baptist churches (CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 5 and CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 1).
[324] M1 explained community groups such as slimming world, Scouts and Guides had returned, although they had to adhere to Methodist *"rules"* (M1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 3).
[325] P2 Phase Two Observation Notes 20 January 2022, p. 2.
[326] A lady from B2 during an onsite visit explained she had enjoyed doing the Bible study on Zoom, because the breakout rooms had helped her to get to know people better (B2 Phase One Mid-Week Bible Study Group Observation Notes 23 June 2021, p. 2).
[327] The P2 leader described how she took a couple of deckchairs and would sit outside a person's front door for a chat (P2 Phase One Interview, p. 5). A lady from CE2 explained how she had four members meet at a time in her garden (CE2 Phase One Observation Notes 5 July 2021, p. 1).

"Please be aware that no one should mix indoors on the church premises, with anyone who they do not live with (or have formed a support bubble with) unless exemptions apply. You are able to chat with people outside in groups of up to 6 people."[328]

Other common guidelines included one-way systems and no hugging or shaking hands.[329] Due to these restrictions, fellowship was extremely limited and impacted on the overall church experience. I witnessed this first hand at P1, as I sat in my seat before the start of the service the lack of talking was disturbing. I had visited several times in the past pre-pandemic and before the service there would normally be people hugging and greeting one another, families talking to each other and children playing together, but instead it was eerily quiet with everyone sat in their socially distanced seats not talking, with no children present.[330] A member of P2 described how she had missed being able to sit next to people and talk together. *"It is very hard to have a quiet conversation when you are 2m apart and everything you say can be clearly heard by all around".* [331] There were a couple of leaders who continually had to remind their members of the guidelines in relation to fellowship during the early pandemic when onsite church resumed. The leader at CE2 explained how her elderly congregation missed their friends a lot, as many of them lived on their own.

"They do miss that company, and also, we've not been able to do refreshments and they've not had their coffee and they've not had their natter and trying to get them out at the end of the service, because we almost have to make a joke of it and say, "come on, time to move", because they are so used to having a natter. I mean social distancing, forget it! It just doesn't mean anything to a lot of them." [332]

"They are very, very close, and they are lovely, and I love them dearly. But they are who they are and getting them to move from what they've done for 50 years is going to be hard."[333]

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[328] P1 Church Guidelines taken off their website May 2021.
[329] P2 issued out guidance via email to members explaining the one-way system, social distancing requirements and to refrain from hugging and hand shaking (P2 email dated 30 July 2021, p. 1). During a visit to CT1, I observed social distancing signs around the hall, numbers on pews and lines marked on the floor (CT1 Phase One Observation Notes 29 June 2021, p. 1).
[330] P1 Phase One Observation Notes 13 June 2021, p. 1.
[331] P2 Questions for Church Members, p. 1.
[332] CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 7.
[333] Ibid., p. 8.

CE1b explained that people objected to the constraints and often had to be reminded about social distancing and stopping to chat.[334] During a mid-week visit at CE1 it was intriguing to observe their natural behaviour. As I arrived and went into the church hall, I saw a group of six ladies, including the leader, sat closely around a table in the kitchen area talking. When it was time for the service the leader rang a bell, and the ladies got up and walked into the hall and sat in social distanced seats and some put masks on. After the service, many of the ladies got up and went back into the kitchen area and sat around the table talking again. I observed this type of behaviour several times. At P3 during a Sunday service visit, many of the members hugged each other when they came in: *"Before we started a lady came up to me and said "are you a hugger?", I replied "yes" and she gave me a big hug".*[335] At CE3 as I was waiting for the service to start I observed a baby being passed from person to person, a little girl offering around her sweets, and members hugging each other. A little girl came up to me and explained she had found some ants, and then automatically reached out and took my hand to lead me to her great find.[336]

By the middle of the pandemic all churches were meeting onsite, but there was a greater variance in the provision of fellowship, which appeared connected to how they were managing the transition from no more government restrictions. Some churches were still asking members to wear masks and socially distance.[337]

"Yes, we've never stopped wearing masks. When the government changed it so that masks were not mandatory in places of worship, our signs changed to "we ask you to wear a mask to keep everybody safe".[338]

CT1 continued to ventilate their buildings during services, which I observed during my visits.[339] As a result the doors were left open throughout the whole service, and most people wore their coats. I noted that the combination of distance in seating, wearing masks and people

[334] CE1b Phase One Interview Schedule, p. 2.
[335] P3 Phase One Observation Notes 25 July 2021, p. 2.
[336] CE3 Phase One Observation Notes 18 July 2021, p. 1, 2.
[337] P1 explained how challenging it had been when the government relaxed restrictions and churches were left to *"make your own rules*". They continued with face coverings and offered socially distanced seating areas that could be booked online (P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 2).
[338] CT1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[339] CT1 Email Communication dated 31 January 2022 to all faith communities, following measures lifting in England but encouraged people to *"continue to follow safer behaviours to protect ourselves and others".*

wearing coats, gave an impersonal cold feel to the service. [340] It was not an environment conducive to fellowship. Whereas other churches were resuming their previous ways of fellowship; they had commenced serving tea and coffee and stood around talking before and after the service. For example, when I visited B2, as I arrived for the family service I was greeted and told I could go and get a drink. As I approached the room where refreshments were being served it was a hub of activity, with groups of people stood talking to one another and children playing together.[341] At the end the service during my M2 visit drinks were also served, and there was a similar scene where people stood in groups talking with children playing together.[342] These scenes reminded me of church pre-pandemic. However, there did not appear to be a denominational pattern on the different approaches used, or the timings of returning to pre-pandemic fellowship practices.[343] A consistent and dominant influence across all participating churches was health and safety, which significantly shaped how rituals were reimagined and carried out in practice.

During the pandemic, other rituals such as singing, praying and fellowship practices were significantly disrupted in churches, though they were not as tightly bound to theological constraints as communion. Many activities moved online (e.g., Bible studies, prayer meetings), often increasing accessibility for parents and shift workers, yet largely retained pre-pandemic formats without creative innovation, merely allowing continuity. Singing proved especially emotive, with many congregants refusing to attend services where singing was banned, highlighting its deep communal and spiritual significance. Churches tried to manage restrictions while maintaining worship, with some leaders struggling not to sing and others encouraging alternative expressions like dancing. Prayer practices also adapted, with the physical aspects of prayer (laying on hands, anointing with oil) paused due to distancing, yet spiritual experiences continued, including tongues and creative adaptations like prayer text lines. Fellowship rituals, including post-service conversations and sharing refreshments, were heavily impacted by distancing rules, creating a sense of loss and coldness in worship spaces.

[340] CT1 Phase Two Observation Notes 2 March 2022, p. 2.
[341] B2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 2.
[342] M2 Phase Two Observation Notes 14 March 2022, p. 2.
[343] For example, within the Pentecostal participating churches, the two that came under a national body or movement kept their guidelines for longer, than the two independent Pentecostal churches. Across the three Anglican churches, the approach was varied, like the two Baptist churches. The Catholic Community seemed to maintain their guidelines the longest which was issued by their regional diocese (Taken from Phase One and Two Interview Transcripts and Observation Notes for P1-M3).

Some churches resumed informal fellowship quickly, while others retained restrictions, with health and safety concerns overriding denominational patterns, showing that the pandemic forced churches to renegotiate and reimagine ritual practices while revealing their deep value in shaping faith, community and embodied belonging.

4.2.4 The Ritual of Cleanliness

One of the main themes that came through strongly from observing the practices at each of the churches, was an emerging new ritual of cleanliness. The previous section highlighted the focus on health and safety, and government restrictions dictated the outworking of many of their practices. Over time this led to the act of cleanliness becoming ritualistic and forming part of the service. For example, during the early and mid-pandemic I observed many leaders using hand sanitiser whilst conducting communion. During a visit to CE1, I observed the leader go up to the altar and start to prepare the communion elements. The sanitiser was kept on the altar next to the communion elements, which he used beforehand.[344] When it was ready, we were invited to go up and partake in communion, and I witnessed nearly everyone use the sanitiser after taking the elements and walking back to their seats rubbing their hands together. In my observation notes I wrote *"there was an audible sound to them doing it. It was almost ritualistic, cleansing them of physical germs".*[345] During a visit to CE2 I observed the leader use a baking bowl to wash their hands in before preparing communion. When I spoke to her afterwards, she explained it was Church of England best practice guidelines to wash your hands.[346] Similarly, when I visited CE3, I observed the priest use hand sanitiser at certain points whilst conducting communion.[347] This was also the case at CT1, across all three of their sites, where the Father would thoroughly sanitise his hands before distributing communion, which was often picked up by the microphone.[348]

The practice of putting on and taking off a mask when going on stage or to the altar became ritualistic at some churches.[349] I observed numerous times leaders and speakers taking their mask's off when entering the altar or stage area and putting them back on when they walked

[344] I also observed this at other churches, such as CE3 (Phase Two Observation Notes 10 April 2022, p. 2).
[345] CE1 Phase Two Observation Notes 6 February 2022, p. 2.
[346] CE2 Phase One Observations Notes 5 July 2021, p. 1.
[347] CE3 Phase One Observation Notes 18 July 2021, p. 2.
[348] CT1 Phase One Observation Notes 2 March 2022, p. 2, 5 March 2022, p. 2 and 6 March 2022, p. 1.
[349] This practice was observed during observation at P1 (13/06/21), CE2 (05/07/21), CE3 (10/04/22), B2 (16/01/22), CT1 (04/07/21).

back down and were amongst the congregation. I wrote in my observation notes that this made me feel as if we, the congregation, were unclean and not safe to be around.[350] Hand sanitiser also played a role on the altar too. During a visit at CT1 whenever someone went to the lectern to read or speak, they all sprayed hand sanitiser on arrival and when leaving. It was positioned next to the microphone, so the noise was amplified, and it felt like the sanitiser had become part of the liturgy.[351] This was observed at all three of their faith communities, inferring it had become part of their health and safety practices.[352] CE2 during a mid-pandemic visit, put on a mask to distribute the Eucharist wafers to the congregation.[353] After carrying out the ritual she walked back to the altar, took her mask off and took the elements herself before clearing away. For some people, these practices were reassuring. A lady I met during a visit to M3 explained she had felt safe coming to church knowing there were precautions in place.[354] However, they also had knock on effects and a P2 member went onto explain *"I think the worst thing about Covid restrictions, while necessary, have taken away our ability to be spontaneous and have caused us to formalise things that are so much better done informally".*[355]

I experienced this first-hand during the early pandemic, where services had been formalised and planned to ensure regulations had been adhered to, but in the process restricting the opportunity for spontaneity and fellowship. This begins to raise questions around the gospel and where cleanliness fits in the narrative. During the early pandemic observation I often felt uncomfortable being welcomed by a steward or volunteer enforcing hand sanitising before I could step past the foyer area or in some instances be given a hymn book.[356] I remember a particular visit to CT1 where I felt like I was on a cleanliness conveyor belt.[357] As I entered the foyer I was greeted by a steward waiting to sanitise my hands, after I had done so I moved forward to the next steward who handed me a booklet, and then moved forward again to where a steward met me and showed me to my seat. I felt like I had to clean myself before I could enter God's family and access worship, with the focus being on having clean hands and covering my mouth. If I did not comply with their cleanliness practices, would I have been

[350] CE3 Phase Two Observation Notes 10 April 2022, p. 2.
[351] CT1 Phase One Observation Notes 29 June 2021, p. 1.
[352] Observed at their other two sites on 03/07/21 and 04/07/21.
[353] CE2 Phase Two Observation Notes 13 February 2022, p. 2.
[354] M3 Phase Two Observation Notes 30 January 2022, p. 1.
[355] P2 Questions for Church Members, pg. 1.
[356] This practice was observed during Phase One Observation at P1 (13/06/21), P2 (06/06/21), P4 (25/07/21), CE2 (20/06/21), CE3 (18/07/21), B1 (30/05/21), B2 (27/06/21), CT1 (29/06/21), M3 (27/06/21).
[357] CT1 Phase One Observation Notes 29 June 2021, p. 1.

allowed through the church doors? I complied with each communities cleanliness practices, but it began to make me question the outworking of these practices on my faith and on how church might be perceived by newcomers. By the mid-pandemic many of these practices were still in place but not enforced through stewards. For example, hand sanitiser was placed on a table in the foyer, rather than having a volunteer or steward distribute it upon entry.[358] However, it had now become a ritual that no longer needed to be enforced as it had become a part of their operant practices.

During the pandemic, a new ritual of cleanliness emerged within church practices, with hand sanitising, mask-wearing, and washing hands becoming embedded into the liturgy and rhythms of services, especially during communion. These practices, initially driven by government health and safety guidelines, became ritualistic acts, such as leaders using hand sanitiser at the altar, congregants sanitising after communion, and masks being put on and removed at specific moments, shaping worship spaces and creating a sense of purification before participation. While some congregants found these practices reassuring, they also formalised and restricted spontaneity within worship, raising questions about how the gospel's message of grace aligns with these enforced cleanliness rituals. Over time, the enforcement of these practices eased, but they remained as ingrained communal behaviours, reflecting how cleanliness became a spiritualised, habitual practice within churches during the pandemic.

4.2.5 Sacred Sunday

Despite the changes during the pandemic, with churches regularly having to renegotiate their practices and rituals, one focus that continued to remain the same pre, mid and post-pandemic, was that of the Sunday service. During the early pandemic when churches transferred their activities online, many churches put on hold activities such as weekly drop-ins or children's and youth activities, however, they tried to continue in some form their original Sunday service.[359] As churches grew in digital knowledge and experience over the first lockdown, their services evolved into a replication of their pre-pandemic services; the itinerary of their programmes mimicked their pre-pandemic services and very often they were held at the same

[358] A table with hand sanitiser in the entrance was observed during Phase Two Observation at P1 (30/01/22), P2 (20/01/22), CE1 (06/02/22), CE2 (07/02/22), CE3 (10/04/22), B1 (02/02/22), B2 (16/01/22), CT1 (02/03/22).
[359] Data collated from Phase One and Phase Two Interview Transcripts P1-M1.

time.[360] In using an empirical approach, it paved the way for employing Campbell's transfer, translate and transform strategy, detailed earlier in the literature review. This served as a measurement tool for the main weekend services, mapping changes through the course of the pandemic.

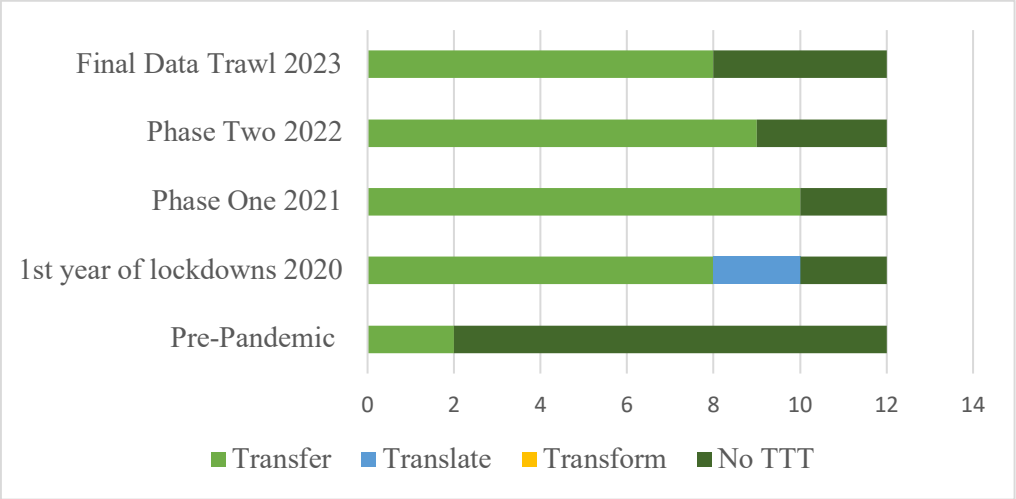

Fig. 4.1 Mapping Campbell's TTT Strategy Across Weekend Services (Pre-Pandemic to 2023)[361]

Figure 4.1 shows out of the twelve participating churches there were only two providing online provision pre-pandemic. However, in the early pandemic during the first lockdown, ten churches offered online provision, eight using a transfer approach and two moving into the translate category.[362] One year later when I conducted the first phase of fieldwork in 2021 these two churches had reverted to the transfer model. When I returned to complete my phase two fieldwork in 2022 the total number had reduced to nine churches offering online provision, although still only using a transfer approach. This continued as the churches begin to transition into the post-pandemic period in 2023, with eight out of the twelve providing online provision through a basic transfer approach.

[360] For example, I attended a hybrid service at P1, and the format replicated their pre-Covid structure consisting of being welcomed by the leader, followed by worship, then prayer, then the main preach, communion, a final worship song and prayer to conclude (P1 Phase One Observation Notes 9 May 2021, p. 1-3).
[361] Note "No TTT" means the church did not provide an online option.

[362] Notably, the two churches that moved into the transfer category, were not the original two providing online provision pre-pandemic.

During both early and mid-pandemic interviews my first question specifically asked how they were *"doing church",* and most leaders instinctively answered focusing on their weekend services. The following table provides a snapshot of the leaders initial sentences and themes in response to my question.[363] The blue shading highlights alternative focus areas to the weekend service.

Leader	**Early Pandemic Interview**	**Mid-Pandemic Interview**
P1	They had no experience of online services, but recognised they needed to get something out there, to keep people connected.	They were now allowed to sing, and more people were attending onsite services as they could engage.
P2	Talked about not being able to meet for the Sunday service.	Explained they were now meeting back in the main hall onsite.
P3	Had to do the service online, as not allowed to meet.	They had gone back to having meetings in person and continued to provide it online as well.
P4	Had to follow social distancing, and had some people leave, which had affected attendance numbers.	Gone back to meeting in person and having small groups too.
CE1	It drastically changed how they did church as most of the year there have been no services.	Online church has continued, but they have been able to restart their Sunday evening meetings now.
CE2	They allowed people to come in everyday for private prayer.	They kept the church building open all the way through.
CE3	It has overhauled how they do church, now they take it out to the people.	They continue to live stream most of their services, except the communion section as it is personal.
B1	It has been difficult, as church is about community and family and interaction through meeting together.	They have returned to onsite services and put a pause on online services.
B2	They had to close short notice, they were there one Sunday and then told they had to close.	Trying to encourage people back to onsite services, rather than online.
CT1	Initially closed completely, but now their churches are open, but places must be booked in advance for weekend masses.	Increased online provision to accommodate more flexibility for funerals.
M1	Explained what medium churches across the circuit were using for their weekend services.	All their churches are now meeting back in person and abiding by the Covid guidelines.

Table 4.2 Early and Mid-Pandemic Interview Responses Describing "Doing Church"

[363] Data collated from Phase One and Phase Two Interview Transcripts P1-M1.

The table shows that they sub-consciously linked *"doing church"* to providing the weekly service or mass and subsequently put their primary energies and resources into it.

"Historically, we put a lot of energy into our Sunday service. You know, in terms of resource, in terms of, you know, shop window for the church… when it went online, we put a lot of resources, spent quite a bit of money on kit, and what have you, to make that work."[364]

The format of the online services also reinforced this. Rather than use it as an opportunity to explore different formats, the running order often replicated their pre-pandemic service structure.[365] Then when churches began to open their doors again, and ran on-site and online provision, most churches used a simple broadcast model and their digital tone was reflective of their denomination.[366] The format had become a part of their operant theology, irrelevant of the medium.[367] A few leaders shared that they aimed to offer quality digital services, but not so polished or convenient that it would discourage people from returning to the in-person Sunday gatherings.[368] CE1b questioned the role of digital: *"Facebook church is good for teaching and people to listen to but lacks interactivity so expects nothing back. God is about reciprocation. It leaves me with the question how we get people from absorbing selfishly to interacting selflessly.".*[369] It was also reinforced through the attendance figures that were collected. Several leaders referred to their figures during interviews, comparing early to mid-pandemic attendance, and analysing the split between onsite and online. They did not demonstrate the same level of interest in attendance figures for their other activities such as prayer meetings or bible studies, unless they had seen a rise due to the online provision

[364] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 15. The investment spent online was to enhance the online experience of the Sunday service.
[365] For example, B1 offered a separate online service in the evening during the early pandemic, however, the format still held similarities with their traditional morning service: welcome by the leader, a Bible reading, worship, preach, final worship song and close (B1 Phase One Observation Notes 30 May 2021, p. 1, 2). I also noticed a similar format during an online service I attended at M2: Welcome, notices, worship songs, an Old Testament reading, a reflection on the reading, a gospel reading, then a hymn, prayer, another hymn, and final closing words before saying the grace together (M2 Phase One Observation Notes 11 July 2021, p. 1).
[366] Taken from Church Digital Overview and Data Trawl Notes P1-M1.
[367] This was reinforced when singing was not allowed as part of government guidance. For example, during an onsite visit to P2 the format still included worship songs after the welcome (P2 Phase One Observation Notes 6 June 2021, p. 1). This was the case at several of the services during this time, where I observed the programme still included space for songs even though singing was not allowed.
[368] B2 explained they did not live stream the services because they did not want to encourage people in their *"slipper watching church".* He went on to explain that it was about coming together and although they recognised that online was useful for people working shifts or ill health, online was a provision, but the focus was coming together onsite (B2 Phase One Observation Notes 27 June 2021, p. 3).
[369] CE1b Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 4.

increasing accessibility around shift patterns or health issues. From observing their practices and the way they instinctively responded to interview questions, it was clear that the focus consistently centred on providing and tracking the weekly service or mass, regardless of the format.

"I mean we had a system in place prior to the pandemic... We might know that they are away or whatever, or something else is going on. So, we had a system in place, but that has been shot to bits."[370]

This highlights important questions about how leaders currently define *"doing church"* and whether this understanding aligns with both scripture and the perspectives of their congregations.

In summary, this section has recognised that despite changes during the pandemic, churches consistently prioritised the Sunday service above all other activities. During the early pandemic, churches paused many activities but worked to continue their Sunday services online, replicating pre-pandemic structures and timings. As churches gained digital experience, they largely used a "transfer" approach (directly replicating in-person services online), with little experimentation in format, and this approach remained as churches returned to hybrid or onsite gatherings. Leaders instinctively equated *"doing church"* with providing the weekly service, directing their primary resources and energy towards it, and attendance tracking focused mainly on Sunday services rather than other church activities. Even though a few leaders recognised the limitations of online church, most reinforced Sunday services as the central marker of church life, raising questions of whether this aligns with scripture and the needs of congregations.

4.3 Renegotiating Leadership

This final section specifically focuses on the leader and how lockdowns and restrictions caused them to renegotiate the outworking of their roles and the impact this had on their identity. During the interviews, leaders were candid about their own struggles and challenges,

[370] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 6.

particularly in managing diverse opinions within their congregation, and across the local ecclesial community. They also described turning to social action during the early and mid-pandemic and working with civic partners, which facilitated greater community engagement and relationships. The section concludes with looking at how the outworking of the pandemic at local church level, has changed the relationship and power dynamics between the state and Church at national level.

4.3.1 Identity and Remit

During the early pandemic interviews, several leaders explained how their roles had changed overnight when the first lockdown was initiated. M1 described how his role pre-pandemic involved visiting members of the Methodist community and attending lunches and coffee mornings.[371] He had been new to the role, so it was important to him to visit all the churches in the circuit. Meetings had transferred onto Zoom, and he felt that changed how people responded. He stated, *"there's very little, that I would call pre-Covid ministry that now exists during Covid ministry".*[372] He went onto explain the biggest challenge he had experienced was the lack of physical contact and having meaningful conversations in person. Previously he would have talked with people at coffee mornings for example, but he felt you did not get the same level of depth over the telephone or on Zoom. CT1 explained how the parish priest had experienced a loss of identity: *"He said to me "I've lost my whole purpose", because as a priest your purpose is to celebrate mass and go out and visit people and all that pastoral work. And at that point, what could he do, other than stay at home and pray for people…".*[373] She went onto explain that his ministry went from going out into the world and visiting people in their homes, to overnight *"absolutely nothing".*[374] However, once the priest realised that he could use online mediums to minister, it opened up avenues for him. She went onto describe them working the hardest they have ever worked in the first month of Covid, to get content out through post, email and online: *"So we were completely different, but really busy".*[375] Other leaders expressed being busy during the early pandemic, and very often it depended on the leader's circumstances. For example, P3 was extremely busy as the other main leader of the

[371] M1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 13-14.
[372] Ibid., p. 14.
[373] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 14.
[374] Ibid., p. 15.
[375] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 15.

church had to shield and was very vulnerable due to health complications. This added more pressure on P3, who was also juggling paid employment as a key worker.

> *"But I did get to the point where I was feeling quite drained emotionally, mentally, and physically, but that wasn't church, it was everything else with work. So, but to put it all together and it makes a bit of a concoction, doesn't it…"*[376]

M2 was also trying to juggle the demands of their leadership role, with her job as a teacher, her husband's job in a key worker role and two teenagers in their GCSE and A-Level years. *"Add being a house group leader, church leader, youth group leader and worship leader to the list and it's not been great… we were tired, fraught and had hardly a minute to take stock".*[377] CE3 shared an insightful observation about their workload increasing, attributing it to the rise in pastoral care demands. They explained that, unlike the pre-pandemic routine where congregants gathered at the same time each week, the new reality required physically visiting individuals outside their homes, which was far more time-consuming and logistically challenging.[378] The increased workload also affected several leader's spiritual walks during the early pandemic. M2 explained *"I do feel as though I have been giving out with a limited amount coming in!".*[379] CT1 described how the busyness had affected her conversations with God, which before the pandemic when she was working in the church building, she would have taken the opportunity to sit and commune with God near the altar, however, if she sat now, she would have to reclean the area again.[380] P3 also felt she had not had as much time to spend with God as she would have liked to.[381] These examples were based around specific contexts involving leadership support, paid employment, health issues and family set up. However, all the leaders in the early pandemic interviews described a significant increase in focusing on health and safety.[382]

[376] P3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[377] M2 Phase One Interview Questionnaire, p. 4.
[378] CE3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 10.
[379] M2 Phase One Interview Questionnaire, p. 4.
[380] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 22, 23.
[381] P3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 8.
[382] Taken from Phase One Interview Transcripts P1-M5.

"Our meetings have become more regular because things have been changing so quickly, and we have been required to make decisions and changes about public health issues which we are not really qualified."[383]

Risk assessments needed to be completed, and procedures implemented in accordance with government guidance. P1 explained how the guidance would often come out two days before it was supposed to be in place, and they would have to read through a 70-page document to see what had changed.[384] A couple of leaders had a member in their church who had qualifications and experience in health and safety through their employment who took on extra workload.[385] Other leaders who were part of a national denomination would receive additional guidance from their headquarters or regional offices.[386] However, there were some leaders who had to navigate it on their own which added extra work.[387]

Notably, there were also some leaders who found that their workload decreased, which they enjoyed. CE1a explained *"I wouldn't want to go back to the sort of manic existence pre-Covid, where you're running around trying to do everything… I think most people have found it good to slow down and be more thoughtful really".*[388] They went onto explain that it had been a really positive experience spiritually for them.[389] This was replicated by P2 stating *"I think it's been quite nice to not rush out in the mornings to get somewhere on time which then affects your quiet time… so spiritually I feel, in a sense, it's been good for me as well".*[390] Many of the leaders described how they curated a mix of online Christian resources, such as listening to podcasts and watching services from larger, well-known churches, to supplement their own spiritual growth and ministry practices. Several leaders also found solace through experimenting online during the early pandemic during lockdowns. M1 started a blog on the circuit Facebook page, talking about his day and sharing encouraging thoughts. The blogs

[383] M2 Phase One Interview Questionnaire, p. 3.
[384] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 11.
[385] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 11, CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 16 and CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[386] For example, the Catholic, Baptist, and Methodist faith communities (Taken from Phase One Interview Transcripts CT1, B1, B2 and M1-M5)
[387] For example, P3 described extra barriers put in place due to social distancing and having to make sure the risk assessments reflected the Covid guidance (P3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3). M3 stated that her role got busier, especially having to do all the risk assessments (M3 Phase One Interview Questionnaire, p. 2).
[388] CE1a Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 5.
[389] CE1a Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 9.
[390] P2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6.

showed a more vulnerable side: what he was struggling with, things he found joy in, and the challenges of leadership during the pandemic.

"… after talking to a colleague whose husband is ill about the sheer helplessness of the situation, I could not go round to the house and offer support, it had to be done on the phone. In the past I have been with families at their most desperate and their most elated, during times of great celebration and of great tragedy, this pandemic has in effect stopped some elements of my ministry and that has caused me great stress. I feel I am unable to do what is part of what God has called me to do".[391]

CE1a explained how his role had totally changed because he was vulnerable and had to shield. He described how he channelled his time into his online ministry on Facebook.[392] P2 explained how she had set up a Facebook page for the church and started posting 2–3-minute evangelistic videos three times a week around the Sunday sermon: *"They are hearing the gospel and that was the whole point of that, it's not for the church people…".*[393]

By the middle of the pandemic most of these new digital ministries had ceased.[394] As churches had opened their doors, the focus returned to onsite meetings, and leaders found themselves not having the time to keep up with their previous blogs or thoughts for the day.[395] This was particularly surprising, because in a number of the interviews the leaders were vocal about the benefit of using social media platforms, but their actions did not align. For example, during the mid-pandemic interview M2 was vocal about prejudice in the church to digital technology.

"So, a lot of it, this prejudice, if you want to call it that, or fear or whatever you want to call it, is not down to the actual technology itself, it's down to the perception of when we worship God, and how we worship him… and that's just down to tradition, with the way we were brought up."[396]

[391] M1 Blog taken from the circuit's Facebook page on 17 July 2021.
[392] CE1a Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 7.
[393] P2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 7.
[394] CE1's had remained, but this ministry existed pre-pandemic, but he posted more often (taken from CE1 Digital Data Trawl Notes).
[395] P2 explained that it involved a lot of work for her to put the content together and took a lot of time and effort and she had now gotten out of the habit of doing it (P2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 6).
[396] M2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 7.

Whilst he was encouraging the churches he oversaw to engage with digital platforms, he himself had ceased one of his main digital ministries during lockdown: *"I don't do much of that at all now, that's a time issue".*[397] There were other aspects of their leadership roles, which having adhered to restrictions and lockdowns, revealed important aspects that perhaps had not been considered. B1 felt the pandemic had revealed how important physical practices were in leadership. *"The challenge of not being able to… (thoughtful pause) the challenge of touch. Hugs! We used to every Sunday, hug, hug, hugging everybody, hugging the elderly. Hugging… people keep putting makeup on my… (pointed to shoulder area whilst laughing)".*[398] He went onto explain the challenging transition as churches were returning to onsite meetings with regards to laying hands on people: *"One is okay, and other will be "why are you touching me?".*[399] The other Baptist leader, B2, also described how using digital platforms through the pandemic had made him realise how much he thrives on physical communication.[400] He felt it was not possible to get the same level of engagement and interaction with people. He gave the example of preaching, where you can see if the audience are engaging with what you are saying, whether they are questioning it, or agree.[401] B1 linked the recent renegotiations of his role, to his leadership training: *"You thrive on the "Amen", you serve on people's attentiveness… I was not taught to read the news".*[402] However, as churches returned to onsite and restrictions were relaxed, by the mid-pandemic interviews leaders had begun to return to their pre-pandemic leadership practices.[403] For example, they were able to reintroduce visiting parishioners in their homes, conduct baptisms and weddings, attend meetings face to face and preach onsite. Despite the interviews revealing a pattern of returning to the normal outworking of their roles, several had made changes, but these tended to be practical things, such as continuing to keep zoom meetings for the running of the church and continuing remote working.[404]

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[397] M2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 13.
[398] B1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 9.
[399] Ibid., p. 10.
[400] B2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 13.
[401] A couple of other leaders also compared the experience of preaching online to on-site. P2 explained when preaching online *"…you haven't got a clue what's happening out there"* (P2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 8). M2 explained how he found it very difficult preaching via Zoom, as he likes to see what people are doing and their body language. He went onto explain how he had adapted to standing up when preaching online, like pre-pandemic, which had helped (M1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6).
[402] B1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 10.
[403] Taken from Phase One and Phase Two Interviews, P1-M3.
[404] M2 chose to attend the national conference online rather than in person, to save fuel costs and to be in the comfort of his own home. *"So, I sat in the front room during conference, and this was national conference, you know, where we voted on the same sex marriage bill, you know, major decisions, sat while I was watching a*

There was also a visible difference in many of the leaders appearance and demeanour in the second interviews and although they did not directly refer to their mental health, they appeared weary and tired.

> *"I think what we've had to learn and adapt to in one year, naturally speaking, would've probably taken a decade to do. You know, you think of embracing new technological ways of doing things, that sort of thing and getting people's mindset to shift and all that sort of thing".*[405]

The mental and emotional exhaustion of the last two years appeared to have taken its toll.[406] P1 explained how he was pulling back from some of his leadership roles.[407] M3 explained how Covid had shown her the fragility of life and that going forward she was going to be more intentional and purposeful, stating *"I am not willing to give my time to being an entertainment centre or letting agency".*[408] M2 stipulated that she was much better at not getting involved in things, and assessing if she had too much on.[409] Several of the leaders were also navigating wider changes in their denominations, which had been put on hold during lockdowns and were beginning to pick up pace again. For example, within the Church of England, the wider diocese had been working through a new visionary programme looking at more collaborative partnerships. At local level for some leaders, this meant working across larger areas and covering more churches.

> *"And you know, you've got to drop what you're doing if there's a funeral or a wedding or a baptism, you've got to go and do it, because that's the way of the world. So, yeah, you've got to be a lot more flexible".*[410]

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screen and stroking the dog" (M2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 13). P1 explained how he had returned to travelling more again, but he enjoyed that as he enjoyed meeting physically again (P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 11).

[405] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 14.

[406] Including carrying financial burdens for their faith communities. CE3 explained that having WIFI put into the church was an extra expense, which had not been accounted for pre-pandemic, but by the phase interviews in Spring 2021 they had lost 65% of their annual income (Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 5).

[407] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 14.

[408] M3 Phase Two Interview Questionnaire, p. 2.

[409] M2 Phase Two Interview Questionnaire, p. 3.

[410] CE2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 11.

Even though the leaders had to renegotiate the outworking of their roles as they moved from early to mid-pandemic, they retained a focus on attendance figures at weekend service. During early pandemic interviews leaders had talked about their online figures. CE1 described how Facebook only allowed the church group page to have 250 members, so he kept the community under 250 but would drop them if members did not access the page for four consecutive weeks.[411] CE3 watched who attended online and explained when they saw them, they would say *"I saw you online, what did you think?"* to initiate a conversation.[412] M5 stated he would flick down the Zoom page to see who was present, and then look into those who were not there.[413] In reference to using Facebook personally, P1 explained that he rarely posted content, but the platform did enable him to keep an eye on what the congregation were doing: *"Sometimes you are encouraged and sometimes you think what on earth are you doing".*[414] There was also a particular focus on numbers when social distancing measures were in place and booking systems were used, as these restricted the seating capacity for some of the larger faith communities.[415] During the mid-pandemic interviews there remained a focus on figures, but the primary focus was onsite attendance. Many leaders explained the attendance had not returned to what it was pre-pandemic.[416] M2 explained there were still a notable number of people who had not returned yet: *"We are also still looking to "find" some of our congregation who haven't been back yet and we doing this via sending cards out to them".*[417] P1 stated that they were currently running at about 45% of their historic Sunday numbers, but it was not the same 45% every week.[418] At the same time as trying to navigate their changing roles, they were also trying to navigate their changing congregations and the mediums they used.

This section revealed how church leaders' roles changed overnight, losing in-person ministry and shifting to online and health and safety work during the early pandemic. Many missed physical contact and felt a loss of purpose, while others found the slower pace spiritually beneficial. Leader's adopted digital tools for ministry, but many stopped as in-person services

[411] CE1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 2, 7.
[412] CE3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 2.
[413] M5 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 5.
[414] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 15.
[415] P1 explained their seating capacity went from 250 down to 50 (P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 4). The Catholic community had gone from across their churches seating 500 down to 150 (CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 11).
[416] Taken from Phase Two Interview Transcripts P1-M3.
[417] M2 Phase Two Interview Questionnaire, pg. 1, 3.
[418] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 5.

resumed due to time pressures and tradition. As churches reopened, many leaders returned to their pre-pandemic practices while keeping some practical changes like Zoom meetings. Many felt mentally and emotionally exhausted and began reassessing priorities to avoid burnout. Throughout these changes, leaders retained a strong focus on Sunday attendance figures, shifting from online tracking to monitoring onsite numbers, which often remained lower than pre-pandemic levels. Leaders actively sought to re-engage absent congregants while navigating the complexities of hybrid ministry and evolving congregational engagement.

4.3.2 Mediating Opinions

Leaders were also faced with differing opinions throughout the pandemic. Some members even left their long-term faith community because they did not agree with how they responded to government guidelines.

> *"...as a member of a congregation, I'd think "what are we going to do now? what's going to happen now?" ...so you feel a bit of weight of responsibility, with regard to, almost a bit of pressure to have an answer... I said to the church at the beginning of the year I haven't got the answers".*[419]

P4 explained how a few people left after they followed social distancing guidelines during the early pandemic.[420] However, because they chose to stay open during the lockdowns, they were also faced with external criticism: *"some people were saying to us you're Christians, you should be following the law".*[421] The hardest part was when a couple who they were very close to who had been part of the church for years, decided to go to another church based on the leaders approach to the government's guidelines.[422] They described what a shock it had been, and how hurt they felt. However, week by week they began to see new people attend and the makeup of their congregation begun to change.

[419] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 18.
[420] P4 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 2.
[421] Ibid., p. 3.
[422] P4 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 7.

"Yeah, so it's quite hard, even though we've been running the church for 20 years, it's like a whole new church."[423]

Other leaders shared similar stories. P1 explained when the church re-opened with restrictions, some people came once and said *"well I'm not coming again until it's back to normal. I can't hug anybody, I can't sing, I've got to hide behind a mask".*[424] However, by the phase two interview P1 explained that more people had returned because they felt like they could engage: *"feel more like the church experience that they were used to historically".*[425] B2 shared that balancing people's diverse opinions has been the greatest challenge for him, some believing they should meet onsite no matter what, and others saying do not meet at all until everything's back to normal.[426] He went onto explain that the spectrum of opinions were represented across the diaconate too, making it even more challenging. He felt the challenge was compounded because they were currently without a paid minister, who he felt was more respected because of their role, whereas his role was in a voluntary capacity as Chair of the Deacons. Another leader in a voluntary role who expressed similar challenges, was Senior Steward at M5. *"Some people are very, erm… (pause) cautious, and others are "that's not important, why do we need to do that".*[427] She reasoned that if you are responsible for doing a risk assessment then you must do it properly. She also felt that guidance had not always been very clear from the Methodist church or government. Leading up to Easter 2021 she had been directed by the regional superintendent to complete a canvas survey across the congregation to see how people felt about returning to onsite meetings from Easter. The response was overwhelmingly to stay closed, however, she received a letter from a very unhappy person about the pain and hurt it was causing their family and as a church they should not be closed. *"I could sympathise with that to some extent, but equally at the same time, if you've asked to take a vote you have to respect what people want".*[428]

By the middle of the pandemic, there was an increasing theme of restriction defiance.[429] CT1 explained how their Polish mass had seen numbers decrease over recent weeks which they

[423] P4 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 8.
[424] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 7.
[425] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 1.
[426] B2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 10.
[427] M5 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 7.
[428] Ibid., p. 9.
[429] Taken from Phase One and Phase Two Interviews P1-M3.

believed was due to them choosing not to wear masks.[430] The Catholic leadership had decided to continue to ask their communities to wear masks when the government had stopped restrictions. She explained how the lead steward had been abused at church, in the street and when she went shopping. *"So, I mean, our lead Polish steward has been accused of siding with the establishment, I don't think they've actually called her a Nazi, but you know that's the type of insults they've been making".*[431] The leadership of the Methodist community also chose to continue wearing masks after restrictions stopped.[432] M1 explained how some people had been awkward and said no. *"The thing that gets me, is we moan about the young people, you know not complying and whatnot but most of my churches are well over retiring age and they're as awkward as they come".*[433] B2 described how they had found a middle ground when restrictions had stopped, as some people were quite fearful and wanted to continue to wear a mask, whereas others said they would not return whilst they had to wear a mask.[434] P1 explained how the government dropping all restrictions had been very challenging, because of the spread of opinions across the congregation: those who want to get back and hug everyone to those who are very hesitant.[435]

"I predicted it was going to be tough, but I think that's been the toughest thing, because you've got so many expectations… I think that's been the most challenging thing to navigate. You'll never please everybody obviously, that's always been the case in leadership hasn't it, and it will continue to be the case. I predicted it was going to be tough, and it was".[436]

Even during the middle of the pandemic after government restrictions had ceased, some members were leaving in response to ongoing church measures. M3 explained some member's had left their church for another one where the rules were different.[437] However, they had found new members join them for the same reason. M3 concluded by alluding to wider societal influences that were shaping people's opinions.

[430] CT1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 7.
[431] Ibid., p. 8.
[432] M1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 3.
[433] Ibid., p. 3.
[434] As a compromise they created areas at the front of the service for those who wanted to wear a mask (B2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 3).
[435] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 13.
[436] Ibid., p. 13.
[437] M3 Phase Two Interview Schedule, p. 1.

"I also think as the general public get more disenchanted with our political leaders who do not fulfil their roles responsibly, that people are looking to others in roles of responsibility to gauge their perception of leadership, looking to the church leaders for their integrity, discernment, and grace and looking for justice and acknowledgement of peoples situations and appreciating life's difficulties, and meeting them in it".[438]

During the pandemic, leaders had to navigate polarised opinions within their congregations about restrictions, leading to tensions and even members leaving churches over disagreements with how guidelines were handled. Some criticised leaders for staying open; others left because of closures or mask rules. Balancing these diverse views was described as one of the toughest challenges, with leaders feeling pressure to have answers while facing unclear guidance from denominations and government. Conflicts arose over decisions like mask-wearing even after restrictions lifted, leading to abuse towards leaders and members departures, though some churches also gained new members seeking their specific approach.

4.3.3 Exploring Social Action

During the early pandemic many of the leaders directed their energy towards social action.[439] The Methodist superintendent referred to this in his interview that he had particularly noticed some of his churches focusing more on social action.[440] Some of the participants were already involved in projects like food banks before the pandemic and increased their efforts in line with the increasing needs, whereas several leaders redirected their energies due to not being able to conduct their normal leadership duties. For example, CE2 described how she was a very hands-on practical person before the pandemic, but when lockdowns came her role changed overnight.[441] She explained how she was given £1,000 by the local authority to help people in the community affected by the pandemic. She put together food hampers for people who had been furloughed, paid off a family's utility bill, and made Christmas baskets for families at a local school who were struggling. She also recounted a story where a local supermarket contacted her on Christmas Eve and offered her all their leftover food that would go to waste. She arranged for volunteers from the church to help her collect the food in their cars and then

[438] M3 Phase Two Interview Schedule, p. 4.
[439] Taken from Phase One and Phase Two Interviews P1-M3.
[440] M1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 22.
[441] CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 13.

distribute it throughout the local community the evening before Christmas. Then on Boxing Day she was involved in helping prepare meals for international lorry drivers who were stuck at the port due to the restrictions and were not allowed to return home yet. *"That was my Boxing Day, I was sat frying chips and peeling spuds, which was great, because it's actually what I should be doing".*[442] For CE2 social action enabled her to feel like she was helping and supporting people in her community and building relationships.

"...you find out more about somebody when you're in the kitchen washing up alongside them or putting the books away or you're stacking chairs. That's when you find out what's going on in someone's life, not over a screen"[443]

CE3 felt the pandemic had been a catalyst for more social action, and an even more urgent call from God to be out there and helping people.[444] They described that at the height of the pandemic, they were handing out 1500 home cooked meals that had been prepared by volunteers. Being out and about in the community delivering food and supporting the homeless they had found people to be more open and honest in their conversations, compared to a church environment.

"I've very often found with people that if you start talking about spirituality, brilliant, the word faith, not too bad, but say the word God or religion, and people go "oh no, I'm not religious, no I don't want anything to do with that"".[445]

CE1b expressed similar stories, of getting involved with the local food larder and delivering food parcels, whereas before the pandemic, her role involved visiting members at home and working within the church building. *"I have been able to be out and about in the community more and got to know more local people so now I feel I have a relationship with my parish rather than my congregation. All I need to do is link the two".*[446] M2 explained how they had had to change their outreach into the local community due to the pandemic, which had resulted in them setting up a prayer line attached to a mobile number and a free book and jigsaw stall.

[442] CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 17.
[443] Ibid., p. 24.
[444] CE3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 8.
[445] Ibid., p. 9.
[446] CE1b Phase One Interview Schedule, p. 3.

Several leaders also shared stories of God's provision through the social action projects they were involved in.[447]

"Whenever we were running out of food at the food larder we would pray. We needed more fruit we discussed bananas; within hours he sent 6 boxes. When we ran out of tinned food in December, we prayed he sent four vans full. In December, 4 days before Christmas we were preparing food for the walk-through Christmas dinner for the homeless. One Lady had not heard about what we did and complained we could do with carrots, so we invited her to pray. Just as we were leaving a Land Rover pulled up and in the vegetables in his boot were six nets of carrots. We now talk of Manna from heaven."[448]

By the middle of the pandemic there appeared to be a shift, from short term support during the pandemic, to local churches beginning to set up new social action projects addressing potential post-pandemic needs. P1 set up three new projects all focusing on building relationships, wellbeing, and mental health.[449] CE1b explained how they had plans for a small coffee shop so people could drop in and widen their social relationships.[450] CT1 shared that they were getting beehives and going to set up a beekeeping club, along with a gardening club.[451] M2 explained how their focus had evolved from before the pandemic.

"We are still a church with a heart for our local area, but the areas of focus have changed (the uniform bank and food bank for example) as people have found life more difficult and as more people are struggling to make ends meet."[452]

M3 described how the café that they had set up in the early pandemic had been a huge success in meeting people's needs: *"It's so much more than a coffee shop*".[453] Several of the leaders who had not been involved in social action pre-pandemic were now seeing the value not only practically but also to demonstrate God's love.

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[447] Taken from Phase One and Phase Two Interviews P1-M3.
[448] CE1b Phase One Interview Schedule, p. 4.
[449] Out of the pandemic they set up three weekly activities geared towards different groups of people. One was a coffee drop-in for the students at the college across the road, another was a mums and tots group and the third was for adults experiencing loneliness (P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 3, 4).
[450] CE1b Phase Two Interview Schedule, p. 3.
[451] CT1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 19.
[452] M2 Phase Two Interview Schedule, p. 4.
[453] M3 Phase Two Interview Schedule, p. 3.

The data in this section presents a story of how many church leaders shifted their focus to social action during the pandemic, expanding food banks and starting new community projects. They helped with food distribution, utility bills and supporting vulnerable people, which strengthened local relationships. The pandemic motivated more practical outreach, seen as a calling to serve. Leaders shared stories of unexpected support, like food donations after prayer. Over time, churches moved from emergency aid to longer-term projects tackling mental health, loneliness and financial hardship. New initiatives like cafés and clubs helped meet ongoing community needs, showing a lasting shift toward practical help and expressing God's love.

4.3.4 Shifting Relationships – Church and State

Another theme that came out strongly in the data was a shift in the relationship between the Church and State. At the beginning of the pandemic in the UK, churches closed their doors in accordance with government lockdown legislation. Then throughout the early and mid-pandemic churches responded to new legislation or guidance, the majority complying with restrictions. P1 described it as *"depending what level of restriction and tier or lockdown we've been, as to what people are allowed to do".*[454] This represented a large shift in the relationship and power dynamics between the UK Church and the British government. Before the pandemic Christians were free to worship across the UK, however, during the pandemic these freedoms were limited by the State, who implemented restrictions that forced the Church to renegotiate the outworking of many of its practices and ways of worship. A sense of lack of freedom came out strongly in the observation data in the early pandemic, from churches being visited by the *"Covid police"* to having seats allocated through a booking-in system.[455] During the early pandemic several leaders referred to the *"rules".*

> *"... but you have to kind of come to terms with it, because those are the rules, you know, it's how it is, and it can't be anything else."*[456]

[454] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[455] For example, when I visited P1 church I could not choose my seat, it had been allocated and in conversation after the service the leader explained they had received their first visit from the *"Covid police"* a few days ago (Phase one observation Notes, 13 June 2021).
[456] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 12.

"Help us Lord to continue to abide by the rules…"[457]

Some leaders even used the government's slogans in their literature, across different mediums to reinforce their message. For example, CT1 in a letter to their catholic communities outlining the current law and restrictions used the *"Stay home, protect the NHS, save lives"* mantra.[458] Science also played a key role during the early pandemic and in the first coding phase was listed within the top three for both phase one and phase two. Leaders were regularly keeping an eye on local covid figures and closing services and activities if levels were considered too high.[459] *"You look about our own area, and just over a month ago, in terms of infection rates, we were one of the lowest in the country. And here we are five weeks later, were like the second worst or something in the country. And it just turns around very, very quickly".*[460] Public health was becoming the basis for leaders closing or opening their doors.

As time went on, during the mid-pandemic many challenges identified by leaders, referred to in the previous section, were around balancing opinions within their congregations of how their church should navigate the transition from restrictions.[461] When it was led by government as legislation during the early pandemic faith communities accepted it: *"I think they just accepted it because it was what had to happen. It was government legislation".*[462] However, during the mid-pandemic when restrictions were stopped, and many churches tried to continue them in some form, such as wearing masks and social distancing, disunity begun to spread between

[457] During a hybrid service which I participated in online, one of the leaders led the prayer section and asked for God's help for the congregation to comply with the rules (P1 Phase One Observation Notes, 9 May 2021, p. 1).
[458] CT1 Phase One Letter to the Parish Community, dated February 2021.
[459] P1 explained that although they could legally gather now, the leadership decided they wanted to support the local effort and keep infection rates down so remained closed (P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 4). P2 sent out an email to the congregation explaining that because local infection rates were high, they were going to be keeping measures such as hand sanitising and the one-way system (P2 Phase One Email titled *"Church",* dated 30 July 2021). CE1 explained they had asked their members to continue with safety measures due to high infection rates locally (CE1 Phase One Email titled *"Update & Request",* dated 29 July 2021). CE2 had a member who volunteered with their health and safety and worked for the NHS, who advised the leader not to open as numbers were rising (CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6). B2 were also asking members to wear masks due to high infection rates in the local area (B2 Phase One Email titled *"Update & Request",* dated 24 August 2021). At the end of a mass, I observed the father advise everyone to stay safe and care for one another as the area currently had three times more Covid cases than the national average (CT1 Phase One Observation Notes, 3 July 2021, p. 2). M2 explained they did not ease the restrictions as quickly as they were allowed by national Methodist advice, as cases were so high in the area (M2 Phase One Update Questions, p. 2). M5 explained *"we did meet for a while, and then people got touchy about the numbers, so we stopped again…"* (M5 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 8).
[460] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 17.
[461] Taken from Phase One and Two Interview Transcripts P1 – M5.
[462] M4 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3.

those who were happy to continue practicing these measures voluntarily and those who wanted to return to normal. The latter group of people no longer saw it as a legal requirement and questioned why leaders were therefore continuing with the measures. Several leaders expressed feelings of frustration towards the government during the mid-pandemic interviews.[463] After all, they had complied and adhered to the legislation and restrictions, yet overnight the government withdrew them, leaving leaders to make their own decisions and navigate the new emerging landscape including mediating increasing diverse opinions. After eighteen months leaders had become accustomed to the State taking control and issuing out directives and felt lost when the government withdrew their support and leadership. They had to navigate the post-pandemic terrain without legislative input representing another shift in the relationship between Church and State. P1 summarised it well when he was asked about what the post-pandemic church looks like: *"It's that unrolling of a blueprint that yet hasn't been fully unrolled. You know, you wait with anticipation to see exactly what it looks like, but I'm pretty confident it isn't what it was".*[464]

The pandemic caused a significant shift in the relationship between the Church and State in the UK. Churches, previously free to worship openly, had to comply with government-imposed restrictions, limiting traditional practices and freedoms. Leaders accepted these rules early on, often reinforcing government messages and closely monitoring local Covid data to decide on closures. As restrictions lifted, tensions grew within congregations between those wanting to continue safety measures voluntarily and those eager to return to normal, causing division. Leaders felt frustrated as government guidance and control suddenly disappeared, leaving them to navigate decisions independently. This period marked a new dynamic where churches had to renegotiate their role and practices without state directives. Though some normalcy seems to return, the pandemic set a precedent of increased government authority over church activities, raising questions about the future Church-State relationship amid a secular and unsettled social climate.

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[463] M2 explained *"health and safety has become a bit woolly which makes it hard to enforce or know what to do"* (M2 Phase Two Interview Schedule, p. 3). M3 expressed frustration in relation to the government scrapping all the restrictions, with all the hard work that had gone into the risk assessments and policies over the last two years. She did not understand how it could now just be burned, especially as she knew people who had had Covid, and some had died (M3 Phase Two Observation Notes, 30 January 2022, p. 1). P1 appeared frustrated when he explained the government told organisations, shops, businesses and churches to make their own rules up, as nothing was legislated anymore (P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 2).

[464] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 11.

4.4 Summary

This project offered a unique exploration of how a sample of UK local churches navigated the pandemic, particularly examining how online and onsite church experiences co-existed and blended into a unified ecclesial life rather than existing separately. By adopting a non-digital-centric approach, the study highlighted how digital platforms naturally integrated into church life within a forced context, while also allowing broader themes around community, ritual and leadership to emerge clearly.

At the onset of the pandemic, when churches went into lockdown, there was a rapid shift to digital platforms to maintain connection and community. Alongside online streaming, leaders employed a variety of communication methods to reach different members. This period saw the highest digital engagement, with church communities expanding beyond physical boundaries into wider online spaces. However, this phase also sparked a renegotiation of rituals and practices, as traditional worship elements like communion and funerals were adapted or prioritised differently depending on theological views and restrictions. Leaders themselves were redefining their roles, as many pre-pandemic duties paused, prompting some to redirect their energy into social action to meet practical community needs.

By the mid-pandemic phase, leaders expressed fatigue but also observed a transformed community landscape. Congregations returning to onsite worship were different from those before, and a tension surfaced around the role of online provision. While digital platforms remained supportive, the preference strongly shifted toward gathered, physical worship experiences, which leaders saw as central to *"doing church."* Managing diverse opinions within congregations, ranging from eagerness to return to normal to cautiousness about ongoing safety measures, became one of the most demanding aspects of leadership.

As churches moved toward a post-pandemic context, digital engagement waned, and attention refocused on revitalising in-person community life. New social action projects addressing mental health and social isolation emerged, highlighting the church's ongoing commitment to practical outreach. While some creative digital ministries faded as leaders returned to their usual responsibilities, the weekend worship service remained the consistent heart of church life throughout all phases. This enduring focus on gathered worship underscores how, despite shifts

and adaptations, the core of church identity and leadership for the participating faith communities continues to revolve around communal presence and shared rituals.

Chapter 5 / Returning to Shore

This chapter undertakes the interpretive and normative tasks of Osmer's pastoral cycle, seeking to understand the underlying dynamics behind the patterns identified in the preceding data chapter and to reflect on what ought to be occurring within the life and practice of the Church. Through re-examining relevant theoretical frameworks, the chapter critically analyses the data to ask, *"Why is this going on?"* and engages theological reflection to consider *"What ought to be going on?"* in conversation with tradition and contemporary ecclesial discourse.

Earlier chapters established the global and national context of increasing digital engagement and connectivity pre-pandemic, with a particular focus on mobile technologies and widespread use of social media. This shift has been paralleled by themed waves of scholarly inquiry in digital religion, as outlined in chapter two. The statistical evidence preceding the pandemic pointed to a highly connected population, both globally and within the UK. However, the findings from the fieldwork indicate that most participating churches have largely reverted to their pre-pandemic modest patterns of practice, despite the broader societal shift toward digital integration. This raises a critical question:

Why did the participating churches, against the backdrop of widespread personal digital engagement, not sustain the digital adaptations they made during the pandemic?

The answer to this question provides a critical entry point for exploring the core theological questions developed in chapter three. First, it enables reflection on how the forced, rather than voluntary, adoption of digital platforms reshaped ecclesiological understandings of gathered community, rituals, and pastoral presence, revealing both the opportunities and limitations leaders perceived during an enforced digital shift. Second, it opens theological inquiry into what insights arise when digital becomes the default mode of worship and relational connection rather than a supplementary extension of in-person ministry, probing whether digital engagement was experienced as a legitimate ecclesial space or merely a necessary stopgap. Third, it allows examination of how the nature of digital embodiment during a crisis challenges theological assumptions about presence, participation, and community, particularly in relation to sacramental practices, congregational belonging, and the role of the body in worship. Together, these questions frame the interpretive and normative analysis of why

churches largely reverted to pre-pandemic practices despite high personal digital engagement, and how these choices reflect deeper theological convictions, fears and aspirations within contemporary ecclesial life.

For many, digital provision appears to have been a temporary solution to an extraordinary situation rather than a catalyst for long-term change. If these case studies are indicative of broader trends within the UK Church, the data suggests a widespread return to modest digital engagement with the addition of broadcast model live streams. To explore insights behind this reversion, this chapter analyses the three core thematic areas that have run throughout the project: community, rituals and leadership. Through multi-disciplinary dialogue drawing on theological, sociological, and digital media perspectives and engaging both previously discussed and newly emerging literature, it seeks to shed light on the complex factors shaping ecclesial responses in the post-pandemic landscape.

5.1 Exploring Community Reflections – A Pixels to Pews Reversal

This section examines how the forced, rather than voluntary, adoption of digital platforms during the pandemic reshaped ecclesiological understandings of gathered community. It explores how faith communities reflected on and redefined what it meant to be together during and after the pandemic, considering why many reverted to pre-pandemic practices despite broader cultural and sociological shifts towards digital connectivity. It also analyses how these wider shifts have influenced evolving perceptions of community within a digital age and highlights the emerging tensions between leaders and congregations regarding the ongoing life of the church.

5.1.1 Community Digital Reversion

In the early days of the pandemic, digital enthusiasts were excited by faith communities transferring their activities online. There was an air of excitement, after what could be described as decades of promoting the use of digital media within the local church being met with various levels of hesitancy.[465] Even though leading up to the pandemic digital engagement

[465] At the time Bryony Taylor described it as people who had previously looked down on Christians using social media were suddenly now enthusiastically embracing online platforms and livestreaming services ("God for All" in *Hybrid Church*, Grove Books, 2020, p. 8). Before the pandemic Heidi A. Campbell in *When Religion*

had increased with more churches having an online presence, live streaming was not commonly used across local churches in the UK.[466] Therefore, when the churches were forced into a position to react to lockdowns and think outside the box or face full closure, academics in the field of digital theology waited in anticipation to see if this would be the catalyst for permanent technological integration in religious institutions.

"This is an opportunity for Christians to grasp the missional initiative by creating informal collaborative networks of creatives across the globe to shape church content, turning flavour of the month into a staple diet. The situation may well have created an appetite for creative, innovative, and resourceful ministry."[467]

The hope was through this forced utilisation of digital platforms it would naturally become part of a church's "*staple diet"* and be integrated into the faith community's everyday life; however, the data tells a different story. Employing Campbells transfer, translate and transform strategy as a mechanism for monitoring digital transformation, revealed very few churches moved past the first transfer stage, and the few that did, returned mid-pandemic. Notably the two churches live streaming pre-pandemic and had an active online presence, did not increase or experiment with their provision. Practically, their offering remained the same. These results were consistent with Campbell's assessment of the over fifty services she had watched and observed during March 2020, with the dominant strategy employed being transference. She explained that a few used the translation strategy, and she observed that only three online services used transformation.[468]

Meets New Media provides a historical perspective of technology being seen as a threat to religious institutions which has fuelled their suspicions over the years (2010, Routledge, p. 4).

[466] The initial data trawl conducted across the participating churches online platforms before the field work commenced, revealed out of the 14 participating churches only 2 live streamed using their church Facebook page pre-pandemic.

[467] Albert Bogle, "Turning Flavour of the Month into Staple Diet" in *The Distanced Church,* ed. by Heidi A. Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p. 9, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/fcc63701-dc5d-4d8e-8ae8-2bb29cd4c513/content [accessed 5 July 2025].

[468] Heidi Campbell, "What Religious Groups Need to Consider when Trying to do Church Online" *The Distanced Church,* ed. by Heidi A. Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p. 49-52, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/fcc63701-dc5d-4d8e-8ae8-2bb29cd4c513/content [accessed 5 July 2025].

"Churches should see the move to digital worship as an opportunity to create a unique space for conversation, care, and encouragement that focuses on affirming the relationships and people within their faith community. Instead of offering a one-way, broadcast-focused church service, the interactive features of social media and digital platforms can be used to create deeper personal connections between church members and leaders."[469]

The integrated view of online provision that Campbell describes here never materialised across the participating churches. The focus was on providing a similar worship format online, rather than creating safe spaces to interact and converse. Other scholars note similar themes of disappointment six months into the pandemic. Angela Williams Gorrell explains that most leaders were merely trying to continue their normal activities, just transferring it online.[470] Stephen Garner described churches' responses being driven by pragmatism, interspersed with creativity, empowerment, and attention to rhythms of life.[471] Even Campbell expresses disappointment in *The Distanced Church* when she explains that most pastors and churches seemed to have concentrated on the practical aspects of conducting church online: *"it seems religious leaders have not given attention to my observations and the advice I have tried to offer over and over again".* [472] These themes were mirrored through the data and continued post-pandemic. Most churches simply transferred their operations online, and then gradually returned onsite as restrictions lifted. However, there was a period where hybrid models began to organically develop in response to changing government restrictions. As churches moved out of these restrictions and could return onsite, the scholars hope was for hybrid models to continue post-pandemic, however, this was not something observed in the data. At this point it is important to note there were examples of inspirational and creative uses of digital platforms by churches across the UK, but the data suggests these might be exceptions, rather than standard provision. Peter Phillips dedicates three chapters in *Hybrid Church* to exploring

[469] Heidi A. Cambell, "What Religious Groups Need to Consider When Trying to Do Church Online", in *The Distanced Church,* ed. by Heidi A. Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p. 52, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/fcc63701-dc5d-4d8e-8ae8-2bb29cd4c513/content [accessed 5 July 2025].
[470] Angela Williams Gorrell, "Enabling, Extending, and Disrupting Religion in the Early COVID-19 Crisis" in *The Distanced Church,* ed. by Heidi A. Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p. 59, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/fcc63701-dc5d-4d8e-8ae8-2bb29cd4c513/content [accessed 5 July 2025].
[471] Stephen Garner, "The Distanced Church: Pragmatism, Creativity, and Rhythms of Life"" in Heidi A. Campbell, *The Distanced Church* (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p. 56-57.
[472] Heidi Campbell, "What Religious Groups Need to Consider when Trying to do Church Online" in Heidi A. Campbell, *The Distanced Church* (Digital Religions Publications, 2020), p. 49.

different models of hybrid provision.[473] However, the data supports that hybrid models were a temporary phenomenon, gradually declining among participating churches as restrictions were lifted. By the end of the fieldwork, when the final data trawl in 2023 was conducted many churches had resumed their normal activities with an added live stream provision through a transfer broadcast model. The leaders acknowledged online viewers at the beginning and end of the service, and at times of prayer, but there was minimal participation from both onsite and online viewers. Social media posts had also significantly reduced on corporate church accounts. Everything pointed towards the local participating churches returning to their pre-pandemic activities and methods, whilst still offering a basic level of online provision.

Over the course of three years, a shifting landscape emerged. During the early pandemic, churches primarily engaged in online transference, with some hints of experimentation in their digital practices. As the pandemic progressed into its mid-phase, faith communities navigated the tensions between online and onsite activities, gradually returning to their pre-pandemic onsite practices as restrictions eased. In the post-pandemic period, most churches reverted to relatively modest online provision, maintaining the continuation of broadcast models of live streaming rather than pursuing further digital innovation. Unfortunately, the anticipated digital "*staple diet"* that Bogle referred to above, did not materialise across the participating faith communities. However, the data did reveal how they navigated the pandemic through processes of continual renegotiation using a mixed medium approach to maintain connection. The focus was not on the medium, but rather on keeping the church community connected and practically which mediums facilitated this. This was different for each church and depended on four core factors.

1. The digital skillset and experience of the leader/ leadership
2. Volunteers with digital knowledge and experience
3. The social makeup of the congregation
4. Available resources such as equipment and finances

The skillset of the leader and their digital experience was important in determining a church's strategy and engagement. For example, P2 describes that the learning process they undertook

[473] Peter Phillips, *Hybrid Church* (Grove Books, 2020).

in the early pandemic, mirrors the online provision offered to their congregation: *"Well, at the beginning, obviously I'm not that technical or didn't, couldn't do all the online stuff. So, I had to think quickly what to do".*[474] As they began to develop their skills, their choice of digital platforms expanded, setting up a YouTube page. Some leaders had little interest in digital engagement; however, this was often circumvented by identifying individuals in their congregation with the experience, knowledge and expertise to assist in providing a level of online provision. CE2 was very transparent about their lack of digital skills or interest in developing them.

"I'm not clever enough to do that, that's not my forte… Technology and me are not, not… I use it because I need it, but it doesn't float my boat, as it were."[475]

However, the church was able to provide a minimal level of digital engagement through their website and recordings of services in the early pandemic, due to two younger local priests which the leader enlisted their help to do *"the techie bit for us".*[476] Another example of this was at P1's church where one of the leaders had a degree in TV production and was referred to as a pioneer by the senior leader.[477] Campbell refers to these digital volunteers as Religious Digital Creatives (RDC) in her book titled *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* and suggests they are organically transitioning into authority figures within their faith communities. However, despite using these figures during the pandemic, the data did not suggest they were elevated to authority status.[478] The third determining factor, was the social makeup of the faith community: *"…but the congregation I've got are not all techie, nor techie savvy or techie interested."*[479] The churches with aging populations explained the lack of interest in technology across their faith community. For example, CE2 explained that watching Songs of Praise on their television was their limit.[480] There was also hints of generational resistance that came through in the data.

[474] P2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 1, 2.
[475] CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 2.
[476] Ibid., p .2.
[477] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3.
[478] Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious* Authority (Routledge, 2021), p. 13.
[479] CE2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[480] Ibid., p. 2.

"So, a lot of it, this prejudice, if you want to call it that, or fear or whatever you want to call it, is not down to the actual technology itself, it's down to the perception of when we worship God, and how we worship him… and that's just down to tradition, with the way we were brought up."[481]

The final influential factor was available resources, such as technology and finances. P1 explained how they had purchased new cameras and upgraded their PA equipment, describing it as completely different to where they were digitally twelve months ago.[482] B1 explained how they had seen an increased number of people volunteer to get digitally involved, describing examples of Christmas advent daily online readings, and weekly recordings of reflections on their chosen Psalm to post on social media.[483] P1 described how members of the congregation had been recording themselves reading bedtime stories for the young children's group.[484] However, for the churches less financially secure, some explained the ongoing financial struggles they faced, exasperated by the pandemic.

"We're getting Wi-fi put in at the church, but we haven't got it put in. So, we've been relying on my own personal phone and hotspot, I'm lucky because I've got a big allowance on it. And so that's an extra expense that the church is now going to incur, that we can't really afford, because during all of this pandemic, I can say as the treasurer as well as the church warden, we've lost about 65% of our income for a year…"[485]

These examples of community digital engagement evidenced in the data are contrary to some of Campbell's findings in *When Religion Meets New Media.* [486] For example, she explains how she found Orthodox Jews to be selective when using technology banning certain mediums such as the internet due to their secular content.[487] None of the participants mentioned a ban or even guidelines on the use of any digital platforms. Theology entered the equation mid-pandemic when churches were conducting reviews and discussions around rituals and liturgy, but their initial general approach early pandemic was based on the four core practical considerations

[481] M1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 7.
[482] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3.
[483] B1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 3.
[484] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 5.
[485] CE3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 5.
[486] Heidi A. Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (Routledge, 2010)
[487] Ibid., p. 73.

identified above. Campbell stipulates that it is essential to understand the history and branch of a community, as they will have their own beliefs in how faith is lived out.[488] However, it was fascinating to find that normative theological considerations were not included in the initial decision-making process (except in relation to rituals, which will be discussed in the next section). Digital platforms were seen as practical tools to enable the continuation of keeping the community connected. During the interviews and participant observation there were no conversations or themes detected about the role of theology in choosing to utilise digital technology. In fact, it was a consistent theme across the leaders that God could move and be present through online platforms, due to his omnipresent nature. One leader even commented that if God could speak through a donkey, he could speak through a digital platform.[489] However, none of the leaders explained that they had theologically considered and prayed about what device or medium to use, rather their decision-making process was based on practicalities whilst being thankful to God that there were tools such as digital platforms available. The data therefore suggests that *integration* had already taken place pre-pandemic. In the words of Andrew Byers *"God can use whatever he pleases when he communicates, reveals, or extends his power".*[490] There appeared to be an unspoken theological acceptance across all the denominations. These perspectives align with the instrumentalist view of technology discussed in chapter two, where technology is regarded primarily as a neutral tool that the Church can choose to adopt or reject.

"So, I like to stick with biblical partners, biblical principles but use 21st century tools, the internet whatever. The means can change, but not the message, the method can change, but not the message, keep the message as solid as Paul will preach it."[491]

However, in the few cases where leaders expressed apprehension, it was not about the technology itself, but in how it was used. Byers draws on Genesis 1–11 to explain the theological apprehensions that often surface when churches engage with new media, framing these concerns around two core anthropological convictions.[492] First, as human beings made in the image of God (*imago Dei*), there is an inherent capacity and calling to creativity and

[488] Heidi A. Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (Routledge, 2010), p, 14.
[489] P2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 8.
[490] Andrew Byers, *TheoMedia* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), p. 96.
[491] B1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 16.
[492] Andrew Byers, *TheoMedia* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), p. 41 and 47-64.

communication, which includes the use of media and technology in ways that reflect God's character and purposes. Second, the doctrine of sin, also evident in these early chapters of Genesis, underscores the human propensity toward distortion, misuse and idolatry within the created order. Byers argues that media sits within these dual realities, where technology can be used to serve God's kingdom purposes while simultaneously being subject to the corruption and brokenness of a fallen world. Holding these two theological convictions in tension within a digital context can create a sense of apprehension among church leaders and communities, who may hesitate to adopt or expand digital practices for fear of misalignment with their ecclesial identity or inadvertently fostering disembodied, consumerist forms of faith. This tension may lead to a cautious or reluctant approach to digital engagement, driven not only by practical concerns but by a deeper theological desire to avoid getting it wrong in the complex intersection of technology, faith and human fallibility. For instance, some avoided social media due to concerns about negative content, while others were cautious when live streaming, fearing potential criticism or misinterpretation. Even though the data suggests that integration had been achieved practically, through observing the participating churches practices, it demonstrated a theological alignment more in fitting with the apprehensive camp.

These transitions from how communities engage digitally were also reflective of wider digital trends. By the time the pandemic hit, chapter one examined how mobile devices and platforms had already become embedded in everyday life. The following table shows a UK comparison between pre- and post-pandemic digital uptake.

Year	Total Population (millions)	Internet Users (millions)	Mobile Device Connections (millions)	Active Social Media Users (millions)
January 2018	66.38	63.06 95%	49.68 75%	38.00 57%
January 2020 (pre-pandemic)	67.71	65.00 96% 1%	72.41 107% 32%	45.00 66% 9%
January 2022 (mid-pandemic)	68.35	66.99 98% 2%	71.84 105% 2%	57.60 84.3% 18.3%
January 2024 (post-pandemic)	67.85	66.33 97.8% 0.2%	88.86 131% 26%	56.20 82.8% 1.5%

Table 5.1 Yearly Comparisons of UK Digital Engagement 2018 - 2024 [493]

[493] The coloured percentages represent the increase and decrease from the previous year. Figures have been taken from the DataReportal reports in partnership with We Are Social for 2018, 2020, 2022 and 2024. These can be found here: "Digital 2018: The United Kingdom", *DataReportal,* 1 February 2018, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2018-united-kingdom [accessed 5 July 2025], "Digital 2020: The United

These figures provide a useful benchmark for assessing mid- and post-pandemic digital engagement and exploring whether the widespread transition to online platforms during lockdowns translated into sustained increases in digital participation, as might have been anticipated. Notably, there was a sudden drop in mobile device connections between January 2020 and January 2022 from 32% increase to a 2% decrease. However, by 2024 this bounced back to an increase of 24%. Another striking statistic was the sharp decline in social media users from January 2022 to January 2024 of 18.3% increase to a 1.5% decrease. There was a big increase from early to mid-pandemic of active social media users in the UK, however, there was a reversion between mid to post-pandemic. This reversion was reflected in the online data trawls conducted between 2022 and 2024 across the participating churches social media platforms.[494] This again raises the question of why would the participating churches, against the backdrop of widespread personal digital engagement across the UK, not sustain the digital adaptations they made during the pandemic? By the onset of COVID-19, mobile devices and digital platforms were already deeply embedded in everyday life, contributing to a globally connected and digitally fluent population at the individual level. It would be safe to conclude that many members of churches up and down the country would have been familiar with the technology and platforms pre-pandemic, with rates of 96% penetration levels of internet users and 107% mobile device connections pre-pandemic across the UK detailed in Figure 5.2.[495] In contrast, the data from participating churches suggests a post-pandemic reversion away from digital practices at the collective, local church level. This divergence raises important questions about the factors contributing to such disengagement.

Byers narrative is an appealing explanation where Christians were simultaneously navigating the tension between two theological convictions: the imago Dei and the doctrine of sin set within a digital context. This theological tension could have fostered a sense of apprehension regarding the full integration of digital practices within ecclesial life. In effect, while practical digital integration was culturally normative, it was often tempered by theological caution, resulting in a measured and sometimes hesitant approach to sustaining digital engagement post-

Kingdom", *DataReportal,* 12 February 2020, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-united-kingdom [accessed 5 July 2025], "Digital 2022: The United Kingdom", *DataReportal,* 9 February 2022, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-united-kingdom [accessed 5 July 2025] and "Digital 2024: The United Kingdom", *DataReportal,* 21 February 2024, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-united-kingdom [accessed 5 July 2025].

[494] Taken from the data trawls for P1-M4 (Likes and Viewings Tracker).

[495] It is recognised that there will be differences of uptake between age brackets as detailed in section 2.

pandemic; practical integration interwoven with theological apprehension. Exploring wider cultural and sociological dynamics may offer deeper insight into why these patterns have emerged within ecclesial contexts.

5.1.2 Wider Cultural and Sociological Influences

During the early pandemic the data revealed that rather than theology being the driving force for the participating communities, it was the practical need to adapt quickly to ensure keeping communities connected. The rate of change that took place across church communities globally was unprecedented.

"…we had to make some very quick decisions like everybody else did. You know, this is totally new, this is like, this is like a ball game we've never been in before… we made an announcement pretty quick about the day after Boris's announcement with some things that we were going to do."[496]

"I think what we've had to learn and adopt to in one year, naturally speaking, would've probably taken a decade to do… But actually, all of a sudden, everything's had to change".[497]

One day the church doors were open, the next they were closed. Churches had to respond quickly to maintain connection, and therefore, even the more historically hesitant churches started to utilise digital platforms. As detailed in chapter two, Vincent Miller argues that over the course of the last two decades the internet has transitioned from leading the way in communication technology to becoming an ordinary, almost unnoticed aspect of our culture and daily lives.[498] Mobile devices have become an extension of us: they hold our daily schedules, wake us up in the morning, entertain us with music and streaming, connect us with friends and family halfway across the world and capture and store our precious memories.[499]

[496] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 1.
[497] Ibid., p. 14.
[498] Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (SAGE, 2011), p. 1.
[499] Marshall McLuhan saw this developmental in the late 20th century, and argued technology was an extension of oneself (cited in Pete Ward, *Celebrity Worship*, Routledge, 2020, p. 14).

Participants even expressed gratitude for the internet and digital tools, identified in the previous section.

"I thank God the pandemic happened in 2020, rather than 1935, because we wouldn't have been able to maintain that community aspect. I'm thankful we've had the internet".[500]

Digital technology has become a necessity, illustrated when the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres identified the need to universal access to the internet by 2030 as a basic human right.[501] It has increasingly expanded civic space beyond traditional physical boundaries, replacing the historic town square. Therefore, although in one sense it was an overnight change of choice of medium by the church, the medium itself was familiar.[502] This likely explains why the sudden transition was smoother and more readily accepted by most congregations, for at an individual level many members had already integrated digital technology and platforms into other aspects of their daily lives.[503] Byers suggests that God continues to use culturally available and relevant mediums to communicate with his people and reveal himself.[504] Using the story of creation in Genesis he articulates how divine monologue became dialogue, imago Dei became our media vocation, and the serpent in the garden of Eden became a medium (albeit a deceptive one).[505] However, even Byers recognises that commercialism and secularisation have blurred the boundaries that once distinguished the sacred from the profane in media.[506]

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[500] Group Leader, P1 Phase One Discussion Notes from Mid-Week Zoom Group 4 May 2021, p. 1.
[501] António Guterres, *A Common Agenda* (United Nations, 2021), p. 4.
[502] According to research carried out by Ofcom, in 2018 96% of the UK population used a mobile phone. Even breaking this down per age group, the lowest usage was over 75's with 81%. In the summary report it states, *"Looking at the underlying behaviour driving this reliance on mobile phones; our qualitative Adults Media Lives research found that there are a number of core activities which almost all the participants in the study do regularly, such as accessing social media, messaging, shopping, and watching and listening to streaming services and YouTube."*("Adults: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2019", *Ofcom,* n.d., p. 5, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/adults/media-use-and-attitudes-2019/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2019-chart-pack.pdf?v=323964 [accessed 5 July 2025]).
[503] Just before the pandemic in 2019 Ofcom reported seven in ten (70%) adults aged 16 years and above had a social media profile ("Adults: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2019", *Ofcom,* n.d., p. 9, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/adults/media-use-and-attitudes-2019/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2019-chart-pack.pdf?v=323964 [accessed 5 July 2025]).
[504] Andrew Byers, *TheoMedia* (Cascade Books, 2013), p. 16.
[505] Ibid., p. 8-9.
[506] Ibid., p. 24-28.

"In our contemporary context, Western Christians have inherited a pluralistic world that has infamously forged a chasm between the sacred and the secular…. No such chasm existed for most of human history".[507]

He describes how religion was deeply embedded in the fabric of ancient societies, which made *"worldly media"* more easily identifiable. However, if one looks at how the UK has navigated the last century there have been some fundamental sociological shifts that has widened the chasm even further. Through her RSST framework Campbell advocates for faith communities to domesticate technologies by integrating them into daily routines guided by the *'moral economy of the household".*[508] However, the latest consensus data from 2021, collected mid-pandemic and completed by more than 24 million households, shows that less than half of the population in England and Wales identifies as Christian.[509] The moral economy for UK households is shifting and becoming increasingly more secularised.[510] Callum G. Brown argues *"…Christianity is becoming Britain's past, not present. The Christian churches have not only fallen in size but also in moral standing".*[511] However, this seems a harsh conclusion considering newly emerging research undertaken by the Bible society. In their 2024 report titled *The Quiet Revival*, it describes a rise in younger people attending church, driven by a desire for authentic community and deeper spiritual engagement.[512] In a context where many leaders expressed concern over declining participation and the struggle to re-engage congregations post-pandemic, *The Quiet Revival* suggests there remains a hunger for gathered, embodied spiritual practices across younger generations. This offers a hopeful signpost, set against pre-pandemic literature such as Brown who suggests there has been a significant shift away from individuals adopting social and moral values founded in Christianity instigated in

[507] Andrew Byers, *TheoMedia* (Cascade Books, 2013), p. 24.
[508] Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (Routledge, 2010), p. 187.
[509] "Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021", *Office for National Statistics*, 29 November 2022, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021 [accessed 5 July 2025]. It is important to recognise that the religion question in the census is voluntary, therefore comparisons must be treated lightly, as who answers the questions varies each census.
[510] The census data also revealed that those who identify as having no religion increased to 37.2%, although Linda Woodhead from Kings College London makes a valid point that in selecting "no religion" it does not mean they do not have beliefs: *"Some will be atheist, a lot will be agnostic – they just say, "I don't really know" – and some will be spiritual and be doing spiritual things*" (cited in Aleem Maqbool, *"Less than half of England and Wales population Christian, Census 2021 shows", BBC News, 29 November 2022,* https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-63792408 [accessed 5 July 2025].
[511] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2009), p. 6.
[512] Rhiannon McAleer and Rob Barward-Symmons, *The Quiet Revival: Mapping Faith in the UK* (The Bible Society, 2025).

the 1960's. He draws on key pieces of legislation passed in that decade around abortion, sexuality and divorce and the growth of feminism that then proceeded.[513] In his book titled *The Death of Christian Britain* he also incorporates interviews spanning multiple generations of families to reveal how traditional discourses on religiosity and morality have evolved, ultimately narrowing into a restricted notion of religiosity rather than embracing a broader personal religious identity.[514] Interestingly, there were examples of this found within the data, mirroring the tension between the different generations. For example, the social profile of 71% of the leaders who took part were over the age of fifty-five and their focus was on church attendance. Several churches expressed difficulties engaging younger people during the pandemic, one of the reasons was accredited to different "*lifestyle schedules"*.[515] B2 explained that people were now fitting church around their new schedules.[516] Church had become one of many things people were balancing. Further tensions were expressed by the leaders when members did not engage with online provision or return after restrictions lifted.

"I don't want to preach a sermon here but surely, as a Christian, the first thing in your life is Jesus in your heart isn't it. That's what it's all about. It's not living for yourself, but I don't want to preach a sermon".[517]

The forced adoption of digital platforms during the pandemic surfaced broader cultural and sociological tensions within the participating faith communities, accelerating conversations and challenges that may have otherwise emerged more gradually in the absence of such a crisis. Brown explains in his findings each successive generation, upon reaching adulthood, displayed an even greater disaffiliation from any form of church connection.

[513] Clifford Hill refers to the period between 1961 and 1974 as the most critical period of social change in Britain, drawing on a long list of legislation, including those cited by Brown, but also drawing on immigration, race, theatre censorship and the European Communities Act. During this 13-year period, the most far-reaching social changes were debated in Parliament and passed as law (*The Shaping of Britain: Church and State Since the 1960s A Personal Reflection*, Wilberforce Publications Limited, 2018, p. 301-302).
[514] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2009), p. 181-186.
[515] By mid-pandemic P1 explained how he had noticed the biggest change in the behaviour of young adults. They were still connected to them, but their attendance behaviour had changed, watching online and in their own time (P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 6).
[516] B2 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 4.
[517] Ibid., p. 4.

"All of the indicators show that the period between 1956 and 1973 witnessed unprecedented rapidity in the fall of Christian religiosity among the British people... Across the board, the British people started to reject the role of religion in their lives".[518]

This came out in the data: *"...I've very often found with people that if you start talking about spirituality, brilliant, the word faith, not too bad, but say the word God or religion, and people go "oh no I'm not religious, no I don't want anything to do with that".*[519] Davie contends that the various methods used to measure religiousness are becoming increasingly misaligned, highlighting how traditional measures such as church attendance and religious affiliation do not fully capture the complexity of modern spirituality and belief.[520] This mismatch suggests that relying solely on traditional indicators may give an incomplete or misleading picture of religious change. Instead, Davie and other scholars advocate for a broader understanding of religiosity that includes informal and non-institutional expressions of faith. She goes onto explain that although secularisation is advancing, British culture is still influenced by Christianity, with new forms evolving, all be it more secular in nature than religious. Davie agrees with British sociologist of religion and scholar Linda Woodhead, who promotes the importance of the emerging market in the 1980's being pivotal in the development of secularisation. Davie describes this period as a shift from *"obligation to consumption".*[521] She warns *"... a steep change is clearly underway as the notion of obligation recedes and the possibilities of choice develop".*[522] Davie goes onto to liken how we shop around for our material needs, so too do we now for our spiritual needs with religious organisations responding accordingly.[523] This came through in the data when a number of the participants referred to transferring their activities online to a shop window. There was a developing undertone of *"try before you buy"* by leaders, who seemed excited in the early pandemic when describing how they were seeing new online visitors join. It was enabling people who might be nervous to enter a church building, to sit and watch what it was like before visiting, like the sales gimmick of a free trial; if you don't like it, no commitment has been made. P1 described the possible future for the Church as a *"blended mixed economy"* with the online enabling people to look in like

[518] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2009), p. 188.
[519] CE3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 9.
[520] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox,* 2nd edn (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), p. 6.
[521] Ibid., p. 224.
[522] Ibid., p. 151.
[523] Ibid., p. 161.

never before.[524] During the early pandemic interviews, leaders also described themselves picking and choosing what Christian content they engaged with, ranging from live services from Rome to podcasts and YouTube videos. Drawing on the philosophical voice of Charles Taylor parallels can be seen with what he describes as the *Age of Authenticity* where spirituality is de-institutionalised and expressive individualism is promoted: the "*understanding… that each one of us has his/ her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside".*[525] The social imaginary takes shape through authenticity and choice, with Taylor repeatedly highlighting the consumer revolution and post-war affluence. This supports Davie's earlier suggestion, where there is a shift in approach from *"obligation to consumption",* based on a new expressive individualist outlook. James K.A. Smith unpacks Taylor's thoughts on this, identifying the uncoupling of the sacred from political as being the most significant. The expressivist pursues their own religion, and their own personal Jesus.[526]

> *"…it is only a matter of time "before the emphasis will shift more and more towards the strength and the genuineness of the feelings, rather than the nature of the object".*[527]

Examples of this are littered throughout the data; with the increasing challenge that leaders faced with managing members opinions and expectations and some choosing to engage with the digital provision and others choosing to leave in response to how their church handled restrictions. The Church has seen a shift from objective to subjective, from religion to spirituality, and from *"we"* to *"me".* Ward explains how the self has become the primary focus or project, shaping how individuals navigate their lives, interact with institutions, engage with consumer products, and form social relationships.[528] A significant cultural shift has occurred, moving from structuring life around objective duties and roles to prioritizing subjective experiences which can be seen in the data. Leaders described challenges with lifestyle schedules, volunteers increasingly stepping back, and conflicting opinions around the church experience. People wrote to their leaders, voiced their concerns, and showed their dissatisfaction in some extreme cases by even leaving their home church. In response to the

[524] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 16.
[525] Charles Taylor cited in James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular* (Eerdmans, 2014), p. 85.
[526] James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular* (Eerdmans, 2014), p. 87-88.
[527] Charles Taylor cited in James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular* (Eerdmans, 2014), p. 88.
[528] Pete Ward, *Celebrity Worship* (Routledge, 2020), p. 36.

second core theological question (*what theological insights arise when digital becomes the default mode of worship and relational connection?*) the findings suggest that the sudden centrality of digital platforms during the pandemic served to surface tensions and divisions within faith communities more rapidly than might otherwise have occurred. The basis of these tensions were steeped in subjective experience. Alongside cultural shifts over the last few decades, there have also been considerable technological advancements, amplifying these messages, such as print, radio, and television.[529] Add into the equation technological and digital systems and infrastructure advancements, the speed and amount of information and communications available to the individual has increased significantly. Digital media has facilitated the cultural consumption shift, and has fed this evolving self-narrative, where today we are the celebrities of our own life stories displayed through social media platforms.[530]

5.1.3 Emerging Tensions

When digital became the forced default mode, it also accelerated emerging tensions between the practices of church leaders and the behaviours of congregational members in relation to the concept of community. Leaders primarily focused on maintaining connection with the existing community, with an emphasis on keeping people engaged through attendance, tracking numbers, and providing pastoral support. These efforts were largely shaped by a traditional, normative understanding of ecclesial life and UK culture, where continuity and cohesion were prioritised. In contrast, a cohort of church members began to engage in what could be described as a more individualised or consumer-oriented approach to faith, shaped by broader cultural and sociological influences. Their engagement often reflected lifestyle changes, including more flexible routines and digital habits. Many adopted a pick-and-mix approach to online worship and spiritual resources, drawing from a range of sources beyond their local church. Some became increasingly vocal about their preferences and expectations, revealing a more personalised and selective pattern of engagement. This divergence illustrated in Figure 5.1

[529] Brown gives the example of how the narrative shifted in magazines for women in the 60s and 70s, with many of the traditionalist magazines failing. *"By the mid-1960s, domestic ideology was assailed on many fronts, putting the cultural revolution in collision with not just Christian churches but with Christianity as a whole"* (*The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2009), p. 179). Magazines transitioned their focus from traditional female virtues and domestic functions to women being equal in relationships, expressing their sexuality, focusing on careers, and consuming entertainment.

[530] Pete Ward describes how social media platforms like Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram are designed around self-representation and performance (*Celebrity Worship*, Routledge, 2020, p. 59).

highlights a growing dissonance between the attendance driven and pastoral intentions of leadership and the lived realities of members, raising important questions about how Christian community is both understood and enacted in a post-pandemic context.

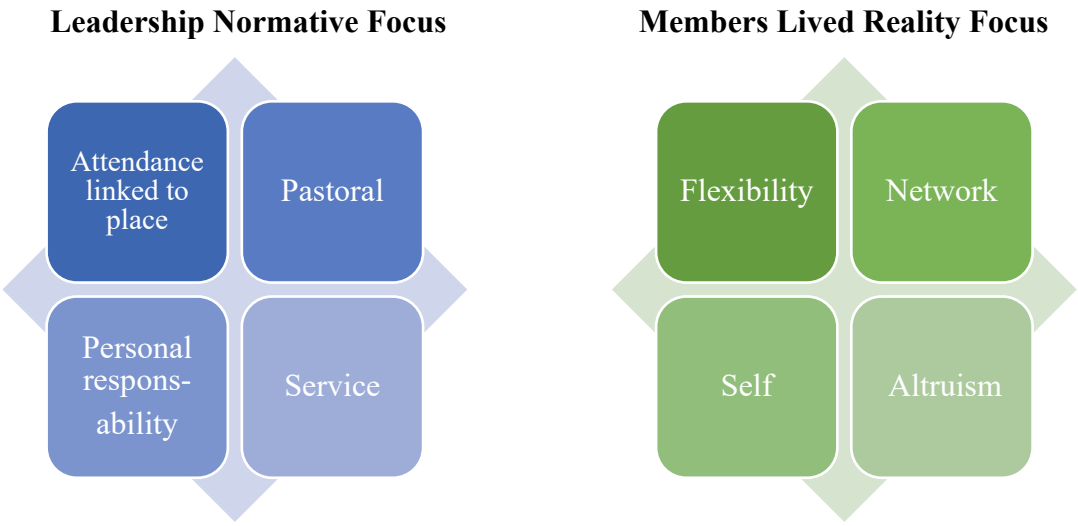

Figure 5.1 Growing Dissonance between Leadership and Members' Notions of Community

The practices and behaviours of most of the participating leaders reflected a focus on attendance. They tried to continue connection through online activities and pastoral support, whilst encouraging personal responsibility to engage and to ultimately contribute to the faith community through service.[531] In contrast, members appreciated greater flexibility through a network of connections, in supporting their subjective contexts, with a focus on the welfare of others (not just isolated to the faith community, but encompassing a multitude of spheres in their networks, such as family, friends, social groups and digital communities etc.).

Campbell identified this mismatch in *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church* published mid-pandemic. She argues that the pandemic brought about an opportunity for leaders to re-evaluate whether their current model of ministry focusing on weekly events and attendance figures was meeting the desires of their faith community.[532] She suggests this model is based on an understanding of community grounded in institutional and hierarchical structures, rather than relational connections, linking it to Christian notions of community termed *ekklesia*. In the

[531] There were a couple of leaders that deviated from these focuses, and placed a greater focus on other areas, such as social action, but they were in the minority.
[532] Heidi A. Campbell, "Understandings of the Church as Revealed in Quarantine: Reimaging the People of God", in Heidi A. Campbell and John Dryer, *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church* (SCM Press, 2022) p. 60.

New Testament Paul frequently uses the term *ekklesia* to refer to the *"ekklesia of Christ"* (1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4; Colossians 1. 18), while the apostle John similarly employs it in Revelation when addressing specific congregations, such as the *"ekklesia of Ephesus"* (Revelation 2. 1).[533] In both cases, ekklesia signifies the Church as a gathered community that met in physical presence, within specific locations and with clearly defined boundaries. Campbell explains these notions and concepts can be limiting: *"This is because they support a structural view of religious community that no longer accurately reflects the way that many people in contemporary Western society actually live out their social lives and relationships".*[534] This has been identified in the preceding chapters drawing on wider cultural and sociological insights. Campbell reinforces this through articulating that for over five decades, sociologists of community have observed a transformation in how communities are formed, shaped largely by globalisation, evolving social structures, and the rise of information and communication technologies (Wellman & Rainie, 2012).[535] Traditional conceptions of community rooted in hierarchical and institutional affiliations have been increasingly disrupted by the emergence and rise of digital technology. Campbell explains social connections and interactions are no longer bound by static frameworks, but instead shaped by individual needs, preferences and fluid affiliations. As a result, community is now widely understood as dynamic and adaptable, rather than fixed and externally imposed. She notes that over the past two decades, churches have largely failed to fully recognise or engage with this cultural shift, yet they are nonetheless being shaped by the emerging model of community as a fluid, social network.[536] The internet, many argue, has flourished precisely because it aligns with and reinforces a cultural shift toward flexible, self-directed forms of social engagement.[537] She goes on to suggest that the Greek term *koinonia* might be more reflective of this transition, drawing

[533] Heidi A. Campbell, "Understandings of the Church as Revealed in Quarantine: Reimaging the People of God", in Heidi A. Campbell & John Dryer, *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church* (SCM Press, 2022) p. 64.
[534] Ibid., p. 61.
[535] Cited in Heidi A. Campbell, "Understandings of the Church as Revealed in Quarantine: Reimaging the People of God", in Heidi A. Campbell & John Dryer, *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church* (SCM Press, 2022) p. 61.
[536] Heidi A Campbell (2004) cited in Heidi A. Campbell, "Understandings of the Church as Revealed in Quarantine: Reimaging the People of God", in Heidi A. Campbell & John Dryer, *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church* (SCM Press, 2022) p. 61.
[537] Heidi A. Campbell, "Understandings of the Church as Revealed in Quarantine: Reimaging the People of God", in Heidi A. Campbell & John Dryer, *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church* (SCM Press, 2022) p. 62.

on relational references to the word found in the New Testament around fellowship, joining together, and unity.[538]

"Koinonia, as a community, is focused on the idea of unity through communion, sharing not just in fellowship with believers, but in their life journey. This means that only Christ is the enabler of community; it is only through communion in him that we can move into true fellowship and relationship."[539]

Campbell goes onto explain that the term *koinonia* consistently carries a relational emphasis throughout the biblical narrative.[540] In the Greek Old Testament (NIV, 1984), it appears primarily in later texts such as Ecclesiastes 9. 4 and Proverbs 21. 9, where it is tied to the Hebrew root habar, meaning to "join together" or "unite", underscoring its association with connection and togetherness. Within the New Testament, koinonia is closely linked to the life of the early Christian community, signifying fellowship, shared participation, and unity among believers. It is noteworthy that Acts 2. 42 (NIV, 1983) identifies koinonia as one of the four foundational practices of early Christian worship, emphasising its role in shaping a community that was defined by deep relational bonds and mutual commitment. She summarises by explaining that ekklesia is focused on a structure driven notion of church, whereby koinonia is built on community derived through a gathered church in Christ. This offers reassurance that, even in a digitally driven world, Christ remains present, affirming that authentic community can be planted, nurtured, and developed both in physical and virtual spaces. The key variables lie not in the medium itself, but in the intentions and approaches of those cultivating these communities, whether they align with traditional, institutional models or embrace more fluid, networked understandings of community. These normative theological terms are helpful in exploring the mismatch between leaders' and members' differeing expectations that surfaced during the forced adoption of digital platforms. While leaders often prioritised maintaining the gathered, location-based nature of church (ekklesia), many members valued the accessibility and flexibility of online participation, highlighting differing assumptions about what it means to "gather." Similarly, koinonia sheds light on tensions around relational connection, as leaders

[538] Heidi A. Campbell, "Understandings of the Church as Revealed in Quarantine: Reimaging the People of God", in Heidi A. Campbell & John Dryer, *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church* (SCM Press, 2022) p. 65.
[539] Ibid., p. 66.
[540] Ibid., p. 65.

expressed concerns about the depth of fellowship in digital spaces, while some members found new forms of connection and participation online. These terms provide a theological lens through which to examine the challenges and opportunities that emerged when digital became the default mode of church life. They can help support post-pandemic strategies on how the Church understands gathering, presence, and community in a digitally integrated world.

5.2 Exploring the Dynamics of Rituals

This section explores the theological tensions surrounding embodiment in rituals, particularly as they relate to ongoing debates over virtual communion and digitally mediated liturgy. The pandemic forced many faith communities to reconsider what it means to gather and participate in sacramental practices when physically apart, surfacing deeper questions around presence, participation, and the communal nature of worship. As churches navigated new modes of worship, theological interpretations emerged, prompting reflection on how the nature of digital embodiment during a crisis challenges established assumptions about presence, rituals, and community. This section will look at how these interpretations inform broader ecclesiological and sacramental debates in a post-pandemic Church, while seeking to answer the third core theological question developed in chapter three.

5.2.1 The Eucharist - Normative Influences

The moment when theology and tradition most clearly came into dialogue was around rituals, particularly the celebration of the Eucharist. This became a central point of discussion as the UK entered its first lockdown just before Easter, making it a highly prominent and timely debate within Christian circles. At the beginning of April 2020 Peter Phillips posted a blog article titled *"Bread and Wine Online? Resources and Liturgies for Online Communion".*[541] He explained that the Church of England, the UK Methodist Church and Catholic Church had not allowed clergy to offer communion online, stipulating that the different denominational stances were anchored in theology, ecclesiology and sociology. John Dyer's summary, shared online in late March 2020, is echoed in the data: whether the Eucharistic elements required consecration by ordained clergy largely depended on each community's theological

[541] Peter Phillips, "Bread and Wine Online? Resources and Liturgies for Online Communion", Medium, 4 April 2020, https://medium.com/@pmphillips/bread-and-wine-online-resources-and-liturgies-for-online-communion-34b80972a068 [accessed 5 July 2025].

convictions. This resulted in six faith communities participating in online communion, and five not, with two providing an alternative. However, there were a couple of examples where congregation members went against their denominational national guidance: *"... with the communion we've sort of broken the rules".*[542] Participating in communion remained a central expression of faith for many, to the extent that some communities chose to adapt the practice for online settings, even if it meant diverging from institutional norms. In these cases, the ritual itself took precedence over longstanding beliefs and traditions. Jonny Baker criticised the Church of England's guidance where priests could only take communion and likened it to the curtain in the temple being stitched back together. He saw it as an issue of control rather than theology and encouraged people in the Church of England to perform communion online: *"I hope there are homes and indeed vicars up and down the country who ignore the church's guidelines on this".*[543] However, the data did not reveal issues of control through the ritual of communion, in fact several leaders went without in support of their faith communities. Some denominations who did not condone virtual communion offered alternatives, such as the methodist community who offered a Love Feast and the Catholic community who offered a *Spiritual Communion.* Despite feeling like inadequate substitutes to some people, Edward Foley suggests these alternative practices are steeped in theology and history and can still offer a rich and valuable pathway for believers.[544]

"Unfortunately, this under catechized and little theologized practice yet suffers under the veil of a kind of sour grapes spirituality, i.e., it is the best we can do, although it leaves a bad taste in our mouths."[545]

In his article, Foley offers a thorough historical and theological account of receiving the sacraments spiritually, pre-dating it back to Augustine.[546] Teresa Berger explains in *@ Worship* that the debate of virtual communion has been around long before the pandemic, for example, the United Methodist Church's Council of Bishop issued an official moratorium on *"online*

[542] CE1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 3.
[543] Jonny Baker, "Share communion in your own home and resist the power of religious control", 10 April 2020, https://jonnybaker.blogs.com/jonnybaker/2020/04/share-communion-in-your-own-home-and-resist-the-power-of-religious-control.html [accessed 5 July 2025].
[544] Edward Foley, "Spiritual Communion in a Digital Age: A Roman Catholic Dilemma and Tradition", in *Religions 12*, Vol. 245, (2021), p. 5.
[545] Ibid., p. 10.
[546] Ibid., p. 5.

communion" as some United Methodist clergy had been practicing it.[547] British Methodists also found themselves in a similar position and produced a report titled *"Holy Communion Mediated through Social Media"* which concluded *"It is not possible theologically to recognize "remote communion"... as being truly the sacrament of the Lord's Supper".*[548] Berger goes onto examine the complexities of virtual communion within digitally mediated worship. She acknowledges that while digital technologies have expanded the ways communities engage in liturgical practices, they also challenge traditional notions of sacramental presence and embodiment. Berger argues that digital worship is not disembodied; rather, it involves specific bodily engagements, such as gestures and sensory experiences, even when mediated through screens. However, she raises critical questions about the nature of sacramental mediation online, particularly concerning the Eucharist. While digital platforms can facilitate spiritual communion and a sense of shared worship, Berger contends that they cannot fully replicate the embodied, communal aspects of traditional sacramental practices. Rather she calls for a nuanced theological reflection that considers both the possibilities and limitations of digital mediation in liturgical contexts.

Even after the height of the pandemic, theological views on virtual communion remain divided. C. Andrew Doyle describes the dilemma: *"It is a deep question about who God is and who we are. The conversation of virtual Eucharist has called into question the accepted notions about the sacramental life".*[549] He contends that the Eucharist ought to be celebrated within the gathered, embodied community, suggesting that practicing it virtually risks disconnecting the Church from its collective identity and further reinforces the individualism that already challenges contemporary church life.[550] He is not alone in his stance, as some traditions continue to hold that the Eucharist must be administered in person by ordained clergy within a gathered physical community, emphasising the sacramental and incarnational nature of the ritual. Others argue that the pandemic revealed the potential for God's presence and grace to transcend physical boundaries, allowing for meaningful participation in communion online. However, it appears that much of the scholarship in this field is deeply rooted in the authors'

[547] Teresa Berger, *@ Worship* (Routledge, 2018), p. 77.
[548] "Holy Communion Mediated through Social Media", *The UK Methodist Church,* n.d., p. 1, https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/conf-2015-37-Communion-Mediated-through-Social-Media_ItOWpRq.pdf [accessed 5 July 2025].
[549] C. Andrew Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy* (Church Publishing, 2021), p. xxiii-xxiv
[550] Ibid., p. 113.

own ecclesial traditions and theological frameworks. These perspectives, while offering valuable insights, often reflect normative theological assumptions specific to denominational contexts. It is perhaps unsurprising that my own personal theological reflection on the subject, is also shaped by the tradition I inhabit. Coming from a Pentecostal background, where a memorialist view of communion is prevalent and an emphasis is placed on the presence of the Holy Spirit rather than the physical elements themselves, I am inclined to view online communion as a valid and meaningful expression of faith. This tradition tends to affirm the accessibility and immediacy of spiritual experiences, even when mediated through digital means. Therefore, my stance aligns with a more adaptive approach to sacramental practice, where the medium does not diminish the sacredness of the act. However, I appreciate the ongoing divergence of opinions reflects deeper ecclesiological questions about the nature of community, presence, and sacrament in a digitally mediated world. It is also valuable to consider these discussions against broader cultural and sociological trends. For instance, had the pandemic occurred 50 years ago, it is unlikely that there would have been such a range of responses and deviations from denominational guidance. This may be representative of the cultural shift Grace Davie's earlier described as *"obligation to consumption"*.[551] Several participants chose to act independently of their national church bodies, challenging traditional institutional authority; the desire to partake in the Eucharist was stronger than their denominational normative traditions. As discussed in the previous section, Davie cautions that *"a steep change is clearly underway as the notion of obligation recedes and the possibilities of choice develop".*[552] This raises the question of whether this broader cultural shift is now extending into our sacramental practices, reshaping how rituals such as communion are understood and enacted in a digital age. Doyle believes so as he dedicates a chapter in his book *Embodied Liturgy* to this theme, titled *"Virtual Liturgy and the Individualist Society".*[553]

"While the pandemic has meant that we might in our mind accompany each other liturgically through virtual reality, it is not the same as physical intention or attendance to each other. In virtual reality we are less attentive to one another."[554]

[551] Grace Davies, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox,* 2nd edn (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), p. 224.
[552] Ibid., p. 151.
[553] C. Andrew Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy* (Church Publishing, 2021), p. 80-87.
[554] Ibid., p. 81.

Doyle draws upon Augustine's doctrine of baptism to illustrate the inherently communal and embodied nature of sacramental practices within the Church, providing a valuable lens through which to examine how digital embodiment challenges traditional assumptions about presence and participation during a crisis.[555] He identifies two interwoven dynamics: the Church, as the embodied presence of Christ in the world, is the agent that administers baptism, while simultaneously being the body into which the individual is baptised. This dual reality for Doyle underscores that baptism is never a solitary act, it requires the gathered presence of the Church to perform and witness the sacrament. Extending this argument to the Eucharist, he contends that participation in the sacrament similarly necessitates physical presence within a faithful community. The Eucharist, he argues, is an embodied, participatory act that requires believers to share, receive and partake together within the gathered body. During the pandemic, when many churches shifted to online communion practices, these theological convictions were brought into sharp focus, challenging communities to reconsider what it means to be physically present in sacramental participation. Doyle's perspective highlights the tension between digital modes of gathering and the embodied nature of sacramental life, questioning whether digitally mediated rituals can truly fulfil the ecclesial and communal dimensions that sacraments embody. The data indicates that responses to this question were often shaped by the denominational orientation of each faith community. This directly addresses the third core theological question of this project, revealing how the crisis-driven adoption of digital platforms compelled churches to confront the limitations of digital embodiment and to reconsider their assumptions about presence, participation, and community in worship. Most participating churches navigated these challenges by remaining aligned with their established denominational theological frameworks, adhering to normative practices around sacraments and gathering even in digital contexts. However, a minority demonstrated a willingness to deviate from these norms, prioritising practice over denominational theological theory during the crisis. This divergence highlights the tension between theological convictions and the pragmatic realities of ministry under pandemic conditions, illustrating how digital embodiment tested, and in some cases temporarily reshaped, established ecclesial practices.

[555] C. Andrew Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy* (Church Publishing, 2021), p. 84-85.

5.2.2 Embodied Experiences

The way in which leaders referred to their members most commonly as *people* gave a foundation for what was to come. Members were seen in the context of their physical actions and feelings. They tried to replicate expressions of community online, such as compilation music videos and using breakout rooms after the service for fellowship, but members fed back that it lacked relational depth and did not provide the same *experience* or using Charles Taylor's terminology, *"it did not speak to them".*[556] When specific practices were explored further, participants focused on the lack of human physical interaction, such as hugging, sitting next to one another and engaging in face-to-face conversation. It was these physical relational elements that were missed the most and referred to when comparing onsite with the use of digital platforms, thus implying a physical embodied nature to the process of developing and practicing one's faith. Or perhaps it was simply what people were *comfortable* with, seeking out their *normal* practices, based on historical Christian practices. M2 felt that people's perceptions of when and how they worshipped God, was based on their Christian tradition and how they were raised.[557] W. David O. Taylor rather argues that our bodies play an essential role in the outworking of our *experiences.*

"…Our physical bodies powerfully shape our experience of the world around us. Our bodies are not a bonus, and they are never neutral. They are a gift."[558]

He describes the COVID-19 lockdowns as life-shrinking as we passively sat at home resting our bodies, arguing the experience affected our ability to be wholly and truly human.[559] Do our bodies truly play such a vital role in shaping our experiences? In the context of church life, particularly in relation to community, rituals, and leadership, the data suggests they do. This is echoed in Eileen Cambell-Reed's *Pandemic Pastoring Report,* where she was involved in a study with over a hundred survey responses and eighty interviews of pastors and lay leaders across more than twenty different denominations in America.[560] Her analysis concluded that

[556] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007) cited in James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular* (Eerdmans, 2014), p. 88.
[557] M2 Phase Two Interview, p. 7.
[558] W. David O. Taylor, *A Body of Praise* (Grand Rapids, 2023), p. 26.
[559] Ibid., p. 3.
[560] Eileen Campbell-Reed, Pandemic Pastoring Report (2022), https://eileencampbellreed.org/pandemicpastoring-report-download-2022/ [accessed on 3 December 2025], p. 3.

"by body" is how we take our cues for what we do in our immediate situation; *"It simply becomes our mode of being in the world".*[561] Further analysis indicates that the participating faith communities were not inherently bound to the church building itself. Upon returning to onsite gatherings after lockdowns, many expressed dissatisfactions, not with the shift back to physical space, but with the limitations placed on their physical engagement. Campbell-Reed argues that the pandemic disrupted our embodied, relational, and situated ways of knowing in profound and far-reaching ways.[562] This highlight's how embodied experience, rather than the building alone, is influential to how faith is practiced and lived out.

"Well, I'm not coming again until its back to normal. I can't hug anybody, I can't sing. I've got to hide behind a mask".[563]

It was not about returning to the church building; it was about firstly returning to their physical practices and secondly, doing so as a gathered community. Joshua Cockayne and Gideon Salter advocate a core component of liturgical practices in faith communities is the shared attention which creates experiences of jointness.[564] Their central argument is that a core aspect of liturgical practices lies in their capacity to enable participants to engage in shared attention with one another, thereby fostering deep and diverse experiences of communal connection and mutual presence. This can be seen in the participants descriptions of their experiences, which were laced with relational content, hugging people, talking to people, interacting with people, praying for people, singing together and worshipping together.

"Nothing is as good as meeting together… I have very much missed being able to sit next to people and to be able to talk together… encountering God freely as a group of believers has a different dynamic I have missed."[565]

[561] Eileen Campbell-Reed, Pandemic Pastoring Report (2022), https://eileencampbellreed.org/pandemicpastoring-report-download-2022/ [accessed on 3 December 2025], p. 22.
[562] Ibid., p. 22.
[563] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 7.
[564] Joshua Cockayne and Gideon Salter, *Why we Gather: Psychology, Theology, And Liturgical Practice* (Baylor University Press, 2025), p. 16.
[565] P2 Phase One Questionnaire, p. 2.

Having the physical aspects stripped away from practices and rituals of gathered church showed the stark contrast of what dis-embodied church could be like. Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn argue that for worship to be genuinely formative for both individuals and the church, it must remain grounded in embodied experience.[566] They emphasise the importance of avoiding practices that disembody either the participants or the church. According to their perspective, there are three primary ways this kind of dis-embodiment can occur. Firstly, worship can disembody individuals when it encourages congregants to turn inward, focusing primarily on their own personal experiences, as if spirituality resides solely within the self. Secondly, worship practices can either facilitate or hinder the church as a body; if worship leads individuals to become increasingly autonomous and isolated, it risks reducing the church to a loose collection of independently spiritual individuals rather than fostering a cohesive, embodied community. Thirdly, worship can disembody both individuals and the church when it becomes disconnected from the ongoing daily life of the faith community, treated as a standalone, more 'spiritual' event rather than being integrated into the community's continual practices of shared spiritual formation. They go on to explain *"what we do with our bodies has a profound influence on what we think".*[567] In the case of the examples above, people did not want to return, for it lacked warmth, spontaneity, connection and unity which were all woven through physiological processes.

In looking at experiences, it is imperative to assess them in their specific context. The experiences participants focused on were worship, aspects of gathered church and the presence of God. This section will now focus on the ritualistic practice of communal worship (singing) as an example, to try and understand what shaped people's experiences. When faith communities were allowed to return to onsite church, but restrictions were still in place, the worship leader at P1 explained *"To not sing is really hard. Many people won't come to gathered church because they can't sing. It has high value for them".*[568] Singing was central to their desired worship experience and without it gathered church lacked fulfilment for these people. Returning to W. David O. Taylor's assertion that our physical bodies profoundly shape our experiences of the world, the inability to sing during gathered worship disrupted

[566] Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 148-150.
[567] Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn*, The Physical Nature of Christian Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 152.
[568] P1 Phase One Mid-Week Meeting 4 May 2021, p. 2.

participants' embodied expectations of church. This dissonance with prior experiences led to a sense of dissatisfaction and discomfort. Taylor turns to science in conjunction with Scripture to explain why people were dissatisfied with digitally mediated singing.[569] He draws on the phenomena of entrainment, which is *"the synchronization of one rhythmic process with another"*[570]. This can take place when congregations come together and sing; when everyone in the room starts clapping to the beat of the song, or when a group of people move in sync to a hymn, or when we are encouraged to participate in the actions of a children's worship song and look around the room to find everyone doing them. Ethnomusicologist Nathan Myrick breaks down what is happening in this experience *"...independent rhythmic processes create shared experiences of sensory data. Our brains and bodies become coupled to others. We do not have the same thoughts and feelings, but have our thoughts and feelings together, at the same time, with those around us".*[571]

The second phenomenon Taylor draws on is interactional synchrony, which describes a form of social synchronisation where two or more people mirror their actions, expressions, or vocal patterns.[572] He draws on the example of a mother and her young baby; the mother smiles and the baby responds with a smile. From a neuroscience perspective, cognitive scientist William Benzon explains *"When two people are making music together, and really listening to what each is doing, they are sharing in the same pattern of neural activity".*[573] In this example, neuroscience helps us understand how our bodies influence of our experiences and outworking of our faith.

"Science simply helps us to understand what happens to our bodies at the neural, chemical, and biological level in a way that complements, rather than competes with, the witness of Scripture about the goodness of singing together in a common corporeal place."[574]

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[569] W. David O. Taylor, *A Body of Praise* (Grand Rapids, 2023), p. 87-89.
[570] Jeremy, S. Begbie, *Music, Modernity and God: Essays in Listening* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 97, cited in W. David O. Taylor, *A Body of Praise* (Grand Rapids, 2023), p. 88.
[571] Nathan Myrick, "Embodying the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Entrainment", *Liturgy 33. No. 3* (2018), p. 32 cited in W. David O. Taylor, *A Body of Praise* (Grand Rapids, 2023), p. 88.
[572] Taylor refers to the work of Stefanie Hoehl, Merle Fairhurst and Annett Schirmer, "Interactional Synchrony: Signals, Mechanisms and Benefits", *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience 16* (January – February 2021), p. 5-18.
[573] Taylor cites William Benzon, *Beethoven's Anvil: Music in Mind and Culture* (Basic Books, 2001), p. 43.
[574] W. David O. Taylor, *A Body of Praise* (Grand Rapids, 2023), p. 89.

However, although these phenomena can explain what happens within a gathered worship experience physiologically and mentally, they can also be used to explain other gathered experiences such as a secular music concert or singing chants at a football stadium with 50,000 other fans. These scientific explanations are not isolated to the context of corporate faith-based singing. However, Stephen Ko, both a pastor and physician and previous public health officer for the CDC, offers both a physiological and theological account. Alongside the physical benefits of singing, such as decreasing anxiety, increasing self-esteem, and drawing on memories, theologically he explains when we sing corporately the chorus of voices invigorates our minds and stirs our heart.[575] Through listening and singing uplifting worship songs, we are reminding ourselves of the goodness of God and his promises for our lives: *"These songs serve as a source of strength and provide meaning in the face of suffering".*[576] Perhaps this is what the lady from CT1 meant when she described not singing influenced the "*high"* the congregation experienced when coming out of church.[577] Gregg R. Allison who promotes a theology of embodiment, also advocates a narrative of worshipping in amidst the tears and suffering of our everyday lives. *"We worship in hope that God will fulfil his promises and fully redeem us, his people".*[578] There is an air of expectancy, through a physical declaration of our love to God in unity with other believers. That in turn generates emotions and feelings, connecting with the Holy Spirit. There are physical, mental and spiritual aspects to the ritual, but they do not work in isolation or separation, rather in synchronisation and interrelation. This was experienced personally during the participant observation visiting P2 during the middle of the pandemic when restrictions were still in place. Even though we were not allowed to sing corporately, there was still a worship time with songs played on screen. As we listened and worshipped internally, some people sat, and some people stood and raised their hands.

"In one song I really felt God's presence and I wanted to sing out my praise at the top of my voice but felt almost gagged… I felt my praise to God hit a ceiling I couldn't move past".[579]

[575] Stephen Ko, *Faith Embodied* (Zondervan, 2024), p. 117-119.
[576] Stephen Ko, *Faith Embodied* (Zondervan, 2024), p. 119.
[577] CT1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 10. Perhaps *high* could be replaced with feeling positive, less anxious, and more at peace having encountered God.
[578] Gregg R. Allison, *Embodied* (Baker Books, 2021), p. 172-173.
[579] P1 Phase One Observation Notes 13 June 2021, p. 3.

In my observation notes I described how the experience left me feeling disconnected to those in the room, I felt there was something missing from not being able to sing with our voices in unison. I particularly struggled with this experience; it radiated through me on various levels, physically, mentally and spiritually. Physically I felt stunted in my verbal communication of praise to God, mentally I struggled to process the emotions I was feeling whilst spiritually experiencing the presence of God to a greater intensity was just out of my reach. However, during the onsite visits I witnessed members use different parts of the body in movement to worship God as an alternative to singing. One experience stood out when visiting M3, where a lady chose to dance to the worship songs being played.[580] Through visually watching her body respond to the music that I could hear; it moved my whole being. I visually witnessed her communing with God through her physical movement in synchronisation with the music, which resulted in the Holy Spirit moving in me. These experiences show a very real and raw physical nature to the rituals such as communal singing. Without it, the effects could be felt on many levels, and some chose not to return to church as a result. However, even when the ritual was performed through a digitally mediated format, there was still a different dynamic to it. At a practical level, digital limitations affected the ritualistic experience. For example, during the early pandemic many churches used Zoom for their main service. During the few times I observed them trying to collectively sing together it was unsuccessful because the platform could not process the multitude of voices; it had not been designed for collective worship.[581] The general practice was that microphones were muted as the music started. Even though we were visually singing to the same song at the same time, the design of the digitally mediated platform distorted the sound element, from voices being heard and processed in unison, to just hearing my own voice and the recorded voices of the song being played. This changed the experience and revealed the important role our senses play in our ritualistic experiences. Ko advocates that we perceive the world around us through our gift of the senses: *"Each one beckons us to glorify God in refreshing ways".*[582] He goes onto to explain that our sensorium also play a vital role in our emotional and spiritual wellbeing, ultimately transforming our

[580] M3 Phase One Observation Notes 27 June 2021, p. 1.
[581] Tim Hutchins discusses this in *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media*, where he explains every platform will come with its own unique features, guidelines, and constraints. For example, if a church sets up a Facebook page, they must accept the platforms rules and regulations and operate within its affordances and limitations (Routledge, 2017, p. 213).
[582] Stephen Ko, *Faith Embodied* (Zondervan, 2024), p. 123.

hearts.[583] In analysing the ritual of communal singing in the context of restrictions and through digitally mediated platforms, Ko's theological sensorium narrative holds significant weight. In each experience illustrated above there was a different dynamic of senses at play, which in turn impacted on how they were experienced physically, processed mentally, and discerned spiritually.

Considering these revelations, one might argue that virtual liturgies and online spaces lack connection and embodiment, but the data does not suggest this. Rather there was evidence to suggest the opposite: the vulnerable blogging leader, weekly quizzes held on Zoom, reading bedtime stories for children online, Facebook daily devotional readings, an interactive live children's puppet show and leaders praying and prophesying for one another from across different continents. These are just some examples from the data that revealed the outworking of connection and embodiment in a digitally mediated space, just *experienced differently,* like Berger describes *"... digitally mediated worship entails its own specific bodily properties"*.[584] Therefore, the emphasis should shift from questioning whether digital platforms can enable connection and embodiment, to exploring how they are used to do so effectively.

> *"Not only has the world changed but our ability to navigate through it is not immediately clear. We are in a new era of ministry, and we need to move our bodies and arrange our relationships and gather our communities in different and more complex ways."*[585]

The account of Pentecost in Acts 2 offers a striking image of diverse languages converging in unified praise, as people from different nations heard the wonders of God declared in their own tongues, yet were drawn together by the Spirit into a shared act of worship. This moment demonstrates that diversity of expression need not undermine unity but can, in fact, enrich the communal act of worship when oriented towards God. This is demonstrated in some of the examples above, and similarly, during lockdowns when faith communities found themselves dispersed and required to worship creatively in different bodily languages across kitchens,

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[583] Stephen Ko, *Faith Embodied* (Zondervan, 2024), p. 21-22. Ko dedicates a whole section of his book to looking at each of the senses, in understanding God's design for them and their role in helping us to worship and glorify Him.
[584] Teresa Berger*, @ Worship* (Routledge, 2018), p. 20.
[585] Eileen Campbell-Reed, Pandemic Pastoring Report (2022), https://eileencampbellreed.org/pandemicpastoring-report-download-2022/ [accessed on 3 December 2025], p. 22.

living rooms and digital platforms. Though separated physically and expressing worship in varied forms, whether through online communion, prayer over Zoom, or socially distanced gatherings, these practices reflected an effort to maintain unity in worship despite diverse modes of bodily participation. The challenge, however, was holding this Pentecost-like diversity in creative tension with a theological understanding of embodied communal worship, prompting churches to discern what it means to worship together when bodily expressions are necessarily varied and physically scattered.

5.3 Exploring Leadership Approaches

This section explores the leadership qualities that emerged through the pandemic, which were facilitated using digital mediums, such as vulnerability, transparency and humility. In the face of uncertainty and personal challenges, many leaders adopted more collaborative and relational approaches. However, as restrictions lifted and churches returned to onsite gatherings, many reverted to their pre-pandemic leadership formulas, raising questions about the sustainability of these more open and transparent practices within institutional church structures.

5.3.1 Emerging Leadership Qualities Revealed through Digital Mediums

Considering the previously discussed cultural and social shifts, several notable leadership qualities emerged using digital platforms. When leaders were more vulnerable and transparent in their social media use, there was greater engagement as opposed to the church's corporate Facebook page. When describing a reflexive experience or how they were struggling with lockdowns, it revealed a raw, authentic personable side to them. This generated increased interactions and comments, not because of the digital medium used, but rather due to the way the posts appealed to the wider audience. These personal blogs were more popular than promoting weekly church services on a Facebook page. The blogs focused on the self and the corporate Facebook page focused on the collective. Creating a sense of intimacy and informality is increasingly being used as a strategy by even political leaders in the new cultural landscape to gain increasing support.[586] However, even with increased engagement, the leaders lapsed these digital activities once restrictions had been lifted. Employing digital strategies required time, and once the churches began to return onsite, leaders showed through their digital practices that maintaining their increased digital profiles was not their priority: "*I don't*

[586] The 2015 British general election saw several publicity campaigns by male politicians in the kitchen to help them seem more personable (Pete Ward*, Celebrity Worship,* Routledge, 2020, p. 58).

do much of that at all now, that's a time issue".[587] There was an opportunity for continued connection, yet the focus returned to getting people back through the church physical doors, once again portraying a misalignment between leaders concepts of church community and cultural contexts.

Another notable leadership quality that surfaced during the pandemic was humility, marked by an explicit recognition of the limits of one's knowledge and control in the face of uncertainty.

"...as a member of a congregation, I'd think "what are we going to do now? what's going to happen now?" ...So, you feel a bit of weight of responsibility, with regard to, almost a bit of pressure to have an answer... I said to the church at the beginning of the year I haven't got the answers".[588]

This posture of vulnerability fostered a more relational and responsive model of leadership. It reflected an adaptive capacity allowing leaders to navigate complex and evolving circumstances with authenticity, openness, and a collaborative spirit. This quality of humility was evident in the identity struggles many leaders experienced, as they grappled with disrupted routines, shifting expectations and the limitations of traditional leadership models. In response, some began to engage in collaborative efforts with other local churches and civic partners, particularly around social action projects. This move towards interdependence signified a departure from isolated leadership towards a more integrated and community-oriented approach, where shared mission and mutual support became central to navigating crisis and reimagining ecclesial identity.

"I have been able to be out and about in the community more and got to know more local people so now feel I have a relationship with my parish rather than my congregation. All I need to do is link the two."[589]

Some leaders were also navigating significant personal challenges during the pandemic, including the need to shield due to health vulnerabilities, caring for elderly relatives, or

[587] M1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 13.
[588] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 18.
[589] CE1b Phase One Interview Schedule, p. 3.

supporting their children through online education while continuing to work. P3 explained how she got to the point of feeling drained *"emotionally, mentally and physically"* juggling paid employment as a key worker, supporting her children and leading the local church.[590] M2 expressed similar feelings with balancing her church leadership roles, secular employment as a teacher and supporting her teenage children through homeschooling in the face of their exams: *"I do feel as though I have been giving out with a limited amount coming in!".*[591] These shared experiences of disruption and vulnerability humanised leaders in the eyes of their congregations, breaking down hierarchical distance and making them appear more relatable and accessible. In doing so, the pandemic momentarily levelled distinctions, reinforcing a sense of shared humanity and collective struggle within faith communities. Some of these struggles leaders shared through their new digital ministries. M1 used his daily blogs via the circuit church Facebook page to share how he struggled when he could not go and visit a colleague when in need.

"...after talking to a colleague whose husband is ill about the sheer helplessness of the situation, I could not go round to the house and offer support, it had to be done on the phone. In the past I have been with families at the most desperate and their most elated, during times of great celebration and of great tragedy, this pandemic has in effect stopped some elements of my ministry and that has caused me great stress. I feel I am unable to do what is part of what God has called me to do."[592]

Christian Fuchs presents a compelling argument that in contemporary modern society, distinct social roles increasingly converge within shared social spaces.[593] The once-clear boundaries between public and private life, as well as between the workplace and the home, have become increasingly porous and fluid.

"A new form of liquid and porous sociality has emerged, in which we partly act in different social roles in the same social space.".[594]

[590] P3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[591] M2 Phase One Interview Questionnaire, p. 4.
[592] M1 Blog taken from the circuit's Facebook page on 17 July 2021.
[593] Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (Sage Publications, 2021), p. 41-42.
[594] Ibid., p. 42.

In the case of M1 above, the merging of multiple social roles within a single digital space offers a practical example of the blurring boundaries that Christian Fuchs describes. By using his personal Facebook account to share daily blogs on the circuit church page, M1 was not only disseminating spiritual reflections but also weaving in elements of his personal life, stories about his family, references to friends, interactions with church members, and observations about the local community. This convergence of roles (husband, father, church leader, friend, and civic participant) presented a holistic and authentic portrayal of his identity. Rather than compartmentalising his personal and professional personas, M1 began to embrace the fluidity of social media platforms to create a more integrated and accessible presence. This relatability likely contributed to increased engagement, as followers may have felt a deeper connection to him as a person, not just a leader. It illustrates how digital spaces can foster more open and transparent relationships between leaders and their communities.

Even though qualities such as vulnerability, humility, and relational transparency began to surface during the pandemic, temporarily breaking down traditional leadership barriers, most leaders ultimately reverted to their pre-pandemic leadership practices which were predominantly offline. When asked during both phases of the interviews whether any changes to leadership structures or roles had been implemented, the majority responded negatively. While some temporary additions emerged during the crisis, these shifts did not translate into lasting change in the post-pandemic context. For example, the data also saw examples of churches informally elevating members with particular skills, experience and qualifications. These included areas in digital technology, video production and health and safety. Campbell focuses on those she terms Religious Digital Creatives (RDC) where she suggests the pandemic raised the prominence and profile of these individuals. *"This introduced a potential challenge to established leadership dynamics, as pastors no longer the holders of all vital knowledge required for church programming".*[595] However, there was no formal promotion onto the leadership teams, these generally remained static throughout early, mid and post-pandemic. The experience these individuals had was recognised and drawn upon during the pandemic, however, as churches transitioned back to mainly onsite provision and restrictions lessoned, these increased temporary roles of influence reduced. This prompts compelling questions about who should be regarded as essential and hold a position of authority in a post-pandemic

[595] Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* (Routledge, 2021), p. 209.

landscape of Christian work and mission in the context of digital, cultural and sociological shifts.

5.3.2 The Decline of Hierarchical Structures and Authoritarian Leadership Styles

Participating leaders saw an increased engagement online when they showed vulnerability and transparency, yet when restrictions lifted, they ceased these creative ways to engage with their members returning to their traditional hierarchical structures. In the words of one leader who used social media to keep an eye of their congregation *"Sometimes you are encouraged and sometimes you think what on earth are you doing".*[596] However, these surveillance-like tactics used on faith communities through digital platforms will be unsettling to members in what Charles Taylor describes as the Age of Authenticity, where the sacred is detached from political affiliation.[597] This helps us to understand the growth of anti-institutionalism in contemporary Christianity, and comes out in the data through one of the biggest challenges faced by leaders during the pandemic; mediating diverse opinions within their faith communities. Andrew Root explains how it was already hard for pastors pre-pandemic in a post-Durkheimian world where the expressivist outlook dominates, leading to competition and jealousy amongst pastors.[598] Within a crisis environment such as the pandemic, people were more vocal to share their opinions, and disagree with authority figures within their church, in some extreme examples choosing to leave and worship somewhere else; using Charles Taylor's language, their church no longer *"spoke to them"*. Coincide this with what Ward describes as *"the self has become a matter of endeavour and an all-consuming project… the responsibility to achieve oneself has become a heavy burden".*[599] The traditional hierarchical leadership structures that still dominate institutionalised churches in the UK, do not sit comfortably within a post-pandemic society focused on expressive individualism. James K.A. Smith refers to it as *"In the name of securing freedom, we swap submission to the priest for submission to the therapist".*[600] In a Western culture that elevates self-help books, personal mentors, and lifestyle coaches as dominant authoritative voices, a leadership model centred on authentic accountability networks

[596] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 15.
[597] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007) cited in James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular* (WM Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), p. 88.
[598] Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age* (Baker Academic, 2019), p. 142-143.
[599] Pete Ward, *Celebrity Worship* (Routledge, 2020), p. 57.
[600] James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular* (WM Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), p. 107.

might be perceived more positively.[601] M3 summarised it eloquently during the phase two interview process:

"I also think as the general public get more disenchanted with our political leaders who do not fulfil their roles responsibly, that people are looking to others in roles of responsibility to gauge their perception of leadership, looking to the church leaders for their integrity, discernment, and grace and looking for justice and acknowledgement of peoples situations and appreciating life's difficulties, and meeting them in it".[602]

Drawing on Campbell's proposed shift from ekklesia to koinonia, Fuchs' concept of porous sociality, and Taylor's rise of expressive individualism, there is a clear trajectory suggesting the weakening of traditional ecclesial hierarchical structures and authoritarian leadership styles.

Which poses the question of why leaders withdrew their new digital ministries post-pandemic if they had seen positive interaction and engagement during the pandemic?

Despite the creative digital breakthroughs experienced during the pandemic, traditional normative notions of church leadership ultimately prevailed. Many leaders gravitated back to familiar, pre-pandemic models of authority and structure, even after experimenting with new forms of digital engagement. Part of this return can be attributed to a sense of discomfort and fear. Some leaders expressed anxiety about being misinterpreted online, with some avoiding live streams altogether due to the vulnerability of speaking on camera without the immediate feedback of a gathered congregation or fear of being misjudged by viewers.

"I don't know if you remember the way I preach, I'm quite... I don't stick to what I've written... and I bounce things off the congregation where I sense there is a need... when you are bringing content online you need to be quite careful about certain remarks... it has to be refined."[603]

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[601] This leans on the concept of networked theology by Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner in *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Baker Academic, 2016) which was referred to in the Chapter 3. They stipulate a networked theology must address questions around relationships, identity, and community in relation to the online and physical worlds (p. 80). They also emphasize ethical considerations for how Christians can live wisely and holistically in a world that seamlessly integrates both physical and digital spaces.
[602] M3 Phase Two Interview Schedule, p. 1.
[603] B1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 6.

The digital space also introduced a perceived loss of control; unlike onsite services, where attendance and participation could be closely tracked, online engagement felt unpredictable.

"So, it's hard, when you're preaching in a church, you know, you can see people's reactions, you can see maybe God touching their life, but you know when you preach into the screen you haven't got a clue what's happening out there."[604]

These tensions reveal an underlying reliance on established practices that offer leaders clarity and control, even at the expense of more flexible, experiential modes of connection that emerged in the digital transition.

"I mean we had a system in place prior to the pandemic... We might know that they are away or whatever, or something else is going on. So, we had a system in place, but that has been shot to bits."[605]

Notably, quite a few of the leaders responsible for making key digital decisions during the pandemic had limited digital literacy and minimal personal engagement with digital platforms. This disconnect is echoed in Campbell's *Revisiting the Distanced Church*, where her findings revealed that those leading digital transitions in churches were often the least familiar with the technologies they were implementing. This gap between decision-making authority and digital competence arguably shaped not only the type of online content published but also the extent to which digital innovation was embraced or resisted.[606]

The theme of weariness also comes through in the data from leaders. Leading a faith community through a global crisis of unprecedented scale placed extraordinary emotional, spiritual, and logistical demands on church leaders, which was identified in the previous section. According to a Barna Group report summarising their findings from two pastor surveys conducted in 2021 and 2022, as of March 2022, 42% of pastors reported having considered

[604] P2 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 8.
[605] P1 Phase Two Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[606] *Revisiting the Distanced Church,* ed. By Heidi A. Campbell (Digital Religions Publications, 2021), p. 66, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/4fec8cf5-0afc-472b-8200-01009a650cf0/content [accessed 5 July 2025].

leaving full-time ministry within the previous year.[607] This figure reflects a sustained level of pastoral burnout, aligning with Barna's findings from late 2021, which first highlighted a significant rise in such sentiments. The data marks a notable increase from January 2021, when only 29% had expressed similar thoughts; an overall rise of 13% in just over a year, underscoring the mounting pressures and emotional toll faced by church leaders through the pandemic. More than half of the pastors who took part in the surveys have contemplated leaving full-time ministry (56%) and cite *"the immense stress of the job"* as a major contributing factor. In addition to these overall pressures, 43% also report feeling *"lonely and isolated,"* highlighting the emotional and relational toll that ministry took throughout this unprecedented time. With no established roadmap or prior models to follow, many found themselves navigating uncharted waters alone: *"...you feel the weight of responsibility hugely".*[608] They were also having to contend with a decrease in members volunteering. The Evangelical Alliance found that 59% of church leaders perceived a decrease in the numbers of volunteers during autumn 2021 compared to pre-pandemic.[609] In such a context, reverting to familiar structures and practices perhaps offered a sense of stability and control. Digital experimentation, while innovative, also introduced new complexities and blurred traditional boundaries. Christian Fuchs also highlights that the pandemic triggered a fundamental reorganisation of the time and space in everyday life.[610] The usual physical and social separations between different spheres, such as work, home, education, leisure, worship, and relationships, were effectively dissolved. The home which pre-pandemic primarily served as a space for family life, became a multifunctional hub, simultaneously serving as office, classroom, church, and social gathering place.

"The problem that can emerge in such a situation is that the individual becomes overburdened when it becomes difficult to manage multiple social roles – such as being a parent, a worker, a friend, a neighbour, etc. – at the same time from one location."[611]

[607] "Pastors Share Top Reasons They've Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year", *Barna Group,* 27 April 2022, https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/ [accessed 5 July].
[608] P1 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 9.
[609] "Changing Church: Autumn Report 2021", *Evangelical Alliance,* n.d., https://www.eauk.org/what-we-do/initiatives/changing-church/autumn-2021-survey [accessed 5 July 2025].
[610] Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (Sage Publications, 2021), p. 44.
[611] Ibid., p. 44.

When this reorganisation of space is coupled with the demands of 24/7 digital connectivity, it is unsurprising that many church leaders reported feeling drained *"emotionally, mentally and physically".*[612] The boundaries between work and rest, ministry and personal life, became increasingly blurred, leaving little room for disconnection or renewal. However, Andrew Root, in *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, proposes a focused and realistic approach to pastoral leadership, encouraging pastors to embrace their core role rather than attempting to be everything to everyone. He argues that many of the cultural structures that once upheld and publicly validated religious life have either diminished or disappeared, giving way to a societal pull towards the privatisation of religion. In such a context, the pastor's role becomes even more vital, not as a manager of religious goods or a content provider in an age of spiritual consumption, but as one who is deeply present in the concrete events of people's lives. For centuries, pastors have been invited to share in, interpret and help discern the meaning embedded in the moments of birth, suffering, joy and death that shape human existence. Root contends that in a secular age, where individuals are left to construct meaning within the confines of their own private experiences, the pastor's calling is to witness and mediate God's presence within these lived realities.[613] The pastor, therefore, is not primarily an institutional figure maintaining religious activity, but one who remains faithfully present, holding space for individuals and communities to encounter transcendence within the immanent frame of everyday life. Root advocates for a ministry of presence, attending to the lived, storied, and relational dimensions of faith within the complexities of contemporary life. The ministry of presence is vividly reflected in Jesus' leadership style, serving as a foundational model for pastoral care and community building. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus consistently embodies a leadership approach centred on being fully present with individuals and communities, listening attentively, engaging compassionately, and sharing in the lived experiences of those around him. Jesus' willingness to enter the everyday realities, struggles, and joys of people demonstrates that leadership is less about directing from afar and more about journeying alongside others as Root advocates.

[612] P3 Phase One Interview Transcript, p. 6.
[613] Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age* (Baker Academic, 2019), p. 206-212.

5.4 Summary

This analysis reveals a complex, often ambivalent landscape of church life in the UK shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting significant tensions and transitions across community, rituals and leadership. The initial optimism that digital platforms would permanently transform church practice gave way to a widespread reversion to embodied, in-person worship across the participating faith communities. In exploring community reflections, the data reveals a clear *"pixels to pews"* reversal. Despite technology enabling churches to maintain continuity during lockdowns, digital engagement largely remained a pragmatic, provisional solution. Underlying this was a theological tension: while digital tools facilitated connection, concerns about embodiment and sacramental integrity tempered more radical innovation. A clear overarching theme emerged, blending practical integration with underlying theological apprehension. At the heart of these challenges lies a profound reconfiguration of what community means in a digitally mediated context. The pandemic exposed a growing gap between traditional, institutional notions of church as a gathered ekklesia and emerging fluid, networked forms of koinonia that emphasise relational flexibility and unity.

Ritual practices, especially around the Eucharist, became a focal point for negotiating these tensions. Varied denominational responses to online communion highlighted enduring theological debates about embodiment, presence and sacramental validity. While most churches maintained traditional sacramental frameworks, the crisis opened space for adaptive approaches that challenged established norms and invited fresh theological reflection on virtual embodiment and communal participation. Other ritual practices observed during the crisis, such as worship, revealed new ways of embodied connection both online and in physical gatherings. This showed that embodiment in worship can take diverse forms, adapting to different contexts. Drawing on the Pentecost narrative alongside the data, it highlights how varied bodily expressions in dispersed worship can still foster unity through the Spirit, even as diversity challenges traditional understandings of embodied communal worship.

Leadership practices likewise underwent transformation, with pandemic conditions revealing both the possibilities and limits of digital ministry. Qualities such as vulnerability, humility and relational emerged as vital for authentic connection, resonating with cultural desires for accessible, transparent leadership. Yet post-pandemic, many leaders reverted to familiar

hierarchical structures, constrained by fears of loss of control and exhaustion. This retrenchment highlights the continuing challenge of embodying a leadership style that balances authority with accompaniment, and control with presence, especially in an increasingly secular age. One proposed solution is a ministry of presence, modelled on Jesus' leadership as portrayed in the Gospels.

Overall, the pandemic functioned as a catalytic moment, exposing and accelerating existing cultural, theological and ecclesial dynamics rather than producing wholesale transformation. It revealed the enduring centrality of embodied community and sacramental life even as it invited churches to reconsider how these realities might be expressed in increasingly hybrid and digitally mediated contexts. The chapter highlights both the resilience and the fragility of church life navigating these converging pressures, suggesting that future vitality will depend on churches' capacity to embrace nuanced, flexible approaches that honour tradition while engaging creatively with evolving cultural and technological realities.

Chapter 6 / Preparing for New Adventures

What can faith communities learn from their experiences and reimagined practices during the pandemic? How do they ensure connection and embodiment is at the core of its day-to-day practices, both onsite and online, whilst operating within modern worldviews and appealing to the pluralistic spiritual plane? These are challenging questions, ones the UK Church was grappling with pre-pandemic, alongside decreasing membership. This final section will draw on the final pragmatic task in Osmer's cycle, exploring *"how might we respond?",* because it is important now more than ever, to tackle some of these challenges head-on. In the words of Brown *"Britain is showing the world how religion as we have known it can die".*[614] He holds a pessimistic outlook for the Christian faith in Britain, stating mutation is the best the Christian faith can hope for set within British secularisation. However, this narrative is now being challenged by emerging post-pandemic research by the Bible Society which notes a rise in younger people attending church, driven by a desire for authentic community and deeper spiritual engagement. Nevertheless, no-one can truly know what God was doing through the pandemic, but it has revealed important challenges the UK Church has been struggling with for a while: changes in lifestyle schedules and priorities, *"obligation to consumption"* behavioural changes, people's transition of focus from "we" to "I" and increasing pluralistic worldviews and opinions. Perhaps the pandemic is a call for the Church to re-evaluate its current position, and implement the changes needed to try and grapple with some of these challenges. This thesis contends that there is important work to be done in a post-pandemic landscape, beginning with exploring ways to foster two key themes held important to faith communities that emerged throughout the data of connection and embodiment. This final section synthesises insights from the preceding chapters to inform post-pandemic strategies. It maps the emergence of a further new wave of scholarly inquiry, highlighting further shifts in the field's focus, and concludes by outlining the study's limitations, suggesting directions for future research.

[614] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000,* 2nd edn (Routledge: 2009), p. 232-233.

6.1 A Post-Pandemic Ecclesiology

Having explored the dynamics of community life, ritual practices and leadership approaches during the pandemic, this section highlights key insights emerging from these interconnected areas. It seeks to provide practical strategies that faith communities can use to enhance their post-pandemic approaches within a media-driven, post-pandemic society.

6.1.1 Developing Adaptive Hybrid Faith Communities

Considering broader cultural shifts, changing lifestyles, and an increasing emphasis on individual choice and autonomy identified throughout this project, faith communities must adapt to remain relevant and accessible. The rise of individualism, coupled with the convenience and flexibility of digital engagement, has reshaped how many people relate to church, spirituality and everyday life. Adaptive hybrid faith communities, in which traditional congregational structures coexist and interact with emerging forms of community, offer a constructive way forward. This approach recognises that spiritual formation and belonging can occur across multiple platforms and spaces and can take various forms, allowing churches to meet people where they are.

The Church has a long history of responding to cultural, social and technological shifts, while maintaining multiple forms of community in creative tension. From early house churches alongside temple worship in the first century, to monastic communities coexisting with parish structures, and more recently the development of fresh expressions alongside traditional congregations, diverse modes of church life have consistently coexisted. What is new, however, is the growing digital dimension within these faith communities. The pandemic accelerated engagement with online spaces, prompting faith communities to treat digital platforms not as temporary substitutes, but as legitimate extensions of ecclesial life. Even when many churches returned to pre-pandemic in-person practices, this experience broadened understanding of how digital and physical expressions of church can mutually enrich one another, responding to contemporary cultural dynamics of individualism, consumerism and technological connectivity.

This model also accommodates the emerging focus areas for members in relation to community of flexibility, network, self and altruism highlighted in Figure 5.1 in chapter five. First, it enables flexibility by allowing individuals to engage with faith communities in ways that align with their personal rhythms, locations and preferences, whether through attending an in-person service, joining an online prayer group, or watching a sermon later. This adaptability removes traditional barriers to participation, such as time constraints or geographic distance. Second, it cultivates networked relationships by allowing people to form and maintain connections across congregations, regions, and even denominations through digital platforms. These digital touchpoints foster a broader sense of belonging and collaboration, creating a web of interconnected faith communities. Third, this approach acknowledges and accommodates individualism by respecting personal choice and agency, offering multiple modes of engagement that enable individuals to curate their spiritual journeys according to their unique needs and beliefs. It recognises that faith is no longer practiced in uniform ways and validates diverse expressions of spirituality. Finally, flexible hybrid faith communities foster altruism by expanding opportunities for outreach, pastoral support and collective action. Digital platforms amplify social justice efforts, fundraising initiatives and service projects, enabling participation in acts of service even when physical presence is not possible. In this way, the model balances personal autonomy with communal responsibility and mission. Therefore, adaptive hybrid faith communities offer a framework for the Church in a post-pandemic society and can intentionally integrate both in-person and digital expressions of faith, whilst accommodating cultural and societal shifts across the UK landscape.

6.1.2 Re-imaging Traditional Rituals

This section, which focuses on reimagining traditional rituals, advocates for advancing the mixed ecology model beyond simply offering both digital and in-person options. If churches continue to treat these as separate domains and rely on Campbell's transfer strategy of broadcasting in-person services online, they risk missing the opportunity to truly engage with the digitally connected world. To remain relevant and foster deeper participation, faith communities must move towards integrated, interactive and contextually sensitive approaches that fully embrace the potential of both physical and digital spaces as part of a unified ecclesial experience.

- *Foster connection and embodiment*

Churches must seek fresh ways to foster connection and embodiment, particularly by drawing more intentionally on the role of the senses in worship and community life. As identified in the previous section, we experience the world through our bodies, including our sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell, all shaping how we understand and engage with our environment. This embodied way of knowing deeply influences how faith is lived and practiced, which we saw with members not wanting to return to onsite services until they could participate fully in a physical manner. Therefore, it is important that churches explore how rituals and practices can be reimagined to honour this sensory and embodied dimension to help people connect more deeply with their faith, with each other, and with God in a way that is tangible and transformative.

- *Create a continuum of connectedness*

Churches are encouraged to experiment within mixed ecologies to create a continuum of connectedness that embraces both digital and in-person expressions of faith, rooted in embodiment and sensory engagement. Rather than treating digital and physical spaces as separate or hierarchical, faith communities can design integrated experiences that honour the full human experience. This involves crafting rituals and practices that speak to the senses, whether online or in person, cultivating a sense of presence, participation and belonging. By doing so, churches can nurture a deeper, more holistic form of spiritual connection that resonates with people's everyday lives.

- *Shifting focus from the weekend service*

This study has highlighted the need to shift away from churches placing their full focus and resources solely on the weekend service. Instead, they could cultivate a holistic, whole-person approach to worship and ministry encompassing all areas of people's lives throughout the week. This approach aligns with the growing networked nature of contemporary life, where individuals express and integrate their identities across various digital and physical platforms. By embracing this interconnectedness, faith communities can offer more flexible, responsive,

and contextually grounded expressions of discipleship and spiritual formation that speak to the rhythms and realities of everyday life.

These three strategies can support churches to cultivate more responsive and inclusive expressions of faith that resonate within today's cultural landscape. These approaches seek to foster deeper spiritual engagement, through connecting our anthropological design with the realities of digitally connected lives, and in turn contributing to a more holistic and exploratory model of worship and community life in a post-pandemic context.

6.1.3 Adapting Fluid and Holistic Leadership Approaches

The suggestions above have significant implications for leadership approaches within faith communities. By prioritising connection, embodiment and a more hybrid model of engagement, these strategies naturally shift emphasis away from centralised control and traditional markers of success, such as weekly attendance or quantifiable outputs. As churches experiment with mixed ecologies and decentralised practices, leaders are challenged to move beyond managerial or hierarchical models of leadership and instead embrace more relational and present forms. This requires cultivating trust, empowering others to lead within their own contexts (both digital and in-person), being present in members life events and fostering a culture of collaboration. It also calls for leaders to adopt a whole-person approach that considers the spiritual, emotional and social wellbeing of individuals in a networked world where faith is increasingly woven through multiple spheres of life.

- *Develop fluid and collaborative leadership structures utilising transparent and humble approaches*

The research suggests leadership in today's faith communities requires a shift from rigid hierarchies to more fluid structures. The previous section revealed how transparency, humility, and openness to shared learning and vulnerability, can foster trust and create space for genuine dialogue and responsiveness. Digital platforms naturally support more decentralised and interactive forms of leadership. Leveraging tools like collaborative apps, live stream Q&As, or online forums and blogs enable leaders to practice transparency. Through inviting feedback and leading with humility, these approaches will break down traditional barriers and foster trust in more relational ways.

- *Bring a diversity experience and knowledge onto the team*

Embracing diverse voices within leadership teams broadens perspective and strengthens decision-making. By including individuals from different cultural, generational, and experiential backgrounds, churches can better reflect the communities they serve and engage more meaningfully. Digital communication can break geographic and institutional boundaries, allowing churches to build more diverse and representative leadership teams. By inviting input and participation from those with varied backgrounds via mechanisms such as online meetings, digital mentoring, and shared learning spaces, churches can draw on a broader range of gifts and insights.

- *Revert focus from attendance driven to whole person centred*

Instead of measuring success by numbers, leadership could prioritise the spiritual, emotional and relational well-being of individuals. A whole-person centred approach recognises that faith is lived across all areas of life, and leadership should support holistic growth, not just church attendance, embracing cultural and societal shifts. Digital engagement offers new ways to support the holistic well-being of faith community members beyond the weekend service. From online pastoral care and midweek small groups, technology can facilitate ongoing connection and growth tailored to people's lived realities and rhythms.

This project saw the participating leaders revert to the rigidity and hierarchy of pews, but perhaps it is time to embrace a new balanced approach, one that integrates the freedom and fluidity of digital engagement with the rootedness of tradition. Instead of choosing between the liberated *"pixel"* and the structured formality of the *"pew",* leaders could consider a hybrid path where the legacy of the past meets the innovation of the future. A creative blend that honours both presence and participation across physical and digital spaces.

6.2 Expanding the Waves of Scholarly Inquiry

While the literature review focused primarily on sources from the early stages of the pandemic, more recent and newly published work was reviewed and incorporated during the analysis phase. This highlighted the need to further update the adapted waves of scholarly inquiry framework outlined in chapter two as a clear shift in focus had emerged. The fifth wave of

research identified in chapter two was primarily concerned with documenting how faith communities transitioned their practices online during the pandemic. This phase was characterised by rapid, live research, with findings often shared through more immediate platforms such as blogs, websites and eBooks, rather than traditional academic journals or books. For instance, Heidi A. Campbell, one of the leading scholars in this field, published a series of timely eBooks during this period, many of which have been referred to throughout this thesis. The pandemic not only influenced the content of scholarly work but also transformed the mediums and pace at which it was produced. The urgency of the moment led many researchers to work quickly and creatively to capture the unfolding changes during this unprecedented time. Subsequently, we begin to see a return to more traditional publishing formats and a shift in tone, from reactive documentation during the crisis to more reflective, post-pandemic analysis detailed in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1 A Post-Pandemic Adaptation of Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg's Waves of Scholarly Inquiry (2005)[615]

[615] As explained in section 2.2, the first to third waves were identified by Højsgaard and Warburg (2005), Campbell and Lövheim (2011) expanded on the third wave and the fourth wave was developed by Campbell and

The focus gradually moved from real-time responses to developing long-term strategies and theological insights considering the pandemic experience. Figure 6.1 offers a visual summary of the evolution of scholarly inquiry, from its early stages to the present day. It is this emerging sixth wave that this project is situated within, with its reflective analysis falling within a post-pandemic, postdigital context.

6.2.1 The Emerging "Postdigital Theology" Tide

The sixth and most recent wave of inquiry illustrated in Figure 6.1 reflects an emerging post-pandemic shift toward what scholars are beginning to describe as *postdigital theology*. Whereas *digital theology* has traditionally focused on how digital technologies, such as the Internet, social media, online worship and the digital circulation of texts, shape theological practice and discourse, postdigital theology takes as its starting point a cultural landscape in which digital saturation has become normative. Its concern is not merely the presence or use of technology, but the transformed conditions of human identity, knowledge, community and transcendence that arise from living within a thoroughly digitised environment. As Sabrina Müller and Aline Knapp observe, the term *postdigital* signals the increasingly seamless fusion of virtual and everyday life, to the point where the boundaries between online and offline experience are becoming nearly indistinguishable.[616] However, echoing the findings of this study, Müller notes that in her work supporting churches across Germany and Switzerland, local congregations still tended to treat offline and online spheres as separate and largely independent domains. [617] Müller and Knapp argue that postdigitality currently manifests most clearly at the level of the individual, particularly through the everyday, habitual use of smartphones, which effectively synchronises online and offline experience. [618] In this sense, the postdigital shift has moved from the corporate life of the church to the practices and perceptions of individual participants. When discussing research on the "postdigital church," they observe that scholarly attention is therefore less focused on institutional structures and more oriented toward the lived perspectives of congregants. This shift, they point out, has

Evolvi (2019). The fifth and sixth waves have been added to reflect emerging research early, mid and post-pandemic. The waves have also been allocated approximate time periods based on the literature.

[616] Sabrina Müller and Aline Knapp, 'The Postdigital Church: Implications of the Concept of Postdigitality for Current Research on the Digital Church', in *Postdigital Ethical Futures*, ed. Maggi Savin-Baden et al. (Springer, 2026), p. 56.

[617] Ibid., p. 55.

[618] Ibid., p. 60.

significant implications for the field: first, it generates a new set of research questions, and second, it brings into view phenomena that would not necessarily emerge from an institutionally centred approach.

Building on this individualised orientation of postdigital experience, Petar Jandrić and Sarah Hayes deepen the conversation by situating postdigitality within the wider socio-technological landscape of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.[619] They argue that the digital revolution is no longer an anticipated future disruption but an accomplished transformation that now forms the taken-for-granted backdrop of contemporary life. From this vantage point, the question is not how the church or any institution might adopt digital tools, but how human learning, meaning-making and social interaction are already being reshaped in a world where digital and non-digital dimensions are thoroughly entangled.

> *"While we do not (yet) understand the exact nature of relationships between humans and machines, it is easy to see that these relationships are quickly changing."*[620]

Their concept of "Postdigital We-Learn" critiques the dominant neoliberal framing of education as an individual economic investment, challenging the reduction of learning to market value or personal competitiveness. Instead, they contend that postdigital conditions reveal the limits of this economic logic and call for more relational, collective and socially embedded understandings of participation and knowledge.[621] Significantly, these arguments echo the sociological dynamics mapped in the opening chapter of this thesis, which similarly highlighted how broader economic, political and technological forces are reshaping the cultural and religious landscape of the UK. Jandrić and Hayes suggest that a postdigital perspective presents exciting opportunities to critically re-examine the broader learning economy. By extension, it may also offer a valuable opportunity for local churches to reassess their own learning economies, in areas such as discipleship and pastoral care, in ways that could help to lessen the leader–congregant dissonance identified in the previous chapter.

[619] Petar Jandrić and Sarah Hayes, 'Postdigital We-Learn', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 2020, 288, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-020-09711-2 [accessed 3 December 2025].
[620] Ibid., p. 288.
[621] Ibid., p. 289.

"The shift towards the postdigital provides possibilities for unlearning in order to relearn, together; this is hope."[622]

Jandrić and Hayes further argue that humanity has progressed through successive revolutions, rendering it increasingly inadequate to frame our understanding in terms of rigid categories such as "industrial," "digital," "robotic," or "analog".[623] They contend that the longstanding distinction between "humans" and their "tools" is no longer tenable, urging a recognition of the deeply intertwined nature of human and technological agency. In a complementary perspective, Campbell, whose research has been a consistent dialogue partner throughout this project, suggests in her more recent post-pandemic work that the Church has, in effect, embraced a posthuman trajectory, navigating a future in which human and nonhuman elements are inseparably interwoven. In their chapter *"When the Church Embraces a Posthuman Future"*, Heidi A. Campbell and Grace Jones examine how churches navigated the rapid shift to online and hybrid worship during the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing that these adaptations resulted in an implicit acceptance of posthuman and postdigital orientations.[624] The pandemic revealed the deep entanglement of humans and technology, challenging traditional distinctions between "human" and "tool" as well as "body" and "machine." They explain how church leaders and congregations had to negotiate not only logistical but also theological and existential questions to sustain sacraments, pastoral care and community life in digitally mediated environments. In doing so, they suggest churches began to operate in ways that recognised human identity and ecclesial life as hybrid and technologically integrated, reshaping conventional understandings of presence, embodiment and community. However, findings from this research project suggest that these postdigital shifts were not universal: participating churches largely reverted to pre-pandemic offline practices once restrictions eased, raising questions about whether posthuman orientations were selectively adopted depending on denominational culture, congregational digital engagement or local context.

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[622] Petar Jandrić et al. (2019, p.189), cited in Petar Jandrić and Sarah Hayes, 'Postdigital We-Learn', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 2020, 288, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-020-09711-2 [accessed 3 December 2025], p. 293.

[623] Petar Jandrić and Sarah Hayes, 'Postdigital We-Learn', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 2020, 288, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-020-09711-2 [accessed 3 December 2025], p. 290.

[624] Heidi A. Campbell and Grace Jones, "When the Church Embraced a Posthuman Future: How Pastoral Negotiations with Technology During Covid-19 Pandemic Resulted in an Implicit Acceptance of Posthumanism", in Maggi Savin-Baden and John Reader, eds, *Postdigital Theologies: Technology, Belief, and Practice., Postdigital Science and Education* (Springer International Publishing AG, 2022), p. 201-216.

This emerging wave of postdigital research in a post-pandemic context highlights how scholars across numerous fields are navigating the entanglement of humans and technology. Müller and Knapp emphasise individual-level synchronisation of online and offline life, while Jandrić and Hayes situate these shifts within the Fourth Industrial Revolution, critiquing neoliberal approaches to learning and participation. Campbell and Grace show how churches temporarily embraced posthuman practices during the pandemic. Positioned within this sixth wave of scholarly inquiry, this piece of research indicates that most participating churches reverted to pre-pandemic offline practices, suggesting that postdigital adaptations and posthuman orientations are selective and context-dependent, underscoring the need to explore further how these dynamics are negotiated across faith communities.

6.3 Project Limitations and Further Research

Using a practical theological approach in conjunction with Osmer's pastoral cycle has proven to be especially appropriate for this research. Osmer's model offered a structured yet flexible framework to explore the complex and evolving responses of church communities during and after the pandemic. Its fourfold process enabled a comprehensive engagement with both the descriptive realities and theological implications of these responses. The research has offered valuable depth and rich insights into how local churches navigated the pandemic, particularly in areas such as maintaining community, shifts in ritual practice, and leadership adaptation, it is not, however, without its limitations. The study primarily focused on a select number of church communities within a specific geographical context, which limits the generalisability of its findings across broader ecclesial traditions and national or global settings. Nonetheless, as explored in chapter three, this approach is valuable in practical theological research as it allows for rich, in-depth exploration of lived experience within specific contexts.

A further limitation was my own unfamiliarity with the diverse traditions, rituals and theological nuances of denominations beyond my own background. While the study engaged with a range of Christian communities, a deeper understanding of the specific liturgical practices, doctrinal emphases and cultural expressions unique to each tradition would have enriched the analysis. This gap sometimes made it challenging to fully interpret certain ritualistic practices within their denominational contexts, potentially affecting the depth of insight into how different communities navigated the pandemic. Additionally, the rapid pace of change during the pandemic meant that the data captured represents a specific moment in

time. Therefore, longer-term impacts and developments may not yet be fully visible. The reliance on self-reported experiences through interviews, observation and digital content also introduces a degree of subjectivity, potentially overlooking voices less represented in formal leadership or those disengaged from digital platforms. There are also instances of proactive, fully digitally immersed and engaged faith communities across the UK that were not included in this study due to the sample criteria. These communities may have adopted innovative approaches to online worship, discipleship and outreach that differ significantly from the hybrid or returning-to-onsite practices examined here. Including such examples could have provided a broader spectrum of digital ecclesiology and highlighted alternative models of thriving in a digitally connected society. Their exclusion represents a limitation in capturing the full diversity of how UK churches responded to and evolved during the pandemic.

These limitations point to the need for further research that encompasses a wider demographic, longitudinal perspectives, and interdisciplinary approaches to better understand the evolving shape of church life in a post-pandemic world. However, the volume and richness of data collected throughout this project has been substantial, offering numerous potential avenues for analysis beyond the primary focus areas explored. For instance, further investigation could have been undertaken into the heightened emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene within sanctuaries, and how these practices reshaped the symbolic significance of sacred spaces. Additionally, the prolonged reduction or absence of sacramental elements raises important questions regarding the spiritual, emotional, and even physiological effects on members. I hope to explore some of these additional areas of focus through the publication of future journal articles, as they represent important aspects of ecclesial life that were beyond the scope of this current study. Future work can build on this foundation, offering a more nuanced understanding of how the pandemic continues to reshape Christian practice and community life in the UK and beyond.

6.4 Conclusion

This research project set out to examine how churches in the UK responded to and navigated the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on community life, ritual practices and leadership approaches. Through the lens of practical theology, and guided by Osmer's pastoral cycle, the study has offered a critical yet constructive exploration of how

the participating faith communities have been reshaped by this global crisis and what insights and learning can be used for the Church's future ecclesiology in a digital, post-pandemic society.

From the outset, the study recognised that UK churches were already operating within a digitally engaged, shifting cultural and societal landscape. Long before the pandemic, secularisation, individualism, and a general loosening of institutional affiliations were already impacting religious engagement. Simultaneously, the rapid evolution of digital technology was transforming how people connect and communicate. A growing trend of *"obligation to consumption"* reflected an increasing desire for personalised, flexible expressions of faith, often facilitated by digital platforms. Churches faced the challenge of maintaining relevance in a culture shaped by consumer choice, digital interconnectivity and declining commitment to traditional structures.

The methodological foundation of this project lies in the practical theological approach, employing Osmer's pastoral cycle. This model proved particularly well-suited to the research, offering a structured yet flexible way to engage theologically with real-world complexities. Fieldwork was conducted across multiple time phases to account for shifting contexts, allowing the interpretive and empirical tasks to evolve alongside the data. A key contribution of this research has been the development and adaptation of the waves of scholarly inquiry related to digital religion. Originally framed in four stages, this study has argued that the pace and scope of change brought on by the pandemic necessitates the need for two additional waves. The fifth wave captured live, reflexive documentation of church responses during the height of the crisis often through blogs, eBooks, and non-traditional academic outlets. The current sixth wave, reflects a deeper theological and strategic reflection on post-pandemic realities, with an emerging tide on postdigitalism and posthumanism. This evolution in the literature validates the need to continually update theoretical frameworks to reflect lived realities and contextual shifts.

Through in-depth engagement with faith communities, this research has surfaced several practical strategies for a post-pandemic ecclesiology**.** These include developing adaptive hybrid faith communities, re-imaging traditional rituals and adapting fluid and creative leadership approaches. These strategies naturally invite a rethinking of leadership models**;** centralised, hierarchical and performance-based leadership styles often struggle to

accommodate decentralised, fluid expressions of church. Instead, more relational, humble and present leadership rooted in transparency and openness to diverse experiences can perhaps offer a better fit for the emerging ecclesial landscape.

While the research offers rich insights, it is not without limitations**.** The scope of the study required a small, geographically based sample size, meaning the findings are not exhaustive or universally representative. One notable limitation was my restricted knowledge of other denominational traditions and rituals**,** which may have influenced the depth of analysis in more diverse contexts. These limitations highlight the importance of collaboration in future studies and of widening the research pool to incorporate broader denominational and cultural perspectives. However, looking forward, there are numerous avenues for further research**:** the role of hygiene and cleanliness in rituals and the long-term spiritual effects of sacramental absence or adaptation are just two examples.

In conclusion, this project has shown insights into how forced adoption of digital platforms can reshape ecclesiological understanding of gathered community, rituals and pastoral presence. In the context of cultural and sociological shifts alongside the practical integration of digital mediation, it is argued that faith communities can reimagine their communal life in ways that are sustainable, spiritually enriching and deeply attuned to the realities of twenty-first-century existence. The vision is not one of abandoning tradition, but of integrating the stability of the *"pew"* with the flexibility of the *"pixel",* creating a truly hybrid post-pandemic ecclesiology.

Chapter 7 / Bibliography

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Appendix 1: Ethical Issues and Solutions

(Note – the following table formed part of application to the Ethics Committee)

Area		
Conflict of Interest	I am a resident of the study area and could know the churches through my previous professional and voluntary roles	I will declare my position within the Participation Information Sheet that will be sent to prospective participants as part of the invite.
Confidentiality	Participants and church communities wanting to remain anonymous	Names will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms used. Each church will be given a personal identifier code. Identifying data will be reasonably changed or removed.
Data Storage and Security	Data protection and compliance with GDPR	A Data Management Plan was submitted to the university as part of the application. A Privacy Notice will be sent to all participants detailing in depth how their data will be used, processed, and shared.
Participants Expectations	Negative research participant experience	The Participant Information Sheet will outline the research process and what it involves. It will detail what is expected from them and their church communities. The Privacy Notice will outline the withdrawal of data procedure. A Participant Consent Form will also be sent to each participant to sign before starting field work, along with a Participant Profile form to complete.
Additional Support for Participants	Complaint process	The participants will be given access to the complaints procedure and contact details for both supervisors.

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

(Note – details referencing the locality has been redacted for anonymity purposes)

Participant Information Sheet

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my Postgraduate Doctorate in Theology and Ministry at Durham University.

Project title:
"Tracking the UK Church's Response to COVID19 from a Leaders Perspective"

Researcher: Sarah Taylor
Contact details: Email: sarah.e.taylor2@durham.ac.uk

Supervisors Details:

Rev Dr Peter Phillips Director of Centre for Digital Theology, Durham University Email – p.m.phillips@durham.ac.uk	Prof Pete Ward Professor of Practical Theology, Durham University Email – peter.ward@durham.ac.uk

This study has received ethical approval from the Theology and Religion Department Ethics Committee of Durham University. I have the relevant experience for conducting this study.

- A degree in Health and Social Care and a Masters in Applied Theology
- I managed a Christian Homeless charity for seven years, which involved conducting research and collecting/ analysing data for various audiences. Prior to this I worked for the NHS as a Performance Management Officer.
- In my various roles I have had responsibility for data protection, confidentiality and safeguarding. I also hold an IOSH Managing Safely qualification.
- I have been a member of local church communities for over 20 years.
- I have been involved in church leadership for 18 years in various capacities, from leading and running a department/ ministry to being on the senior leadership team.
- I have experience of facilitating group work within a local church setting, leading Bible studies and in-house training.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

- To conduct up to date research to feed into the ongoing dialogue in the field of religion and new media.
- To track the responses of churches to COVID19, from a leader's perspective.
- To collect data from pre, mid and post pandemic, in order to provide a picture of the digital and physical church landscape against variables such as denomination and geographical and social factors.
- To investigate if the following three areas influence a churches digital engagement: authority, community and rituals.
- To see if new models of church are emerging in the UK because of COVID19 or if churches are treading water until they can return to their pre-pandemic structure and services.
- To investigate if practical, theological and ethical considerations played a prominent role for a leader in their decision making throughout the pandemic.

The timescale for the study is outlined in the table below.

Active Research Stage	**Writing Up Stage**
January 2021 – October 2021	November 2021 – Summer 2022

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited because you lead a church in the chosen locality and have been in the role a minimum of 3 months before lockdown in the UK.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw, without giving a reason. This is explained in the Privacy Notice, which will be sent out to participants in a welcome pack before commencing the research.

What will happen to me if I take part?

- The research will consist of two phases. In each phase you will take part in an interview with the researcher, either in person at an agreed location, or via zoom/ telephone depending on your preference and current local COVID19 guidelines. The second interview will take place 6 months after the first one. Each interview will last approximately 45 minutes, and the audio will be recorded for transcript purposes.

- Before the interview, in phase one, the researcher will request documents to be sent via email or will collect hardcopies, to establish an overview of the churches beliefs, activities, ethos and vision e.g. Church leaflets/ newsletters/ statement of faith/ core values etc.

- During the interview, further documents/ information might be identified which can be sent onto the researcher e.g. digital viewing statistics, zoom meeting attendance numbers etc.

- Six months later, you will be asked to conduct a second interview, as part of phase two and to send any new documents/ updates that would help inform the research.

- Please note, as the study will involve interviews, you can omit any questions that you do not wish to answer.

- The researcher will also take part in online services/ activities for observation purposes.

What are the benefits to taking part?

- You will contribute to a unique, first of its kind research project in the UK looking at how local churches have responded to the pandemic from a leader's perspective.

- You will be part of a group of leaders across the chosen locality that will be looking at how the church is moving forward and navigating a post-pandemic society.

- It may give you the opportunity to network with other local leaders and learn from each other and support one another through these challenging times.

- You will be provided with a free report detailing the findings which could be used as a resource tool for your wider church.

Are there any potential risks involved?

- Due to the changing nature of government legislation and local restrictions in relation to COVID19 in the UK, the researcher will need to keep abreast of up-to-date information which might inform how and where interviews are conducted.

- Participants may need to pull out, due to a number of reasons such as ill health, family commitments or change in role. If this happens during phase one, a participant from a new church will be sought to take their place. However, if this happens in phase two, the researcher will look to continue the phase with the new leader (if the previous one has a change of role or moves on) where at all possible.

- Theft of data (hardcopy and digital) is a potential risk; however, the researcher will put in place practices to mitigate against this risk which are outlined in the Privacy Notice.

Will my data be kept confidential?

All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential. If the data is published, it will be entirely anonymous and will not be identifiable as yours.
In the case of using quotes from interviews and focus groups, referencing such as "Methodist Minister" will be used. Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen to the results of the project?

- Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a

thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.

- No personal data will be shared; however, anonymised (i.e. not identifiable) data may be used in publications, journal articles, reports, presentations, webinars and other research outputs.

- All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after the end of active data collection.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisor. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's Complaints Process accessible of the Durham University website.

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study,
I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

This form is to confirm that you understand what are the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy to take part.

Please initial each box to indicate your agreement:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet and the Privacy Notice for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I agree to take part in the above project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am able to withdraw (as detailed in the Privacy Notice).	
I understand that anonymised (i.e. not identifiable) versions of my data may be archived and shared with others for legitimate research purposes.	
I understand that the project will collect 'special category data' (formerly 'sensitive personal data') as defined by data protection legislation, and I give my consent for this to be collected and processed.	
I consent to being audio recorded during interviews and focus groups and understand that the recordings will only be used by the researcher to facilitate the production of transcripts.	
I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, and other research outputs. However, I will be anonymised, and my real name will not be used.	

Participant's Signature_____ Date_____

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS) _____

Appendix 4: Interview Questions Schedules - Phase One and Phase Two

Phase One Interview Schedule

Thank you so much for participating in my research. Just to reiterate that its aim is to explore how leaders have navigated the pandemic over the last year, how "doing church" has changed (for example, moving services online), but also exploring how these experiences have influenced faith, and the experience of encountering God.

There are three sections to the interview: the first focuses on the church, the second focuses on your experiences as a leader and the third section looks at going forward. The format I'm using is a semi-structured interview, to enable more of a conversational, informal approach. I have questions that I will use to guide me, but I have the scope to ask you to expand on something or clarify in more detail. So, shall we begin?

Section 1 – The Church

It's been a year since all of this started…

1. **How has the pandemic changed how you are doing church?**

I'm really interested to hear…

2. **How did the church community react to these changes?**

Throughout the last year, many churches have made the transition to providing online services and activities. From your experience…

3. **Has there been any parts of "doing church" (so for example, worship, communion, praying, pastoral support etc) that you have struggled to adapt to a digital medium and why?**

From the feedback you've had from your congregation, discussions in your leadership team meetings, and even from your own personal experience…

4. **Have these changes enabled people to still encounter and experience God?**

5. **Do you feel your church community has grown and developed through this experience?**

Section 2 – The Leader

This next section focuses on your personal experiences as a leader.

6. **From a practical point of view, has your focus and outworking of your role changed over the last year? (For example, how has your "working week" changed from before the pandemic?)**

7. **What challenges have you personally faced leading a church through this period?**

8. **What positives have you experienced leading a church through this period?**

9. **Has your church experimenting with digital platforms over the last year, revealed anything new to you about encountering God through technology?**

10. **How has this last year affected your own spiritual walk with God?**

Section 3 – Going Forward

Finally, looking forward as we hopefully begin to enter a post-pandemic future…

11. **Has this experience changed how you will "do church" in the future?**

12. **Do you feel God has been teaching you something new through this last year?**

Finally, as we come to the end of the interview, thinking back over this last year…

14. **What three words would you use to reflect your experiences as a leader?**

15. **Is there anything else that you would like to share?**

Thank you for your time today.
The next stage of the research will be to carry out some participant observation over the next few months.

Phase Two Interview Schedule

Section 1 – The Church

1. I conducted my interviews and participant observation in the Spring/Summer months, before the restrictions were due to be lifted towards the end of July. Since then, what changes have there been in how you're "doing church" through your online and onsite provision?

2. How has your online and onsite attendance changed since we last spoke?

3. Has the makeup of your church community changed from pre-Covid?

4. During the pandemic, restrictions have affected the way we do, what some might call rituals, such as worship, communion, funerals etc. Is this still the case within your church, and if so, how?

5. Since restrictions have lifted, what are the general opinions you are picking up within your church, regarding online and onsite provision and how they experience God?

6. What events do you have in place for Christmas?

Section 2 – The Leader

7. From a practical point of view, has your focus and outworking of your role changed since the first interview?

8. What challenges and positives have you experienced leading a church since restrictions were lifted?

9. How has the last 18 months influenced or changed your leadership style?

10. What resources have you been using for your own personal learning/ development/ teaching throughout the pandemic? (e.g., books/ podcasts/ conferences/ consultants etc)

11. How has your engagement with digital platforms changed over the last 18 months?

Section 3 – Moving Forward

13. How has the whole experience affected the churches original vision pre-Covid?

14. What plans are in the pipeline for introducing new activities/ initiatives/ projects etc going forward?

15. Are there any plans to, or has there been, any changes to the leadership team in terms of areas of focus or structure?

16. Allow yourself to dream and imagine finances, resources, volunteers, and restrictions were not a barrier. What areas would you focus on and push going forward, and why?

17. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Appendix 5: Interview Schedule

Church Leader ID Code	Phase One Date	Phase Two Date
P1	19th March 2021 (Pilot)	8th December 2021
P2	25th March 2021	9th December 2021
P3	15th April 2021	14th December 2021
P4	15th July 2021	12th January 2022
CE1a	24th March 2021	9th December 2021
CE1b	*Interview questions answered via email*	*Interview questions answered via email*
CE2	31st March 2021	13th December 2021
CE3	16th April 2021	7th December 2021
B1	26th March 2021	6th December 2021 (Pilot)
B2	1st April 2021	16th December 2021
CT1	16th April 2021	21st December 2021
M1	30th March 2021	14th December 2021
M2	*Interview questions answered via email*	*Interview questions answered via email*
M3	*Interview questions answered via email*	*Interview questions answered via email*
M4	13th July 2021	*Not available*
M5	15th July 2021	*Not available*

For CE1 there were two leaders: CE1a led the digital community and took part in the interviews and CE1b focused on the onsite church and completed the interview questionnaires via email.

Appendix 6: Phase One – Services and Activities Attended During May 2021 to July 2021

ID Code	Date	Onsite/ Online	Platform	Event	Onsite Attendance	Online Views	Additional Info
P1	04/05/2021	Online	Zoom	Young Adults Mid-Week Study Group	5	N/A	Only online provision
	09/05/2021	Online	YouTube	Sunday Service	Not known	167 (after 24 hrs	I attended online as I was ill, but there was onsite provision
	13/06/2021	Onsite	YouTube	Sunday Service	35-40	150 (after 24hrs)	Both options available
P2	20/05/2021	Online	Zoom	Mid-Week Prayer Meeting	5	N/A	Only online provision
	06/06/2021	Onsite	YouTube	Sunday Service	15	9	Both options available
P3	25/07/2021	Onsite	Facebook	Sunday Service	25	32 (after 4 hrs)	Both options available
	27/07/2021	Online	Zoom	Mid-week Prayer Meeting	8	N/A	Only online provision
P4	20/07/2021	Online (25/07/21)	Facebook	Mid-Week Bible Study	N/A	195 (after 5 days)	I watched 5 days after live stream - Only online provision
	25/07/2021	Onsite	Facebook	Sunday Service	25	65 (after 6 hrs)	Both options available
CE1	12/05/2021	Onsite	N/A	Mid-Week Communion	7	N/A	Only onsite provision
	14/05/2021	Online	Facebook	Mid-Week Cyber Church	Not known	Not known	Only online provision
	16/05/2021	Onsite	N/A	Sunday Service	30	N/A	Only onsite provision
CE2	20/06/2021	Onsite	N/A	Sunday Service	10-15	N/A	Only onsite provision
	05/07/2021	Onsite	N/A	Mothers Union Meeting	13	N/A	Only onsite provision
CE3	18/07/2021	Onsite	Facebook	Sunday Service	15	4 (after 7 hrs)	Both options available
B1	26/05/2021	Online	N/A	Mid-Week Prayer Meeting	10	N/A	Only online provision

	30/05/2021	Onsite	N/A	Sunday Service	20-25	N/A	Only onsite provision
	30/05/2021	Online	Facebook Live	Sunday Evening Service	N/A	14 (live)	Only online provision
B2	20/06/2021	Online	Zoom	Sunday Evening Prayer Meeting	20	N/A	Only online provision
	23/06/2021	Onsite	N/A	Mid-Week Bible Study	11	N/A	Only onsite provision
	25/06/2021	Online	YouTube	Family Fun Friday (episode 10)	N/A	80	Watched live – only online provision
	25/06/2021	Online	YouTube	Family Fun Friday (episode 9)	N/A	130	Watched week later after episode 10 – only online provision
	27/06/2021	Onsite	YouTube	Sunday Service	40	112 (after 35hrs)	Both options available
CT1	29/06/2021	Onsite	YouTube	CT1a Mid-Week Mass	30	72 (after 13hrs)	Both options available
	03/07/2021	Onsite	N/A	CT1b Saturday Evening Mass	30	N/A	Only onsite provision
	04/07/2021	Onsite	N/A	CT1c Sunday Mass	55	N/A	Only onsite provision
M2	08/07/2021	Online	Zoom	Mid-Week Bible Study	14	N/A	Only online provision
	11/07/2021	Onsite	Zoom	Sunday Service	Not known	31	Both options available – I attended online as I was ill
	01/08/2021	Telephone	Conferoo	Sunday Service	19	N/A	Only telephone provision
M3	27/06/2021	Onsite	Facebook Live	Sunday Evening Service	20	25 (after 3 hrs)	Both options available
	27/06/2021	Onsite	N/A	Sunday Evening Prayer Meeting	12	N/A	Only onsite provision - straight after evening meeting

Totals **Online 12** **38.71%**

Onsite 18 **58.06%**

Telephone 1 **3.23%**

31 **Sunday services, bible studies, prayer meetings attended**

10 out of 31 provided both online and onsite options (hybrid) 32.26%

Appendix 7: Phase Two – Services and Activities Attended During January 2022 to March 2022

ID Code	Date	Onsite/ Online	Platform	Event	Onsite Attendance	Online Views	Additional Info
P1	30/01/2022	Onsite	YouTube	Sunday Service	70	50 (after 5hrs)	Both options available
	31/02/2022	Online	Zoom	Informal discussion with pastoral lead	N/A	2	N/A
	17/02/2022	Onsite	None	Mid-Week Connect Group	12	N/A	Only onsite provision
P2	20/01/2022	Onsite	None	Mid-Week Bible Study	4	N/A	Only onsite provision
	23/02/2022	Onsite	YouTube	Sunday Service	15	0 (after 2hrs)	Both options available
P3	20/02/2022	Onsite	None	Mid-Week Bible Study	5	N/A	Only onsite provision
	23/01/2022	Onsite	Facebook	Sunday Service	30	31 (after 3hrs)	Both options available
	29/01/2022	Onsite	Zoom	Monthly Prayer Meeting	4	1 on Zoom	Both options available
P4	08/03/2022	Onsite	None	Mid-Week Healing Course	6	N/A	Only onsite available
	08/03/2022	Online	Facebook	Twisted Scriptures	N/A	91 (after 2hrs)	Only online provision
	27/03/2022	Onsite	Facebook	Sunday Service	15	62 (after 7hrs	Both options available
CE1	31/01/2022	Online	Facebook	Mid-Week Cyber Church posts	N/A	Average 4 likes	Only online provision
	06/02/2022	Onsite	N/A	Sunday Service	30	N/A	Only onsite provision
CE2	07/02/2022	Onsite	N/A	Mothers Union Meeting	14	N/A	Only onsite provision
	09/02/2022	Onsite	N/A	Mid-Week Holy Communion Service	10	N/A	Only onsite provision
	13/02/2022	Onsite	N/A	Sunday Holy Communion Service	8	N/A	Only onsite provision
CE3	29/03/2022	Onsite	N/A	Visit Foodbank and meeting	2	N/A	N/A
	10/04/2022	Onsite	Facebook	Sunday Service	25	3 (after 5hrs)	Both options available
B1	02/02/2022	Onsite	N/A	Mid-Week Drop-in Café	10	N/A	Only onsite provision
	15/02/2022	Onsite	N/A	Bi-Weekly Prayer Meeting	22	N/A	Only onsite provision

	06/03/2022	Onsite	N/A	Sunday Family Service	80	N/A	Only onsite provision
B2	16/01/2022	Onsite	N/A	Early Traditional Sunday Service	40	N/A	Only onsite provision
	18/01/2022	Onsite	N/A	Mid-Week Bible Study	10	N/A	Only onsite provision
	02/02/2022	Online	Zoom	Monthly Prayer Meeting	N/A	31	Only online provision
	11/02/2022	Onsite	N/A	Family Fun Friday	100	N/A	Only onsite provision
	13/03/2022	Onsite	YouTube	Family Sunday Service	100	37 (1 day after)	Both options available
CT1	02/03/2022	Onsite	YouTube	CT1a Ash Wednesday Mass	70	38 (after 10hrs)	Both options available
	05/03/2022	Onsite	N/A	CT1b Saturday Evening Mass	60	N/A	Only onsite provision
	06/03/2022	Onsite	YouTube	CT1c Sunday Mass	80	57 (after 6hrs)	Both options available
M2	14/03/2022	Onsite	N/A	Mid-Week Bible Study	7	N/A	Only onsite provision
	20/03/2022	Onsite	Zoom	Sunday Family Service	70	Unknown	Both options available
	26/03/2022	Telephone	Conferoo	Saturday Weekly Prayer Meeting	N/A	11	Only telephone provision
M3	25/01/2022	Onsite	None	Café Drop-in	2	N/A	N/A
	30/01/2022	Online	Facebook	Kids Church Live Stream	N/A	18 average	Online provision only
	30/01/2022	Onsite	None	Café Sunday Evening Service	10	N/A	Onsite provision only
	20/03/2022	Onsite	Facebook	Sunday Evening Service and Bible Study	25	22	Both options available

Totals **Online 5** **13.89%**

Onsite 30 **83.33%**

Telephone 1 **2.78%**

36 **Sunday services, bible studies, prayer meetings attended**

11 out of 33 provided both online and onsite options (hybrid) 33.33%

Appendix 8: Coding Breakdown – Phase One and Phase Two

PHASE ONE

Interview Place Order	
Codes	**Place**
Leadership (Lead)	1
Digital (Dig)	2
Change (Ch)	3
Community (Cty)	4
Government (Gov)	5
Physical Touch (PT)	6
Serving (Serv)	7
Communication (Comm)	8
Science (Sci)	9
Personal Circumstances (PC)	10
Pastoral (Past)	11
Opinions (Ops)	12
Finances (£)	13
Mental Health (MH)	14
Social Action (SA)	15
Skills (Sk)	16
Ecumenism (Ec)	17
Fellowship (Fel)	17
Fear (Fe)	19
End Times (ET)	20
Vaccinations (Vac)	21

Observation Place Order	
Codes	**Place**
Change (Ch)	1
Science (Sci)	2
Digital (Dig)	3
Leadership (Lead)	4
Community (Cty)	5
Physical Touch (PT)	6
Government (Gov)	7
Fellowship (Fel)	8
Personal Circumstances (PC)	9
Communication (Comm)	10
Serving (Serv)	10
Finances (£)	12
Social Action (SA)	13
Fear (Fe)	14
Mental Health (MH)	14
Pastoral (Past)	16
Skills (Sk)	17
Opinions (Ops)	18
Vaccinations (Vac)	19
Ecumenism (Ec)	20
End Times (ET)	21

Overall Place Order	
Codes	**Place**
Change (Ch)	1
Digital (Dig)	2
Leadership (Lead)	3
Community (Cty)	4
Science (Sci)	5
Physical Touch (PT)	6
Government (Gov)	7
Serving (Serv)	8
Communication (Comm)	9
Personal Circumstances (PC)	10
Fellowship (Fel)	11
Finances (£)	12
Pastoral (Past)	12
Social Action (SA)	14
Mental Health (MH)	15
Opinions (Ops)	16
Skills (Sk)	17
Ecumenism (Ec)	18
Fear (Fe)	19
Vaccinations (Vac)	20
End Times (ET)	21

PHASE TWO

Interview Place Order	
Codes	**Place**
Leadership (Lead)	1
Community (Cty)	2
Digital (Dig)	3
Change (Ch)	4
Onsite (in-person) focus (ons)	5
Communication (Comm)	6
Science (Sci)	7
Social Action (SA)	8
Serving (Serv)	9
Personal Circumstances (PC)	10
Government (Gov)	11
Finances (£)	12
Pastoral (Past)	13
Opinions (Ops)	14
Fear (Fe)	15
Fellowship (Fel)	15
Skills (Sk)	17
Ecumenism (Ec)	18
Mental Health (MH)	19
Physical Touch (PT)	20
End Times (ET)	21
Vaccinations (Vac)	22

Observation Place Order	
Codes	**Place**
Science (Sci)	1
Community (Cty)	2
Digital (Dig)	3
Fellowship (Fel)	4
Onsite (in-person) focus (ons)	5
Leadership (Lead)	6
Communication (Comm)	7
Change (Ch)	8
Physical Touch (PT)	9
Serving (Serv)	10
Social Action (SA)	10
Government (Gov)	12
Personal Circumstances (PC)	13
Fear (Fe)	14
Finances (£)	15
Mental Health (MH)	16
Opinions (Ops)	16
Ecumenism (Ec)	18
Pastoral (Past)	18
Skills (Sk)	20
Vaccinations (Vac)	20
End Times (ET)	22

Overall Place Order	
Codes	**Place**
Leadership (Lead)	1
Community (Cty)	2
Digital (Dig)	3
Science (Sci)	4
Change (Ch)	5
Onsite (in-person) focus (ons)	6
Communication (Comm)	7
Social Action (SA)	8
Serving (Serv)	9
Fellowship (Fel)	10
Government (Gov)	11
Personal Circumstances (PC)	11
Finances (£)	13
Physical Touch (PT)	14
Pastoral (Past)	15
Fear (Fe)	16
Opinions (Ops)	16
Ecumenism (Ec)	18
Mental Health (MH)	19
Skills (Sk)	19
Vaccinations (Vac)	21
End Times (ET)	22

Appendix 9: Church Digital Overview – Pre-Pandemic to April 2023

Code	Pre-pandemic (Early March 2020)	1st Year of UK Lockdowns (March 2020 - February 2021)	Phase One Observation April – July 2021	Phase Two Observation Jan – April 2022	Final Data Trawl April 2023
P1	Had website and active Instagram and Facebook accounts.	Set up YouTube channel in May 2020. Closed during lockdowns and did pre-recorded videos on YouTube. When opened in mid-September, provided onsite and online live stream via YouTube.	Continued to provide dual options for Sunday services.	Continued to provide dual options for Sunday services.	Focus remained the on-site Sunday service. Continued to provide YouTube live stream. No activity on Facebook or Instagram accounts since 31/12/22
P2	Had website and old Facebook page that had not been used recently.	Posted and emailed out notes to begin with of service when church closed in lockdown. Set up new Facebook page March 2020, eventually began posting *"thought for the day"* short video clips. Then went to Zoom and phone service, until set up YouTube channel in September 2020 to post pre-recorded Sunday messages weekly and church re-opened onsite.	Continued sharing thoughts via video on Facebook and platform used to promote events. Continued to use YouTube for pre-recorded Sunday messages.	YouTube used the same, but no more thought videos shared on Facebook, now only used for promoting events or info updates.	Same as phase two observation (but gap in Facebook posts between Jan - March 2023)
P3	Had website and active Facebook account.	Initially did not do a Sunday service but shared other external resources. From May 2020 did live Facebook message from home. Then from August when church opened onsite, did live stream of message only.	Continued to share verse of the day and live Sunday message, interspersed with info/ resources.	Same as phase one.	Same as phase one and two.
P4	Had website and active Facebook page and live streamed services. Had a YouTube channel which was set up 8 years previous.	During first lockdown, the church split into two due to differing opinions. In July opened back up for onsite services. They also live streamed the services and provided mid-week bible studies on Facebook and YouTube.	Continued to share posts of live streamed services and mid-week bible study. Also promoted events and external biblical teaching.	Same as phase one.	Same as phase one and two
CE1	Had a very active Facebook page and online community before pandemic but no website.	During first lockdown, onsite church closed. They did not have the technology to live stream, so people were directed to the pre-existing online community on Facebook for	Set up an extra Facebook which later transitioned to a different name.	Continued to use both Facebook pages to post daily thoughts, prayer requests and information.	Set up new Facebook group in Feb 2023 and Messenger chat groups. Posted same

	Listed on national CofE website.	those that could access it. *"Thought for the day"* videos were posted daily. When churches were allowed to reopen onsite, returned to services in the building and continued Facebook online church community.	Continued with similar posts.		content on all 3 Facebook groups.
CE2	Website and Facebook page, but very little interaction.	Used Zoom for services initially, then recorded services and posted on website for short time, but very minimal Facebook use. When churches were allowed to reopen, returned to onsite services.	Minimal Facebook use - others tagging the page rather than church posting.	Same as phase one.	Same as phase one and two.
CE3	Website page via CofE national website and active Facebook page.	Initially closed onsite services and posted online services from other churches (national and local). In July when started to meet onsite, began to livestream services via Facebook.	Continued to share similar posts to pre-covid, plus covid guidelines and updates on lockdowns. Regular posts focused on social action.	Same as phase one.	Same as phase one and phase two. Noticed leader interviewed no longer posts.
B1	Had own website and active Facebook account. Also had Instagram and Twitter accounts but inactive.	During first lockdown live streamed services online. First few weeks into lockdown also did a midday intercession/ online live stream prayer. Throughout the lockdowns, the periods when churches were allowed to meet onsite, they did not live stream services.	Started to share Zoom prayer links and continued with online livestream via Facebook and scriptures posts. Also shared thoughts on a scripture every few days.	No online services or meetings, only posted scriptures and occasional invites to seasonal services e.g., Mother's Day	Same as phase two.
B2	Had website and active Facebook page. Had YouTube channel but no videos posted pre-covid.	During lockdowns closed church and provided online pre-recorded services via YouTube and shared on Facebook. Also provided mid-week reflections and worship videos. Started Family Fun Fridays online children's show pre-recorded on YouTube.	Continued to post similar posts of recorded services on YouTube, information, updates, and mid-week reflections, but no worship videos.	Continued to post recordings of onsite services and updates and invites to on-sites services.	Reduced activity, but still every couple of days. Posting recordings of online services on YouTube and upcoming events.

CT1	Had website and active Facebook page for whole parish.	During lockdown when churches closed onsite, set up a YouTube channel in April 2020 to livestream services. In early days of lockdown only had equipment to livestream from one church. Mixed source of communication between Facebook, email and posting newsletter.	Regularly continued to share details of weekly services, celebrations, and pandemic updates, but YouTube link of live services was shared less.	Same as phase one, but no live YouTube links shared.	Regular activity but no longer promoting online services via Facebook or website. Only access live streamed services via YouTube channel.
M1	Had website for whole circuit	Created Facebook page for across the circuit March 2020 as first lockdown started. Used mainly for blogs of circuit leaders and sharing of resources through lockdown.	As before.	Occasional blog but more posts from churches promoting in person actives.	No blogs and a lot of posts promoting individual churches activities and social action posts requesting donations.
M2	Had website and active Facebook private group.	Facebook used to share encouraging links, resources, and updates. Used Zoom and Conferoo for services and continued to use them when church re-opened onsite.	Posts start to decrease, but more focus on social projects.	More biblical posts done by two members. When leaders post, tends to be Covid updates.	Leaders post to organise activities and need help. Two members continued to share biblical scriptures and encouraging thoughts.
M3	No website but had an active church Facebook page.	During first lockdown they set up a separate private group on Facebook for the Sunday livestream. On community page put Covid updates.	As lockdowns started to ease, more posts on social action projects on community page. Less mid-week videos and engagement posts on private live stream group.	Created another private Facebook page for Kids church live stream. Public page posted more about community projects. Less posts promoting live stream on Sundays.	Reduced to once or twice a month post on community public page. Live stream page only posts Sunday live stream, and kids church live stream not posted since Dec 2022.