

Law, Religion, Health and Healing in Africa



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25 DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND NETWORKED THEOLOGY: NEW FORMS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN COVID-19 AT CITAM NGONG, KENYA

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INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus affected several sectors in Kenya in major ways. One sector that was especially affected was churches and other places of worship, as a result of social distancing and total lockdowns. The advent and subsequent growth of the internet, prompted computer-mediated communication in all spheres of human life, including religion. The period of the coronavirus forced people to embrace extensive digitalisation. Religious rituals and behaviours were transferred and practised online. The pandemic and creation of virtual spaces became a challenge as a result of the foreclosure of social gathering areas, especially churches.² There were changes in the worship experience, interactions and other church rituals, such as tithing and offertory. Invention and extensive use of virtual spaces led most of the congregants of CITAM (Christ is the Answer Ministries) Ngong Church in Kajiado, Kenya not to visit churches and places of worship, but instead to follow proceedings through the mass media and social media services.

This chapter considers the new forms of religious experiences resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact in Kenya. It explores in subsequent sections the pandemic and its impact on Kenya's religious landscape. It introduces us to CITAM Ngong Church, which is one among many CITAM churches in Kenya that are commonly located within urban settings, such as Nairobi, and also in some smaller towns, such as Ngong. CITAM also has branches in Romania, East Timor and the United States. The chapter further considers the practice of digital ethnography in CITAM Ngong. The focus is on the practice of digital ethnography by concentrating on human experiences of what congregants felt and how congregants experienced the virtual practices and things.

COVID-19 IN KENYA

The Ministry of Health (MOH) Kenya first confirmed a Covid-19 case in Nairobi on 12 March 2020. The Kenyan government traced all the contacts of the patient since the individual's arrival in Kenya from the United States. Kenyans were reminded that most people who become infected may experience only mild illness and recover

- 1 Research Fellow, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria and Senior Lecturer, Maseno University.
- 2 Campbell HA. 2012. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. London: Taylor & Francis Group.

easily, but that the disease could be more severe in others, especially the elderly and persons with other chronic illnesses. The Republic of Kenya Ministry of Health, in a 13 February 2020 press release updating the coronavirus situation, insisted that people were to avoid close contact with people suffering from acute respiratory infections. In addition, anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness, such as fever, coughing, difficulty in breathing and sneezing was to report to nearest health facility for assessment.³

Over the years, religious activities and gatherings across the country were the norm and taken for granted. However, with the sudden closure of places of worship in Kenya, there was profound impact on the across the country.⁴ For example, the Ministry of Health ordered the closure of churches in a locality in Kisii County in southwestern Kenya following an upsurge in Covid-19 cases among church members and the surrounding community. In a letter addressed to church leaders, the local public health officer said that all places of worship would remain closed for a period of fourteen days beginning 11 June 2021.⁵ Even after the government relaxed the rule on the right to attend church and allowed 100 people to gather, there was more confusion: “Who do you admit and who do you leave out? And just how many services can you hold on a Sunday?”⁶

Covid-19 in Kenya had an impact on the religious experiences of many. It is noted that in times of uncertainty and change, phenomena of prophecy, eschatology and miracles tend to be emphasised, since there are often few options for the majority who crave for consolation, empathy and motivation.⁷ During this time, some Christians sought after prophecies about the pandemic, its longevity, end times, survival options and the like. Many people in Kenya, including Christians, lost their livelihoods, loved ones and access to health care and education. They also experienced gender inequality, social injustice and accelerated burdens of unpaid care work. In order to cope with these multi-faceted effects, many sought information about the disease, counselling services for anxiety and generalised fears. They also went after opportunities to connect and engage with family and friends through available technology.

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- 3 Republic of Kenya. Ministry of Health. 2020. “Update on Coronavirus Disease-19 (Covid-19), as at 13th February 2020”.
 - 4 Maseno L. 2021. “Eschatological Prophecies before and during Covid-19: Female Pentecostal-Charismatic Preachers Self-Legitimation through Prophecy in Kenya”, *Pharos Journal of Theology* 102(2):1-12.
 - 5 “MOH Orders Closure of Churches as Covid-19 Spike”, *Kenya News Agency*, 11 June 2021.
 - 6 Kahura D. 2020. “Covid-19: The Great Disruptor of the Church in Kenya”, *The Elephant*, 20 August.
 - 7 Maseno, “Eschatological Prophecies before and during Covid-19”.

CITAM NGONG CHURCH

CITAM, or Christ Is the Answer Ministries, has its roots in Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC), a result of revival witnessed in Canada during the early 1900s, which spread to Kenya as the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAG) in 1918. It is recorded that the first missionaries of PAOC in Kenya were the Reverend Otto Keller and his wife. Nyang'ori mission, based in Nyang'ori area of Vihiga County, served as its headquarters. CITAM churches are located within urban settings of Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, Eldoret, Kakamega, Meru, Nyeri, Kisii, Naivasha, Thika and Nakuru. Others are located in smaller towns that include Kiserian, Kikuyu and Ngong. It also has branches in Romania, East Timor and the USA where pastors were sent to plant churches.

CITAM Ngong was started in July 2003 within the precincts of the town on Ngong. The church started with a tent as its house of meeting and with Reverend Stephen Mutua as the first senior pastor. Mutua was succeeded by Reverend Jesse Mwai, before Reverend Edward Ngaira took over.⁸ The church would later move from the tent to a sanctuary, which was completed in 2017. This transition from tent to sanctuary was termed as "Moving the Ark" and was popularly promoted by Bishop Dr David Oginde. CITAM Ngong is also referred to as God's habitation and the church conducts two Sunday services. The senior pastor at the time of this research was Reverend Josphat Shichende. The first service, which starts at 7:00 am, covers prayer and intercession. The youth service, New Believers class, doctrinal and Sunday school classes start at 8:30 am. The second segment of services begins at 11:00 am, and the main family, teen and Sunday Services are run simultaneously at this time. CITAM Ngong youth ministry targets the youth and young adults and takes care of their spiritual needs through Sunday church services. At CITAM Ngong, youth also have programmes for students who have just sat for their class eight and form four national examinations, as well as for university students and others. Mission and Outreach includes programmes of evangelism, local and international mission, drama, music and dance.

CITAM Ngong was the church selected for research sampling in the study on digital ethnography that is the basis for this chapter. CITAM Ngong was selected for its very close connection to the head and first church branch at CITAM Valley Road, whose virtual footprint is one of the greatest across the Pentecostal churches in Kenya. CITAM Ngong was also selected because it embraced a virtual presence even before the Covid pandemic. It is in an area slightly out of Nairobi and has a consistent membership of persons who reside in the locality. Access and formal permission to carry out research in this congregation was granted by the Deputy Bishop of CITAM.

⁸ The CITAM Church leadership is rotated after three to five years. The pastors are moved across the CITAM branches and others are sent to start a Church plant, thus the frequent changes of leaders. Each pastor when hired is supposed to agree to be deployed across the CITAM assemblies at any time.

DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY METHODOLOGY

Digital ethnography in this chapter is both a methodology and a practice. As a methodology, it covers how to do ethnography in any environment in which digital media is unfolding. As a practice, elements of what differences the digital makes to the practices of communities come better into focus. As new media unfolds, it offers new ways of engaging with research environments, causing actual practices by the communities and researchers to also shift.

Digital ethnography, as outlined by Sarah Pink and others, is that approach to doing ethnography that considers how we live and research in a digital, material and sensory environment.⁹ Clearly, the contemporary world and environment we live in is not static. Digital ethnography is a methodological import for how to do ethnography, even as the digital unfolds as part of the world that we co-inhabit with the people who participate in our research.¹⁰ It involves doing research with, through and in an environment partially constituted by digital media. Pink adds that through digital ethnography, researchers ask “how digital environments, methods and methodologies are redefining ethnographic practice”.¹¹ Digital ethnography also “takes the novel step of acknowledging the role of digital ethnography in challenging the concepts that have traditionally defined the units of analysis that ethnography has been used to study.”¹² The intersection of the offline-online social world is an important dimension in unearthing the relationship between religious practice in a virtual space and religious change in terms of experiences.

Towards this endeavour, digital ethnography was used to collect rich data from CITAM Ngong Church. Primary data for this study involved obtaining data with, through and in an environment partially constituted by digital media. I carried out interviews and participant observation, which enabled me to determine whether the findings were substantiated. I chose interviews, direct observation and participant observation as the empirical methods to enable me gather what is commonly referred to as “thick description”.¹³ Thick description is detailed and informative and is acquired through sufficient probing.¹⁴ In the context of interviews, questions were posed which were open-ended, and which avoided the eliciting of “yes” or “no” answers.

The objectives of the study were to examine the modes of operation and postures in relation to religious experiences in the virtual space in CITAM Ngong and to reflect on the adoption of virtual space and its effects on the religious experiences of congregants of CITAM Ngong. I sought to find out from the respondents how digital

9 Pink S et al. 2016. *Digital ethnography: principles and practice*. London: Sage, 20.

10 See Underberg NM and Zorn E. 2013. *Digital ethnography: Anthropology, narrative and new media*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 3.

11 Pink et al, *Digital ethnography*, 20.

12 Pink et al, *Digital ethnography*, 20-21.

13 Geertz C. 1993. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. London: Fontana, 6.

14 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 6.

environments impacted their services and worship experiences. I also sought to know how they felt in this new virtual space as congregants and their experiences of virtual practices and things. Although CITAM has a presence in different cities and towns, a choice was made to situate the study at CITAM Ngong, located in a smaller town, to facilitate the gathering data. This CITAM Ngong space was one where the present researcher had taken time to build a good rapport, close engagement and involvement within this religious milieu, in order to enhance the research.

Participant observation was a method to gather in-depth data for this study at CITAM Ngong. Participant observation is a scientific method that when combined with other methodologies enables the researcher to obtain systematic facts or data.¹⁵ It is a method of verifying data acquired through other methods, such as interviews.¹⁶ Through participant observation, I was enabled as a researcher to pick up not only verbal information, but also nonverbal cues, thus enriching data. CITAM Ngong is a 5 000-seat capacity church, and my presence in the distant balcony as an observer did not appear to influence the running of the services nor the behaviour of the persons present. I had been granted access by both the deputy bishop of CITAM and the senior pastor of CITAM Ngong, to carry out research of which the leadership was well aware. Through participant observation, I entered and experienced the world of the participants in their services. This was not just an experiential process, but also involved the recording of field notes throughout the process, which was important for the sake of the analysis of the collected data.

The Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya had different phases, such as the complete closure and partial shutdown of churches, as well as face-to-face services carried out under strict guidelines. This study was carried out from July 2021 onward when in-person services at CITAM Ngong were being conducted and in-person research was possible. Even as in-person services started picking up again, there was streaming of services and programmes, such as prayer, counselling, training and others, that continued to be carried out online. Data from participants observation and interviews enriched the digital ethnography.

Primary data from interviews for this study was obtained from a sample size of twelve youth, three church leaders and fourteen adult members. Purposive sampling was used to obtain the three church leaders, who included the senior pastor, the youth leader and the information technology (IT) officer in charge at the church. The youth pastor was allowed to invite the youth for the interviews, while the fourteen church members were selected from one of the *safari* (small groups) of the church. The research was consistent with the observations of feminist ethnographer Ruth Behar that in carrying out ethnography, there must be a real desire to engage

15 Kothari CR. 2004. *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques*. New Delhi: New Age International Publishers, 9.

16 Kothari, *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques*, 4.

with real people in real and usually forgotten places.¹⁷ At the same time and at a fundamental level, embodied communities must be researched in their particular contexts. Data was collected for the study over a series of visits to CITAM Ngong over a period of six months. It was clear that the digital community was unfolding in a space which involved some view of the transcendent. Through this digital community at CITAM Ngong, it was possible to reflect upon immanent processes of cultural place-making, the negotiation of social identities and the formation of boundaries.

In doing research through and in an environment partially constituted by digital media, it was possible to unpack the practice of specific narratives regarding divine action, transcendent presence and supernatural reality in the immanent world. The presence of digital media in shaping the techniques and processes through which we carry out and practise ethnography itself became a focus of study and reflection, leading to various understandings of how the digital, methodological and practical dimensions of ethnographic research were increasingly intertwined. The study required mapping the technologies CITAM Ngong Church used to reach its congregants, along with assessment of how these have changed or been enhanced in the recent times due to Covid-19. Participant observation and conversation with the IT officer identified which Information Communication Technologies (ICT) were preferred at CITAM Ngong, as well as their limits. Respondents to the study also identified the expressions of spirituality produced through these technologies.

Using ethnography provided the opportunity to be directly involved with CITAM Ngong congregants to see how they understand, accounted for, took action and managed their day-to-day situation. When contact with a given community or group and concern for day-to-day events and direct or indirect participation in local activities is pursued, the name given to this research is fieldwork, which is also described “doing ethnography”.¹⁸ Ethnography is as a means of data collection in which the researcher is immersed in a social setting for an extended period of time in order to observe and listen with a view of gaining an appreciation of individual’s perspectives and interpretations.¹⁹

A special feature of ethnographic approaches, namely directly observing situations through which congregants move, contributes significantly to understanding these congregations. Ethnographic method allows the gathering of rich collections of different kinds of information among different congregants, including the elders known as “golden-agers”, adult women and men as well as youth to provide background information on the people and the locality in which the Church was situated. This background information permitted description aspects of the congregants’ social milieu using a holistic gaze. This would not have been achieved if the

17 Behar B and Gordon DA (eds). 1985. *Women Writing Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 10.

18 Agar MH. 1980. *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*. New York: Academic Press, 2.

19 Bryman A. 2004. *Social Research Methods*. Second Edition. London: Oxford Press, 267.

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study had solely involved questions within the strict confines of oral interviews. Participant observation was crucial. Collecting these kinds of information from digital ethnography, supplemented with literature on ethnography, digital religion, Covid-19, gender and gender systems, intersectionality and networked theology was a stepping stone to the possibility of finding patterns and frames that could help describe new forms of religious experiences, rituals and solidarity during the Covid-19 pandemic and the practice of digital ethnography.

DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND NETWORKED THEOLOGY AT CITAM NGONG

Networked theology

According to media study scholar Heidi Campbell and theologian Stephen Garner, as digital media continues to find its way into church practice, we are increasingly faced with the challenge of how to evaluate and theologically reflect on these changes. Further, the new media technologies are situated in a unique cultural context, the networked society. It is from this networked society that a networked theology emerges as a framework for understanding the intersection between new media and theology.²⁰ According to Campbell and Garner, networked theology describes theologising about the digital, technological and network society in which many people live. It captures the way people of faith consume and are affected by digital media.²¹ It is defined as, that which highlights and analyses how religion is practised both online and offline in an information-based society. It explores issues and trends that influence Christian beliefs and practices in a world wrapped in new media. Campbell and Garner argue that serious theological discourse is important to fully understand how new media shapes everyday lives.²²

Networked theology provides a glimpse into the relationship between religion and the internet, with a focus on how religious communities have responded to and used the internet. Through studying networked theology, scholars are able to investigate the impact that online religious communities have on perceptions, church involvement, identity, authority and community. Network theology builds bridges between theology and media studies to create a vibrant interdisciplinary conversation which touches on rituals, community and identity in a globalised world.²³ In the context of the present study, examining of practices of digital ethnography allowed for concentration on human experiences of what people felt about their religious experiences and solidarity at CITAM Ngong during the Covid-19 pandemic.

20 Campbell H and Garner S. 2016. *Networked Theology: Negotiating faith in digital culture*. Ada, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2-3.

21 Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 2-3.

22 Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 15.

23 Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 15.

Congregant experiences

By some respondents' descriptions, the experience of the shift to digital forms of community and solidarity was fine. Others described the feeling as good in light of the digital community's expanse and reach and for the convenience that it afforded members during the closure of churches. Many felt that the virtual services expanded outreach to those members who could not make it to the sanctuary physically or who worked on Sundays. In addition, they could invite their friends and family from around the country and overseas to join in the services. To these respondents, the shift was a blessing and a convenience. In the framework of Campbell and Garner, these experiences are illustrative of the conditions of a networked society, in which digital technologies and their supporting culture are characterised and enabled by constant contact.²⁴ Accordingly, the instantaneous nature of digital communication allows easy transcendence of time-space boundaries and connection anytime and anywhere, with the possibility of plugging into several church services on any given day.

Other respondents experienced feelings of inclusivity in the digital services, such that those who did not have the possibility of coming in person could be part of the church without borders. This inclusivity was accorded to both members and non-members who may have felt odd attending a physical service. Some men who wear hairstyles such as braids, plaited hair, relaxed hair and uncommon haircuts that were different from the social norm reported feeling shunned or under a gaze when they walk into a sanctuary. The virtual church left all people feeling comfortable regardless of their habits, dress code and hairstyles. Mothers were comfortable breastfeeding and minding their children in the comfort of their homes. Thus, digital services facilitated this inclusivity.

Others felt a reluctance to attend the virtual services, since some were unable to concentrate on the services owing to a myriad of disruptions. For these respondents, being in the home came with a number of distractions. They would start the virtual service with others, but their attention wanes at the tail end of the service or they were tempted to walk to the kitchen to take a snack while the service was ongoing. The respondents added that they normally would not get distracted at a church service if they attended physically. For these virtual congregants, the home generated distractions to the detriment of their concentration. It is clear that the shift to a virtual space generated new experiences among different congregants. While others welcomed these churches, the practice of digital ethnography at CITAM Ngong brought to light variations in experience.

These findings from CITAM Ngong congregants' experiences were an indication of different people's religious experiences in an environment partially constituted by digital media. In this research, the practice of digital ethnography highlighted how the internet, social media, digital worlds, platforms, devices and content more broadly were experienced and engaged in ways that generate new experiential

24 Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 54.

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configurations.²⁵ The congregants who embraced the internet and social media during the Covid-19 lockdown used specific narratives regarding divine action, transcendent presence and supernatural reality in the virtual world. Some congregants resisted or were uncomfortable to be involved in any religious environment partially constituted by digital media. Others became distracted in ways that made it clear that navigating both the embodied, sensory or affective realms of experience and the virtual church service was a challenge. Since these online services were accessed at home, it is important to reflect on the normally unspoken aspects and experiences of media in the home – what is referred to as “media presence”.²⁶

According to ethnographers Sarah Pink and Jennie Morgan, in each home, there is a level of routine and sensory experiences from games or music played and programmes or movies watched and other activities.²⁷ For congregants at home and in a bid to help those distracted, it is important to inquire further, so as to begin to understand, and to some extent share, some of these routine and sensory experiences. This can help to consider media in the home environment beyond what conventional studies might uncover in relation to media as communication and content. When researchers focus on the experiential rather than material, they discover that what matters is the use of media to create sensory and affective environments not necessarily directly related to the particulars of the content or the technology itself.²⁸

When a virtual service is therefore streamed into the scene which already is laden with additional loud sensory and affective media environments, then there are bound to be unplanned distractions. For these congregants, such a mixture did have an effect on the flow of the service and served as a distraction to them. Congregants who were reluctant to attend virtual services, must also be understood from the perspective of the psyche and the spirit, where venues for normative religious encounters, such as the church building as a meeting place, are emphasised as a matter of theology. Such is the interdisciplinary conversation and dialogue that bridges theology and media studies. Can a virtual service replace what is normative for these congregants who prefer church buildings as the right and proper settings for worship?

These varied responses from congregants on where to partake a church service is a theological discourse worth examination and touches upon the perceptions relating to authority and community in religious circles. For many Christians, church has a meaning over and beyond an ordinary building and it must be designed in a certain way with respect to the pulpit, the altar, the position of the minister or priest and other factors. The plan of church-building is made so as to demarcate space and invite the divine. Traditionally, it was stated in both Pentecostal and

25 Pink et al, *Digital ethnography*, 59.

26 Pink S and Morgan J. 2013. “Short-term ethnography: Intense routes to knowing”, *Symbolic Interaction* 36(3):351-361.

27 Pink and Morgan. “Short-term ethnography”.

28 Pink et al, *Digital ethnography*, 59.

missionary-founded churches of Kenya in the early nineteenth century,²⁹ that people go to the “house of the Lord” and that the house of the Lord is distinct from one’s own house. The sanctuary or the house of the Lord, is well laid out with sections distinctly set out for specific persons. The clergy sit at the front, while the laity sit facing the clergy. Emblems are shared from the front, and many rituals officiated in such spaces. Therefore, holding Sunday services and taking Eucharist and doing other Christian rituals in one’s house, traditionally, has not been the norm in CITAM Ngong. This meant there was need for a mental and paradigm shift for these congregants to get into the flow of networked theology, especially under the Covid-19 pandemic. These feelings and persuasions are rather personal in nature and may not be generalised from one person to another.

Experience of the virtual practices and things

During the coronavirus pandemic period, CITAM Ngong congregants embraced the use of social media and online media worship. Findings showed that during the Covid-19 lockdown, CITAM Ngong church members, especially the youth and young adults between 18 years and 35 years old, became more conversant with the use of Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. These platforms existed and were functional before the pandemic, but they had not gained currency as the official broadcast channels for Sunday services to a large extent, since it had never been envisaged that a time will come when church attendance was banned. Many church meetings were done over Zoom. The preferred social media used among the CITAM Ngong youth, however, was Instagram. In fact, using other social media apart from Instagram hindered outreach among the youth.³⁰ Qualitative dimensions of youth values and behaviour affected how youth made choices and how they engaged with apps like Instagram and interfaces and devices in the context of the realities of everyday life.³¹ Digital media and religious content were embedded in but also shaped everyday routines and habits of the CITAM youth, as well as their feelings, expectations and experiences of time and speed.

Youth indicated that they had to have the necessary gadgets to connect with their counterparts and plug into the sessions or announcements. It was clear that their engagement on various platforms, especially Instagram, required their ability to learn how to sign in and use them and that this required them to have the necessary WiFi to connect. Participant observation showed that most of the youth had

29 The mainstream churches are those founded by missionaries and include churches, such as the Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist, Anglican, Quaker, Salvation Army, and Eastern Orthodox churches. Towards the independence movement, these missionary churches were seen as deeply integrated into a racist society and thinking. See Maseno L. 2015. “Christianity in East Africa”, in Bongmba E (ed). *The Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa*. New York, Routledge, 112-119.

30 See, for example, Baym N. 2010. *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Polity, 10-24.

31 See also Campbell HA and Golan O. 2011. “Creating digital enclaves: Negotiation of the internet among bounded religious communities”, *Media, Culture & Society* 33(5):709-724.

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Android phones, which could capture and share images. Youth taught themselves how to use the technology and shared lessons on how to connect virtually. They even shared with each other how to use least amounts of money for connectivity when on the move. These lessons and actions among the youth were eye-openers to the researcher and the other youth.

The physical youth meetings at CITAM Ngong before Covid-19 included the Cross-road sessions, which comprised college and university students. This category of youth met every Sunday at 2:00 pm. The youth had a youth service from 11:30 am to 1:00 pm. Often, the university and college youth decide on a specific topic for focus or selected a book to study. Findings from the church leader in charge of youth indicated that most youth like what is trending, so they prefer to use the Instagram app more. They also continue to use WhatsApp and Facebook. The youth have continued to connect virtually for leadership meetings, announcements to the group and devotional messaging, even with Covid on the wane.

It was noted that young people easily get distracted by what is going on, for instance, using Facebook to listen to sermons and services. A respondent was quick to point out that, while on the Facebook live service, when messages come into their inbox, the youth end up getting distracted. One youth said that “the virtual church led to distractions, especially when we use our phones to watch sermons, and members instead get tempted to watch other kinds of stuff rather than the sermon”.³² In the event a gadget had several windows open, it was tempting to view the flashy adverts that popped up. Indeed, there were many in the wider digital audience, and through use of various media found that their attention and concentration could be hampered and limited. Another youth indicated that “virtual church has brought a new way of how the church can be administered and revealed or brought out the weaknesses or strengths in the church which were hidden before.”³³ By this, the youth was pointing to how those churches, which did not have a clear service structure, well prepared sermons and music would be exposed when they streamed their content. At the same time, churches with good content and order would end up getting more views from people across the world.

At CITAM Ngong, relationships groups were formed in, through and with digital media and technology and the different forms of co-presence which are central to relationships. Co-presence involves the different ways of being together with others. The intersection of the offline-online social world can be understood through co-presence that allows persons to engage at a distance, for example, to play online games. These relationships create intimacy through particular communication technologies, and the fact that people are playing across physical distances is what makes online games so entertaining. Similarly, at CITAM Ngong, the particular ways in which co-presence become meaningful were shaped by different cultural contexts and norms around the ways in which intimacy is expressed. One congregant said

32 Interview with study participant by L Maseno. Ngong, Kenya, 8 November 2021.

33 Interview with study participant by L Maseno. Ngong, Kenya, 8 November 2021.

that “virtual services limited one-on-one experiences of fellowship”.³⁴ Another noted that “the virtual space does not have the human touch as it feels distant”.³⁵ Still another noted that with the advent of Covid-19, social life and relationships among congregants had been greatly affected. Particularly the loss of loved ones during Covid-19 put a strain on relationships in many ways. Friends who might have wanted to be close to the bereaved family or even the sick during this time were hindered. Many people could not condole with their friends due to the restrictions that were imposed at the time. Life includes walking with people during the tough patches, but under the circumstances of Covid, many were constrained to do so.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 realities in Kenya had an impact on religious experiences, beginning with lockdowns and the shutting of face-to-face church services. However, the innovation and creativity of the digital arena was quickly embraced by CITAM Ngong. Digital ethnography at CITAM Ngong invited reflection upon the experiences of the digital world in new ways. These included their experiences of what congregants felt and how congregants experienced the virtual practices and things. They experienced inclusivity and feelings from the engagement with the virtual demonstrated a somewhat new experiential configuration for them. Congregants were enabled to adapt although there were some challenges for others touching upon the perceptions relating to authority in religious circles. The experiences of the virtual practices brought about new ways in which digital media and religious content were embedded to the congregants. At the same time digital media with religious material shaped some everyday routines and habits, expectations and experiences of time and speed. Many acquired the necessary gadgets to connect with their counterparts and plug into the sessions.

The congregants at CITAM Ngong during Covid-19 period saw their services interface with the virtual. Findings showed that congregants not only consumed but were affected by digital media in their practice of religion. They were able to share new experiences from their online and offline engagements of religious purposes. Their reflections comprised networked theologies on authority, scope, jurisdiction and space. These dimensions appeared to be minimised in those environments where encounters with digital media was limited. However, findings from CITAM Ngong indicate some overflow between content from online and offline engagements.

These findings show what the congregants felt and how they responded to their experience of the shift to virtual practices and the ramifications of this for “doing Church”. They present the implications of the digital world and ethnography for understanding the contemporary virtual contexts in which CITAM Ngong finds itself. They demonstrate the multiple ways in which religious content over digital space – as both a material culture and a set of media practices – is overlaid and

34 Interview with study participant by L Maseno. Ngong, Kenya, 7 December 2021.

35 Interview with study participant by L Maseno. Ngong, Kenya, 8 November 2021.

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entwined in specific narratives regarding divine action and transcendent presence in the immanent world. They also shed light on the considered behind the church's adoption of the virtual space during the coronavirus pandemic and the impact on the religious experiences. It is clear that through the digital world, they experienced easy transcendence of time-space boundaries and were enabled to connect anytime and anywhere, and the possibility of plugging into several church services on any given day. Therefore, we note the amplification of transcendent presence and intimacies in the space.