

## **The Virtual Church as a New Means of Grace in the Post-Pandemic Era in Africa: Reflections on Pauline Corpus<sup>1</sup>**

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### **I Introduction**

Late 2019 heralded the coming of Covid-19, the novel disease that gradually became a pandemic that has altered the life we live. Phrases like the "new normal" have been used to describe the after-effect of the pandemic. Though these phrases are used to describe our mundane life in reality, our religious life has been affected too. The closure of churches during the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown has forced Christian churches to 'do' church differently and to re-imagine the future of the church.<sup>1</sup> But one needs to ask: is the coming of Covid-19 an accident? Not! It is part of God's design to restructure the church and 'force' a new vista in the life of the church.

Pillay observes that "every 500 years the empowered structures of institutionalised Christianity, whatever they may be at the time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur".<sup>2</sup> Explaining this statement further, Pillay presents the moments of great changes in church structure:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Structural Change in the Church</b>
6th Century	The ministry of Gregory the Great
1054	The Great Schism splitting Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Roman Catholicism
1517	The Great Reformation led by Martin Luther

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented by the author as a lead paper presentation.

The next (c) 500 years following 1517 would bring us to 2019/2020 and the "Covid-19 pandemic has shifted churches into a somewhat revolutionary way of thinking and being church".<sup>3</sup> During the attendant lockdown, an unprecedented number of churches took to the electronic platform to reach out to their members, thus giving rise to the virtual church (also known variously as the digital church or the cyber church or the online church).

## II Definition of Terms

From the topic above, the following are the keywords/terms that I considered important for defining.

### Grace

Grace is the English translation of the Greek *χαρις*. *χαρις* occurs 154 times in the New Testament with the highest occurrence in the Pauline epistles with 100 occurrences in the 13 authentic Pauline epistles. It is heavily clustered in Romans with 23 occurrences and followed by the Corinthians correspondences with 28 occurrences. In non-Christian writings it refers to “generosity,” “gracefulness,” and “beauty,” but in Pauline usage, it carries the basic sense of “favour,” that is Hebrew *חַן* (favour), *רַחֲמִים* (loving-kindness) and it is usually qualified with ‘unmerited’ or ‘undeserved’ where God or Christ is the subject and human beings are the direct object.

The Pauline message of grace is summed up in Ephesians 2:5 - *χάριτί ἐστε σωσθέντες* (by grace you have been saved). Grace embraces the actual offer of the gospel message. Fundamentally, however, grace refers to a pivotal event: God's eschatological deed in Christ Jesus which is experienced in the present gift of justification, which comes by divine grace and is appropriated by faith. Believers continue to experience this grace in the ongoing work of sanctification in their lives.

χαρις is a term describing God in action to give life to humankind, an activity which expressed God's love and favour.<sup>4</sup> χαρις is used to describe the benefactor's goodwill, that is, the disposition of the benefactor and the result of that disposition that is materialised in a gift (Patterson 2008:101).

Closely related to χαρις is χάρισμα, a term which occurred 17 times in the New Testament out of which 16 is Pauline (if you accept Pastoral Epistles as Pauline). It is more intriguing to know that Paul did not copy the term from Secular Greek literature as the earliest occurrence of χάρισμα in secular literature is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD<sup>5</sup> nor did he copy it from the Septuagint (LXX) as the word was not used in the LXX. However, 1 Corinthians 1:7 makes it clear that Paul derived χάρισμα from χαρις and regards the rich varieties of the grace gifts the Corinthians possess as the various concretions of God's grace<sup>6</sup>. This confirms the position of Patterson (2008) that χαρις "is also used of the gift, which is the material manifestation of the benevolence and the honour of the bovine factor. The gift is thus closely connected with the person of the giver, and with the status of the giver in society (p. 103). It should be noted that χάρις is also used for the receiver's gratitude. To receive grace is to place oneself in a relationship governed by reciprocating the giver's generosity.

### **Means of Grace**

To talk on the means of grace is to walk on troubled grounds. This is because it is a doctrinal issue with which the church is hardly in agreement. There are two main divisions on this issue: those who agree that there are means of grace and those who disagree. Among those who agree, there is hardly also any agreement on how many they are and what constitutes the means of grace.

The best definition for the means of grace comes from John Wesley who defined the means of grace as follows:

By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs; words, or actions, ordained by God and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.

I use this expression, means of grace, because I know none better, and because it has been generally used in the Christian church for many ages; .. in particular by our Church, which directs us to bless God both for the means of grace, and the hope of glory; and teaches us, that a sacrament is "an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive same"<sup>7</sup>

The means of grace are usually classified into three categories:

- a. The Instituted (Particular) Means (that is, those specifically ordained in Scriptures). These include the following:
  - Prayer (private, family, public; consisting of deprecation, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving; extemporaneous and written.
  - Scripture (searching all scriptures by reading, meditation, hearing, attending the ministry of the word, either read or expounded.
  - The Lord’s Supper
  - Fasting or Abstinence, and
  - Christian conferences include both the fellowship of believers and rightly ordered conversations which minister grace to hearers.
  
- b. The Prudential Means (these are context-specific rules that help Christians to grow in grace which varies from person to person and situation to situation).<sup>8</sup> These include the following:
  - Particular rules or acts of holy living
  - Class and band meetings

- Prayer meetings, covenant services, watch night services, love feasts.
- Visiting the
- Doing all the good one can, not harm.
- Reading devotional classics and all edifying literature.

Prudential means of grace are said to be subjected to “change as common sense and circumstances dictate”.<sup>9</sup>

c. General Means of Grace

- Universal obedience
- Keeping all commandments
- Watching
- Denying ourselves
- Taking up our cross daily
- Exercise of the presence of God

### ***Post-Pandemic Era***

The word pandemic was first used in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and today it is defined as "the form of a large epidemic that occurs worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries, through the human population, and affecting a large number of people" (Baz et al. 2021:2-3).<sup>10</sup> The latest pandemic is the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid-19 is a new infectious disease that first emerged in December 2019. As of 2021 September, 226,844,344 people have been infected globally and a total of 395,294 new infections. Though the recovery rate was 205,482,474, the mortality rate was 4,666,334. In Africa, total infections to date are 5,389,205 with 307,667 active cases and 7,506 new infections with 141,883 deaths. Nigeria has recorded 200,957 total infections with 9,039 active cases and 2,647 deaths and 189,608 recoveries. As of the September 6-12 week, there are 4 million new cases globally (this represents the first substantial weekly decline in 2020) with 62,000 deaths. There are also 9 identified variants of the virus. Economically, the whole world felt and is still feeling the effect of the pandemic. Yeyati and Filippini say “the impact of the pandemic on world GDP growth is massive. The Covid-19 global recession is the

deepest since the end of World War II. The global economy contracted by 3.5% in 2020”.<sup>11</sup> Virtually every country covered by the IMF posted negative growth in 2020 and the downturn was more pronounced in the poorest part of the world. Over \$16 trillion has been spent in 2020 on Covid-19. With all these, can we say we are in the post-pandemic era?

With the high rate of infection new cases globally, that is, 4 million as quoted above, we cannot boast of being in the post-pandemic era. However, with the invention of the vaccine, circulation, and widespread immunization, we can say that we have come to the beginning of the end of the pandemic, but this does not mean the end of SARS-Cov-2.<sup>12</sup> The records from WHO state that as of 15 September 2021, the doses of vaccine already administered globally stand at 5,634,533,040. Out of these, 131,499,400 doses have been administered in Africa with about 54, 103, 629 people fully vaccinated and out of these, 5,858,737 doses were administered in Nigeria giving about 2,929,369 people fully vaccinated. Considering the misgivings and confusion over the safety of the vaccine, especially in Nigeria (though it is a global phenomenon), I would consider the rate of immunization quite impressive. Since this paper is not on the issue of immunization, I would not venture into the area as we would be left divided. Yet, many do not know that if we have people that remain unvaccinated, the virus has hosts to infect and mutate, creating variants that would make it difficult to control the virus and make it come to the level of being endemic.

Whether we are still in the pandemic era or we are going to the post-pandemic era, Covid-19 has left an indelible mark on the globe. Fact: Covid-19 has come to stay, and we must change our lifestyle to cope with its presence.

### **Virtual Church**

The virtual church has been called other names such as cyber church<sup>13</sup> and online religion.<sup>14</sup> Estes defines the virtual church as “a place where people professing to have faith in Jesus Christ gather regularly to be in meaningful community appointed to build up the kingdom – or more

specifically, a virtual church is the confessing people gathering in a synthetic world"<sup>15</sup>. Using the term online instead of virtual (these two words are synonymous in popular usage), Dixon says it is "the body of all Christians who interact using global computer networks"<sup>16</sup>. He went forward to describe it as "an electronically linked group of believers, aiming to reproduce some aspects of conventional church life"<sup>17</sup>. Grayson says the online church is a church in which services are provided online via live or pre-recorded streaming, social media, and other digital applications.<sup>18</sup> Defining it more circumspectly, and using the word cyber, Campbell says they are "online environments where electronically linked groups aim to reproduce some aspects of conventional church or temple life".<sup>19</sup> He concluded by emphasising the location that "these entities exist solely on the internet and have no equivalent structure offline".<sup>20</sup> In a bid to identify a virtual church with the traditional understanding of church, Estes adds that a "virtual church is a local church because it is a place, a specific group of people present together under the leadership of Jesus".<sup>21</sup>

From the above, one can conclude that for a church to be regarded as virtual, the following conditions should be fulfilled:

- a. It must exist online
- b. It must use digital means
- c. The programmes streamed are church programmes
- d. It involves a gathering of Christians primarily

### **III The Church as a Means of Grace**

Though seldom listed as a means of grace, the church itself is a means of grace. Tennet admits that the church is a means of grace to the world.<sup>22</sup> He also identifies two ways by which the church functions in this regard: "one, way is through extending the radical, universal, uncompromising call of the love of God for every person on the planet. The other way is through the call to transformation through the power of the gospel". In the same vein, Dever says:

The church itself is a means of grace not because it grants salvation apart from faith but because it is the God-ordained means his Spirit uses to proclaim the saving gospel, to illustrate the gospel, and to confirm the gospel. The church is the conduit through which the benefits of Christ's death normally come.<sup>23</sup>

This position of the church as a means of grace is first muted by Macpherson as he opines that the church is a means of grace as "affording at once the subjects and the ordinances".<sup>24</sup> The premise of this paper is based on the acceptance of the church as a means of grace. This is because while other means of grace remain unchanged throughout the pandemic and thus unchanged post-pandemic, the pandemic has given us a new means of grace: the virtual church.

#### **IV The Virtual Church: A Brief History**

Religious use of the internet can be traced back to the early 1980s.<sup>25</sup> In this early period, it was basically discussion based. Though groups were formed, these too focused on religious discussion, it was not until 1992 that the first online church was established.<sup>26</sup> The first online church is the First Church of Cyberspace which was operated in conjunction with a traditional church, the Central Presbyterian Church of Montclair, USA. The First Church of Cyberspace was initially based on discussion and prayer with no active worship service. Statistically, it was receiving 10,000 visits per week.

The second virtual church is the "world's first virtual three-dimensional church"<sup>27</sup> called the Church of Fools and within its first 24 hours, it had 41,000 visitors. This church ran in conjunction with the Methodist Church and conducted weekly services with hymn singing and synchronous interactive communication. It was also open for interaction throughout the day (24 hours).

Within the same period, two mainstream denominations in the United Kingdom created virtual churches. For the first time, a cyber church was assigned a Bishop, a parish, and a vicar. It has regular times for worship and prayer and a robust pastoral care system with interactivity. Notably, members were allowed to assist the pastoral team (Roberts 2010). In 2006, the Methodist Church of Great Britain created another virtual church. Though the church had a two-dimensional interface with text and graphics, it has a regular time for daily prayer and worship as well as discussions and interactions.

During this early period, the church exhibited three views about the virtual church. On the one hand, those who have the utopian view saw the internet revolution as a *déjà vu* and readily adopted it. On the other hand, were those who hold the rejectionist view and saw internet technology as a demonic tool. In between these two views are those who hold the reflective view and would want to understand the long-term implications of the internet revolution before adopting it.<sup>28</sup> The pre-Covid-19 situation in Africa reflects these views as only a few churches have any online presence as many are grappling with the 'rightness' of adopting the internet. Unfortunately, with the coming of Covid-19 and the attendant lockdown, the Church was faced with only two choices: digital presence or no presence. As Pillay says:

A large number of churches turned to electronic platforms to reach their members and this has given a faster and inevitable rise to the digital church. Churches had to adjust to digital worship, digital sacraments, digital sermons, digital tithes and digital missions.<sup>29</sup>

## V The Virtual Church: How Scriptural? Reflections on Pauline Corpus

Since the existence of the virtual church is mired in controversy, it is better, to begin with, the compatibility of the virtual church with scripture.

### Is the Virtual Church an ἐκκλησία?

To consider this question, we need to reflect on the Pauline use of ἐκκλησία.

#### ἐκκλησία as Abstract Noun (the Gathering Event)

One of the Pauline usages of ἐκκλησία that is usually overlooked is the use of ἐκκλησία to designate the event or gathering of believers. This usage can be seen in 1 Corinthians 14.

<sup>28</sup>ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἦ διερμηνευτής, **σιγάτω ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ**, ἑαυτῷ δὲ λαλεῖτω καὶ τῷ θεῷ.

<sup>34</sup>αἱ γυναῖκες **ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις** σιγάτωσαν· οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτρέπεται αὐταῖς λαλεῖν, ἀλλ' ὑποτασσέσθωσαν, καθὼς καὶ ὁ νόμος λέγει.

<sup>35</sup>εἰ δέ τι μαθεῖν θέλουσιν, ἐν οἴκῳ τοὺς ἰδίους ἄνδρας ἐπερωτάτωσαν· αἰσχρὸν γάρ ἐστιν γυναικὶ **λαλεῖν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ**.

It is important to note that Nida and Taber (1982:38) say that the usage of ἐκκλησία in these verses is that of an abstract noun, an event word. Button and Van Rensburg opine that “Paul used the word in this sense to designate a gathering of Christians”.<sup>30</sup> Though most English versions render ἐκκλησία as a church, few scholars assert the actual meaning of ἐκκλησία in these verses. International Critical Commentary renders verse 28 as follows:

But if no interpreter is present, let whosoever has this gift be silent in **public worship**, and exercise it in private between himself and God.

In the commentary later, Robertson implies that ἐκκλησία is better translated as “congregation”.<sup>31</sup> In the same vein, Prior also translated ἐκκλησία as “gathered church”.<sup>32</sup> Though the term is tautological, he is only trying to bring out the gathering event which is implied in ἐκκλησία. Button & Van Rensburg conclude that “the most natural understanding of ἐκκλησία in these verses is that it referred to the event of Christians gathering together”.<sup>33</sup>

### **ἐκκλησία as a Concrete Noun (the Groups of People)**

When used as a concrete noun, ἐκκλησία functions as an object of the sentence and would thus denote a group of Christians. Even when used as a concrete noun, the basic nuance of gathering is still not lost. Both Banks and O’Brien agree that the concept of the group of Christians is an extension of the first concept as any group designated, as ἐκκλησία must have the capability to gather.<sup>34</sup> On this usage, Button & Van Rensburg adds the following to present an overview of Paul’s concept of the ἐκκλησία.

- a. In 1 Corinthians 1:2 Paul used the phrase: τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἡγιασμένοις ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, τῇ οὔσῃ ἐν Κορίνθῳ and in 2 Corinthians 1:1, he used the phrase: τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ οὔσῃ ἐν Κορίνθῳ. Though the two phrases seem to be different, the use of the present participle οὔσῃ is common to the two. Taken literally, the phrase would then read “the church of God existing continually in Corinth”. Translated this way, it would be clear that “the emphasis was on the people and the group, not on a particular activity”<sup>35</sup> as discussed above. This usage is also present in Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 6:4; 2 Corinthians 8:24 and 11:8.
- b. Still using 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 1:1 as the example, it is noteworthy that the word ἐκκλησία is used in the singular. When he is referring to a group of Christians in a particular place, he used the singular form of the word. Thus, we have “the church in Corinth” or

“the church in Cenchrea” among others. However, when he refers to a group of believers in different places, he uses the plural form as in Roman 16:4: *καὶ πᾶσαι αἱ ἐκκλησίαι τῶν ἐθνῶν*. It is important to note that the concept of a denomination is foreign to the New Testament use of the *ἐκκλησία*.<sup>36</sup> The use of the singular to designate the believers in particular places underscores the essential unity of the local church. The churches in Corinth and Thessalonica were regarded as one (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1). For example, in the epistle to Titus, Paul told Titus that he had left him in Crete to appoint elders in every city. Though there are local assemblies in every town, Paul would still refer to the church in Crete in the singular.

### **ἐκκλησία as the Universal Church**

The third use of *ἐκκλησία* by Paul carries the concept of the universal church and this is found mostly in Ephesians and Colossians. A good example is Colossians 1:18: *καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας* (and he is the head of his body, the church). This is a clear reference to the universal church even though the singular form of *ἐκκλησία* is still used.

### **ἐκκλησία as the Home Church**

Used a total of four times (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15 and Philemon 2) is the phrase *τὴν κατ’ οἶκον αὐτῆς ἐκκλησίαν*. In this phrase, it would be difficult to translate *ἐκκλησία* as a local church.

Though in most translations, *κατά* is taken to mean 'in,' a preposition that indicates spatial location, however, no lexicon has ever listed 'in' as part of the possible translations of the preposition *κατά*. In similar constructions in Acts (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 8:3 and 20:20) using *κατ’ οἶκον* as this, it was translated as "house by house". In support of this reading, Louw and Nida indicate that *κατά* can be "a marker of distributive relations, whether of place, time or number".<sup>37</sup> With this sense, in *κατ’ οἶκον αὐτῆς ἐκκλησίαν*, the noun “*ἐκκλησία* refers to the entire local church, and the preposition *κατά* indicates that the members of this body were conceived of as being distributed into *οἶκοι*, specifically the *οἶκοι* of the people named each time the phrase is used.<sup>38</sup> Thus, *ἐκκλησία* in this construction refers to the gathering of some members of the larger local church in the homes of other members of the church. Having seen the major ways in which *ἐκκλησία* has been used, one can now go on to consider if the virtual church can be *ἐκκλησία*.

The first thing to note is that the church is a gathering of believers. When used in this sense, the emphasis is on the coming together and not on the place where the coming together is taking place. For example, the early church gathered in the houses of members, in the synagogues, in caves and the temple. If these gatherings can take place and still be regarded as a church, then the gathering on the world wide web should be accepted by us as a gathering. I propose the term, *τῆ ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ τῆ οὔσῃ ἐν κυβερνοχώρῳ* (the church of God existing in the cyberspace).

### **The Church as Community**

The church is seen as a community. Foltz and Foltz opine that the church expresses itself as a community at three levels: a local community, an associative community, and a global community.<sup>39</sup> The concept of the church as a community is shaped by Paul and he made use of images like that of the body and the household to press home the metaphor. These images were used by Paul to express the Christian's "relationship with one another – Christians who were not necessarily members of the same congregation and a wider group, possibly including all Christians".<sup>40</sup> A good example of this interplay of relationships between Christians was expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:2b

σὺν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἐπικαλουμένοις τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν  
Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ, αὐτῶν καὶ ἡμῶν·

In this verse, Paul made the Corinthians aware of the fact that they are not alone as a Christian community, but that they are called saints together with everyone calling on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. This interrelationship is emphasized with the use of the two pronouns: αὐτῶν and ἡμῶν (theirs and ours). Using the household image to buttress the community, Paul pictures God as the Father and believers are God's children while Jesus Christ is the firstborn. This is the basis for Paul's calling Christians brothers. Unfortunately, even as a local church, this community only comes up during the gathering that is once a week, as weekly gatherings are always scanty.

On the other hand, since the coming of the internet, a new community is being created in the world. Amodu says that the internet has brought about a paradigm shift from citizenship to citizenship.<sup>41</sup> The Pew Internet & American Life Project states that "28 million Americans, 3 million a day, 25% of all internet users, have gone online for religious purposes"<sup>42</sup> and interestingly this

number is far higher than those who “have gambled online, use Web auction sites, traded stocks online, placed phone calls on the Internet, done online banking, or used Internet-based dating services”.<sup>43</sup> Though statistics of religious site users in Nigeria cannot be ascertained, Kemp shows that as of January 2021, Nigeria has 104.4 million internet users (representing 50% of the total national population) though there are 187.9 million mobile connections.<sup>44</sup> This shows that potential internet users in Nigeria are 187.9 million this year. These staggering figures underscore the fact that “the internet is no longer simply a form of communication around which people can form an associative community. Now, it is. A place where people can build a new community that assumes roles played by the local form”.<sup>45</sup> Some people believe that cybercommunities will provide users with richer experiences than those offered by the local community. If the church in Africa does not accept the virtual church as the new community, the church would lose not only its members but also potential converts to unbelieving cybercommunities. By way of summary, the virtual church displays and enhances the community sense more than the local church.

### **The Purpose of the Church**

Another important aspect of the church we need to examine is its purpose of the church. The universal claim that Christians gather to worship notwithstanding, Paul identifies two important purposes for the gathering of believers.

The first purpose is the edification of the members of the church. This is stated expressly in Ephesians 4:12:

πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας, εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ,

Before explaining the implication of this verse, one needs to note that it belongs to the wider context of 4:11-16. This passage is made up of one long sentence consisting of 124 words. Merkle rightly noted that this passage demonstrates Paul’s “complex and unwieldy style in which prepositional phrases intermingle with subordinate clauses and participle.”<sup>46</sup> It is on this basis that Merkle concludes that the two prepositional phrases, εἰς ἔργον διακονίας and εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ are subordinated to the previous phrase (πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων).<sup>47</sup> If this stand is taken, the verse then means that only “the special ministers, not all the saints, are called

to do the work of ministry. Stott says “this interpretation has an aristocratic, that is, a clerical and ecclesiastical flavour, it distinguishes the (mass of the) saints from the (superior class of the) officers of the church.”<sup>48</sup> However, if the prepositional clauses are taken as coordinates, then the verse brings out two purposes for the gift of leadership. One, the immediate purpose, to equip the saints for the work of ministry and two, the ultimate purpose, for the building up of the body of Christ.<sup>49</sup> Other Pauline passages emphasising edification as the purpose of the gathering are 1 Corinthians 14: 3-5, 12, 17 and 26 and 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

Another passage worth examining is 1 Corinthians 14:26:

Τί οὖν ἐστίν, ἀδελφοί; ὅταν συνέρχησθε, ἕκαστος ψαλμὸν ἔχει, διδασκαλίαν ἔχει, ἀποκάλυψιν ἔχει, γλῶσσαν ἔχει, ἑρμηνεῖαν ἔχει πάντα πρὸς οἰκοδομὴν γινέσθω.

In this verse, Paul likely envisages the regular gathering of believers in different homes within the city of Corinth. He sees a situation where many members bring a distinctive contribution to the gathering. In such a situation, he called for corporate edification as the deciding factor and not individual aggrandizement.<sup>50</sup> The important phrase here is πάντα πρὸς οἰκοδομὴν γινέσθω. In this phrase, Paul used the third person imperative, γινέσθω, meaning it is a command. The use of πρὸς with accusative denotes purpose and the purpose is οἰκοδομὴν, meaning building up (edification). Thus, for Paul, the most important factor in the gathering is edification. It is not a misnomer therefore when Tetley concludes that “the goal of the worship experience is to build oneself and others up in the faith.”<sup>51</sup>

The second purpose for gathering is for the believers to meet with Christ. Two verses from Paul that centres on this are Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19-20.

Now the question here is this: Can the virtual church meet these purposes?

### **Advantages of the Virtual Church**

The evils of Covid-19 notwithstanding, it has come with some advantages one of which is that “the pandemic has successfully directed church ministry to the context of the digital world”.<sup>52</sup> There is a need to take time and examine the advantages of the virtual church.

### ***Returning the Church to the House***

Before the pandemic, the church has become so institutionalized that the home aspect that has been part of church life from the beginning had fizzled away. Describing the scenario, Darmawan et al. say "the pandemic becomes a situation in which koinonia (fellowship) in small communities of the homes of the faithful becomes alive and runs well. Before the pandemic, family worship rarely happens, but the pandemic enables it to happen regularly."<sup>53</sup> Rediscovering the home as the fulcrum of worship has its advantages. Captured Widaja et al. say "this transition becomes a strategy to strengthen the spiritual life of Christian families as the smallest units in church congregation and society in general. If these small units are strong, the strength will impact significantly on larger groups".<sup>54</sup>

### ***Recreating the Lay Clergy***

Another damage that institutionalization of the church has done to the church ministry is the creation of a specialized clergy that has taken over the work of ministry thereby destroying the use of lay clergy that has been the key to the development of the church since the beginning. As Paul indicated in Ephesians 4:11-12, the function of the gifts in the church is to equip the 'believers' so that the believers could then move ahead to do the work of the ministry:

<sup>11</sup>Καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν τοὺς μὲν ἀποστόλους, τοὺς δὲ  
προφήτας, τοὺς δὲ εὐαγγελιστάς, τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ  
διδασκάλους,

<sup>12</sup>πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας, εἰς  
οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ

As the home becomes the focus of worship via the virtual church, the head of the family naturally becomes the family's priest, and he becomes responsible for the members of the family and the success of the worship encounter in the home.<sup>55</sup> In the same manner, Ngema et al. state that "ordinary church members were immediately promoted into leadership roles. Elders in families were requested to lead scripture readings and prayers in their families".<sup>56</sup>

### **Extensive Reach for Mission**

It is no hidden secret that the virtual church can open mission opportunities for the local church. This opportunity operates in three ways:

Opportunity to reach the netizens: these are citizens of the net who would not bother to go to any church. They can be reached in their 'country' where they are citizens: the net.

Opportunity to reach out to non-members of their church: there exists today hundreds of church members who attend virtual services of churches of their own. In this way, churches can reach out to non-members of their church.

Opportunity to take the message to the outermost ends of the earth: with the use of the net, the services of the church can be viewed all through the globe by those who wish to tune in. In this way, church members outside the country can still be part of their services and invite their friends who are foreigners.

#### **Putting the Church on the Go**

Travelling members can still be part of the church worship. They can partake in the service even when they are on the road. In this way, weekly activities can be restituted at the homes, and this will stimulate attendance. As youths also belong to the digital generation, their spiritual life would be rekindled by the virtual church.

### **Conclusion**

As the lockdown was relaxed, many churches shut down the virtual church that was created to meet the emergency of the lockdown. Statistically, over 85% of churches closed down their online presence after the lockdown. Consequently, most gains of the Covid-19 period were lost. This is a grave mistake on the part of the church. We need to as a matter of urgency recreate the online presence to harvest the gains. Finally, we must master our response to the theories raised in social media (5G theory, Antichrist theory). There is no truth in the speculations that Covid-19 was caused by the commencement of the 5G internet services nor is there any truth in the rumour that adopting 5G would usher in the antichrist. With our adoption of mobile telecommunications, all our data is already accessible and could be used by the antichrist, in case the antichrist needs it!

### **Recommendations**

To end this paper, I would make three recommendations:

Churches should keep their online presence alive and active: if possible, all churches that made use of the virtual church should keep their online presence alive and active to reap the gains of the growing virtual world.

Open a ministry online: all churches, even those that could not do a full service online can open an aspect of their ministry online to keep their presence online.

Train the leadership of this ministry: any church wishing to launch online should ensure that the leaders of the virtual ministry are trained in the required skills. It is not going to be brand ideal to set out on the wrong foot.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> (Pillay 2020, 266)

<sup>3</sup> (Pillay 2020, 267)

<sup>4</sup> Peter Stuart, "Charism in the Light of Scripture," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 47.3 (2012):328

<sup>5</sup> Enrique Nardoni, "The Concept of Charism in Paul," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55(1993):69

<sup>6</sup> (Nardoni 1993:70)

<sup>7</sup> Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford, 1964), 28.

<sup>8</sup> Dean G. Blevins, "Means of Grace: Toward a Wesleyan Praxis of Spiritual Formation," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32.1 (1997): 79.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, "John Wesley and the Means of Grace," *Asbury Seminarian* 40.2 (1985): 26.

<sup>10</sup> Baz et al., "Covid-19: The Pandemic ---- (2021):2-3

<sup>11</sup> Eduardo L. Yeyati and Federico Filippini, "Social and Economic Impact of COVID-19" Brrokings Global Working Paper 158, [www.brookings.edu/global](http://www.brookings.edu/global), (2021):1

<sup>12</sup> Amalio Telenti et al., "After the Pandemic: Perspective on the Future Trajectory of Covid-19," *Nature* 596 (2021):495.

<sup>13</sup> P. Dixon, *Cyber Church: Christianity and the Internet* (UK: Kingsway, 1997), 5. Cf. Won-Bo Cho, *Virtual Church Leadership*, *Torch Trinity Journal* 16.2 (2013), 183.

<sup>14</sup> T. Hutchings, "Creating Online Church: A Case-study Approach to Religious Experience," *Studies in World Christianity* 13.3 (2007):343.

<sup>15</sup> D. Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009):37.

<sup>16</sup> (Dixon 1997, 17)

<sup>17</sup> (Dixon 1997, 17)

<sup>18</sup> Pamela L. Grayson, "The Spiritual Development of Online Church Attendees Compared with Traditional Church Attendees," (DeD diss., Dallas Baptist University, 2017), 7.

<sup>19</sup> (Campbell 2006, 5)

<sup>20</sup> (Campbell 2006, 5)

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<sup>21</sup> (Estes 2009, 68)

<sup>22</sup> Timothy Tennet, "The Church as a Means of Grace," <http://www.timothytennet.com> (accessed October 21, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Mark Dever, "The Church as Means of Grace," <https://lifewayresearch.com/2015/04/28/the-church-as-means-of-grace/> (accessed October 21, 2021).

<sup>24</sup> John Macpherson, *Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1898), 410.

<sup>25</sup> Heidi Campbell, "Religion and the Internet," *Communication Research Trends* 25.1 (2006):4.

<sup>26</sup> (Campbell 2006,4)

<sup>27</sup> Mark D. Roberts, "Is Online Church Really Church" <http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/onlinechurch.htm> (accessed October 21, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> David H. Michels, "Digital Faith: Law, Ethics, and Theology for the Online-Engaged Church" (paper presented at the annual international conference for the Center for the Study of Information and Religion, Kent State University, UK, 6 May 2015):2

<sup>29</sup> (Pillay 2020, 267).

<sup>30</sup> B. Button and J. van Rensburg, "The House Churches in Corinth," *Neotestamentica* 37 (2003), 3.

<sup>31</sup> Archibald Robertson, *The First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, ed. Samuel Rolles Driver, Alfred Plummer, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*. Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), paragraph 21278.

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<sup>35</sup> (Button and van Rensburg, 2003, 4).

<sup>36</sup> (O'Brien 1993,124).

<sup>37</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, Vol. 1, (United Bible Societies: New York):789.

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<sup>39</sup> (Foltz and Foltz 2003, 324).

<sup>40</sup> (O'Brien 1993,127).

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<sup>46</sup> B. L. Merkle, "Ephesians," *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament*, (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group 2016), 120.

<sup>47</sup> (Merkle 2016, 120).

<sup>48</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians, The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 167.

<sup>49</sup> (Stott 1984, 167).

<sup>50</sup> (Prior ----, 253).

<sup>51</sup> S. M. Tettey and M. Nel, "Discerning the Essence and Mission of the Church in the Midst of COVID-19," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7.2 (2021), 13.

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<sup>53</sup> (Darmawan 2021, 94)

<sup>54</sup> F. I. Widjaja et al., "Fruit in the unfruitful season: A case study of the Indonesian Bethel Church's response to the COVID-19 pandemic," *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 42.1 (2021), 5.

<sup>55</sup> (Widjaja et al., 2021, 5)

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