

ESTABLISHING AND RUNNING VIRTUAL CHURCHES LESSONS FROM COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A TEMPORARY NORM OR A NEW FRONTIER?

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Abstract

Most spiritual formation processes are housed within a certain religion. And every religion has over the years gained momentum and maintained their purpose through the physical communion of believers or adherents. This is until the COVID-19 pandemic happened. The pandemic created restrictions that included the closure of the brick and mortar churches and forced members to engage in *Domus ecclesiae* that was dependent on virtual church services. This has undoubtedly raised a number of questions especially among congregants and adherents who still value physical contact in their religious practice. The key questions are: Do we need virtual churches? How will a virtual church operate? And what does it take to begin and run a virtual church? A systematic review of literature operating concurrently with qualitative case study employed to critically and intensely examine online church streaming and virtual projects from the researcher's participation in the following three online churches; Truth Online SDA Church, Otsego Online SDA church and KBC Services of Nairobi Central SDA formed the methodological approach of this study. From the findings, it is clear that that judging by the world's emergencies that rope in the church; the SDA Church should embrace virtual churches and develop policies that will guide their establishment and running.

Keywords: *Virtual Churches, Brick and Mortar Churches, Covid-19 pandemic*

Introduction

Most current health and wellness models consider spirituality an integral role of positive wellness alongside physical, psychological and emotional elements¹. That is why all over the world, even among atheists, people attach their existence to some spiritual connotation (Nsereka & Nwanze, 2021). Most spiritual formation processes are housed within a certain religion (Garssen et al., 2021). And every religion has over the years gained momentum and maintained their purpose through the physical communion of believers or adherents (Garssen et al.,

2021). This is until the COVID-19 pandemic happened.

COVID-19 is defined by the WHO (2020) as a respiratory infection caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus that is mostly transmitted via respiratory droplets or even smaller aerosols that utilize the nose and mouth as primary entry points. Consequently, the onset of Covid-19 brought about restrictions that were to contain the disease in public interest. The restrictions included the wearing of masks, containment measures that were characterized by quarantining and social distance restrictions that also included suspension of public gatherings including

¹ Check the Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model for instance. Started by Engel (1977) it has been expanded by Katerndahl (2008) an basically argues that all health outcomes and results must be

considered and determined by examining the elements that constitute human existence from physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual.



churches. The closure of churches came with mixed reactions. Some believed in science and accepted that this was necessary to manage the disease (Parish, 2020). Others were skeptical about the disease and felt like closure of churches was an affront to religious liberty (Njeru & Kiboi, 2021).

Studies done to consider the pandemic and how it affected church practice especially within the SDA church also presented mixed results. On one side, the challenges associated with online streaming of church services to people at home during the pandemic included moral turpitude occasioned by a physical and even psychological disassociation of the clergy with their worshippers (Hove, 2022; Kidder & Hucks, 2020); psychological distress especially in the form of anxiety and fear occasioned on congregants whose psychological wellbeing depended on physical contact in physical churches with other worshippers (Hove, 2022); the upending of the general understanding and basic practice of ecclesial life (Backer et al., 2020; Hove, 2022); movement of hitherto dormant members of the church to fully disconnect from the church as a result of online fatigue (Pew Survey, 2022); the introduction of digital exclusivity and divide that lent itself to user segmentation that characterize the inability of a section of members to access the online or virtual resources (Kolodzieka, 2020).

Conversely, some scholars and writers, again from the SDA fraternity, have noted that online church presence portends significant benefits and should thus be established and implemented. Kidder and Hucks (2020) for instance noted that online church presence builds awareness among church members about the potential and inevitability of certain alternatives to church participation away from the brick and mortar church format. The Secretariat Report for the 2021 Annual Council under the auspices of the General Conference of

the SDA Church noted that online church presence sets the church up to leveraging on the digital revolution that every institution cannot ignore. But even more poignantly, the Executive Committee of the Northeastern Conference (NEC) headquartered in New York, USA, established the first virtual church in the history of the SDA Church. The Living Manna First Online Seventh-day Adventist Church is fully a virtual church. The need to establish the church apart from the realization that church can be also at home and not just in the physical church is also based on the ability of the virtual church to reach more people (Adventist Review, 2022). Further, the virtual church allows direct member participation, real-time feedback from the members and the ability of the church to consequently respond also in real-time. In the experience of the virtual church pastor, Ivor Myers, speaking on the difference between the virtual church and online streaming of church services notes that, *“The difference between streaming services online and forming a virtual church is that the people online are not on the outside looking in; they are not just joining a service; they are the service,”* (Adventist Review, 2022, Para, 4). Although, of note, the online streaming services offer a foundational framework for virtual churches.

Further, the virtual church offers a desirable avenue for churches to access members from diverse demographics and thus helps the church fully meet the needs of all its peoples (Hall & Kołodziejska, 2021). Also, it would allow for the generation and procurement of pastors and other resource persons to facilitate services at the comfort of their different geographical locations and thus help save travel and accommodation costs while accessing their value (Kuryliak & Ovchar, 2021). The key challenge noted by every scholar who views virtual churches as problematic is the fact that members of brick and mortar churches have

positively been indoctrinated and fully appreciate the history of the church, its unique social structures and fellowship that indelibly and strongly connect them to one another; a factor that virtual churches threaten to lose (Hall & Kołodziejska, 2021). Other antagonist scholars view virtual churches as a means to “steal” members from physical churches and all the ramifications that come with it (Adventist Review, 2022). However, Abraham Jules, the NEC President is not scared of the last assertion as he poignantly argues that;

“I have always said that if a pastor is scared about losing members to any other congregation, any other preacher, or any other establishment in town, you should lose them. If you are doing what is right and people still leave, it is a free country. You do your best to minister.”
(Jules in Adventist Review, 2022, para, 7)

Nonetheless, even with the consideration of virtual churches catalyzed by the pandemic, key questions still arise. One of those is, can church be church without physically meeting together? Also, is worship and church attendance the same thing? Further, Sabbath is a 24-hour event but we value the 3-5 hours in church more than the rest. Can we have those 3-5 hours virtually? And more significantly, is a virtual church a possible reality? Further, and important for the present study, there has not been an empirical evaluation of The Living Manna First Online Seventh-day Adventist Virtual Church and as such, the benefits aforementioned may not necessarily be empirically valid. Further, there is need to examine the veracity of establishing and running a virtual church in geographical areas like in Africa and particularly in Kenya where different perspectives, histories and cultural dynamics may promote or inhibit full-scale acceptance of

virtual churches. There is also need to look into some of the challenges that may inhibit the establishment and running of virtual churches to avoid future pitfalls if and when virtual churches in some form are fully embraced.

All these questions are underscored by the fact that during the height of the covid-19 people were forced to work from home where possible. Some institutions for instance continued with studies online. Therefore, if students can study virtually and workers work virtually, can worshippers also worship virtually? If yes, what would it take to establish and run a virtual church? Consequently, this study is significant because church leaders need to be sure if having virtual churches is consistent with faith. Further, members need to know if virtual churches are good enough for purposes of faith and evangelists and pastors will need working information on how to start and run virtual churches. The key proposition of this paper is that judging by the world’s emergencies that rope in the church; the SDA Church should embrace virtual churches and develop policies that will guide their establishment and running. Therefore, the three main research questions are:

- i. Do we need virtual churches?
- ii. How will a virtual church operate?
- iii. What does it take to begin and run a virtual church?

Methodology

This study combined qualitative case study research approaches with systematic literature review. The systematic literature review looked at literature that have generally examined the case of establishment and running of virtual churches post COVID-19 pandemic. It also specifically looks at literature that examines whether the church needs virtual churches and whether virtual churches are thus a

possibility. It also examines literature that have looked at how a virtual church operates and later literature on what it takes to begin and run a virtual church. In the systematic review of literature, this study critically examined the works of other authors in a bid to relate their findings to this paper's research questions. To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the systematic literature review, an inclusion and exclusion criteria grounded on the tenets of the SLR was used. The inclusion criteria thus included examination of works based on primary data where the authors gained knowledge relevant to the research questions through questionnaires and interviews of the respondents concerned or through analysis of reliable secondary data. Also, the journals included were full texts that were published. Moreover, to further tighten the scope of the review, only articles written after 2019 were used because they were directly in tune with the pandemic subject and were reliably aligned with virtual churches during and post pandemic. Further, the journals and published dissertations included for review were those that were related to the study's search key words which were but not limited to "virtual churches" OR "churches established virtually after the pandemic" OR "Virtual-run churches post pandemic" AND "operating a virtual church, OR "How to operate a virtual church" AND "resources needed to run a virtual church" OR "what is required to run a virtual church"

The systematic literature review was meant to test the hypothesis of the study which is: judging by the world's emergencies that rope in the church; the SDA Church should embrace virtual churches and develop policies that will guide their establishment and running. And based on the search strategy and scoping review used in this

study, only 10 pieces of literature met the inclusion criteria. The articles included peer reviewed journals.

Further, on the qualitative case study front, the case study was employed and appropriate because it critically and intensely examined 3 online church streaming and virtual projects from the researcher's participation in the following online churches: Truth Online SDA Church, Otsego Online SDA church and KBC Services of Nairobi Central SDA. The qualitative case study² was grounded on the constructivism paradigm which unlike positivism believes that there are various avenues of accessing the truth and not just one objective way (Stake, 2008). As such, this study used subjective mechanisms to mostly examine the 'What' and 'why' questions which are not only aligned with the case study design but offers an in-depth, credible and trustworthy examination of the study variables. Thematic analysis that examines the insights, opinions, perspectives and interpretations of texts being investigated was employed as the analytical tool. The thematic analysis was done on the Systematic Literature Research review and the qualitative case study and the themes were:

- i. Do we need virtual churches?
- ii. How will a virtual church operate?
- iii. What does it take to begin and run a virtual church?

To further entrench the trustworthiness of the study, observation was used by the researcher who using field notes was able to underscore the happenings in the three churches that had robust virtual elements in their church services. The observation notes were added to augment the arguments of the literature review. So the systematic review

² Qualitative is differentiated from quantitative because while the former uses statistical and numerical tools to describe or explain data, the

former uses non-numerical data to access insights, experiences, opinions, perspectives, attitudes among other qualitative-based elements.



and observation notes more or less acted concurrently.

Findings

This section thus presents the findings based on the three thematic areas which also align with the research questions. As already noted the systematic literature review is concurrently augmented by the filed note based on observation the researcher made in Truth Online SDA Church, Otsego Online SDA church and KBC Services of Nairobi Central SDA.

Do we need virtual churches?

An analysis of literature shows from the outset a need for virtual churches for certain key reasons. One of the key reasons is pegged on the need to include and reach as many people as possible with the gospel in an accessible and convenient format as possible (Kuryliak & Ovchar, 2021). Kolodzieka, (2020) considers the reason attached to reach and participation and observes that:

The analyses show that as a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions, media production and use increased substantially in some digital media formats produced by the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, which was on the one hand a response to the pandemic context as such, and on the other hand, a reaction to the discriminatory laws which drastically limited the Church's activities offline. The pandemic has opened up new possibilities of reach and participation, but also increased the chances of digital divides and exclusions (pg. 4).

While Kolodzieka, (2020) admits the potential for virtual churches to improve

reach and participation he also notices the gaps in exclusivity and digital divide. Further, to reinforce the need for virtual churches, the Secretariat Report for the 2021 Annual Council under the umbrella of the General Conference of the SDA Church observed that online church presence sets the church up to leveraging on the digital revolution that every institution cannot ignore. This means that they view virtual churches as conforming to the inevitability of the digital space influence among believers. Corpuz and Sarmiento (2022) corroborates this when they assert that,

“The world is facing unprecedented shifts in the way the faithful celebrate the liturgy. ... one type of Domus ecclesiae (house church) in the cyber Church which is a type of Church that uses the online mode in the celebration of the liturgy. This type of Church exists primarily for the continuation of the celebration of the liturgy with the use of technology or the internet. But more importantly, the cyber churches (read virtual) says that the church is amenable to conforming to the pervasive digital revolution which cannot be ignored (pg. 117)”

The digital revolution aligns mostly with the deep mediatization theory propounded by Hepp et al (2018). The basic premise of the theory is grounded on recognition that the media and its associated platforms are linked strongly to societal life which includes the practice of religion. To that end, institutions like churches are confronted with the need to constructively



embrace media innovation to survive and live fully to its purpose³.

Further, the virtual church allows direct member participation, real-time feedback from the members and the ability of the church to consequently respond also in real-time. According to the Adventist Review (2022), virtual churches more or less extinguishes the inertia that is pervasive in traditional brick and mortar churches where while it is assumed that feedback is welcomed and easily accessed and expressed within the physical church, the online platform offers avenues through the interfaces that actually encourages members to offer feedback and expect quick communication from church leaders and administrators.

Further, the possibility and validity of the virtual church is reinforced by the scholarly and empirical observation that the virtual church provide a desirable path for churches to access members from diverse demographics and thus help the church fully meet the spiritual needs of all its peoples (Holleman et al., 2022; Hall & Kołodziejska, 2021; Kuryliak & Ovchar, 2021). This means that the virtual church not only accesses people from their unique demographic inclinations in terms of age, gender, socio-economic status, educational levels and marital and geographical residences but also offer avenues for spiritual nourishment. Speaking of spiritual nourishment offered by virtual churches, Corpuz and Sarmiento (2022) noted that:

“The use of house Churches during a pandemic and its emphasis on liturgical renewal, in particular, has substantially and positively impacted the spiritual lives of the faithful. The faithful can now receive the

spiritual nourishment in the Eucharist via the internet, television, radio, and other means of social communications (pg. 119).”

Moreover, analysis shows that virtual churches are possible and necessary because they would allow for the identification and access of pastors and other resource persons to facilitate services at the comfort of their different geographical locations and thus help save travel and accommodation costs while accessing their valuable biblical insights (Johnston et al., 2022; Village & Francis, 2020). The scholars observe that within the church, accessing pastors from abroad, pastors and facilitators with long standing experiences and renowned deep rooted biblical understanding and value in helping disciple church members requires getting them from far countries and thus using a lot of money. Also, their physical presence means that they cannot be used by more than one church in a day. However, virtual churches allow easy access and these pastors in the comfort of their houses or office spaces can speak in more than one church in a day depending on the different time zones (Holleman et al., 2022; Hall & Kołodziejska, 2021; Kuryliak & Ovchar, 2021; Village & Francis, 2020).

However, one key argumentation against virtual churches that must be mentioned here concerns the relationship between Sabbath observance and taking the church online. Njeru and Kiboi (2021) observe that *“the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church has maintained the physical observance of the Sabbath to be one of the marks of*

³ The deep mediatization theory is more extensively examined in a related unpublished work done by Rei Kesis titled, *“Challenges and*

opportunities in public evangelism during Covid-19: the Case of the Virtual Public Evangelism conducted by the UEAB Field School of Evangelism”

*identifying the true church*⁴, the pandemic and the need to go online therefore seems to destroy that principle and SDA members are feeling biblically shortchanged (pg. 1).” From this view, what is clear that for virtual churches to be considered possible especially in Africa and Kenya there is need for a thorough demystifying of the virtual church within the biblical canon and within an understanding of faith. If it does not happen, the attitudes of members who would otherwise form the virtual church would undoubtedly be contaminated and that church would be a non-starter.

I noticed the value of virtual churches in my engagement with Truth Online SDA Church, Otsego Online SDA church and KBC Services of Nairobi Central SDA during the pandemic. One of the values that were clear was the intention of the said churches to reach as many people as possible. However, I did not see efforts to help reduce user segmentation. Two, the engagement between the church administration and the members was real-time. In fact as a pastor preaching in those churches, avenues were created and I could see them, where members even responded to the message of my sermons via comments, prayers and even questions. To a significant extent, there were days that I preached in more than online virtual church within one day and I felt the resourcefulness of that exercise. What I did not see or grasp is the strategy of those churches to follow up members in a bid to reinforce connectedness.

How will a virtual church operate?

How that virtual church would operate is ably determined by examining the first SDA virtual church. The virtual church as practiced by The Living Manna First Online Seventh-day Adventist Church operates largely as a traditional physical

church where periodic church elections are held, tithes and offerings are given, the general liturgical formats are periodically followed and where typical traditional church auxiliaries are maintained. The only difference being the assimilation of members from every region of the globe (Adventist Review, 2022). It seems that this church practices hybridized virtual churches which basically combine the virtual element with traditional elements to try and create a wholesome church. The hybridized virtual church is better discussed in the next theme. Further, the elements of specialized staff and the resources needed to operate the virtual church are also discussed fully in the next theme.

However, I noticed in the virtual churches that I engaged in; that is, Truth Online SDA Church, Otsego Online SDA church and KBC Services of Nairobi Central SDA during the pandemic that they were more focused on the single stream virtual church capacity. To that extent, while it was easy to see the traditional formats of tithes and offerings and other liturgical services, the need to bridge the digital divide and the need to fulfill the psychological demands for physical fellowship were not evident.

What does it take to begin and run a virtual church?

From the analysis of literature, there is almost an overarching consensus among scholars who have engaged in empirical review of virtual churches during and post pandemic that technological infrastructure availability and general financial stability are key factors in beginning and running virtual churches (Baker et al., 2020; Johnston et al., 2021; Seabright & Raiber, 2020). In fact, Seabright and Raiber, (2020) note that churches that were sufficiently endowed with technological infrastructure that supports virtual churches and who were

⁴ The marks of the true church mainly speak of the elements in the apostolic creed adopted in the Nicene Council of AD 325 which said: “I believe in

one holy catholic and apostolic church, the communion of saints.”



live streaming before the pandemic had more seamless virtual churches during the pandemic than those who started from scratch during the pandemic. Holleman et al. (2022) for instance examined virtual preparedness of churches, especially among Roman Catholic churches, and noted for instance that:

“We found that, while many congregations were technologically and financially equipped for a time of social distancing and economic recession, there were stark inequalities in levels of preparedness among congregations on the basis of race, class, size, urban/rural location, religious tradition, and the age of congregations’ parishioners. In particular, Catholic congregations and congregations with older attendees tended to lack streaming or online communication capacities, and both rural and small congregations had more limited technological infrastructure and less financial cushion” (pg, 163).

The technological infrastructure that is spoken about includes the ability of the church to offer live streaming in real time as the service is going on; meaning that online, quality cameras and expert human resource capacities being present. It also means that the church has recording capacity to place videos within their website for members who missed the live church services (Kołodziejska, 2022; Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020). Financial capacity means the sufficiency of money to ensure that all the virtual church processes go on uninterrupted.

Other scholars have noted that virtual churches are enabled by reducing user

segmentation. Analyzed studies show that virtual churches do not operate in an environment where some congregants, especially those from rural geographical areas, low-income homes and older members, have low access to the resources (technological-enabling gadgets like phones and computers, financial resources to access internet, negative attitudes) needed to access and participate meaningfully in virtual church services (Holleman et al., 2022; Kilonzi & Omwalo, 2021; Kołodziejska, 2022; Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020; Widjaja et al., 2021).

Also, some scholars writing still on the subject of virtual churches during and post the pandemic have observed that hybridized virtual churches work best for all members (Roso et al., 2021; Village & Francis, 2020). Hybridized virtual churches are those whose services are done fully online but which also retains some traditional formats that are supremely important to members. One of the key traditional formats includes physical visitations by clergy to members for face-to-face prayer services and connections. It is estimated that the hybridized virtual churches creates follow-up capacities that help to bridge the psychological gaps that exist especially among members of the church who get disassociated when the physical touch is lost (Francis & Village, 2021; Roso et al., 2021). In fact, Parish (2020) more pointedly speaks about the emotional and psychological effects of virtual churches for members and hopes for some form of hybrid to help bridge it. He thus says:

“Given its liturgical, pastoral, and sacramental significance, the pandemic-housed church service was a highly charged moment for the relationship between the Christian churches and the faithful, and between religious worship and social media. In the shift from embodied community to virtual

congregation that followed, the material absence of physical presence in collective worship was striking, as was the psychological presence of that absence (pg. 276) and accommodation to bridge the divide is needed.”

Further, both Holleman et al. (2022) and Johnston et al. (2021) and inferred in almost all the other reviewed studies highlight the need for specialized staff to successfully run virtual churches. Specialized staff is meant to operate the virtual church as effectively as possible.

On a more qualitative front, there is need to examine the attitudes towards virtual churches among a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Studies reviewed have shown that attitude and perspectives regarding virtual churches have a significant correlation with the effectiveness and success of virtual churches wherever they are established (Village & Francis, 2020). There were some of the influential church stakeholders who still feel that virtual churches are not aligned to both the biblical precepts and SDA church policy. On the other hand, there are those among the more optimistic group, mostly younger church members between the 20-30 age brackets who feel that it is about time that the church went virtual to enhance accessibility, convenience and widespread viewership (Kołodziejka, 2022; Sulkowski & Ignatowski, 2020).

From my own observations engaging the virtual platforms of Truth Online SDA Church, Otsego Online SDA church and KBC Services of Nairobi Central SDA during the pandemic, I noticed certain salient issues especially related to the present study. One, all the churches based on my observations had the requisite technological infrastructure required to sustain a virtual church. Two, the financial independence of those churches were both

observable and admirable considering the high levels of virtual church capacities I saw. Three, there appeared to be specialized experts in their staff who enabled seamless processing and operations of the virtual church. However, what was notably absent was some form of training for the clergy and the members regarding the basic formats of virtual church that they were to be immersed in. It was assumed that both the clergy and the members had almost *a priori* knowledge of virtual elements and yet this was not clearly the case. Further, a look at some of the people who participated showed that older members were left out and it thus inferred a negative attitude towards virtual churches among older members with no efforts among the churches that constitute this case study to bring them on board.

Conclusion and Implications to Knowledge and Practice

From the foregoing, what is clear is that is that judging by the world's emergencies that rope in the church; the SDA Church should embrace virtual churches and develop policies that will guide their establishment and running. This conclusion is premised on the finding that the virtual church is grounded on the necessity to take account of and reach as many potential congregants as possible with the gospel in an accessible and convenient format as possible. Further, the virtual church places the church within the digital revolution that is both inevitable and pervasive. Again, the virtual church allows direct member participation, real-time feedback from the members and the ability of the church to consequently respond also in real-time. Furthermore, the likelihood and soundness of the virtual church is strengthened by the scholarly and empirical observation that the virtual church offers an advantageous path for churches to access members from different demographics and thus help the church engage in robust spiritual formation. Also, it is increasingly clear that virtual

churches are possible due to its ability and capacity to permit the identification and access of pastors and other resource persons to facilitate services at the comfort of their different geographical locations and thus help save travel and accommodation costs while accessing their valuable biblical insights.

Further, technological infrastructure availability and general financial stability are key factors in beginning and running virtual churches. Also, virtual churches are enabled by reducing user segmentation. Again, hybridized virtual churches work best for all members. Studies highlight the need for specialized staff to successfully run virtual churches and there is need to examine the attitudes towards virtual churches among a broad spectrum of stakeholders.

The following are the key contribution to knowledge, presented succinctly thus:

- i. A Church must be made up of people who at some point must know and interact with each other physically. This is important for accountability and follow-up. This is the reason for proposing a hybridized virtual church
- ii. A virtual church will help the sick and those whose work takes them away from home regularly and therefore they lack a consistent community to engage with
- iii. Training of pastors should now move towards including virtual ministry training
- iv. Churches can begin with department of virtual ministries at local church level
- v. Recruitment should seek to rope in the tech-savvy young people and those who are unable to attend fellowship

- vi. Policies that include the church manual need to be developed so that church leaders, church programs and church members consent and give commitment plus consistent engagement with the virtual church

Caution is given regarding virtual churches. The possibility of member disconnectedness due to virtual space fatigue is real and valid. Churches must therefore create a hybrid virtual church that couples the virtual elements with the important and almost never-changing dynamics of visitations that exist in the traditional brick and mortar church format. Further, effort should be enacted to bridge the digital divide experienced especially among older church members still steeped in their traditional view on church. This is better helped through training on virtual church and its biblical implications.

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