



Beyond Walls: Redefining Church Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic, through Autoethnographic Reflections

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ABSTRACT

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a paradigm shift in religious practices, necessitating the reimagining of traditional congregational gatherings. This study delved into this transformation by employing autoethnography as a methodological lens to explore the re-definition of the church within the context of the pandemic. Focusing on personal experiences, observations, and reflections, this research navigated the terrain of virtual worship spaces and the accompanying spiritual yearning that emerged during the COVID-19 era. This study shed light on how the researcher grappled with the re-defined concept of "church." It investigated the theological implications of congregational dispersion and virtual connectedness. The findings of this study revealed that COVID-19 led to the redefinition of "church" and the reframing of faith within the context of unprecedented circumstances. The study's core revelation revolved around the dynamic adaptability of faith when faced with adversity. This introspective reflection showcased the profound re-evaluation of what constitutes "church," the renewed understanding of faith's essence, and the recalibration of its practical application. Church is better experienced even in unprecedented times if it is understood as *space* rather than *place*. Therefore, the study recommends that churches constantly interrogate their theological stances of what the Church really means. The revisiting of scripture and understanding the historic practices and understanding of the church has implications for how the 21st-century church operates and applies its theological teachings.

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INTRODUCTION

In the throes of an unprecedented global event, the COVID-19 pandemic, the intricate fabric of everyday life underwent a profound transformation. As the world grappled with the ramifications of a highly contagious virus, societal norms and practices were upended, and institutions across all sectors faced the imperative to adapt or face irrelevance.¹ Among these institutions, religious communities confronted a particularly complex challenge – how to sustain communal worship, fellowship, and spiritual sustenance while adhering to stringent public health measures. The pandemic prompted a shift in religious practices that propelled religious institutions to navigate uncharted territories in a digital landscape. Congregational worship, traditionally confined to physical sanctuaries, migrated to virtual platforms as churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples suspended in-person gatherings to curb the spread of the virus. Congregants faced a novel mode of spiritual engagement – a virtual realm characterized by screens, disembodied voices, and mediated connections.

¹ Felix Made et al., "Impact of Level Five Lockdown on the Incidence of COVID-19: Lessons Learned from South Africa," *Pan African Medical Journal* 39, no. 1 (2021).

During South Africa's stringent COVID-19 lockdown regulations, the Christian community underwent a profound and unparalleled transformation. As one of the most rigorous lockdown measures globally, the regulations brought about changes where church doors, once open wide to the faithful, were then closed as physical sanctuaries became dormant spaces.² The echoes of collective prayers, hymns, and sermons, which had reverberated through these sacred halls, were temporarily silenced. This abrupt pause in congregational activities led to a sense of spiritual dislocation for many believers and this highlights the vital role those communal gatherings played in nurturing their faith and fostering a shared sense of identity. Yet, amidst this new reality, the Christian community showcased remarkable resilience and adaptability. Congregations turned to digital platforms to bridge the gap left by physical separation, seeking refuge in virtual spaces that allowed worship and fellowship to continue in some form. Online streaming services, virtual prayer meetings, and digital study groups emerged as channels through which believers sought to recreate the sense of community, they had long cherished.

This transformation was not without challenges. Congregants faced a myriad of emotional, psychological, and theological complexities as they grappled with the disconnection between virtual and physical worship spaces. The virtual realm, while serving as a lifeline in a time of crisis, could not fully replicate the tangible presence and shared energy of in-person gatherings. This schism between the sacred and the digital prompted believers to reevaluate the essence of communal worship, the significance of physical proximity, and the role of technology in shaping their spiritual experiences. This led the researcher reconsider the theological implication of what *church* is and how *faith* is applied in such circumstances as reflected in the preceding sub-sections. The sub-sections cover the literature review of similar works by offering a historical analysis of the patterns of worship and locating them to current trends. The second section looks at the conceptual framework: faith-based adaptability which is sourced from the book of Hebrews 11. Thirdly it discusses the methodology and why an autoethnography was the justified approach. The fourth section precedes to discussion of the findings and therefore leads to the fifth section being the discussion. The sixth section offers an overview of the recommendations the study makes, and the last section concludes with the key lessons and findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolving Church Dynamics: Historicizing Shifting Patterns of Worship

Lockdowns, social distancing measures, and restrictions on public gatherings forced religious communities to reevaluate their traditional practices and embrace innovative approaches to maintain spiritual connections with their congregations. Scholars contend that the pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of rigid church structures that heavily relied on physical gatherings.³ They argue that the crisis underscores the need for churches to embrace flexibility, leveraging digital platforms and hybrid models of worship to ensure continuity of spiritual engagement. This shift has challenged the mindset within religious leadership, encouraging them to view technology not as a challenge to tradition but as a tool that can enhance accessibility, inclusivity, and community-building.⁴ When considering biblical texts from the New Testament, the historical accounts of the early Christian community, show that the disciples of Jesus would convene in various locations for their gatherings. In Jerusalem, the disciples held their meetings in private residences, moving from one house to another as a part of their practice (Acts 2:46). Another instance is noted in Troas, where they gathered in an 'Upper Room' of a house, often identified as the Cenacle. Notably, the Apostle Paul referred to Gaius as the host for the entire Church of Corinth (Romans 16:23), suggesting that the congregation might have assembled at his house.⁵ However, it's important to note that the reference to 'house to house' and 'upper room' does not conclusively indicate that these spaces were exclusively designated for gathering. Rather, they likely represented portions of houses that were utilized for these purposes. These residences were typically modest, reflecting the common architectural style of the Graeco-Roman world and often belonging to humble individuals within the community.⁶

² Devanand Moonasar et al., "COVID-19: Lessons and Experiences from South Africa's First Surge," *BMJ Global Health* 6, no. 2 (2021): e004393.

³ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, "Saint Augustine and COVID-19 Pandemic: The Future and Divine Providence," *Tansian University Journal of Arts, Management & Social Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2020).

⁴ Jeff Clyde G Corpuz and Philip Joseph D Sarmiento, "Going Back to Basics: Experiencing Domus Ecclesiae (House Church) in the Celebration of the Liturgy during COVID-19," *Practical Theology* 14, no. 1-2 (2021): 110-22.

⁵ Kanu, "Saint Augustine and COVID-19 Pandemic: The Future and Divine Providence."

⁶ Kanu, "Saint Augustine and COVID-19 Pandemic: The Future and Divine Providence."

Historical records frequently suggest that early Christians often chose to gather in homes due to the prevailing fear of persecution by Romans.⁷ The practice of domestic worship among early Christians during the period spanning the first to the third centuries resonated with the fundamental ethos of early Christianity.⁸ In the first century, Christianity faced constraints in establishing dedicated worship spaces. In Jerusalem, a brief period saw Christians participating in worship activities at the temple and synagogues, operating within the broader context of Judaism (permitted religion).⁹ However, over the subsequent three centuries, Christians experienced a series of challenges stemming from various forms of persecution, a situation that endured until the eventual legalization of Christianity by Theodosius to a permitted religion.¹⁰

“The early Church practice for worship was primarily in a house Church due to political, economic, and sociocultural reasons. However, house Church as has been experienced in this present time is the result of lockdown, home quarantine, and social distancing to contain the spread of COVID-19”.¹¹ The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a profound leveller among individuals, prompting the confrontation of the stark inevitability of mortality. Within the context of today's pandemic, the liturgical landscape has compelled churches to return to fundamental elements, including the faith community, prayer practices, engagement with the Word of God, participation in the Eucharist, and connection to the Divine.¹² Notably, House Churches have emerged as sanctuaries for those of faith, encapsulating the essential essence of religious devotion.¹³ In essence, the concept of House Churches represents an endeavour to retrace the footsteps of the early Christian congregations, harkening back to the foundational principles that underpinned the earliest expressions of faith.¹⁴

Worship Space than Place

In Christian theology, the significance of place has been duly recognized, encompassing a profound understanding of sanctified grounds and consecrated structures. The concept of pilgrimage, which holds substantial importance in various Christian traditions, underscores the prioritization of specific physical locales as inherently sacred.¹⁵ This prioritization can be attributed to a multitude of factors ranging from miraculous occurrences and divine visions that have transpired on those grounds, to the housing of significant relics.¹⁶ Moreover, the antiquity of certain locations as spaces of worship also contributes to their distinct holiness. However, there has been an emphasis on worship space rather than place by theologians. The intersection of geography and religion presents a rich and diverse realm of inquiries, encompassing an extensive range of questions to explore.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it is noted that there has been a certain hesitancy to delve into what might be perceived as peripheral domains within this field. Within the realm of geography, there have been several endeavours aimed at discovering fresh terminologies to articulate the spatial dimensions of modern religious practices and "grounded theologies."¹⁸

A religious gathering serves as a unifying platform where individuals come together to partake in communal worship. This often entails collective hymn or psalm singing, reading and expounding upon scriptures through sermons, both shared and personal prayer, and frequent participation in rituals like the Eucharist or Holy Communion.¹⁹ In certain contexts, the continuity of worship holds paramount importance, exemplified by the unbroken devotion observed over centuries at a particular location, even if it involves solitary prayers offered by a single priest.²⁰ However, for most Christians, these rituals are best experienced within the nurturing environment of a supportive community of co-believers.²¹ Active participation in shared worship

⁷ Anscar J Chupungco, *Handbook for Liturgical Studies: Introduction to the Liturgy*, vol. 1 (Liturgical Press, 1997).

⁸ Kanu, “Saint Augustine and COVID-19 Pandemic: The Future and Divine Providence.”

⁹ Kanu, “Saint Augustine and COVID-19 Pandemic: The Future and Divine Providence.”

¹⁰ William Hugh Clifford Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014).

¹¹ Tshenolo J Madigele and James N Amanze, “Churches and COVID-19 in Botswana,” in *Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa* (Routledge, 2022), 172–85.

¹² Grant Sandercock-Brown, “Paul’s Letters as a Guide to Online Worship: Reflections on a Denominational Survey of Worship during Lockdown,” *Practical Theology* 16, no. 1 (2023): 95–107.

¹³ Chupungco, *Handbook for Liturgical Studies: Introduction to the Liturgy*.

¹⁴ Kanu, “Saint Augustine and COVID-19 Pandemic: The Future and Divine Providence.”

¹⁵ Douglas Davies, “Christianity,” *Sacred Place*, 1994, 33–61.

¹⁶ John R Bryson, Lauren Andres, and Andrew Davies, “COVID-19, Virtual Church Services and a New Temporary Geography of Home,” *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie* 111, no. 3 (2020): 360–72.

¹⁷ Lily Kong, “Geography and Religion: Trends and Prospects,” *Progress in Human Geography* 14, no. 3 (1990): 355–71.

¹⁸ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*.

¹⁹ Kanu, “Saint Augustine and COVID-19 Pandemic: The Future and Divine Providence.”

²⁰ Roger Arguile, *A Church in a Landscape: A History of South Creake Church* (Jubilee Publications, 2011).

²¹ Kanu, “Saint Augustine and COVID-19 Pandemic: The Future and Divine Providence.”

stands as a foundational element of religious life, fostering strong bonds among individuals. This sense of fellowship plays a pivotal role in shaping the connections between people and their place of worship. Forging relationships centred around shared worship experiences solidifies a collective identity. Unfortunately, these fundamental principles have encountered disruptions due to the implementation of social distancing measures and lockdown protocols.²² A church, although physically situated within a place, plays a crucial role in fostering and enriching the local connection of its members, all the while strengthening their shared sense of belonging. This article acknowledges the undeniable significance of the church and its physical gatherings. However, the advent of COVID-19 has unintentionally prompted a contemplation on the essence of being a part of the church—the body of Christ—when the conventional act of congregating within the church building is impeded.²³ This situation has, in a way, prompted the re-evaluation of the comprehension of the church beyond its often-associated elements like structures, administrative setups, financial planning, ministerial roles, leadership dynamics, theological stances, doctrines, and its visible manifestations.²⁴ Some assert that COVID-19 has taught a dimension of the church as invisible as stipulated in literature:

“The invisible church (ecclesia invisible) is composed of all those who have been reached by the Word of God and have responded in faith, wherever they may be. According to Luther, this is the true church. It has no head other than Christ. The risen Christ operates through the Word in the power of the Spirit. No human being can grant or deny access to this fellowship. The power of the new life of Christ flows into the members and through the members into the world. Expressed in Paul’s terminology, the Spirit of Christ permeates the Body of Christ and empowers its members to witness to Christ and build up the Body of Christ with their respective gifts”.²⁵

This dimension of the church shows how COVID-19 has called for the rethinking and re-imagining of certain theological pre-suppositions about the Church.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Faith Based Adaptability

Rooted in faith and grounded in the biblical narrative, this paper uses a conceptual framework on *faith-based adaptability* which is adapted from the book of Hebrews 11:1-2 (ESV): “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation”. This verse encapsulates the essence of faith as the foundation for adaptability, emphasizing the assurance and conviction that believers have in God’s promises even when circumstances are uncertain. It resonates with the concept of churches navigating challenges with a strong sense of faith, trusting in God’s guidance, and responding creatively to changing circumstances. A prevailing sentiment within the Christian community was that virtual church meetings lacked the authenticity and spiritual depth associated with traditional physical gatherings. Many felt that the digital medium diluted the communal aspect of worship and that the tangible connection with fellow believers and the sacred space was irreplaceable. Drawing on the framework of faith-based adaptability, this research delves into an alternative perspective that confronts these initial reservations. This framework posits that faith empowers believers to adapt and thrive, irrespective of external circumstances, and this principle extends to the realm of worship.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing autoethnography as the primary methodology. Autoethnography was chosen due to its suitability for investigating personal experiences and reflections within the broader socio-cultural context of evolving church practices. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the researcher’s own experiences while enabling the extrapolation of broader themes and insights that resonate with literature.²⁶ Within the realm of academic inquiry, conventional research methodologies have faced scrutiny for their inherent limitations, often failing to encompass the researcher’s unique perspectives and underlying worldviews.²⁷ However, the emergence of autoethnography offers a distinctive pathway, harnessing the power of the researcher’s personal experiences to illuminate cultural

²² Jerry Pillay, “COVID-19 Shows the Need to Make Church More Flexible,” *Transformation* 37, no. 4 (2020): 266–75.

²³ Sandercock-Brown, “Paul’s Letters as a Guide to Online Worship: Reflections on a Denominational Survey of Worship during Lockdown.”

²⁴ David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis books, 2011).

²⁵ Klaus Nürnberger, *Martin Luther’s Message for Us Today: A Perspective from the South* (Klaus Nurnberger, 2005).

²⁶ Robin M Boylorn and Mark P Orbe, “Introduction Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice,” in *Critical Autoethnography* (Routledge, 2016), 13–26.

²⁷ Dwayne Custer, “A Father’s Death: The Therapeutic Power of Autoethnography.,” *Qualitative Report* 27, no. 2 (2022).

phenomena.²⁸ This approach cultivates a heightened sense of self-awareness among researchers, enabling them to position themselves as integral participants in their investigations.²⁹

The utilization of autoethnography in this study is substantiated by the inherent nature of the research topic and objectives. The exploration of personal faith experiences, particularly within the context of the Christian community's response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitated an approach that intimately engaged with the researcher's own reflections, emotions, and insights.³⁰ Autoethnography provides a fitting avenue to authentically examine the dynamics of faith, worship, and community within the framework of one's own experiences.³¹ By embracing this approach, the study gained the ability to weave a narrative that delves beyond surface-level observations. It helped in penetrating the underlying nuances, motivations, and tensions that shaped individual responses and collective attitudes. This personal narrative was then seamlessly interwoven with broader cultural, historical, and social contexts, fostering a more profound understanding of the researched phenomenon. Furthermore, autoethnography allows for the challenging of assumptions and the unveiling of complexities that traditional research methods might overlook. Ultimately, the use of autoethnography aligned with the study's aspiration to provide a holistic and empathetic exploration of the intricate intersection between faith, personal experiences, and the unfolding challenges faced by the Christian community during unprecedented times.³²

Autoethnography inherently involves the researcher sharing their personal experiences and reflections. Positionality acknowledges that the researcher's subjectivity influences how they construct and narrate their story. Positionality encourages the researcher to critically reflect on how their own background, cultural context, and life experiences impact their understanding of the subject matter.³³ This self-awareness helped in minimizing biases and interpreting data more comprehensively.

FINDINGS

My Personal Interpretation of Church: It is not a building / I am church.

In an era where the familiar sights and sounds of church buildings have been temporarily dimmed, a profound realization has taken root—an understanding that transcends physical structures and invites us to embrace a more intrinsic truth. This personal interpretation speaks to the essence of the church, unveiling a profound reality that goes beyond the bricks and mortar. It's a revelation that proclaims, "*It is not a building; I am the church.*" The conventional concept of *church* often conjures images of grand sanctuaries and echoing hymns, places where believers congregate for worship. However, as the boundaries of physical gatherings became limited, the essence of church emerged from the shadows—a truth that resonates even in the quiet corners of our homes. I am the church." This declaration illuminates a shift in perspective. No longer confined to a designated space, the essence of church resides within each individual believer. Just as the early church was a collective body of believers (1 Corinthians 12:27), so too are we, as individuals, vessels of Christ's presence.

In this interpretation, we embody a living sanctuary. Our hearts become altars where prayers ascend, and our lives become living testimonies. This realization reaffirms that wherever we are whether in solitude or amidst a virtual congregation God's Spirit dwells within, transforming us into walking temples (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) "I am church" defies the limitations of distance. This declaration unites believers across digital landscapes, reinforcing the truth that community thrives beyond physical proximity. As virtual connections form, our shared faith breathes life into these digital spaces, and God's presence bridges the gaps. This personal interpretation beckons us to embody the essence of worship, not bound by the structures of physical buildings but rooted in the sincerity of our hearts (John 4:23-24). The songs we sing, the prayers we offer, and the lives we lead converge into an authentic expression of devotion. This in essence is an expression of *faith based adaptability* which is the conceptual framework of research, which invites believers to not hold onto the seen realities but behold that which is unseen.

This contemplation finds reinforcement in the biblical usage of the term "church," appearing around 114 times, where its direct translation seldom pertains to physical structures but primarily signifies the assembly

²⁸ Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*, vol. 1 (Routledge, 2016).

²⁹ Friend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*.

³⁰ Sakhiseni Joseph Yende, "Gospel Music and Liturgical Hymns to the Researcher's Spiritual Healing during the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Autoethnography Biblical Perspective.," *E-Journal of Religious & Theological Studies (ERATS)* 9, no. 5 (2023).

³¹ Yemisi Bolade-Ogunfodun, Lebene Richmond Soga, and Benjamin Laker, "Entwined Positionality and Interpretive Frames of Reference: An Autoethnographic Account," *Organizational Research Methods* 26, no. 4 (2023): 678–704.

³² Carolyn S Harris, *Cancer and the Role of Religion and Faith in Self-Actualization: An Autoethnography* (University of Arkansas, 2008).

³³ John Horton, "Centring Reflexivity, Positionality and Autoethnographic Practices in Creative Research," in *Creative Methods for Human Geographers* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2021).

of individuals united for a shared objective.³⁴ The writers of the New Testament conceived the church as a fellowship of Jesus Christ's followers. This signifies that the essence of the church can manifest wherever individuals convene to offer worship and praise to God. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, pastors and the Christian community in South Africa often experienced a sense of loss in fellowship as traditional religious activities came to a halt due to lockdown measures. This perception, however, posed a challenge for me as it seemed to confine the concept of "church" to a physical structure. Rather than embracing the rich history of innovative gatherings seen in biblical times—where believers formed smaller, intimate groups akin to house churches—many resorted to expressing dissatisfaction with the imposed restrictions, inadvertently missing the opportunity to adapt and create meaningful connections in new ways.

My Faith as a Catalyst for Adaptability:

The Bible is replete with stories of individuals and communities that face adversity and change while upholding their faith. This rich narrative provides churches with a blueprint for navigating challenges by leaning on God's promises and embracing faith-based responses. The essence of faith-based adaptability rests on principles of resilience and creativity. Just as biblical figures like Abraham, Joseph, and Esther displayed resilience in times of uncertainty, churches draw on these virtues to reimagine worship practices, foster community, and maintain their mission.

When churches closed for a period, an interesting shift occurred within me—I did not find my faith disheartened. Instead, it provided an opportunity for profound reflection on the essence and significance of "church" in my life. The pandemic's impact on the Christian community prompted me to consider the challenges it posed to our collective understanding. Notably, it became evident that an attachment to physical church buildings was a cause for concern. While public gatherings were prohibited, the opportunity for smaller, intimate worship gatherings in homes remained open. This contrast highlighted how our fixation on religious routines and practices, especially those tied to buildings, could hinder our grasp of spiritual truths.

I realized that my personal journey of faith did not hinge solely on a Sunday service or a specific location. Rather, it was a tapestry of experiences, reflections, and connections with God and fellow believers. The pandemic underscored the importance of detaching our faith from physical structures and external rituals. It revealed that worship could flourish within the heart and extend beyond the confines of a building. While I acknowledged the challenges that pastors faced due to the pandemic's impact on their livelihood, I found myself questioning the extent to which our faith relied on traditional church practices.³⁵ In this context, the disruption served as a wake-up call—a reminder that our faith should transcend specific routines and locations. It inspired a deeper exploration of worship's true essence and our spiritual connection with God.

The temporary closure of churches led me to a profound realization. It was not a dent in my perception of worship; rather, it highlighted the need to break free from ritualistic practices and embrace a more genuine and holistic understanding of faith. It reaffirmed that spiritual growth transcends physical boundaries and that our relationship with God is not confined to a single day or place.³⁶

Innovative Approaches as Acts of Worship: Space rather than Place

In the absence of traditional gatherings, churches were challenged to redefine worship in innovative ways. Within Christian theology, the significance of place has been acknowledged over time, with a keen awareness of sanctified land, consecrated structures, and the concept of pilgrimage.³⁷ The latter, a vital element within various Christian traditions, underscores the sanctity of physical locales, often due to their association with miraculous occurrences, divine visions, or the venerable history of worship spaces.³⁸ However, theologians have typically leaned towards emphasizing the importance of *space*, rather than *place*, a perspective founded on the idea that sacred space possesses a conceptual abstraction that transcends mere geographical location.³⁹ This viewpoint accommodates temporal shifts and welcomes the precedence of the spiritual experience taking place

³⁴ John Graveston, "A Theological Reflection on Church Property in the Diocese of Dunedin: Conversations That Count," Diocese of Dunedin Child Youth & Family Educator, accessed November 28, 2023, <https://www.stfrancisohariu.nz/assets/Documents/Property-Review/Theological-Reflection-on-Church-Property-2020-3-1.pdf>.

³⁵ Innocent T Mahiya and Rejoice Murisi, "Reconfiguration and Adaptation of a Church in Times of Covid-19 Pandemic: A Focus on Selected Churches in Harare and Marondera, Zimbabwe," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2022): 2024338.

³⁶ Nicholas Thomas Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Baylor University Press Waco, TX, 2019).

³⁷ N T Wright, *Exile: A Conversation with NT Wright* (InterVarsity Press, 2017).

³⁸ Bryson, Andres, and Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church Services and a New Temporary Geography of Home"; Davies, "Christianity."

³⁹ Kim Knott, "Religion, Space, and Place: The Spatial Turn in Research on Religion," *Religion and Society* 1, no. 1 (2010): 29–43.

within it.⁴⁰ The advent of the internet,⁴¹ introduces a layer of complexity to the understanding of the sacred, highlighting that grasping the internet's potential as a generator of sacred space hinges on the development of fitting digital sacred locations.⁴² Notably, thousands of such digital sacred spaces have been forged during the COVID-19 crisis.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, a profound transformation took root within my understanding of church as a *space*. While the concept of sacred space had always been an integral part of my faith, it was during these unprecedented times that its significance became resolutely solidified. As traditional church gatherings ceased and the doors of physical sanctuaries closed, the challenge to redefine the spaces of worship emerged as an unexpected opportunity for reflection and growth.

The initial shock of being distanced from the familiar pews and sacred halls gave way to a deeper exploration of the essence of *church*. Amid the quietude of my own surroundings, I began to recognize that the confines of a building were not the sole harbinger of sanctity. Instead, the spaces in which I found myself—whether a corner of my home, a secluded spot outdoors, or the virtual realms of digital gatherings—gained newfound importance. Each space was transformed into a canvas for spiritual connection, a realm where faith could be nurtured and communion with the divine could flourish. As the months unfolded, I witnessed a collective journey of fellow believers navigating this redefinition of sacred space. Conversations shifted from discussions about the grandeur of cathedral architecture to exchanges about the quiet corners of home sanctuaries. The virtual pews became portals through which we glimpsed the global expanse of our faith community, transcending geographical distances and uniting us in worship.

It was during this time that the lines between *place* and *space* blurred, and the essence of church as space emerged as a prevailing truth. The transformation was not just about adapting to new circumstances; it was a journey of the heart, an introspection that led to a more profound connection with God and fellow believers. The redefined spaces held stories of prayer, solace, and shared struggles. Through this experience, I realized that sacred space is not confined to physical walls—it is a dynamic essence that finds its expression wherever believers gather with the intent to worship, connect, and seek divine presence.

DISCUSSION

The present article delved into the nuanced interplay between Church as Space and Place in the context of the COVID-19 Era, highlighting the reflections of the researcher across three prominent themes. Firstly, the conception of the church is explored through the lens of "*I am the church*," which transcends the confines of physical structures—a concept well-aligned with existing literature²². This perspective also accentuates individual agency in matters of spiritual engagement, a departure from conventional norms where pastoral figures shoulder the responsibility of orchestrating and organizing church services. This shift underscores the transformation of spiritual nourishment into a personal commitment among individual Christians.

The second pivotal theme that pervades this paper is the role of *faith as a catalyst* for adaptability. This theme is meticulously woven through narratives of biblical characters, elucidating how the essence of faith compels individuals to navigate from the known (the traditional church edifice) to the unfamiliar (the idea of the church transcending its physical location). This transition underscores how faith necessitates embracing the uncharted, echoing the sentiment that faith inherently involves trust in the unseen. The third theme interwoven with the narrative is the conceptualization of *the church as space, rather than mere place*, which seamlessly intersects with the second theme. Viewing the church as a space liberates it from the constraints of geographical limitations, a particularly pertinent consideration considering the COVID-19 pandemic. As South Africa's lockdown measures fluctuated, physical attendance was allowed for up to 50 individuals and practical challenges surfaced—especially for larger congregations accustomed to auditorium settings. The introduction of booking systems underscored the challenge of allocating limited physical slots, inadvertently amplifying the perception of prioritization based on physical presence. This situation unveiled a poignant dichotomy: an inclination towards emphasizing place-led spirituality while inadvertently testing the adaptability grounded in faith.

This poignant scenario underscores a crucial aspect of the study's conceptual framework, rooted in Hebrews 11:1-2, which urges believers to exercise faith by embracing the intangible. It becomes apparent that the essence of faith-based adaptability extends beyond external circumstances—it resides within the realm of personal conviction. The research spotlights the vital role of faith in surmounting the visible barriers posed by

⁴⁰ Bryson, Andres, and Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church Services and a New Temporary Geography of Home."

⁴¹ Maria Beatrice Bittarello, "Spatial Metaphors Describing the Internet and Religious Websites: Sacred Space and Sacred Place," *Observatorio (OBS*)* 3, no. 4 (2009): 1–12.

⁴² Bryson, Andres, and Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church Services and a New Temporary Geography of Home."

physicality, propelling individuals to embody the underlying ethos of the church as a dynamic and encompassing space.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the paper the study recommends that churches should constantly interrogate their theological stances in the face of unprecedented times. The constant revisiting of scripture and understanding the historic practices of the church has implications for how the 21st century operates and applies their theological teachings. This entails avoiding applying scripture verbatim without understanding the contextual, cultural, and historical implications of the teachings. Critical approaches to scripture are crucial in how the church responds to crisis, in the Apostle Paul's times there were no Zoom calls/meetings made for church gatherings. However, in exploring their history, the study did find that the ancient church did resort to alternative ways of worship in unprecedented times of persecution. This therefore calls for the 21st century church to be flexible in the application of their faith and to consider what church means even in times of crisis (Space or Place).

Given that this study was limited to the autoethnographic approach another recommendation made for future research would be the importance of incorporating qualitative interviews. Employing triangulation through various data sources or methods could enhance the understanding of the phenomenon being worshipped. By embracing these recommendations, future studies can further illuminate the intricate interplay between faith, technology, and community in the context of evolving religious practices, contributing meaningfully to the ongoing discourse of the Church being a space or place.

CONCLUSION

This autoethnographic paper has spotlighted the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious practices. Through personal interactions and introspection, this study delved into the redefinition of "church" and the reframing of faith within the context of unprecedented circumstances. The study's core revelation revolved around the dynamic adaptability of faith when faced with adversity. This introspective reflection showcased the profound re-evaluation of what constitutes "church," the renewed understanding of faith's essence, and the recalibration of its practical application. The interplay between physical sanctuaries and virtual spaces prompted contemplation on the nature of worship, the value of shared physical presence, and the evolving role of technology in shaping spiritual encounters. Through personal narratives, this study contributes a unique vantage point to the discourse on the dynamic evolution of religious practices, exemplifying the potency of faith's transformative journey.

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