

# From in-person to online worship

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For too long, the world of theology was separated from the digital world. At present, the church of God is facing a unique moment, in which they have to decide how to act as a community of joyful and engaging followers of Jesus in a world where coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) protocols like wearing masks and maintaining physical distancing are followed and where digital connectivity has become indispensable. Many people refer to this period as the 'new normal', while it is actually the interim period between the 'old normal' and the 'new normal' which is to come. What should the church of God do in this period, first to accommodate her congregants now, and second to prepare herself and them for the time to come? This unique moment should be utilised to its fullest in both instances. This article discusses the three periods indicated above, with the focus on the present time. It only concerns the Christian church and her actions pre-, during, and post-COVID-19. The main source of this article is a book published in 2020 by Heidi Campbell, *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*. The insights gained from this article can be of much help, especially in South Africa, to (re)gain momentum as church of God in a pandemic-struck country during the present time, and afterwards.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** Semper reformanda: The church is in constant change/reformation. This article intends to assist pastors and lecturers in the transformation process from in-person to online or hybrid worship, requiring a mental paradigm shift. It involves Church History, the Bible, and Practical Theology. Will the church adapt or die? The debate is on.

**Keywords:** Church worship; church service; digital services; online services; pastor; congregants; COVID-19.

*The present crisis is an excellent opportunity for the church to begin to reach out to the creatives in this [technological era]. This will be for many a missional opportunity, as they start to include those on the edge of faith, the artists, the musicians, the techies, the honest inquirers, those who are not far from the Kingdom of God. – Bogle (2020:8)*

## Introduction

Heidi Campbell is a professor of communications at the A&M University in Texas, being well-known for doing research on digital religion and religious communities (Campbell 2020:3). Being in total lockdown during the first part of 2019 in their home in the USA, she invited church leaders, some of whom are also academics, from many places in the world, specifically the USA and UK, 'who [were] struggling with and studying what it means to do church online' for a book project (Campbell 2020:3). As the congregants of all the different church institutions were physically separated due to the fact that public worship was prohibited because of health concerns as well as safety regulations, church leaders had to find an alternative for their physical gatherings and worship services (Campbell 2020:4). Campbell published this book in 2020, which is used as the basis for this article. The insights gained from this article can be of much help to the church of God, specifically in South Africa, to (re)gain momentum in a pandemic struck country, during the present time, and afterwards. This article aims at introducing an online 'participatory culture' – a term coined by Henry Jenkins as far back as 1992 – consisting of 'dynamic, interactive qualities' (Jenkins 1992:5–6) which opens spaces for 'active and communal engagement, creating, sharing, mentorship, belonging, and relationship' (Gorrell 2019:67). The aim is not to replace in-person services as such, but to discuss a worthy replacement during total lockdown periods of COVID-19, and to act as an alternative or supplement to the 'normal' services during periods of less lockdown or no lockdown.

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According to Hutchings (2020:61), the ‘first computer-mediated worship events were recorded in the 1980s, [leaving the church of God with more than] 35 years of experience in building long-distance communities of prayer and worship’. Almost two decades ago, Christopher Helland has already distinguished between *religion online* and *online religion* (Helland 2005). The former is almost a duplication of the in-person worship held in the church building, with a ‘come to us’ attitude, where the congregants are only consumers, not partners (‘prosumers’ – see below). According to Philips (2020:71), this is not ‘online worship, but rather offline religion’. *Online religion*, on the other hand, makes space for new practices as well as different social structures, not necessarily located in the church building. This kind of online delivery requires much offline organisation and preparation in order to make sure that the partners would be active participants in the whole event (Philips 2020:71). In this way the pastor indicates to the congregants that God is also inhabiting the digital world.

This article gives more prominence to *online religion*, depicting a ‘mediamorphosis of faith’ (Sbardelotto 2020:75). The reason is that in our communication with the YOU (God) and the ‘you’ (congregants), we should not allow space for passive subjects anymore, but rather for ‘an encounter of interlocutors who seek the signification of meanings’ (Sbardelotto 2020:76). We should therefore motivate our pastors to become part of the digital ecclesial community, ‘going beyond spatiotemporal or cultural-ethnic configurations of local religious structures’ (Sbardelotto 2020:76–77). Fact of the matter is that ‘[d]igital life is not additional to modern life [anymore, but forms an] integral part of it’ (Schmidt 2020:80). This does not imply that the ‘normal worship’ in the church building should end, but it serves as an imperative supplementary worship.

## The ‘old normal church’ – pre-COVID-19

In our country, ‘church’ is mostly understood in three ways. Firstly, as a reference to the church institutions and/or its congregations, secondly, as a reference to the church building, and thirdly, as a worship event where most congregations’ ‘life [revolves] around their weekly services’ (Shepherd 2020:37). These perceptions have made ‘church’ an embodied gathering causing pastors to put most of their energy in the preparation of the Sunday service (cf. Shepherd 2020:37).

On Sundays, the church (building) bells were ringing from as early as six or seven to almost 12 O’clock in different localities of the towns and cities, calling all ‘sinners’ to attend a public worship. Everywhere one could see people walking or driving to a church building, greeting and hugging each other, and talking about whatever. Then they would enter the building for the public worship and afterwards chatting more about whatever while the children were attending Sunday school (at some congregations), also called catechesis. This was socialising at its best. The public worship was extended to cell groups during the week where the socialising

was continued. In this scenario, most of the pastors did not think about internet as a tool and a means of Christian worship (Bogle 2020:7).

However, was this church institution in a good state of affairs? How ‘normal’ was the ‘church’, and would she like to go back to that state? After some serious and deep contemplation, both of these questions would most probably get a negative answer. If so, then what was the state of the ‘old normal church’ before COVID-19? If we may take a short (negative?) look at this worldwide institution, we find the following:

- Many church institutions found themselves in a struggle for survival or even a process of dying, with Europe and the USA in the forefront. In the USA, ‘over two-thirds of [all] congregations are small, under 100 attendees’ (Thumma 2020:84). Schaper (2020:34–35) states that these congregations were already in ‘survival mode’, adding that many mainline congregations have already closed. Troy Shepherd (2020:39) indicates that this phenomenon includes ‘all’ church institutions, like Protestants, Catholics, mainline churches, and evangelicals. He does not specifically refer to the Pentecostals. In South Africa, the situation does not look any better.<sup>1</sup>
- Mostly in Africa, but also in the USA, many Pentecostal churches, among others, acted manipulatively and misused their congregants in many ways, mostly the women (Horn 2020:12).
- Many church institutions, mostly megachurches, were there for the money, equalling their congregation to a business (Bazanini & Machado 2017).
- More positively, there were some small groups (Stephan Joubert would call them *ekklesiai* – Joubert 2012:129; cf. Oliver 2021:2 of 8 pages) who were really doing what God wanted them to do: Care...

This contemplation questions what ‘church’ in the old normal was beyond the building and the Sunday sermons (Lewis 2020:64). Was the Sunday worship really what ‘church’ was all about, or was there more to the church of God than that – and how much more? Answers and words are few. However, when it comes to the ‘interim period’, it looks as if the opposite is true.

## The interim period – a redeployed church

Currently we can consider ourselves to be in the interim period – between the old and the new normal. When the doors of the church buildings closed during the first lockdown, it actually opened the doors of the church of God on social platforms. Instead of inviting people to the church buildings (‘come to us’), the church of God went out and

1. Erna Oliver (2019b:4) has hard words for the situation in South Africa, ‘The churches are currently still acting as if they are deaf and blind – unable or unwilling to assist and support those in need on the one hand, or only focusing inward on the needs of its existing members on the other hand. There are no actions and protests, prophecy and provision of alternatives to the corruption, crime and other evils that are crippling the South African society’.

proclaimed – although not necessarily in person (Zsupan-Jerome 2020:91). This did not stop after the first lockdown level five was lifted to the extent that worship services could take place again.

Many people have the conviction that the lockdowns have in fact disabled the ‘church’. Others believe that this has depicted the end of many congregations because what happens to a congregation if there is no physical worship services anymore? The fact of the matter is that the church of God has now actually been *redeployed* (Tan 2020:82). Shepherd (2020:39) argues that this should cause the church leadership to make a paradigm shift with reference to the term ‘church’, so that the church can reach a new understanding of what was initially meant with *ekklesia*. The pastor should rethink what it means to educate and form their congregants in a Christian religious way about ‘church’ and the gospel (Gorrell 2020:58, 59). Part of the education is that ‘church’ must move away from a focused Sunday sermon to a ‘24/7 space of digital discipleship’ (Lewis 2020:65), where the congregants are actively practising their faith on a day to day basis. Sunday worship must therefore stay, but as part of all the other activities that take place during the week. Schaper (2020:36) adds to this by contrasting the ‘outer’ (in-person) and ‘inner’ (online) worlds with each other and concludes that the interim period culminates in people starting to act and think collectively instead of the old individualistic way. The interim period challenges pastors to totally rethink religious days like Easter, Passover, and Christmas.

This interim period already forms a very important part of the new normal, as it will and must lay the foundation for what is to come. In most congregations, things are closely back to normal (that is between the pinnacles of the waves when there is no severe lockdown) as the congregants are allowed to attend the public services again, although in limited numbers and with the adherence to all protocols (in South Africa). However, within strict lockdown periods,<sup>2</sup> when church services are prohibited, many congregations in South Africa do not have any kind of worship services, blaming it on expensive bandwidth or the lack of devices like smartphones or computers. In our congregation, for example, the pastor will (only!) post a random short message on Facebook, with nothing else being offered, not even on a Sunday. This depicts a sad situation.

The book by Campbell shows us what can be done if a pastor has some sort of adventure, innovation, leadership skills, and a consideration and love for their congregation. However, this requires proper theological thinking and an active commitment from the pastor, linked with proper training (Bogle 2020:8). Key to this entire endeavour is prayer and mindfulness (cf. Mercer 2020:22). This leaves the able and willing pastor with quite a few challenges.

The first challenge is the internet and the available social media platforms to reach the congregants. Facebook,

2.Floberg (2020:18) refers to this as ‘Church in quarantine’.

WhatsApp, Google Hangouts,<sup>3</sup> and Twitter, among others, are social media sites, which can be very helpful in supporting a pastor with their outreach to their congregation. However, to just use these media is mostly not good enough. Here, some pastors would argue that they are not able to reach all their congregants due to connectivity challenges, bandwidth challenges, or because some congregants do not have smartphones, tablets, laptops, or desktops. These remarks are impairing the entire endeavour. As the main thrust of each congregation should be to care for her congregants, the congregation should think of supplying those (few) people with the necessary means to obtain a device and/or Wi-Fi facility. The fact is that many congregations are suffering financially during these pandemic times. However, where there is a will there is a way. There is always the odd rich congregant who is an employee/owner of a big company or business who displays a generous attitude to support these people and even the congregation. This is already done at universities, even at some schools, supplying their students and learners with tablets and bandwidth during these troubled times. Although this is easier said than done, pastors should learn not to have their ways obstructed by problems – which are paralysing them – but change it into challenges, to look for solutions and to work harder and smarter to reach it. An enthusiastic pastor is always a winner.

In order to present a Sunday worship online, the pastor needs an appropriate programme like Skype, Zoom,<sup>4</sup> Facebook lifestream,<sup>3</sup> or Teams, among others, with Zoom being used most of the time in the USA, mainly due to the fact that it is (mostly) for free. Having decided on a programme, the question is if the pastor just wants to replicate a worship service online, or to use any other better options. Here the pastor should confer with their church council or leaders in the congregation and confirm with them what the congregation’s needs really are (cf. Shepherd 2020:38).

What is very important here is that the focus should not be on how good we can stream the service over the internet, or how many cameras, microphones, and video mixers we need or already have, but how this new medium will be able to strengthen and nurture the *interactive* communication between the pastor and the congregants, and between the congregants mutually (Campbell 2020:49) – Gorrell (2020:59) refers to it as ‘participatory’. This will enable the congregation to witness rather than merely watch a worship service (Danielsson 2020:11). Especially at the beginning of the endeavour, both the pastor and congregants will most probably feel *disembodied* (cf. Floberg 2020:17) and therefore the pastor must really do their best to make it work. Zach Lambert refers to ‘virtual hugs’ that the congregants should learn to give each other (Lambert 2020:20). He adds that

3.In a podcast with Tyler Stalman, Alex Lindsay praises Google Hangouts meetings because the participants are ‘looking at me the whole time, there is a straight-on shot looking straight at me the whole time. That is a really powerful format’ (Stalman 2020).

4.Lambert (2020:19–20) is using Facebook effectively, also Taylor (2020:44). Floberg (2020:18; cf. Campbell 2020:51; Schaper 2020:36; Silverkors 2020:41) prefers Zoom to Facebook lifestream. On Zoom, congregants are able to engage with the pastor and other congregants, even by taking the lead, like leading in prayer.

'content is important, but our connection is imperative' (Lambert 2020:21). Perry (2020:28) calls it 'community' (including common prayers and just being together, although it is on 'camera'), stating that 'worship at its best is holy play'.

The next challenge is the pastor herself or himself and the congregation. How competent is the pastor with social media? If their competence is not on par, then the congregation should make sure that the pastor immediately gets the necessary training. There may be a skilled person or two in the congregation who will be able to help. Make use of them! The congregants should also be equipped (trained) to connect to these social media and other programmes (Elbert 2020:12). This could be one of the new projects in the congregation!

Another challenge is the age of the congregants. The pastor and their church council have to decide if one worship service will suffice for all the age groups, or should there be diverse ways in reaching out to the different age groups? The pastor must remember that they now have a window opportunity 'to pioneer a radical approach to worship' during this pandemic time (Bogle 2020:9). This could determine a brand-new way of interactive services, if desired, where the congregants are 'fully participatory' (Danielsson 2020:11). Arni Danielsson (2020:11) indicates five principles that need to be applied:

- The pastor and the congregants ('audience') must (learn to) know each other well.
- The presenter/s (pastor and others) must be acquainted with the programme ('know your space').
- The presenter/s must know their message.
- The presenter/s must engage and empower their audience.
- They must actively nurture a connection between 'everyone'.<sup>5</sup>

Besides, the pastor must deeply contemplate about utilising the youth, women, and children in the services – congregants with the 'energy, enthusiasm, and skills needed to form part of the production and coordination team, as well as with the delivery of the service' (Garner 2020:57). The pastor should remember that the youth is familiar with this kind of engagement, and therefore they should be treated that way by utilising them more and also giving them another kind of interactive presentation. The congregations consisting mostly of elderly people will have other needs than a younger congregation.<sup>6</sup>

The next challenge: It would be very useful for the pastor to sit down and define what a Sunday worship really is and what it should entail. What would be allowed during such a worship – like Holy Communion?<sup>7</sup> – and what not? Will the

5.The confidence with which the presenter/s act is very important. In this regard, they can take a cue from 'YouTubers, gamers who livestream, or influencers on platforms like Instagram' (Danielsson 2020:11).

6.Whereas younger people have a very high digital literacy, the elderly will feel themselves isolated in this regard (cf. Elbert 2020:13).

7.In the case of the Roman Catholic church, this is a big challenge. However, for Floborg of the Episcopal Church, there is no problem (Floborg 2020:18).

worship be presented live, will it be pre-recorded in the church building, or will it be recorded/live from the pastor's home? Will the worship be interactive, or will the pastor run the whole show (called 'clericalist exhibitionism' by Sbardelotto 2020:75) with a passive audience/spectators like in the church building (cf. Shepherd 2020:38)? Will there be praise and worship and the congregants invited to join in? How many (Sunday) worships should be presented in a month's time? Things to consider are to just *transfer* an in-person service to an online one or to *translate* the service to something like a talk show where the pastor merely acts as the host (Campbell 2020:51). Campbell is in favour of *transforming* the service. One example is where the pastor sits on their couch and converse with their congregants, giving them a chance to respond or reflect. A chat box could be added for comments, photos, other pics, and prayer requests, among others.

According to Campbell (2020:49), congregants are ready to get engaged in an *interactive worship service*. She has identified six traits that congregants are looking for in an online service:

- *A sense of relationship* – a space to form a 'network of relationship'.
- *Care* – to 'give and receive support and encouragement'.
- *Value* – to receive appreciation for partaking in the online service.
- *Connection* – to be engaged with fellow congregants on a 24/7 basis.
- *Intimate communication* – a group where they can just open their hearts.
- Being part of *homogenous groups*, with like-minded friends.

It is therefore imperative to address the congregants' needs during a worship service. The engagement between the pastor and congregants, and individually between the congregants must be based on reciprocity (Nord & Luthe 2020:68). A one-on-many way of engagement does not reach resonance because the congregants should not only be consumers in these events, but also co-constructors ('prosumers') thereof (Nord & Luthe 2020:68).

This really brings us to the heart of worship – from the *technological how* to the *ecclesiological how* (Dyer 2020:52). Is the livestreaming of worship services really the best way of replicating the in-person service? Is it the best way to serve the congregants?<sup>8</sup> Is this really what church is all about: One active pastor in front of a group of 'passive consumers of religion? Or was the church meant to be something else, something more life altering, more transformational?' (Shepherd 2020:38). These are pragmatic questions that have to be answered in order to 'pass the peace' to the congregants (Garner 2020:56).

Answering these questions could help the congregation and pastor to build a biblical identity and get a 'missional

8.These questions should have been asked already during the 'old normal' era with reference to the in-person services.

approach to members living a disciple-based life' (Shepherd 2020:38). Therefore, what the pastor and church council have to decide on is the disrupting question if they are on the right track. Should they not NOW start to focus their energy into a new direction, a new form of connecting/engaging with people, and connecting people with each other, of supporting and caring for the congregants? (Shepherd 2020:38). The pastor must remember that they are not in a JIT (just in time) ministry, their online services are not a JIT operation, or something that they can concoct minutes before going live. A better way is to keep on rethinking the next worship in such a way that 'the homily is not finished until Sunday morning' (Campbell 2020:54).

Furthermore, the pastor should rethink the term 'priesthood of the believers' (Lewis 2020:67). Karle (2020:135) defines it as follows: 'This means that not a particular ministry, but faith alone qualifies a person for pastoral witness; every Christian person can pass on the Word of God and pray for others'. The pastor should stop being the only presenter and start to implement this more aggressively into the congregation's ministry, especially the Sunday worship.

Interestingly, during the pandemic, research by the Barna Group (2020) has indicated that most people in the USA are not interested in the usual worship experience anymore. They want something new. This implies that the pastor and their church council should consider creating new forms of worship which are applicable for online presentation (Taylor 2020:44). For most of the people, a live service is much better than a recorded one, complemented by encouraging the congregation to engage with each other and with the pastor during the week through calls, as well as texts and e-mails (cf. Campbell 2020:54). This will keep the pastor engaged and on the forefront of information in their congregation.

Additionally, another challenge is that many pastors focus so much on the Sunday service that they forget about the other 6 days of the week. The pastor should ask themselves about how the Sunday worships should be supported by other social media and by events during the week. In fact, the pastor should regard the Sunday worship as part and parcel of all the activities in their congregation in a week's time. Aneya Elbert complemented her services with morning prayers as well as Compline Monday to Friday (Elbert 2020:13). Steve Evoy posts 'fireside chats' and monologues where he just speaks to his congregation from his heart (Evoy 2020:16). To his Sunday worship, Stephen Garner adds (2020):

[O]nline morning and evening prayers, musical worship (streamed or interactive), daily activities for children... intentionally eating meals together as a household...help for [congregants] working from home, shared reading of the Bible, encouraging responsible contact with neighbors, and making people available to provide all manner of support. (p. 57)

Prayer requests are also given verbally or per text on the congregation's website (Campbell 2020:51–52). To accommodate

the people who feel isolated, Catherine Wybourne has decided to add voice to her blog posts (Wybourne 2020:47).

Something else that should be established in congregations, are chat rooms and prayer rooms – also for creating prayer chains. After obtaining the consent of the congregants, the pastor or church council should establish their challenges, needs, hobbies, and preferences, and put it on the website. In this way the congregants will most probably learn to know each other far better than they did before, and this will also allow them to become part of groups where they can discuss whatever, exchange ideas, comfort each other, do Bible study together, pray together, and care. A person can belong to as many groups as they like. In this way, the congregation should become one big family, or a cluster of families (groups).

Personal contact, the next challenge, is something that was grossly neglected in most congregations during the 'old normal' days as many pastors did not do pastoral visits anymore. Personal contact before and after worship services were regarded to be enough. However, during this interim period, the pastor and church council should make a point to contact each congregant or at least each family once every semester on a *personal basis* – using phone, WhatsApp, e-mail, or the like (called 'pastoral check-ins' by Garner 2020:57; cf. Evoy 2020:16). Especially with the lockdown periods in our minds, it is very important to do this, as the personal contact before, during, and after services are 'void' in online communication (Floberg 2020:18).

Then a hard challenge is something that pastors many times were the prey of is the size of the audience. A fully attended worship service most of the time makes the pastor feel good. Schaper (2020:36) contrasts that. She argues that theatre depends on an audience, but not faith – two or three are enough for God (Mt 18:20). Added to this, we have discovered in this interim period that outer things like Easter eggs do not really matter. What matters is the 'authentic spiritual experience' (Schaper 2020:36).

One may also think that the attendance of online services and group meetings during weekdays will be lower than in-person services<sup>9</sup> or group meetings, due to a myriad of reasons. However, this has much to do with the *enthusiasm and passion* with which the pastor approaches it. Piazza (2020:30) narrates that his virtual worship services attendance was quadruple what it had been before COVID-19 (cf. also Lewis 2020:65). Congregants are getting used to the fact that there should not be a big difference between the 'online spiritual community' and being physically together (Silverkors 2020:41). Lambert (2020:20) claims that his small groups reported a 'higher attendance and increased engagement...[as] social distancing seems to be revitalizing them'. The reason for this could be that during these lockdown periods, the congregants became aware of the fact

9. Whereas Floberg (2020:18) prefers 'in-person', Steve Evoy (2020:14) refers to these services as 'on-site'.

that they are lacking deep friendships (cf. Lambert 2020:20). The people have always confused small talk at the church building or wherever they meet others, with friendship, while especially during the lockdown times, they have discovered a deeper need for real friendship: 'The figurative masks we used to wear have been replaced by literal masks separating us from our surface-level relationships' (Lambert 2020:20).

A big challenge for the congregation as 'family' and for everybody belonging to a group in the congregation is the fact that, during the dreadful times of the pandemic, many congregants are dying. During strict lockdown periods, it is almost impossible to visit the dying person, while the number of attendants to the funeral is limited. Livestreaming can help much with a funeral. But what about the period before and after the funeral? The congregation and specific groups inside the congregation (cf. above) have a vital role to play in the grief process. New 'practices and rituals' should be invented to comfort the bereaved, to stay connected, and to lift them up again (cf. Hutchings 2020:63).

The congregation also needs a good website (and mobile app) where the congregants are informed about everything that happens in the congregation, on Sundays as well as during the week. This calls for a daily update (cf. Elbert 2020:13). The website can also be used to post general messages from the pastor and/or church council, recordings of praise and worship done by the congregation's band, messages from youngsters/children, and prayer requests (cf. Elbert 2020:13).

Yet another challenge is power outages, loadshedding, and slow internet. This is something South Africa is very familiar with. What happens when an online worship is in process and suddenly there is an unexpected outage? People could say, 'Buy a generator *and* move over to mobile data!' However, not every congregant has the availability of a generator or mobile data. A good option for the presenter is to wait until the outage is solved and then make a video of the rest of the worship and put it on, for example, YouTube for the congregants to look at when they have time (cf. Elbert 2020:13). Then there is also a lack of bandwidth, server overload, or constant buffering due to one of the two aforementioned challenges. For the former it is advisable to get better bandwidth, but for the twofold latter there is no alternative but to wait, which boosts the frustration levels and could make many congregants to exit (cf. Shepherd 2020:38). The pastor and their church council should have a solution for this challenge ready and communicate it beforehand with the congregants.

Lastly, something that pastors and their church councils should contemplate about is to use their church building productively during the interim period as a temporary hospital or a refuge for the homeless, giving the latter food on a daily basis, while the rest of the church yard could be utilised to grow vegetables on, or as space for temporary tents which could serve as extensions of the hospital and refuge for the homeless. A specific group in the congregation

could take responsibility for this as it will have its own specific challenges.

With what has already been said, the pastor can easily withdraw, saying that they are not equipped or contracted to do this. Here the words of Rick Yancey come to mind: 'God doesn't call the equipped, son [/daughter]. God equips the called. And you have been called' (Yancey 2013). The pastor must take this to heart and begin to identify their own strengths and start to play to their strengths, and get the congregants involved as far as possible (Mercer 2020:23). A pastor never stops learning, and that includes getting acquainted with technology and new ways of presenting the gospel to others.

This was only a bird's-eye view on the situation in which God's church finds herself nowadays. However, what lies ahead?

## 'Back to normal' or a 'new normal?'

In light of all the exciting new challenges and (possible) outcomes discussed above, the question is whether, 'after' the pandemic, the church of God should go back to the 'old normal', or has the pandemic brought an end to the 'old normal?' One person who does not want to go back to the 'old normal', is Piazza (2020), who argues:

[I] hope life never returns to [*the old*] normal. Maybe we can be kinder and more compassionate, sensitive and empathetic when this pandemic-enforced isolation has ended. Maybe we will understand that the poor and marginalized in our society need and deserve the same health care as the rich. (p. 29)

Maybe the 'new normal' will open further spaces for us, spaces about which we have not even thought.

Should it happen that COVID-19 can be contained like other viruses and illnesses (with a pill or vaccine, becoming endemic) and that all the lockdowns are taken away, will everything be 'back to normal' again, and would the church of God like to go back to her previous state? Looking back, we must admit that the 'old normal church' was deteriorating/dying/dead (cf. Oliver 2019b). Our circumstances caused by the pandemic have given the church of God another chance to survive. Maybe, hopefully, in history, the pandemic will be regarded as the impetus to the Fifth Emergence, called the Great Emergence by Phyllis Tickle (Tickle 2008:12, 14; cf. Gorrell 2020:59; Oliver 2019a; Tickle 2012). Already in 2008, Tickle quoted Right Reverend Mark Dyer, who argued that 'about every five hundred years the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale...we are living in and through one of those five-hundred-year sales' (Tickle 2008:16).<sup>10</sup> This depicts a brand-new way of serving God – a new Reformation.

We would therefore rather (have to) remember 2020–2022 as the time when Christianity went 'live' again (cf. Danielsson

10. The First Emergence was the first coming of Jesus Christ, followed by the decline and fall of the Roman Empire 500 years later (Second Emergence), the Great Schism in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa during the 11th century (Third Emergence), and then the Great Reformation marking the 4th Emergence and starting in 1517 (Tickle 2012:20, 171, 17).

2020:11). For the innovative and willing pastor, the beginning of the 'new normal' will be a 'period of experimentation' (Gorrell 2020:60), which will be 'less about technology and more about connection and new ways of gathering as churches' (Danielsson 2020:11). Schaper (2020:35) predicts that online worship will prevail because it is 'green' – no parking problems, and lower utility bills. She adds that the new 'spiritual experience has rendered the pew obsolete. We need to remove the pews from our sanctuaries and from our souls and our heads' (Schaper 2020:35). There is a good reason for this: 'People want interactivity; they don't want to be talked at. People want relief from shame and blame – and pulpits and pews exude shame and blame' (Schaper 2020:35). It therefore looks as if virtual services will continue, complementary to in-person services, as especially the elderly will be reluctant to attend services and risk their lives (Piazza 2020:30). Gorrell (2020:59) rightfully suggests a hybrid ministry – both in-person and online.

Silverkors (2020:41) gives two more reasons for 'lifestream services' to continue after the pandemic, namely people with health issues or a lack of time. One could also add those people with disabilities, those who do not want to go to the church building, those who do not want to see specific fellow congregants, those with transport issues or limited mobility, and those with other geographical reasons (Hutchings 2020:61). Taylor (2020:44) adds to this by stating that online worship gives people anonymity to attend whichever worship service they want (cf. also Taylor 2016).

## Role of theological faculties in the new normal

Just as the congregations have to adapt to their new circumstances, theological faculties will also have to adapt. Will they continue to present classes in-person, will they go online, or will they choose a hybrid model? Sometimes certain departments claim that they are online, while they are only presenting their full curriculum online instead of in-person – that is called 'paper behind the glass' (Ncube, Dube & Ngulube 2014:360). The faculties should rethink the new circumstances of the church of God and then decide on a curriculum that would fit these circumstances and be in line with it, maybe consisting of other subjects than the current few. Multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary research should play a more significant role for the students at theological faculties.

Take Practical Theology for an example. It should be a more comprehensive subject, comprising of much more than it offers right now. Among others, students should be taught how to assess a specific congregation with regard to their technological competencies and Wi-Fi availability, as well as the size of the different age groups to determine her needs for both normal and online worship and/or other presentations. With that, students should be taught how to communicate and write fluently (getting a course in journalism), how to use different internet programmes (courses in IT), and how to utilise participants in an online worship, making it

interactive and participatory (cf. Schmidt 2020:78). Are our theological faculties ready for such an endeavour?

## Conclusion

In this article, I have touched on the three periods, namely the 'old normal', the 'interim period', and the 'new normal'. Because the 'old normal' is well-known to us, it did not need much discussion, whereas the 'interim period', which should form the building block for the 'new normal', needed most of the discussion. As the 'new normal' is yet unknown to us – something we can just speculate about – only a few markers were given.

This article has just touched the ears of the hippo regarding in-person versus online. Much more thinking and discussion and debate are needed for the church of God to work through the 'interim period' and be ready for the 'new normal'. Will the church of God be willing to engage in this kind of debate? I predict that if the church of God in South Africa ignores this debate and does not find a new way of presenting the gospel to her congregants, she will fade away like many 'churches' in the USA and even Europe and become a last sanctuary for elderly people to go to in the years before they die. Even this will end, as today's youth will not even be part of that.

Something that needs more research is the founding of small groups across church borders, calling themselves *ekklesiai* (Joubert 2012:129). The church of God within the Fourth Industrial Revolution world with its own challenges was not discussed in this article and needs our focussed attention. An article on this would enrich theological readers much. The use of the sacraments in a virtual environment will also be an interesting topic.

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