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Descriptive empirical perspectives on participants' attitudes on virtual worship services kindle an ineluctable revisiting of ecclesial assumptions in a post-pandemic world

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When it comes to debating the background of this article, the matter of participants' attitudes in virtual worship in a post-pandemic world is the central theme. One should always acknowledge that participants in the liturgy and faith communities have to cope with the effects of the pandemic. The physical attendance of worship services is an essential pillar in faith communities understanding of corporeal worship. Because of the lockdown measures and with the insistence on staying away from social gatherings, most people were obliged to adapt to new ways of engaging in virtual worship services. People hope that the previous normal will return whilst participating in virtual liturgy or limited groups of 50 people within church buildings. This article wants to embark on descriptive empirical perspectives to determine whether the virtual environment has not resulted in an inevitable revisiting of ecclesial assumptions regarding people's understanding of worship. Many complex questions about how worship services will realise when the lockdown measures have been lifted remain unanswered. This article offers a descriptive section on what are the currently concerning aspects related to a topic like this. Secondly, a Likert scale with numerous statements was provided to 60 respondents from three denominations in the Potchefstroom area. The request to respondents was to indicate what their attitudes about certain statements are. This investigation will be conducted from a reformational paradigm and is interested in debating the responses of participants that is related to attitudes on virtual worship services in a post-pandemic world.

Contribution: The article concludes with some practical theological perspectives that could lead to a follow-up article on how this matter could be revisited in the light of more clarity on people's attitudes.

Keywords: liturgy; worship attendance; virtual engagement in liturgy; ecclesial premises; attitudes.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the perplexing reciprocation between the absence of visible presence in face-to-face worship, or conversely the virtual presence recompensing for tangible absence in virtual worship. Consequently, at various stages of the lockdown, the accompanying ideas of social distancing and remote religious gatherings became a conspicuous concern for faith communities. Moreover, it perturbated faith communities and their leadership because limited physical presence became a significant concern amongst other ecclesial aspects. In general, worship service attendance is a prominent pillar in most Christians' understanding of worship (Bryson, Andres & Davies 2020:360; Campbell 2020:3; Immink 2019:13). Thus, at first glance, the Covid-19 pandemic has resonated in an unsettling manner, especially as far it is concerned with participants in liturgy views of what is essential for a worship service. The aspects discussed next are related to refining assumptions of worship where virtuality and face-to-face engagement in worship got closer to each other.

People are anxiously waiting for the customary everyday aspects to return

Since childhood, Christians have been exposed to this convention of coming together to become involved in soul-stirring elements of the liturgy (Cassingena-Trévedy 2021:4). The nucleus of this engagement deals with the notion of *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*, or one could say the consciousness of the mystery of the presence of God. The idea is, after all, the fundamental

characteristic of worship. Therefore, Dela-Dora (2018:44) emphasised the renowned idea of participants in the liturgy coming together to share and engage in collective remembrances of God. The surrounding tension underpinning this research deals with people eagerly waiting for the probability of the previous normal of unobstructed communion returning. Still, within this tension, Taylor et al. (2020:17) reiterated that the menace of the Covid-19 pandemic is not yet something of a transient essence and will probably be a reality for years to come. This postulation supported by respondents' responses produces an opportunity for deliberation about previous ecclesial premises.[1]

Time to think about what and why we are doing what we are doing

The pandemic[2] initially started with the idea that the virus is somewhere at a distance.

Suddenly, the pressure on liturgy and the continuation of pastoral activities became a significant concern for faith communities when people realised that the pandemic was here at our doorsteps (cf. Pearson's 2020:850). Furthermore, because of medical and safety concerns, the emphasis on digital ecclesiology emerged leaps and bounds (cf. Pearson 2020:851). In line with this, Immink (2014:38–44) denoted the significance of worship. A communal experience in which participants in liturgy experience the meaningfulness of their faith in efficacious worship centres around the prominence of the meaning of salvific acts. Therefore, Green (1989:21) could say that worship is where participants learn to listen to God with the immediate result of seeing daily life differently. Thus, liturgical actions function as life-changing arrows that should penetrate everyday life (cf. Gaarden 2014:3; Immink 2014:1).

When the time eventually arrives to return to face-to-face meetings

The intriguing question that is of relevance and surfaces is, exactly how will faith communities meet again, and will it realise in precisely the same unimpeded way as before? (Vanderwell & Witvliet 2017:22–23). In this vein, Dewsbury and Coke (2009:23) reiterated the reality that the challenge offered by regulations because of the Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us about the intrusive shift from face-to-face encounters of the whole congregation to an online environment. However, many questions are emerging that urge us to refine or rethink our ecclesial premises (Nikolajsen 2014:165).

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1. According to Drescher (2012:2), the concept of digital ecclesiology is sometimes used in broad, undefined ways, either to advocate for use of digital media, or to debate the problems that arise when churches integrate internet technologies into their ministries. A more appropriate way could be described as the endeavour to help us understand how a church could possibly function in a digital age without giving away the identity of the church. In this sense of the word, it refers to the nature of the Church and how it looks like in the digital age. The theological understanding of the essence of being church in the virtual environment is underlying this idea.

2. The disease transmits when people breathe in air contaminated by droplets and small airborne particles. The risk of breathing these in is highest when people are in proximity, but still present over longer distances, particularly indoors. The Covid-19 has undeniably thrown the world into a practice of fear and chaos that puts people under considerable life pressure (Jones 2020:3). The philosopher, Marten Heidegger, once emphasised the notion of angst that relates to a feeling or mood (Gefühl), which indicates an encounter with nothing or nothingness (Pembroke 2013:13).

The research problem of this article thus is as follows:

'Have participants' attitudes on liturgical engagement in virtual worship services during the Covid-19-pandemic kindled an ineluctable revisiting of assumptions in a post-pandemic world?'

In addressing the research problem by employing a qualitative study, the author intends to adhere to the methodological insights of Osmer (2008:11). Therefore, in this article, the author will only elaborate on the descriptive empirical phase to determine the participants' attitudes towards engaging in virtual worship services within a post-pandemic world. This article thus is exploratory and wants to embark on the functioning of participants' attitudes in the liturgy, and consequently, to determine whether experiences during the pandemic have kindled a revisiting of premises related to the interplay between face-to-face and virtual worship services. Hence, qualitative literature research will be accompanied by the utilisation of a Likert scale to determine whether the need for a revisiting of ecclesial premises is essential for praxis in a post-pandemic world.

Descriptive empirical perspectives on people's attitudes on the presence of absence and the absence of presence

This section consists of a descriptive paragraph determining what is going on within a literature search related to this topic. Secondly, by conducting empirical research, participants' attitudes in liturgical acts are investigated according to the utilisation of the Likert scale.

Descriptive analysis of the challenging praxis

In the literature review undertaken for this research, it has become clear that the interest in this aspect centres around the following three key elements:

A distant church relying on digital technology to navigate the pandemic's effects

Oliver (2021:4) touched on an essential matter in debating whether this world has not become a Covid-19-defined world in all respects. According to the author, the fear of this virus has invaded all spheres of life, including worship services. Bauman (2010:11), in this vein, has previously emphasised the emergence of liquid modernity[3] where social systems do not hold their shape for long periods. The so-called online and under the radar life is, after all, according to Joubert (2018:215), an integral part of reality to be integrated into people's lives. The Covid-19 pandemic has put this dynamic in the foreground, although it was present even before the emergence of the pandemic.

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3. Bauman was the first to use the term 'liquid' in a study about the current state of society. He highlighted the idea of 'fluidity' as the significant metaphor for the current stage of the modern era. Fluids neither fix space nor bind time. Liquids do not keep to any shape, and they are constantly ready to change it. He finds the characteristics of the fluids entirely appropriate to point out the instability, constant changeability and uncertainty of modern society.

However, one should be cautious about underestimating the importance of face-to-face relationships, and according to Davis (2016:6), the absence thereof could increase further uncertainty or disruption in people's lives. However, some non-linear people still prefer online communication technologies to avoid physical proximity (Bauman 2010:57). Therefore, in a liquid society, physical absence has been limited with cognisance of a virtual presence. Campbell (2020:3), for example, underlined the notion of digital theology and digital ecclesiology that have become essential discourses of note. The author even denotes the idea of what is often called a distant church.

Based on this research offered by Castells (2000:694), the importance of reality in which the virtual becomes an integral part of communication and the symbolic environment could not be ignored (Castells 2000:695). Wolff (1999:261–264) had earlier on taken a somewhat cautious approach to worship within the virtual environment. He referred to what he describes as an ecclesiastical experience within the face-to-face worship services that hinges on the contrast of what is happening within the space of a church building that always stands in contrast with daily life (Wolff 1999:262). This view of Wolff is subjected to some critical thoughts in the light of the earlier definition of the liturgy where a perspicuous distinction between worship and daily life is refutable. However, I agree with the author that the essence of what is happening whilst worship should be further refined in virtual worship.

Campbell and Delashmutt (2014:268) convincingly debated the issue of faith communities that have described online technologies as problematic for worship. The authors have also indicated that people were previously afraid that digital technology could distract participants before the pandemic and that it could lead to new notions of church affiliation (cf. Campbell & Delashmutt 2014:268–269). Danielson (2020:10) expressed a unique interpretation of the use of digital technology within a post-pandemic world. The use of digital technology should not urge liturgists to become real experts in live-streaming or even in technology but, on the contrary, to know the challenge offered by this medium. The most profound challenge is, after all, to facilitate participation amongst participants rather than to cultivate a practice of observing worship from a distance (Elbert 2020:13; Mercer 2020:22).

The emergence of a new way of life mediated by digital awareness

Legare (2021:3) therefore highlighted that there is also more at stake. The idea that the Covid-19 pandemic has provided a new emphasis on the need for physical and social support within virtual reality is a concerning matter. People's daily rituals, for example, have been transformed because technology has become necessary. All aspects of life have become integrated within people's homes. As a result, a new way of living and coping with challenges has emerged (Scott 2020:2). Cooper (2021:3) referred to the traits of effective communication in the virtual functioning of a faith community. Cooper (2021:4) is convinced that online or

virtual platforms allow the opportunity to be connected to other people and that the opportunity to share life experiences is valuable.

Based on this insight, it is valid to raise how this pandemic will influence worship services in the future, where connectivity to the faith community is influenced by the notion of staying away from each other. Scott and Wepener (2020:6) firmly believed that life and being church in a post-pandemic world will most probably never be the same as before the pandemic. The in-between phase of the current pandemic stands between faith communities' pre-pandemic functioning and faith communities' post-pandemic functioning should be considered (Scott 2020:4). Campbell (2020:4) denoted the vital aspect that a distant church[4] is confronted with, the imperative that part and parcel of being church entails support and care for each other during the pandemic. In this process, essential aspects, amongst other things, like the embodied manifestation of the church and the notion of being disembodied within the virtual environment, are also aspects calling for further reflection.

Rather than waiting for things to return to what was before the pandemic, the need to discover new avenues, faithful to sound principles to worship, should be realised (Piazza 2020:30). For example, previously, virtual encounters were an integral part of the outreach or ministering of people in elderly homes. The challenge now will be to engage all people, whether physically present or absent but still present in the virtual worship (Reimann 2020:32–33). Shepherd (2020:37–40) embroiders this idea to highlight the belief that limitations on the number of participants in worship services and regulations about their encounters are indeed a big deal.

Leadership to guide faith communities in a post-pandemic world

Leadership in times of change, like the post-pandemic world mentioned in this article, is vital in shaping attitudes, especially when discussing the church's praxis in the future (Banks 2013:85; Yukl 2010:25–26). For one, Miller (2011:21) raised the matter that life in a digital age, after all, is not entirely unproblematic. It boils down to the case in which the argumentation of this article has kicked off, namely how is it possible that someone could be absent yet also present within the virtual environment (also see Cloete 2015:2). Nell (2016:3–4), for example, pointed into the direction that faith communities need leadership that could utilise both the physical meetings in worship services and the virtual environment to establish the feeling of being a community and the accompanying idea of aliveness. The ability to communicate effectively to resonate with the poignant meaning of liturgy mentioned earlier in this article stands

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4.The notion of 'The distanced church' is often utilised within the context of social distancing, which refers to keeping space between oneself and others in social settings (cf. Campbell 2020:4). During normal circumstances, worship services are after all, corporate, corporeal and communal. People sing together, listen to preaching together, greet one another and have communion together, all in the same place at the same time. This idea of a distant church is related to the idea of being physically separated from one another because of specific health concerns and safety regulations. The notion of distant church does not imply the idea of a disembodied church, but rather indicates the quest for the church as community of believers to find creative ways within challenging times to communicate their interconnectedness.

central in this debate. Leaders within faith communities must also engage with participants in virtual worship services and invest in leadership where the online and offline environments are indispensable within challenging circumstances. A new look at critical ecclesial assumptions and how to adequately apply them to a context where contagion fears exist could enable faith communities' leaders to reflect on new avenues within the virtual environment.

Empirical research

The need for the empirical research

The literature review on the functioning of a virtual church has revealed that virtual worship services have offered faith communities during the pandemic the opportunity to reflect on how they will adapt to a new normal. However, the interrelationship between the online (virtual) and offline (physical) attendance of worship services elicits matters of concern. Therefore, the empirical research needs to focus on how people think about previous generally accepted vantage points on ecclesial premises within a post-pandemic world.

Method

Likert scales operate in determining the attitude of participants (Bothma 2016:138). In constructing a Likert scale, a list of aspects (ideally 10–20 statements) is selected, connected to favourable and unfavourable attitudes on the functioning of attitudes. Based on the comments made, respondents should respond and indicate whether they agree or disagree. In line with an availability selection, the questionnaires were distributed to local congregations from a reformed tradition, consisting of three Afrikaans speaking faith communities in the Potchefstroom area. In addition, one congregation from the Dutch Reformed Church, one from the Nether-Dutch Reformed Church of Africa, and one from the Reformed Churches in South Africa were selected. The questionnaire distributed to people between the ages of 21 and 80 years of age has the intention to measure the underlying attitudes of people on the mentioned topic.

Ethical considerations

The following aspects were taken into consideration:

1. The avoiding of face-to-face encounters during Covid-19 stands central in this research.
2. The author has obtained permission from the ethics committee to continue with this research. According to the questionnaire's completion, this research is of *minimal ethical risk*. Therefore, there is no risk for the participants, and the danger of harm is not present. Informed consent of all participants was obtained.
3. The researcher has beforehand obtained permission from the three Church Councils. The request was to circulate the questionnaires to 20 people within the local assembly.

Biographical data

The invitation to participate in this questionnaire has specified that respondents should select just one of the five options and assign which attitude is the most applicable to the statements offered. The five options are: strongly disagree, disagree moderately, neutral, agree partially, and wholly agree. Therefore, a Likert scale was distributed to the respondents to grasp what was going in respondents' minds (see Appendix 1). A total of 60 questionnaires were online distributed to male and female participants between the age of 20 and 78 years. Out of the 60 distributed questionnaires, 40 (66%) were received back. Female respondents provided 58% of the answers, and 42% of responses were from male participants. Based on the age criterion, 30% of the reactions are related to people between 20 and 30 years of age, 38% from respondents between 30 and 60 years, and 32% from respondents between 60 and 78 years. Therefore, the request to provide this questionnaire solely to participate in worship services actively was honoured.

Interpretation of data

Attitudes about the effect of the pandemic on worship within the new normal

The following statements were made within this category:

• Worship and participation in the liturgy are essential aspects of my spiritual growth.

In response to the above statement, 75% of the respondents indicated that they agree, whilst 22.5% said they partially agreed. In addition, 2.5% of the respondents opted for the option to stay neutral. Thus, most of the respondents agree that participation in the liturgy is pivotal for their spiritual growth. Nikolajsen (2014:162), for one, embarked on the idea that Church history contains two major shifts: the first shift encompasses the church's movement from marginalised to having an influential position in society; the second shift embodies how the church is losing its significant role and therefore becoming increasingly marginalised. Yet, despite this insight, most respondents in this sample believe that participation in the liturgy is an essential aspect of spiritual growth:

• The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted previously generally accepted convictions concerning worship in my life.

A total of 32.5% of the respondents disagreed strongly or moderately with this statement. However, 67.5% of the respondents indicated that they agree partially or entirely. Based on the respondents' answers, a significant number of the respondents believe that the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced previously accepted convictions in their lives. Therefore, two-thirds of the respondents are aware and realise the impact of the pandemic on their thoughts and beliefs of worship. This statement has pointed into the direction that people have experienced that meaningful participation in the liturgy is, after all, not left untouched by the effects of Covid-19:

• The demand for social distancing has altered my understanding of the importance of physical attendance of worship services.

This statement is related to the previous one about presuppositions that are influenced by the pandemic. However, 42.5% of the responses have completely or moderately disagreed with this statement, namely that the importance of physical attendance has been influenced. Thus, 7.5% of the respondents opted for standing neutral on the idea of whether Covid-19 has indeed altered their understanding. It is not sure why respondents have opted for the neutral option or whether they are unsure whether this pandemic has changed their understanding of the importance of physical attendance of worship services.

Nevertheless, most of the respondents have indicated that the pandemic emphasising social distancing has changed their understanding of the physical attendance of worship services. Based on this idea, it could be concluded that the demand for social distancing has indeed influenced many people's attitudes about physical attendance of worship. It is further illustrated by the notion that only 27.5% of the respondents have completely disagreed with the statement that the demand for social distancing has not influenced their understanding of physical attendance of worship services:

• The expression 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' has urged me to think differently about what the new normal within my local congregation will be if things could return to normal.

This statement aimed to look further into participants attitudes on whether the effect of the pandemic would not cause some cognitive distortion[5] once faith communities are allowed to gather within church buildings. Only 12.5% of the respondents have entirely or moderately disagreed with this statement. In addition, 10.0% of the respondents have opted for the option of being neutral. A total of 77.5% of the respondents have indicated that they agree either entirely or partially. Based on this response from the participants, even if faith communities are allowed to return to regular meetings, the expression 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' could be subjected to a shift in people's attitudes about whether a rethinking of the way of meeting each other should not occur:

• I don't think regular worship service attendance within a church building is pivotal within the new normal when excessive regulations are lifted.

In a previous statement, respondents indicated that their views on physical attendance had experienced some challenges. Ninety per cent of the respondents have indicated that they strongly or moderately disagree with this current statement. On the other hand, 10% of the respondents have shown that they wholly or partially agree with this statement. In this instance, none of the respondents has opted for the option of being neutral. Therefore, respondents have strong attitudes about this statement, namely that regular worship services are

pivotal when lifted regulations. Considering the previous responses, most respondents believe that physical attendance of worship services is still important to them. Hence, a rethinking of how it should realise has inevitably to occur.

Attitudes related to virtual worship

The following attitudes about virtual worship will be offered:

• I can fully participate in the worship service within the safe space of my home by utilising digital technology.

In all, 42.5% of the respondents indicated that they entirely or moderately disagree with this statement. While 52.5% of the respondents entirely or partially agree with this statement. The responses of participants from various age groups are noteworthy. Interestingly, 72.7% of the respondents between 20 and 30 years agree with this statement, whilst 42.5% of the respondents between 30 and 50 years agree partially or entirely. Furthermore, 62% of the respondents between 51 and 60 agree partially or wholly, whilst 35.7% of the respondents between 61 and 78 years of age agree fully or partially. Based on participants' responses, the emergence of utilising digital technology in worshipping from home could not be ignored:

• Digital technology has enabled me to revise and edit the worship service on my own time.

Only 7.5% of the respondents entirely or moderately disagree with this statement. Thus, 90% of the respondents fully or partially agree with this statement. Based on this response, the benefit of digital technology above and beyond physical attendance of worship services has to be integrated as a powerful mechanism in taking the liturgy of worship to people's homes and workplaces. In addition, the idea of editing of worship services in, for example, rewinding and re-listening of aspects of the liturgy should be seen as valuable. Based on this response, it seems that an inevitable shift from gathering to connecting has occurred. The responses also clarified that the pandemic had evoked the longing for community, but the virtual environment has offered new possibilities. Although church buildings were closed for specific periods, the churches (connectivity between people) were still open:

• During the pandemic in the online mode, virtual worship services of other faith communities have provided me with more options in liturgical participation than the faith community I belong to.

On the one hand, 40% of the participants entirely or moderately disagree with this statement. On the other hand, 42.5% of the respondents indicated that they agree with the statement, while 17.5% of the respondents have indicated that they have a neutral attitude. It is not sure why people are neutral, but what is evident is that a significant number of the participants in the liturgy believe that the online engagement in worship during the pandemic has offered them the opportunity to have exposure to more faith communities' way of worshipping. This response indicates towards the

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5.Cognitive distortion or cognitive dissonance refers to an imbalance between two or more of the individual's cognitions. This imbalance causes tension within one's mind and individuals want to employ mechanisms to provide consonance (cf. Berg & Theron 2006:175).

challenges faith communities could experience when they can gather in full in a post-pandemic world:

• My view of the requirements for a good sermon and a worship service has changed during the lockdown.

Forty seven per cent of the respondents entirely or moderately disagree with this statement. Conversely, 20% of the respondents agree partially or fully with this statement, whilst 13% have opted for neutrality. Based on this response, it seems that people's cognition (understanding) of what a good sermon and meaningful worship should entail is also slightly affected by the effects of Covid-19. Only 47% of the participants have indicated that they disagree. The pandemic has indeed not left people's thinking processes untouched:

• Virtual worship doesn't enable me to have community with believers and fully participate in all liturgical aspects.

Eighty five per cent of the respondents have indicated the vital matter of community with believers as one of their concerns of virtual worship. In this response, they have also highlighted that virtual worship has not enabled them to participate in all liturgical aspects fully. However, 10% of the respondents have disagreed, whilst 5% have indicated a neutral stance on this statement. Thus, in this section about attitudes on virtual services, it has emerged that participants in the liturgy believe that the virtual environment offers significant benefits for worship services.

Attitudes about worship, liturgy and ecclesiology (view of what the essence of the church should be) in a post-pandemic world

The following aspects related to what could be called ecclesiological assumptions will now be offered, namely:

• I don't think that virtual services are genuine worship services.

Fifty five per cent of the respondents have strongly or moderately disagreed with this statement. On the other hand, 32.5% of the respondents agree partially or entirely with this statement, whilst 12.5% disagree. Thus, even amongst people regularly attending worship services, differences in their understanding of whether virtual services could be seen as genuine worship is evident. Nevertheless, most of the respondents have a strong attitude that virtual worship is indeed actual worship services:

• Even if things return to the previous normal, I will carefully look after myself in making limited social contact with a community of believers because of contagion fears.

Fifty five per cent of the respondents have indicated that they strongly or moderately disagree with this statement. Twenty five per cent of the respondents within the category of people opposing have indicated that they somewhat agree. And 42.5% of the respondents have indicated that they partially or strongly agree with this statement. Twenty five per cent of the respondents within this category have indicated that they partially agree. It seems that approximately 50% of all respondents are either disagree moderately or agree partially. Contagion fears are a reality and viewed from participants' responses; it seems that people have not yet entirely made up their minds on how they will approach this matter of social contact. But it is also striking that a significant number of the participants have indicated that they will be aware of taking care of themselves in the proximity of the community of believers:

• My local church should creatively do more to help participants in the liturgy of virtual worship services too.

A total of 32.5% of the respondents have indicated that they agree partially or fully with this statement, whilst the same percentage of the respondents have stated that they moderately or entirely disagree with this statement. Thirty five per cent of the respondents have indicated neutrality when it comes to this statement. The diverse responses could reveal the possibility that the question was not entirely clear or the chance that some respondents should still come to grips with the idea of virtual services and local faith communities' assistance in this regard:

• It is impossible to maintain our local church's identity or ethos within a virtual environment, and a return to face-to-face worship services should urgently realise.

Sixty per cent of the respondents have indicated that they partially or fully agree with this statement. Conversely, 40% of the respondents have shown that they moderately or entirely disagree with this statement. In a previous response, it was stated that faith communities should start with whether virtual worship services are indeed genuine worship services. We have touched upon another important matter: whether it will be possible to maintain a local faith community's ethos within the virtual environment. Based on the responses, most participants are convinced that it is impossible to keep the faith community's identity. At the same time, a significant number of the respondents (40%) believe that it is indeed possible. Finally, it was posed that leadership is needed in a post-pandemic world:

• I miss essential aspects like koinonia and opportunities to serve and share my experiences with other people within the online or virtual worship.

A majority of 75% of the respondents have indicated that they agree fully or partially with this statement, 10% have shown that they moderately or entirely disagree with this statement, and 15% have shown neutrality to this statement. Most of the responses have indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic has left a vacuum in their interaction with other people. The 15% of the respondents who have opted for neutrality allow us to debate whether an emerging trend in koinonia or a different manifestation of koinonia has not emerged. The intriguing question of whether the virtual environment has not increased a feeling of living under the radar needs further reflection when debating critical ecclesial assumptions. When things return to normal in a post-pandemic world where the online and offline engagement in worship will be closer, a rethinking of these essential ecclesial aspects should receive the attention

of faith communities. Based on the responses above, it is inevitable that the virtual environment and physical attendance in worship services should connect with a new regular and vital reflection is needed:

• I think the functioning of a virtual church will negatively impact people's understanding of ecclesial aspects (for instance, worship services, pastoral care, preaching, the celebration of the sacraments and giving of the alms).

This statement has interplay with the previous statement. Thus, 85% of the respondents have demarcated the defects of virtual engagement in worship services. However, suppose virtual services are regarded as genuine worship essential aspects, assumptions thus should be revisited because listeners have indicated that the current circumstances have harmed their understanding of the aspects listed in the statement:

• The Covid-19 pandemic has offered me insight into what should be done to revise our understanding of the church's identity within the online environment.

Eighty two per cent of the respondents have partially or fully agreed with this statement. Only 5% of the respondents have moderately disagreed with this statement. Respondents have agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic has provided them with the opportunity to rethink what the church's identity within the online environment should entail. The vital aspect of identity is another aspect that has emerged in this research:

• I believe churches should expand their virtual or digital presence to accommodate people who prefer the online mode of being part of the faith community.

A majority of 58.9% of the respondents have partially or entirely agreed with this statement. On the other hand, 17.9% of the respondents have opted for neutrality, whilst 33.1% of the respondents have indicated that they moderately or entirely disagree. Most of the respondents believe that much could be done to increase local faith communities' digital presence to accommodate people favouring this mode within a post-pandemic world:

Descriptive empirical perspectives on people's attitudes of worship in a post-pandemic world

The descriptive empirical research has shed light on the following aspects of participants' liturgy attitudes that should lead to an inevitable rethinking or refining of assumptions within a post-pandemic world where virtual worship services seem to be more organically integrated into faith communities' liturgical engagement:

• Respondents have divergent attitudes about the effect of the pandemic on worship within the new normal. Most respondents have indicated that the pandemic has altered previously generally accepted convictions concerning worship in their lives. However, 50% of the respondents have suggested that measures related to social distancing have influenced their understanding of face-to-face worship services.

• Concerning respondents' attitudes on virtual worship services, the following aspects are interesting. Firstly, most respondents have indicated that the virtual environment has enabled them to participate in the liturgy. Secondly, almost 90% of the respondents have suggested that one of the benefits of virtual engagement in worship services has to do with them being able to revise and edit some aspects of the liturgy. Thirdly, a significant number of participants have also expressed the idea of them being enabled to participate in other faith communities' liturgy. Finally, 85% of the respondents have underlined the concept of missing the community of believers within the virtual environment.

• Hence, 55% of the participants believe that virtual worship services are genuine, whilst 32.5% think that it is not the case. Furthermore, almost half of the respondents believe that even if things could return to a situation before the pandemic, their contagion fears will help them look after themselves. Finally, 60% of the respondents have indicated that they have concerns that their local church's identity or ethos within a virtual environment could not be maintained. At the same time, almost the same number of participants feels that their local faith community should do more to have a deep footprint of worshipping within the virtual environment.

Based on the empirical data showing people's attitudes, two-thirds of the respondents have suggested that the pandemic has indeed influenced certain convictions related to worship in their lives. Half of the respondents have indicated that their views about physical attendance of worship services have been affected. Although most respondents have emphasised their longing for more prominent visibility and experience of the community of believers, they have also indicated that this should occur with certain reservations. Many participants believe that physical worship attendance is pivotal but feel that virtual engagement in the liturgy has its benefits, something local congregations should further invest in. Most respondents have indicated that virtual services are genuine worship services, although some aspects of the liturgy offer challenges that should be investigated. Elements that should receive further attention in a post-pandemic world entail the virtual environment's unique way of worship and the interplay between pastoral care and liturgy. The interplay mentioned above necessitates an in-depth reflection on the experience of communion in both offline and online environments.

Further aspects that need to be revisited include preaching and interaction with the preacher, the celebration of the sacraments without ignoring the idea of a corporeal meal and giving of the alms. Most respondents are convinced that the interplay between face-to-face worship services and virtual worship will be a reality in a post-pandemic world, which could not be overlooked. However, a mere duplication of the offline practices within the online environment seems to offer a challenge.

Conclusion

This article deals with descriptive empirical perspectives on whether people's experiences of virtual engagement in the liturgy have indeed kindled an ineluctable revisiting of ecclesial assumptions in a post-pandemic world. The Covid-19 pandemic with the emphasis on social distancing has influenced participants in the liturgy convictions about worship. After all, face-to-face worship services could be seen as usual in most faith communities before the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the idea of a virtual ecclesiology has surfaced because strict lockdown measures were taken to focus on social distancing. This article has also indicated that participants' responses have revealed that they see virtual services as beneficial because they could revisit the worship services on their own time. They could even do editing of the recording in playing it back and forward. It became evident that the participants' attitudes on virtual services and engaging in the liturgy in this environment were positive. Based on the descriptive section of this article, it was clear that a mere replication of what is happening in face-to-face worship to the virtual environment is not the best practice. The exact outcome of people engaging in face-to-face worship and the role that virtual worship services could play in future is something that faith communities should become increasingly aware of. Still, it was clear that a rethinking of ecclesial assumptions in a post-pandemic world is inevitable. The respondents have indicated that guidance from their leadership in a faith community's worship practice is unavoidable. Clarity on one's ecclesial assumptions and how they will be applied should be realised to address the challenges of a worship praxis in a post-pandemic world. The author intends to further embark on the outcome of this descriptive empirical research in writing follow-up articles in which various aspects of revisiting ecclesial assumptions will be addressed.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire on participants' attitudes on virtual worship services

Dear respondent,

Thank you for your participation in completing this questionnaire. This questionnaire is part of an investigation by the researcher on the impact that Covid-19 has on people's understanding of what worship should entail within a post-pandemic world. The intriguing question of the interplay between online (virtual) and offline participation in worship services is coming to the fore. The article that emanates from this research will address virtual worship during the Covid-19 pandemic- Revisiting ecclesial premises concerning the offline-online praxis in a post-pandemic world.

Your identity will be at all times honoured, and the completion of this questionnaire is strictly confidential.

In completing this questionnaire, take into account that each statement is provided with five options. You should only indicate the one option the most applicable according to your understanding thereof.

Likert-scale

Could you kindly indicate the following?

Male	Female
Age	

1. Attitudes about the effect of the pandemic on worship within the new normal

1.1   Worship and participation in the liturgy are essential aspects of my spiritual growth.

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

1.2   The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted previously generally accepted convictions concerning worship in my life.

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

1.3   The demand for social distancing has altered my understanding of the importance of physical attendance of worship services.

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

1.4   The expression of *absence makes the heart grow fonder* has urged me to think differently about what the new normal within my local congregation will be if things could return to normal.

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

1.5   I don't think regular worship service attendance within a church building is pivotal within the new normal when excessive regulations are lifted.

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

2. Attitudes related to virtual worship

2.1   I can fully participate in the worship service within the safe space of my home by utilizing digital technology.

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

2.2   Digital technology has enabled me to revise and edit the worship service on my own time.

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

2.3   **During the pandemic in the online mode, virtual worship services of other faith communities have provided me with more options in liturgical participation than the faith community I belong to.**

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

2.4   **My view of the requirements for a good sermon and a worship service has changed during the lockdown.**

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

2.5   **Virtual worship doesn't enable me to have community with believers and fully participate in all liturgical aspects.**

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

3. Attitudes about worship, liturgy and ecclesiology (view of what the essence of the church should be) in a post-pandemic world

3.1   **I don't think that virtual services are genuine worship services.**

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

3.2   **Even if things return to the previous normal, I will carefully look after myself in making limited social contact with a community of believers due to contagion fears.**

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

3.3   **My local church should creatively do more to help participants in the liturgy of virtual worship services too.**

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

3.4   **It is impossible to maintain our local church's identity or ethos within a virtual environment, and a return to face-to-face worship services should urgently realize.**

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

3.5   **I miss essential aspects like koinonia and opportunities to serve and share my experiences with other people within the online or virtual worship.**

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

3.6   **Future online/virtual worship services should still be seen as mere additional equipment for daily life and a platform for outreach opportunities.**

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

3.7   **I think the functioning of a virtual church will negatively impact people's understanding of ecclesial aspects (for instance, worship services, pastoral care, preaching, the celebration of the sacraments and giving of the alms).**

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

3.8   **The Covid-19 pandemic has offered me insight into what should be done to revise our understanding of the church's identity within the online environment.**

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree

3.9   **I believe that churches should do more to expand their virtual or digital presence to accommodate people who prefer the online mode of being part of the faith community.**

Strongly disagree	Differ moderately	Neutral	Partially agree	Completely agree