Special Issue: Digital Ecclesiology

Introduction: Studying Digital Ecclesiology: How Churches are Being Informed by Digital Media and Cultures

What is Digital Ecclesiology?

Digital ecclesiology has become a popular term over the last decade, surfacing around discussions about churches and their use of technology. It is typically used in broad, undefined ways, either to advocate for church use of digital media, or to debate the social and ethical problems that arise when churches integrate internet technologies into their work. This was seen when Elizabeth Drescher used the term in a 2012 interview about her book *Tweet If You ♥ Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation*. The book focused on best social media practices and the need for churches to engage the internet in their ministries. She argued, ‘this book is kind of a digital ecclesiology,’ suggesting churches that use digital media for ministry function in tune with society’s growing digital environment (NA, 2012).¹ More recently, the Aqueduct Project from Moody Bible Institute hosted a roundtable podcast on digital ecclesiology. Here, interviewer Jonathan Armstrong used the term digital ecclesiology to get respondents to either offer a rationale for, or critique of, practices related to the virtual church and the theological issues online Christian community may raise (Armstrong, 2019).² As these examples suggest, the phrase ‘digital

1 NA, (21 May 2012), ‘Elizabeth Drescher: Digital Ministry, Made for the Mainline, Faith and Leadership.’ <https://faithandleadership.com/elizabeth-drescher-digital-ministry-made-mainline.com>.

2 Jonathan Armstrong, (April 12, 2019), ‘Digital Ecclesiology Podcast.’ <https://static1.square-space.com/static/57759952f5e231b6a29263c5/t/5da93f1084400e460a076927/1571372817416/Digital+Ecclesiology+Transcript.pdf>.

ecclesiology' is often used in somewhat provocative ways, attempting to evoke an emotional response about digital media and how they will impact traditional conceptions of the church.

However, a few instances exist where the term digital ecclesiology has been taken more seriously. In these cases, people understand the term as creating a conversation about the relationship of the Christian church to emerging technologies and consider the extent to which this changes contemporary ecclesiological understandings. For example, the New Media Project, an exploratory study funded by the Lily Foundation between 2010 and 2017 that explored how religious leaders think theologically about digital technology, used this phrase in their research to investigate how digital media alter or affirm the church's ethos as well as practices. Team members conducted a series of six comparative case studies on how churches and other Christian ministries were using digital and social media to accomplish their mission. They also sought to document reactions of church leaders to these experiments. Their case studies focused on how each group sought to engage digital technology and how this influenced core attributes of spirituality, community, and ministry.

Digital ecclesiology was used in several of New Media Project's online reports, where research team members reflected on the ecclesiological assumptions reflected in the observed digital practices of these bodies and the meaning and assumptions underlying their various approaches. Jim Rice (2012), for example, discussed what a 'digital ecclesiology' might look like in terms of how it helps us understand a model of how church functions in a digital age. He said,

Just as there are communion ecclesiologies and feminist ecclesiologies—theological studies of the church from particular perspectives—a 'digital ecclesiology' could yield fresh and profound insights into the nature of the church in the postmodern world and, conversely, into the ways that church bodies make use of new media technologies (<http://cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/essays/models-of-the-church-and-social-media>).³

Though he never fully defined digital ecclesiology in his writings, he used the idea to provoke discussion on the ways digital environments and engagement may require both new ways of thinking about the church and returning to traditional models. Drawing on the classic work of Avery Dulles's *Models of the Church* (1974), Rice argued that while the project's studies of online congregations, a clergy network, and a Christian university's engagement with the

3 J. Rice, (10 May 2012), *Models of the Church and Social Media*, The New Media Project. <http://cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/essays/models-of-the-church-and-social-media>.

internet showed digitally-driven innovations in the ways these bodies gathered and communicated, the actual ways these churches functioned as a liturgical community could be defined using Dulles's work. He asserted it might be helpful to turn to ideas embedded in historical theological reflections on the purpose of the church first, before suggesting a digital ecclesiology is emerging. He concluded:

The way the church behaves digitally in our world today is no different, morally or spiritually, than any other mode in which the church is manifest. If the church is a servant to the marginalized and an advocate for justice, the church will use its digital presence as a way to fulfill those missions. If the church emphasises the formation of Christian community, social media will be an increasingly important contributor to the nurturing of communal connections. Proclamation of the Word will always be central to the church's calling, and new media will join older media as vehicles for the announcing of the good news.⁴

Yet this thinking was challenged by discussions taking place at the New Media Project's 2013 conference, *Digital Church: Theology and New Media*. The phrase digital ecclesiology was used by several speakers to suggest that new media—such as augmented reality, podcasting, and cloud computing—had the potential to greatly change expressions of the church. Many further suggested it was too early to rule out the potential of digital ecclesiological models still emerging. What was needed was further consideration of the extent to which traditional ecclesiological language can capture these potential new expressions of church, or whether revised or digitally informed models are needed to accurately describe their work.

This response is echoed by work in the TheoComm network, another group which takes discussions about what digital ecclesiology might look like seriously. TheoComm runs an annual gathering of mostly Catholic theologians and media scholars who meet to examine a myriad of issues around the role contemporary communication and emerging technology play in understanding and broadly presenting the identity of the Catholic Church. Digital ecclesiology was the core theme of their 2016 conference, entitled 'In the World Yet Not of The World: Ecclesiology in a Digital Age.' Here, discussion surfaced around what the nature of the Church could and does look like in the digital age.

⁴ (Rice, 2012, <http://cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/essays/models-of-the-church-and-social-media>).

Papers presented at this event explored issues such as the extent to which practices of communion, prayer, or worship participation can or cannot adapt to digital environments. Others asked whether traditional theological models such as the mystical Body of Christ might need to be reconsidered for a digital context. Discussions around 'digital ecclesiology' focused broadly on how digital culture is shaping and transforming church life on multiple levels and how churches should go about living and expressing their ecclesial identity in digital contexts. Presenters suggested the need for flexibility in defining what constitutes church both online and offline in the digital era. Speakers also called for careful reflection on what criteria we use to define the functions of the church, and whether we should privilege discussions of digital or historic ecclesiology discourse or some combination of the two.

When the above examples are taken together, we can see some common themes surfacing through this inquiry. Digital ecclesiology is a phrase used by individuals to reflect on the strategies used, and the motivations behind, churches' negotiation with digital media. It points to the need to unmask the cultural and theological conceptions that lie behind different definitions of church and assumptions about technology. The idea of a digital ecclesiology invites a robust conversation about what the theology of the church should look like in a digital age. Specifically, it asks church leaders and theologians to consider what factors should inform choices related to technology use in liturgy, worship, and mission, and to carefully reflect on how such decision making might transform or support established church traditions. Digital technology interactions have the potential to frame how we understand and explain the nature and structure of the Christian church in new ways. It is in this line of inquiry that this special issue proceeds.

1 How We Investigate Digital Ecclesiology

Digital ecclesiology was chosen as the title of this special issue of *Ecclesial Practices* in order to highlight the need for greater exploration of the ways digital media intersect with contemporary church life. Our goal is to offer insights from sociological, ethnographic, and media studies perspectives on church practices related to the digital media use. The aim is to reflect from a variety of disciplinary lenses on the current forms of online technology integration into church environments and how these may and are informing contemporary missional, ecclesial, and liturgical practice. Our use of the phrase digital ecclesiology here points towards the need for more scholarly analysis of how churches, church institutions, and Christian communities engage with and

respond to digital media and digital cultures. This documentation of digital media practices then opens the door to more refined consideration of theological and ecclesiological implications of this technological innovation.

The aim of this special issue is to create a platform for conversation around digital ecclesiology. By offering articles that highlight concrete examples of how church institutions engage digital media, we hope to focus our discussion on specific social and religious implications of their choices. We hope this focus reveals common intentions and assumptions about the relationship between technology and the church. In order to present a diversity of interdisciplinary perspectives, and not only on how scholars from different fields conduct the study of the technological engagement of contemporary churches, care was taken in selecting and inviting papers for this special issue. The intent was also to highlight the variety of social, cultural, and theological tools used to assess the ethos and culture created when digital media technologies are used in missional and ministry contexts.

Articles in this special issue offer several comparative examples related to how Protestant, Catholic, and non-denominational churches engage digital media in the USA, UK, and Germany. By offering such a survey, we can compare and contrast the similarities in church media strategies, the ways digital media shape church identity, and how churches see their relationship to 'secular media' culture. By offering examples from both the American and European context, we seek to show readers that while variation exist in churches' media strategies, these are often informed by common perceptions of how the church sees technology.

In summary, digital ecclesiology is used in this special issue to argue that churches' social structures, cultural relationships, and theological understanding are all being informed by the technological landscape, even when churches attempt to avoid or limit their contact with digital media. Together, these articles provide an overview of the different methods, theories, and questions that scholars can use to study the formation of a digital ecclesiology. The collection also calls for needed interdisciplinary inquiry in order for churches and religious organizations to fully understand and be able to consider the implications of their engagement with digital media and culture. I suggest that along with the article featured here, a multi-faceted exploration of the digital and the church and their current intersections is needed before one can offer a definitive answer to what a digital ecclesiology is, could, and/or should look like. Overall, the articles in this special issue highlight common trends in churches' technological practices, areas of contestation raised by the digital mediation of church institutions, and how scholars seek to analyze these new types of ecclesiastical practices.

2 Overview of Contributions

We begin with an exploration of how digital media tools and environments are used by churches to shape and present their church's religious identity. In 'Technological Liturgy and Mediated Identity in American Multisite Churches,' attention is given to these practices in multisite churches located in the Philadelphia, PA, area of the USA. This is because multisite churches are typically heavily dependent on technology for running their services and facilitating aspects of church life, thus providing diverse examples of technology integration and decision making about using media to frame their story. Zachary Sheldon, Jhane Gibson, Giannina Gutzman, and I investigate the digital performances of religious identity of multisite churches, which are churches that meet in multiple locations. We argue technology plays a key role not only in facilitating their church services, but also in shaping members' and visitors' understanding of what church is within these contexts. This investigation leads us to study closely churches use of digital media to uncover the factors such churches need to consider about their use of digital media in order to ensure they are communicating cohesive and consistent identities in online and offline aspects of their church.

Next, we look at another study of technology integration and decision making in an American evangelical context. 'Brazos Fellowship: A Case Study in Digitally Mediated Liturgical Design' focuses attention on how technology use can shape liturgical design. Adam Bajan argues most churches in this context are more motivated by the functionality of digital media than ecclesiological concerns when making choices about media integration. Through an ethnographic study at a medium-sized evangelical church in East Central Texas, he observed the fact that decisions made about the liturgical design were primarily shaped by motivations of pragmatic purpose related to the orchestration of the service; demographic outreach goals, as technology use is seen as necessary to draw new members; and strategic design, as technology offers new opportunities for controlling and facilitating emotive experiential worship. In this way, the decision making of churches of this type can be seen as rooted in an instrumental, pragmatic desire to connect with congregants in a manner that is linked to previous experience with secular digital culture and commercially available digital technologies.

Then the article 'Reshaping Offline Community in the Image of Online Experience: The Impact of Digital Media on Church Conflict in the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh' investigates the use of social media networks for church discourse in the state of Pennsylvania. Christopher Craig Brittain and Andrew McKinnon consider the extent to which online communication helps address

or contribute to inter-church conflicts. Through a detailed ethnographic study of digital media use within the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, they map how social media use heightened ideological and theological tensions between Anglican and Episcopalian church groups in Pittsburgh. This shows how digital media may enhance disunity amongst church members when they are left to their own devices online, and how attempts at intervention by church leaders may not be given the same weight in the online setting.

We then move to explorations of digital media use by churches in the German context. This begins by asking how religious organizations like the Roman Catholic Church engage and respond to media in cultural contexts where society and religion are shaped by the process of mediatization. In other words, they are shaped and informed by logics of how media function and communicate. This means religious organizations are forced to adapt to secular communication processes, which frame not only the presentation of their messages, but how they are presented to their external public. To investigate these conditions, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and Hannah Grünenthal use what is called a communicative figuration approach to study both sides of church media-related practices. Attention is placed not only on studying situations in which media are used, but also when media are not used and the implication of these choices. 'The Roman Catholic Church as a Religious Organization in Times of Deep Mediatization in Germany' explores Church decision-making media practices and the opinions of three different groups within the German Catholic Church about church engagement with media, as well as attitudes towards secular media and religious media the church produces. By mapping differing responses and media practices, the authors show how media engagement offers different actors new levels of religious participation, while raising concerns about how media representations may build disconnection from religious centers of church life.

Next, we turn to an exploration of the reaction of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) to digitization practices within the church. Ilona Nord, Thomas Zeilinger, and Katharina Alt investigate the social and cultural challenges triggered by digital media integration that sought to transform churches' practices and environments. 'Digitization in the Evangelical Church(es) in Germany: Exemplary Insights' spotlights examples of how the EKD governing church body and three of its member churches have experimented with digital media in worship and mission setting—experiments that have raised a myriad of technical, cultural, theological questions. The experiments demonstrate the need for churches to consider in detail how technology solutions can have unplanned effects on the church setting, stimulating deep ethical and theological discussions. The authors consider how these integrations

raise broader concerns about how digitization alters established structures and ethical outlooks.

We then move to the British context, where Steve Knowles explores the unique media-engagement history of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC), formerly known as the Exclusive Brethren. This small, introverted Christian evangelical sect exists in tightly bounded connexional communities in which they seek to separate themselves from mainstream culture. The rise of new media platforms in the past decade has played a central role in disseminating (mis)information about the group from disgruntled ex-members. Due to these narratives and external pressures, the PBCC has recently undertaken a re-branding exercise to improve their public image, one forcing them to engage with media forms they have long sought to separate themselves from. 'Media Engagement for Public Benefit: The Case of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church' spotlights how churches may be obliged to interact with media to both protect their reputation and enhance their ability to interact with wider society.

Finally, we move from the exploration of how specific church contexts have responded to and engaged with media to consider what churches might need to consider when preparing the next generation of leaders for service in the church. Kyle Matthew Oliver, Stacy Williams-Duncan and Elisabeth Kimball tackle the challenges and opportunities new media spaces pose to religious leaders and educators in 'Digital Literacies for Ministry: A Qualitative Study of Theological Educators Preparing Students for New Media Engagement.' This article presents evidence from an interview-based study of theological educators actively engaged in teaching ministry students technological skills and preparing them for a new era of ministry with experiences of online engagement. Based on this work, they outline seven key digital literacies needed by contemporary ministers preparing for church leadership in the 21st century era of digital media. This work provides a useful guide for discussing not only essential technological skills needed by a new generation of ministers in a digital society, but also how church structures and practices might need to adapt or be in conversation with attributes of digital culture and how they might challenge or inform ecclesiological processes and practices.

3 Issues Raised for Considering the Shape of a Digital Ecclesiology

Overall, these articles show different ways churches are being impacted by technology, including on economic, social, and communicative levels, as well as how they are perceived and framed within civil society as religious

organizations. Authors also address churches' tendencies to focus primarily on religious and social critiques of digitization and digital technology, which miss the point and distract them from taking seriously the reality of the broader technological culture in which they exist.

This does not mean, however, the process of engagement should be without serious reflection. Indeed, the authors highlight the fact that digital media are indeed a double-edge sword, simultaneously offering both opportunities and challenges. New technologies offer advantages such as streamlining church communicative practices and providing members easier access to church information and teachings. But these advantages must be weighed against the potential for social media to make private church conversations public, potentially exposing church structures and leadership to public scrutiny in new ways. Indeed, several of these studies show how the integration of digital media in church work can lead to the loss of a unified voice and the ability to manage divisiveness within the church. Emphasis on using technology to mediate religious experiences and encounters has the potential to shift the traditional focus of the church, so offline structures or gatekeepers may no longer be seen as prime definers of what constitutes church.

Yet, as these studies also point out, even when digital media cause a loss of church control over its communication and message, they cannot be ignored. At the most basic level, churches must interact with new technical and communicative infrastructures in a society undergirded by digital media. They must engage with these to perform the most basic functions in a digital society, such as mailings, record keeping, payrolls, and structural communication. Some churches will find interacting with or incorporating digital media more challenging than others. This may be due to their desire to create a distanced relationship between themselves and modernity and general society, or due to the nature of their hierarchical or layered structures that seek to tightly manage membership and liturgical practices. Yet even groups hesitant about digital technology have found it is almost impossible to avoid. Digital technology use has become almost a requirement for churches to perform the most basic organizational and community structured tasks today.

As digital media becomes a more central resource for many churches, their pragmatic uses often open the door for staff to experiment with new forms of digital integration for non-essential purposes. In these studies, we have seen digital media described as serving as pastoral support for communication and ministry work, a missional tool providing new outreach opportunities that connect online-offline spaces, and a form of liturgical enhancement enabling the re-imagination of the worship environment and its associated practices. Indeed, in some church contexts, digital technology has also become an

important symbolic tool, demonstrating a church's fluency with contemporary society or its attempt to be seen as culturally relevant in spaces where religion is decreasing in cultural influence.

This means, as several articles suggest, there is a need for ecclesial leadership to cultivate digital literacies that do not simply focus on the pragmatic use of technology, but literacies that unpack the theological ethos and values of different technologies and their implementation in church environments. These digital literacies also require churches and church leaders to understand how to construct digital resources and presences online that match and echo their core vision and mission. This requires creating a flow and connection between a church's online-digital and offline-embodied identities.

Overall, these articles argue that churches seeking to move towards a digital ecclesiology should focus not simply on how technology should be used in the church environment, but also on why and for what purpose they should choose to engage digital media. Theological reflection should be at the heart of this strategic reflection. Several authors suggest churches should focus on a moderation of technology approach. Here technology is seen as something to be understood, guided, and informed with theological values and ecclesiological frameworks. Moving towards a digital ecclesiology should be approached as a process of thoughtful, faith-based reflection and communal conversations that consider both the historic and emergent social and ecclesiological implications of digital media integration for a church in a digital age.

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