

Digitalization of Ecclesiastical Practice in the Pandemic

by Thomas Schlag

The paper investigates which digital church formats were developed during the first wave of the Corona pandemic in spring and early summer 2020 in the German-speaking world during, and how pastors experience and assess the accelerated digitalization of church activities. First results of the international CONTOC study indicate a strengthening of participatory structures through the digital worship practice, but also a “top down” staging can also be observed.

Key words: pandemic; coronavirus crisis; digital literacy; religious practices.

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Churches Online in Times of Corona

These questions will be examined in more detail on the basis of the initial results of the so-called CONTOC study (Churches Online in Times of Corona - www.contoc.org) for the contexts of Switzerland and Germany, and here more specifically for the Protestant churches. The CONTOC study is an international ecumenical survey, especially of digital church formats under the conditions of pandemic-related contact and meeting restrictions, related to the first wave in the spring and early summer of 2020. The study was conducted by the chairs of practical theology at the Universities of Zurich, Würzburg and St. Georgen, the Zurich Centre for Church Development (ZKE), the Swiss Pastoral Theological Institute St. Gallen (SPI) and the Social Science Institute of the EKD (SI) and was carried out together with academic and church colleagues from a total of 22 countries.

In the survey period from the end of May to mid-July 2020, a total of just under 6,500 pastors took part in the predominantly quantitative survey consisting of around 50 quantitative questions and an additional five open questions that will enable a qualitative evaluation. Around 5,000 of the pastors were from the Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

Looking back at the period from Easter to Pentecost 2020, the participants provided information about their experiences and insights into the fields of worship, pastoral care, education, diaconia and church communication. In addition, they were able to make assessments with regard to their own pastoral role as well as the possible long-term consequences of digital church activities. The responses from these three countries and the associated statistical processing allow us to speak of a representative study, at least for the German-speaking contexts (i.e. excluding French-speaking Switzerland, which also participated, at least on the

Catholic side).

One of the main aims of the study is to ask, on the basis of the results collected, whether and, if so, in what way these will influence both the digital design of church practice and pastoral self-understanding in the longer term. This is linked to the broader question of what possible effects this will have on the structures of church formats, both in the area of congregational work and in the area of church training and continuing education.

In the following, first insights concerning the Protestant churches in Switzerland and Germany, especially on the question of church services, are presented and at the same time connected with practical-theological reflections. Already during the conceptualization of the study, we were aware that the focus on the pastors would only be able to represent a part of the actors of the actually carried out digital activities in the mentioned period. Nevertheless, the quantitative results provide important insights into this practice. Detailed results and interpretations of the CONTOC study will be discussed and published in various conference formats in the course of early 2022.

New Digital Presence: Pros and Cons

From the answers of the participating pastors it becomes clear that before the assembly ban almost 95% of the participants had not offered own digital worship formats. This means that many pastors in Germany and Switzerland have embraced this technical option for their worship activities for the first time during the pandemic – in this sense, one can undoubtedly speak of a kind of “technical” digitalization push. However, whether this will also lead to a quasi “ecclesiastical-cultural” digitalization thrust in the medium and long term will have to be closely observed.

It is clear from the results that around 50% of those who have organized worship services since the beginning of the pandemic have conducted one service per week. Among the various forms, a “service of the word / celebration of the word / sermon service” was carried out by 57% of Swiss and 47% of German pastors, “devotion / spiritual impulse / alternative form” by 59% of Swiss and 65% of German pastors. This already indicates that offering the “classic form” of the Sunday service was not the only, indeed probably not even the prioritized format for many of them. Digital communion services in the period in question were reported by 13% of Swiss pastors, but only 5% of German pastors.

With regard to the concrete experiences with this digital practice, their assessments as well as the possible consequences, the response behaviour shows, on the one hand, a positive perception. On the other hand, some aspects are also met with reservation and scepticism: thus, about 70% of the pastors in both countries are “satisfied or very satisfied with my online forms of worship and their effect”.

Around two thirds of respondents in both countries agree that online forms of worship reach people with whom “we would otherwise have no contact”.

Over half agree with the statement that “online services reach more people than local services”. 67% of the Reformed Swiss and 58% of the German pastors note that through these formats “people with mobile impairments are better reached”. However, it is surprising that only about one third of the pastors agree with the statement “I have adapted my online worship services based on feedback”. In Switzerland 35% and in Germany 45% agree with the statement that they want to “offer more alternative forms of worship for communal celebration and prayer in the future”. It is also interesting to note that for around 60% of those surveyed, the digital services were “developed together with a team”.

A certain sceptical attitude towards digital worship services is reflected in the fact that a two-thirds majority affirm that online forms of worship exclude people “to whom digital media are foreign”. Over 80% agree with the statement that they have “missed the resonance with the congregation (e.g., singing)” in regard to worship. That online forms of worship can “replace communal celebration” is denied by around 90% in both countries. At the same time, more than 80% of all pastors surveyed understand online forms of worship only as a supplementary offer.

With regard to the question of how the understanding of worship has changed in times of Corona (the whole variety of liturgical and worship forms, devotions and impulses was deliberately asked for here), almost 50% in both countries say that traditional worship “has gained in importance for me”, but at the same time 60% each say: “I have discovered new forms of digital presence for worship”. On the other hand, 42% in Switzerland and 52% in Germany are in favour of promoting “digital forms of church community”.

The assessments differ regarding whether new forms of digital presence have been found and whether an authentic expression of one’s own role in digital worship has taken place. 75% of pastors in Switzerland and 70% in Germany agree with the statement: “My role has not changed, only the form of presence. It is interesting that in Switzerland 57% and in Germany 50% report that they have succeeded in “authentically expressing my role in digital worship.” Whether and to what extent one is “very much at the centre of online worship as a person” and thus “the role gains in importance” is answered even less clearly: only about one fifth of the respondents are in favour of such an increase in the importance of the role.

Sustainable Changes of the Classical Formats?

Following these quantitative results, some conclusions can be drawn as to how pastors assess the digitalization processes within the church for their own practice and for the church as a whole:

Among the (interviewed) pastoral staff – in connection with the respective

conditions on site, but also depending on the personal affinity to digital media – a varying degree of digital testing practice occurred, which at the same time clearly went beyond the classical formats of the Sunday service.

An increased problem perception of current church communication (e.g. with regard to the assessment of traditional church services) increasingly led to a turn towards digital formats. Those respondents who have relied on teamwork and the integration of volunteers in the development of digital formats, and who at the same time claim particularly positive experiences, also rely heavily on participatory structures in other areas of community action. Among those (interviewed) pastoral staff who have embraced digital possibilities and assess their effects positively, there is at the same time a high level of interest in future theological reflection and exploration of criteria as well as an increased interest in training and further education offers for the acquisition of digital competences.

Many of the pastors interviewed in the CONTOC study assume that the reach of their digital worship formats is greater than that of the analog formats. Other studies on church practice in the first Corona phase also assume such an increase in reach with regard to the number of clicks. In fact, digital worship services and other proclamation formats are generally accessible to everyone and can reach a potentially larger audience. Such a transformative practice not only opens up wide creative space, but can also unleash creativity and potential for local worship among all those involved in it. Whether this will become a permanent fact, however, cannot be clearly determined at present. In any case, the increase in reach and access numbers does not necessarily result in a change of the classical formats, which actually use the digital media in their innovative possibilities. After all, during the Corona crisis many digital formats have themselves remained more or less “classical”, for example by offering an online format of an offline worship format.

It is also questionable whether digital media favour participatory communities and network-like structures, and thus whether the priesthood of all believers can be realised in a new way. In fact, it can be assumed that digital forms of proclamation by their very character are not to be thought in a linear and frontal way, but in a responsive and participatory way. Whether this has actually occurred through the formats during the first wave of the pandemic cannot be clearly substantiated for the time being against the background of the results of the CONTOC study.

On the one hand, this may be due to the fact that only pastors were integrated into the study, and thus the possible perceptions and participatory activities of other congregational leaders and committed persons as well as the worship participants were not surveyed. At the same time, the data obtained do not allow a precise conclusion as to whether the development dynamics during the first wave really promoted a participatory community character and even network-like structures throughout. For in many services accessible online it could be

observed that communicative interpretative power was not (only) shared, but also often staged “top down” in a digital way. At least in the beginning, the diversity of congregational life was often not represented. Could it be then that through certain pastoral-worship digital forms of communication the mutual congregational exchange about interpretations of reality has even been impaired or stopped? And has the worship orchestration and event dimension thus just not been given adequate space? Behind this is, on the one hand, the much more far-reaching question whether such a common, bodily experienceable overall space can be orchestrated and experienced at all via digital media and, on the other hand, with a view to pastoral self-understanding, what role-presence is claimed and assumed in these cases by pastoral personnel.

It would therefore be necessary to examine which participants were able to experience fellowship during the pandemic in online worship services according to their own assessment and which were not: The hypothesis that these are primarily people who have also frequently participated in offline worship services is obvious. New forms of worship that work with explicitly participatory, interactive elements of communication could indeed gain new reach here. But it is precisely these contexts that need to be analysed in more detail in the future. The analyses and interpretations of the extensive qualitative data material are scheduled for early 2022.

Potentials of Digital Pastoral Innovation

Whether with regard to worship and its pastoral actors a comprehensive digitalization of proclaiming and liturgical action and even a kind of pastoral “digital literacy” has come about or will come about in the future must remain open for the time being in view of the results of the CONTOC study so far.

Without question, these results are highly stimulating, on the one hand, in order to visualize the broadly existing potential for innovation with regard to new forms of worship practice. Among those surveyed, a predominantly positive attitude towards the online forms of communication tried out in Corona times is evident, and thus a high creative potential, which is a good prerequisite for further digitalization of church practice. On the other hand, creative theological reflection and pastoral “digital literacy” are to be promoted much more strongly in the future with regard to worship and professional self-image.

Ultimately, all digital formats raise crucial ecclesiological questions about the meaning of the content of proclaiming and celebrating worship, which are by no means settled even with the highly professional use of technical possibilities. In any case, theologically speaking, the priority goal cannot be to merely increase the reach of worship activities through digital forms of communication.

In addition, the reasons of those respondents who expressed rather skeptical

or distanced opinions about digital worship formats must be intensively explored: Is such skepticism primarily based on a lack of digital literacy, or is it precisely a certain basic theological convictions and “habitual” attitudes that may prevent digital innovation? It will therefore be extremely exciting to explore the relationship between theological and technical competence in the pastoral profession.

Whether the character of the communication of the gospel can be promoted by digital forms and formats in such a way that bodily resonance spaces are opened, in which people can meet each other in an appreciative way, is a central question of theological-professional self-critical reflection that arises. Only under the prerequisite of an intensive process of reflection within the churches can the future designs of digital practice and the transformation processes that become possible with it attain a deep theological meaning.

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