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Developing Virtual Ministry Models for Small Black Churches

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Abstract

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, many small Black congregations struggled with using technology to remain connected to their communities. From the lack of volunteers to the equipment cost, many pastors and ministry leaders experienced several challenges staying connected to their congregants as the physical church doors closed. To help small congregations transition from public worship to a primarily online ministry, I developed virtual ministry models to help churches quickly pivot their operations to a digital format. This paper highlights the models and shares best practices for implementing virtual-only and hybrid ministry styles. It also provides resources and recommendations on maintaining the models in post COVID-19 ministry settings.

Developing Virtual Ministry Models for Small Black Churches

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It was Monday, March 16, 2020, at 6:00 p.m. As raindrops gently fell at a steady beat on the acrylic sanctuary windows, the silvery overcast weather was gradually changing to a darker shade of gray that was only illuminated by small lamps atop tall, slender light poles in the parking lot. As the sky continued to dim on the outside of the church, a symbolic darkness began to hover inside the beautifully crafted and well-maintained worship space. The projector screens, which were usually down and ready to display scriptures and congregational hymn words, had been rolled into the minimally visible coves on the front and rear ceilings. Plastic covers draped the soundboard, video monitors, and cameras as if the media team would soon pack them away. There was an eerie silence in this sacred room that was only broken by the subtle hum of the air conditioner unit fan blowing from the ceiling vents and the faint sound of the second hand moving on the wall clock located at the base of the balcony near the red emergency exit sign.

The darkness and silence were emblematic of the discontinuance of worship as it had regularly unfolded at Cascade United Methodist Church every week. The day before, Sunday, March 15, 2020, would be the last day for in-person worship services until further notice due to safety concerns amid the impending and mysterious Coronavirus pandemic, per the advice of the North Georgia Conference leadership. On this next evening after the final physical worship experience, a COVID-19 task force, including myself, was formed to quickly identify some next steps to keep the congregation of Cascade going until the church could regain some sense of ministry normalcy.

Cascade, one of the largest United Methodist Churches in the southeast region of the United States, is a predominantly Black congregation nestled in the southwest area of Atlanta. The church's ninety-five year history of discipleship, service, and social justice is well known and highly revered in the surrounding communities. It is the home church to many of the city's

dignitaries, politicians, and civil rights leaders. The late Dr. Joseph E. Lowery, noted activist and long-time leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, once served as the congregation's pastor. The ministry has been known and applauded for its radical hospitality through several significant outreach and evangelism initiatives. Since Cascade is nearly 100 years old, it is an intergenerational congregation with members of varying ages, with the average being 45. The current pastor, Dr. Kevin Murriel, is quite progressive in his leadership style and continually pushes the congregation to be open to ideas about using technology and modern strategies, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the initial task force meeting, the committee members posed several concerning questions: How will we inform the congregants about the worship service change? What impact will eliminating onsite worship have on financial contributions and the ministry's expenses? Will outreach activities and community initiatives continue despite the building closure? Will the church staff begin to work from home? And most importantly, in what manner will worship continue during the indefinite period that the physical edifice is closed? In the unfamiliar space of church closure, a strong sense of fear and concern arose in me and within the church's executive board. Though their questions about the future of ministry were valid, there was much apprehension amongst the leadership team. To help diminish this timidity, I reminded the group of the Isaiah 41:10 biblical text that encourages believers not to fear nor be dismayed, for God with will strengthen, help, and uphold them.¹ Even as the Israelites experienced Babylonian exile in Isaiah 41, I believe this scripture applies to current-day uncharted territories, mysteries, and uncertainties like what the COVID-19 pandemic has presented to the entire world.

¹ Isaiah 41:10 (New King James Version).

In addition to providing some theological support to the team, I developed a virtual church model that has sustained the presence and connectivity of the congregation. It has also expanded the ministry's reach to connect with people who would never know about the church or even step foot in the physical space. Additionally, I've encountered many other ministries, most notably small Black congregations, that have needed initial and ongoing support to incorporate technology to keep their churches going during the Coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, I've decided to share the virtual church model to meet this group's worship and operations technology needs.

The opportunity to develop a virtual platform for ministries has been significant as I've been working in church technology for the past ten years with moderate response and engagement from small churches. Since March 2020, the requests for ministry technology training and consultations significantly surged, which warranted the need for a platform that ministries can use to create an all-encompassing online space designed explicitly for Sunday worship interactivity and church activities during the week. This project will outline and correlate this portal's technical efficiency and user practicality to increased spiritual growth and theological understanding.

My project will work to answer the following research question: How can an all-inclusive, customizable, and church-specific virtual platform comprising technology tools for outreach, giving, streaming, Christian education, meetings, small groups, staff productivity, event and project management, social media, community engagement, church ordinances, guest services, and new member orientation strategically increase salvation, discipleship, Sunday worship attendance, and interactivity along with daily ministry activities during times of quarantine and when there are regular physical gathering opportunities for small Black churches that consist of congregants with varying levels of computer savviness? This question will result in a model that

will shift future approaches and commitment to church technology as essential to ministry success and effectiveness.

The Evolution of Church Technology

Though the use of technology for ministry has drastically increased in recent years, it is not new to the church. Even before the 20th Century, tools like the Gutenberg Press were used to mass print the Bible to make scripture available to wider audiences beyond an ecclesial setting. From Rev. C.L. Franklin's use of 45 records to publish and distribute sermons in the 1940s and 1950s and Bishop G.E. Patterson's television broadcasts in the 1980s and 1990s to today's preacher podcasts and online live streaming, technology continues to reshape and redefine Sunday worship experiences and daily ministry execution. For several decades as technology has evolved in enhancing the worship experience, using digital tools for ministry was not a priority for many ministries, especially before the COVID-19 pandemic. As I've interviewed pastors, surveyed board members, and conducted training in small Black churches, it was pretty clear that acquiring and using websites, projectors, digital soundboards, and video cameras weren't directives on their ministry agendas.² Clergy and church leaders who participated in the interviews and surveys completed a church technology resource request form that I posted on social media and shared with my email distribution list.³ And as technology frequently advances, these churches are continually falling behind the times.⁴ When it comes to digital tools for ministry, the only constant thing is change.⁵ As a result, these congregations have slowly declined in membership as there has

² See appendix.

³ See appendix.

⁴ Timothy Welch, *Technology Tools for Your Ministry* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2008), 90.

⁵ Darrell L. Bock and Jonathan J. Armstrong, *Virtual Reality Church: Pitfalls and Possibilities (or How to Think Biblically about Church in Your Pajamas, VR Baptisms, Jesus Avatars, and Whatever Else Is Coming next)* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2021), 55.

been no connection with a virtual audience to establish a sense of presence in a global community. To be clear, I'm not suggesting that small churches can't be successful without using technology. However, ministry can be quite challenging to execute effectively with closed physical church doors during a global health crisis. There are no virtual means to connect with people in their environments. The congregations with whom I've connected represent only a fraction of similar churches with little or no technical infrastructure to support virtual engagement for worship or administrative efficiency. Many comparable ministries also struggle with additional challenges such as lack of funding and minimal willing volunteers to support a viable technology framework.

Though many small ministries have struggled with allocating an adequate budget and securing staff to support church technology, digital tools are now available to transform congregations with even the most limited financial means and minimal laity to form a media team. Such resources can provide churches with the capability to inexpensively and quickly live stream worship services, create and manage a website, host virtual meetings, develop and post online forms, and process approval workflows. The tools can also help members and guests participate in small groups, make electronic contributions, devise Christian education pathways, and engage in discipleship sessions, to name a few ministry components. Implementing these instruments can heighten congregational worship engagement, increase physical and virtual membership, optimize monetary donations, and streamline the execution of procedures, especially if these elements are all in one place in a virtual church model.

History of the Black Church

The Black church is an institution that has been a staple in religious life for centuries. It has been an epicenter for social and educational development for communities across the nation and beyond. The term "Black church" is not confined to one specific congregation. There are

denominations composed of generations of Black persons and under their control, and there are countless free-standing congregations. However, there is no one entity that can be called the Black church.⁶ And though the existence of the Black church is not in jeopardy, its capacity to attract younger contemporaries and Millennials is often plagued by a 20th Century ethos. According to church-growth researcher Win Arn, approximately 350,000 churches in America are surviving, yet 80 to 85 percent of them have plateaued in membership growth.⁷ And as many ministries experience congregational stagnancy, operational and maintenance costs continue to increase.⁸ This challenge is even more of an issue for small churches, many of which are composed of mostly Baby Boomers and congregants who were born during the Silent Generation.⁹

According to ministry strategist Karl Vaters, a typical small church has between 25 and 350 members documented on its roll. Most of these congregations have substantial pastoral control, and ministries are most often offered by age categories.¹⁰ As stated earlier, churches in this size category have been a core group for most of my recent technology training and support initiatives.

Technology in the Black Church

Historically, technology has had a presence in the Black church for many years. From the days of preachers airing sermons on the radio and victrolas to churches broadcasting Sunday services on television and online, technology has revolutionized how ministries communicate

⁶ Milton C. Sernett, *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 582.

⁷ Aubrey Malphurs and Michael Malphurs, *Church next: Using the Internet to Maximize Your Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2003), 13.

⁸ Jeffrey H. Mahan, *Church as Network: Christian Life and Connection in Digital Culture* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 89.

⁹ Sernett, 585.

¹⁰ Karl Vaters, *The Grasshopper Myth: Big Churches, Small Churches and the Small Thinking That Divides Us* (New Small Church, 2012), 679.

worship to a mass amount of people. However, many small Black churches have struggled to stay on the cutting edge with digital tools, which has become even more apparent since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March of 2020, when federal and state guidelines and CDC recommendations discouraged public gatherings, some churches designed innovative practices for the congregants during lockdown while several small congregations maintained in-person services despite stay-at-home mandates. An April 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center found that worshippers at many historically Black churches were the least likely to say that their services had moved online.¹¹ Leaders of those congregations likely thought that the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic would be just a few months and not nearly two years. Some congregations attribute their slow move to using technology to an aging population, racial and economic disparities, and barriers to internet access and high-speed connections, to name a few issues that many Black congregations have faced over the years.¹² And while the sluggish technological advancement thwarts the progress of smaller ministries, worship in the virtual world continues to grow at lightning speed, continually leaving many in-person only churches behind.¹³ Additionally, exclusively physical ecclesial gatherings eliminate valuable opportunities for evangelism, missions, and Christian education that the online experience can bring.¹⁴

To capture further details about the technology hindrances that many small Black churches have incurred, I conducted surveys, interviews, and observations with pastors and ministry lay

¹¹ Erika Gault, “Black Churches Have Lagged in Moving Online during the Pandemic – Reaching across Generational Lines Could Help,” *The Conversation*, December 2, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/black-churches-have-lagged-in-moving-online-during-the-pandemic-reaching-across-generational-lines-could-help-132170>.

¹² Gault, “Black Church.”

¹³ Douglas Estes, *Simchurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 17.

¹⁴ Malphurs, 95.

members to drill deeper into their obstacles and to identify the best virtual models to meet their congregational needs optimally.¹⁵

My Research Project

This paper will work to solidify the value of virtual models for small Black churches, as mentioned in my research question. To do so, this document will:

- Discuss in detail the technology challenges experienced by small Black churches
- Highlight the elements of each virtual church model prototype and review how they addressed the needs of the tested congregations.
- Evaluate and assess the results of the prototype implementations
- Outline possible church leadership and laity questions and concerns
- Conclude with summary remarks, perspective reflections, and future work and possibilities on this project.

In my church technology work, both before the COVID-19 pandemic and even now, I've observed and encountered several challenges that brought me to the research question shared earlier in this document. *How can a virtual church model be created and used to increase the effectiveness and reach of small Black churches?* Here are some of the most critical issues that have hindered these ministries.

Limited Template Options

At the onset of the Coronavirus health crisis, many small churches struggled tremendously with the basics of developing an online presence. Even a fundamental technology tool such as a website was hard to establish due to a lack of knowledge of getting one started, the features it should include, and the layout of the menu and pages. Even website services provided by

¹⁵ See appendix.

WordPress, GoDaddy, and SquareSpace were complex for novice volunteers to navigate because no church-specific templates were available on these hosting sites. These templates could include ecclesial themes and web pages that are pre-formatted for worship engagement, small group interaction, and online giving opportunities. After conducting surveys with eighty-six pastors and church leaders who serve small Black churches, I discovered that sixty-seven of them were not only terrified about getting the website development process started, but they didn't even know where to begin. For many of the ministries that did have a website, the content was highly outdated, and there was no access available to the dashboard for a staff member to make any edits or enhancements.

Minimal Budget for Technology Costs

In addition to the challenges of small Black congregations with limited options for website templates, they struggle with the expense of imploring the services of web designers to create custom sites specific to the needs and branding of their ministries. For many of them, technology expenses beyond the monthly electric bill were not a part of their annual budgets, especially before the COVID-19 pandemic when an online presence was a secondary ministry component and not an essential one. Now, many churches face the difficult task of adjusting spending plans to accommodate the costs of digital tools to remain relevant and connected to the world. Most of the pastors and church leaders who were frightened about establishing a website were also concerned about the costs. According to the survey referenced earlier, sixty-one of the polled people expressed frustrations around technology costs beyond their ministry budgets.

Connecting with People on their Mobile Devices

In addition to conducting surveys, I interviewed forty-one small Black church pastors via Zoom to assess their current use of technology and comfort level with increasing their savviness

with digital tools. Though twenty-three of the clergy indicated that they were minimally familiar with technology, they all agreed that using mobile technology was important when asked about their opinion on connecting with congregants on their cellular phones and tablet devices for worship engagement.¹⁶ However, only a few church-specific virtual tools can easily help smaller ministries create a space for worship and ministry engagement that can quickly be customized and launched with an affordable cost and minimal setup.

Centralized Location for all Online Ministry Tools

As many small congregations slowly and even reluctantly embrace technology to sustain their ministries, several of them struggle with communicating the location of the different digital resources to church members. From online giving sites to social media channels to live streaming pages, smaller churches need a central online portal where all of the most commonly used links can reside and be easily accessed. As pastors and church leaders communicate their ministries' technology components, their notifications should lead congregants to one online space rather than multiple sites.

Accessibility for Seniors and Non-Tech Savvy People

A typical conversation among pastors and church leaders as they work to include everyone with new digital resources is finding ways to ensure that senior members and those who are technologically challenged and disadvantaged can easily connect with the ministry for virtual worship and other online activities. Even if it's just providing a dial-in number, parishioners need to be at least able to hear the audio of church gatherings if they don't have an iPhone or an Android or have difficulties maneuvering apps on a smartphone. Otherwise, many people will be disconnected from the ministry and other members for weeks at a time.

¹⁶ See appendix.

Attracting a Millennial Audience

Millennials, those ages 23 to 38, are currently the largest living population. Research suggests a declining number of them are involved in the Black church. The number of young adults and Black Americans identifying as Christian fell by 16 percentage points and 11 percentage points, respectively, between 2009 and 2019.¹⁷ An online presence is essential to reach a Millennial audience. However, strategic visibility on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok is critical to connecting with this group of adults and other generational networks. Unfortunately, many small Black church pastors and leaders struggle with maintaining social media platforms and configuring them to promote ministry events and broadcast live worship services, panel discussions, and small group gatherings.

Small Black Church Subgroups

In addition to traditional small Black congregations, three subgroups are also associated with this ministry dynamic. They are church plants and rural ministries. These subgroups also experience many of the same issues as typical several small churches, yet they have some unique challenges that can make ministry success even more difficult.

Church Plants

Church plants are newly developed congregations created to provide a particular type of worship experience or meet underserved communities' needs. They can be organized under the direction, guidance, and funding of a well-established religious group or founded as a non-denominational entity using its own resources. Church planting has been happening for centuries, and many have grown to become large ministries while others maintain an intimate setting. A

¹⁷ Gault, "Black Church."

common challenge for many church plants is access to permanent worship space.¹⁸ Unlike traditional small congregations with their own buildings, some church plants have to move locations periodically because of scheduling conflicts with shared space, worship attendance fluctuations, and unexpected expenses. As a result, maintaining a consistent in-person worship audience can be quite difficult.

In addition to securing permanent worship space, many church plant pastors have challenges with finding the time in their day to do additional ministry tasks such as maintaining a website. Along with having families, many church plant pastors are bi-vocational, working full-time jobs and serving their ministries. I interviewed a church plant pastor, and he informed me that he has limited time during the week. Also, he and his family are responsible for setting up the worship space on Sundays in the school gymnasium that the congregation rents and breaking everything down after service every week.¹⁹

Rural Ministries

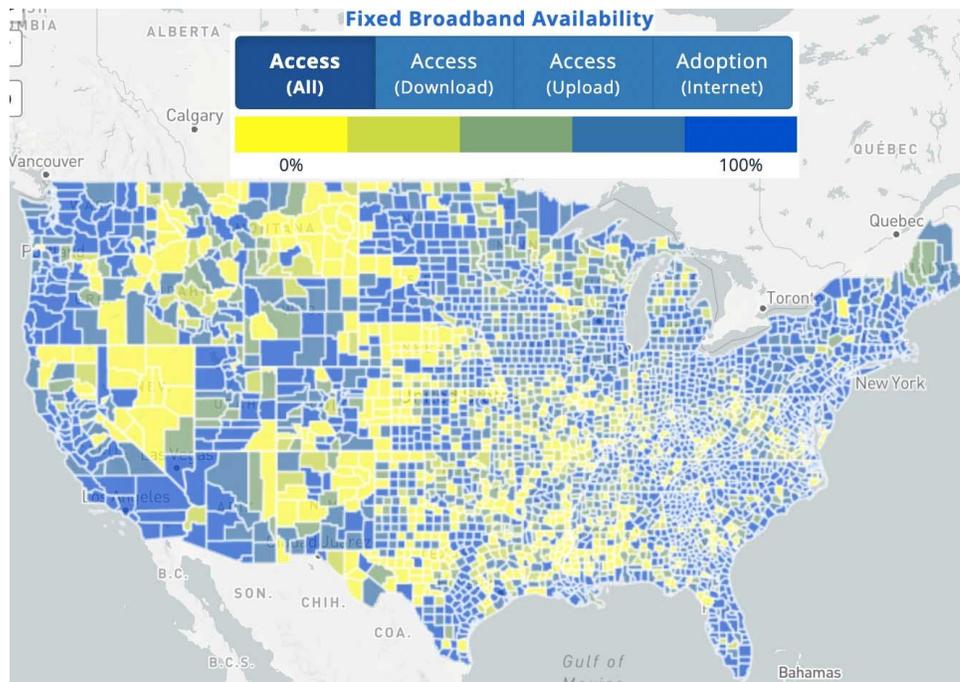
One of the primary issues that rural churches face when incorporating technology into their ministries is access to high-speed internet. While the nation is making strides in broadband deployment, millions of rural communities still lack robust online network connectivity. According to the Federal Communications Commission fixed broadband availability map below, 38 percent of the nation's rural communities still have limited or no access to high-speed internet.²⁰ Quality broadband connectivity is the nucleus of seamless live worship streaming, online

¹⁸ Matthew Fretwell, *Church Planting by Making Disciple-Makers* (New York, NY: Timeless Publications, 2020), 48.

¹⁹ See appendix.

²⁰ "Federal Communications Commission Fixed Broadband Availability," Connect2HealthFCC - Mapping Broadband Health in America 2017, accessed January 13, 2022, https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/maps/connect2health/#l=40,-95&z=4&t=broadband&bbm=fixed_access&dmf=none&zlt=county,2.

meetings, and other virtual gatherings. It is also a key component for managing a church website. Without an optimal internet connection, updating and maintaining web pages can be extremely difficult.



Preparation for a Post Pandemic Church

As small Black church pastors and leaders are weathering the storm of the COVID-19 pandemic and trying to stay afloat in a boisterous sea of challenges with technology integration, financial stability, and culture changes, the forecast of their ministry relevance and viability after the health crisis is uncertain. Dealing with these issues has left clergy and laity of such congregations with little time and energy to think about principles such as developing a virtual worship model, creating discipleship opportunities for online members, and devising a remote work plan for staff. It would be ideal if templates to address these matters were available online for small congregations to access and customize for their individual ministry needs. According to Thom Rainer's book entitled *The Post Quarantine Church*, more than 10,000 churches that never had an internet presence beyond a website began streaming their worship services during the

pandemic. More than 250,000 Congregations had never had a digital presence of any kind before the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹

Though many small church leaders are currently working through the complexities of establishing and maintaining an online presence, it's important to highlight that the concept of virtual ministry is nothing new. Yet it began with Jesus' time on earth thousands of years ago. The term virtual, defined as "not physically existing" by Oxford Languages, was personified in Jesus' method of connecting with people outside of a traditional worship building.²² In the book *The Connected Church*, the author points out that Jesus preached and taught most often in the common marketplace, where people gathered for work and business every day. Of the 132 public appearances of Jesus Christ, 122 were in public places, and only ten were in the synagogues.²³ Therefore, virtual ministry should be a priority in the church today to emulate the impact of Jesus with people who likely would never attend an in-person service. Though the integration of technology has been overwhelming for many small Black churches, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that the effort to infuse digital tools in ministry life continues to forge ahead to ultimately fulfill the Great Commission.²⁴ From the pew to the pulpit, pastors, church leaders, and laity must reach out to audiences beyond the four walls of the church, including connecting with people in the online world as a fluid network of conversation and engagement.²⁵

²¹ Thom S. Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges + Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2020), 11.

²² Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. "virtual (adj.)," accessed January 22, 2022, <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/virtual>.

²³ Lazarus, 38.

²⁴ Matt. 28:16-20 (New King James Version).

²⁵ Mahan, 89.

As a result of extending discipleship to the internet space, worshippers are more likely to not only attend church but to likewise "be" the church as well.²⁶

To address the technology challenges incurred by the pastors and church leaders I've interviewed or surveyed, along with my anonymous observations, I believe crafting a virtual ministry model can meet their needs to become more relevant and viable in today's digital world. This customized prototype will require minimal setup, and staff or volunteers from the church who are minimally technologically savvy or novices with digital tools can manage it. Small congregations can approach a virtual church model using two possible mediums: a website or a mobile app. Based on the needs and budget of the ministry, a church can use both platforms collectively to minimize or eliminate many of the challenges that small Black congregations face to remain relevant and connected with both their physical and virtual audiences.²⁷ To help answer my research question regarding virtual church models, I created prototypes for several small Black churches in the form of websites and mobile apps. Here are the details about both platforms' elements, development timeline, and implementation process.

Websites

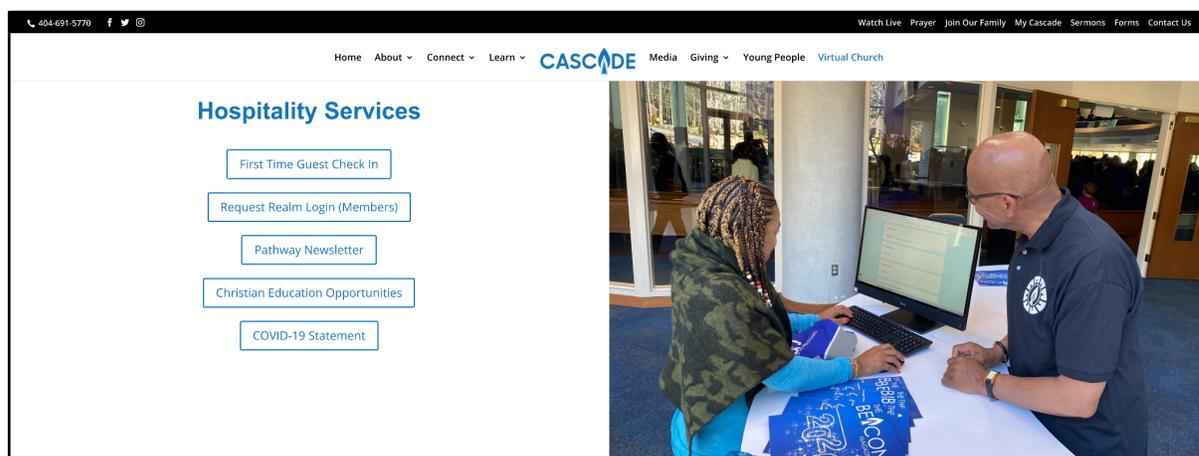
Though many small black congregations have some type of website, very few ministries have them set up as a virtual church model. This type of site configuration not only allows for parishioners to get information about activities and events at the church, but it gives members and guests alike a worship encounter similar to an onsite ministry experience. From walking into the lobby before Sunday service to after worship gatherings, the virtual church platform can engage an online membership in a similar and simultaneous fashion as in-person congregants to transcend

²⁶ Kelly Bean, *How to Be a Christian without Going to Church: The Unofficial Guide to Alternative Forms of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 27.

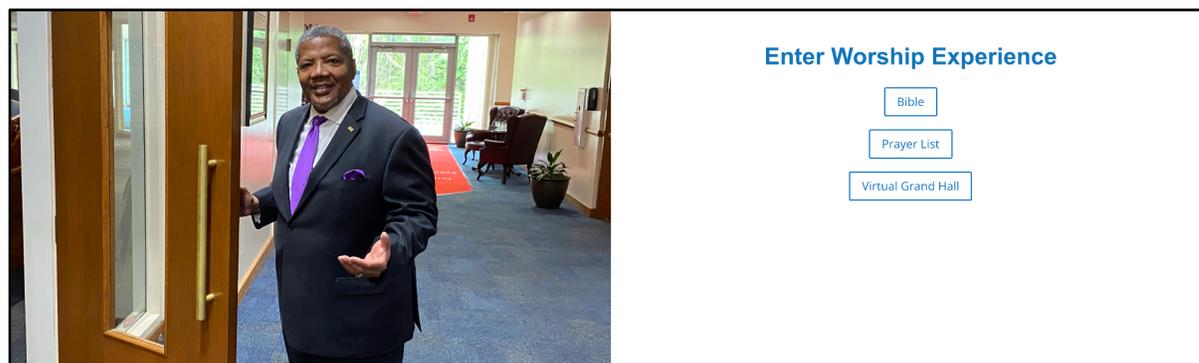
²⁷ Walter Franklin Davis, *Rebooting.Church: Re-Imagining, Re-Inventing, and Re-Booting Your Church to Reach More Seekers and Grow the Faith* (Nashville, TN: Davis Publishing, 2019), 65.

the physical structure to an endless and boundless ministry entity. One of the primary goals for churches in the 21st Century should be to embrace digital transformation in order to maximize ministry effectiveness and reach.²⁸

Virtual Church Section for Guest Check-In



The virtual church model layout should unfold similarly to the physical worship experience. The website includes pictures to help enliven the online parishioner experience.



Virtual Church Section for Worship Experience and Engagement

Also, links and buttons in the layout should lead virtual church members and guests to additional internet spaces to further connect with the ministry. They can include a visitor check-in, a Christian

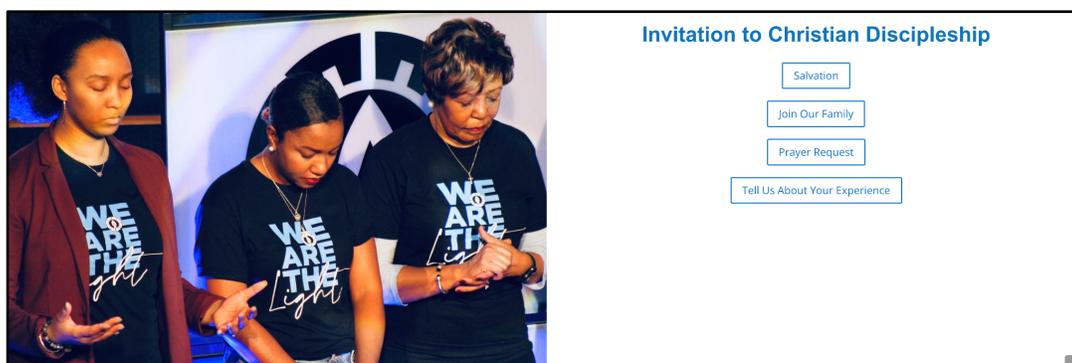
²⁸ Franklin Davis, 78

education portal, and even a virtual lobby for people to communicate with each other in real-time to help build congregational relationships and connections for professional networks.²⁹



Virtual Church Section for Online Giving Opportunities

The virtual church model can include the live video feed to the in-person worship services and other onsite activities that are streamed in real-time to increase the interactivity of online engagers through chat and reaction functions. Multiple giving options are also essential for the online audience to conveniently make financial contributions to support the church's vision and mission. They should be easily visible with large, clear buttons in one place, which can help to establish regular donation practices.³⁰ Easy online access to online giving can also encourage automatically recurring gifts.³¹



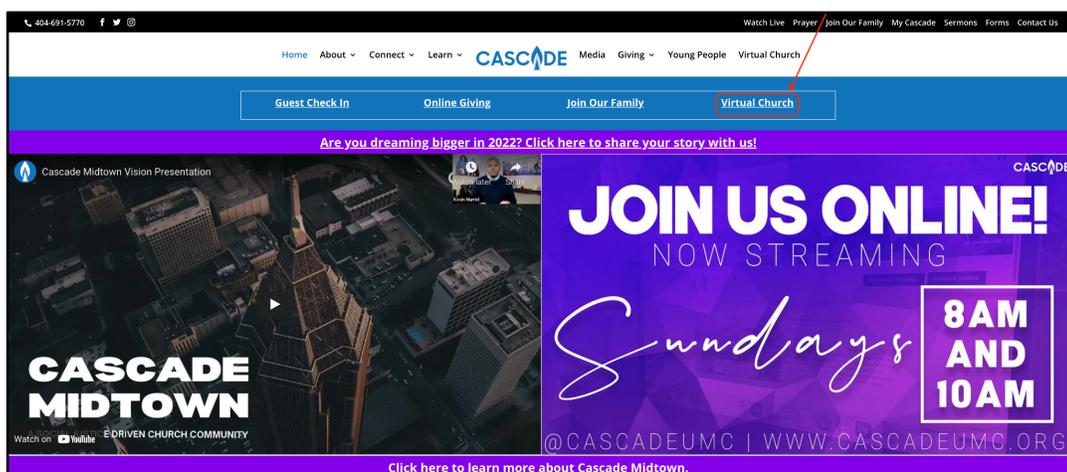
Virtual Church Section for Christian Discipleship

²⁹ Dwight J. Friesen, *Thy Kingdom Connected: What the Church Can Learn from Facebook, the Internet, and Other Networks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 45.

³⁰ Ian Matthews, *Hashtag Church: Making the Most of Social Media in Christian Ministry* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2015), 48.

³¹ Kenny Jahng, "3 Proven Ways to Seamlessly Promote Recurring Giving," *ChurchTechToday*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.churchtechtoday.com/promote-recurring-giving/>.

The ultimate goal of the virtual ministry model is to invite people to Christian discipleship through salvation, church membership, small groups, and prayer. Like the giving options, discipleship connections should be clearly visible with updated information about engagement opportunities such as new member orientation, Bible studies, one-on-one sessions, and other activities that help develop and advance the Christian community physically and virtually. The virtual church model expands the traditional concept of discipleship with primarily in-person interactions to a global environment of believers who can access the platform at any time. Unlike the brick-and-mortar ecclesial structure, the virtual church model is never closed.³² Because virtual ministry models live in a timeless world and endless internet space, this online Church platform is always open. Through live streaming, parishioners can view and engage in weekly worship services and participate in asynchronous activities such as digital discussion boards and self-paced training. They can also access on-demand videos and downloadable learning materials. The 24-hour accessibility to the virtual church model personifies the continual availability of a connection with God no matter the time of day. The physical church doors close at a designated time of the day, but the online ministry entryway remains open indefinitely.

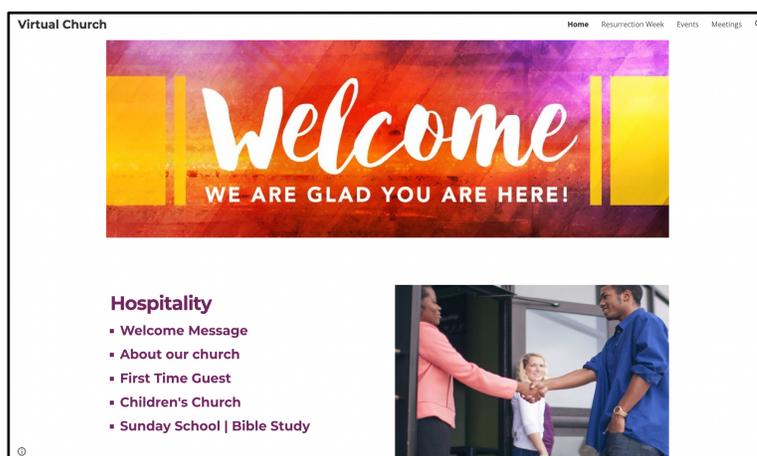


³² Nona J. Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2020), 17.

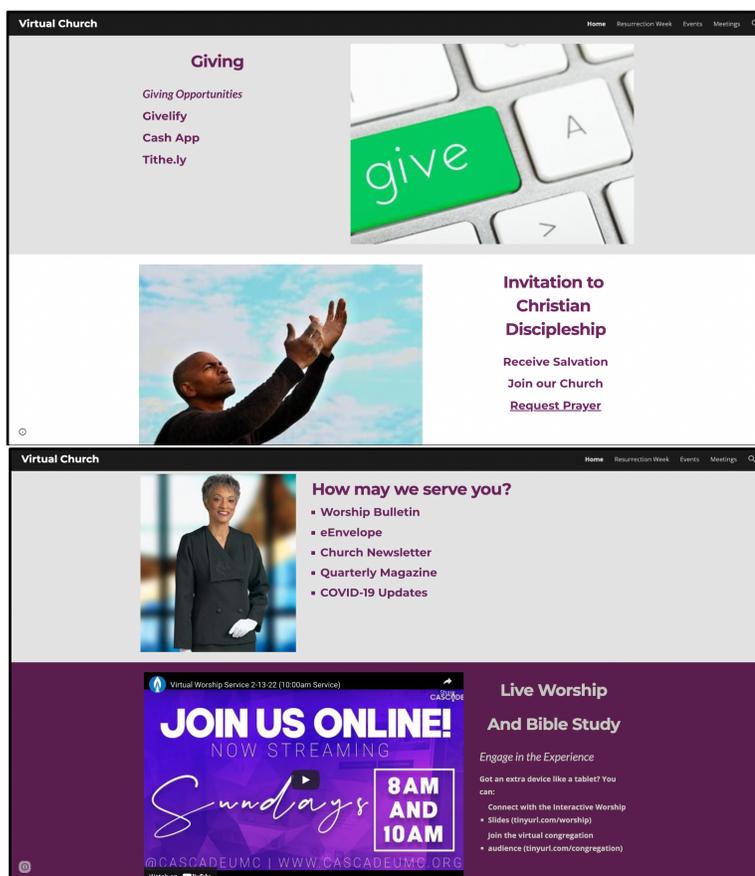
Virtual Church Integration on Church Website Homepage

For existing websites, ministries can add a virtual church page to their website home page to take viewers to a specialized page that provides an online experience similar to an in-person encounter for worship and ministry activities.

A web designer developed the virtual church model shown in the pictures above for a congregation with a small communications budget that allowed them to create this page on their church's website. However, many small ministries not only don't have the funds to hire a web designer to create a virtual church model, but several of them struggle with the resources to develop a basic website. To help resolve this challenge, I've designed a free virtual church model template with Google Sites for small ministries to replicate, customize and then publish as their primary website or as an additional page to an existing site. Since churches can duplicate the template, several congregations shared it with others to use. As a result, over 500 ministries have explored the template and many have used it to establish a virtual church.³³ Here are pictures of the template.



³³ See appendix.



Virtual Church Template

Mobile Apps

Similar to the website version of the virtual ministry model, mobile apps also provide an online experience that unfolds like the physical church environment. Mobile apps have an additional advantage over websites as they can be downloaded to a cell phone or tablet, always making them visible to users when they navigate their device's home screen. This technology attribute benefits 92% of Millennials and 96% of Generation Z young people who own smartphones. Since mobile apps are installed only once and require merely one tap to open, they are usually easy to access for the 74% of people ages 50-75.³⁴

³⁴ Valerie Russell, "5 Unexpected Benefits of Launching a Church App," ChurchTechToday, December 11, 2018, <https://www.churchtechtoday.com/5-unexpected-benefits-church-app/>.
<https://www.churchtechtoday.com/how-to-choose-the-best-church-app-for-your-community/>.

In addition to the features of the website version of the virtual church model, mobile apps provide engagement options such as access to audio versions of sermons, songs, and Bible study classes. According to church technology expert Valerie Russell, 64% of people visit ministry websites to download and listen to worship content. Church apps make it easier by giving the virtual community instant access.³⁵ Also, mobile apps generate and send out push notifications that provide members and visitors access to updates and helpful information quickly and efficiently. These messages can be scheduled for later notice or sent immediately and designated to specific groups or individual app users. Other mobile app advantages include simple event registration, sign-up forms, and access to the mobile device camera for uploading pictures to scan QR codes. Also, a mobile app can connect to cell phone location services to allow GPS services to get directions to the physical church campus.³⁶

In the same manner as the website model, the primary goal of the mobile app iteration is digital discipleship, which should include easy pathways to salvation, prayer, and membership opportunities.³⁷ To help with the spiritual motivation and focus of both new and seasoned believers, an app can be integrated with a smartphone's calendar to provide automatic daily or weekly devotionals and event invitations and reminders for worship services and ministry activities.³⁸

³⁵ “How to Choose the Best Church App for Your Community,” ChurchTechToday, October 6, 2018,

<https://www.churchtechtoday.com/how-to-choose-the-best-church-app-for-your-community/>.

³⁶ “10 Ways Church Apps Outperform Mobile Websites,” ChurchTechToday, February 28, 2018,

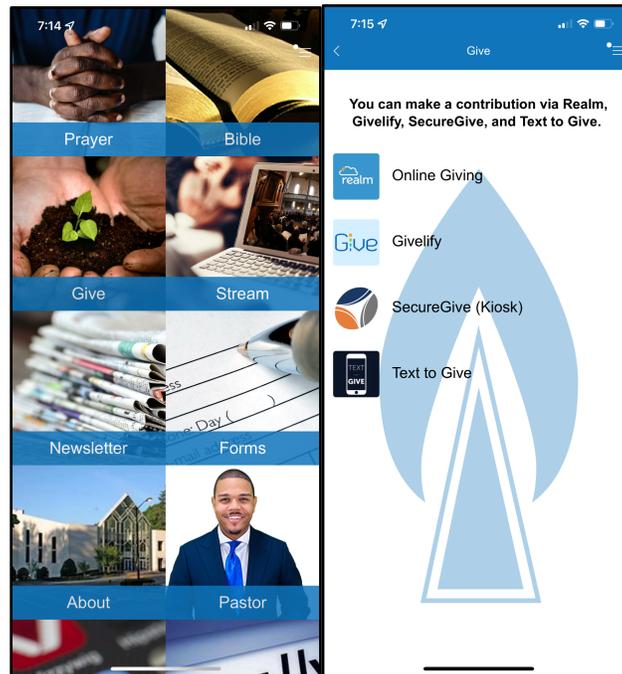
<https://www.churchtechtoday.com/10-ways-church-apps-outdo-mobile-websites/>.

³⁷ Christian Taylor, “Digital Discipleship with Your Church App,” ChurchTechToday, May 15, 2020, <https://www.churchtechtoday.com/digital-discipleship-with-your-church-app/>.

³⁸ Phil Thompson, “6 Questions to Ask Your Church Mobile App Provider,” ChurchTechToday, February 5, 2018,

<https://www.churchtechtoday.com/6-questions-ask-church-mobile-app-provider/>.

The virtual church mobile app model was piloted with two congregations for six months as a part of my project research. Here are the layout and function images from these mobile apps that I created for both ministries using the PHP (Hypertext Preprocessor) computer coding language. The apps can be downloaded from the Apple App Store and Google Play Store.³⁹

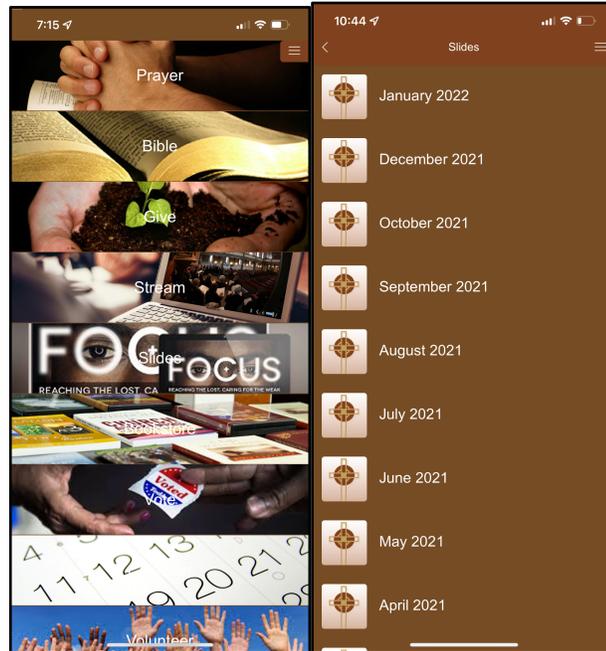


Virtual Church Mobile App Model

Picture-based mobile apps help seniors and congregants who are not technologically savvy to navigate the features easily and quickly gain access to ministry content.⁴⁰

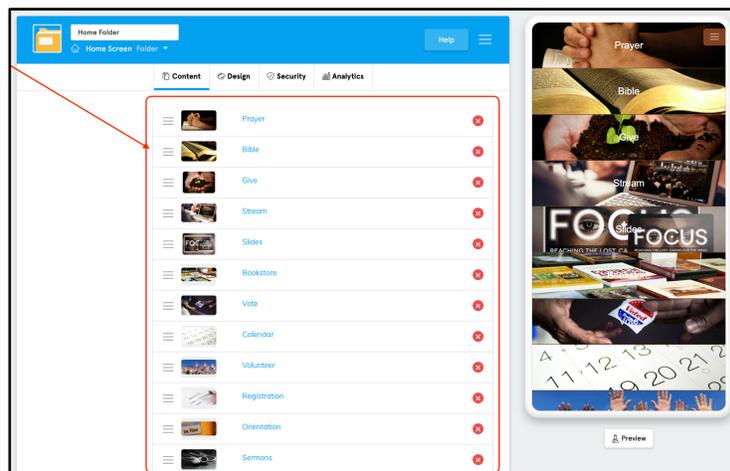
³⁹ See Appendix

⁴⁰ Alicia Wyman, *2020 Digital Church Strategy: How Churches Can Use the Internet to Expand Their Reach and Glorify God* (New York, NY: Wyman Publishing, 2020), 9.



Virtual Church Mobile App Model

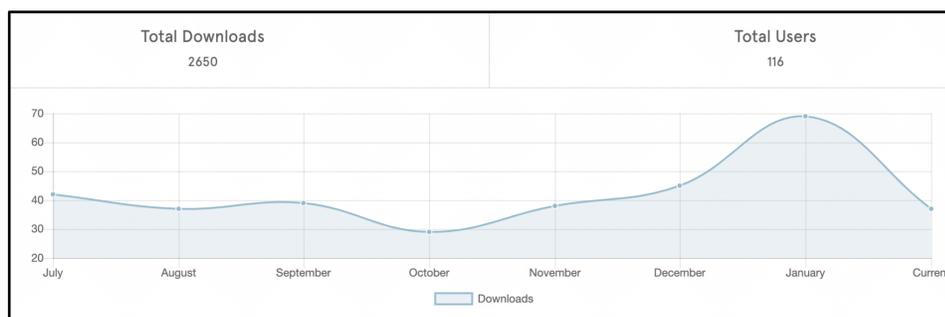
For interactivity during worship services, the mobile app version of the virtual church can give congregants access to content like sermon slides for them to follow along during the sermon and for future reference.



Virtual Church Mobile App Model Control Panel

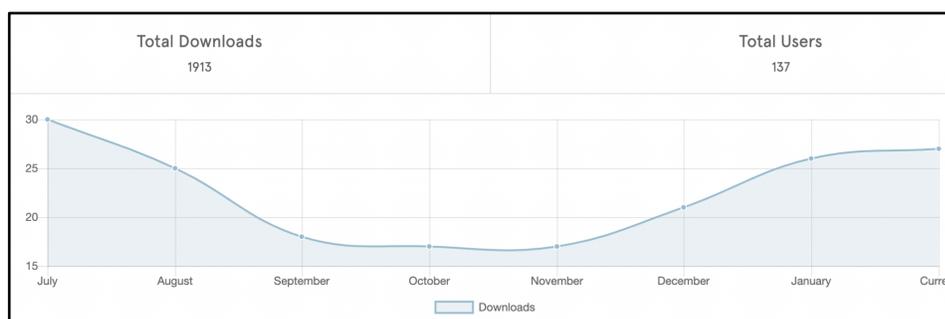
To ensure that virtual church information remains updated, the control panel or administrator dashboard should be user-friendly and easy to navigate for staff and volunteers who are technologically savvy and those who are novices with using and managing digital tools.⁴¹

The two churches that participated in the pilot experienced significant growth in giving, which increased by 40%, and membership, which grew by 30% due to incorporating a mobile app into their ministries.



Virtual Church App Downloads (First Church)

The first church's app had 2,650 downloads, and 116 people created user profiles that provide a personalized experience for notifications, weekly devotionals, Bible study opportunities, and more. The Senior Pastor promoted the app during the ministry's virtual worship service for several months, which reaches a broader audience than the physical congregation. Communication about the app was also added to the church's newsletter in January 2022 to help increase downloads.



Virtual Church App Downloads (Second Church)

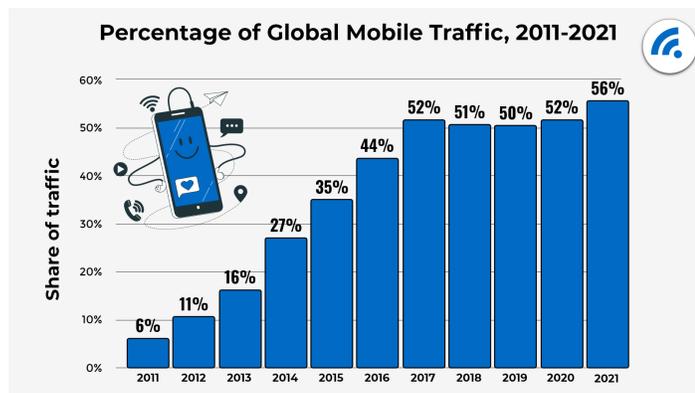
⁴¹ "5 Key Growth Strategies Using a Church App," ChurchTechToday, November 11, 2020, <https://www.churchtechtoday.com/5-key-growth-strategies-using-a-church-app/>.

The second church's mobile app had 1,913 downloads, and 137 people created user profiles. The app was advertised on the ministry's website and during the weekly worship service. The church's media team also promoted the app on social media in January 2022 to help increase downloads. Unlike the website version of the virtual church model, there isn't a free version of the mobile app concept. However, there are low-cost options for the app. As the return on investment yields positive, data-driven increases in donations, discipleship, and engagement, many small congregations will likely see a significant benefit to their technology infrastructure.⁴²

Also, more people are using their smartphones to engage in worship than ever before. They are using different apps to access social media accounts, make charitable contributions, and participate in virtual meetings. Research suggests that more people use their mobile devices more regularly than desktops on laptops. They are more portable in size and can easily access the internet nearly anywhere. As of January 2022, cell phones have taken the lead at 55 percent of the market as the preferred online engagement method, with desktops and laptops taking up 45 percent.⁴³ This increase is significant since global mobile traffic was only 6 percent in 2011 as indicated in the graph below from Broadband Search Internet Statistics Database.

⁴² Jonathan Bodnar, "3 Ways to Fuel Growth through a Church App," ChurchTechToday, August 23, 2018, <https://www.churchtechtoday.com/3-ways-to-fuel-growth-through-a-church-app/>.

⁴³ "Mobile vs. Desktop Internet Usage (Latest 2022 Data)," BroadbandSearch.net, accessed February 12, 2022, <https://www.broadbandsearch.net/blog/mobile-desktop-internet-usage-statistics>, 2.



Based on the data trend in the graph, mobile device usage will continue to exceed computer usage as a primary device of choice for online engagement. Therefore small churches should strongly consider incorporating the mobile app version of the virtual church into their ministries in addition to the website can version. While parishioners can access web pages on a cell phone, a mobile app is installed on the device to make it clearly visible and easily accessible.

Small ministries must develop a technology team of volunteers and youth who could keep the virtual church maintained and updated to ensure that the model, both a website or a mobile app, is adequately sustained and optimally promoted and utilized by parishioners.⁴⁴ Since the virtual church model is online for both the website and mobile app options, the technology team is not confined to the physical church space, but they can access the platforms anywhere and at any time.⁴⁵ If a church does not have a technology budget when deploying a virtual church and a media team, it is highly encouraged that one is developed shortly thereafter, even if it is a minimal amount of money.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Aaron Spiegel, Nancy Armstrong, and J. Brent Bill, *40 Days and 40 Bytes: Making Computers Work for Your Congregation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 65.

⁴⁵ Jonathan B. Lonon, *Effective Technology in Ministry: A Practical Guide* (S.l.: Xulon Press, 2021).

⁴⁶ Kelly Bean, *How to Be a Christian Without Going to Church: The Unofficial Guide to Alternative Forms of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 145.

For the churches that incorporated the virtual church model into their ministry Sunday operations for worship and day-to-day activities, the responses from pastors, church leaders, and members have been overwhelmingly positive. To gather perspectives about their experience, I interviewed forty-three people who serve in these roles to better understand the specific features of the virtual church model from which they mostly benefited. A common thread in their responses was the ease of use for senior congregants, expanded participation of Millennials in small group and Bible study sessions, increased online contributions from guests and visitors, and boosted new member intake and engagement.⁴⁷ Also, several pastors who didn't have a website before implementing the virtual church model now understand the importance and power of having a web presence to connect with people locally and globally in an online community.⁴⁸

Theologically, the virtual church model provides a means for ministries to reach a broader audience beyond traditional means of engagement that ultimately connects with more souls. This kind of reach embodies Jesus' words in John 14:12, which say, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father."⁴⁹ Additionally, the virtual church model allowed many congregations to continue ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic when most churches were empty and unsafe for public gatherings. The platform forged a new path of possibility and hope during a seemingly impossible and hopeless ministry trajectory. This pathway is symbolic of the words written in Isaiah 43:19, which say, "Behold, I will do a new thing, Now it shall spring forth; Shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See appendix.

⁴⁸ Peter DeHaan, *Visiting Online Church: A Journey Exploring Effective Digital Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Rock Rooster Books, 2021), 59.

⁴⁹ John 14:12

⁵⁰ Isaiah 43:19

In reviewing my research question, the virtual church model has proven to enhance the daily activities and weekly worship services for the small Black congregations that implemented the template into their ministry operations. For future possibilities and explorations, I'd like to expand the virtual church model to include access to administrative functions such as electronically signing and submitting expense requests, reviewing ministry policies and procedures, and initiating approval workflows for special projects and initiatives, just to name a few additional features.⁵¹

Since the virtual church model is a relatively new concept, I anticipate and will be prepared to answer the following questions from pastors, ministry leaders, and congregants considering using this technology tool.

- What impact will incorporating digital tools such as a virtual church model have on the current traditions and culture of the ministry?
- How will ordinances of the church such as baptism and communion be facilitated through the model?
- Are there any denominational or conference requirements on approvals that must be cleared before implementation?
- Can the virtual model be used for other entities that the church may manage, such as community nonprofit organizations, schools, and daycare facilities?
- Is the virtual church owned by the church once it is implemented?
- Can the model be integrated with the church's online membership database?
- Who will have administrative access to the control panel of the website or the mobile app virtual church model?

⁵¹ Jeffrey H. Mahan, *Church as Network: Christian Life and Connection in Digital Culture* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 87.

- How do we access analytical data to determine the number of app downloads and website clicks?
- What are the internet security specifications and safeguards to ensure that user information is adequately protected?

In reflection on my final project, I believe that my church technology work is timely and relevant to impact small churches to maximize their fullest 21st Century ministry potential. In addition to the project relevance, my participation in the DMin program at the COVID-19 pandemic onset was divinely destined. When starting my course work in the Fall of 2019, I could have never imagined that the world would drastically change by March 2020 because of the Coronavirus. Before this global health crisis, it was unfathomable for churches not to gather for weekly worship services. Moreover, it was inconceivable that my church technology work would help support hundreds of small churches to develop an online presence with virtual ministry models.

Interestingly, I'd planned to begin the DMin program in the Fall of 2018. However, I was not granted admission at the time. Though I was disappointed then, I now understand that God had a greater plan for me to begin the Dmin program in the Fall of 2019 for my project to directly impact many congregations unfamiliar with virtual ministry before the pandemic.

My upcoming plans are to expand the virtual church model to more small ministries and even large and medium-sized congregations that could benefit from this platform. The platform's expansion includes incorporating additional features in the website and mobile app, such as a sermon notes creation tool and a virtual lobby for member and guest engagement before and after worship service. I also plan to provide ongoing technology training to congregations on topics to support the significance of the virtual ministry model, including the church's future in online spaces, the power of digital discipleship, and leveraging mobile devices to reach new audiences.

In the future, I plan to develop a new interface to manage the virtual church website and mobile app in one place. This platform will allow content updates to synchronize to the website and mobile app virtual church models simultaneously for the ministries using both platforms. To create a dual control panel for the models, a web developer will use Internet coding languages such as Javascript to connect both versions into one space. This connection will allow the website and mobile app to communicate automatically with each other for church members and guests to see up-to-date information no matter where they look.

Another possibility for the virtual church model is for the mobile app version of the platform to have free featured promotion space in the Apple App Store and Google Play Store to increase the online visibility of small ministries. When someone types in keywords in the app stores such as church, ministry, prayer, salvation, choir, and other ecclesial terms, featured small ministry mobile apps would appear at the top of the search results among larger congregations. Therefore, mobile device users would be able to see all church mobile apps in one place, no matter the ministry size, and download virtual church models of their preferred congregational dimensions. Fortunately, both Apple and Google provide featured ad sponsorships to nonprofit and community organizations. I'm currently awaiting responses from Google and Apple to identify if the sponsorships could also be offered to churches.

Working on the virtual ministry model for my DMin project has been a blessing to me as it has strengthened my passion for church technology. As a product of the Black church, it is overwhelmingly refreshing to see how the model has helped hundreds of congregations similar to the ministry to which I was a member during my childhood and young adult years. Though the COVID-19 health crisis has adversely impacted numerous lives worldwide, it has also caused smaller congregations that were hesitant to embrace digital tools for ministry to become open to

the boundless capabilities of church technology. It is my hope that the virtual church model continues to be a positive asset to the endless possibilities of church technology during this pandemic season and for many years to come.

In conclusion, the opportunity to develop the virtual church model has helped me appreciate the emergency leadership meeting on Monday, March 16, 2020 regarding the unknowns regarding COVID-19. Though the circumstances of that day were bleak, they would open the door for an opportunity to develop a platform that would help ministries establish an online presence to engage people and make disciples in more innovative

ways. The onset of the Coronavirus and the cease of public worship also increased the receptivity of church technology for many pastors and church leaders who were resistant to digital tools before the pandemic. Now, more congregations have websites, live stream worship services, engage people through small groups, and offer online Christian education opportunities more now than ever before.

In retrospect of March 2020, there are several statements of encouragement that I would share with Timothy Farmer two years ago. If I could go back in time, I would empower him with the instructions of the Apostle Paul to not have the spirit of fear but of power, love, and a sound mind.⁵² I would also remind Timothy of the Romans 8 text, which emphasizes that all things, both good and bad, work together for good to them that love God and are called according to his purpose.⁵³ Like David, I would teach Timothy to encourage himself in the midst of adversity even as he encouraged the church's leadership team when public worship ceased.⁵⁴ Finally, I would encourage Timothy with words from the book of Jeremiah that before he was formed, God knew

⁵² 2 Timothy 1:7

⁵³ Romans 8:28

⁵⁴ 1 Samuel 30:6

and called him for great work even amid a global pandemic. Now that I fully realize my calling to advance virtual ministry due to my church technology experiences over the past two years and through the Candler DMin program, I'm greatly strengthened to fulfill my destiny and energized for the journey ahead.

Appendix

Introduction of The Virtual Church Model to Churches Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

<https://www.facebook.com/tbfarmer80/videos/10221727297321144>

Virtual Church Model Template Request Form

<https://tinyurl.com/v7hq355>

Virtual Church Model Instructional Videos

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cO3PSCZzqvTAH_fisFKeC3TqkzKmqi7?usp=sharing

Virtual Church Model Showcase for Pastors and Preachers

<https://www.facebook.com/Drmartha.simmons.186/videos/10213293682855592>

Keys to Effective Church Streaming

<https://www.facebook.com/tbfarmer80/videos/10221802554242520>

From Online Streamer to Connected New Member

<https://www.facebook.com/tbfarmer80/videos/10222294606463518>

Online Church vs. Online Community: Where do we go from here?

<https://youtu.be/MWJ4TPS0wTc>

Virtual Ministry Visioning

<https://youtu.be/OAz1ClK5b0>

What to do when Facebook is Down

<https://www.facebook.com/tbfarmer80/videos/287511193216789>

Small Black Church Interview Questions

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1guJemT8LQ5hlpdYq3UeD5P0PUQKBZgCNYXxW6xB8vLE/edit?usp=sharing>

Church Plant Interview Questions

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1guJemT8LQ5hlpdYq3UeD5P0PUQKBZgCNYXxW6xB8vLE/edit?usp=sharing>

Virtual Church Interview Questions

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WMUa-pmITs0nkr6_3oCbgBkTCaZCAcjAc-xlYTxsA8/edit?usp=sharing

Black Church Technology Survey

<https://forms.gle/x1WjyeHwV6YTE4D9>

Greater Piney Grove Baptist Church App

Apple App Store <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/greater-piney-grove/id1091506301>

Google Play Store

https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=mobapp.at.TheGroveapp&hl=en_US&gl=US

Cascade United Methodist Church App

Apple App Store <https://apps.apple.com/zm/app/cascade-umc/id1484112634>

Google Play Store

https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.n8b50cdcdb83.www&hl=en_US&gl=US

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Isaiah 43:19 (New King James Version).

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