

# Reaching Out Online: Learning From One Church's Embrace Of Digital Worship, Ministry And Witness

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## Abstract

The covid-19 global pandemic radically interrupted all areas of life, including forcing churches to adapt their worship, mission, and pastoral care within new constraints of physical distancing. This article explores a case study of how one church communicated the message of faith; connected with, and cared for attenders, the wider community, and others; and experimented with different forms of worship and ministry during covid-19. Drawing on data from a questionnaire, focus groups, interviews, content analysis and participant observation, the article demonstrates the importance of amplifying a message consistent with one's values, providing opportunities for warm connection, and continuing to make iterative change to ministry practices. Considering this alongside recent research on contemporary conversion, the paper affirms the significance of relational authenticity in engaging in Christian witness, including when the church is forced into unfamiliar and undesired realities. Churches can be encouraged by the potential fruitfulness of multiple voices communicating the significance and meaning of their faith; being honest about life's challenges; and encouraging and resourcing engagement in spiritual practices as means of Christian witness, including in challenging times.

Keywords: Christian witness; Evangelism; Authenticity; Covid-19

## Introduction

The covid-19 pandemic forced churches to radically adapt their worship, ministry, and mission practices. Before March 2020, most churches held worship services in physical buildings. Many ran in-person small groups for social and spiritual purposes, provided in-person pastoral care and offered community-facing ministries. Such gatherings functioned as key ways that attenders expressed and grew in their faith; met for fellowship; supported the wellbeing of the wider community; and sought to communicate the good news inherent in the Christian faith. Covid-19 disrupted these

usual forms and required a pivot to offering worship, ministry, and mission online.

Online church is not new and has been well-researched and theorized.<sup>1</sup> Previously, however, religious communities *chose* to adopt online platforms, rather than having them forced upon them, as occurred in 2020. During covid-19, adaptations previously unimagined by most churches were readily accepted as necessary responses to a changing context.<sup>2</sup> Some see this change as an opportunity to reimagine the church's form, encouraging ongoing agility and adaptation.<sup>3</sup>

This article is part of a wider project investigating how churches responded to the covid-19 pandemic: exploring their motivations and actions, including how

<sup>1</sup> For example, Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media*, Routledge Research in Religion, Media and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Aneya Elbert, "Turning Flavor of the Month into Staple Diet," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, ed. Heidi Campbell (Texas: Digital Religion Publications: Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Piazza, "Getting Back to Normal," *ibid.*, 31.

they communicated the message of faith, connected with their congregation and with newcomers, explored new forms of worship and ministry, and supported holistic wellbeing. This paper homes in on a case study of one church. It emphasizes the importance of warm connection; ongoing experimentation; communicating a message (and in a way) that is consistent with one's core values; and begins to demonstrate the interconnectedness of different motivations for online worship and ministry. It considers all this in the light of Christian witness.

### Background to Aotearoa New Zealand's covid-19 experience

To minimize the spread of covid-19, "flatten the curve," and reduce pressure on the health care system, governments and health authorities implemented restrictions relating to physical distancing and gathering sizes.<sup>4</sup> Different countries, taking different approaches, had various success in controlling the pandemic. The small island-nation of Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), with a population of five million, went beyond controlling the outbreak and successfully adopted an elimination strategy.

NZ took a "precautionary approach" from early in the disease's international spread.<sup>5</sup> In keeping with their Influenza Pandemic Plan (plan for it; keep it out; stamp it out; manage it; manage it post-peak; recover from it)<sup>6</sup>, NZ began border controls before any local covid-19 cases were recorded, closing the border to non-citizens

traveling from China, and then Iran. Contact tracing was undertaken from the earliest cases (28 February). On Saturday 14 March, with less than ten cases nationally,<sup>7</sup> Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern announced further border restrictions: mandatory self-isolation of everyone entering NZ from non-Pacific countries.<sup>8</sup> Gatherings of over 500 people were banned (Monday 16 March),<sup>9</sup> a ban later extended to indoor gatherings of more than 100 people (Thursday 19 March).<sup>10</sup> A four-tiered alert system was introduced, and NZ was placed at Alert Level-2 (Saturday 21 March). On Monday 23 March, with 102 cases recorded, an immediate move to Alert Level-3 was announced, with the move to Alert Level-4 to take place at 11.59 pm on Wednesday 25 March.<sup>11</sup> The Lockdown had begun. All were "instructed to stay at home in their bubble other than for essential personal movement."<sup>12</sup> Businesses were closed, except for essential services such as grocery stores, pharmacies, and gas stations. Gatherings were cancelled, and schools and public venues were closed.

This first (and only national) Lockdown was in place for eight weeks until 11.59 pm on Wednesday 13 May 2020, after which most restrictions were eased. Gatherings, however, remained limited to ten people until Friday 29 May, when the limit was increased to 100 people. On 8 June, with no active cases of covid-19 within NZ borders, a move to Alert Level-1 was announced for midnight, and remaining restrictions (except border controls) removed.<sup>13</sup> At that time, there had been a total of 1505 covid-19 cases in NZ and 22 deaths.<sup>14</sup> Community transmission had been eliminated.

<sup>4</sup> Siouxie Wiles and Toby Morris, "The Three Phases of Covid-19 – and How We Can Make It Manageable," *The Spinoff* (9 March 2020), <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/09-03-2020/the-three-phases-of-covid-19-and-how-we-can-make-it-manageable/>. Accessed 17 June 2021.

<sup>5</sup> David Clark, "Travel Restrictions to Remain in Place as Coronavirus Precaution," Media Release, 15 February 2020, [www.beehive.govt.nz/release/travel-restrictions-remain-place-coronavirus-precaution](http://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/travel-restrictions-remain-place-coronavirus-precaution).

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Health, "New Zealand Influenza Pandemic Plan: A Framework for Action," (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Data accessible from <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-data-and-statistics/covid-19-case-demographics#case-details>.

<sup>8</sup> From 10 April, this moved to managed isolation or quarantine.

<sup>9</sup> "Coronavirus: Gatherings of 500 or More People Will Not Go Ahead - Prime Minister," (16 March 2020), <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/411868/coronavirus->

[gatherings-of-500-or-more-people-will-not-go-ahead-prime-minister](https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/411868/coronavirus-gatherings-of-500-or-more-people-will-not-go-ahead-prime-minister). Accessed 17 June 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Jason Walls, "Coronavirus: Gatherings of More Than 100 People Banned to Stop Spread," *New Zealand Herald* (19 March 2020), <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/coronavirus-gatherings-of-more-than-100-people-banned-to-stop-spread/7B4SEOQBVNXLXUAPDWOC5HLZRY/>. Accessed 17 June 2021.

<sup>11</sup> <https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-system/history-of-the-covid-19-alert-system/>. Accessed 17 June 2021.

<sup>12</sup> <https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-system/alert-level-4/>. Accessed 17 June 2021.

<sup>13</sup> "Covid-19 Timeline: A Look Back at How NZ Responded to the Crisis, Eliminating All Active Cases," *One News* (8 June 2020), <https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/covid-19-timeline-look-back-nz-responded-crisis-eliminating-all-active-cases>. Accessed 17 June 2021.

<sup>14</sup> <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/nz>. Accessed 16 June 2021.

At the time of writing (16 June 2021), there have been 2353 confirmed cases of covid-19 in NZ and 26 deaths.<sup>15</sup> Most of these additional cases were caught at the border.<sup>16</sup> Some cases, however, occurred in the community and genome testing was used to trace likely sources of all cases, and contact tracing was undertaken backwards and forwards to identify transmission paths. Self-isolation or quarantine of close contacts was mandated. Most frequently, community cases were traced back to the borders. While another national lockdown has not been necessary, Auckland, NZ's largest city (and location of most managed isolation facilities), has had an additional three Alert Level-3 lockdowns (12 – 30 August 2020, 14 – 17 February 2021, and 28 February – 7 March 2021) in response to community cases. Aucklanders were required to stay home, and only essential services operated. Each Lockdown necessitated a move to Alert Level-2 for the rest of the country, and in Auckland were followed by a period at Alert Level-2. Gathering restrictions applied.

NZ's quick move (in March 2020) to Alert Level-2, and on to Alert Level-4, required a rapid transition to online worship, first for larger churches and then for all churches. Churches with over 500 attenders were aware from the Monday that their Sunday services would not be able to go ahead unchanged. Other churches, with 100-500 attenders, had to adapt their Sunday worship following the further restrictions announced on the Thursday. By the following Sunday, no churches were permitted to gather in person, regardless of size.

At a time of immense personal challenge, physical distancing meant that many of the usual means of pastoral care (for example, participating in small groups or receiving pastoral visits) were not possible. Ministries that helped care for members of the public (for example, preschool music groups, after school clubs and social

groups for youth, older adults, or migrants) were similarly unable to operate as usual.

Many NZ churches responded quickly, adapting from providing synchronous, face-to-face spiritual and social gatherings to worshipping, resourcing spirituality, engaging interpersonally, and offering practical and pastoral care within the boundaries of physical distancing. Often, churches sought to quickly return to previous patterns of gathering as soon as permitted.<sup>17</sup> A few objected to the restrictions.<sup>18</sup> Other church leaders, however, discerned benefits in the new practices that they wanted to retain.<sup>19</sup>

### Online worship before covid-19

Drawing on his earlier research, sociologist Tim Hutchings theorizes three common ambitions for online churches: "the desire to amplify, to connect, and to experiment."<sup>20</sup> Amplification uses online broadcast technologies to increase the audience of a (generally established) preacher. Connection seeks more than one-way communication, providing ways for genuine communities to be formed, including between people who are isolated, perhaps by distance, disability, or ideology. Experimentation engages with new media, exploring what new rituals and initiatives might be possible, as well as reflecting theologically on those possibilities.<sup>21</sup>

Restrictions on in-person gatherings made amplification essential. Pre-covid, some churches live-streamed services to the internet. Other church services were broadcast on television. Churches used websites, email and social media platforms to communicate with members and others. In doing so, churches offered what Stig Hjarvard calls mediated religious content (communicated through a medium) within a mediatized context (recognizing the impact media has on social realms; including religion).<sup>22</sup> Pre-covid, Hutchings

<sup>15</sup> <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/nz>. Accessed 16 June 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Covid-19 tests are administered on days 0, 3 and 12 of managed isolation.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Maney, "Three Realities for New Zealand Churches in Alert Level 2 and Beyond," New Zealand Christian Network, <https://nzchristiannetwork.org.nz/three-realities-for-new-zealand-churches-in-level-2-and-beyond/>. Accessed 15 May 2021.

<sup>18</sup> ODT, "'Nanny State': Tamaki Vows to Hold Sunday Service," *Otago Daily Times*, 25 May 2020.

<sup>19</sup> BCNZ. *Covid-19: Baptists Reflecting on How Future Ministry and Mission Might Be Different*. Auckland, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Tim Hutchings, "What Can History of Digital Religion Teach the Newly-Online Churches of Today?," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, ed. Heidi Campbell (Texas: Digital Religion Publications: Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 61.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Stig Hjarvard, "Three Forms of Mediatized Religion: Changing the Public Face of Religion," in *Mediatization and*

explored how “mediatization operates within institutions, as a part of their daily communicative activity,” noting that churches act as media agents publishing, broadcasting, posting on social media, and so on.<sup>23</sup> In a media-saturated world, churches are both evaluated by the standards of other forms of media, and “adapt to the logic of the media.”<sup>24</sup>

Covid-19, however, confirmed that amplification (or “unidirectional broadcasting”<sup>25</sup>) of a media-savvy message is insufficient, perhaps even counterproductive.<sup>26</sup> While providing high-quality streaming of worship services makes *logical* sense in a pandemic-affected mediatized world, it became apparent, as Steve Evoy noted, that “*trying to produce the “best” streaming services is not the best way for pastors to move their ministries online.*”<sup>27</sup> Rather, what people were “longing for [was] something familiar, something that feels as normal as possible: ... [seeing the pastor] and a few other familiar faces speaking to them.”<sup>28</sup> As Zach Lambert realized, “our content is important, but our connection is imperative.”<sup>29</sup>

In fact, for Angela Gorrell, “the major possibility that new media use affords is *connection*.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, cautioning against the tendency to instrumentalize technology in communicating the gospel, Katherine Schmidt emphasized *encounter*, “focus[ing] not on content-delivery but on relationality.”<sup>31</sup> Heidi Campbell recognizes “the internet [is] a social network, where connecting with people becomes the primary goal.”<sup>32</sup> Theologically, our human desire for connection can be understood as reflecting our created status as made in the image of the relational God.<sup>33</sup> Maggi Dawn extends the

implications of this relationality as not merely driving connection towards other people, but also to the Divine. Worship involves “join[ing] in with a relationship of [eternal] love and adoration,” and is a potential site (for Christian and non-Christian alike) of encounter with God.<sup>34</sup>

As Marshall McLuhan noted, often “people use new media to remake the old world, rather than open up the imaginative possibilities the new media afford.”<sup>35</sup> Jonny Baker calls, therefore, for deep theological and missional reflection, and imagination, on the missional possibilities offered by digital technologies.<sup>36</sup> The process of translating ministry into any new context - including the digital - requires both “a deep immersion in the gospel ... [and] a letting-go [of familiar] forms of language and culture.”<sup>37</sup> Such an approach, requiring “presence, attention, imagination and then translation,”<sup>38</sup> was certainly unable to be achieved solely in the few days between government announcements and lockdowns. This points to both the need for ongoing, iterative change, and the importance of skillful reflection on experiences, understandings, and theologies.

Heidi Campbell et al also note the need for congruency between churches’ offline identity and online expressions. Incongruency can suggest inauthenticity.<sup>39</sup>

Some church leaders, academics and commentators see covid-19’s disruption as an opportunity to reimagine the form and expression of the church: to be “agile and adaptive,” rather than to return to a normal that was neither as rich as the present, nor sustainable into the

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*Religion: Nordic Perspectives*, ed. S Hjarvard and M Lövheim (Gothenburg, Sweden: Nordicom, 2012), 26.

<sup>23</sup> Hutchings, *Creating Church Online*, 209.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>25</sup> Kurlberg, "Introduction: Missio Dei in a Digital Age," 13, in *Missio Dei in a Digital Age*, ed. Jonas Kurlberg and Peter M. Phillips (London: SCM Press, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Katherine G. Schmidt, "Digital Inculturation," *ibid.*, 23; Jonas Kurlberg, "Introduction: Missio Dei in a Digital Age," *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Steve Evoy, "The Unspectacular Pastor: Live and in Person," in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, ed. Heidi Campbell (Digital Religion Publications: Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 15. Original emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Zach W Lambert, "Facilitating Deep Friendship Digitally When Analog Acquaintances Are Gone," *ibid.*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Angela Gorrell, *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 22. Original emphasis.

<sup>31</sup> Schmidt, "Digital Inculturation," 33.

<sup>32</sup> Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Hutchings, *Creating Church Online*, 34.

<sup>34</sup> Maggi Dawn, "Worship, Community and *Missio Dei* in a Digital Age," in *Missio Dei in a Digital Age*, ed. Jonas Kurlberg and Peter M. Phillips (London: SCM Press, 2020), 176.

<sup>35</sup> Paraphrased in Jonny Baker, "Mission: An Adventure in (Digital) Imagination," *ibid.*, 45.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>39</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, Zachary Sheldon, Jhane Gibson and Giannina Guzman, "Technological and Mediated Identity in American Multisite Churches," *Ecclesial Practices* 7, no. 1 (2020): 14.

future.<sup>40</sup> Previous research exploring church responses to the 2019 mosque shootings (in Christchurch, NZ) revealed an agile church, with hardworking leaders responding quickly, both in the context of the ensuing church services and in ongoing action.<sup>41</sup>

**Authentic Christian witness**

As well as experimentation being necessary in relation to the *form of online worship*, our broader secularizing context necessitates attention to the *form of Christian witness*. One way secularisation is understood and evident is in the declining religious affiliation occurring in Western nations including the USA.<sup>42</sup> My earlier research explored why and how previously unchurched Australians convert to Christianity and Figure 1 shows the conversion process, the affects experienced by those journeying towards faith, and the role that other Christians played in conversion.<sup>43</sup> This research points to the significance of engagement in spiritual practices as a means towards, as well as a consequence of, conversion.<sup>44</sup> It emphasizes the importance of honesty and openness as Christian friends, and churches vulnerably demonstrate that faith makes a difference in everyday life. Foundational to this is what I call *relational authenticity*: “the project of becoming the person you are: imaging the relational God.” Demonstrated by other Christians and enabled by God, relational authenticity acts as both motivation for and *telos* of conversion.<sup>45</sup>

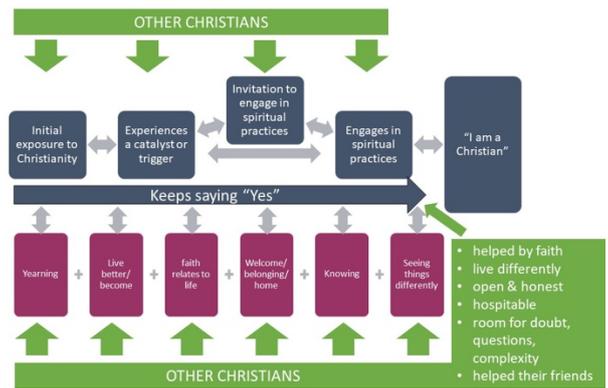


Figure 1: Conversion process, affects and role of other Christians

**The research process**

This article considers Avonsleigh Baptist Church (ABC) as a case study.<sup>46</sup> It draws on data from a questionnaire, leadership interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of and participation in online worship services to explore ABC’s ongoing response to covid-19, including concerning Christian witness.<sup>47</sup>

An online questionnaire of NZ and Australian church leaders provided rich comparative data on the worship, pastoral care, and community engagement of 75 churches during covid-19. In addition, the questionnaire enabled me to identify churches that provided online worship gatherings during Lockdown, perceived that there were positive aspects of their experience of worshipping online, had recordings of Lockdown services readily available, and were prepared to be included in further research. Three churches of different sizes, all located in neighboring suburbs within the Auckland supercity were approached and consented to being involved in further research. This paper narrows down further to a case study of one church: a church that continues to invest in online worship and ministry as a means of reaching out beyond their previous bounds.

My site visit occurred in March 2021, just after Auckland came out of its fourth Lockdown and it proved

<sup>40</sup> Piazza, "Getting Back to Normal," 31.

<sup>41</sup> Steve Taylor and Lynne Taylor, "Praying for Christchurch: First Impressions of How Local Churches Responded in Gathered Worship to the Mosque Shootings," *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 27, no. 4 (2020).

<sup>42</sup> Pew Research Center, "In US, Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace." Pew Research Center (2019).  
Lynne Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity: An Empirical Study on the Conversion to Christianity of Previously

Unchurched Australians" (PhD, Flinders University of South Australia, 2017), 10-13.

<sup>43</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 165.

<sup>44</sup> Lynne Taylor, "Our Doing Becomes Us: Performativity, Spiritual Practices and Becoming Christian," *Practical Theology* 12, no. 3 (2019).

<sup>45</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 277.

<sup>46</sup> The church’s name, along with the name “James” given to the lead pastor, is a pseudonym.

<sup>47</sup> The research was reviewed and approved by the School of Arts, University of Otago, New Zealand..

difficult to recruit participants for lay focus groups.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, I ran just two focus groups at this church; one with the team responsible for the church's online worship services, and another with committed long-term attenders. While in Auckland, I also interviewed the lead pastor (who I'm calling James). I later conducted online interviews with the pastoral care team leader and the woman who runs the Christianity Explained and Discipleship Explained (CE/DE) groups. With a research assistant, I undertook content analysis of recordings of selected services, making formal analyses of Service #1 (first compulsory Lockdown service), Service #7 (last service in Level-4 Lockdown) and Service #35 (final pre-Advent service of 2020).<sup>49</sup> We also analyzed Service #0 (the first covid-19 affected online service). I engaged in participant observation, synchronously attending three online worship services on their Facebook Live platform. Social media feeds (Facebook and Instagram) were informally followed.

The wider questionnaire provided invaluable data on ABC's response, including their early motivations, and reasons for continuing to offer an online option. It briefly outlined the content of online worship as well as levels of pre- and post-production participation. Finally, it included descriptions of pastoral care and community engagement during Lockdowns.

Services #1, #7 and #35 were viewed by the research assistant and me, transcribed and loaded into NVivo. Memos recorded impressions and field notes for each service. Initial open coding broke the data apart, enabling comparisons between churches and services. Later, we undertook further coding to themes evident in the literature and the other data sources. I returned to the service content after coding the interview and focus group data. Participating synchronously in selected worship services enabled me to experience the levels and content of chat engagement.<sup>50</sup>

Focus groups gather qualitative data from a homogeneous group of people.<sup>51</sup> The purpose of each focus group differed based on their composition. The first comprised five members of the core online team: creative ministries leader, communications advisor, lead pastor and technical staff/volunteers. This team had been formed when gathering restrictions became inevitable,

and it continues to be responsible for the online services. The purpose of this focus group was to learn what had been offered online by the church, particularly during Lockdown, and what continued to be offered after gathering restrictions were eased; to understand the motivation for offering what they did; and to explore how they supported the holistic wellbeing of the church and the wider community.

The second focus group comprised three committed attenders: one worked with an affiliated agency; another had previously held a leadership role and continued to serve as a volunteer; and the third person served as a volunteer for on-campus worship. Two, a married couple with a young family, had been part of the church for over ten years. The other participant was also married with a young family and had been part of the church for over 30 years. All had worked hard in their regular paid employment during Lockdown, as well as having family responsibilities. This focus group explored what they valued about ABC during Lockdowns, and why; how their (and others') wellbeing was supported; as well as the contributions they made to the church and wider community during covid-19.

Once I had revised the automatic transcriptions of focus groups and interviews,<sup>52</sup> I began coding the leader focus group and interview data into subcategories under each of the three major themes (amplification, connection and experimentation). While the subcategories drew on my theoretical sensitivity, they emerged from the data and most of the subcategories fitted within the three themes. Unwilling to impose existing categories on the Attender Focus Group data, I coded that independently, before merging the two sets of results. This made clear the relative importance of connection for attenders: experimentation and amplification were mentioned only in response to direct questions. I observed resonance between the gathered data and the espoused values of the church and coded the data to those values.

<sup>48</sup> This was also the case for another of the churches studied.

<sup>49</sup> With thanks to my research assistant, Jessica Bent.

<sup>50</sup> Chat comments were generally not included in the service recordings that could be accessed later.

<sup>51</sup> Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), 15.

<sup>52</sup> Using Otter.ai.

**Introducing ABC**

ABC is situated in an established suburb. Although the area has an above-average proportion of people of no religion (52% compared with 48% nationally), an above-average proportion also reports a Baptist affiliation (2% cf 0.8% nationally).<sup>53</sup> This is suggestive of the church’s local influence. ABC is well-supported with an extensive and capable staff team as well as affiliated agencies providing digital technical support and other services, including mental health care. Weekly, covid-19 notwithstanding, they hold morning and evening services at their main campus, as well as another service in a second location. Pre-covid they broadcasted a live stream of their worship service, and they continue to offer a weekly online service.

As a large church of over 500 attenders, ABC was impacted by any gathering size restrictions. To mitigate the disruption caused by changing restrictions, they only meet in person at Alert Level-1 (when there are no size restrictions). As a result, ABC was fully online for 23 weeks during 2020. Situated in Auckland, they have experienced three additional Lockdowns of between four and eighteen days as well as the eight-week national Lockdown.

ABC’s vision and values relate to *doing faith and life together*. They are centered on God. They seek to be real and honest about life, and they are aware that no one is perfect. They are innovative and creative: unafraid of trying new things and expecting to reflect God’s creativity in their own lives. They are generous because God has been generous to them. They want to grow, numerically and in discipleship, and they seek to be a place of welcome for all.

This section outlines the findings through the lens of Hutching’s Experimentation, Amplification, Connection schema, attentive to the stated values of the church (indicated in italics). How ABC engaged in Christian witness is also explored.

**Motivation**

Responses to the online questionnaire helpfully provide a snapshot and comparison between ABC’s early and later motivations for offering and continuing an online worship option (see Table 1).

In offering an online option, to what extent was it important that you ...		Early days	Later in	After
4 = Extremely important	1 = Not so important		Lockdown	Lockdown
3 = Very important	0 = Not at all important			
2 = Somewhat important				
Continued to meet as the body of Christ		1	2	1
Continued to meet as a church family		1	2	1
Provided a means of Existing/regular attenders		3	4	2
communicating a message of People on the fringes		3	2	4
faith to ... New people		2	2	3
Provided a means of Existing / regular attenders		4	4	2
remaining (becoming) People on the fringes		2	3	4
connected with ... New people		2	2	3
Explored new forms of worship and/or ministry		3	3	2
Supported people’s spiritual wellbeing		4	4	4
Supported people’s social wellbeing		3	3	2
Supported people’s mental wellbeing		4	4	4
Supported people’s physical wellbeing		3	3	3

Table 1: Motivations for responses

Nothing was unimportant. Supporting people’s spiritual and mental wellbeing were extremely important throughout and supporting their social and physical wellbeing were also very important.

In the early days of covid-19, the most important thing for this church was remaining connected with regular attenders, a motivation that continued later in Lockdown. They were offering stability: “creatively engaging with people in a normal way that showed we as leaders were OK when everything else was changing.”<sup>54</sup>

It was always very important, but later in Lockdown it had become extremely important that they had a means of preaching or communicating with their regular attenders. Early on, their perception was that “the ‘core’ congregation could look after themselves and [they] saw an opportunity to connect with both fringe and new folks.”<sup>55</sup> Two things are interesting here, first that James answered a question about preaching/communicating with a comment about connecting. This hints at how they see the communication task as a means of connection, not just amplification, and points to the interrelationships inherent between the three motivations. Secondly, we need to note the increased desire to communicate the message of faith to those in the church as Lockdown progressed.

After Lockdown, when meeting in person was again permitted, they continued to provide the online options, motivated more by a desire to communicate a message

<sup>53</sup> Data from 2018 Census (Statistics New Zealand). Author holds the data, accessible at [www.stats.govt.nz](http://www.stats.govt.nz). ABC is a member church of the Baptist Union of New Zealand.

<sup>54</sup> Questionnaire.

<sup>55</sup> Questionnaire.

of faith to people on the fringes, and to a lesser extent, new people. They were keen to “build on what [they] had started.”<sup>56</sup>

The questionnaire response noted it was “very important” that they explored new forms of worship and/or ministry. The interviews and focus groups suggest that this “very important” should be heard as “VERY important.” It was an opportunity that was seized by James and the online team. After Lockdown, the importance of experimentation had diminished, but that was perhaps because they had by then “launched an online campus,” establishing what had begun as a new form of worship that is “geared specifically at an online audience, people who may never come to their physical site.”<sup>57</sup> They now call themselves a “phygital church” – merging physical and digital campuses.<sup>58</sup>

### Experimentation

ABC is *innovative* and *creative*. “We want to be on the front foot of this,” James noted in an early video posted to social media.<sup>59</sup> They had “always dreamed about what church might look like in another form” and took the opportunity to “experiment.”<sup>60</sup> Their first pivot was deciding pre-emptively to stop gathering at the auditorium and offer a live-stream service, with only those leading the service present in person. The move to Level-4 required another pivot, to a home-to-home format. A core motivation: “the Bible tells us to meet people where they’re at right now. People are online, Lockdown or not. So why [would we] not [be] there?”<sup>61</sup>

They drew on resources already in place: the capacity to live-stream services; a communications staff appointment; an unused YouTube channel; and underutilized Instagram and Facebook sites. Covid-19 “advanced a whole lot of stuff” for them.<sup>62</sup> While their online campus “is [already] better than [they] imagined” it would be by now, they recognize the need to continue to adapt.<sup>63</sup> James noted, “It’s kind of like *God made us ready for it* and I hope that it is a [key] moment for us”

as a church community: one that will be looked back on as deeply significant.<sup>64</sup>

They sought to be *welcoming* to all, and *generous* beyond their usual bounds. While they had been live-streaming on-campus services before covid-19, they recognized that services needed to be different during Lockdown. As James reported, “We didn’t want it to feel like it was from a church and not directly curated for people. We wanted it to feel like it was for people in their home: a service for them they could be part of. Not that they were just watching a service that others were attending.”<sup>65</sup> They also “assume that not everyone will connect into Sunday” and seek to resource and welcome beyond Sunday, including with pre-recorded videos shared online.<sup>66</sup> They supported and warmly affirmed those who needed help to get online.<sup>67</sup>

A key evangelistic initiative, their CE/DE program, pivoted to, and continues to meet online. This enables ongoing connection with people from other countries currently including Singapore, Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia, with potential for reaching into China, and “other [places] that Christianity could not [easily] reach.”<sup>68</sup>

All they offered was for the sake of *growth* and *flourishing*, seeking “to resource you to be God’s people in your homes, in your bubbles, doing the things that we believe will help us ... thrive as people over this time.”<sup>69</sup> Iterative changes were made in response to feedback on “what is going to be useful for you.”<sup>70</sup>

They were *honest* about the challenges being faced. For instance, James acknowledged that he was both “excited” and “nervous” about the changes they were making.<sup>71</sup> It was hard work and they worked hard. The pastoral care team leader saw part of her role early on as “wind[ing] everyone right back and say[ing] ‘we’ve got a long walk ahead of us and we’re going to walk through this at a sensible pace’.”<sup>72</sup> By the end of 2020, leaders, volunteers, and congregation members were tired and all were encouraged to follow Jesus’ example and withdraw to rest and refresh. They appreciated “know[ing] it’s

<sup>56</sup> Questionnaire.

<sup>57</sup> Questionnaire.

<sup>58</sup> Questionnaire; Online Team Focus Group.

<sup>59</sup> Video 18 March 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Video 18 March 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Online Team Focus Group.

<sup>62</sup> Online Team Focus Group.

<sup>63</sup> Online Team Focus Group.

<sup>64</sup> Online Team Focus Group.

<sup>65</sup> Online Team Focus Group.

<sup>66</sup> Online Team Focus Group.

<sup>67</sup> Online Team Focus Group; Service #1 29 March 2020.

<sup>68</sup> CE/DE Leader Interview.

<sup>69</sup> Service #1 29 March 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Video 18 March 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Video 18 March 2020.

<sup>72</sup> Pastoral Care Team Leader Interview.

OK” to have a break, including from Sunday worship commitments.<sup>73</sup>

### Amplification

At least five core messages were communicated by the church during Lockdown: Comply with the rules; God prepared us for this; it’s tough, so take care of yourself; we’re here to support you; and stay connected. Excluding the first, these can be linked with one or more of the church’s values.

From the outset, James named the desire to play “a proactive leadership role ... in our community that takes seriously the [gathering restrictions and] requirements of the government.”<sup>74</sup> This was also evident in Service #1, where James reiterated the church's compliance with and support of the government action to “get on top of what’s happening with this virus.”<sup>75</sup>

While ABC does not follow the lectionary texts that proved so timely for many other churches, their pre-decided sermon series was apt during Lockdowns and James reminded the congregation that, through their planning and preaching, they had been prepared for their pandemic reality. For instance, the theme of exile and “what it is like to have been in a foreign land” continued in their Mothers’ Day service, linking exile with what they were facing due to covid-19.<sup>76</sup> Testimonies given by five mothers shared a “common denominator”: whatever the circumstances, “*God is with them. God is with you. God is with us.*”<sup>77</sup> A second message, explored above, was that ABC is “committed to *innovative* and non-traditional ways of being, of ministry and mission.”<sup>78</sup>

Being *real* and *honest* is “part of [their] culture” as a church.<sup>79</sup> While the church doesn’t have a strongly articulated “theology of suffering,” there was always an acknowledgement that “this is tough” and an invitation to “keep our *eyes on Jesus* ... [and] trust him to hold us.”<sup>80</sup> Weekly, when “James is ... leading in worship, [or] praying [a] pastoral prayer, [he] will name the struggles or the challenges that we're facing as a society

or as a community, and we'll pray about those.”<sup>81</sup> The need to “take care of yourself” was acknowledged.<sup>82</sup>

Also clearly and repeatedly articulated is the message: *we’re here to support you*. Over time, the pre-service slides moved away from providing general or promotional information towards a greater emphasis on informing viewers how they can receive care and support from the church. During services, the fact that technology made it possible to *welcome* people from around NZ and the world was celebrated. Messages about generosity were usually framed in terms of an invitation to contribute financially.

A final key message concerned the need to stay connected. This core category is explored next.

### Connection

When permitted, attenders were encouraged to gather in small groups to participate in the services. Church staff linked hosts and guests to ensure that everyone who wanted was part of a larger group. Newcomers’ events (an opportunity to “meet some new people and connect in”<sup>83</sup>) continued online and resumed in person when permitted. When viewed synchronously, the worship services included greetings posted in the chat, to and from people in different locations. Bibles were posted to people on request. In these ways and others, the church sought to be *inclusive* and *welcoming*. Staying connected required “a bit more intentional[ity]” than usual.<sup>84</sup> Some felt a sense of loss as their usual volunteering roles were not required.

Social media provided opportunities for connection and ABC developed their Instagram and Facebook pages. Many different people are featured in photos displayed on social media, highlighting the value placed beyond the lead pastor or wider staff team. Access to social media groups was extended to anyone, rather than (as previously) restricted to people who had been part of the on-campus congregations. A virtual prayer wall was established as a place for people to “post their prayer requests” and pray for one another.<sup>85</sup> People were invited to participate in the service both pre- and post-

<sup>73</sup> Attender Focus Group.

<sup>74</sup> Video 18 March 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Service #1 29 March 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Leader Interview.

<sup>77</sup> Service #7 10 May 2020.

<sup>78</sup> Attender Focus Group.

<sup>79</sup> Online Team Focus Group.

<sup>80</sup> Attender Focus Group.

<sup>81</sup> Attender Focus Group.

<sup>82</sup> Attender Focus Group.

<sup>83</sup> Service #35 22 November 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Attender Focus Group.

<sup>85</sup> Pastoral Care Team Leader Interview.

production, for example with “families doing different welcomes, or [sharing] what they getting up to.”<sup>86</sup> These *innovative and creative* initiatives utilized the available resources and media to help enable people to “engage with one another” beyond Sunday, thus deepening relationships.<sup>87</sup>

Part of ABC’s motivation was a desire to “get alongside and support” people and acknowledging the reality of “mental health [issues], anxiety and stress” was one way this occurred.<sup>88</sup> Such sharing included *honest and real* reflection on their lives and experiences, for example during the Mothers’ Day service already mentioned or as James shared how hard it was when his family suffered a bereavement during Lockdown. While the honesty from the staff was appreciated, focus group members laughingly agreed that it was also good to hear from people who weren’t “paid” to talk about the “hope [they had] in Christ.”<sup>89</sup> Synchronous interaction (via the chat functions) enabled attenders to share insights and reflections on the service, although this was more prevalent in earlier services than in later ones.

The *generosity* of the church was evident in the Care Team’s “phenomenal job” of caring for people in the church and the wider community.<sup>90</sup> To do so, they drew on paid and volunteer church and trust staff, set up rigorous structures, and provided “easy pathways” to care.<sup>91</sup> The usual ministries were offered online, and online forums, chats, worship, devotions, and resourcing videos were added. Practical support (for example in meal kits/foodbank and shopping support) was offered, the latter connecting younger people with older adults advised not to shop in person. Alongside clear messages about how to access support was a proactive checking that everyone is covered. The purpose? “To make people feel that they are supported and that we are thinking of them.”<sup>92</sup>

*Growth* in wellbeing and discipleship were supported, and the capacity for numeric growth was enhanced by ensuring people beyond the usual reach of the church had ways to deepen their involvement. Links to resources and opportunities mentioned during the service were posted into chat. Resourcing videos were produced. After service Zoom meetings provided

pastoral support to those who opted in. Pastoral caregivers are available to “walk alongside people ... [providing] supports and encouragements [until they] find their wholeness or their healing.”<sup>93</sup> People were encouraged to join Life Groups, and ABC has a goal of 50% of the church involved in these groups.

An “influx of families ... found [the church] online and want to connect in” and “fifty people” (including newcomers and staff/volunteers) attended a newcomers’ lunch.<sup>94</sup> The CE/DE group provides an opportunity for people to learn about the Christian faith and is attended by people at various stages of their faith journey.

During online services, viewers were encouraged to *focus on God* by singing along with the worship songs and praying. ABC also featured bible reading plans that they encouraged people to engage in together, building faith and discipleship.

### Christian witness

ABC used multiple voices during services to tell the stories of faith and God and encouraged attenders to do the same on social media, exposing newcomers and friends to the Christian faith. The CE/DE group strengthened understandings. ABC invited engagement in spiritual practices including attending online services, Bible reading, worship, and small groups. Further, they resourced engagement in spiritual practices by supplying Bibles on request, encouraging shared Bible reading plans, providing worship playlists, and working to connect people into appropriate small groups.

As people shared honestly about their joys and struggles and where they saw God at work, they were demonstrating how faith relates to everyday life. ABC sought to be welcoming and provided opportunities to belong, running welcome events, providing pathways to greater involvement, and encouraging everyone to check in with each other. They demonstrated that their faith helped them to survive, even thrive, despite the difficulties that they were open and honest about. In these ways, they were engaging in Christian witness.

<sup>86</sup> Online Team Focus Group.

<sup>87</sup> Online Team Focus Group.

<sup>88</sup> Pastoral Care Team Leader Interview; Lead Pastor Interview.

<sup>89</sup> Attender Focus Group.

<sup>90</sup> Lead Pastor Interview.

<sup>91</sup> Pastoral Care Team Leader Interview.

<sup>92</sup> Online Team Focus Group.

<sup>93</sup> Pastoral Care Team Leader Interview.

<sup>94</sup> Leadership Focus Group; Attender Focus Group.

## Implications for theory and practice

This research has implications for both theory and practice, in relation to online church and Christian witness. How might ABC continue to develop their online ministry? What might other churches learn from ABC's experiences? How might their story contribute to wider understandings of online worship and Christian witness?

ABC readily and skillfully embraced the available media, viewing it positively as a conduit or resource for ministry and mission.<sup>95</sup> However, despite the move from live streaming to an online campus, the form of the church service (although shorter) was familiar. A welcome, sung worship, Scripture, sermon, and prayer all featured each week. Short videos at the beginning often introduced the theme or offered space for reflection, although more could be done to draw the participant into worship, particularly before the first song. While the familiarity was appropriate for those used to attending worship offline, it does not yet represent Baker's "translation" or "letting-go" of the familiar forms of church.<sup>96</sup> ABC, like all churches offering an online ministry, is invited to continue to consider who their online campus is for. Is it a pathway to, or more widely accessible version of their on-campus worship services? Or do they seek to engage in a different context? If so, they are invited to add to their understandings of the gospel and of the media itself a deep exegesis of that new environment and its inhabitants. They already recognize the iterative, experimental nature of their online ministry, and its current form holds space for future development. James' dream of appointing an online campus pastor could help fulfil their hopes in this regard, particularly if that person is able to undertake the necessary deep listening and translation work.

A media-savvy desire for connection saw them "speaking specifically to" the viewer, rather than the viewer seemingly "watching from a distance."<sup>97</sup> During Lockdowns, this was facilitated by videoing from a sofa or living room, in homely setting. Although *person to person* interaction was impossible, intimate communication occurred *from my home to your home*. While they continued to use close-up video shots once

gathering restrictions eased, the intimacy was lost as broadcast was from a staged setting rather than a presenter's home. How might a sense of intimacy between presenter and viewer be reestablished? What possibilities are there for regular online participants to form and deepen interpersonal relationships between each other?

Having a host posting comments and resources into the chat was an excellent initiative to help build such community, although the potential for synchronous connection among worship service participants was not fully realized. In fact, engagement diminished over time. Having people other than the host primed to contribute could help deepen both the interaction and resultant connections. Opportunities to connect beyond the online service will also be required.

ABC's online presence (resourced by their newly appointed communications advisor) amplified the church's values, including emphasizing the communal nature of life and faith. This raises the question of whether some values translate better to the online space than others. Campbell et al distinguished identity from "how the church wants to be *perceived*," advocating for consistency between the two, including both on- and off-line.<sup>98</sup> In part, this might be enhanced by churches having a healthy core goal or purpose that encapsulates their values. For ABC, behind the values is a desire to see people thrive. The communal, connected nature of thriving is recognized in their commitment to engaging in life and faith together. Their experimenting with online worship acknowledges that off-line worship is not all that will be required into the future. The messages that they amplify seek to communicate how one might thrive, while also naming the challenges.

The results also point to the integration inherent at ABC between the three motivations for online ministry. For example, the online worship space (a new initiative or experiment) provided a platform in which connection and amplification could occur. A stated goal of the messages, at least early on, was connecting with newcomers (see Figure 2). These interrelationships are worthy of further exploration.

<sup>95</sup> Campbell et al., "Technological and Mediated Identity in American Multisite Churches," 15.

<sup>96</sup> Baker, "Mission: An Adventure in (Digital) Imagination," 37.

<sup>97</sup> Leader Interview.

<sup>98</sup> Campbell et al., "Technological and Mediated Identity in American Multisite Churches," 31.

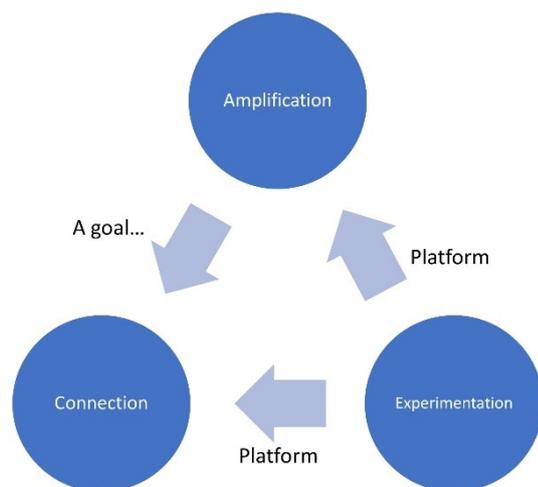


Figure 2: Interrelationships between amplification, connection, and experimentation.

In terms of Christian witness, as they contributed to the various stages of the conversion process and to the affects experienced by seekers on the journey to faith, ABC was living into an impulse towards relational authenticity. They were emphasizing relationality and connection. They were not afraid to name the difficulties of life. They were pointing to God as the true source of our identity and hope: God in whose (relational) image we are made. They were encouraging and resourcing engagement in spiritual practices. Such things make for good and effective Christian witness.

## Conclusion

In living into and out of their shared values, ABC was being authentic to itself. Rather than reinventing itself during covid-19, it expressed in a new context that which it already knew itself to be. They drew on their history, resources, and values as they experimented and adapted to an unfolding situation; amplified an honest message of hope and courage; and encouraged connection with other people and with God. In prioritizing interpersonal connection, they were reflecting their relationality. They know that they are “better together” because that is who we are created to be. Their values held them, shaped their actions – both reactive and proactive – and helped enable the fruit of holistic wellbeing and thriving. As well as positively impacting those already involved in church life, newcomers were welcomed, the wider community was cared for, and previous attenders were reconnected with.

Future research can draw on these insights to explore how other churches engaged in Christian witness during

covid-19. Analyzing the content of selected sermons will enable an exploration of the messages that were amplified by different churches. Investigating how churches supported holistic wellbeing during the pandemic will offer insights for the future practice of pastoral care.

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