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# Sprout Digital

## Digital Discipleship Research Report

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## 1 Executive Summary

### 1.1 The Church

While all participants were comfortable with the concept that a church could exist in an online form, not all participants identified their ministry or community as a church. Among those who did identify their ministry in this way, four distinct online forms were identifiable:

- Metaverse churches
- Digital churches—where the church exists only or primarily as an online entity, possibly as a campus of a brick-and-mortar church
- Online churches—where the church exists as an online presentation of a brick-and-mortar church, providing a video/live stream of the traditional church while possibly providing a chat option
- Gaming churches

Some churches operated in more than one of these spaces, while others had an online aspect that was associated with a brick-and-mortar church.

The structure of the church often related to the type of church. Gaming churches operated with the understanding that many members socialized on a daily basis in the gaming community. As a result, those who were involved in these churches provided church-based interactions on a daily basis. In some instances this varied on a day-to-day basis to provide novelty and freshness for content. Metaverse churches may have the look, feel, and function of a brick-and-mortar church, but simply meet in VR (virtual reality). Their format may vary to provide greater relevance to the VR community to which they appeal.

Digital churches have varying structures based on the technology they use. Some operated on a 24/7 basis using a moderated chat, while others met formally on a much more limited basis. Online churches provided some level of extension from their brick-and-mortar base in terms of ongoing engagement, but that ongoing engagement may be paralleled in the brick-and-mortar congregation by gatherings for Bible study and/or prayer during the week.

While all churches provided some form of content, this was not always in the form of a sermon. The choice of content varied on a church-by-church basis. Churches that did not provide a formal sermon provided teaching supported by engagement, often in the form of question-and-answer sessions.

### 1.2 Discipleship

To provide context, interviewees were asked to provide their understanding of discipleship. While there was a spectrum of responses, they could be grouped into three general categories:

- A natural process for all believers
- A structured engagement process
- A path to leadership in the church

Almost all believed that discipleship could take place in an online-only medium. Some indicated that they preferred engaging in online-only relationships. Others reported having to conduct discipleship online due to COVID lockdowns, noting that people were still saved, still grew in their faith, and still ministered to others despite not being able to meet face-to-face. A common response was that people are more open online and it is easier to establish rapport and maintain relationships than in a face-to-face situation.

While agreeing that discipleship can take place online, almost all highlighted that human contact is an incredibly important aspect of our lives and that, ideally, discipleship would include some form of contact at some stage(s) in the discipleship process. Several gave examples of the blessing of meeting their disciples face-to-face.

One issue commonly addressed in online churches and discipleship was the ability to meet the needs of those who were being disciplined. There were some things that could be done relatively easily—such as providing prayer or financial support or sending care packages. For other forms of support, face-to-face ministry was still important—such as baptisms, being there for people going through a personal crisis, or for health issues or funerals. Some churches found local brick-and-mortar churches who could provide local support, while in other instances, pastors had travelled considerable distances to be present for their members.

### **1.3 Structure and Content of Discipleship**

Discipleship in gaming churches was often conducted while in gameplay or while being involved in streaming. As such, it related more to an unstructured discussion than a structured Bible study. The gaming churches also indicated that they met outside the game platforms in platforms such as Discord, where discussion and more structured discipleship could take place.

In metaverse churches, one of the issues was that people presented as avatars. While this provided a level of anonymity, it also provided a tool for being more open, or opening up to issues more quickly than was often the case in the real world.

Interviewees from digital and online churches were able to engage with people in a discipleship process through online chat or Zoom without the challenge of not knowing the true identities of the people in the group.

When asked about content for discipleship, responses varied based on the definition of discipleship, and also based on whether the interviewee was more comfortable with structured or unstructured engagement. While there were variations in the choice of content and in the structure of engagement, those variations parallel the choices that pastors would make in brick-and-mortar churches.

## 2 Project Overview

Four partnering organizations (GACX, Exponential, Sprout Digital and Stadia Church Planting) commissioned a research project to investigate the ability of people to be effectively disciplined in an online medium. While this was the primary focus, the research also investigated details regarding types of online churches and how they engage with their members, including seeking an understanding of issues such as children’s ministry, music, finances, and governance.

An interview guide was developed to address the project objectives. The research fieldwork was conducted between July 20 and September 15, 2022, with analysis and reporting continuing until October 2, 2022. During this period, 72 pastors and church leaders were invited to take part in interviews. While many were not available or declined to take part, a total of 34 interviews were conducted during this period.

Participants<sup>1</sup> from 11 countries took part in the research, including some participants from all continents. The ministries they were involved in had a global reach. Countries mentioned included Australia, Brazil, China, Dominican Republic, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Germany, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Japan, Kenya, Latvia, Mozambique, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Philippines, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, UK, USA, and Yemen.

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<sup>1</sup> As several who took part in the research do not regard themselves as pastors, the term ‘interviewee’ has been used extensively in this report.

### 3 The Church

Previous research investigated whether churches could exist in an online-only space; this research indicated that many pastors are comfortable with the concept, even if they see that this is not an appropriate format for all Christians. The current research did not specifically address this question. However, many interviewees chose to comment regarding whether groups that only met online could be considered churches. While there are some who do not consider online-only gatherings as churches, this was not the consensus view. Yet even the interviewees who believed that online gatherings alone were adequate felt that having some level of face-to-face engagement could be beneficial.

Having established a baseline of understanding regarding the question of online churches, the next factor to note was that many online ministries do not identify their community as a church. Some examples of responses included:

*"A church or just a group of Christians who meet online. Some people would refer it to as a church. That depends on what you define as a church. I think it's more of a Christian community because most of those that come online, actually have their own [church]."*

*"I go to a brick-and-mortar church on Sunday mornings here in the town that I live in. But there's also several churches that are exclusively online and do ministry online. So, I don't think that the church looks a specific way."*

Others were more comfortable with a more diverse definition of a church. One participant stated:

*"Church is the people of God, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ. I think the church gathering right the assembly can happen digitally, it can happen in a building like what I'm in right now it can happen in a bar it can happen in a park, you know, Jesus where it said Where two or three gather in his name, he's in our midst."*

Another said:

*"If people are getting reached for Christ, and you're seeing people get born again, and if you're seeing them grow, and in discipleship become changed from glory to glory, and to the image of His son, and disciples are making disciples, I think that's more what really matters. If I could do that via Zoom, then I'm going to do it."*

While noting that not all ministries consider that they are operating as a church, responses from the interviews indicated that four distinct forms of online church exist:

- Metaverse churches
- Digital churches
- Online churches
- Gaming churches

Each of these churches was likely to appeal to a different audience. In several instances, churches operated in more than one of these formats, or operated in an online format as well as having a physical meeting. One pastor who was involved in ministries in more than one platform noted:

*"People are always trying to fit something into a box. And the Holy Spirit doesn't quite fit into a box sometimes."*

Membership varied considerably. Some felt that if their church grew to be more than could be disciplined by one person, it was time to consider separating into discipleship-focused groups, each of which would function as an independent church. Others had fostered ministries that reached up to 28 countries or had tens of thousands of people who had engaged with their online ministry.

Some saw the movement from face-to-face churches to an online church (in various formats) as an opportunity to change the dynamics of how churches exist and function. In one example, the pastor facilitates online Bible study and discipleship with close members of her church while continuing to meet with them for meals. There is no formal Sunday 'church service.' The members are encouraged to bring the church to the local communities and neighborhoods by inviting neighbors to their dinner tables, serving their neighbors in any way that's relevant, and showing the gospel through this engagement.

One pointed to COVID-19 as being a driver of change in the church, noting:

*"I think that COVID allowed the church to reimagine the Great Commission, and how we do it. I think COVID allowed the church to reimagine how we raise up disciples. COVID allowed us to reimagine how the church can gather."*

Another pastor talked of the way in which churches have become transactional and that the move to online churches provides the opportunity to change that dynamic. He noted:

*"There has been this attitude of a consumeristic approach, where I just come to church, I take what I need, I'm leaving."*

*"But we're trying to change our culture to something that makes you see church as a family that you go to, as other individuals that you're interacting with, in the journey to being more accepting of Christ. And encouraging people to pray together, to play together, to eat together."*

Yet another said:

*"Jesus never said, 'You need to go to church on Sunday morning' or, 'You need to go to Bible college.' As humans we like the familiar so we tend not to deconstruct it, even if when it is rebuilt it may be something better."*

### 3.1 Metaverse Churches<sup>2</sup>

Several participants were ministering in churches that met in a VR space. These churches operate in a manner that may resemble a traditional brick-and-mortar church from a content and function basis. However, all participation is through VR or AR. Ongoing engagement may happen in VR or in a 2D associated platform.

Various metaverse platforms exist that can host a VR church. The participants in the current research identified Rec Rooms as their preferred platform and used Discord as their 2D platform for engagement.

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<sup>2</sup> For clarity, when respondents in this study refer generically to a church that has an online component, the term 'internet-based church' has been used to avoid any presumption that the reference may relate to any one of the four identified formats of online church.

Pastors involved in metaverse churches indicated that in many ways their church may be very similar to a traditional brick-and-mortar church, with the exception that everyone present was represented by an avatar. Members met in a virtual auditorium and could take part in a manner that reflected contemporary Sunday services.

One pastor described it as:

*"...a way to experience testimony more than just telling a story. Immersive, well beyond Zoom screen interactions. The metaverse is kind of giving us a sense of community that will transcend all the mediums we've experienced up to now. Put on your headset; that's essentially like the doorway into your home. And then you both put it on and you're together."*

While another said:

*"People who are attracted to this type of church may be unable to meet in a brick-and-mortar church due to personal issues or health. Others are attracted to the medium and the ability to engage."*

Some digital churches (i.e., churches operating on the internet but without VR) are considering expanding into VR. Pastors talked of new developments such as a VR art gallery of virtual Christian art, of Web 3.0 activity and of developing NFTs (non-fungible tokens).

### **3.2 Digital Churches**

Many pastors operating in this space see themselves as communities; leaders may have been hesitant to call the ministry a church. The form and structure of ministry are purpose-built for 2D online platforms. The structure is likely to include some teaching content, opportunities for engagement from members, prayer, and Bible study.

Churches in this space use digital tools such as Church Online Platform, Altar Live, Discord, Live Control, Facebook, and YouTube. Communication among church/community members is generally managed through Discord, Zoom, or messaging services. Some also identified using Twitter, TikTok, WhatsApp, Telegram, SMS texting, or purpose-built platforms.

Ministry is shaped around the medium. Most identified that sermons are shorter than would be the case in a brick-and-mortar church. Many limited the 'sermon' focus but rather sought a two-way engagement, with a leader prompting discussion and engagement that led to an interaction between members.

Most indicated that their music ministry (praise and worship) was limited as the platforms don't lend themselves to communal singing. A stand-out exception for this was respondents from Africa who indicated that music and singing were a part of their lives and that there was no real awkwardness in singing from their homes.

Several indicated that their digital churches operated in association with a physical church. While the ministry may look and feel different and may appeal to different audiences, the focus and content aligned with the focus of the physical church. These hybrid churches are identified by some as 'Phygital.'



### 3.3 Online Churches

Churches in this category have a desire to provide for the needs of those who are unable to physically attend the service. They broadcast the brick-and-mortar meetings, often using a medium that allows for engagement such as a chat service.

Churches in this category are likely to use Facebook Live, YouTube, or a similar streaming service. Using YouTube allows for asynchronous viewing. Engagement takes place through chats, although some report that only 10% of viewers will engage.

COVID led to many churches moving to an online presentation of their ministry. Church members could watch the services from their homes during lockdowns. The ministry was generally a broadcast of the brick-and-mortar ministry. In some instances, there was a strong degree of integration, with the church leaders speaking directly to the camera, or the ministry that was being broadcast simultaneously being shown on a big screen in the auditorium.

Many pastors working with this model also had leaders ready, online, to engage in online chat for prayer, support, or simply maintaining a community feel. One pointed out that while the IP addresses indicated a large online presence, in general no more than 10% engaged through the chat.

While the focus of these churches was online ministry, many indicated that there was a face-to-face aspect of their ministry. This may include locals in a remote location getting together, people flying from various places for an annual face-to-face meeting, or pastors travelling to remote areas to minister face-to-face when required. One pastor indicated that they had traveled several hundred miles on more than one occasion so that they could baptize a new believer.

There were some unique presentations of churches operating in this space. One example was a pastor from an African community. In his home country, it is illegal to be a Christian. His people have dispersed and live in a wide range of countries. The people of the global diaspora meet online to pray and fellowship online, supporting each other. Another was the church that met online for worship and discipleship, but also met face-to-face for meals and to serve their neighborhoods and communities.

### 3.4 Gaming Churches

Participants from gaming communities have engaged with other players while gaming or streaming their play. This has increased to the level of evangelism, seeing people come to faith, then discipling them within the game platforms (e.g., Roblox, Minecraft) or on a communication platform such as Discord.

Another unique presentation of the church is the example of those who have built up communities inside gaming platforms. Examples include Minecraft and Roblox. Some members meet in VR while others take part using 2D formats. The ministry is targeted at evangelizing and engaging people who spend their time gaming. Ministry takes place during game play, but the churches operating in this space also indicated that they have other forums (e.g., Discord) for their members to take part in community.

One pastor said:

*"While we operate in Minecraft, we do consider ourselves a church. We see it as a body of believers who are investing in each other and want to seek to further their relationships with Christ. So that looks like not only the Sunday services, but that mostly what we want to focus on is discipleship."*

This pastor went on to note that, while they have members who engage using 2D interfaces as well as VR, they would only engage in some aspects of their church using VR. For example, they would be comfortable baptizing someone in VR, but would not baptize members who accessed the church through a 2D interface.

### 3.5 Participants in Internet-Based Churches

Several pastors providing ministry to online churches noted that people who are attracted to online churches are likely to be people who may not normally attend a physical church. That may include those who have health or lifestyle challenges that limit their ability to attend, as well as those who would not feel comfortable in a brick-and-mortar church building. One pastor gave the following example:

*"We have four target groups:*

- *Those with a church home but also interest in an online community*
- *Those who don't have a church home but are looking for one*
- *Those who have left the church but still love Jesus*
- *Those who have left the church and Jesus but are curious about this group"*

Some people chose to attend internet-based churches because they offer a relatively safe environment. As one noted:

*"People feel safer online than I think they do in a traditional church setting."*

And another:

*"In both 2D and 3D, people are willing to be more vulnerable because they feel a little safer. Maybe because they feel a little more anonymous or they just, somewhere in the back of their mind, know they're at home by themselves and can opt out at any time."*

One commented about people involved in the gaming community, noting:

*"Gamers – some prefer anonymity strengthened in virtual reality, being able to make those personal connections, in virtual reality, being able to make what is essentially eye contact, and being able to see the body motions, more than even through the webcam. And that depth, and everything that comes with virtual reality is a natural strength of being able to be more open while feeling a little bit more anonymous. So, it's a big strength of being able to be vulnerable with people, while not feeling like there's major consequences to it."*

Another common group of people seeking to engage with online churches were those who have been hurt by their physical church and have left. Pastors identifying people in this category indicated that the participants had never given up on Jesus but were not confident in attempting to attend another brick-and-mortar church. An internet-based church provided the opportunity for engagement without commitment. However, over time, many grew in confidence and gave up their anonymity to become regular, committed participants in the internet church.

A common factor identified was the anonymity associated with taking part in a digital church. To some extent this varied based on the platform being used, as there is relatively less anonymity on Facebook (where most people have accounts in their name) than on platforms which allow pseudonyms. While

participants may have chosen to engage anonymously, some pastors indicated that if the person showed any indication that they may be in a challenging situation and need help, the church could use the IP address to find the location of the person and provide assistance. (Naturally, this was not an option for those who use VPNs to disguise their IP address.)

While there were demographic factors associated with gaming churches, respondents indicated that there were no clear differences based on age or gender for the other three forms of internet church, with some noting that the majority of their members were over 50. Interviewees identified younger members, older members, single members, couples, and families with many children were all able to engage with internet-based churches.

While participants did not identify many differences in participation based on demographic factors, there were cultural factors that did impact participation. Informants from Africa indicated that African people in general were more likely to engage in a face-to-face medium than an online one. Therefore, digital and online churches were less likely to appeal to Africans, although the metaverse churches may have greater appeal as it increasingly approximated real-life engagement.

Once people have engaged in an internet church, respondents indicated that they may engage far more rapidly that would commonly be the case in a brick-and-mortar church. Informants who identified this related it to participants from various circumstances including non-Christians seeking to understand Christianity, Christians who had left church, and mature Christians. As one noted:

*"People are very open online. I mentored one young lady who wanted to commit suicide, and today, I still have a relationship with her."*

### 3.6 Structure

The structure of the church often related to the type of church. Gaming churches operated with the understanding that many members socialized on a daily basis in the gaming community. As a result, those who were involved in these churches provided church-based interactions on a daily basis. In some instances this varied on a day-to-day basis to provide novelty and freshness for content.

Digital churches have varying structures based on the technology they use. Some operated on a 24/7 basis using a moderated chat, while others met formally on a much more limited basis. This may be as frequently as having three or four regular sessions per week but in some instances was limited to one Zoom call per week. Those operating moderated chat rooms frequently sought to engage with members across a range of time zones, and the asynchronous nature of online chat provides an effective tool for this form of ministry. Those who provided the opportunity for multiple engagements per week identified structure to their meetings such as: teaching on Sunday, meeting for prayer on Wednesday, and a Bible study based on Sunday's teaching on Friday. As one informant noted:

*"It's all about the relationships. We don't stop relating with the people after Sunday service. Our relationships go week-long. When we gather together, we gather together because that's what we want to do."*

Informants from digital churches discussed whether their meetings were open (available to anyone who had the URL) or closed (only available to people who had been invited). Churches used a balance of open and closed meetings to provide opportunity for outreach to a broader audience, while also providing the

opportunity of ministry to their members without the risk of having relatively private conversations in a public forum. Several noted that the open meetings were sometimes challenging, as internet trolls could engage in the meetings in a disruptive manner.

While online churches may simply broadcast the physical service, they often provide the option of a moderated chat room during the service and/or a moderated chat in the YouTube chat channel for ongoing engagement.

Some online and digital churches used tools such as Facebook and Discord to host regular prayer meetings, or to at least post and respond to prayer requests.

### 3.7 Content

As with structure, the content used in internet-based churches varied based on the type of church. Online churches generally reflected the content of their offline (brick-and-mortar) ministry with minimal adaption to meet the needs of online members. In contrast, digital church pastors indicated that they shaped their content to ensure it was more closely aligned to the needs of their online members. Others had adapted their content to be more interactive rather than formal teaching, allowing greater levels of questioning. Some example responses included:

*"We've shortened our service to 25 minutes. That is our services, we're about an hour long online live. But people don't stay engaged that long. We've turned Sundays into more of a teaching and an interaction time."*

*"A sermon—you can get that anywhere; I have access to the best speakers in the world just through googling topics. I don't preach anymore. I don't prep content. I'm present in a discussion where we're reading through Matthew, we look for speed bumps, we stop, we sit on them, we slow down. And then just ask questions."*

*"Podcasting is a great tool for sermons. I think it's a great technology' you can do it any way like, you can do it while you're driving. Maybe whether they do or don't do a service, most of life will happen in their coffee shop or their other space where people can begin to discuss and talk together."*

*"You can find content everywhere. YouTube, TV, an app—there's content everywhere. Content itself is not church, because it's a one-way thing. You can talk to the content, as the content talks to you. But church as a community is a two-way thing."*

*"On Sunday, after ten minutes of greeting, one of us will give the opening remarks and then the other pastor who's preaching that day will go into the build that's prepared for Sunday. And we'll go in and talk about the message."*

## 4 Discipleship

### 4.1 Definition of Discipleship

The first question that needed to be addressed regarding online discipleship was agreement regarding what discipleship was, *per se*. The responses demonstrated three different perceptions regarding discipleship:

- A natural process for all believers
- A structured engagement process
- A path to leadership in the church

Interviewees substituted other words to try to explain their perceptions of discipleship including 'mentoring' and having an 'apprenticeship.' One suggested that discipleship was effective when various outcomes were observed: (1) learning how to enjoy life with the Father; (2) encouraging each other in the Father's love; and (3) understanding the gospel for themselves and being able to share it. While no one said that the measure of effective discipleship was participation in church on a Sunday morning, one interviewee indicated that they perceived that church attendance was a common measure used by some churches regarding the effectiveness of their discipleship processes. In reality, these people weren't disciples, they were 'church attenders.' In contrast, one interviewee defined discipleship as putting Matthew 7:24 into practice, noting 'the wise person is the one who hears and puts these things into practice.'

One interviewee who felt that all Christians are being disciplined noted:

*"Discipleship—it's not just taking in the information, but there must be a spot for us to ask questions. There must be a spot for us to say maybe, 'hey, I don't agree. I don't agree with that.' This is how we learn. The Bible says, 'Iron sharpens iron'."*

Another said:

*"I believe that as you accept Jesus Christ, you are a disciple. And so, discipleship is really that aspect of learning how to live your life now as a disciple of Jesus Christ."*

Another comment in the same vein was:

*"The best discipleship happens when they don't even know what's happening."*

This commentor used the example of talking with his neighbor. They would meet once a week for a workout. The pastor would just ask the neighbor questions and engage him in a relationship-building process. The neighbor came to know Jesus and was now maturing in his faith. A similar response was:

*"My goal for discipleship is that it doesn't happen in our church space, that it happens at our tables. So, I'm trying to equip people to disciple and pastor and shepherd in their context. Because of that, we're not looking for a brand-new believer to come and be part of our Wednesday night meeting. I'm not taking anybody through a discipleship process online. I'm doing it in person with my neighbors and in my spheres just like everyone else."*

One related discipleship to a step-by-step process, noting:

*"People are on a scale anywhere from a negative 10 to positive 10. A negative 10 is somebody that just absolutely hates the church, and a positive 10 might be Billy Graham. Discipleship is taking them to that next step, and, and maybe that next step is to accept*

*Jesus as their Savior, then maybe that next step is baptism, then that next step would be to either get connected in a group, or get connected serving."*

One of those who felt there was a need for structure in discipleship said:

*"Discipleship looks like an intentional study of God's Word and trying to identify nuggets that are personally applicable for an individual's life or situation maybe that they're going through. I think that discipleship, for me specifically, is best served in a small group setting. Because I find that you can have deeper, more extensive conversations about topics than if you're speaking to a larger group."*

And:

*"I like the structured approach; I will usually go through a devotional, and then maybe watch a video together and then pick apart pieces of it and talk about specific verses or passages and kind of deep dive into it afterwards. I like to have a topic or some sort of video that we watch, and then dive into together for study. Sometimes it's more about the head knowledge—more about the discussion of scripture. And sometimes we hit triggering topics that can get really heavy into heart talk and background trauma and kind of expose weaknesses."*

A question associated with discipleship was to find whether it related to learning (i.e., 'head knowledge') or understanding (i.e., 'heart knowledge'). Almost all interviewees felt that it was both. As one said:

*"The only way you can measure spiritual maturity is the Fruit of the Spirit. Of course, it's intangible, and it's something that only you can measure about yourself. Even knowing the Bible so much is not a measure of spiritual maturity. Because it's possible that you studied the word a lot, and you will be exposed to a lot of spiritual teaching. So, for me, the one way to know is the Fruit of the Spirit."*

Another provided a similar insight, saying:

*"There are people that are Christians, who are learning how to find and follow Jesus. I call them hungry, hungry Christians. They're very, very good at absorbing the Bible—they've read it a lot. They know way more than they've shared. And so that's the problem: how do I share? It's really important to just be yourself and to be able to live that out. To do this, I think a better word is being an apprentice rather than being a disciple."*

## 4.2 Online Discipleship

Having established a definition of discipleship, interviewees were asked, "Can this discipleship take place in an online-only structure?" Almost all believed that discipleship could take place in an online-only medium. Some indicated that they preferred engaging in online-only relationships. Others talked of having to conduct discipleship online due to COVID lockdowns, noting that people were still saved, still grew in their faith, and still ministered to others despite being unable to meet face-to-face. A common response was that people are more open online and it is easier to establish rapport and maintain relationships than in a face-to-face situation. In the same vein, one said that it was easier to see whether the message was reaching people's hearts in an online situation as responses aren't hidden by the charisma of the person.

One participant used COVID as an example of the effectiveness of online discipleship, noting:

*"During COVID I saw people get saved, I saw people get filled with the Spirit, I saw marriages restored, I saw all sorts of awesome things happen digitally—and the doors of the church, the building, were still shut. COVID did not shut the church down."*

At the same time almost all highlighted that human contact is an incredibly important aspect of our lives and that ideally, discipleship would include some form of contact at some stage(s) in the discipleship process. As one interviewee stated:

*"I don't think we felt like we're being shortchanged in online discipleship, outside of the fact that God does create us for physical touch."*

He gave an account of an online ministry he had been involved in for some time. He had come to know another Christian and had discipled him over that time. They had occasion to meet. He recounted:

*"I gave him a hug, and we held each other for 30 seconds. And tears flowed down our face. So yeah, so I think that's real. And I think God's designed us for that. But I don't think it's necessary."*

Similarly, a German pastor said:

*"Many of the people of the core team from all over Germany traveled to one place and we had a one-and-a-half-day meeting together. We had barbecues, walked together, talked together, thought, and planned together. And it was really good. It was fascinating to me that many of the people haven't ever met offline before. Nevertheless, from the beginning on, coming together felt like being the church together."*

And the pastor of the African language church gave a similar account of meeting disciples:

*"The disciples were caught red-handed while worshipping at their home. They were sent to jail. They spend almost eight months in jail before being deported. I flew there personally to receive them as they arrived in [country]."*

One participant from Eastern Europe told of how she had become a Christian during a time when Christianity was not acceptable in her country. She had been discipled before the internet by believers in another country who engaged with her by mail for many years. She felt that there was no difference in online discipleship than the mail-based discipleship process that saw her growth in faith. She also pointed out that Paul had been the first who had actively discipled people remotely, sending them letters of encouragement, instruction, and where necessary, correction.

A metaverse pastor said:

*"In the metaverse, if we're discipling, we're making it more real than just the casual expected exchange. So, I think your consistency determines the intensity and thus it goes to different levels in the discipleship. And you just really have to put more effort into letting people know 'I care'. This is not just casual into the metaverse; it's almost like you have the best of both."*

### 4.3 The Engel Scale

Interviewees were shown a graphic of the Engel Scale. They were asked whether they felt it was an accurate representation of a path to faith and discipleship. Having addressed their level of comfort with the scale, they were then asked whether the scale was as relevant in online discipleship as it was in real-world discipleship.

Many applauded the fact that there were several 'pre-Christian' stages and noted that many Christians don't take the time to understand that there is a path to people giving their lives to Jesus. Several participants questioned the need to wait to move through Stages 6 (Regeneration) and 7 (Incorporation into the Body of Christ) before being able to witness. One said:

*"Oftentimes, Stage 8 (Witnessing for Christ) is a by-product of becoming saved. Most new Christians are just keen to let others know: 'You just got to know what happened to me'. In my experience, I would put Stage 7, right after Stage 5, that in making that decision for Christ, more new Christians are more likely to witness for Christ. Disciple making may not need to wait until Stage 7."*

Conversely, there were interviewees who felt it was 'risky' to have new or uninformed believers engaging in evangelism and, as such, agreed for the need to move through those stages.

Regardless of perceptions of the various stages, interviewees agreed that the stages are paralleled in online ministry and that the scale was a credible tool for understanding the path to faith in both the real world and online.

### 4.4 Providing Support in Online Discipleship

A commonly discussed theme was the ability for people to be supported when living at a considerable distance from their church. Many informants related discipling to a level of engagement that provided support in times of need as well as being present to take part in activities such as baptism when required.

Interviewees talked of being able to send money in a time of need, being able to send flowers, gift baskets or care packages. But they also agreed that the inability to be present was a challenge that was not easily addressed other than taking part in considerable travel. One pastor indicated that he had at times travelled 300-400 miles to provide support to those who he was discipling. Another related this situation:

*"This man's ex-girlfriend had heard about our church. He reached out to us, and we connected with him. After about a month he was diagnosed with brain cancer. And while he was in the hospital, some of our online hosts drove to the hospital to go visit him. The first and only time he was physically in on our campus was in January of this year, when he was baptized. And so, I got the privilege of baptizing him in January. Later in February, he passed away."*

Others have outlined similar challenges that related to being distant from those they were discipling. One discussed the way that they were planting small groups of disciples in various locations. These groups were able to look after and support each other while being disciplined remotely. However, the pastor identified inherent risks in this structure as the people in the remote groups may not have the spiritual maturity necessary and that the church, in their oversight role, had a level of accountability for the actions



taken by the remote groups. In other churches, pastors made contact with local brick-and-mortar churches and asked for the local church to help provide for the person in need.

### 4.5 Structure and Content

One thing that was commonly identified was that discipleship is generally a group-based activity rather than a one-on-one activity.

*"Jesus did group discipleship, he didn't do one-on-one, per se. So, I'm beginning to think, to tell all of them, 'okay, guys, we're going to come together in one group so that this is easier for all of us.' And then we can all grow together."*

As interviewees were relating their perceptions of discipleship to the medium where their church was based, there were differences that become evident. For example, one participant who has a ministry in a metaverse church said:

*"Discipleship in the metaverse is different because you don't always know the person behind the avatar. It works both ways, because people are often more open on the internet and in the metaverse—they're willing to discuss issues a lot more openly, because they can hide behind perhaps an identity where they feel more safe."*

Discipleship in gaming churches was often conducted during gameplay or while being involved in streaming. As such, it related more to an unstructured discussion than a structured Bible study. The gaming churches also indicated that they met outside the game platforms in platforms such as Discord, where discussion and more structured discipleship could take place.

In contrast, interviewees from digital and online churches were able to engage with people in a discipleship process through online chat or Zoom without the challenge of not knowing who the people in the group really were.

Participants were asked to provide details of their preferred content for discipleship, and to outline whether their approach was more likely to be structured or unstructured. Issues addressed included:

- How to effectively engage people in the same group or program who had been Christians for varying lengths of time
- Whether the content was top-down (i.e., teaching) or bottom-up (i.e., question-and-answer), or some combination of both
- How the discipleship could effectively involve growing in faith through increased understanding of life as a Christian, while practically meeting the needs of those who lived a long way apart

A common response was that content needed to be shaped and structured to meet people at their current level in faith. This was challenging when the same group may include both new Christians and those who had walked with Jesus for 30-40 years. Some pointed out that even with 'simple' teaching and discussion, people from different faith journeys could learn from each other. Others had structured studies for different levels of Christian maturity. One interviewee said:

*"We have people of varying background and belief. I have a couple of pastors that are in our small group that are getting poured into because of that, too. So, it's interesting, but I*

*wouldn't say that it's necessarily a specific background or length of belief. It's kind of a mixture."*

One who advocated an unstructured approach said:

*"Programs don't make disciples; disciples make disciples. I think that there is an aspect of the larger preaching-teaching training, that is part of the discipleship process. But I think if we rely on exclusively that side of things, I think we're going to be falling short."*

Several indicated that they used structured content—citing sources such as the material presented the previous Sunday in the sermon, the Life Application Bible, Alpha, and the Timothy Initiative—while others cited specific books that they were working through. One based their structured teaching on a secular mental health program and made parallel processes for engagement in spiritual health. One informant using one of these tools said:

*"There was so much...as I call it, Christianese. Like: 'keep your eyes on Jesus'. What does that really mean? So, from the start of my own salvation, it has been a matter of breaking down the Word of God, and analyzing it to say, 'how do I live?' What the Bible actually says, and not what people are saying it says."*

In contrast, others had an informal approach to their content. As one noted:

*"I try to take an apologetics approach and just meet people where they are and realize that sometimes it could take weeks...months...years. And not to put a time limit on God's working in their heart. I really try to formulate things so that we can answer questions through on multiple levels."*

## 5 Functioning of Internet-Based Churches

### 5.1 Evangelism

The research did not specifically seek to address evangelism. However, participants were presented with the Engel Scale<sup>3</sup>. That scale does outline a nominal scale with eight stages of understanding, the first four of which are related to people who have not committed their lives to Jesus.

Some respondents provided insights into how they engaged people in their internet-based church; and in many instances, those who engaged were not Christians at the time, but became Christians at some time after engaging with the church. Other respondents identified that they actively look for people who may be asking questions about faith in online forums in platforms such as Facebook and Reddit, then engage these people and evangelize them. One interviewee said:

*"There are people asking spiritually hungry questions online on Reddit, which is kind of forum-based and therefore searchable all the time. So, I began to train and develop a team of people who would then respond."*

Some pastors identified that their churches run advertising campaigns on social media platforms to help people find their online ministry. While they may have a focus on engagement with Christians, they have also had non-Christians respond to their advertisements, engage with them, and come to faith.

Others indicated that they saw evangelism as a central component of their ministry. For these interviewees, it was essential that a church—whether internet-based or brick-and-mortar—can reach people, introduce them to Jesus, and see them come to know Him. In this vein, several identified their ministry as being 'digital missionaries.' One gave this example from a pastor operating in a country hostile to the gospel:

*"We put this advertisement online as a test. This guy messaged us late in the evening. He said, 'Can I call you?' So, I gave him my husband's phone number. So, he called at 10:30 PM. And he was a guy who was hungry for God. We invited him to church; he came to the Easter service. And two days later, my husband met with him. He shared the gospel, he received Christ. He came to our church, became part of our church."*

### 5.2 Music

The functioning of music ministry varied greatly based on the type of internet-based church. Churches operating in the metaverse were more likely to be able to have music and praise included in their meetings, while many who operated digital or online churches often indicated that music was a challenge. Interviewees expressed concerns with the ability for technology to effectively provide the ambience for the music ministry.

Interviewees who minister in the metaverse provided these examples:

*"In the metaverse if we're in the church and broadcasting online, then we just take the praise team in that way and show them full-screen online. We do try to incorporate music, but it looks different from playing instrumentals to just Zooming into the praise team live on stage or doing a pre-recorded segment. We still try to keep worship there, but it's shorter than it normally is in person."*

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<sup>3</sup> A copy of the Engel Scale is provided in Appendix 1

Some examples of responses from those who have found music ministry challenging included:

*"Corporate worship is one of the biggest challenges of online ministry."*

*"Worship is a big topic and a large definition, but we haven't done worship through music digitally."*

*"We tried also to sing together over Zoom, but that's something you just shouldn't do. It's awful."*

*"You can't worship corporately in the online setting as much as in the physical setting. You can feel people's voices in the auditorium, your own voice. And it's kind of awkward to just stand and sing by yourself alone in a room because it's kind of strange."*

At the same time, there were interviewees who indicated that they were comfortable with including music in their online ministry:

*"I would go against what most people say—most people say don't do music on Facebook Live. And we've done that very well. Even before we started holding the actual service, we were holding worship nights. We'd post a few songs and people would choose a song and everybody was singing their song and would post it on Facebook. Couldn't do it on Zoom – Zoom isn't optimized for music."*

*"It feels a little bit weird if you have other people, family, friends, neighbors, gathering around a screen singing like that. I think that we're all fairly comfortable belting it out when we're by ourselves in a car. For the most part, digital ministry isn't necessarily going to be gathering a bunch of people into my house to watch a digital church service; most of the time, it's going to be one person in his car or in his bedroom, engaged or on a chat. I think from that standpoint, as we've shifted back to broadcasting live streaming or worship, I've heard nothing but good things."*

*"In Africa, people love singing. So, it's just part of the DNA, right?"*

Pastors involved in online churches indicated that there have been analyses conducted about viewing numbers through the broadcast. Those analyses generally show that people stop watching after the message.

### **5.3 Children's Ministry**

Many respondents indicated that they did not provide children's ministry as part of their church or community. There were several reasons for this. Two commonly cited reasons were 1) that platforms such as Facebook and gaming platforms do not provide accounts for people younger than a certain age and 2) that sitting and watching an online church or digital church may be boring to children. Possibly more importantly, many interviewees indicated that they preferred to train parents in how to minister to their children and then empowering the parents and providing resources for them.

In some instances, churches provided options for children to engage such as having one service a month that was child-friendly or providing a link in the chat to an online game that the children could play while the parents engaged with the internet-based church service. Some provided face-to-face activities for families with young children such as meeting socially in the local park. Some metaverse churches did

provide options for families to engage, including having their kids design rooms that other online kids could come to while their parents were meeting in the metaverse church or simply engaging in other ways in the metaverse. One noted that their ministry focuses on discipleship, and that some discussions involve 'dirty laundry' and are not necessarily PG-rated.

Some examples of responses included:

*"We don't have any children's ministry really in the metaverse, you've got to be over 13, technically, to come to some of the games."*

*"I don't think it's super effective to have kids watching the screen as their main thing."*

*"It would be more empowering parents of kids, which is where I think the most discipleship should happen within the family. It's modeled to empower parents with resources."*

*"One of the weaknesses and challenges with online is that we need to consider more family ministry, where we want to disciple the parents for their parenting. The parents are the sole spiritual leaders of the household and should be doing the discipling of their children. So, we want to equip and support that..."*

While the question focused on children, several participants also addressed youth ministry, noting that youth are more likely to want to be active and engage in a physical/ real world process. In these circumstances, parents were encouraged to have their youth engage in a brick-and-mortar church.

## 5.4 Governance

Respondents' understanding of governance varied. The focus of the question was associated with accountability and ensuring a biblically-based spiritual direction as the church grew. The simplest model was the churches or ministries that had been established under the oversight of an existing church. These churches naturally aligned with the church that they sat under.

For many, the ministry was still in a formative stage and as a result, there was limited need for a detailed governance structure other than whatever was legally required for the church to exist as an entity (subject to the laws of the country in which the church was based).

When interviewees were asked to consider plans for growth and the implications for governance, some sought greater control while others sought to see God move without them imposing structure on that growth. One talked of the challenges of establishing house churches in remote locations across the country and internationally, noting:

*"Logistically, there's also a challenge as well, in terms of accountability. Like how do we ensure that the people you meet are genuine people or not harmful strangers?"*

Some examples of responses included:

*"You can either control your leaders or you can have growth, but it's difficult to do both. But we do need to vet future leaders to make sure they aren't a wolf in disguise."*

*"What we're trying to do is to empower and encourage believers to do missions wherever they find themselves. And so that will mean reaching people outside of our control, so to speak, where people are coming up with things organically based on how God is leading."*

*"My pastor and I have regular conversations about the health of the community, but it's not necessarily formal or official."*

*"I don't think they will be hierarchical in the metaverse because it doesn't seem to work that way. The early church wasn't that hierarchical either. We didn't really have pastors, you know, in the same way we have them now."*

A few churches had established a governance structure including elders with the intention of having a structure that allowed for growth within guidelines.

*"We need a good leadership team that's on the same page and empowered—following a house church model. If one of the house pastors is starting to kind of go off in left field, then they say, 'well, this doesn't sound like what we're hearing on Sundays.'"*

*"We have elders that represent our digital community. Our elder meetings are held on Zoom. As our digital presence grows, including Metaverse, we're going to continue to have, an eldership and a leadership team presence."*

And one outlined a greater degree of control:

*"We have an activation sheet that goes out on a weekly basis, which those leaders need to complete. They need to tell us how many people there were, what songs were sung, and what happened during praise and worship."*

Some had programs in place such as ensuring future leaders were trained in the 'Timothy Initiative' before being given the opportunity of working remotely.

## 5.5 Finance

The question of financing the internet-based churches varied greatly among participants. The first thing that most participants pointed out was that an online ministry did not require similar levels of funding to an equivalent brick-and-mortar ministry. The capital and operating costs were frequently lower than their brick-and-mortar equivalent costs. Several participants also indicated that their churches or ministries were young and growing, and that while they anticipated that the church may become self-funding in the future, the church was not at the stage where it could currently support a full-time pastor.

A common response was that the interviewee trusted God to provide and that funds had been available as and when they had required, without them needing to actively fund-raise. In parallel, several interviewees noted tithing or regular giving as an important part of spiritual maturity and that it was an outcome of people being effectively disciplined.

Many participants indicated that their ministries were self-funded and that they, as online pastors, had other income-earning roles including construction, driving, and accounting. Others were retired. In some instances, the online ministry was funded by a 'sending' church in much the same way that churches provide support to face-to-face missionaries.

Where internet-based ministries were operating in association with a physical church ('phygital'), the physical ministry was frequently able to provide funds and support to the online ministry.

One metaverse church has created an online NFT art gallery to generate finances.

## 5.6 Geographic Diversity

When interviewees were asked to discuss the spread of their ministry, they provided insights regarding how their church functioned in different locations and how they were able to provide discipleship remotely.

### 5.6.1 Churches

Some churches indicated a reasonably limited range for their online members—often within a city where people could functionally meet face-to-face if required. Others had a broader scope but generally operated within one time zone. Others reached across time zones, countries, and continents. As noted in the Project Overview, participants were based in one of twelve countries and identified by name 29 different countries, with other additional countries being alluded to.

### 5.6.2 Disciples

*"In the real world we can only reach so many people, right? Our sphere of influence is limited to our physical area. Online, our interactions can go worldwide."*

Interviewees involved in online discipleship talked of the ability to reach, engage, and disciple people anywhere on the planet. This needed to be structured around people's waking hours and working schedules. Bearing this in mind, several interviewees indicated that they were able to modify the times when they provide ministry to be able to regularly meet with people who lived several time zones ahead of, or behind them. Others indicated that they have a mix of synchronous and asynchronous ministry which provided the opportunity to also meet people from a wide range of locations.

While not a regular activity, one participant indicated that they had organized a 24-hour 'day of prayer' where there were people involved in their ministry praying at all times, using the variation in time zone to maximize the ability to engage with others, globally.

## 5.7 Maintaining Health as an Internet-Based Pastor

Many interviewees were aware of the risk of burn-out associated with being always available to their digital church members. Most had put some boundaries in place by maintaining boundaries—designating times of day and days of the week to turn off their computers, phones, and notifications. Many used these times to ensure that they maintained healthy relationships with their spouses and families, as well as receiving spiritual feeding and teaching for themselves. Some participants confessed that they found it challenging to 'turn off' their ministry by putting boundaries in place, even though they knew that it was a necessary step to do.

Where there were appropriately trained people available, some delegated responsibility for answering messages so that there was always someone online who could provide support. Some took additional steps such as leaving their phones in a room away from their beds at night to avoid the risk of being disturbed overnight.

*"I think always trying to make sure that my marriage is always my number one focus—Jesus said, 'Husbands love your wives as Christ loves the church'. And me and my wife have a really good marriage, and we talk a lot, pray a lot."*

*"We're far more effective when we're not doing things in our own strength and flesh; and so the more I can do to keep in step with the Spirit and keep my eyes locked on God as the author and perfecter of my faith, I'm usually doing things at a place of rest."*

One issue is the perceptions of those in the church community. There is a perception that once a message has been seen, the person who sent it expects an answer. Many messaging apps show when the other party has seen the message. Therefore, some pastors chose not to open messages until they were able to be able to respond. By doing this, they were able to reduce other people's perceptions that they were being ignored.



## Appendix 1 The Engel Scale

Stage 1 –	IGNORANCE OF CHRIST (may be exposed, but pays no attention)	-10 -9
Stage 2 –	AWARENESS OF CHRIST (sees Christ as an option)	-8 -7
Stage 3 –	UNDERSTANDING OF CHRIST (what knowing Christ means)	-6 -5
Stage 4 –	PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT WITH CHRIST (what Christ can do for me)	-4 -3
Stage 5 –	DECISION FOR CHRIST (I want or don't want Christ)	-2 -1
Stage 6 –	REGENERATION (Disciple-making – theologically)	0 +1
Stage 7 –	INCORPORATION INTO BODY OF CHRIST (Disciple counted – strategically)	+2 +3
Stage 8 –	WITNESSING FOR CHRIST	...

## Appendix 2 Paths to Digital Ministry

Informants involved in the research study had various paths that led to their current roles and ministry. Many indicated that circumstances and the Holy Spirit had brought them to places and roles that they had not planned or foreseen.

Two informants had been involved in internet-based ministry since the 1990s. In contrast, many had commenced ministry in this space in the period since COVID-19 lockdowns. And some had been ministering in internet roles for several years prior to COVID. Some examples included:

- A pastor who had left his African homeland and spent years working in various countries across the Middle East and Europe, who now pastors a digital church in his native language and has members from countries all over the world.
- A pastor who had been set to take on a senior pastoral role just before lockdown, had left for a vacation internationally, and was unable to return for many months.
- A pastor who had retired from a secular role but had been inspired to take on a pastoral role in retirement.
- A pastor who, with a good friend, had decided to plant a digital church, but had now also planted a face-to-face church and was working in both roles.
- A businessman who had seen the decline of the traditional church in his country and had been moved to invest his time and energy into building online ministries targeting specific populations in his largely post-church region of a major city—containing over 350,000 people, the majority of whom do not speak English or come from Western societies or 'Christian' backgrounds.
- A pastor who had been asked to fill in for her bishop in his church approximately 350 miles from her own church, who maintained her pastoral role in her own church online while conducting the fill-in role. She now is back in her home church but the internet-based ministry has continued.
- Similarly, a pastor who was working in a remote region who had returned to a major city 1,000+ Km distant but had maintained an online church to continue ministering to the remote community.
- An IT manager in a church who was asked to take on an online ministry role when COVID meant that in-person services could no longer take place.
- A live streamer online who found that people watching his streaming asked questions, engaged, and became Christians, so he started to pastor them while maintaining his streaming.
- A gamer who heard of online ministries and saw the opportunity on the gaming platform. He then engaged with another player and started an online church within the game.
- One who had become involved in a global women's ministry and over time had engaged with people who wanted to have depth of Bible study. The online studies had morphed into a church.
- A pastor who had become a Christian in an Eastern European country and had been discipled remotely while the country was behind the Iron Curtain. As the internet grew, she started a blog, which eventually grew and morphed into an online ministry and a church.
- One highlighted the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, saying:

*"God kept saying the same thing to me—that there's more to this online. So, I kept looking further into what can be done online. And then, as we found that it wasn't just about house churches as it was about our online ministries, it became more close ministries. And we started connecting with people online all*

*over the world. We wanted God to open doors to the churches, that they would see the advantage of online ministry. But it seems the pandemic opened more doors than we could ever imagine."*