

# *Church Leadership in a Digital Age: Cultivating Community and Spiritual Growth Online*

By

Britni Michelle Johnson

A Project Thesis

submitted to the faculty of

Virginia Theological Seminary

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Educational Ministry

**March 6, 2023**

*Altagracia Perez-Bullard*

Altagracia Perez-Bullard+ (Mar 6, 2023 11:17 EST)

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The Rev. Altagracia Perez-Bullard, Ph.D.

*Elizabeth DeGaynor*

Elizabeth DeGaynor (Mar 6, 2023 13:42 EST)

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Elizabeth DeGaynor, Th.D.

*Elisabeth M. Kimball*

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Elisabeth M. Kimball, Ph.D.

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## **Abstract**

The current season of Christian ministry calls for church leaders to view their social media platforms as online sacred spaces where God is present and believers online can experience the presence of God and each other. Technological advancements of social media platforms enable ministry leaders to leverage digital media as cyber sanctuaries where congregants can digitally come together for true community and have digital experiences that contribute to their faith formation and development. This thesis will show that collaborative leadership (shared power) and social constructivist educational approaches (dialogic processes of learning) align with digital church ministry and promote community and spiritual growth in online sacred spaces. It argues that growth and community online are fostered through bidirectional influence and reciprocity of education and ideas; and claims that a leadership approach that values and includes the community's perspective cultivates a connected living environment online.

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## Introduction

Early Christian gatherings were shaped by the social and religious culture of the Graeco-Roman world. Formal meal sharing was central to meeting together during the Hellenistic and Roman periods; and the Christian community adopted this tradition. Early Christians shared a meal whenever they gathered.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the Church's history, believers have gathered according to the socio-religious context of their time. As today's socially networked world accepts a technologically advanced culture, there is a calling for Christian church ministries to embrace a digital reality. The impact of the 2019 coronavirus pandemic forced theologians and Christian ministers resistant to integrating digital media into ministry, to reconsider how these means help the church do and be the church digitally.

Doing church digitally is not a new phenomenon. The globalization of television broadcasting enabled the Gospel message to reach audiences anywhere there was access to television networks. Several worship services were transmitted on cable television, instituting another tradition of doing Christian ministry: televangelism<sup>2</sup>. Televangelism shifted the cultural climate in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Today, livestreaming features on Facebook and YouTube enable Christian ministries to share spiritual content with audiences worldwide conveniently and at no cost. Digital media has customarily been used by churches as a tool for information sharing. However, the 2019 coronavirus pandemic triggered a

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<sup>1</sup> Alikin, Valeriy A. *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries*. (Davers: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010) 1

<sup>2</sup> Televangelism is the use of television programs to communicate Christian teaching.

<sup>3</sup> American evangelist Pat Robertson founded the first Christian television network, established in the United States in 1960, known as the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). In 1973, American television evangelists Paul and Jan Crouch launched Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), which is now the largest Christian television network in the world. American viewership of religious television grew from about 5 million to 25 million between the 1960s and mid-1980s.

paradigm shift where Church leaders had to reconsider online platforms as venues for doing and being the church. How to create community and aid the spiritual growth of believers online became a concern of ministry leaders. If leaders can understand ministry techniques attuned to the digital culture, they can learn how to cultivate community and help encourage the development of faith digitally. This study will show that collaborative leadership (shared power) and social constructivist educational approaches (dialogic processes of learning) align with digital church ministry and promote community and spiritual growth in online sacred spaces. Online sacred spaces are the holy, set apart virtual environments the Spirit of God inhabits. It is in these sanctified cyberspaces where believers encounter God and one another online. Those congregating in online sacred spaces can experience the divine presence of God and the digitally mediated presence of others.

My hope is that ministry leaders will understand that the digital platforms they steward are not simply tools for sharing spiritual content, but virtual communities sanctified for growing faith and community. When the church's social media platforms are primarily used for content sharing, it is like keeping digital disciples on the outside, looking through the window at a library of sermons or bulletin board of ministry programs, instead of inviting them to enter the digital door of a community where there is worship, fellowship, and discipleship. My thesis and research work aim to demonstrate how facilitating community and growth in online sacred spaces are possible.

## Chapter 1: Ministry in Online Sacred Spaces

### Congregational Context

The vision to develop victorious disciples was evident when Victory Grace Center (VGC) was born on September 6, 2015. In its infancy, VGC was nurtured in the auditoriums of two Prince Georges' County, Maryland High Schools.<sup>4</sup> However, having meditated on Acts 1:8<sup>5</sup> and prompted by the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, VGC re-organized itself as an online church to preach and teach the Word of God digitally by way of its multiple social media platforms. With its more than 45 active ministries, VGC's purpose is to do worship, fellowship, discipleship, and encourage outreach and service virtually.

Biblical Scriptures and historical documents record early Christians gathered as a worshipping community in the temple, homes, and whatever places were made available.<sup>6</sup> Setting aside the idea of seeking out a traditional church building or venue for worship, the people of VGC made Zoom video conferencing and Facebook<sup>7</sup> groups their residence. Both Zoom and Facebook have become online sacred spaces for worship, fellowship, and discipleship. At least 120 of VGC's roughly 300-member congregation gather in one of VGC's online sacred spaces on Sundays to glorify God and to receive spiritual insight and wisdom. At this predominantly African American church, the members, referred to as V-partners<sup>8</sup>, enter the virtual sanctuary hosted on Zoom affectionately greeting one

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<sup>4</sup> Victory Grace Center gathered for worship each Sunday at Bladensburg High School in Bladensburg, Maryland and later at Charles Flowers High School in Springdale, MD

<sup>5</sup> Acts 1:8 [NIV] But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

<sup>6</sup> Craig, Angela Lynne, *Online Jesus: A Guide to Community, Discipleship, & Care Online* (2020) 14

<sup>7</sup> Facebook is a popular social networking website that enables the sharing of photos, videos, and information with connected users.

<sup>8</sup> The members of VGC are referred to as V-partners.

another with the welcome “It’s a Victory Day!” The V-partners exit with a biblically grounded message affirming their victory in their “faith, family, finances, and flesh.”<sup>9</sup> During the week, the V-partners gather in Zoom for Bible Study. When leading Bible study, the pastor of VGC uses a teacher-centered<sup>10</sup> method to facilitate Christian education.

When the V-partners and visitors congregate online in the sacred space of Zoom, they are strongly encouraged to bring their face into the space, to turn their camera on and bring their face in view. This encouragement is an invitation to participants to enter a posture that brings reverence to God and to support their intention of creating an atmosphere for experiencing the move of God mediated through digital means. God is seeking worshippers who will spiritually and authentically worship in holy, set apart virtual environments.<sup>11</sup> When online congregants come on camera, worship transitions from individual and spectated to communal and participative.

Between Sundays, V-partners engage one another in the church’s private Facebook group called The Village. The Village is the primary virtual space where there is a persistent presence of V-partners. V-partners gather as a community in the Village. The Village is comprised of 272 members, of which 77% are female and 22% are male. The ages of the participants in the Village range between 18 and 65. V-partners participating in the Village predominantly reside in Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia. At least one V-partner resides in South Africa. The online

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<sup>9</sup> Victory Grace Center Church Affirmation

<sup>10</sup> The teacher centered educational approaches holds the instructor as the expert and authority for sharing knowledge through direct instruction or lectures.

<sup>11</sup> John 4:23-24 [The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation] “Yet the hour is coming-and is already here-when real worshippers will worship Abba God in Spirit and truth. Indeed, it is just such worshippers whom Abba God seeks. God is Spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth.”



sacred space of the Village enables immediate connection despite distance. Zoom and Facebook enables VGC's ministry to transcend its geographical location. Angela Craig, the lead pastor of Pursuit Church Live, the first social media church in Assemblies of God fellowship, is a leadership coach and speaker helping organizations turn their online platforms into communities. She affirms that "Today, technology can help us create deeper connections and community while ministering to those who might otherwise remain beyond our reach."<sup>12</sup> Social media tools used in ministry enable the church to stretch its digital arms beyond its physical capacities. Even so, there are V-partners who prefer the regular fellowship of in-person worship. This is made evident in the decision of some V-partners to transfer their membership to churches that have re-opened their doors for doing worship and ministry in-person. Despite VGC considering itself a global ministry according to its digital reach, V-partners who move out of the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia areas tend to use their relocation as an opportunity to unite with a physical church.

The Village was designed for participants to connect and give and receive spiritual and social care. As Craig argues, it is supposed to provide a space for them to "connect organically, building community around common interests and mutual care."<sup>13</sup> When I joined VGC's digital team in January 2021, I observed that while the ministry leaders consistently posted in the Village, the content was predominantly flat pictures and provoked sparse engagement if reacted to beyond a "like".<sup>14</sup> The content also consisted of many promotions of upcoming ministry events and programs. Posts made in the Village

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<sup>12</sup> Craig, Angela Lynne, *Online Jesus: A Guide to Community, Discipleship, & Care Online* (2020) 20

<sup>13</sup> Craig, Angela Lynne, *Online Jesus: A Guide to Community, Discipleship, & Care Online* (2020) 17

<sup>14</sup> You can react to a post or comment on Facebook by clicking the "like" button, letting people know you enjoyed reviewing the content.

to facilitate spiritual insight, call for deeper spiritual and personal reflection, or create space for pastoral care were infrequent.

### **Leadership Context**

In January 2021, I joined the digital team of VGC as the Facebook Campus Director. VGC's Facebook Campus consists of all the private and public ministry Facebook groups of VGC. I provide advisement on posting content in the Facebook groups. However, my main responsibility is facilitating spiritual and social engagement in the Village through created content. I post spiritually reflective pictures and videos, interact with each responder, ask questions to probe areas of concern, and lead prayer on live videos.

Additionally, I am one of the core team leaders of the Young Adult Ministry (YAM). As a member of the YAM leadership team, I work with four other ministry leaders to create opportunities for fellowship, service, and discipleship. Experienced Youth Leader and researcher on Youth Ministry, Andrew Zirschky asserts that young people are seeking "full-time intimate communities of people who are present with one another in the realities of life,"<sup>15</sup> Understanding this, I collaboratively contribute to plans to carry out YAM's mission for young adults to mature spiritually by studying God's word, building community, enhancing connections, and fostering relationships. I plan, create, and lead the biblical studies portion of YAM's monthly meetings. I use the YAM private Facebook group to post spiritual reflections, go live for prayer and special

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<sup>15</sup> Zirschky, Andrew. *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected But Alone Generation*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015) 37

announcements, and have used the Facebook Messenger Rooms<sup>16</sup> feature to teach topical biblical lessons.

Furthermore, in September 2022, I became the Department Leader to the Discipleship Ministries. I provide direct oversight of the Men's, Women's, Young Adult, Seniors', Youth, Children's, and Married Couples' ministries. I work with the servant leaders to set ministry goals and plan events that aid spiritual transformation of participants in the ministry. I host regular department meetings to equip and strengthen the leaders to disciple participants in digital spaces. Emphasizing the need to utilize the ministries' Facebook groups for discipleship teaching, I encourage the servant leaders to go live in their private ministry groups sharing biblically grounded messages. Going live also creates an experience of presence online. As Nona Jones, Head of Global Faith-Based Partnerships at Facebook and recognized as one of the world's foremost experts on digital discipleship through social technology, states, "Going live in a group, if harnessed the right way, has the added benefit of building a sense of accessibility between group members and church leaders."<sup>17</sup>

This project will explore how true community and spiritual growth can be fostered in online sacred spaces when facilitated by collaborative leaders using social constructivist approaches. I will examine the role leadership plays in influencing the formation of community and spiritual growth in online sacred spaces. When I joined the ministry staff of VGC, I was excited and eager to embrace the progressive innovation and forward-leaning digital ministry. VGC is successfully taking the Gospel message to

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<sup>16</sup> Messenger Rooms is a video-chat feature that enables multiple connected users to conference.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, Nona, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020) 104

“Jerusalem, and in all Judea and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth”<sup>18</sup> by way of its teaching and preaching on multiple social media platforms. The public social media platforms make it possible for the preaching and teaching ministry to reach people near and far, but how are the private discipleship Facebook groups being used to bring those who connect with VGC into a discipleship community? Disciples are human beings. Humans were designed by God to be in relationship. The human need for relationship can only be met in community. This thesis project provides the opportunity to articulate the nature and needs of human beings and explain methods of enabling meaningful relationships through technology.

The V-partners, like most people, have what Zirschky describes as a “ravenous appetite for relationships—the deep, heart aching, knowing relationships.”<sup>19</sup> They have a great desire to live in a community of presence. This project will assess whether the servant leaders are leading participants in the discipleship Facebook groups to a knowing presence. A knowing presence, as I define it, is the online state of being where digital users are emotionally and cognitively attentive to their digital peers throughout their social interactions in online sacred spaces. Their consistent sharing of life stories and regular social engagement establish relational ties between the members of the community, providing opportunity for them to acquire an empathic understanding of each other, necessary for supporting one another in sorrow and celebration. These online experiences provide online congregants a sense of presence, the feelings of togetherness online, with people who have personal and sensitive knowledge of who they are.

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<sup>18</sup> Acts 1:8 [NIV] But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

<sup>19</sup> Zirschky, Andrew. *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected But Alone Generation*, 5

Shallow and passive posts restrain relationships and deep connections, whereas interactive and self-reflective posts can lead the community to create a presence of truly knowing one another. Flat posts provoke little reflective thought and demonstrate a lack of genuine care. As Alexander Strauch, renowned writer of books contributing to the field of biblical leadership, says “A leader will not have much of a ministry if people do not know that he or she truly cares about them.”<sup>20</sup> The discipleship Facebook groups must reflect a community where the people strive to connect in ways that lead to a deep knowing of one another, allowing for each to bear one another’s burdens, encourage, and build each other up.

True community is possible in online sacred spaces. I understand true community to be the intimate intertwinement of shared life together<sup>21</sup> where human beings are present with God and each other. True community offers a presence of deep knowing of one another. Just as in the secular social world human communities have transformed, so have Christian church communities evolved into a digital presence.

While VGC ministry leaders emphasize the need for adaptive leadership<sup>22</sup> in its digital spaces, the current season of Christian ministry also calls for leadership that fosters true community and spiritual growth in online sacred spaces. Before the digital age, it was thought and expected that information flowed in a straight, hierarchical line; and the answers to questions came from the clergy heads. However, this model of leadership is especially not conducive to a people living in a digital culture. This project argues for a model of leadership that reflects the digital cultural shift, while

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<sup>20</sup> Strauch, Alexander. *Leading with Love*. (Littleton: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 2006), 109

<sup>21</sup> Zirschky, Andrew. *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected But Alone Generation*, 5

<sup>22</sup> Victory Grace Center approaches adaptive leadership as a continuous process of assessments and adjustments to meet changing needs of people or an organization.

simultaneously promoting community amongst and transformational growth in its online congregants.

Ministry leaders who exercise collaborative leadership are able to cultivate true community and support spiritual development amongst digital disciples because they value and leverage others' interests, ideas, and insights. Furthermore, collaborative leadership aligns with the culture of technology, which is collaborative and connective in nature.

A major concern of digital ministry leaders ought to be the spiritual maturity of online congregants. Advertisements for virtual church events should not outweigh content tending to the soul care of V-partners. "Communicators go wide; pastors go deep,"<sup>23</sup> says Nona Jones who suggests ministry leaders are to create spiritual depth online. VGC's methods of teaching discipleship in digital spaces lean toward a teacher-centered educational approach. The discipleship programs offer no opportunity for bi-directional learning. This can inhibit learners from actively engaging in the material. Leaders in digital ministry must embrace teaching styles that value the voices of learners as contributors to expanded perspectives. Ryan Panzer, learning and leadership development professional in the technology industry and a speaker and consultant on technology for ministry, states that "Ample space for questions is a prerequisite to faith formation for people of all ages in our tech-shaped culture."<sup>24</sup> When we provide room for questions, thoughts, and opinions, we are being intentional about fostering meaningful learning. This project explores and applies pedagogies aligned with a tech-shaped culture

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<sup>23</sup> Jones, Nona, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship*, 69

<sup>24</sup> Panzer, Ryan. *Grace and Gigabytes: Being Church in a Tech-Shaped Culture*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020) 34

that are supportive of faith formation. Spiritual growth is possible in digital disciples when ministry leaders use social constructivist approaches in Christian education, such as collaborative learning and dialogical teaching styles. Spiritual transformation takes place in the interchange of ideas and perspectives.

### **Research Project Plan**

I embarked upon this research to explore the role of digital ministry leaders and the nature of digital discipleship communities. My aim was to understand how VGC servant leaders' role and influence can improve a sense of community online and help promote spiritual development in its digital disciples. Theologically, I believe online sacred spaces are sites for social and soul care where a deep personal knowing and depth of Christian learning can take place. Hebrews 10:24-25 calls believers to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works not neglecting to meet together, as is habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, VGC's online sacred spaces ought to be communities of care and discipleship.

My research project sought to discover appropriate leadership and teaching approaches used in online sacred spaces that cultivate a sense of true community and spiritual growth amongst digital disciples. The research methods I used to collect, assess, and reflect on data used to contribute to the field of study on church leadership in a digital age for growing faith and community included the ethnographic research approaches of participant observation, written responses, anonymous surveys, and

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<sup>25</sup> Hebrews 10:24-25 [ESV]: And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works not neglecting to meet together, as is habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near

interviews, the exercise of reflection and reflexivity; and action research to test and validate my claims concerning suitable leadership and educational approaches for virtual environments, leading to true community and spiritual growth.

My research project focused on four discipleship ministries with active Facebook ministry groups: the Men's, Women's, Young Adult, and Married Couples' ministries.

My research project plan included:

1. Collect a ministry profile about the four discipleship Facebook groups
2. Conduct a survey of participants in the discipleship Facebook groups
3. Conduct interviews of V-partners actively participating in the online sacred communities of Zoom and Facebook
4. Conduct observations of the discipleship Facebook groups
5. Facilitate a leadership development workshop for the servant leaders of the discipleship ministry Facebook groups
6. Observe the servant leaders use of educational approaches in a live digital discipleship program
7. Conduct a post-discipleship program survey of participants

In September 2021, as the Facebook Campus Director, I required the servant leaders of the discipleship Facebook groups to complete a detailed Facebook ministry group profile.<sup>26</sup> I used this to gain insight into the leaders' interpretation of their discipling efforts, how they contribute to a fellowshiping community, and their observations of maturing Christians. I received a completed profile from each of the ministry groups. I also had the participants in each of these groups complete a survey to

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<sup>26</sup> The Facebook Ministry Leader Profile included a caption indicating its use for my doctoral research related to the formation of leadership in online sacred communities.



gather insights on the culture of the discipleship communities. There were 25 respondents to this survey.<sup>27</sup>

Shortly after, I conducted interviews of V-partners in October 2021.<sup>28</sup> My aim was to understand their experience doing ministry digitally and gather a perspective of their spiritual development by digital means. I was able to successfully conduct six interviews of V-partners participating in VGC's online sacred spaces. I examined and analyzed the context of the discipleship ministries by observing the digital engagement and activities within each group between 2 October 2021 and 1 October 2022. I sought to understand how the group activity hampers or helps the sense of community and grows the participants' faith.

Using the information from the ministry profiles and literary resources, I planned for each ministry leader to participate in a leadership development workshop for building community and discipling online. I made two attempts to hold the workshop. On the first attempt, in October 2021, the church calendar was unable to accommodate the workshop. In January 2022, I made a second attempt to host the leadership workshop. I provided two dates to accommodate the leaders' schedules. However, the ministry leaders did not make themselves available on either date to fully participate.

Since I am a core team leader in Young Adult Ministry (YAM) and work closely with the other core team leaders, I determined it would be best to host the leadership workshop with YAM core team leaders during a scheduled team meeting. On the evening

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<sup>27</sup> The 25 responses to the Facebook Ministry Group Survey consisted of six from the Men's, eight from the Women's, eight from the Young Adult, and three from the Married Couples' ministries.

<sup>28</sup> Each interviewee provided verbal consent during the interviews. The statements and contributions of the interviewees were anonymized to protect their identities.

of July 19, 2022, I successfully held a 1-hour and 15-minute leadership workshop with two core leaders of YAM via Zoom.

The leadership workshop was designed to help the leaders understand their call to ministry in an online church, learn what Christian community looks like online, and acquire educational approaches that facilitate faith formation and development. The course was comprised of three components.

1. The Call to Leadership: Using a biblical account of Moses' call to leadership, I led the leaders through an exploration of their unique call and a reflection on their core convictions, passions, and purposes; and aligned it to their leadership in online sacred communities.
2. The Human Being in Community Online: I led them through a theological discussion on the digital presence of humanity in correlation to the theological anthropology of human beings. I correlated elements of biblical covenantal relationships to the unity of digital disciples gathered online.
3. Teaching in Sacred Online Communities: I introduced educational models most conducive to individuals in a digital learning environment and pointed out where I used these techniques throughout the workshop.

My hope was the leaders would leave the workshop with an actionable plan to cultivate community online and grow disciples digitally. The YAM core team leaders were to apply insights garnered from the July 19, 2022 workshop in an upcoming digital discipleship program. On September 1, 2022, the YAM digital discipleship program was facilitated collaboratively by one YAM core team leader and myself. I used this

opportunity to further demonstrate teaching techniques in a virtual learning environment and conducted observation of the leader's use of learned methods. There were four young adults who attended the program. Each of the participants received a post-participation survey that I used to collect further data. There were two respondents.

## Chapter 2: Research Findings

During this study, I relied on ethnographic and action research approaches, as well as engagement with reflection and reflexivity to examine VGC's online sacred spaces and assess leadership and teaching most appropriate for cultivating a sense of true community and helping digital disciples' faith grow while congregating in virtual spaces. "Ethnography is a way of immersing yourself in the life of a people in order to learn something about and from them. Ethnography as a pastoral practice involves opening your eyes and ears to understand the ways in which people practice their faith."<sup>29</sup> In an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the individuals congregating in VGC's online sacred spaces, I used ethnographic research questions to study the narratives of their lives and collected survey responses from participants in the discipleship Facebook groups to gather insights on the culture of the discipleship communities, as well as a post-participation survey from participants in an online discipleship program designed to discover what the attendees learned, what was most meaningful to them, and whether they felt they played a valuable role in incorporating their own ideas into the lesson.

My engagement in the ethnographic research approaches of participant observation, research interviews, and collection of written responses from an online ministry profile helped me explore the practices and social interactions of the ministry leaders and digital disciples in the natural setting of their virtual environment. I asked ethnographic interview questions to gather insights on their experiences in VGC's online sacred spaces and feelings related to their spiritual development and relationships online. During the interviews, I inquired about their religious background and factors related to

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<sup>29</sup> Moschella, Mary Clark, *Ethnography: as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008) 4

the formation of their faith; as well as their sentiments as an online congregant. The surveys allowed me to collect data concerning the digital disciples' sentiments concerning online worship, fellowship, and discipleship and approaches the leaders take to minister to them online. The data I gathered and analyzed was used to learn the underpinnings of the activities taking place in the online sacred spaces and the meaning of their experiences.

Action research enables researchers to engage in “a practical form of inquiry”<sup>30</sup> to improve practices, generate new ideas, and provide fresh understanding. My research aim has been to encourage ministry leaders to take seriously the formation of community and faith online by way of their leadership and teaching approaches. I hope to influence pastoral leaders thinking of doing and being the church online. This research study required that I engage in action research inquiry. Action research called me to consider what practices of digital ministry I was concerned with and provide explanation as to why I was concerned. My oversight of the VGC's private Facebook group the Village afforded me the opportunity to be an active observer of the digital activity, where I became concerned with the flat posts that provoked little to no thought or reflection. I feared the same nature of posting was happening in the discipleship ministry groups. Additionally, the Lead Pastor's tendency to lead online Bible studies in a lecture style, a teaching approach out of sync with the digital age, peaked my inquiry in whether the servant leaders were modeling this method of biblical and spiritual instruction in their discipleship ministry groups. I developed a personal theory that circular leadership styles and social constructivist teaching approaches are more suitable for leading and

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<sup>30</sup> McNiff, Jean. *Action Research: All You Need to Know*. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017) 9

instructing in virtual environments. To test the validity of this claim, as well as to help the leaders understand their call to ministry in an online church, learn what Christian community looks like online, and acquire educational approaches that facilitate faith formation and development, my action research included the design, development, and facilitation of a leadership development workshop and observation of the servant leaders use of educational approaches in a live digital discipleship program.

Critical to my research was my own reflection and reflexivity on the research and my personal engagement in the work. As stated by the authors of *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology*, “The practices of seeing, reflection and discernment facilitate greater self-understanding, and especially awareness of how one’s own social, economic, cultural, ideological locations are complicit in the construction of knowledge.”<sup>31</sup> While I engaged in reflection and reflexivity throughout my project, I gave particular attention to exercising this method after completing the participant observations and research interviews, knowing the sum of my thoughts will serve to build knowledge. The following will detail my research and the interpretation of the findings. I will introduce my experiences exercising each method and provide a reflection after each practiced method.

Using surveys, I collected data separately from the discipleship Facebook group servant leaders and participants in the groups. My aim was to investigate the leadership exercised in the group and gather an understanding of the human experience of the digital disciples when they engaged in VGC’s online sacred spaces. The online ministry profile was used to gain insight into the leaders’ interpretation of their discipling efforts, how

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<sup>31</sup> Bennett, Zoë; Graham, Elaine; Pattison, Stephen; Walton, Heather. *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2018) 43

they contributed to a fellowshiping community, and their observations of maturing Christians. The survey distributed to the participants in the groups was designed for the respondents to submit the survey anonymously. This was to encourage freedom of expression.

The discipleship ministries I observed were the Men's, Women's, Young Adult, and Married Couples' ministries. These Facebook groups serve as online sacred spaces for VGC. The servant leader of each group was to complete the online Ministry Profile, which captured the leaders' personal purpose, their perceived value of the group, and thoughts about their digital leadership. The leaders provided short responses to each open-ended question.

The profile responses revealed the leaders are passionate about spiritually developing members of their group. They use their Facebook groups as spaces of encouragement and work to create a safe digital atmosphere for vulnerable transparency. "I share my personal experiences with others to facilitate openness and relatability."<sup>32</sup> The leaders believed teaching Bible studies, hosting Christian book studies, and sharing testimonies contributed to the spiritual growth of those participating in their group. It was also highlighted that the groups engagement in spiritual disciplines contributed to their spiritual growth. The Men's group provided "a great avenue for men to pray that were not used to praying openly before,"<sup>33</sup> shared Profile Respondent 3 about the monthly prayer call his ministry holds. Those in Christian communities are taught to pray. It is through their engagement in prayer, both personally and corporately, that they are educated in

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<sup>32</sup> Profile Respondent 2. 2022. Facebook Ministry Leader Profile. JotForm, September 24, 2021

<sup>33</sup> Profile Respondent 3. 2022. Facebook Ministry Leader Profile. JotForm, September 21, 2021

prayer. As Christian formation scholar, Maria Harris says, “The curriculum is in the praying.”<sup>34</sup> There is opportunity to grow and learn through the words of prayer.

The profile responses indicated the leaders sought to create connection in groups by making posts of relatable content and conversation starters. The Facebook Ministry Group Survey prompted participants in the groups to reflect on their connection with other members in the group. The responses indicated that 56% of participants feel somewhat connected, having no significant relationship with others in the group. Whereas 32% of the respondents shared they feel totally connected, knowing others in the group personally. Twelve percent of the responses stated that they do not feel a sense of connection when engaged in the group. The respondents who felt no connection to the other members in their group also conveyed that they did not actively engage in the group and expressed feelings of forgottenness. One of the disconnected participants stated, “I don’t engage very much in the group and when I have it was to get information.”<sup>35</sup> Ideally, participants’ engagement in the groups would lead to accountable relationships, not merely the consumption of information.

Ephesians 4:3 [NIV] says, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” The respondents who felt most connected in the group describe it as a place of unity. Their group was an online sacred space for gathering together and connecting. “It’s also a place where young adults can hang out and chat and

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<sup>34</sup> Harris, Maria. *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 98

<sup>35</sup> Respondent 1-G. 2022. Facebook Ministry Group Survey. JotForm, September 22, 2021.



get support as needed.”<sup>36</sup> “I understand the group to be able to join sista’s together to support and uplift one [another]. Create a sense of unity and [offer an] outlet.”<sup>37</sup>

“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another,” Proverbs 27:17 [NIV]. Based on the survey respondents, these groups are communities of learning, supporting growth and transformation. They ascribed Bible studies, reading and discussing spiritual books together, and open reflective dialogue with individuals of diverse backgrounds as contributing to their spiritual growth. When asked about the teaching styles that contribute most to their spiritual growth, 64% stated a collaborative method (participating in a group discussion where thoughts and ideas on a topic bring forth beliefs and values), 20% stated dialogue and reflection (finding value and meaning through answering questions and reflecting on thoughts), and 16% claimed a lecture style (the teacher delivers the lesson, sharing thoughts and ideas concerning the subject). This affirms collaboration as an important aspect of the digital culture and leaders of digital ministry must embrace collaboration in the areas of faith formation. A collaborative model of teaching better aligns with discipling online congregants.

The leaders aimed to cultivate a space of encouragement and care. “I believe no one can make it through life alone. We all need help, support, and love.”<sup>38</sup> Based on the survey responses, laughter, love, support and comradery is found in these groups. “When others post in the morning it helps my day.”<sup>39</sup> The responses conveyed that the groups were safe spaces for vulnerability and transparency. Two respondents shared that the personal experiences revealed in the group have been transformative for those who

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<sup>36</sup> Respondent 4-B. 2022. Facebook Ministry Group Survey. JotForm, September 25, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Respondent 1-F. 2022. Facebook Ministry Group Survey. JotForm, September 22, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Profile Respondent 2. 2022. Facebook Ministry Leader Profile. JotForm, September 24, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Respondent 4-F. 2022. Facebook Ministry Group Survey. JotForm, September 22, 2021.

engage with the stories.<sup>40,41</sup> Another suggested it was the testimonies of growth and resilience that contributed to their transformation.<sup>42</sup> I believe this is made possible because the leaders take seriously the responsibility of keeping the groups safe and sacred. They do this through the privacy settings, the control of membership, and monitoring of posts.

In reflection, the responses collected from the ministry profiles suggest the leaders of these online sacred spaces are making a conscious effort to lead authentically with their personal sharing and expressing their willingness to help others with their areas of vulnerability. The survey responses make evident the participants rely on the spiritual support and encouragement offered in these groups to sustain their wellbeing in the physical world. When the members make a concerted effort to engage the people and the information shared, they experience a sense of belonging and connectedness.

“When puzzling over questions of how a religious practice works in a specific context, it is helpful to go to the places where people engage in this practice and spend time there, seeing what you can see,”<sup>43</sup> says Practical Theologian Mary Clark Moschella, who presents participant observation as a qualitative model for research when seeking to understand how things work or function. I wanted to understand how VGC cultivates community amongst digital disciples and facilitates their spiritual growth. This understanding can only be developed by visiting the online sacred spaces where the V-partners regularly congregate. Therefore, I sought to understand as much as possible through participant observation in the discipleship Facebook groups. Max van Manen, a

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<sup>40</sup> Respondent 4-H. Facebook Ministry Group Survey. JotForm, September 20, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Respondent 3-D. 2022. Facebook Ministry Group Survey. JotForm, September 15, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Respondent 1-D. Facebook Ministry Group Survey. JotForm, September 22, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Moschella, Mary Clark, *Ethnography: as a Pastoral Practice*, 68

scholar specializing in phenomenological research methods, describes it this way: “Close observation involves an attitude of assuming a relation that is as close as possible while retaining a hermeneutic alertness to situations that allows us to constantly step back and reflect on the meaning of those situations.”<sup>44</sup> I entered the online sacred spaces of the Facebook groups and examined the postings of the ministry leaders and how the participants digitally engaged with the content and each other. I took note of core messages and how they were delivered (written, graphic, live, or pre-recorded). Throughout this period of observation, I aimed to identify the explicit and implicit intent of the digitally gathering body.

The V-partners encounter and experience God through the digital context and culture of the groups. Studying the context is therefore essential. Practical theologian and senior scholar Joyce Mercer’s definition of the term is instructive. “The term context points to the variety of factors outside of the ministry itself that impinge upon it and contribute to its possibilities and limitations.”<sup>45</sup> I examined and analyzed the context of ministry through the discipleship private Facebook ministry groups, to understand how its features hinder or enhance community and spirituality. I observed the digital engagement and activities within each group for a period of one year (2 October 2021 – 1 October 2022).

The Women’s Ministry named their group Sista’s With Victory (SWV). There are 174 members. During the observation period, there were 218 posts in the group. Activity<sup>46</sup> in the group was most actively observed on Saturdays. The members were

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<sup>44</sup> van Manen, Max, *Researching Lived Experience* (Abingdon: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1997), 69

<sup>45</sup> Mercer, Joyce. *Introduction: Why Do We Study the Institutional or Other Context for Ministry?*

<sup>46</sup> Activity is the posts, reactions, and responses by members participating in the group.

considerably more likely to respond to live video posts than pictures of inspirational quotes. Rarely did the responses exhibit anything of significant depth. The participants tended to engage the content posted as the leader directed. “Drop your best praise dance in the chat,”<sup>47</sup> which invited the members to respond to the picture with a Graphical Interchange Form (GIF) image. My observation of the group revealed there were three threads interwoven in SWV’s posts and messaging: (1) affirmation of the Black woman’s identity, (2) accolades of Black women’s success, and (3) admonitions to endure. The posted content reflected images, pictures of quotes, and short devotional messages that acknowledged the beauty, strength, and resiliency of Black women. The majority of the group’s content were re-posts of Black women’s success and history making in the United States and abroad from other Facebook user pages. There were shared articles concerning women of color who conquered feats in athletics, business, government, movies, music, and television. Video clips of political and award speeches of prominent women were also posted. However, there were no personal pictures or articles shared that acknowledged the achievements of the women participating in the group, with whom they were more intimately connected.

The leader of SWV would regularly conduct a live eight to 10-minute lesson essentially exhorting members to press toward their goals and endure challenges because God will ensure their success. Aiming to capture the essence of Philippians 1:6,<sup>48</sup> the leader encouraged the members in a live post by saying “Don’t give up! Keep pressing,

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<sup>47</sup> Profile Respondent 1. 2022. “Hey Sistas I stepped outside last night, saw this DOUBLE RAINBOW! I believe we SHALL receive a DOUBLE portion of every promise God has made to us!” Facebook, August 31, 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/sistaswithvictory/permalink/3171198746463252/>

<sup>48</sup> Philippians 1:6 being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

keep moving forward... Hold on a little while longer because the best is yet to come. You will do what [God] created in you to do.”<sup>49</sup> Additionally, live discipleship programs were streamed from Zoom to the group for their monthly digital fellowship and seasonal Women’s Bible study. The programs focused on Women’s health, Women in the Bible, and relevant social issues of the time, such as Juneteenth. The monthly digital fellowship programs were structured with two to three key speakers sharing content on a selected topic. The Women’s Bible study was taught lecture-style by the Pastor, but private breakout rooms for small discussion were held after each lesson.

Members of the group participated in creating vision boards. While pictures of the completed vision boards were posted in the group, there was no picture of the people who created them. There were flyers posted inviting members to meet other women at in-person fellowships, however there were no follow-up posts expressing the women’s experience meeting together in person, nor were there pictures posted capturing their times together. Of the 218 posts there was only one invitation to submit prayer requests.<sup>50</sup>

The Young Adult Ministry named their private group YAM-V-Millionaire Club. There are 90 members. During the observation period, there were 159 posts in the group. While the members were observed to be most engaged in the group on Saturdays, they preferred to react to posts by “liking”. There were sparse responses to posts, however when they would respond, responses reflected thoughtfulness and expressed transparent experiences. The reflective responses were prompted by a question related to socially

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<sup>49</sup> Profile Respondent 1. 2020. “Profile Respondent 1 was live.” Facebook, August 20, 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/100008172464397/videos/851707752478349/>

<sup>50</sup> Facebook User. 2022. “We want to pray with you and for you on today. As I call on every Intercessor, Deacon, and Minister to stand on the wall together, as we break the cycles on today.” Facebook, January 20, 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/sistaswithvictory/permalink/2998164313766697/>

relevant topics such as thoughts concerning the overturning of Roe vs. Wade and the future of work in physical locations given the shift to remote work since the COVID-19 pandemic. Members of this group tended to view but not respond to pictures, even when there was a question prompting their engagement. Additionally, I observed the members were more apt to respond to video messages. I found it interesting that a post simply stating, “Happy Monday!” brought about frequent and immediate engagement and connection amongst the members. “The regular and frequent exchanges, that have little if any informational value, are key to the strength of ongoing social binding.”<sup>51</sup> What some may call jabbering and silly inconsequential chatter, Andrew Zirschky shared as critical to having presence and building intimacy. It is the small details that reflect involvement in one’s life and display actual care. Mundane chitchat provides a sense of belonging.

The YAM servant leader posted a weekly “tap in” video to check in on the young adults participating in the group. In the videos, the leader expressed interest in the wellbeing and life happenings of the members. He highlighted trending topics and often included a motivational or biblically inspired message. The messages captured transparent stories about the leader’s journey to a transformed life. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, this person is a new creation; the old things passed away behold, new things have come,” 2 Corinthians 5:17 [NASB]. The messages also encouraged members to remain disciplined, to stay the course spiritually and professionally in order to prosper.

I observed equity in the posting of content between the YAM servant leader and core team leaders.<sup>52</sup> Observation of the YAM discipleship Facebook group also revealed

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<sup>51</sup> Zirschkey, Andrew. *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected But Alone Generation*, 44

<sup>52</sup> Core team leaders are individuals who play a supportive role to the servant leader to help them plan and deliver program and events according to the stated mission of the discipleship ministry.

there were virtual and in-person fellowship and discipleship events. The leaders and group members posted pictures and live videos of their time at the in-person gatherings. The virtual discipleship programs focused primarily on securing financial freedom. There was a series of lessons designed to help young adults create a plan to make reality the vision of their future. These lessons were held in Zoom and live streamed to the Facebook group. Each of the lessons was undergirded by biblical principles, taught by the Pastor in a lecture style. Articles related to billionaires under 40 and the richest Americans were shared in the group. Links to leadership conferences and entrepreneur networks were also posted.

The Married Couple's Ministry named their group VGC Marriage. There are 111 members. During the observation period, there were 33 posts captured in the discipleship group. The members of this discipleship group engaged most with the posts on Mondays and Saturdays. A married couple serve as the leaders of this group. In my review and observation of the activity in this group, it is clear that the servant leaders post content and hold virtual programs to help members sustain and build quality marriages. The servant leaders held quarterly online fellowship and discipleship programs to discuss and celebrate black love, sex in marriage, and lessons from marriages in the Bible. While there were videos and flyers promoting the programs, the group did not live stream or share recordings of the events. When I began serving as the Discipleship Department Leader, I learned this was due to the intimate personal discussion taking place during their online discipleship sessions. There was no indication that the group held any in person gatherings.

The leaders created a space for members of VGC Marriage to mutually share their insights to help others be an example of upholding a healthy marriage. They facilitated questions that permitted the members to share their thoughts and opinions related to positive and problematic behaviors in relationships and enhancing physical and emotional intimacy. The leaders also shared advice based on anthropological research findings concerning love and money languages to help members understand these behaviors and respond in ways to strengthen their marriage. The collaborative sharing of ideas is integral to facilitating meaningful learnings.

The Men's Ministry named their private group Men with Victory (MWV). There are 60 members. During the observation period, there were 161 posts captured in the group. Activity in the group was most actively observed on Mondays and Fridays. My observation of the group revealed the chief aim of the group is to cultivate men of an excellent standard. "You are called to be a 10X better man in core areas of your life. You're called to be a ten times better man spiritually, physically, emotionally, relationally, mentally, and monetarily,"<sup>53</sup> said one of the special guest speakers during a Men's ministry discipleship program. The MWV live streamed most of their weekly and seasonal discipleship programs. At different points during the year, the core leaders of MWV rotated facilitating Motivational Monday and Men's Power devotional weekly lessons. The lessons focused on intentional relationship with God, examining the character and actions of men in the Bible, biblically grounded principles to redefine manhood, and advisement on how to be an exemplar man. Occasionally, experts in various fields, such as a licensed professional counselor and leadership coaches were

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<sup>53</sup> Facebook User. 2022. "MARCH MADNESS w/ Dr. Johnny Parker." Facebook, March 21, 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/100008377776940/videos/523761452511628/>



guest speakers. Those facilitating the lessons tended to use a lecture or dialogic style of teaching. In dialogical teaching, the thoughts and reasonings garnered through discussion are used to develop understanding and cultivate learning.

A significant amount of the posts promoted men's mental health. The posts reflected tips to reduce stress, encouraged self-care, and provided information related to recognizing the warning signs of suicide and how to intervene. There was a reiteration that men need acts of love and care and should engage in catering practices that express self-love and self-care. The pictures that were posted in the group memorialized prominent Black men in sports, government, and television who had passed away and gave honor to one of the men of MWV who died. One picture was posted to solicit prayers for a member who had lost his father. The members were considerably more likely to respond to posts about football or racial injustices. "I need to hear what y'all are thinking and feeling about the attack on Black People in Buffalo, New York."<sup>54,55</sup> This post sparked enough engagement that there were requests by the members to have a round table conversation to further discuss the topic.

Reflecting on my digital experience as a participant observer of the discipleship Facebook groups, I considered how the presence of my human body in virtual spaces felt and how that might be true for others. When attending to how my human body feels when engaged in these spaces, my human body feels present with those who are present with me. There is an online presence of a person behind the text of each post I read.

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<sup>54</sup> Facebook User. "I need to hear what y'all are thinking and feeling about the attack on Black People in Buffalo, New York." Facebook, May 16, 2022.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1048957582193665/permalink/1407729872983099/>

<sup>55</sup> On May 14, 2022, Payton Gendron, an 18-year-old white gunman, carried out a racist mass shooting at a Buffalo, NY supermarket, resulting in the death of 10 people, almost of which were of Black.

There is also emotion and reflective thought behind each post. My human body emotionally and cognitively responds to the sentiments and suppositions of another human body in the virtual environment, who also responds to comments and makes posts.

Furthermore, I came to understand that helping to nurture an online community of care and transformation requires an increased level of digital literacy. Online ministry leaders are responsible for creating content that influences the culture of online sacred spaces. Oftentimes, the servant leaders are already operating on a time-starved schedule. Consistently creating original content can put the leaders in a crunch. Reposting content can save time, but the leader must take caution that the abundance of reposted content does take away from their authentic connection and engagement with the community. Shared posts must still be relevant, engaging, relatable, and substantive. As a participant-observer in the SWV group, I felt the community was overwhelmed by the informational content, despite its encouraging messages and symbolism. I suggest the servant leader demonstrate engagement with the information shared by doing a live or pre-recorded video offering personal reflections and create an opportunity to engage the group in a discussion.

Additionally, I see there is opportunity to secure a social binding and aid spiritual growth by providing more opportunities for the groups' members to pray together and for each other online. Spiritual care is displayed when online ministry leaders pray for their members and their concerns. The leaders can invite group members to write specific prayer requests in the comment section where those in their community can see and lift in intercession as well. Those in need will rely on these prayers for strength, believing that the might of their community is helping them to lift their burdens to God. When in the

discipleship Facebook groups, I suggest the servant leaders lead prayer using the live stream feature of Facebook, so that the members can actively engage the prayer in real time, writing their requests or leaving words affirming what is said.

In October 2021, I conducted ethnographic research interviews of six members. My aim was to gather insights on their experiences in VGC's online sacred spaces and their feelings related to their spiritual development and relationships online. I asked questions about their religious background and factors related to the formation of their faith, their sentiments as an online congregant, and meaningful spiritual encounters in a digital worshipping community. The interviews revealed that the online congregating community of VGC feels it is growing spiritually through digital media because they are met with a Word that is relevant to their life situations and practical for their use. "You cannot not grow in this atmosphere,"<sup>56</sup> one interviewee relayed concerning her transformative experience since participating in virtual church.

With each coming from a background where they attended church regularly since their childhood, they felt like they knew how to do church, how it was to feel, and what it was to look like. It took time for most of the members to be comfortable with doing church digitally, primarily due to learning how to use Zoom technology and giving grace to the leaders as they worked out the technological glitches. While the V-partners recognize that the worship and fellowship online is different from gathering in person, most expressed that they felt "You can get just as much, to me, being online as you can being in the church."<sup>57</sup> However, some expressed that their encounter with the presence of God felt less powerful compared to when they gathered in person. They believe that

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<sup>56</sup> Interviewee D. 2021. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 7, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Interviewee A. 2021. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 4, 2021.

they felt the Spirit of God to a greater degree in the physical church because of the community of voices and instruments. The V-partners conveyed that they believed that God inhabits the praises of God's people.<sup>58</sup>

Nonetheless, many of them confessed that since doing ministry digitally they have experienced increased intimacy with God. "The online experience has helped me to realize that I need to focus. The whole point of church is to focus on myself, my relationship with God, and better myself."<sup>59</sup> Nearly all of the interviewees shared that doing church online has given them a more personal relationship with God. They attributed this to the limited distractions from worship in the virtual place. Their home has become a personal sanctuary for worship where their only focus is on "a room of one, which is God."<sup>60</sup> The responsibility of setting the atmosphere for an encounter with God has shifted from the worship leader, the musicians, and the parishioners sharing the pew with them. The V-partners must usher God into their presence.

The church experience online has led V-partners to a deeper, more personal relationship with God. It also provided them opportunities to grow spiritually. They attribute this to being taught the word of God in a relevant way. The primary desire of the people of VGC is to be satisfied with an authentic, timely message bound by biblical principles. Some of the interviewees shared that they left their previous places of worship because the biblical instruction was no longer meeting their needs. "I wasn't getting taught what I needed to be taught,"<sup>61</sup> shared one interviewee in a story about leaving her childhood church. However, in this digital worshipping community, they are receiving

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<sup>58</sup> Psalm 22:3 [KJV] But thou art holy, O thou that inhabits the praises of Israel.

<sup>59</sup> Interviewee B. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 4, 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Interviewee B. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 4, 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Interviewee C. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 5, 2021.

the spiritual sustenance they need to flourish. “I am fed the Word... It’s rare that it will be a sermon that I don’t feel something from it.”<sup>62</sup>

One of the primary ways the Word of God is shared with the members of VGC is through Sunday morning preaching. “Preaching is the form through which and by which the church takes time to reflect as a community on the word of God spoken in its midst as well as on the meaning that word has for daily life.”<sup>63</sup> Sunday morning sermons are preached in the online sacred space of Zoom. I noted a great sense of satisfaction for the preached Word given the pastor’s ability to connect the Scriptures to relevant life issues and provide solutions based on the interpretation of the texts. Describing the pastor’s relatable and practical approaches to preaching, one interviewee shared, “She’s authentic, she’s real. And me being my age, I think that’s what I’ve been craving for so many years, for somebody who loves the Lord but at the same time understands that real life stuff happens. Don’t gloss over nothing or what you’re feeling. I think that’s needed.”<sup>64</sup> It seems it is the application of the explicated Scriptures that encourages their faith.

Deuteronomy 6:6-7 [ESV] says, “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” The word of God is learned and understood through biblical instruction. It is through the study and right handling of the word of truth<sup>65</sup> that disciples are nurtured in such a way that they become “rooted and built up in [Christ] and

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<sup>62</sup> Interviewee B. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 4, 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Harris, Maria. *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in Church*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989) 141

<sup>64</sup> Interviewee C. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 5, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> 2 Timothy 2:15-16 [ESV] Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

established in the faith.”<sup>66</sup> Members of VGC are also disciplined digitally in Bible Study and other discipleship programs held on Zoom or live streamed to the discipleship ministry groups. Although the discipleship ministry groups hold regular Christian education programs and each Fall there are topical small group studies, the interviewees focused on weekly Bible study as benefiting them spiritually. “Definitely the prayer call I love and the Bible study because that just reinforces my faith and gives me that extra booster, turbo shot I need for the week,”<sup>67</sup> one interviewee stated.

The interviews also revealed that the V-partners possess a great desire to be a part of and involved in a community. “I have to feel like I belong to the church, like I’m vested and invested in the church,”<sup>68</sup> one interviewee stated to elaborate on the confirmation she received that VGC was her church home. The interviews revealed belonging is what they are after. To belong is to be a part of, to relate to, but particularly to play a particular role in contributing to. They confirmed what Peter Block, a consultant and speaker on organizational development, community building, and civic engagement, shares in his text *Community*: “Belonging is best created when we join with other people in producing something that makes a place better.”<sup>69</sup> VGC is a community where their desire to belong is fulfilled and they are able to participate in something greater than their individual selves.

“To belong is to know, even in the middle of the night, that I am among friends.”<sup>70</sup> The V-partners do not just belong, but they want to be in a community of care.

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<sup>66</sup> Colossians 2:7 [ESV] rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

<sup>67</sup> Interviewee A. 2021. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 4, 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Interviewee F. 2021. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 7, 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Block, Peter, *Community* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2018), 18

<sup>70</sup> Block, Peter, *Community*, 19

Describing the confidence and care in VGC’s digital communities, one interviewee shared, “As you cry, we cry with you. As you laugh, we laugh with you. That we are not one above the other, but we are making this journey together... we understand that we are a family.”<sup>71</sup> One interviewee described her personal life journey as painful and feeling that there was no place she’d been where she felt loved, however, at VGC she does not feel rejected or abandoned. Rather there is “community, connection, commitment, and compassion”<sup>72</sup> found. Embracing the benefits of being in an online community where she can unashamedly share her vulnerability and receive the support she needs, she went on to say, “There is always someone available.”<sup>73</sup> Unlike the physical church, the online church is always open. The digital experience makes it possible for members to seek support outside the normal operation hours of a physical church.<sup>74</sup>

“One thing that matters to me is that we evangelize the lost. And we get to take over the airways like never before as evangelists... If we were in a building, there is no way we would have a member from South Africa or California or Arkansas. It’s no way. But because we are virtual, because of this time, we are able to help people global. We’re a global church,”<sup>75</sup> expressed one interviewee. VGC is a reflection of the universal

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<sup>71</sup> Interviewee E. 2021. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 7, 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Interviewee D. 2021. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 7, 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Interviewee D. 2021. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 7, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> In the online sacred space of Facebook groups, online congregants can post questions and express prayer concerns and need for support at any time of the day, where every participant in the group can view the content. Due to the persistent presence of members online in the Facebook groups of Victory Grace Center (VGC), members in need can be attended to immediately. It is the practice at VGC that members of the Facebook groups respond to generic questions and offer encouraging words when prayers are requested. Additionally, the online ministry leaders are responsible for the daily review of the posts and comments of its online congregants and can attend to observed matters within minutes of a post, given their account settings provide notifications of activities. If a request for prayer or support is observed, the leaders initiate an internal process involving identification of the member and their contact information, aligning the conveyed need with the appropriate ministry of support (intercessors, outreach, grief counseling), and ministering until the need is met.

<sup>75</sup> Interviewee E. 2021. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 7, 2021.

church, with digital congregants connecting with others in community virtually from places around the globe. The digital arms of VGC now have a broader missional reach. “All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, Lord; they will bring glory to your name,” Psalm 86:9 [NIV]. The doors of the digital church have been opened and people from all around the world are welcomed into worship. The digital ministry of VGC has enabled people from Canada, England, Trinidad and Tobago, and countries in Africa to congregate online with members from the United States. Acknowledging online church has afforded her a great privilege to worship with believers worldwide, another interviewee claimed, “When you’re in the building... its limited. I get to worship with people all over the world,”<sup>76</sup>

Based on the interviews, online ministry has provided V-partners greater access to their Pastor. They feel the online sacred spaces of Facebook, particularly the Village, has enabled them to connect with the pastor more than they were able to when they were gathering in a church building. Some of the interviewees shared that going virtual has provided a personal knowing of the pastor. “I wasn’t able to see Pastor as much. Now I’m able to see pastor more up close as opposed to when we were in the school. In person, I wasn’t able to have personal conversation with her as much.” I share a similar feeling when I consider my own experience in VGC’s online sacred spaces. This is the experience described by van Manen. “In drawing up personal descriptions of lived experiences, the phenomenologist knows that one’s own experiences are also the possible experiences of others.”<sup>77</sup> VGC is not only the context in which I minister, but also the context of which I am ministered unto. Based on my own experience, in the online sacred

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<sup>76</sup> Interviewee B. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 4, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> van Manen, Max, *Researching Lived Experience*, 54



space of the Village, the pastor goes live on Facebook from anywhere in the world. She talks with us from her back patio about what God shared with her earlier in the day, to revealing a vision while on a beach or golf vacation, to teaching a quick lesson from the backseat of a car chauffeuring her to preach for another church. Coming from a tradition where the pastors were elevated from members reach, and lived privatized lives where my contact with the leadership was only on Sundays, this privileged access allows me to feel personally connected to the pastor. I also feel like I have privileged access to divine wisdom throughout the week. I do not have to wait for Sunday or Bible Study to receive a divine word. The pastor goes live throughout the week to share spirit-filled messages that are encouraging and helpful in life circumstances.

Despite claims that the “virtual space gives me everything I need in the community,” the interviewees recognized there are still disadvantages to doing ministry digitally. Some of the interviewees expressed that they missed going to worship in person or that they could not wait for them to go back in the building regularly. The digital space makes it impossible for the members to physically touch others. One interviewee shared that she missed the opportunity to hug everyone when they were worshipping in person. Furthermore, now that worship services are on Zoom, the capacity in which they serve has changed. During in person worship, many of them were on the praise and worship team. Ministry done digitally at VGC has praise and worship lifted by a soloist.

To assess the impact of my role and presence in the interview, I reflected on how I personally felt about myself and my engagement with the interview participants. At the time of the interviews, I had only been serving on staff at Victory Grace Center for 10 months. Being relatively new to the ministry of VGC, I believe I approached the design

of the interview questions as a neutral third party. However, my cursory observations about the context and what that may imply may have influenced the types of questions I asked in the interview when I desired the interviewees to expand upon their responses. For example, one interviewee shared that she did not often get to catch the pastor's live streams in the Village but would go back afterwards to listen and comment. I suggested that since she was not actively participating in the chat responses during the live streams that it caused her to be separated from the community. I viewed her as a passive consumer of content. She responded contrarily stating, "I don't feel isolated by seeing it later. If I see it live it's a wonderful experience, but if I see it later it's about the same to me. I don't feel isolated at all."<sup>78</sup> This speaks to Karen Littleton and Neil Mercer, authors of *Interthinking: Putting Talk to Work*, description of the benefit of asynchronous discussion. Littleton and Mercer believe participants in asynchronous discussion can authentically express their ideas more fully and freely because their thinking is not constrained by the limitation of live discussion.<sup>79</sup>

In further reflection, I noticed that during the interviews, some of the participants seemed to be careful with their choice of words. I was unsure why they seemed uncomfortable to speak freely. I presumed it was because they did not know the questions I was going to ask. One of the interviewees told me that she intended to request the interview questions in advance but failed to do so in time. I also presumed the interviewees were careful with how they responded to the questions because they did not want to say anything that would bring the vision of the pastor and mission of the church

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<sup>78</sup> Interviewee A. 2021. Interview by Britni Johnson. Zoom. October 4, 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Littleton, Karen and Neil Mercer *Interthinking: Putting Talk to Work* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013) 83

into a negative light. Finally, I presumed their cautious statements were likely due to me being relatively new to the ministry leadership team and their possible belief that I did not have a vested interest in the ministry of VGC yet. Nonetheless, by the end of the interviews, I seemed to have built up a level of rapport and respect with each interviewee, made evident in the personal stories they began to share with me about their family and how they became connected with VGC.

“Communities of practice sharpen the mind. They hold their members to account and constitute a critical benchmark.”<sup>80</sup> This statement by the authors of *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology* highlights group members’ dependence on the mutual support for obtaining shared wisdom and understanding. In community, members work together to increase their learning, providing constructive critique of thinking. The open accountability within the group simultaneously serves to build emotional support. VGC servant leaders are responsible for leading online sacred spaces where digital discipleship takes place. When collaborative leadership and teaching takes place, there is transferred skills, mutual sharing, and communal learning. On September 1, 2022, YAM hosted a digital discipleship program via Zoom examining biblical characters and why God changed their names. I and another YAM core team leader collaboratively instructed the lesson.

I used this program to demonstrate teaching techniques most conducive for leading digital ministry aimed at community and spiritual growth. I also sought to observe whether the YAM core team leader would use any of the teaching methods shared during the July 19, 2022 leadership workshop. I was particularly looking for the

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<sup>80</sup> Bennett, Zoë; Graham, Elaine; Pattison, Stephen; Walton, Heather. *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology*, 85

leader to facilitate his portion of the lesson from a collaborative or dialogical stance. Based on my observation, the leader attempted to utilize these approaches with the use of questions but was uncomfortable with providing the space for participants to respond. The leader offered poignant and reflective questions that would have facilitated productive conversation and led to meaningful contributions by others. However, he chose to answer the questions himself which caused him to adopt a lecture style of teaching. His unease with leading his portion of the lesson in a collaborative or dialogical style was highlighted when he posed a relevant question to closeout his lesson, but immediately turned the program over to me before allowing anyone to answer it. I led the second half of the program interactively where I provided space for the participants to discuss their personal thoughts and opinions on the topical study.

Immediately following the discipleship program, I met with the leader to learn his perspective on teaching the leadership workshop collaboratively and dialogically. Although not exercised appropriately, he pointed to the questions he posed during the lesson as his attempt to discuss the use of the educational approaches. I suggested he create more space for the participants to voice their perspectives and insights.

The four young adults who attended the program were sent a post-participation survey. It was designed to discover what the attendees learned, what was most meaningful to them, and whether they felt they played a valuable role in incorporating their own ideas into the lesson. There were only two respondents to the survey. The respondents articulated principal points highlighted during the program by the facilitators. They also shared their personal interpretation of how the lesson applied to them and what the new perspective they believe about themselves, which I suggest is

indicative of their expanded thought and spiritual growth. The respondents viewed themselves as valuable contributors to the lesson.

In reflection, online ministry leaders may lean toward a lecture style of teaching when they are uncomfortable with instructing in digital spaces. This discomfort may come from the fear of technical disruptions or concern with not being able to read social cues as one would in person. However, I perceive the servant leader feared losing control of the trajectory of the lesson. I presume the servant leader had key points he wanted to share and did not want to permit the participants to offer up thoughts and insights that could lead the lesson off the pre-laid track. The interconnected structure of digital discipleship groups requires styles of teaching that are socially constructive to enable spiritual growth and secure relational bonds.

### **Chapter 3: Covenant Community in Online Sacred Spaces**

When I considered the design and implementation of this project to develop leaders in online sacred communities, I sought to shatter the perspective that technological media are solely forms of information and connection. These digital platforms can be viewed as holy, set apart spaces where congregants come into community online. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the restrictions on churches and ministry groups to physically convene proved the need for ministry teams to exercise leadership that cultivates community and spiritual growth in virtual environments. Leaders must move beyond the perspective that social media and other internet-based platforms are simply tools, but rather come into the view that they are also intimate spaces where interpersonal relationships can be established, and spirituality can flourish. Leading a ministry online with an appreciation for the potential of online spaces requires the intention to engage and interact with individuals online as though they are human beings, not bots. This chapter will examine the design of humanity in order to provide insight into human needs. The needs of human beings in the physical world mirror the needs of human beings in the digital world, particularly the need for relationship with God and others. We will explore my idea of true community formed through theological interpretation and the responsibility of leaders for facilitating an environment that nurtures relationships and leads to the transformation of members online. Additionally, it will present that sacred online communities ought to reflect critical elements of a biblical covenant relationship.

#### **The Design of Humanity**

Considered a genius for his iconic paintings and futuristic design sketches of weapons and machines, Leonardo da Vinci is best known for his emotionally expressive artwork. Vincent van Gogh is a renowned painter whose paintings captured his emphatic brushwork and use of captivating colors. The paintings of these artists continue to draw diverse audiences and their design methods are studied to this day. Having an incredible influence on modern art, their artistic gifting was bestowed by God, who is creatively artistic. Scripture reveals God as a creative craftsman who framed the heavens and the earth. A masterful painter, God painted the sunlit sky with strokes of blue and brushes of orange. The original sculptor, God molded the mountains, carved out the valleys, and fashioned the fields. The workmanship of God is delicate and detailed. When God created humankind, God formed our inward parts. God carefully knit us together in our mother's womb. God took time on our design, adding every feature and characteristic of our being so that when we came forth, we could declare, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are your works" (Psalm 139:14 [NKJV]).

Masterful works by artists are inspired by many things- nature, culture, personal experiences. The list can go on. Mexican artist Frida Khalo was deeply influenced by Mexican culture and her personal experiences. Fifty-five of her 143 paintings are self-portraits. When God considered the creative work of forming humanity, God was inspired to create a self-portrait. "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27 [NKJV]). Humanity has the great dignity of being designed in the image of God. Our perception is made visible in an image. The image of God grants us insight into the perception God has of God's self, while simultaneously releasing revelations about who we are. We are the

image of God. The biblical creation narratives hold the genesis of our theological understanding of the image of God. We come to understand the *imago Dei* in the human person through three primary perspectives: the substantial, the functional, and the relational views.<sup>81</sup> Each perspective is theologically framed from Genesis 1:26-28.<sup>82</sup> The substantial approach provides an ontological explanation. It is the very presence of the divine image that distinguishes humankind from other creatures. This approach claims that the human beings' resemblance to God is found in their ability to think logically and apply reason. This is affirmed by Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau, theologians and writers on church, religion, and Christian thought, who suggest that other living creatures do not have the unique structural characteristic of "intelligence, rationality, the capacity for meaningful and abstract speech or self-reflection."<sup>83</sup>

The functional perspective of the image of God rests in the special responsibility given to God's image bearers. Humanity has been entrusted with the responsibility to protect, nurture, and care for creation. It is this governance that reflects the image of God. Proponents of this view believe the stewardship to "be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:28 [NKJV]) is the foundation of

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<sup>81</sup> Antwi, Eric B. *Human Creation in the Image of God* (New York: Peter Land Publishing, Inc., 2018), 61-68

<sup>82</sup> Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

<sup>83</sup> Jones, Beth Felker and Jeffrey W. Barbeau, *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Exploration in Theological Anthropology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 68



this theological perspective of the functional image of God. The substantial and functional perspectives do not align with the claim that humanity needs community.

However, there is also a relational approach to understanding the meaning of the image of God in humanity. The relational approach contends the image of God is reflected in humanity's capacity to have relationships with God and other human beings. The divine image is viewed through a social or community lens. Its theological argument rests in the triune God being relational. Human beings were made in the image of God as relational beings. In *The Significance of God's Image in Man*, Gerald Bray, research professor teaching on Church history and historical theology with written works examining the doctrine of God and biblical interpretation, argued, "Relationships are only possible between persons, and it is this elusive concept, the thing which defines man (sic) as a 'who', not as a 'what', which gives the image its meaning."<sup>84</sup> The relational nature of God has been imprinted on humanity. Human beings can relate to God and others because the image of God reflects God's relational nature. The theological explanations and arguments of this thesis are grounded in the soil of this relational perspective. Rooted in the image of God as a relational being, I hold that there is a fundamental need for human beings to be one with the Creator and one with each other. As summarized by Colin E. Gunton, a systematic theologian, "To be in the imago Dei refers, first, to humanity's unique capacity for communion with God."<sup>85</sup>

Let us examine how the image of God reflects our capacity to have a relationship with God and others. First, we must understand how God's image reflects relationship.

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<sup>84</sup> Bray, Gerald, "The Significance of God's Image in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 42.2 (1991): 195-225

<sup>85</sup> Gunton, Colin E., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 163

Examining God, we find that there is one God in divine Threeness. Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell describe the Trinity this way in their text *The Divine Dance*. From the beginning there was relationship.<sup>86</sup> The relational nature of God is revealed in God's triunity as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Godhead is differentiated, yet unified oneness. There is plurality in the unity of God and each person is interrelated with the others. God is relationship.

Not only is God relationship, but God is in relationship with himself. We are introduced to the relational cooperation amongst the Godhead during the creation. As Grenz describes it, "The Son is the Word, the principle of creation, through whom the Father creates. And the Spirit is the divine power active in bringing the world into existence."<sup>87</sup> They were together and of one accord when God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us" (Genesis 1:26 [NLT]). Their communion is witnessed in the Lord's appearance as three men during a visit with Abraham and God was received with hospitality, as interpreted from a Christian biblical perspective. "The Holy One in the form of Three—eating and drinking, in infinite hospitality and utter enjoyment between themselves."<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the tender and affirming relationship of the Godhead is revealed at Christ's baptism, where the Spirit rested on him and God's voice came from heaven. It is also recognized in the commission to go and make disciples that are to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

While examining God, it is revealed that the relational God extends relationship to God's created beings. The Trinitarian persons' decision to make humanity in their

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<sup>86</sup> Rohr, Richard and Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance* (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 2016), 30

<sup>87</sup> Grenz, Stanley J., *Theology for Community of God* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, n.d.), 64

<sup>88</sup> Rohr and Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 30

image marked the entrance of a relational connection with humanity. Human beings came to be through the intimate relational act of God grabbing hold of the dust of the earth and enlivening it with the divine breath of God's exhale. The relationship between God and humankind grew to the point that God entrusted them as keepers of the Garden of Eden. It is clear that the Lord maintained close connection and communion with human beings in that both the man and the woman recognized the sound of the Lord walking in the garden.<sup>89</sup> The extension of God's arms to people for relationship is illustrated not only in the creation story, but "through the covenants, exodus, and God's dealings with Israel through prophets, exile, and the return to Jerusalem, and ultimately through the sacrifice and second-coming of His (sic) Son."<sup>90</sup> There is such a great emphasis on humankind being in relationship with the Lord that God prohibits other gods the idolizing of other gods and images, who cannot provide reciprocating relationships. "Their idols are merely things of silver and gold, shaped by human hands. They have mouths but cannot speak, and eyes but cannot see. They have ears but cannot hear, and noses but cannot smell. They have hands but cannot feel, and feet but cannot walk, and throats but cannot make a sound" (Psalm 115:4-7 [NLT]).

The image of God depicts relationship. God designed human beings as relational beings. Humanity was constructed for connection. God designed human beings to be in relationship with God. It is this relationship that makes it possible for human beings to be in relationship with other individuals. Rowan Williams offered, "If our first relationship is with that energy that made us and sustains us in being, then of course, when I look

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<sup>89</sup> Genesis 3:8- And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

<sup>90</sup> Mueller, Chris, 1999. "What It Means to be Created in the Image of God" Liberty University, Thesis <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1179&context=honors>

around, my neighbor is also always somebody who is already in a relation with God before they're in a relation with me."<sup>91</sup> Our desire for connection is rooted in our divine construction as relational beings. We are in relationship with a relational God who not only extends relationship to us, but who expands God's relations through us.

Relational connections are required for human flourishing. It is not good for human beings to be alone because it is not an attribute of the triune God. Accordingly, it is not a characteristic of those who bear the image of God. Living life without meaningful connections does not reflect the image of God. Old Testament scholar Terence E. Fretheim offers that "Only the human being as social and in relationship with other beings is truly correspondent to the sociality of God and what it means to be created in the image of God."<sup>92</sup> The divine identity of humanity is tied to their relational connection with others. When human beings fully live into their divine identity, the image of God is truly reflected. Humankind was divinely crafted to carry the image of relationship. The need for meaningful social ties is not optional. It is essential due to our divine design for connection. Thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas posited that all living things by nature pursue unity because they cannot exist separate.<sup>93</sup> To exist outside of community is to be outside one's nature. "It is not by choice but by nature"<sup>94</sup> that human beings come together in political community and political society, what Aquinas describes as the human association established for protecting and promoting the ultimate good.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Williams, Rowan, *Being Human* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2018), 37

<sup>92</sup> Fretheim, Terence E., *God So Enters into Relationships That ... A Biblical View* (Baltimore: Word & World Books Project Muse, 2020), 21

<sup>93</sup> Regan, Richard J. *Thomas Aquinas: Commentary on Aristotle's Politics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007) 2-6

<sup>94</sup> Regan, Richard J. *Thomas Aquinas: Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, 4-5

<sup>95</sup> Regan, Richard J. *Thomas Aquinas: Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, 2-6

When human beings are divorced from meaningful relationships, they experience loneliness and have a diminished quality of life. Social isolation negatively affects one's physiological, psychological, and sociological wellbeing. Research suggests the lack of social connections is linked to declining health and premature mortality. Cognitive brain function decreases.<sup>96,97</sup> Andy Stanley and Bill Willits, pastoral leaders, and authors of books on Christian community, living, and relationships, discuss this in their text *Creating Community*. They name other maladies of loneliness and social isolation include the unfavorable characteristic of selfishness, self-absorption, and the inability to be vulnerable due to the fear of intimacy.<sup>98</sup> This is why God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18 [ESV]). In his text *Human Creation in the Image of God*, systematic theologian Eric B. Antwi explained while there is the purest and perfect union between God and humanity, the Lord does not discount the importance of their being in relationship with a suitable companion. The differences of animal kind proved their inadequacy as a suitable helper to the man. Since the man was under the authority of God, God's superiority made their union unequal. The man was created as a social being that required companionship with one who possessed his exact nature.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, the Lord fashioned woman who was the man's equal, bearing his exact nature. Both male and female bear the image of God: the image that God is a relational being, who designed humankind to be relational beings. Human beings have an unquenchable thirst for meaningful connections. This thirst can only be

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<sup>96</sup> Campaign to End Loneliness, "Risk to Health." Published October 1, 2020, accessed February 23, 2022, <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/>.

<sup>97</sup> Novoteny, Amy. 2019. "The Risks of Social Isolation." American Psychological Association, Vol. 50, (May): 32. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation>

<sup>98</sup> Stanley, Andy and Bill Willits, *Creating Community* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2004), 30-33

<sup>99</sup> Antwi, Eric B. *Human Creation in the Image of God*, 65-68

satisfied in community. What, then, does community offer that satisfies the human need for relationship?

### **Human Presence in Community**

The establishment of community begins with two people. When God brought the woman to the man, Adam and Eve became the first community. A community is more than a group of individuals with shared characteristics and interests; they have shared lives. Individuals decidedly unite and mutually commit to share life together. God desired human beings in community to commit to establishing themselves in relationships that nurture, strengthen, and encourage through the time naturally spent together. In Western society, today's support of individualism and emphasis on private property have led to increasingly privatized lives and of loss of relational depth. Andy Stanley and Bill Willits speak of a time when American front porches were an invitation to interactions and the spot where people valued and embraced the time taken to know one another. The open front porch has been replaced by the private back deck and fenced yard, assuring we avoid people and their potential requests.<sup>100</sup> However, online platforms and social networking websites have re-extended the invitation for human beings to interact, but to do so digitally.

Human beings find themselves in many communities in the workplace, service organizations, social clubs, or community groups. Most of these communities gather for a purpose: to work toward planning programs, raising money, or completing a task. The people become well-versed in the projects but lack any depth of knowing the people with whom they work. This is because many of the communities we find ourselves in, whether

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<sup>100</sup> Stanley and Willits, *Creating Community*, 21

its work or social circles, can offer little knowing presence.<sup>101</sup> I contend that a true community can only be defined by the intimate intertwining of shared life together where human beings are present with God and each other. True community offers a presence of deep knowing of one another. Often, we navigate circles where we encounter and engage individuals on a daily basis, but we rarely come to know anyone deeply. We may know others' names and the work they are involved with, but sadly we do not experience authentic relationships with others. In true community, there is relational depth and rich knowing. The intimate intertwining of shared life together offers space for vulnerable transparency, where individuals can be their authentic selves and still belong. North Point ministries suggests that an authentic community has accountability (persons invited to challenge and encourage us), belonging (assured of one's place and acceptance), and care (the natural effect of connecting well with others).<sup>102</sup> I suggest the missing element of this description is (inter)dependence. In a truly authentic community, an emotional bonding is secured through genuine interactions, and members feel secure in sharing and responsible for meeting the needs of others. There is reciprocating reliance where individuals meet each other's needs.

Essential to human beings in community is presence. Presence is beyond mere existence. It is an attentiveness to others in fellowship and sharing, leaving one another with the assurance that they matter and there is concern about the matters of their heart.

Human beings in true community are present with God and one another by *being*

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<sup>101</sup> I define knowing presence the online state of being where digital users are emotionally and cognitively attentive to their digital peers throughout their social interactions in online sacred spaces, where the consistent sharing of life stories and regular social engagement establish relational ties and provides opportunity to acquire an empathic understanding of each other, necessary for supporting one another in sorrow and celebration.

<sup>102</sup> Stanley and Willits, *Creating Community*, 105-106

*koinonia*, that is exercising a relational ministry toward others through one's life of witness. Andrew Zirschky explains that Paul intended to help Corinthian believers understand that "koinonia isn't a meal we eat, but is a way of approaching others and the world that challenges the normal human ways of social operation."<sup>103</sup> How often have you been surprised by or questioned the intentions behind spontaneous interactions where individuals have taken interest in you or the things about you? Christian believers become as bread, broken, and shared when they come into relational communion with Christ and others, thus resisting measures of isolation and privatization that have become the societal norm.

Bread was part of the primary meal in biblical times. It was a source of sustenance and nourishment. It was bread from heaven that sustained the lives of the Israelites in the wilderness. Jesus identifies himself as the true bread from heaven when he said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35 [ESV]). Christ is life and gives us life when we choose to commune with him. Kneaded, twisted, and intimately entangled in Christ, we begin to bear the essence and identity of Christ, which transforms us into bread that can be shared with others. As we share and receive the bread of each other's stories of tests, trials, and testimonies, it initiates the intertwining of shared life together with others.

Communion with Christ enables human beings to be present in community. Without communion with Christ, there is no bread to nourish the physical, emotional, and spiritual hunger of people who desire true presence. However, those who are as bread, share themselves with others in such a way as to give life. The suffering and pain of people can cease with a real and meaningful encounter. It is possible for them to be enlivened by the

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<sup>103</sup> Zirschky, Andrew, *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected But Alone Generation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 75



bread of life that has been stirred up in them with love and good works. As shared bread, we sustain and nourish the life of those in need of encouragement and edification.

Extending friendship, love, mercy, kindness, and care- that is *being koinonia*.

At the first institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus took bread and called it his body. As in the manner in which the unleavened bread was broken during the Passover meal, the body of Jesus was wounded, beaten, bruised, and broken. Everyone has experienced brokenness. We are all broken beings. Whether it is the emotional wreck of a relationship, the crushing of grief, or the damage of disease, all have suffered some form of brokenness. Henri J. M. Nouwen believes brokenness is unique to the individual. "Our brokenness is always lived and experienced as highly personal, intimate and unique. I am deeply convinced that each human being suffers in a way no other human being suffers."<sup>104</sup> Individuals feel alone in their periods of pain and times of difficulty. The value of presence increases given this uniqueness and intimate individuality of brokenness. In true community, broken people come together with an awareness of their sufferings and struggles and maintain a consciousness of others' broken condition. Bread is broken and shared so that others may touch the sensitive and shattered pieces of our being to begin a restorative work. The back and forth of transparent, vulnerable sharing by broken people leads to a deep, intimate knowing of one another.

As I mentioned before, true community is defined by the intimate intertwinement of shared life together where human beings are present with God and each other. As such, human beings in true community are not only present, but also connected. Paul explains our connectedness as being one bread. "For we being many are one bread, and one body:

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<sup>104</sup> Nouwen, Henri J., *Life of the Beloved* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 71

for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:17 [KJV]). Believers are not only bread broken and shared with others to give life, but believers are bread of one loaf, being kneaded, together, as one. Andrew Zirschky emphasizes this when he claims that “Christians become the one body they share, and sharing (koinonia) in Christ makes them partners, sharers—one—with all others who share in Christ.”<sup>105</sup> Together as one bread and one body, believers are harmoniously connected, sharing life together as one. This shared life is most recognized in the body’s shared suffering, sacrifice, and service. Each member of the body is affected by the individual injuries of another. Trauma, trials, and tears are no longer individual but communal experiences. Since everyone is connected, everyone is a co-laborer in the care of the body’s injured parts, working to re-establish health and wellbeing.

The Eucharistic language used here may raise questions around whether the ordinance of Holy Communion can be received in virtual spaces, and if so, how the biblical Scriptures are theologized to dictate its practice online. However, the understanding and practice of Holy Communion online is beyond the scope of this study. The Eucharistic language was used to illustrate the intertwining of shared life in community where a deep knowing and an interchange of care can take place. At Victory Grace Center, the practice of Holy Communion is believed to be a symbolic act memorializing the death of Jesus Christ. In the online sacred space of Zoom, the Pastor leads the ceremony of the Lord’s Supper by inviting congregants to gather their own bread and grape juice from their kitchens. The bread, symbolizing the body of Christ, and the grape juice, symbolizing the blood of Christ, is then consecrated with the Pastor

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<sup>105</sup> Zirschky, Andrew, *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected But Alone Generation*, 78

directing the online participants to hold their elements up as the Pastor prayers. The participants eat and drink together in Zoom where they can see one another, as if they were across the table from each another.

The influences of others in community cultivate transformational growth. Human beings are spiritually formed and developed through their intimately intertwined lives as a result of their relationship with God. David Watson, renowned Anglican evangelist and author, describes it this way verbatim: “As we share our lives with one another, God is able to share his life in us and through us, until he forms us into the likeness of his own Son, and until he develops the gifts and ministries he has given us into full maturity.”<sup>106</sup> Stephen Lowe, a Christian Education Professor, and Mary Lowe, the Dean of Online Programs at Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, suggest people grow when they connect to and interact with the ultimate Source of Life and other growing people. “Growth is a byproduct of an intricate series of interlocking events, conditions, and exchanges between and among living and nonliving entities.”<sup>107</sup> The spiritual growth of an individual is endangered when they are disconnected from the whole. When we consider the trees of a forest, the life and health of a tree is dependent on its network. Trees are connected through the ecological mycorrhizal network that serves to signal when other trees are distressed and enables the sharing of nutrients. The mycorrhizal network makes evident that trees are connected and codependent.<sup>108</sup> “Seedlings severed from the forest’s underground lifelines are much more likely to die than their networked

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<sup>106</sup> Watson, David, *Called and Committed: World-Changing Discipleship* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1982), 55-56

<sup>107</sup> Lowe, Stephen D. and Mary E. Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 28

<sup>108</sup> National Forest Foundation, “Underground Networking: The Amazing Connections beneath Your Feet.” Published May 28, 2019, accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.nationalforests.org/blog/underground-mycorrhizal-network>

counterparts.”<sup>109</sup> Like a tree in mycorrhizal network, a person is able to flourish through the nourishment and sustainment of connections found in the network of a digital discipleship community.

### **Human Presence in Digital Discipleship Communities**

The paradigm is shifting from the fundamental belief that human beings must be physically present in order to be present one with another. I contend that true community, where there is a deep knowing presence, can occur in digital spaces. Technology has mediated physical presence, enabling human beings to encounter one another authentically. The developments of social networking platforms have made it possible for people to create an online identity that reflects their authentic selves. Shanley Corvite, Oliver I. Haimson, Tianxiao Liu, and Ben Zefeng Zhang, researchers on social computing and human-computer interaction, describe online authenticity as the true and honest presentation of self online that is consistent with who the person is offline.<sup>110</sup> Individuals online can express their authentic feelings through a social media post, as well as share and respond to photos and videos of major life events. Authentic engagement of online users is reflected in the users’ genuine responses to expressed thoughts and opinions on personal posts or shared information on social news.

No longer just a place of information and communication, the internet is a space where meaningful connections are made, and community is created. In her book *From Social Media to Social Ministry*, Nona Jones says, “The internet is not just a “thing”

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<sup>109</sup> Ferris Jabr, “The Social Life of Forests,” *The New York Times*, February 2022; Accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/02/magazine/tree-communication-mycorrhiza.html>

<sup>110</sup> Corvite, Shanley, Oliver I. Haimson, Tianxiao Liu, and Ben Zefeng Zhang. 2021. “The Online Authenticity Paradox: What Being “Authentic” on Social Media Means, and Barriers to Achieving It.” *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.* 5, CSCW2, Article 423 (October), 423:1-423:18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3479567>

people do; it's the place people live.”<sup>111</sup> The intimate intertwining of shared life together where human beings are present with God and each other is possible in digital spaces. Technology has a way of binding people together where interests are united, needs are met, and authentic relationships can be established. Physical presence is not an indication one feels a sense of community. Pointing to the isolation in gathered worshipping communities, Róisín Pye, webmaster of the Irish Jesuit website *the Sacred Space*, notes congregants enter, sit, and leave alone; but when it comes to congregating online, “there seems to be a sense of togetherness and sharing in online communities although each user sits on their own in front of the screen.”<sup>112</sup>

As technology transforms the social world, the landscape of ministry must be reconfigured to reach people in relevant ways. Today's religious life is unlike that of the church in the 1950s where church attendance was high, and its ministry events and program stood at the center of the social world. Around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, church membership and affiliation began its pattern of descent. American communities gradually evolved to post-Christian societies, where secular thought is favored over Christian perspectives. Social media is now the navel of social life. Nona Jones encourages ministry leaders to go fishing online. “If you and your local church are not online, you are missing a vast sea of fish whom Jesus sent you out for. Right now, three out of four Americans are on Facebook.”<sup>113</sup> The research of Kate Shellnutt, Journalist for evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, suggests that when COVID-19 has more fully receded, churchgoers are not expected to return to the church building at the same levels

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<sup>111</sup> Jones, Nona, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zonervan, 2020), 12

<sup>112</sup> Pye, Róisín, “Sacred Space and Online Communities.” *The Way*, April 2005, 83-92

<sup>113</sup> Jones, Nona, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship*, 16

as prior to the pandemic.<sup>114</sup> The landscape of ministry must be a hybrid of in-person and online gatherings. The ministry arm of social media at many churches has been handicapped by the utilization of it as a library of sermons and billboards for upcoming events. Ministry leaders have neglected the reality that human beings are on social media for connection, not information; and have discarded intention in forging authentic relationships with people through the ministry of social media. The main concerns of leaders when ministering online ought to be the spiritual growth and maturity of disciples and cultivating a community that meets congregants' needs by digital means. Far too common leaders focus on generating spiritual content for viewers' passive consumption without careful consideration of how its delivery and engagement could extend opportunities for relationship and faith development. Their digital spaces become online libraries of preaching and teaching videos rather than virtual sanctuaries of care.

Ministry leaders are responsible for cultivating true community in digital spaces that enhance the spirituality of human beings online. Digital media can offer human beings the opportunity to experience the intimate intertwinement of shared life together, where each person is present and connected with God and others in such a way there is shared strengthening and encouragement. Human beings in online sacred spaces can forge relationships where there is a deep knowing of one another, the bearing of one another's burdens, and emotional support. These relationships are portrayed as covenantal relationships in the Bible. I contend the body of Christ gathered on digital

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<sup>114</sup> Shellnutt, Kate, 'Americans' Return to Church Has Plateaued,' Christianity Today, March 22, 2022; Accessed January 9, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/march/return-to-church-plateau-in-person-virtual-pew-research.html>

platforms is to be united in a way that reflects critical elements of biblical covenantal relationships.

Covenant is typically understood in terms of a binding contract to enter some form of a relationship. Abraham entered into a covenant relationship with Abimelech to form an alliance. Genesis 21:23-24 shares that Abimelech asked Abraham to swear by God that he would not deceive him or his descendants and to be loyal to him in return for the loyalty he has shown. Abraham responded, “I swear it.” A marital covenant is established at a couples’ vow to have and to hold until death do them part. The covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel is revealed in many Old Testament writings. Exodus 19:5 [NIV] shares that God said, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.” The idea of covenant relationship is that two or more individuals agree to be bound together for reciprocating rewards and accountable responsibilities. In online sacred spaces, covenantal relationships serve to deepen connections and meet the needs of others. The following will examine the covenant relationship between the biblical characters Ruth and Naomi; and identify elements that can be established in digital discipleship communities.

The covenant relationship between Ruth and Naomi is recorded in the Old Testament Book of Ruth. Widowed Moabite woman Ruth is urged by her widowed Hebrew mother-in-law Naomi to return to her people and land so as not to suffer a life of plight and poverty. Undeterred by Naomi’s pleas, Ruth clung to her (Ruth 1:14) and sealed the deal on their covenant relationship using covenant language:

“Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people

shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus, may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me” (Ruth 1:16-17 [NASB]).

Covenants are clearly stated and subsequently sealed. Ruth clearly stated and committed her unyielding devotion to her mother-in-law. Naomi recognized her relentless loyalty, and this covenant relationship was sealed in Naomi’s concession from urging Ruth to return to Moab.

Digital discipleship communities must first be established as covenant communities. For a sacred online community to be established in covenant, there must be a clear understanding of the purpose of the gathered bodies online and a commitment by each person to contribute to the group’s mission. Human beings who join these communities must covenant to combine efforts with others and contribute to creating a desired community. This is possible in digital spaces more often than not when online users understand the purpose of the community. Students taking classes in virtual learning environments illustrate this. The students gather in digital spaces for the purpose of achieving the course objectives. Each student offers thoughtful reflections on the materials and engaging the instructor and the other students’ responses. Their regular class attendance demonstrates a covenantal commitment not just to the work but to the other students. Over the course of critically constructive dialogue a relational binding is established amongst the students in the learning community. Their preparedness and sharing of intelligent perspectives help build the learning community they want to be a part of.



In Block's definition, "To belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community."<sup>115</sup> In covenant communities, there is communal ownership and accountability of the mission and purpose. Disappointments with the group's deliverables dissipate when leaders make the mission evident and hold members accountable for fulfilling its purpose. Each person secures their place of belonging and satisfies the covenant in the relationship when they contribute in such a way that it makes positive differences. Clarifying the mission is critical given people who are unable to articulate the community's true purpose are often disconnected, having no sense of belonging or feeling of purpose within their community. There is covenant in communal relationships online when the people understand, acknowledge, and act on the digital community's mission. This covenant is sealed through their commitment to combine efforts and work toward fulfilling its purpose.

Communal ownership and accountability for carrying out mission and purpose as a covenant community was illustrated in my study of VGC's discipleship ministry groups. The protocol for opening each digital ministry meeting or event is that the leaders state the mission and purpose of the group before carrying out ministry activities. Furthermore, most of the groups have the mission detailed in the description section of their Facebook group. My study of the discipleship ministries revealed the participants in the groups were able to articulate its mission and purpose. While not verbatim, their responses captured much of its essence. With the mission as the focal point of the ministry, the participants demonstrated covenant in their commitment to continue to be present in the online sacred space and engaging digital content reflective of the mission

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<sup>115</sup> Block, Peter, *Community* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018), XVIII

and purpose of the groups. They are present in being in the space and they are present in bringing their full consciousness to the discourse taking place. For example, the Facebook group for the Men's ministry states that its mission is to encourage, educate, and equip men through instruction, fellowship, and evangelism- following the example of Jesus Christ. Participants in the group who responded to my research survey expressed the mission to concern the building up of men through God's Word, fellowship, and for soul winning. Based on my observation, the maintenance of the covenant in this discipleship community is best illustrated in the Men's Bible study where the participants are given opportunity to share their thoughts and perceptions of the Scriptures through the lens of their context and experiences. During one of the Bible studies, a participant expressed concern for what he viewed as a lack of Men's boldness in being witnesses of God. This led the group to discuss forms of holy boldness, increasing the participants' knowledge of active and passive evangelism.<sup>116</sup>

Care is another critical element of a biblical covenantal relationship that the body of Christ gathered on digital platforms ought to reflect. The account of the relationship between Ruth and Naomi reveals bidirectional care where each demonstrated genuine care for each other's wellbeing. Naomi returned to Bethlehem widowed and without sons. Life's bitter circumstances left her destitute in old age, but her young daughter-in-law went to work in the barley fields so that they would not be without provisions. What Ruth gleaned, provided for the care of her mother-in-law. The account shares, "Ruth gathered barley there all day, and when she beat out the grain that evening, it filled an entire

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<sup>116</sup> Facebook User. 2021. "Kingdom Man." Facebook, November 16, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/100008377776940/videos/177707067909056/?idorvanity=1048957582193665>

basket. She carried it back into town and showed it to her mother-in-law. Ruth also gave her the roasted grain that was left over from her meal” (Ruth 2:17-18 [NLT]). Naomi returns care through her concern for Ruth’s future and livelihood as a young widow. Desiring her to be protected and provided for, Naomi introduces Boaz as a kinsman redeemer (Ruth 3:2) who could fulfill the responsibility of remarrying Ruth.<sup>117</sup> Both Ruth and Naomi viewed the sufferings of the other as their very own.

The covenant relationships in online sacred communities dictate the care of others. Individuals with intimately intertwined lives naturally have compassionate care and concern for those with whom they have been entangled. When individuals covenant to participate in the mission of the community, they commit not only to combined efforts, but the joining of lives where a deep knowing presence can take place. Care is a natural by-product of authentic community due to the closeness and deep knowing of others.<sup>118</sup> This closeness provides insight into the personal lives of the individuals within the community. Caring communities bear the weight of other’s burdens in such a way they take on the obligation to intervene in circumstances.<sup>119</sup>

With the manifold advances in communication and connection technologies, congregants can digitally stretch arms of care in ways like never before. Despite being removed from the physical presence of one another, we can encounter authentic beings and experience genuine care mediated through technological means. Expressions of care can be shown through corporate prayer online. In a case study, Róisín Pye discovered

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<sup>117</sup> According to Deuteronomic Law, the responsibilities of being a redeemer included remarrying the childless widows of family members.

<sup>118</sup> Stanley and Willits, *Creating Community*, 106

<sup>119</sup> Being in community is not only the bearing of each other’s burdens but also the sharing in each one’s blessings. When Ruth married Boaz and bore a son, Naomi was a recipient of her rewards. The women of the town praised God for the restoration of her life. She was also blessed by the women for because of her daughter-in-law, she now had a son.

how a simple<sup>120</sup> online prayer website became a space of community for individuals to join in on the common action of prayer and belonging to a network of believers praying all around the world.<sup>121</sup> Individuals belonging to online sacred communities express their care for those in need by convening communal prayer over the unfavorable circumstances of those they are in covenant with. I believe the strengthening in online prayer experiences is significantly owed to the people being in covenant relationships.

Evolving social media technologies enable communities to stretch their digital arms of care wider and farther. Mobile group messaging applications, such as GroupMe, enable groups to easily access their network for support and encouragement. In *From Social Media to Social Ministry*, Nona Jones opens the toolbox of Facebook and displays features to help churches connect, communicate, and care. Highlighting its “rooms” video chat function, Jones described how this feature helps lend ways to deeper connections between members.<sup>122</sup> It is in rooms where members can digitally and privately gather to share personal concerns and receive care for their needs.

The body of Christ in digital discipleship communities ought to be a community of covenant, care, and finally counsel. Since there is a covenant relationship between Naomi and Ruth, there is room for wise counsel and advice. Naomi provides Ruth guidance in being redeemed by Boaz through marriage.

“Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes, and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. It shall be when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies, and you

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<sup>120</sup> According to Pye, the online prayer platform was a static website with no online chat room or e-mail discussion list. However, the website featured a section for feedback that allowed participants to respond to the prayer session. The feedback that was published fostered the sense of community.

<sup>121</sup> Pye, “Sacred Space and Online Communities.” 83-92

<sup>122</sup> Jones, Nona, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020) 135

shall go and uncover his feet and lie down; then he will tell you what you shall do” (Ruth 3:3-4 [NASB]).

Conscious of her responsibility to find rest<sup>123</sup> for her daughter-in-law, Naomi gives Ruth wise counsel to secure an eligible husband.

The relationship between members of the body of Christ gathered online dictates a duty to counsel one another. “Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory” (Proverbs 11:14 [NASB]). Digital discipleship communities must be an atmosphere of spiritual and social wisdom, instruction, and guidance. Lives are enriched and spirituality flourishes when human beings are disciplined in the spaces in which they are digitally gathered. Counsel in digital networks can be one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-many. One-to-one counsel typically occurs when an individual in the community forms a bond of confidence with another member and the two personally exchange wisdom and instruction. This might occur asynchronously in a private chat during online worship or a private message on Facebook, or synchronously via a web conferencing application. One-to-many counsel occurs when an authoritative individual addresses an area of interest and shares their knowledge, experience, and recommendations for the spiritual development or social betterment of the group. Group members commonly gather in digital conferencing rooms or watch live streaming platforms to receive communal counsel. Many-to-many counsel takes place digitally on social media messaging and blogging sites where multiple people can interact in exchanges of ideas.

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<sup>123</sup> Ruth 3:1 [ESV] Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?”

The human need for relationship can only be met in community. With the majority of people seeking relationships online, the onus of fostering spiritual growth and cultivating true community in sacred online spaces falls on the ministry leaders. Ministry teams are responsible for facilitating the intimate intertwining of shared life together where human beings are present with God and each other. It is in true community where human beings can be united in ways reflective of biblical covenantal relationship and garner a deep knowing presence.

## Chapter 4: Facilitating Faith Development Digitally

In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul conveys God’s expectation of disciples to grow in their faith according to their efforts to increase their knowledge of God.<sup>124</sup> Believers are to leave behind the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity.<sup>125</sup> Regenerated believers<sup>126</sup> who are studying and applying biblical teachings expect to experience spiritual growth. At the point of salvation, believers enter a sanctifying process to progress them to holiness and transform their character to the likeness of Jesus Christ. Spiritual growth transpires as believers “live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10 [NIV]).

Given the biblical mandate for spiritual growth, ministry leaders ought to strive to facilitate the faith formation and spiritual growth of disciples. The educational ministries of the church play a critical role in growing Christians to spiritual maturity. Church leaders facilitate Sunday school, weekly Bible studies, small group studies, and other educational programs to stimulate the growth of faith in disciples. However, spiritual growth cannot take place absent the Spirit. Perry G. Downs, professor of Christian education at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, said “Christian education is best understood as an educational partnership with God.”<sup>127</sup> In collaboration with the Holy Spirit, the teachings of ministry leaders can touch the hearts and minds of Christian

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<sup>124</sup> 2 Timothy 2:15 [NIV] Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

<sup>125</sup> Hebrews 6:1 [NIV] “Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God”

<sup>126</sup> A regenerated believer is a “born again” Christian, an individual who has been accepted the salvation of Christ and been enlivened by the Spirit to live a life of faith and piety.

<sup>127</sup> Downs, Perry G., *Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 34

disciples for them to know, understand, and then apply truth; evident in their living a life reflective of internalized Christian teachings. In cooperation with the Spirit, leaders in educational ministry have a spiritual advantage to minister in ways biblical truths are made clear, helping bring disciples to maturity in their faith. This partnership begins with an invitation to the Spirit of God to give the leader heightened awareness and knowledge to sensitivities in their community that need addressing so that they may spiritually discern topics of study. The Spirit of God is then invited to guide the design of the Christian education lesson. This partnership can also be observed in the leaders' prayers leading up to and while delivering the lessons, asking the Spirit to use their efforts for spiritual transformative purposes.

### **Educational Approaches for Spiritual Growth**

Online sacred spaces exist for discipleship and community. Individuals covenant and commune in virtual discipleship environments for spiritual nourishment and transformational change. Similar to ministry leaders who lead Christian education programs in person, ministry leaders of digital discipleship communities are charged with facilitating the spiritual development of their community members. It is incumbent upon these leaders to use educational approaches that align with the connected social world. The internet and technology have reframed how human beings think and learn. There was a time when scholars scoured volumes of encyclopedias to conduct research. However, the digital evolution enables everyone from academic researchers to social web surfers to become versed on subjects through their access to the Internet and information on handheld devices, such as a cellular phone or a tablet. Unlike the expensive scholastically sourced books of information that quickly outdates, the Internet can feature real-time



information with individuals contributing facts and opinions, collectively constructing knowledge. Experts and enthusiasts post videos on subjects of interests. Social media users publicly share their perspectives sparking contributive responses.

Christian education in virtual environments must account for the digitally connected world. Growth and community online are fostered through bidirectional influence and reciprocity of education and ideas. Bidirectional influence takes place in community when each person permits the advisement of others to persuade their thinking and provoke positive internal change. Reciprocity of education and ideas deals with mutual and respectful exchanges of insights between members of the community. Leaders must guard against teaching methods that strictly frame or hinder the free sharing of digital disciples' thoughts. Formal presentations have often been the primary pedagogical method of Christian education; however, teaching by exposition of one's engagement with sacred text and doctrine creates digital disciples who simply consume information, rather than participate in the construction of new insights. The interconnected frame of virtual learning environments dictates that all participants (both the leader and learners) are involved in building its groups knowledge. Spiritual growth can be curtailed by virtual learning environments when the approach inhibits digital disciples' engagement and expression of ideas. Presentation styles tend to cut off open collaboration which misaligns with the connected social world.

When instruction is approached with the use of a lecture style, the teacher controls the context of learning and defines the learning outcomes. It suggests students learn best by a passive transmission of facts. Educational approaches that maintain the instructor as the sole source of knowledge and in charge of the course of learning are in opposition to

the communal and collaborative nature of online sacred communities. Leaders must resist replicating conventional instruction techniques in Christian communities online given the participatory nature of the digital social world. Virtual discipleship spaces must provide learning opportunities where the disciples are co-creators of inspired principles, not simply regurgitators of information,<sup>128</sup> as discussed in Christian leadership researcher Andrew Babyak's *A Teaching Strategy for a Christian Virtual Environment*. When educational methods are focused on the learner and the process of learning, there is room for relationship building (cultivation of community) and the maturity of faith (spiritual growth).

I agree with learning technology researcher Matt Bower, that true community and spiritual growth can be fostered in online sacred spaces when facilitated by collaborative leaders using social constructivist approaches, where knowledge and understanding is developed through the socialization of ideas and perspectives. In his book *Design of Technology-Enhanced Learning*, Bower writes, "The combination of an immersive environment and opportunities for collaboration make virtual worlds particularly appropriate for application of social constructivist pedagogies."<sup>129</sup> The agenda of online ministry leaders should be to bring about transformational growth of digital disciples by facilitating the understanding of sacred texts and Biblical principles. The leaders are to guide understanding by presenting opportunities for digital disciples to (1) interact with Scripture and explanatory notes, (2) engage with other disciples as sources of knowledge, and (3) find the meaning of the material within their social, cultural, and technological

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<sup>128</sup> Babyak, Andrew T. 2015. "A Teaching Strategy for a Christian Virtual Environment" *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, Vol. 24, (April): 63-77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10656219.2015.1008080>

<sup>129</sup> Bower, Matt, *Design of Technology-Enhanced Learning: Integrating Research and Practice* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017), 46

context. When social constructivist approaches are used in online sacred spaces, digital disciples can gain insight and understanding through an interpretative process of engagement with others. “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17 [NIV]). Through the intercourse of interpretive thoughts and ideas, each individual is enlightened by the expressions and opinions of others that they can internalize and integrate into their understanding and context. There is a profound level of learning that takes place in dialogic processes of shared thoughts. In *A Teaching Strategy for a Christian Virtual Environment*, Babyak stated, “The online discussions with other Christians who might have different interpretations of Scripture can be very useful and faith building.”<sup>130</sup> The course of conversation provides spaces for the generation of ideas and further provokes thoughts, which leads to discoveries of new perspectives and principles that can increase understanding and potentially shape future actions.

Paul Adams, a lecturer on curriculum and pedagogy policy, states in his essay that “Social constructivism posits that learner construction of knowledge is the product of social interaction, interpretation, and understanding.”<sup>131</sup> Psychologist Lev Vygotsky developed the Sociocultural Theory,<sup>132</sup> which emphasized the critical role social interaction played in the development of cognition. Basing learning and development in social interactions, Vygotsky proposes the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (hereafter ZPD), which is described as the area where learning takes place through the support of and collaboration with knowledgeable peers. Individuals can expand their

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<sup>130</sup> Babyak, Andrew T. “A Teaching Strategy for a Christian Virtual Environment,” 66

<sup>131</sup> Adams, Paul. 2006. “Exploring social constructivism: Theories and practicalities” *Education 3-12-International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*, Vol. 34, (October): 243-257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004270600898893>

<sup>132</sup> Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory views human development as a socially mediated process in which children acquire their cultural values, beliefs, and problem-solving strategies through collaborative dialogues with more knowledgeable members of their community.

knowledge based on their interactions with others.<sup>133</sup> ZPD suggests that Christian education in virtual environments requires each learner to contribute to the exchange of ideas for the construction of knowledge and communal development of faith.<sup>134</sup> Expanding on Vygotsky's ZPD theory, educational psychologist and theorist Jerome Bruner developed the concept of scaffolding, where learning is first supported by the teacher and gradually transitions into self-directed learning. The aim is for the learners not to rely upon the teacher for generating ideas and perspectives. Instead, the teacher guides the learners' participation in the task of developing knowledge through interpersonal engagement and synthesis of thought. Ministry leaders can foster spiritual growth in online sacred communities when digital disciples are encouraged to contribute to theological conversations and work cooperatively to deliberate upon differing perspectives and discover meaningful insights that influence their thoughts and behaviors.

Professor of Psychology George Siemens suggests that connectivism is a learning theory best aligned with digitally networked environments given it hinges knowledge and learning on networks and connections. While connectivism values diversities of opinions, it holds learning as a process of connecting with specialized information sources that are primarily inhuman. Knowledge can be stored in a database, manipulated by technology, and accessed by human beings when needed. It accounts for the rapid development and

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<sup>133</sup> Bower, Matt, *Design of Technology-Enhanced Learning: Integrating Research and Practice* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017), 44

<sup>134</sup> Junker, Débora B. Agra. 2013. "Zone of Proximal Development, Liminality, and Communitas: Implications for Religious Education, Religious Education," *Religious Education*, Vol. 108 (April): 164-179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2013.767677>

exponential increase in information over time. Connectivism suggests learning takes place in the process of access and flow of information.<sup>135</sup>

While connectivism aligns with the digital social work, it is not a suitable concept to be used in online sacred communities. Online congregants gather in these digital environments for communal discipleship. Connectivism's emphasis on connecting with non-human devices for sources of information removes the possibility of developing meaningful relationships and acquiring useful insight that digital disciples can internalize and transform their way of living. Connectivism treats knowledge as an object to possess, not necessarily to understand. Spiritual growth is not produced by the accumulation of and access of information. Faith is grown by the garden work of finding meaning and use of the biblical material within one's context. Therefore, I would argue that social constructivism is best suited for virtual learning environments over Siemens' connectivism. Disciples can experience transformational growth in digital discipleship spaces when collaborative leaders use social constructivist approaches to Christian education. In the following pages, I will explicate how the social constructivist approaches of collaborative learning and dialogical teaching enable seeds of faith to grow.

In collaborative learning, the teacher is not the sole source of information; rather the teaching authority rests in the collective work of the group, where understanding and meaning are mutually sought amongst the teacher and learners. Given collaborative

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<sup>135</sup> Siemens, George. 2005. "Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age," *International Journal of Instructional Technology & Distance Learning*, Vol. 2 (Jan): 1-9  
[http://www.itdl.org/Journal/Jan\\_05/article01.htm](http://www.itdl.org/Journal/Jan_05/article01.htm)

learning has its home in social constructivism,<sup>136</sup> knowledge and how it is socially applied is developed through the cooperative processing of information.<sup>137</sup> Collaborative learning calls learners to a social mode of thinking where knowledge and understanding are co-constructed by learners in the group. Learners are given control over the learning processes and outcomes. In collaborative learning communities, the learners are at the center finding understanding and applying meaning based on situations relevant to their experiences.<sup>138,139</sup> The learnings are enriched through the social interactions of the cooperative processing of information. Each member engages with others in the group and contributes equitably from their personal and educational purview, making each person accountable for the group's development. Teaching and learning strategists Martha Nyikos and Reiko Hashimoto affirm that the group's social interaction promotes cognitive reflections of ideas and the internalization of accepted thoughts.<sup>140</sup>

It is in this interchange of social interaction where spiritual transformation takes place. Spiritual growth is possible in sacred online spaces when the collaborative learning approach to teaching Christian education addresses three critical features, as identified by Elizabeth F. Barkley, Claire H. Major, and K. Patricia Cross: intentional design, co-laboring, and meaningful learning.<sup>141</sup> Ministry leaders' efforts to disciple congregants

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<sup>136</sup> Barkley, Elizabeth F., Claire H. Major, and K. Patricia. Cross. *Collaborative Learning Techniques* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 9

<sup>137</sup> The intended use of the phrase "cooperative processing of information" by the writer was to convey the collective reading and responding to text, mutual identification and categorization of themes and images, group examination and interrogation of content, joint discussions, and the like.

<sup>138</sup> "What is Learner-Centered Pedagogy" IGI-Global. Accessed July 7, 2022. <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/placing-technology-in-learner-centered-design-through-blended-learning-in-post-secondary-education/16795>

<sup>139</sup> Weimer, Maryellen. *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Sass, 2013)

<sup>140</sup> Nyikos, Martha and Reiko Hashimoto. 1997. "Constructivist Theory Applied to Collaborative Learning in Teacher Education: In Search of ZPD," *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 81 (Winter): 506-517. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/328893>

<sup>141</sup> Barkley, Elizabeth F., Claire H. Major, and K. Patricia Cross. *Collaborative Learning Techniques*, 13

online demand the design and method of delivery of Christian education be preplanned given the particular use of technical tools. “Central to implementing collaborative learning effectively is creating the learning tasks itself.”<sup>142</sup> Intentionally designed programs must be premeditated, online group activities structured for acquiring knowledge, internalizing reflections, and influencing future behaviors. In digital disciple communities, collaborative leaders demonstrate intentional educational design through pre-arranged learning assignments that the group collaboratively works through. These assignments should invite learners to engage in the identification, interpretation, and implementation of the study material. Collaborative leaders must guide digital disciples through a process of identifying main points, key concepts, important issues, and common themes. Assuming no teaching authority, the leader facilitates and participates as a learner seeking to interpret and uncover the intent and meaning of the material with the group. Using the identified information, the group works to determine the relationship between the various points and possible reasons for their connection. Finally, the leader invites learners to consider why the lessons matter to them and make connections with how to live out the principles of the lesson.

Each discipleship program should be intentionally designed for the digital disciples to work interdependently in the construction of knowledge and discovery of understanding. “In collaborative learning, all participants in the group must engage actively in working together toward the stated objectives.”<sup>143</sup> Co-laboring is critical to the collaborative approach to teaching Christian education in online sacred communities. Because learners are dependent on the contributions of others for expanded perspectives,

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<sup>142</sup> Barkley, Elizabeth F., Claire H. Major, and K. Patricia Cross. *Collaborative Learning Techniques*, 33

<sup>143</sup> Barkley, Elizabeth F., Claire H. Major, and K. Patricia Cross. *Collaborative Learning Techniques*, 4

collaborative leaders must make deliberate efforts to encourage the sharing of knowledge and working together to make sense of ideas. There is a challenge in overcoming the common practice of passive observation in virtual learning communities where the learners offer little to no reflective responses. The majority of participants in online learning communities behave passively, observing activity and content, yet having no sense of responsibility to interact with others regarding the information. As documented by Fie-Ching Chen, a writer on topics of social learning, “Lurkers are reported to make up over 90% of online communities.”<sup>144</sup>

While the term lurker has negative connotations, digital researcher of social media and online communication Noella Edelmann recognizes the value of passive online participation. She suggests that passive observation is normal and acceptable behavior and people who use this discretion ought not to be considered non-contributing members of the learning community. “Although participation includes activities such as creating relevant content, participation also involves activities such as consuming content e.g., reading the material that others provide or post.”<sup>145</sup> Edelmann emphasized the need for listeners in the audience, promoted that lurkers helped avoid information overload, and underscored that their presence does not detract from the virtual learning. However, their presence does not add to the digital learning environment either. Instead, they consume information, ideas, and insight for their personal benefit without reciprocating.

Furthermore, I contend the presence of passive observers detracts from the community

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<sup>144</sup> Chen, Fie-Ching. 2004. “Passive Forum Behaviors (lurking): A Community Perspective,” Institute of Learning and Instruction, National Central University.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262361185\\_Passive\\_forum\\_behaviors\\_lurking\\_A\\_community\\_perspective](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262361185_Passive_forum_behaviors_lurking_A_community_perspective)

<sup>145</sup> Edelmann, Noella. 2-16. “What is Lurking? A Literature Review of research on Lurking,” *The Psychology of Social Networking*, (Aug): 159-174.  
<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110473780-015/html>



where the sense of belonging and value of voice is integral. When there is little interaction with the information and individuals involved in constructing meaning, active participants are left to feel that their comments have been disregarded and their contributions are unvalued. This disrupts the cooperative process of learning and ruptures the sense of community. However, group cohesiveness is enhanced when there is a high frequency of contributions.<sup>146</sup> Collaborative learning requires digital disciples to co-labor in constructing meaning.

The final critical feature of collaborative learning is meaningful learning. Meaningful learning, defined broadly, is having a deep understanding of complex ideas garnered by intentional interactive experiences that produce knowledge that is valued by the learners for applicable use in future situations.<sup>147,148</sup> Nada Dabbagh, Jane L. Howland, and Rose M Marra go on to describe meaningful learning as occurring when learners engage in “active, constructive, cooperative, authentic, and intentional” tasks.<sup>149</sup> It cannot be reiterated enough that the active participation of learners is critical to bringing about meaningful learning. Learners must interact both with the information and individuals in the group to come away from the learning experience with significant understanding. It is in the active engagement that reflection and interpretation of content take place, resulting in the construction of meaningful knowledge. This requires the learners to be self-directed and owners of the process, which demonstrates their intentionality. The ability to connect relevant knowledge to the learners’ context is critical to learnings being

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<sup>146</sup> Chen, Fei-Ching. 2004. “Passive Forum Behaviors (lurking): A Community Perspective”

<sup>147</sup> “What is Meaningful Learning” IGI-Global. Accessed July 8, 2022. <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/pedagogical-perspectives-learning/18112>

<sup>148</sup> Dabbagh, Nada, Jane L. Howland, and Rose M Marra. *Meaningful Online Learning*. (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 7

<sup>149</sup> Dabbagh, Nada, Jane L. Howland, and Rose M Marra. *Meaningful Online Learning*, xiv

meaningful. Stylianos Mystakidis, a researcher on virtual and augmented reality and electronic and game-based learning, insists that group members must engage content that is “linked to an authentic experience or simulated, realistic context so that they become personally significant and transferable.”<sup>150</sup> Social processes of learning contribute to meaningful learning because of the cooperative relationship between the group members.

When the collaborative learning approach to teaching Christian education in online sacred spaces is intentionally designed, ensures co-laboring, and promotes meaningful learning, conditions are set to facilitate growth in digital disciples. Spiritual growth online can also be manifested through reflective discourse. This is why dialogical teaching is the second social constructivist approach suitable for facilitating spiritual growth in online sacred spaces.

Dialogic teaching is a social constructivist approach where learning takes place through the discourse of dialoguing with others. Learners think, reason, and respond to shared thoughts and ideas in discussion. As described by education research writer Robin Alexander, in dialogic teaching, the power of talk is harnessed in such a way for learners to “engage their interest, stimulate thinking, advance understanding, expand ideas and build and evaluate arguments, empowering them for lifelong learning and democratic engagement.”<sup>151</sup> Rocío García-Carrión, Garazi López de Aguilera, Maria Padrós, and Mimar Ramis-Salas describe this process as one where communal understanding and growth take place as people *interthink*,<sup>152</sup> think, reason, and create meaning together in

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<sup>150</sup> Mystakidis, Stylianos. 2021. “Deep Meaningful Learning.” MDPI Encyclopedia. 988–997. <https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia1030075>

<sup>151</sup> Alexander, Robin. *A Dialogic Teaching Companion Work* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2020)

<sup>152</sup> García-Carrión, Rocío, Garazi López de Aguilera, Maria Padrós, and Mimar Ramis-Salas. 2020. “Implications for Social Impact of Dialogic Teaching and Learning,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 11 (Feb): 83-92. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00140>

conversation. For spiritual growth to take place in digital disciples, collaborative leaders must facilitate conversations in online sacred spaces that are constructively critical. Leaders must help them be conversation partners who jointly consider statements and opinions, offer challenges and justifications, and co-create common understanding. Dialogic teaching aids the spiritual transformation of digital disciples by dialogically exploring the perspectives of others and collectively creating meaning of Christian principles. Seeds of faith grow in disciples where quality conversations are constructive.

Professor of Education, Neil Mercer and Professor of Psychology, Karen Littleton introduce exploratory talk as a concept necessary for having quality conversations for effective learning. Exploratory talk is described as a social mode of reasoning where the information and ideas offered by each person are treated as worthy of consideration. Those in conversation with one another critically and constructively think, question, reason, and make determinations together.<sup>153</sup> Robyn M. Gillies makes clear that effective dialogical exchanges require each person to participate in “sharing all information; promoting agreement among group members; accepting responsibility for group decisions; providing reasons for decisions; challenging the ideas and opinions of others; discussing alternative propositions before making a decision; encouraging everyone in the group to contribute their ideas and opinions.”<sup>154</sup> When dialogic teaching in online sacred communities permits exploratory talk, digital disciples experience productive growth through the exchange of information, collective evaluation, and communal

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<sup>153</sup> Littleton, Karen and Neil Mercer *Interthinking: Putting Talk to Work* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013) 15-16

<sup>154</sup> Robyn M. Gillies, “The Teacher’s Role in Prompting Dialogic Talk in the Collaborative Classroom” in *Collaborative Learning: Theory, Strategies, and Educational Benefits*, Stephen M. Rutherford (Hauppauge: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2014), 61

understanding. Collaborative leaders facilitate this growth by probing disciples' thoughtful responses for a more detailed explanation, encouraging them to share the background of how they formed their reasoning, and offering helpful challenges where they experience cognitive conflict and evaluate their understandings. Disciples are

“presented with situations that are challenging, which cause them to stop and think, and to reflect on how they must proceed to solve the problem they are confronting. To reconcile these conflicts, students need to engage in a process of cognitive reflection to enable them to re-organize and re-construct their understandings in the light of new experiences and cognitions.”<sup>155</sup>

It is in a dialogical exchange facilitated by collaborative leaders that cognitive conflict creates space for spiritual growth and transformation.

Conversely, dialogical talk that is disputational and cumulative, will stunt the growth of disciples. Disputational talk occurs when ministry leaders have not cultivated a collaborative space for interthinking. Instead, the atmosphere is competitive, the reasoning is individualized, and the understanding is not a communal experience. Similarly, transformational growth is impeded when participants in Christian education discussions broadly accept the ideas of others without critical evaluation and feedback.

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Dialogic teaching provides the double blessing of spiritual growth and true community given its underpinnings of democratic values. In the previous chapter, I described authentic community as having accountability, care, belonging, and

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<sup>155</sup> Robyn, “The Teacher’s Role in Prompting Dialogic Talk in the Collaborative Classroom”

<sup>156</sup> Littleton, Karen and Neil Mercer *Interthinking: Putting Talk to Work* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013) 15-16

<sup>157</sup> García-Carrión, Rocío, Garazi López de Aguilera, Maria Padrós, and Mimar Ramis-Salas. 2020. “Implications for Social Impact of Dialogic Teaching and Learning,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 11 (Feb): 83-92. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00140>

(inter)dependence. Dialogic teaching calls for learners to enter quality conversations where there is accountability, care, belonging, and interdependence. Christa S. C. Asterhan, Sherice N. Clarke, and Lauren B. Resnick explains this idea in their text *Accountable Talk: Instructional Dialogue that Builds the Mind*, where they present principles and practices for a teacher-led, but student owned discussion-based learning process where the students work collaboratively to think through programs and explain solutions that are backed by their cognitive reasoning. In their text *Thinking, Interthinking, and Technological Tools*, Simon Knight and Karen Littleton suggest that there is transformative power with dialogue when it is used to interthink, collaboratively build knowledge through shared understanding. Dialogic teaching enables true community in that the learners are accountable for the group's communal understanding obtained through their conferring on the diversity of opinions. Conversation partners listen to build on shared knowledge where they can make contributions to the discussion. These contributions are valued and considered relevant to the learning discussion, making evident the care, and belonging dialogic teaching secures, while simultaneously cultivating community. Interdependence is observed in the democratic engagement of others to gain knowledge and understanding.<sup>158,159</sup> The communal sharing permits the knowledge, ideas, and experiences of each individual to be intermingled. Insights are garnered through the socialization of perspectives.

### **Spiritual Growth in Online Sacred Spaces**

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<sup>158</sup> Asterhan, Christa S. C., Sherice N. Clarke, and Lauren B. Resnick. (2018). *Accountable Talk: Instructional Dialogue that Builds the Mind*. Educational Practices Series. The International Academy of Education (IAE) and the International Bureau of Education (IBE) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

<sup>159</sup> Knight, Simon and Littleton, Karen (2015). *Thinking, Interthinking, and Technological Tools*. in: *The Routledge International Handbook of Research on Teaching Thinking*. (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2015) 467–478.

In Ephesians 3:17, Paul suggests a believer spiritually grows to maturity of faith by being rooted.<sup>160</sup> To be rooted is to be firmly grounded in place. The growth and formation of Christian spirituality come when one fixes him or herself in a discipleship community through the intimate intertwining of shared life together. Faith is developed in community. Personal growth is interwoven with the measure of communal faith. Paul exhorts believers to grow up in every way as a whole mature body.<sup>161</sup> “Individual holiness spreads from one member of the body of Christ to another, thereby making it possible for the body to build itself up spiritually.”<sup>162</sup>

Stephen and Mary Lowe explain that the growth in natural ecologies informs us of the growth in spiritual ecologies. “In the natural world nothing grows alone, isolated and disconnected from its ecological habitat. Instead, everything grows ecologically through connections to and interactions with other living and nonliving things producing mutual growth and fecundity.”<sup>163</sup> Given that the internet is designed for interconnections, online sacred spaces can serve as the soil where disciples are planted and pruned for optimal spiritual health.

The life and growth of a plant are dependent on the soil in which it is planted. Soil serves plants the water and nutrients needed for them to thrive. The primary soil types a plant can take root in are sand, clay, and silt. The soil type affects the flow of nutrients necessary for ideal plant health. Sand provides excellent oxygen flow but its inability to

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<sup>160</sup> Ephesians 3:17 [NIV] “...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love”

<sup>161</sup> Ephesians 4:15-16 [NIV] “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

<sup>162</sup> Lowe, Stephen D. and Mary E. Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 7

<sup>163</sup> Lowe, Stephen D. and Mary E. Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education*, 4

bind sufficiently makes it incapable of holding nutrients well. The dense nature of clay holds water well, yet it provides little drainage for plants and constricts the roots from expanding. Silt is fertile soil that holds water well, but it inhibits the flow of oxygen needed for plants to survive. It would seem as if there is no proper soil for the life and growth of a plant. However, when these three soil types are well mixed, it becomes a prosperous place for plant life. The well-balanced mixture of sand, clay, and silt is called loam. “Loam is just the right mixture of all three [given] that it holds nutrients well, retains water but still drains properly and allows oxygen to infiltrate.”<sup>164</sup> Plants reach peak growth in a balanced mixture of all three soil types. When it comes to discipling believers digitally, no one online platform will support the total maintenance of online congregants’ spiritual health. A combination of at least three digital media can be used by ministry leaders to facilitate the spiritual growth of digital disciples.

Digital spaces that allow for community, contact, and communication are enriching soils for optimal faith development in believers. Reliance on content-centric platforms creates a culture of consumption and curtails environments of connection where meaningful digital discipleship experiences can be held. Three digital platforms that combined offer community, contact, and communication; and can aid ministry leaders in facilitating the spiritual growth of digital disciples are Facebook groups, Zoom, and GroupMe.

### ***Facebook Groups***

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<sup>164</sup> “What’s the Best Type of Soil for Plants?” Peterson Companies (blog). April 18, 2018. <https://blog.petersoncompanies.net/best-type-of-soil-for-plants#:~:text=The%20ideal%20blend%20of%20soil,%25%20silt%20%E2%80%93%2020%25%20clay.>

Facebook is an enriching soil of community. The online Church remains a community of faith where relationship is critical to the germination of seeds of faith. Facebook groups are online sacred spaces where digital disciples interact online. Human beings establish strong connections and secure relationships in community. Nona Jones argues that “Facebook is the only truly social media platform”<sup>165</sup> given its design to deepen connections and build relationships with others. Ministry leaders can use Facebook, particularly the Facebook groups,<sup>166</sup> as an online sacred space where digital disciples can spiritually transform. Facebook can be an ideal digital space for facilitating faith development in digital disciples because eight out of ten Americans use it every day to engage, interact, and share details of their life experiences.<sup>167</sup> Aligned with my belief that true community is the intimate intertwinement of shared life together where human beings are present with God and each other, Facebook groups can be used by ministry leaders as an online sacred space where digital disciples gather in a community where members share life offering accountability, belonging, care, and (inter)dependence, which is critical to spiritual growth.

Facebook can be used to connect believers each day between Sundays. It also allows ministry leaders to maintain a persistent presence in the life of their congregation. Using the live stream features, ministry leaders can lift prayers, have spiritual talks, teach lessons, and respond to digital disciples in real-time. Disciples can continue to engage with the people and the Bible principles after the live stream. Furthermore, reflective

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<sup>165</sup> Jones, Nona, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 50

<sup>166</sup> Facebook groups are public or private pages on Facebook designed to be a space where community can be built through interactions and engagement.

<sup>167</sup> Jones, Nona, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 52



questions can be posted related to Sunday sermons or the week-day Bible studies to get participants engaged. Prayer requests and testimonies can be shared in Facebook groups, allowing online congregants to timely intercede. Ministry leaders and digital disciples can interact and engage in the comments of each post. Facebook also offers the opportunity for virtual face-to-face interaction through its Messenger Rooms, a video-chat feature designed to draw in the distance and “help people feel present with one another even when they’re not in the same place.”<sup>168</sup> However, its connectivity issues and incapacity to host large audiences offers little challenge to more popular video conferencing platforms, particularly Zoom.

### **Zoom**

Zoom is a nutrient-rich soil of contact. The health and wellbeing of online congregants is a prominent concern for Christian communities considering settling into cyberspaces as their primary home of sacred and social interaction. Video conferencing cannot replace the desire for physical contact, but it can satisfy humanity’s need for intimacy. “Touch is our primary non-verbal communication channel for conveying intimate emotions and as such essential for our physical and emotional wellbeing.”<sup>169</sup> In their text *Online Intimacy and Well-Being in the Digital Age*, Matthieu J. Guitton and Anna M. Lomanowska, scholars on digital well-being and online behavior, explain that “certain aspects of Internet-mediated interactions can facilitate meaningful and intimate social interactions,”<sup>170</sup> and positively impact one’s health and wellbeing. Without

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<sup>168</sup> Meta. 2020. “Introducing Messenger rooms and More Ways to Connect When You’re Apart.” Accessed May 17, 2022. <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/04/introducing-messenger-rooms/>

<sup>169</sup> Van Erp, Jan B. F. and Alexander Toet. 2015. “Social Touch in Human-Computer Interaction” *Frontiers in Digital Humanities*, 2 (Article 2) (May): 1-13 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fdigh.2015.00002>

<sup>170</sup> Guitton, Matthieu J. and Anna M. Lomanowska. 2016. “Online Intimacy and Well-Being in the Digital Age.” *Internet Interventions*, Vol. 4, Part 2 (May): 138-144

meaningful interactions, individuals in online communities can feel alone together.

Intimacy enables living beings to thrive.

Although, historically, intimacy was met by physical touch, advancing social technologies have transformed human connection and engagement,<sup>171</sup> making it possible for intimacy to be mediated through virtual experiences. Intimacy is a relational process where there is reciprocity in sharing and knowing; leaving one another with feelings of connection, care, validation, and being understood.<sup>172</sup> The need for intimacy can be fulfilled in online sacred spaces in some ways similar to how it is satisfied in a physical presence. In his book *Intimacy: Understanding the Subtle Power of Human Connection*, Ziyad Marar, writer in the field of philosophy and psychology, suggests four things enable intimacy: mutual knowledge, confidentiality, emotion, and kindness.<sup>173</sup> Physical touch was not considered a critical element for enabling intimacy. I do not intend to argue against touch being critical to the wellness of human beings.<sup>174</sup> I acknowledge that human beings' social development and growth are dependent on touch from the early stages of

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<sup>171</sup> Guitton, Matthieu J. and Anna M. Lomanowska. 2016. "Online Intimacy and Well-Being in the Digital Age." *Internet Interventions*, Vol. 4, Part 2 (May): 138-144

<sup>172</sup> Holland, Karen J., Jerry W. Lee, and Helen H. Marshak. 2016. "Spiritual Intimacy, and Physical/Psychological Well-Being: Spiritual Meaning as a Mediator." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. 218-227 <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000062>

<sup>173</sup> Marar, Ziyad, *Understanding the Subtle Power of Human Connection* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 210

<sup>174</sup> Harry Harlow's 1958 behavioral science experiments with primates and social isolation prove that while food is a basic need for survival, "touch sustains us." Harlow sought to understand the basis of young primates' bond with their biological mother. First, Harlow separated infant monkeys from their mother within hours of their birth and placed them in isolation. The infant monkeys displayed disturbing behaviors, including self-mutilation. After reintroducing them to social contexts, many of the monkeys remained reclusive and some died after refusing to eat. Subsequently, Harlow replaced the infant monkeys' maternal mother with two inanimate surrogate mothers (one made of metal and the other made of terry cloth.) Harlow discovered the infant monkeys spent more time with the surrogate mother made of terry cloth than the one made of metal, regardless of which had the bottle of milk. The monkeys were able to cuddle with the terry cloth surrogate and receive comfort, which was not afforded by the surrogate made of metal. Harlow's experiments suggest that contact is critical to survival.

life.<sup>175</sup> Physical contact continues to be critical to the well-being of humanity throughout the course of life.<sup>176</sup>

Nonetheless, I suggest the humanity of online congregants craves intimacy, not necessarily touch. Human beings online pursue deep personal connections with others engaged online because the human make up requires it. As social beings, intimate relational connections enable human flourishing. Fundamentally, intimacy online does not differ from intimacy in-person.<sup>177</sup> There are four forms of intimacy: cognitive/intellectual, experiential, emotional, and sexual.<sup>178</sup> Of the four forms, human beings can experience emotional and cognitive/intellectual intimacy online. Emotional intimacy concerns the sharing of one's feelings and empathizing with the feelings of others. Cognitive/intellectual intimacy regards the open exchange of internal thoughts, ideas, beliefs and opinions without threat of judgement or fear of rejection.<sup>179</sup>

While video-conference tools cannot provide physical contact, it does mediate intimacy. Digital disciples can experience intimacy face to face through the virtual contact of Zoom video conferencing. Zoom provides the space for online congregants to be in contact, to form and develop encouraging relationships. Zoom, as an online sacred space, enables digital disciples to connect and grow spiritually through dialogue on spiritual matters. During the period of social isolation at the height of the COVID-19

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<sup>175</sup> Van Erp, Jan B. F. and Alexander Toet. 2015. "Social Touch in Human-Computer Interaction" *Frontiers in Digital Humanities* (May) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fdigh.2015.00002>

<sup>176</sup> Nicole K. McNichols, "The Vital Importance of Human Touch: The Science of Human Touch and What to do if You're Feeling Deprived." *Psychology Today*. August 3, 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/everyone-top/202108/the-vital-importance-human-touch>

<sup>177</sup> Guitton, Matthieu J. and Anna M. Lomanowska. 2016. "Online Intimacy and Well-Being in the Digital Age." *Internet Interventions*, Vol. 4, Part 2 (May): 138-144

<sup>178</sup> "The Four Types of Intimacy." *Infidelity Recovery Institute*. August 29, 2017. <https://infidelityrecoveryinstitute.com/the-four-types-of-intimacy/>

<sup>179</sup> "The Four Types of Intimacy." *Infidelity Recovery Institute*.

pandemic, Zoom was routinely used for social contact. Family and friends played games, watched movies, and even worked out together. Online congregants can use Zoom as the online sacred space for social contact and fellowship.

The challenge with Zoom (and other video conferencing services) being used as an online sacred space is that the space cannot be accessed at any day or time. Once a Zoom session has ended, digital disciples must wait until the next Zoom session is scheduled. There is a break in contact with other online congregants. However, mobile messaging applications, such as GroupMe can bridge the gap in contact with consistent communication.

### **GroupMe**

GroupMe is fertile soil for communication. GroupMe is a group messaging mobile application that can be used as one of the online sacred spaces where digital disciples can maintain consistent communication through group text messaging. Regular text exchanges contribute to presence, intimacy, and connectedness, while simultaneously supporting the expansion of spiritual perspectives. Jerome Kremers argues that text messaging is a prominent means of communication that contributes to the sustainment and security of personal relationships.<sup>180</sup> Growth in interpersonal relationships is possible through text-based exchanges when there is social support and capitalization. Jenna Clark defined social support as a process of receiving tangible or emotional resources for relief of negative feelings and situations, whereas capitalization occurs when positive life circumstances are divulged to provoke others to celebrate.<sup>181</sup> Both social support and

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<sup>180</sup> Kremers, Jerome. 2016. "Text Messaging On Relational Intimacy," University of Arkansas Fort Smith. <https://uafs.edu/sites/default/files/Departments/symposium/kremers.pdf>

<sup>181</sup> Clark, Jenna. 2017. "The Role of Text Messaging in Close Relationships," University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://doi.org/10.17615/j183-2621>

capitalization are part of the interpersonal process model of intimacy. Harry T. Reis suggests that intimacy emerges from the interactive process of emotional sharing and response. The process is initiated by a positive or negative self-disclosure intent on eliciting a response from others. When the need for relief or celebration is met by responsive individuals, intimacy is likely to develop between the individuals involved. Using GroupMe, digital disciples can send messages or photos that other participants can like or affirm with supportive replies.

Digital disciples can use GroupMe to share spiritual reflections, theological thoughts, and inspired ideas. Ministry leaders can text the group daily or weekly Scripture readings and invite digital disciples to share their reflections on what the passage reveals about God, how it relates to their personal circumstances, or what it teaches them about others. Participants in the group text can ask follow-up questions, prompting others to engage even further. The collaborative response will contribute to an intimate social binding, an understanding of perspectives, and a broadening of learnings. GroupMe provides a great opportunity to remind participants of key sermon points to begin a conversation around how the message encouraged and enlightened them. The spiritual text communications will influence the spiritual transformation of each digital disciple participating in GroupMe.

Integrated into everyday life, “text messaging is by far the most popular format of mediated, interpersonal communication, far outstripping other mediated forms such as email, instant messaging, or even mobile voice messaging.”<sup>182</sup> Its preferred use of communication is driven by convenient access, ease of use, and speed in relaying

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<sup>182</sup> Kremers, Jerome. 2016. “Text Messaging On Relational Intimacy,” University of Arkansas Fort Smith. <https://uafs.edu/sites/default/files/Departments/symposium/kremers.pdf>

information. However, the limitations of texts such as the inability to convey facial expressions, tone of voice, and extended explanation emphasize the need for a combination of digital platforms to build an online sacred space offering community, contact, and communication.

Spiritual growth takes place in community. The aim of leaders of online sacred spaces should be to facilitate faith development in digital disciples using educational approaches aligned with the digital social world. Therefore, spiritual growth can be fostered in online sacred spaces using the social constructivist approaches of collaborative learning and dialogic teaching where the learners participate in constructing knowledge and work together to cognitively reflect and find meaning in accepted thoughts.

## Chapter 5: Leadership in Online Sacred Spaces

The landscape of ministry has set its scene on the platforms of social media. Ministry today requires having a presence in the pastures of social media technologies. YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and TikTok make up only a portion of the acreage in which online ministry is presently conducted. Some social media platforms challenge digital congregants' sense of belonging and impede their transformational growth because of the informational design structure. The virtual church experience is compromised by the lack of human presence when the platforms do not invite congregants into active conversation or permit them to contribute to the shape of worship and the process of discipleship. Too often church leaders' connection with people is limited to one-way communication and information transmission and consumption. The creation of community and the formation of faith in online sacred spaces is not possible without multidirectional communication and information. This is why Nona Jones suggests Facebook as the space for churches to launch their social media ministry. "It is the place where people can connect with one another and build deep relationships fostered by social technology. While the other named digital platforms can share information, they don't go so far as to connect users to one another."<sup>183</sup> Facebook facilitates a knowing presence where parishioners can digitally gather in the social, yet sacred space where there are shared feelings and experiences.

Leaders in digital ministry can transform their social media platforms into sacred cyberspaces for community formation and spiritual transformation. This chapter will highlight leadership models that undermine community and others that align with

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<sup>183</sup> Jones, Nona, *From Social Media to Social Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 50

covenant principles in leading an online ministry. Among the positive practices, circular leadership styles enable true community and spiritual growth to be possible in online sacred spaces. I will suggest collaborative leadership is a circular style of leadership most suitable for leading online ministry communities because it permits bidirectional influence and reciprocity of education and ideas, which is critical to fostering community and faith formation in digital spaces. Bidirectional influence takes place in community when each person permits the advisement of others to persuade their thinking and provoke positive internal change. Reciprocity of education and ideas deals with mutual and respectful exchanges of insights between members of the community.

### **Dismantling Misaligned Leadership Models in Digital Ministry**

The landscape of Church ministry has been shaped and re-shaped by social, political, and cultural events and challenges. Technological advancements have played a significant role in the life and ministry of the church across time. The rate of technological change in recent decades has led to rapid globalization and resulted in digital hyperconnectivity that has forever changed the nature of being the church. Sacred places have traditionally been thought to be within the walls of an old church house adorned with large, wide doors or a newly renovated warehouse turned worship center. The patterned pathway of a labyrinth or the quiet courtyard of a chapel have been respected and regarded as sacred grounds. Believers have hallowed these places above others because they were thought to be the place where Christians could go and commune with God. Leviticus 26:11-12<sup>184</sup> indicates the ancient Hebrew tradition held that the divine presence of God resided in the tabernacle. The tabernacle was reverently respected

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<sup>184</sup> Leviticus 26:11-12 (KJV): And I set my tabernacle among you: and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people.



as a holy and pure place. This was reflected in the ministers and worshipers' rigorous adherence to altar preparation and ritual guidelines. The physical church was thought to be a holy place where one encounters the presence of the Lord. The physical church is viewed as a sacred dwelling place of God. The custom has been for Christians to come to an edifice set aside for worship of a very present God. However, the coronavirus pandemic pushed closed the doors of the physical church and opened the way for a radical transformation of doing and being the church online. Faithful churchgoers were forced to attend worship virtually.

In the 1950s, in the United States, the church was the center of the social world. Today, social life hinges on digital platforms given the rise of internet use and the emergence of social networking applications. "Among the growing numbers of Americans who are using the Internet, many of them are turning to the digital dimension to get in touch with God and pursue matters of faith."<sup>185</sup> I see the radical shift in the Church's landscape as an opportunity to bring the Church back to the center of the social world. "The internet is not just a "thing" people do; it's the place people live, especially millennials and gen Z."<sup>186</sup> Those in Christian ministry ought to view online spaces as sacred sanctuaries, not simply spaces for the secular social world. Digital platforms can be hallowed places set aside to commune with God and other believers. Where can we escape the presence of God?<sup>187</sup> Because of God's omnipresence, God has access to all places and spaces. The everywhere present God has no special limitations. God is in the

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<sup>185</sup> Lowe, Stephen D. and Mary E. Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 71

<sup>186</sup> Jones, Nona, *From Social Media to Social Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 12

<sup>187</sup> Psalm 139:7-8 [NIV] Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

heavens, in the earth,<sup>188</sup> and in digital spaces. Believers gathered online will not be denied God's presence. The transcendence of God makes it possible for believers to commune with God in virtual environments. Jesus affirms this in Matthew 18:20 [NIV] when he said, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." Just as the church building is regarded as a place of God's dwelling, the presence of the Lord can be encountered in virtual environments. While we digitally connect, we divinely commune with the Spirit of God who resides in others.

The current season of Christian ministry calls for leadership that fosters true community and spiritual growth in online sacred spaces. The traditional approach to church leadership has been positional, where the authority and power of decision-making stems from their role of seniority. Maintaining this style in the interconnected construction of digital ministry would be to ignore the current reality that society is made up of individuals and groups interrelating, interlocking, and forming communities. As Susan Willhauck and Jacquelyn Thorpe discuss in *The Web of Women's Leadership*, "Life is no longer a simple pecking order, or top-down way of being, but it is an intricate network of people, opportunities, and resources."<sup>189</sup> Pyramid structured models of leadership were traditionally used by organizations where information and actions were delivered by a single leader at the top and consecutively passed down to the tiers of leaders, managers, and staff. However, the interconnected structure of digitally networked communities is dependent on collaboration.<sup>190</sup> Everyone has access to

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<sup>188</sup> Deuteronomy 4:39 [NIV] Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.

<sup>189</sup> Willhauck, Susan, and Jacquelyn Thorpe, *The Web of Women's Leadership: Recasting Congregational Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 16

<sup>190</sup> William Craig, "The Nature of Leadership in a Flat Organization." *Forbes*. October 23, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamcraig/2018/10/23/the-nature-of-leadership-in-a-flat-organization/?sh=656029605fe1>

information and acts according to their knowledge and skills. Therefore, online ministry leaders must exercise a mindfulness of others' background and expertise; and use the gifting of the people to benefit the whole. A leadership approach that values and includes the community's perspective cultivates a connected living environment online.

Command-and-control styles of leadership are ineffective in any community, but particularly those aspiring to be sacred, set apart holy spaces online. The command-and-control nature of hierarchical and authoritarian leadership can hinder communication and connectedness necessary for community, growth, and transformation in sanctified cyberspaces. Hierarchical leadership vests the power and authority in the senior leader. The goals and objectives, and how to action them are assigned through a top-down approach. When power is derived from one's title, the leadership tends to be authoritarian, and there is the expectation that the leader's directions be unequivocally followed by others due to their position or role. Under authoritarian leadership, the free flow of creative ideas and contributions is cut off by centralized decision-making and the lack of alternate, organic channels of communication. Based on their study of authoritarian leadership, researchers Massimo Bianchi, Marika Baseska, Stephane Ngo Mai, Laura Tampieri, and Joaquim Vergés suggest followers are expected to yield to instruction without question or resistance.<sup>191</sup> However, virtual environments create conditions for collaboration, thus lowering the level of social control and presenting an

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<sup>191</sup> Bianchi, Massimo, Marika Baseska, Stephane Ngo Mai, Laura Tampieri, and Joaquim Vergés. 2014. "Beyond the Horizon of Tempus Projects: Theory and Practice of Project Management," University of Bologna.  
[https://www.academia.edu/36273806/Beyond\\_the\\_horizon\\_of\\_Tempus\\_projects\\_Theory\\_and\\_practice\\_of\\_project\\_management](https://www.academia.edu/36273806/Beyond_the_horizon_of_Tempus_projects_Theory_and_practice_of_project_management)

increasing challenge to exercising a command-and-control leadership style,<sup>192</sup> as highlighted by Julia E. Hoch and Steve W. J. Kozlowski in their text *Leading Virtual Teams: Hierarchical Leadership, Structural Supports, and Shared Team Leadership*.

Online ministry leaders are operating in command-and-control styles of leadership when they put forward ministry plans for worship, fellowship programs, biblical lessons, and/or missional outreach according to their independent observations without first soliciting thoughts from and socializing the ideas with lay members supporting digital ministry and/or persons participating in their digital community. In January 2022, I socialized my idea of hosting a virtual conference for the members of online spiritual retreat center *Being & Becoming*.<sup>193</sup> By exercising leadership that permitted bidirectional influence and reciprocity of education and ideas, it afforded me the insight to identify the topics, determine the number of days the conference would be held, and set an affordable and appropriate rate to attend. If hierarchical and authoritarian leadership is relied on in online sacred spaces, the leaders' command-and-control nature will diminish the group's sense of belonging and constrain opportunities for growth. This will become evident, for example, in the members' lack of commitment to the purpose and people of the community, because the rigidity of the leadership weakens the sense of ownership and accountability of the group's good. Furthermore, the people in these

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<sup>192</sup> Hoch, Julia E. and Steve W. J. Kozlowski. 2014 "Leading Virtual Teams: Hierarchical Leadership, Structural Supports, and Shared Team Leadership." *Journal of Applied Psychology* Vol. 99, (3): 390–403. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030264>

<sup>193</sup> Established in 2019, *Being & Becoming* is an online spiritual retreat center residing on Facebook where Rev. Britni Michelle Johnson leads members through a journey of spiritual metamorphosis. Believing that what we will be has not yet appeared and knowing that one day we shall be like Christ, Johnson created a space for spiritual growth and human flourishing where the people come together for true relational community, spiritual sharpening, and social betterment.

digital spaces will not flourish in conditions that prevent cognitive criticism of material and information.

When ministry leaders primarily focus on the numerical growth of the church's membership, ministry events, and financial gifts, they are exercising leadership, which is driven by tasks and results. Such leadership tends to reflect authoritarian behaviors and minimizes the cultivation of healthy, mutual relationships. The primary emphasis is placed on planning and executing successive programs and events, which permits little opportunity for volunteers on planning committees to rest and insufficient room for the community they serve to reflect. The account of Jesus' visit with Martha and Mary discourages the primacy of task-oriented leadership. Mary had chosen to sit by the feet of Jesus and listen to his teachings, but Martha was concerned with preparations that she felt required completion and wanted Mary's assistance. But Jesus says to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42 [NRSV]). While performance and results are important, fellowship and faith formation are of paramount importance. This account demonstrates for leaders that the intention taken to engage and share insight with those under their leadership can be the key that unlocks the door to channels of communication and care, which contribute to the establishment of authentic relationship.

Hierarchical leadership styles will undermine online sacred spaces if the aim of the digital church environment is to foster true community and spiritual growth through online connections. Whether relational or transformational, "growing together online requires the interdependence and interaction between the self and the communities in

which one lives, serves, and learns.”<sup>194</sup> Leadership in online sacred spaces must be a style that permits and encourages authentic relational connectedness with digital congregants. It must cultivate cyber sanctuaries as spaces where parishioners are provided discipleship opportunities that allow seeds of transformation to take root through reflective theological thought and personal application. Leaders in the digital church environment must demonstrate that the thoughts and ideas of gathering digital congregants are valued as significant contributions to the community.

Transformational growth is often stifled when hierarchical models of leadership are in place because information is typically shared on a need-to-know basis. This prevents individuals from engaging the material and garnering insights that would benefit the community. It separates those privileged with the knowledge from the broader community, resulting in “the formation of subgroups, in groups and out-groups, or the popular and the not popular, like cliques in high school,”<sup>195</sup> as affirmed by instructional leadership trainer Linda Roebuck.

The intentional creation of relational and transformative online sacred spaces where digital congregants can be deeply present with one another ought to be included in the top priorities of online ministry leaders. The main challenge to this aim is the proclivity of leaders to turn back to the traditional authoritarian style of leadership. Human beings have a psychological need to control. Psychologist Henry Murray claimed there are 27 psychogenic needs, one of which is dominance (power). Murray suggests

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<sup>194</sup> Lowe and Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education*, 70

<sup>195</sup> Roebuck, Linda, *Circular Leadership: Together We Rise*, (York: Capucia Publishing, 2019), 25

that our need for dominance will drive how we behave and engage with others.<sup>196</sup>

Leaders must maintain a personal self-awareness of this need and be mindful of behaviors that indicate their leadership style is beginning to reflect power over people. One of the ways leaders can share control, keeping their tendency to dominate in check, is by hosting a vision meeting<sup>197</sup> at the beginning of the year where the leaders and select members representative of the community enter a process of mutual influence. The leaders and members have a collaborative discussion concerning observed ministry needs and rising issues, and to establish the ministry-wide annual calendar. By doing this, collaborative decision-making and shared responsibility serve to extinguish dominance. It also has the added benefit of creating strong bonds, building trust, and securing commitment in the group.<sup>198</sup>

### **Leadership Suitable for Ministry on the Cyber Scene**

Not all leadership theorists believe healthy community can be formed online. Management Consultant Margaret J. Wheatley denies that it is possible to build community online, suggesting that groups formed online are designed for conformity, not community. She believes electronic networks are tools that separate people into homogeneous groups. Wheatley stated, “we form highly specialized groups in the image of ourselves, groups that reinforce our separateness from the rest of society. We are not

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<sup>196</sup> Positive Mental Health Foundation. “Henry Murray, 20 Motives or Needs, Human Psychology” Accessed January 5, 2023. <http://positivementalhealthfoundation.com/2010/11/11/henry-murray-20-motives-or-needs-human-psychology/>

<sup>197</sup> A vision meeting is designed to help identify goals and develop action plans to manifest the overall vision of the ministry.

<sup>198</sup> Hoch, Julia E. and Steve W. J. Kozlowski. 2014 “Leading Virtual Teams: Hierarchical Leadership, Structural Supports, and Shared Team Leadership.”

asked to contribute our uniqueness, only our sameness.”<sup>199</sup> She believes the isolated exclusivity of online communities strips away the distinctives of individuals.

I believe Wheatley ignores humanity’s social predisposition to connect with people of their same racial and ethnic background, a reality in online and in-person, embodied settings. Whether online or in-person, people tend to socialize in communities of their same culture and/or shared histories. Howard J. Ross and JonRobert Tartaglione attribute this to tribalism. “Tribalism has equipped humans with a hypersensitivity to signals of group membership and a reflexive urge to favor those whom we deem members of our own tribe over out-group members.”<sup>200</sup> Most churches in America are homogenous communities. In a 1960 interview, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described Christian America as most segregated during the 11 o’clock hour of Sunday morning.<sup>201</sup> The Church, rightly, continues to struggle with overcoming cross-cultural barriers. In the meantime, where groups of people gather faithfully, God is present, and leaders are called to form faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, Wheatley perceives homogeneity of community as the lack of individuality. She contended, “Such specialized, self-reflecting networks lead to as much destructiveness of the individual as any dictatorial, doctrine-based organization. In neither type of group are we asked to explore our individualism while being in relationship with others who remain different. In neither type of group are we honoring the paradox of freedom and community.”<sup>202</sup> I contend that there are diversities within

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<sup>199</sup> Wheatley, Margaret J., *Finding Our Way* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.), 49

<sup>200</sup> Ross, Howard Jr. and JonRobert Tartaglione, *Our Search for Belonging: How Our Need to Connect Is Tearing Us Apart* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.), 31

<sup>201</sup> King, Jr., Martin Luther. 1960. Interview by Ned Brooks Meet the Press. April 17, 1960, MSNBC. Video, 00:05 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1q881g1L\\_d8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1q881g1L_d8)

<sup>202</sup> Wheatley, *Finding Our Way*, 50



homogenous networks. This is best illustrated with racial groups. While blacks are thought to be of the same ethnic groups, there are differences between Africans, African Americans, and Caribbean-born blacks. Those outside the Latino culture ought not to deindividualize Latinos from Cuba, Mexico, or Puerto Rico. There is a uniqueness to whites who are Jewish, Mormon, and Catholic.<sup>203</sup> Web-based groups do not necessarily create conformity. Whether individuals join an online sacred community reflective of their racial group or not, the distinguishable gifting and creativity each person brings to the space ought not to be overlooked and can be celebrated.

True community and transformation are possible in online sacred spaces with leadership that reflects interdependence and inclusion of others' insights, ideas, and experiences. Circular leadership styles make true community and spiritual growth possible in online sacred spaces. When leadership online is circular, power and information is widely distributed, and diverse gifts are welcome. According to IGI Global's dictionary, circular leadership is "a model or approach wherein all participants are deemed equal, reach consensus, and contribute to the greater good by focusing on interconnectedness."<sup>204</sup> Leaders are able to "guide the energy that empowers the group"<sup>205</sup> when their leadership style is circular.

Collaborative leadership is a circular style of leadership most suitable for securing relational connections and enabling transformation in digital ministry communities.

David Archer and Alex Cameron, leadership advisors on business relationships, argue

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<sup>203</sup> Ross, Howard Jr. and JonRobert Tartaglione, *Our Search for Belonging: How Our Need to Connect Is Tearing Us Apart*, 33

<sup>204</sup> "What Is Circular Leadership." IGI Global. Accessed November 25, 2022. <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/circular-leadership/85773#:~:text=1.,Spirit%20to%20Secure%20Desired%20Futures>

<sup>205</sup> Roebuck, *Circular Leadership: Together We Rise*, 60

that collaborative leadership is circular in nature given this approach requires interdependence to set goals and achieve results through established relationships, leveraging the value found in the diversity of backgrounds, skill, and experiences.<sup>206</sup> The African proverb “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far go together” points to an advantage of collaborative leadership. Collaborative leadership uses the wisdom of combined intelligence to achieve aims that would be insufficient if left to a sole decision maker.<sup>207</sup> The relational feature of collaborative leadership invites the community to an opportunity of shared ownership of its direction and creation of its future.

Leadership consultant Thomas Hurley says, “Collaborative leadership is grounded in relationship.”<sup>208</sup> The circular nature of collaborative leadership creates channels of relationship through valuing and appreciating each persons’ interests, ideas, and insights. The success of digital ministry leaders hinges on maintaining authentic relationships with people. Human beings online are relational beings desiring connection. Human beings online are motivated to relational cooperation when leaders take a genuine interest in getting to know them. Relationship is the key to accessing the knowledge, resources, and expertise of others needed to enable the efficiency of ministry. Christopher Branson, a professor of Educational Leadership, and Maureen Marra, an Organizational Ecologist with expertise in ecology, leadership, change and culture for engagement and belonging, stipulated in their text *Leadership as a Relational Phenomenon*, “A collaborative culture built upon healthy relationships from the leader down is at the heart of how today’s

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<sup>206</sup> Archer, David and Alex Cameron. *Collaborative Leadership: Building Relationship, Handling Conflict and Sharing Control*. (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013) 9-10

<sup>207</sup> Hurley, Thomas J. 2011. “Collaborative Leadership.” White Paper, Oxford Leadership

<sup>208</sup> Hurley, Thomas J. 2011. “Collaborative Leadership.” White Paper, Oxford Leadership

organizations can survive and thrive.”<sup>209</sup> Online sacred communities rely on the relational nature of their collaborative interconnected frame to flourish and sustain.

Not only must online ministry leaders be intentional, while coming to genuinely know the people they are leading, but they must model authenticity, transparency, and vulnerability. Ministry heads are positioned for personal and intentional ministry opportunities when they cultivate digital spaces for their congregants to self-disclose aspects of themselves, supportive of social bonding and spiritual edification, that they may want to restrain themselves from sharing when offline. John Suler, a Psychology Professor who has published works on cyberpsychology stated, “People say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn’t ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly.”<sup>210</sup> Due to the disinhibition effect, individuals share intimate details about themselves more readily online than in-person. The disinhibition effect suggests people online tend to present a greater disclosure of self based on dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and the minimization of authority. For a cyber sanctuary to be a place of true community, there must be room for a rich knowing of one another through the intimate intertwinement of shared life with God and others. This can begin with the leader initiating a revealing of their authentic, transparent, and vulnerable self. Online ministries enable leaders to connect with their digital disciples from anywhere and at any time. Using this opportunity as an advantage permits pastors to

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<sup>209</sup> Branson, C.M and M. Marra. 2019. “Leadership as a relational phenomenon: What this means in practice.” *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership*, Vol. 4, (July): 81-108. DOI: 10.30828/real/2019.1.4 5

<sup>210</sup> Suler, John. 2004. “The Online Disinhibition Effect” *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, Vol. 7 (July): 321-326. <https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295>

leave behind their privatized lives and offer digital congregants privileged access, allowing them to know who they are truly. Although people tend to avoid disclosing personal information about themselves to guard against negative judgement and would rather filter the presentation of who they are, vulnerable transparency creates the perception of authenticity. When leaders share sensitive details of who they are and their life, they are viewed by their community as sincere.<sup>211</sup>

Leadership online requires authenticity. The act of self-disclosure serves to build rapport, enhance intimacy, and instigate a desire to cooperatively work with the leader. This is illustrated in a study on leaders' sensitive self-disclosure on the social networking site Facebook, conducted by researchers of psychology, behavior, and information systems Li Jiang, Leslie K. John, Reihane Boghrati, and Maryam Kouchaki's. The researchers examined social media content of senior leaders and comparatively analyzed the reactions to self-disclosive and less disclosive content. The results of the study revealed more positive reactions to and increased engagement with the self-disclosive content. They concluded the benefits from being perceived authentic as a leader will produce positive effects in the organization.<sup>212</sup> Leaders who are authentic tend to be successful because their transparent, vulnerable self-disclosure increases cooperative work efforts.

The leaders' authenticity does not necessarily detract from the need for setting boundaries in digital spaces to secure one's personal wellbeing. The doors of digital

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<sup>211</sup> Jiang, Li, Leslie K. John, Reihane Boghrati, and Maryam Kouchaki. 2022. "Fostering Perceptions of Authenticity via Sensitive Self-Disclosure," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*. Advanced online publication, (Oct) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/xap0000453>

<sup>212</sup> Jiang, Li, Leslie K. John, Reihane Boghrati, and Maryam Kouchaki. "Fostering Perceptions of Authenticity via Sensitive Self-Disclosure"

churches are always open. There is increased accessibility to information and individuals in virtual environments, unlike the physical places where there are office hours and closing times.<sup>213</sup> The “always openness”<sup>214</sup> of online sacred spaces expresses the need for leaders to set boundaries to protect and preserve their wellbeing. Psychotherapist Anne Katherine contemplates on the amount of ceaseless electronic connections we have to people and information and the need for digital users to erect virtual fences. In her book *Boundaries in an Overconnected World*, she writes “If ever boundaries were needed, they are needed now, in this universe without boundaries.”<sup>215</sup> Uncontrolled accessibility to digital leaders can bring about serious physical and mental health concerns and have a negative effect on familial relationships. If online ministry leaders are not intentional setting boundaries that secure their personal care, they will experience stress and ministry work-life imbalance, possibly resulting in health issues, sleep loss, and a decline in productivity and purpose.

Contending that leaders need time to unplug, refuel, and remember their God-given purpose, leadership coach Angela Craig suggested small changes like putting our electronic devices on Do Not Disturb between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. can start building virtual fences required to sustain our wellbeing in the digitally connected world. What matters the most can be protected by setting deliberate limits.<sup>216</sup> Anne Katherine advised changing the notification settings on applications, so we are not alerted to digital activities. To reduce the digital media fatigue that can come with doing online ministry,

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<sup>213</sup> Jones, Nona, *From Social Media to Social Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 70

<sup>214</sup> Jones, Nona, *From Social Media to Social Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 75

<sup>215</sup> Katherine, Anne, *Boundaries in an Overconnected World: Setting Limits to Preserve Your Focus, Privacy, Relationships, and Sanity* (Novato: New world Library, 2013) 12

<sup>216</sup> Craig, Angela Lynne, *Online Jesus: A Guide to Community, Discipleship, & Care Online* (2020) 57-58

the leaders can schedule times when they will visit the online sacred spaces and check their instant messages.<sup>217</sup> During these scheduled times, the leaders can return to previous posts to review and respond to comments.

Collaborative leadership facilitates an environment of non-judgmental sharing and supports the view and understanding of alternative perspectives. True community and transformation are possible online because collaborative leaders facilitate dialogic processes. In *Leadership Can Be Taught*, Professor of Leadership Sharon Daloz Parks encourages dialogue with our experiences of leadership failures. Dialogic reflections on weaknesses will enlighten future ministry practices. It “can open up angles of vision that yield new insight, recompose reality, and invite new understanding and action.”<sup>218</sup> Online ministry leaders must be in dialogue with each other concerning observed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT)<sup>219</sup> to their service. Each holding a stake in the mission of the church, the leaders can safely offer in discussion their perspectives of pitfalls, problems, and propose solutions for doing ministry online. The dialogue presents opportunities for each leader to function as a consultant addressing issues and suggesting ideas from their knowledge and experiences. This creates a community of sharing and collaboration amongst the leadership team. They are practicing collaborative, interdependent leadership among their peers.

Additionally, the online ministry leaders must not only be concerned with their own perspectives and at the risk of ignoring the concerns of those they are leading.

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<sup>217</sup> Katherine, Anne, *Boundaries in an Overconnected World: Setting Limits to Preserve Your Focus, Privacy, Relationships, and Sanity* (Novato: New world Library, 2013) 63

<sup>218</sup> Parks, Sharon Daloz, *Leadership Can Be Taught*, (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 2005)

<sup>219</sup> SWOT is a technique used for analysis of projects and processes.

Online ministry leaders exercise collaborative leadership by facilitating dialogic processes with digital congregants in online sacred spaces. This is done through careful listening. Listening is an indispensable quality of a leader.<sup>220</sup> Digital congregants come to online sacred communities with unmet needs, unmanaged emotions, and unrequited desires in hopes to be satisfied and supported. Careful listening affords the leaders opportunity to discover those needs, learn what practices are ineffective, and gather an understanding of the people's heart matters. They make themselves open to receive constructive feedback and gain new insight that would not have been garnered on their own. Teaching on spirituality and leadership, Virginia Theological Seminary Professor Kathleen Brown stated, "Listening demands a conscious choice to expand our awareness, to sharpen our focus."<sup>221</sup> Collaborative leaders in online sacred spaces will not effectively lead digital disciples without listening to the opinions and perspectives of the people. Listening was proven effective in the digital ministry of Victory Grace Center when it came to its online worship service. When a soloist is unable to facilitate praise and worship live, the leaders rely on playing music from videos on Youtube. Initially, the leaders focused on finding videos they believed enhanced the visual experience, such as live Gospel performances. It was not until members began requesting videos that focused on the lyrics did the leaders realize lyric videos enabled the online parishioners to more fully participate in the worship experience. Even if the parishioners were not familiar with the song, they would know the words and learn the rhythm along the way.

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<sup>220</sup> Maxwell, John C. *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of A Leader*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2019)

<sup>221</sup> Brown, Kathleen. 2021. "Spirituality, Leadership, and Mission: Holy Listening." Lecture, Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA. May 17, 2021

Listening fosters deep personal relationships because it adds value to people. Active listening satisfies other's desire to be heard and it sets the foundation for building relationships. By providing others the space to share, it demonstrates empathy and care for their challenges and concerns. Ministry leaders will learn details needed to understand a situation or comprehend information, thus equipping them with what is necessary to effectively lead. It will provoke reflective thoughts around the relevant ways a leader can minister going forward.

The openness and acceptance that listening provides gives digital congregants the safety and security required in true community. Thomas Martin, a researcher on collaborative leadership, determined that "As we share, there is a sense that wherever you are is okay. Our joys are shared and our distresses seem more manageable."<sup>222</sup> The inclusive environment of sharing is transformative because there is bidirectional learning from members of the community and each person acquires new knowledge.<sup>223</sup> Circular styles germinate seeds of growth by the free flow of ideas and information. Interaction with information and engagement with the thoughts of others allows people to draw insights that can integrate into their life or can increase their understanding of a matter, which can guide their future behavior.

### **Collaborative Leadership in the Digital Church**

There is an opportunity for collaborative leadership to be exercised in the digital church with the involvement of online congregants in the creation of its mission and purpose. The virtual church will neglect the needs of the online community if leaders

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<sup>222</sup> Roebuck, *Circular Leadership: Together We Rise*, 22

<sup>223</sup> Martin, Thomas. 2021. "The effects of collaborative leadership practices on employee satisfaction levels." Ed.D diss., Pepperdine University.  
<https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2208&context=etd>



simply transfer physical church practices to online spaces. When leaders maintain the same stated church mission and the ministry practices of their physical church in their virtual church, leaders resist the evolution of Christian ministry. It is like putting new wine in old wineskins. Jesus said, “And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins” (Luke 10:41-42 [NRSV]). Collaborative leaders in online sacred spaces intentionally involve digital congregants in the creation of the virtual church mission. Gathering their buy-in concerning the mission and purpose of the church online grows the sense of belonging to a caring relational community. It becomes evident that each voice is critical and the presence of each indispensable. It also secures the leader’s commitment to the community and fulfilling its purposes as a result of the intimate process of examining the church’s values, determining what is important to the people in online sacred spaces, and evaluating the church’s ability to meet needs.

Opportunities for collaborative leadership also present themselves in the ministry of *didache*, *koinonia*, and *leitourgia*. Teaching, fellowship, and prayer were the elements of early church gatherings. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42 [NSRV]). These elements remain integral to believers gathering digitally. Still, the methods of *didache*, *koinonia*, and *leitourgia* in cyber sanctuaries must align with the culture of the digital world. Attempting to replicate in virtual environments how teaching, fellowship, and prayer takes place in brick-and-mortar churches displays resistance to the cultural shift to virtual realities and inhibits the emergence of new models of being the church.

In my chapter on *Facilitating Faith Development Digitally*, I discuss in detail educational approaches that help facilitate spiritual growth in digital disciples. Here, I only seek to offer an example of how collaborative leadership presents itself in the teaching ministry. Leading Christian education programs in a lecture style misaligns with the collaborative nature of ministry being done on the cyber scene. Lecture styles of teaching calls learners to submit to a one-way stream of information from an authoritative instructor. The passive consumption of expositional material is not ideal for faith formation and spiritual development. Holding this belief tends to lead ministry heads to “teach in a way that demands obedience to authority, respect for order, and submission to hierarchy.”<sup>224</sup> This method of teaching emphasizes facts instead of focusing on the contextual application (offered through the sharing of diverse viewpoints) that can aid the faith formation of believers.

If the aim in teaching is to bring about transformation, instruction in online sacred spaces must provide an experience of community. Collaborative leaders can facilitate this through the practice of peer-to-peer learning. Peer-to-peer learning increases engagement and improves learning retention. Christian education becomes a communal and collaborative process of learning. The digital environment dictates that collaborative leaders provide digital disciples the opportunity to be sources of educational information. Collaborative learning is embraced when collaborative leaders invite learners to not simply consume facts but to actively process the lessons and demonstrate what they have digested through a dialogue with their peers. When instruction is conducted “as a

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<sup>224</sup> Panzer, Ryan, *Grace and Gigabyte: Being Church in a Tech-Shaped Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020), 93

collaborative exercise between participants, it leads to deep learning.”<sup>225</sup> Digital disciples garner applicable insights when collaborative leaders guide their interaction with material and engagement with others.

The ministry of *koinonia* is critical to churches online, just as it is to churches in physical locations. The difference is the fellowship offered in online sacred spaces is not limited to established operating hours or scheduled ministry events. “Unlike most brick-and-mortar churches, the door of online churches is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.”<sup>226</sup> The setting of cyber sanctuaries allows congregants to connect and engage online on any day at any time. There can be a deeper and richer knowing and accountability online than in-person because the internet offers greater access and daily engagement to members within the community. Church involvement can happen anytime, anywhere, and is not compartmentalized to two hours on a Sunday. Collaborative leaders leverage digital tools to help members maintain a continuous awareness of each other’s life transitions and circumstances. Social media and technological tools like Facebook and GroupMe can serve as sacred spaces for the intimate intertwining of shared life. Online ministry leaders can encourage members of their digital community to post pictures, videos, or share comments about their personal life happenings to foster a rich knowing of one another. Digital congregants can receive support and affirmation from the community on messages, comments, questions, and other information they share. There is access and open communication each day in online sacred spaces.

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<sup>225</sup> Panzer, *Grace and Gigabyte: Being Church in a Tech-Shaped Culture*, 95

<sup>226</sup> Craig, Angela, *Online Jesus: A Guide to Community, Discipleship and Care Online* (Independently Published, 2020), 50

In the physical church, at many American Protestant churches, acts of leitourgia are primarily led by clergy and lay leaders while the congregants participate by prayerfully standing in reverent silence with bowed heads. After prayers of intercession, there is rarely discussion concerning the prayer needs and often the parishioners are left unaware of any changes in circumstances. However, online sacred spaces can make follow-ups to prayer concerns convenient and communal. Members of the digital community can easily engage dialogically about issues of the heart and build interpersonal relationships in the online sacred spaces during and after acts of prayer online. For instance, the online sacred space of Zoom video conferences permits the generation of reports concerning the participants in the Zoom. The report details the participants' stated name and associated email address, if they are registered users. If, during a live worship experience on Zoom, an attendee shares a prayer request in the chat field, digital ministry leaders can take note of the individuals who requested prayer and attempt to connect with them using their associated email to pray with them personally. In the online sacred space of Facebook groups, members can use the "ask for prayer" feature to solicit prayer requests. The other members of their community can acknowledge that they are praying for this member by writing encouraging responses or simply by clicking the "I prayed" button. In the online sacred space of GroupMe, members can receive a group text message notifying them of a member's need for prayer. Participants can acknowledge by "liking" the message or consider replying with a short response such as sharing a Bible verse related to the matter.

Online parishioners are a priesthood of believers embodying, "that everyone has access to God through Christ, without mediation by a priest or clergyperson, and that all

the faithful are equally called to serve God, the church, their community, and their family.”<sup>227</sup> The intimate intertwinement of shared life is fostered when collaborative leaders organize parishioners as a digital priesthood in prayer.<sup>228</sup> For parishioners to feel bonded with one another, online sacred spaces must be a place where the people collaboratively engage in prayer online. Sacred spaces on Facebook offer the opportunity for online congregants to share and be tended to in their community. Members can post prayer concerns, which allows all members of the community, not just ministers, to engage them with prayers, affirmations, and other means of support. These requests become significant events in the shared lives of digital congregants. Members share in the pain and relate to the same brokenness not detached from the one going through the actual experience. The posts become ministry moments that can be revisited by members for continued care. Intimacy and bondedness are developed in online sacred communities when collaborative leaders facilitate a digital priesthood in prayer.

The current season of Christian ministry calls for leadership that fosters true community and spiritual growth in online sacred spaces. Leadership in online sacred communities must be familiar with the culture of technology and digitally literate. Circular styles of leadership make it possible for digital congregants to experience the intimate intertwinement of shared life together where there is a deep knowing presence and the enablement of spiritual growth. Collaborative leadership is a circular style of leadership most suitable for leading online ministry communities.

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<sup>227</sup> Panzer, Ryan, *Grace and Gigabyte: Being Church in a Tech-Shaped Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020), 101

<sup>228</sup> Most Protestant faiths hold the doctrine of the priesthood of believers, viewing all believers as priests, having direct access to God without a human mediator and authority to study and apply Scriptures. Those who follow Catholic teachings affirm the universal priesthood, but distinguish it from a ministerial priesthood where ordained priests exercise the special authority to mediate between God and humanity.



## **Conclusion**

The current season of Christian ministry calls for church leaders to view their social media platforms as online sacred spaces where God is present, and believers online can experience the presence of God and each other. Technological advancements of social media platforms enable ministry leaders to leverage digital media as cyber sanctuaries where congregants can digitally come together for true community and have digital experiences that contribute to their faith formation and development. These sanctified virtual environments offer an invitation to digital disciples to enter community, having their human need for relationship satisfied. With the majority of people seeking relationships online, there is a mandate to ministry leaders to cultivate true community and enable disciples to grow spiritually in online sacred spaces.

It is in true community where human beings can be united in ways reflective of biblical covenantal relationship and garner a deep knowing presence. When ministry leaders facilitate intimate intertwinement of shared life together, online congregants can be cultivated in authentic community where there is accountability, belonging, care, and (inter)dependence. In the authentic community of online sacred spaces, spiritual growth is possible. Given that the internet and technology have reframed how human beings think and learn, ministry leaders ought to consider using educational approaches that align with the networked nature of cyberspace to help develop the faith of digital disciples. I suggest spiritual growth can be fostered in online sacred spaces when facilitated using the social constructivist approaches of collaborative learning and dialogic teaching, where digital disciples co-construct knowledge and work collectively

to reflect and find meaning in their learnings. This engagement creates spiritually transformative experiences, instigating their growth in faith.

The sense of community and spiritual transformation does not have to suffer with doing and being the church online. A leader's capacity to minister online relies on their digital literacy and familiarity with the culture of technology. The effectiveness of their ministry will depend on the style of leadership they exercise when leading their virtual community. I suggest the circular style of collaborative leadership is most suitable for leading online ministry communities because it permits bidirectional influence and reciprocity of education and ideas, which is critical to fostering community and faith formation in digital spaces. When ministry leaders assume a collaborative style of leadership, it aids the intertwinement of shared life together. This allows the leaders to make possible a presence of deep knowing and demonstrate the intentional value and use of others' contributions to the community.

During the research project, I used action research to test my personal theory that circular leadership and social constructivist teaching approaches are more suitable for leading and instructing in virtual environments. The initial design of the project included a multi-phase process of feedback and practice over a series of discipleship programs. However, the time-starved schedules of VGC's servant leaders and their unwillingness to make themselves fully available presented challenges. The opportunity to observe the transformation of their leadership and educational approaches would have allowed for a robust record of real-time changed behavior.

My research does not suggest that doing church digitally ought to replace in person gatherings. Today's technological culture has drawn us to consider what other



aspects of ministry can be supported and sustained by digital means. While online sacred spaces can offer a community of presence where digital disciples can experience spiritual growth, an area of research that remains rests in how ministry leaders theologize and enact pastoral practices, such as the Lord's Supper, Baptism, and core beliefs, such as the Articles of faith, in light of the digital age.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1

Data collection for ministry profile of discipleship Facebook groups



### Victory Grace Center: Facebook Ministry Leader Profile

I, Rev. Britni M. Johnson, am conducting doctoral research related to the formation of leadership in online sacred communities. As a leader of one of VGC discipleship Facebook groups, you are invited to complete the below leadership profile form.

Name

First Name

Last Name

Phone Number

Please enter a valid phone number.

Email

example@example.com

What Facebook Ministry Group do you lead?



Now create your own Jotform - It's free!

Create your own Jotform

---

How long have you been the leading this ministry group? (Years/Months)

What is the mission and purpose of the discipleship ministry group you oversee?

Type here...

How does the mission and purpose of this ministry connect with your personal passions? (Please explain in detail)

Type here...

What statement best describes your efforts?

- The boxer, it's getting up more than you've been knocked down
- The marathoner, it's running another ten miles when your strength is gone
- The soldier, it's going over the hill, not knowing what's waiting on the other side
- The missionary, it's saying good-bye to your own comfort to make life better for others
- The leader, it's all that and more because everyone you lead is depending on you



Now create your own Jotform - It's free!

Create your own Jotform

Type here...

**How do you facilitate the spiritual growth of members in the Facebook group?**

Type here...

**If your group has gathered in person during the last 12 months, please describe the purpose of this gathering.**

Type here...

**What characteristic or traits does a leader in digital ministry need?**

Type here...



Type here...

If you or another leader facilitated lessons or discussions for this ministry group online, please describe the event AND the engagement of the participants during this lesson/discussion.

Type here...

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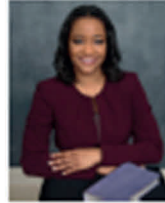
**Thank you for completing your ministry profile. You will receive information related to the upcoming leadership workshop soon. Please click the submit button below.**

---

Submit

## Appendix 2

Survey of participants in the discipleship Facebook groups



### Victory Grace Center: Facebook Ministry Group Survey

I, Rev. Britni M. Johnson, am conducting a survey in support of my doctoral research. By completing the below survey, you will help broaden my insights into VGC's cultivation of community and spiritual growth in its discipleship Facebook groups. All responses are anonymous. Questions should be answered based on your experiences with the ministry in Facebook only. Thank you for your participation. I pray the Lord will reward you for your efforts.

Select 1: Which discipleship group are you a part of?

- VGC Marriage (Couples' Ministry)
- Men with Victory (Men's Ministry)
- Sista's with Victory (Women's Ministry)
- YAM-V-Millionaire's Club (Young Adult Ministry)

How long have you participated in this discipleship group?

- Less than a year
- 1 to 3 years
- More than 3 years

What is your engagement level in this ministry group on Facebook?

- I initiate posting in the Facebook group
- I often comment on posts in the Facebook group
- I primarily like posts in the Facebook group
- I only peruse the Facebook group from time to time



Now create your own Jotform - it's free!

Create your own Jotform

Based on your knowledge and experiences with this ministry group, what do you understand is the purpose and mission of this ministry group?

Type here...

What words best describe your thoughts and feelings when you are engaged in this ministry Facebook group? (Select 3)

- Clarity
- Confusion
- Community
- Connectedness
- Comradery
- Depth
- Fear
- Forgotten
- Growth
- Joy
- Laughter
- Learning
- Limited
- Lost
- Love
- Reflective
- Safety
- Shallow
- Stagnant
- Transformation
- Unity
- Uplifted
- Vulnerability

How connected do you feel to other members when you participate in this Facebook group?

- I feel totally connected, I know other members in this group personally
- I feel somewhat connected, but I have no significant relationships with others in this Facebook group
- I do not feel a sense of connection with



Now create your own Jotform - it's free!

[Create your own Jotform](#)

In the last 12 months, has the ministry of this group on Facebook contributed to your spiritual growth?

- Yes, very much so  
 Yes, but moderately  
 No, not at all

Please describe a discipleship experience in this group that transformed you or left you feeling changed.

Type here...

Please describe any hinderances to your spiritual growth when engaging in the Facebook group.

Type here...

What contributes to your spiritual growth the most?

- A lecture-style: The teacher delivers the lesson, sharing thoughts and ideas concerning the subject
- A collaborative method: Participating in a group discussion where thoughts and ideas on a topic bring forth beliefs and values
- Through observation and modeling: Following the beliefs and behaviors of a leader
- Dialogue and Reflection: Finding value and meaning through answering questions and reflecting on thoughts

What are some things this particular ministry group can do to better meet your needs for community and/or discipleship through Facebook?

Type here...



Now create your own Jotform - It's free!

Create your own Jotform



**Thank you for completing the survey.  
Your contributions will support my  
doctoral research. Please click submit  
below.**

Submit

### **Appendix 3**

Interview questions of V-partners who actively participate in the online sacred communities of Zoom and Facebook

1. Where does your faith journey begin and what is the story around you becoming a Christian?
2. Tell me about your childhood church: The Pastor, the People, the denomination.
3. How did you come to connect with Victory Grace Center?
4. What keeps you at VGC?
5. VGC is an online church with “physical presence.” In what ways, has the presence of people online provided you a personal sense of community?
6. How have you recognized a move of God in your life since worshipping and fellowshiping online?
7. What ministry program or service is most meaningful to you and contributes most to your spiritual growth? Why do you think that is?

## Appendix 4

### Leadership Workshop Curriculum

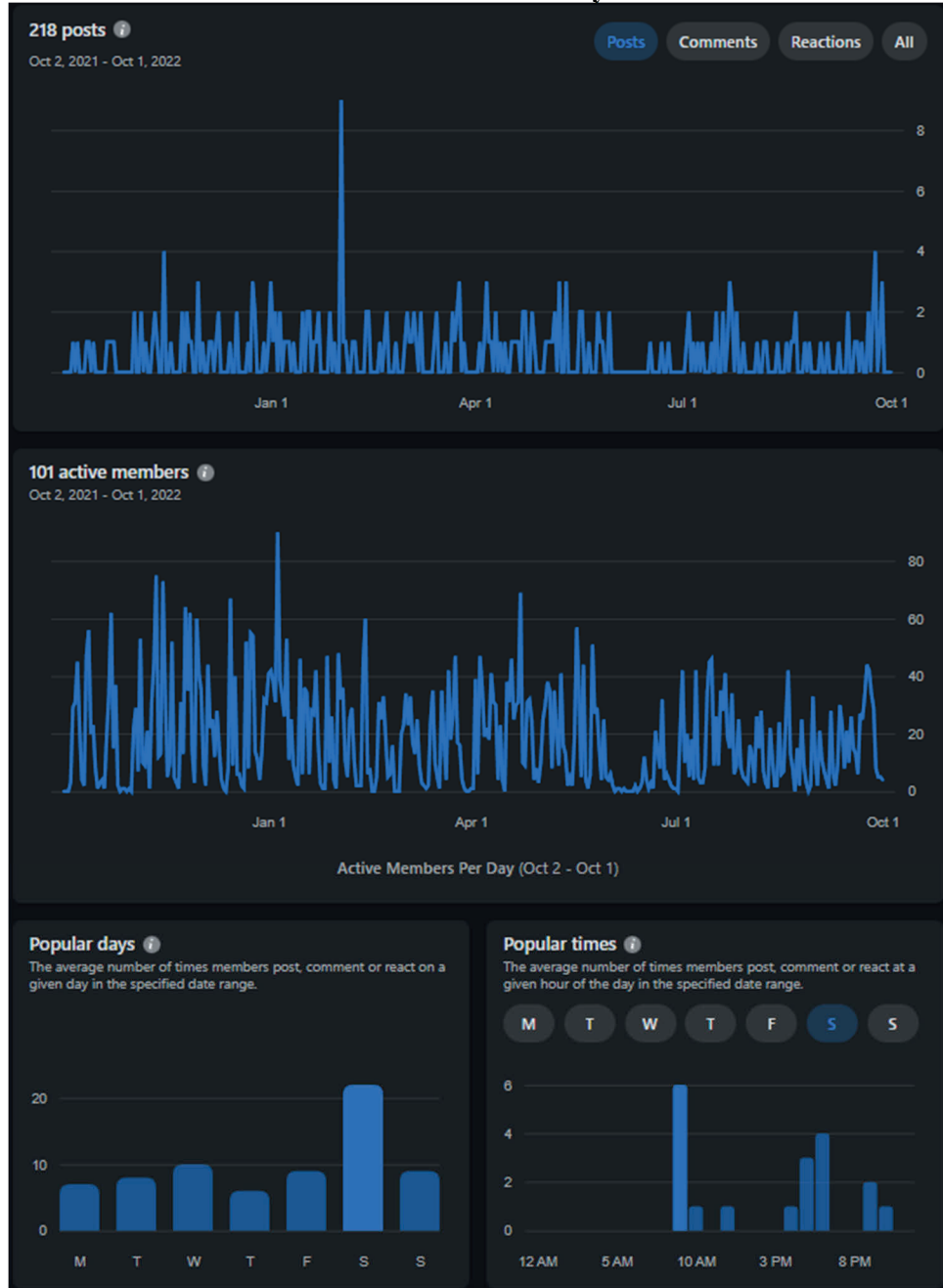
The following outlines the curriculum used to facilitate the 19 July 2022, leadership workshop. The leadership workshop was designed to help the leaders understand their call to ministry in an online church, learn what Christian community looks like online, and acquire educational approaches that facilitate faith formation and development.

<b>Formation of Leadership in an Online Sacred Community</b>	
<b>Module</b>	<b>Components</b>
The Call to Leadership	Biblical Calls to Leadership  Understanding your call to leading an online sacred community <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Commitment</li><li>• Connection</li><li>• Care</li></ul>
Human Beings in Community Online	Relational Design of Human Beings  Models of Biblical Covenantal Relationships  Cultivating communities online
Teaching Sacred Online Communities	Dialogical Teaching Approach  Collaborative Learning Strategies

## Appendix 5

### Discipleship Facebook Group Data

#### Sistas with Victory

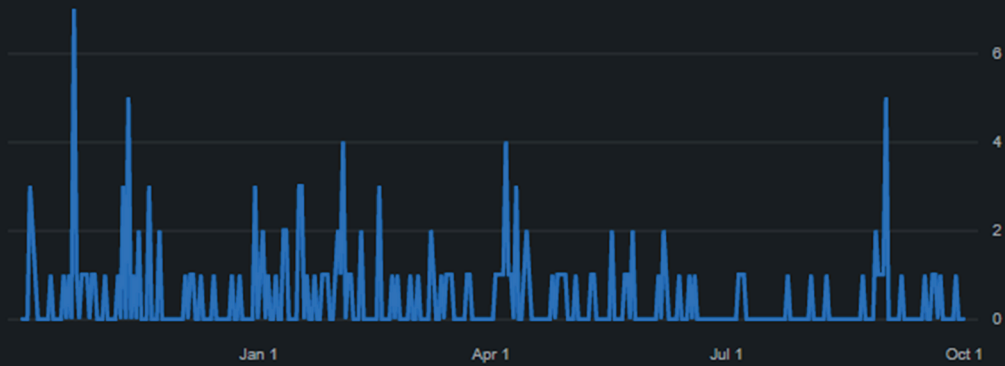


# YAM-V-Millionaire Club

159 posts

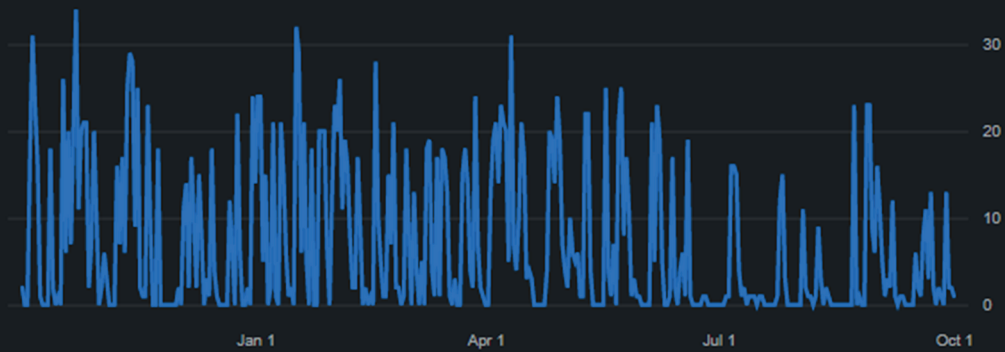
Oct 2, 2021 - Oct 1, 2022

Posts Comments Reactions All



43 active members

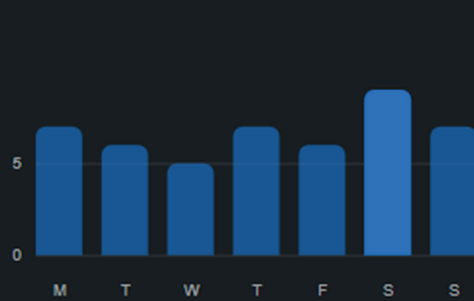
Oct 2, 2021 - Oct 1, 2022



Active Members Per Day (Oct 2 - Oct 1)

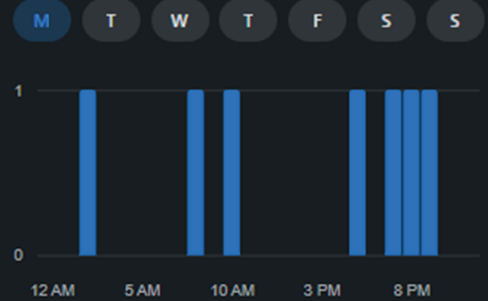
Popular days

The average number of times members post, comment or react on a given day in the specified date range.

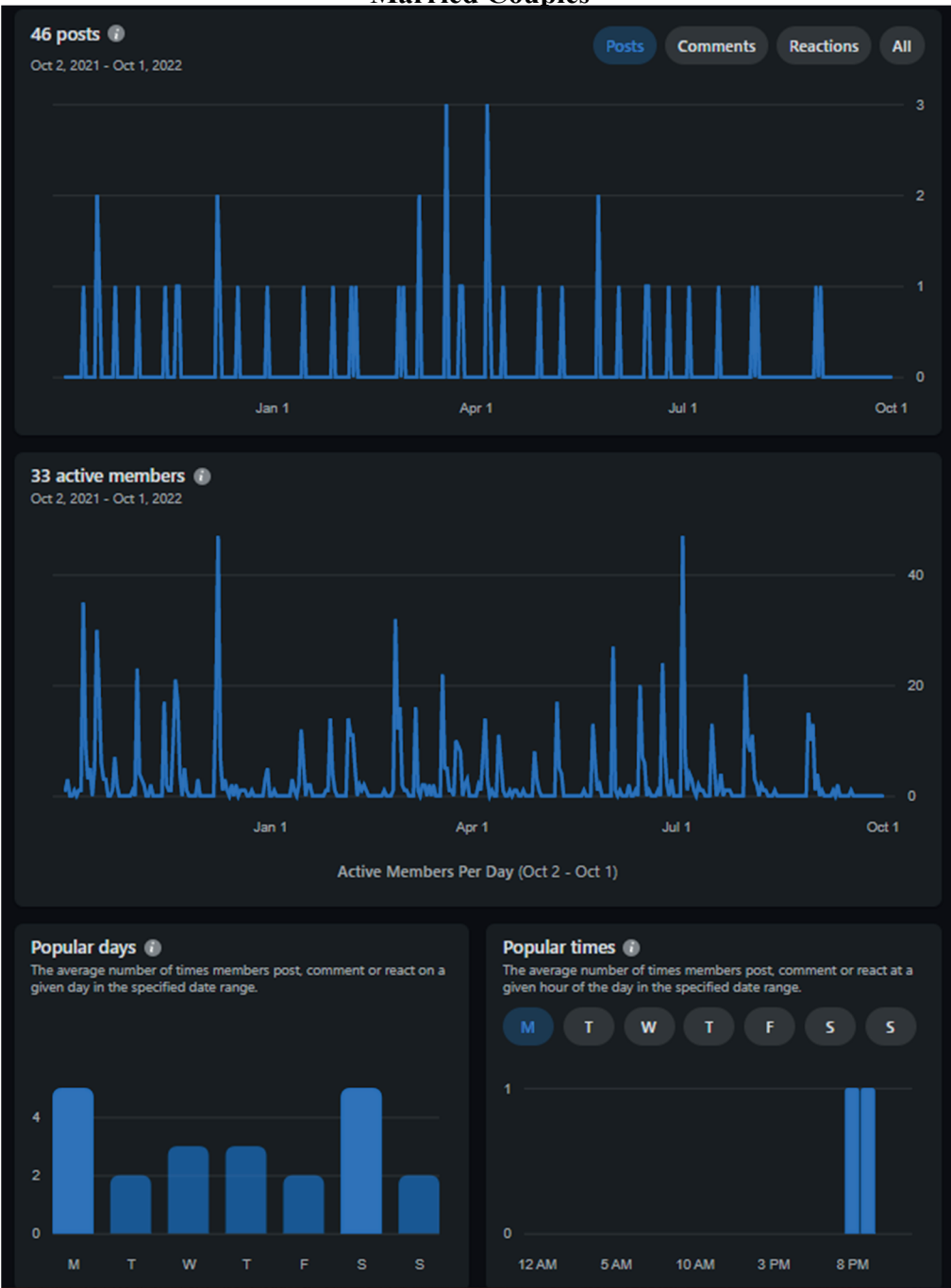


Popular times

The average number of times members post, comment or react at a given hour of the day in the specified date range.



# Married Couples



# Men with Victory

161 posts ⓘ

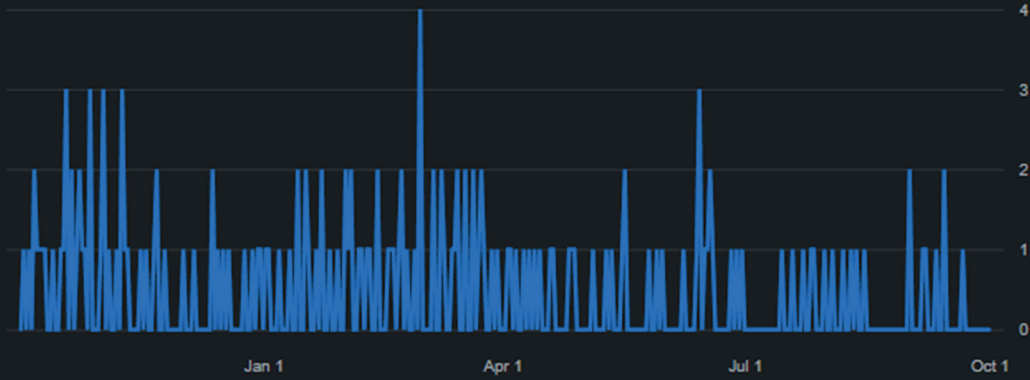
Oct 2, 2021 - Oct 1, 2022

Posts

Comments

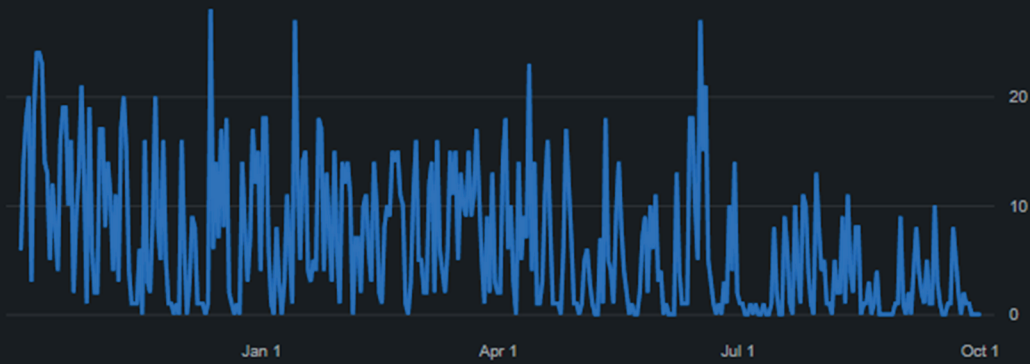
Reactions

All



34 active members ⓘ

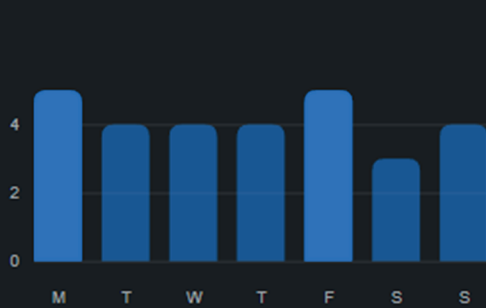
Oct 2, 2021 - Oct 1, 2022



Active Members Per Day (Oct 2 - Oct 1)

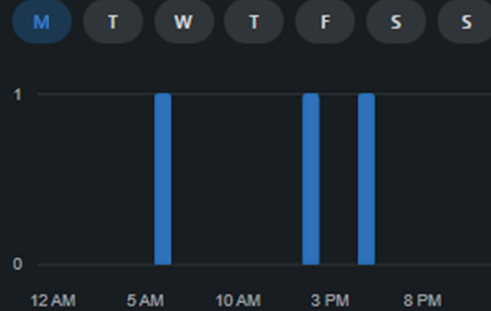
Popular days ⓘ

The average number of times members post, comment or react on a given day in the specified date range.



Popular times ⓘ

The average number of times members post, comment or react at a given hour of the day in the specified date range.



## Appendix 6

Post-discipleship program survey

When God Knows Your Name  
VGC Young Adult Ministry Discipleship Program  
September 1, 2022

Please provide your feedback concerning your participation in this discipleship program.

Please describe your key learnings/take-aways from the discipleship program “When God Changes Your Name.”

What part of the lesson benefit you personally? Please explain how or why.

Did you feel like you were able to contribute your own ideas and insights to the lesson/discussion during the discipleship program?

- Yes
- No
- I participated through Facebook, not Zoom

What can the leaders do to help you grow spiritually through other discipleship program?



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