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Study guide

The virtual church?

ELCA communities grapple with the future of digital worship

By Robert C. Blezard

The internet has opened a “whole new world” to faith communities—but it’s one that is still unfamiliar and in need of exploration for many church leaders and followers of Jesus. As congregations expand beyond the sturdy buildings that have served as the center of church life for hundreds of years, the digital church offers hope, opportunity and challenge.

EXERCISE 1: THE DIGITAL AGE

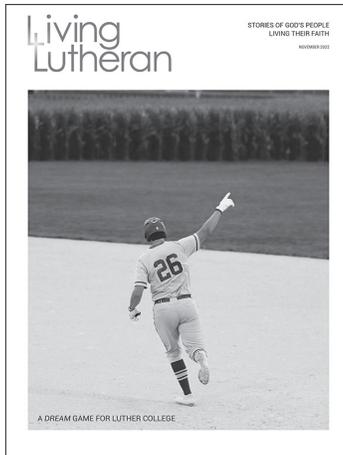
In only a few decades, the internet has mushroomed from an obscure tool for the military and government to a commercial juggernaut that has changed virtually every area of our lives. How much? Reflect on how, before the internet, you used to accomplish everyday tasks in these areas. Discuss what was gained with each transition, as well as what was lost. After your discussion, ask, “Are we better off now?”

- Banking.
- Shopping.
- Reading.
- Keeping up with news.
- Communicating with friends and family.
- Watching movies.
- Watching TV.
- Listening to music.
- Telephoning.

EXERCISE 2: SOCIAL CHANGES

COVID-19 has changed how many Americans conduct their everyday lives, from their occupations to their avocations. Discuss how the following developments have affected you, your family or community:

- Working from home, rather than commuting to a workplace.
- Playing games with friends online, rather than in person.
- Making a doctor “visit” via telemedicine.
- Gathering virtually with family or friends.
- Using a restaurant delivery service rather than dining out.



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- Watching new movies at home rather than in a theater.
- Taking classes online rather than in person.

EXERCISE 3: PANDEMIC PUSH

Many churches were already adopting digital worship and outreach before the pandemic began in 2020, but experts say that COVID-19 greatly accelerated the pace. It has been the occasion for both innovation and disruption. Discuss:

- How did the pandemic affect congregational life for most churches? How did it affect your congregation or ministry in the following areas:
 - Financial
 - Attendance
 - Worship life
 - Christian education
 - Social activities
 - Community outreach
- How did your congregation cope?
- What factors during the pandemic created an urgency for digital options in church functions? How and why?
- When the pandemic hit, how well prepared were most churches to enter into the digital age? Explain.
- How did your congregation or ministry adapt to digital church? Would you describe that adaptation as easy, challenging or difficult? Why?
- Describe the challenges of digital church, as well as the opportunities.
- What's next?

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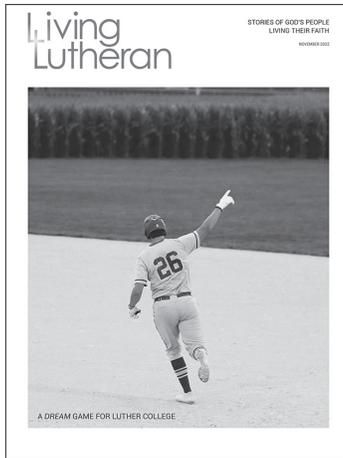


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EXERCISE 4: ONLINE WORSHIP PROS AND CONS

Digital and online worship opened up new opportunities for congregations, but also brought challenges. How has your church fared?

- Make a list of the benefits of online worship. When done, discuss how congregations and congregants are taking advantage of these opportunities.
- Make a list of the drawbacks of online worship. When done, discuss how congregations and congregants are suffering or missing out as a result of these drawbacks.
- Overall, which is greater with online worship—the benefits or the drawbacks? Why?



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EXERCISE 5: DIGITAL JESUS

Online worship raises some interesting theological questions for God's faithful people and their communities of faith:

- Jesus promises that where two or more are gathered in his name, he is also. How is Jesus present in a congregation gathering in person? If additional people join the gathering online, is Jesus present to them?
- Does Jesus' presence in worship continue after the service has been recorded? If congregants don't participate in a church while it is livestreamed, choosing to watch it at a later time, is Jesus present with them? Why or why not?
- After confession, when the minister announces the forgiveness of sins, is absolution effective among those participating via livestream? How about those who watch the service at a later time? Why or why not?
- During the eucharist, the pastor says the words of institution and acknowledges that the bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ, containing the real presence of Jesus. If congregants are watching by livestream and participating in eucharist with their own bread and wine (or grape juice), is Jesus still present in the elements? Explain. If congregants are participating at a later time, is Jesus present for their home eucharist?
- For God, who made earth, matter, space and time, is anything impossible? Do any of the foregoing present obstacles that God cannot overcome?

EXERCISE 6: THE HYBRID CHURCH

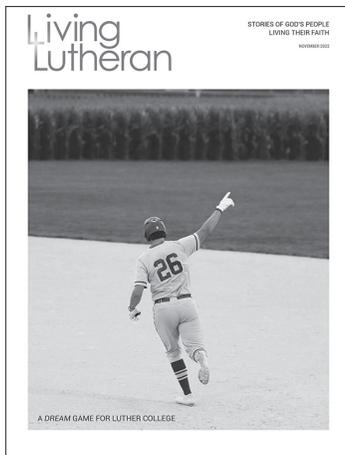
As a result of the pandemic, most congregations are operating in "hybrid mode"—offering both online and in-person gatherings for worship and other occasions.

- From what you have experienced or heard about, how well does hybrid church work?
- For congregations that do hybrid church well, what has been the source of their success? What are they doing right?
- For congregations that aren't doing hybrid church well, what are they doing wrong? How could they improve?
- What has been your congregation's experience of hybrid church? What is going well? What needs improving? How can your congregation make things better?

EXERCISE 6: THE METAVERSE

The technology for 3-D digital experiences is being perfected all the time, and it's clear that virtual reality capability will be widely and inexpensively available in the foreseeable future. This may be a game-changer for some aspects of congregational life.

- What's your reaction?
 - You have to be kidding! My congregation doesn't even do virtual worship!
 - We are still getting our livestreaming perfected. Maybe in the future.



About the study guide author:

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is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has done further study at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.), now called United Lutheran Seminary.



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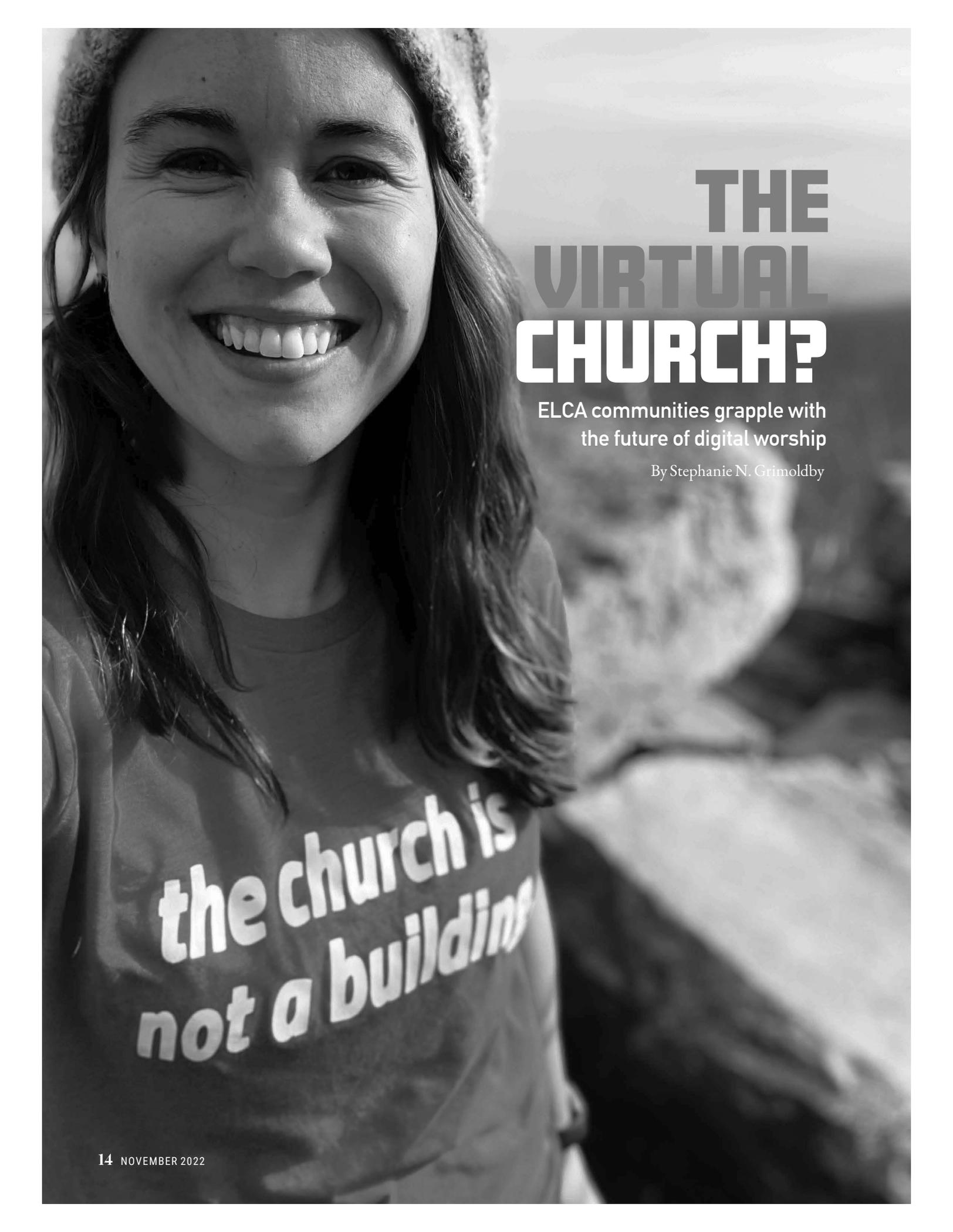
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- Oh no, not another digital tool to learn!
- Can't wait! It will be fun to expand our capabilities.
- What do you see as the metaverse's potential? What about the drawbacks?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In-person ministry is great for building community and developing relationships, but it requires everyone to be together in the same place at the same time. Many find it more convenient to gather online through digital conferencing and other tools. How can a congregation help build community and relationships online? How is your congregation managing? What might be helpful strategies?
- Digital and online tools are quite useful for some church ministries but not for others. What types of church programs or events are conducive to online tools? How can a congregation best utilize them? What church programs or events are unsuitable for online tools? How can a congregation best continue to offer them non-digitally?
- The pandemic forced many digital-shy congregations to plunge into the deep water of internet and digital offerings. What was your congregation's response? What's going well, and what's not going well? What have you learned? What's next?
- What's been your personal response to the digital universe that has opened up in the last 30 years? How has it changed your life? Your congregation's life?
- Make a list of the pros and cons of the digital church in your ministry context. Now list the opportunities and the challenges it presents. Discuss whether digital church is worth the effort.
- What's next for your congregation in using online and digital tools for ministry?



THE VIRTUAL CHURCH?

ELCA communities grapple with
the future of digital worship

By Stephanie N. Grimoldby

Bounce around the internet for a while and you'll catch wind of how virtual reality experiences, such as those sought in the metaverse, are supposed to change the world—and soon.

Pre-COVID-19, these conversations might not have meant much to congregations. But since the outbreak of the pandemic, which forced nearly all congregations to close their doors at some point and made “going digital” one of the only ways to connect with congregations, conversations about the digital future have taken on new meaning for the church.

“Every church dealt with this and has its own story regarding what decisions they came to [during the pandemic],” said Craig Mueller, a pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Chicago. “Nearly every church is continuing some kind of worship presence online, even if they weren't doing it before, so it really is a whole new world.”

Today, some churches are expressing further interest in that “whole new world” in the context of the metaverse, a 3D virtual world accessed when a person straps on a virtual reality headset. The technology gives them the sensation of “stepping” inside a virtual community—which could easily be a church, some spiritual leaders have said.

And though some congregations are sprinting toward the latest in digital church, most remain comfortably in hybrid mode: offering both in-person and online opportunities to gather. Some are slowly moving back into pre-COVID ways of existing almost exclusively in-person.

Is there a right or wrong way for churches to assemble in a post-pandemic future?

“The pandemic just exploded our sense of what church is, what being connected to people is, what community looks like,” said Deanna Thompson, director of the Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minn. “There's not a one-size-fits-all [solution].”

In his book *Any Body There?: Worship and Being Human in a Digital Age* (Wipf & Stock, 2017), Mueller argues that in-person, embodied, sacramental worship is an antidote to our fast-paced, distracted digital lives.

Today he still believes that. But he also concedes that online components of the church are necessary.

“I feel most comfortable thinking that it always needs to be parallel, that there always needs to be encouragement for in-person participation—if health and distance allow it—for experiencing bodily not only the sacraments but the engagement of our senses,” he said. “But with health and distance [as part of the equation], we do need to provide digital options for people.”

Thompson said churches need to have thoughtful conversations with their community and ask

IS THERE A RIGHT OR WRONG WAY FOR CHURCHES TO ASSEMBLE IN A POST- PANDEMIC FUTURE?

the questions that will lead them to serve their congregation best.

“What did we learn about what it means to be church during the pandemic? How did these tools help us, how did they make things harder, how do we want to be with people moving forward?” she asked.

“I think there's room for, hopefully, experimentation.”

DEEP QUESTIONS

Determining participation in digital worship isn't simply a question of whether a church has the resources, both monetary and bodily, to provide such opportunities.

“We're in an interesting position right now because there are still some deep theological questions that parallel the technological ones,” said John Weit, a deacon and the ELCA executive for worship. “And we're taking our time to not rush to answers. So it would be difficult to give concrete answers to [these] questions, but more to note that the questions will

BUT NOW'S A GREAT TIME TO BE SAYING, AS A CHURCH, 'HOW CAN WE USE THESE TOOLS STRATEGICALLY?'

continue to be in front of us for some time as we navigate these waters as church and world.”

Part of the sensitivity of parsing those big questions is that Lutherans are centered in word and sacrament, Mueller said. “Our liturgy is meant to not only be multisensory and embodied, but participatory,” he said.

Mueller believes congregations need to make sure they’re asking questions and talking through the answers rather than thinking there are absolute paths forward right now.

“[During] the pandemic, my experience showed that people can experience community online and they also can experience divine presence, which, in some ways, is surprising to people,” he said. “What I learned through my experience and now through other people who watch primarily online [is that] they are experiencing grace and the gospel ... while being online.

“We all are needing to take this into account and are in some ways having to think theologically about it in retrospect,” he added. “People now worship online and there is no going back.”

REACHING THOSE WHO NEED COMMUNITY MOST

Unlike most congregations, Faith Lutheran in Flower Mound, Texas, got on the digital bandwagon early.

When Rusty Sullivan began his call as a pastor of Faith in 2010, the congregation didn’t have any digital ministry; there weren’t even projector screens in the church, he said.

“That was fine, but we went to work pretty early on to say, listen, if we’re going to be a place for *all* people—and all means all—[if] we want to be able to connect with people of different backgrounds and interests and passions, then we’re going to need to

diversify the ways in which we’re going to share the gospel,” he said.

Faith created an in-house digital ministry, and the congregation’s first online broadcast took place in 2017.

The church had been online for only a few months when the lone staff member who ran the streaming system was hospitalized on a Saturday night. Faith couldn’t broadcast its service the next day.

That Monday, Sullivan received a call from someone in rural Wyoming questioning why the Sunday service hadn’t been broadcast. The man explained he had been gathering with about 20 other people each week for nearly two months to watch Faith’s services online and then have lunch and discuss the sermon.

“They didn’t have a church close by they were connected with,” Sullivan recalled. “After I apologized profusely to him, I said to him, ‘I tell you what, you hang in there with us, and I promise ... our failure to adequately plan will not happen again.’

“We’ve never missed a broadcast since.”

Sullivan said communicating the importance of digital media was difficult at that time because from 2017 to 2019 only about a dozen of the ELCA’s 125 largest congregations were doing any meaningful work online. Online worship was often criticized by others in ministry, he said. “That wasn’t authentic church to them.”

Beginning in March 2020, Sullivan started fielding around 15 calls a day from those same colleagues, and many others, asking how to build an online presence.

“As game-changing as the printing press was to the Reformation ... so, too, is digital technology for our 21st-century ministry mission,” he said. “That was the truth prior to the pandemic, which is why we were already heavily invested years before it happened. But now the world has experienced church in a new way. ...



Matthew 14:22-24
Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

The Storms we don't expect



It's a mistake to think we can, or should, put the genie back in the bottle."

Thompson, once a digital skeptic, agreed.

In her book *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Abingdon Press, 2016), Thompson chronicles her life after being diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer and shares how digital tools helped her heal.

"To my shock, digital spaces were spaces where I could feel most myself when I was really sick, because in-person communication was really, really painful. People would look at my body, [which] looked like I was dying, and that determined the conversation," she said.

Thompson noted Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 12 that the members of the body who seem weakest are the least dispensable. Those are the people on whom the church should be focused most fully, she said.

"Some people are not coming back to church because they like being in their PJs on a Sunday morning," she acknowledged. "But a lot of people are [immunocompromised]. Some, when COVID started, were 87. Now they're 90. Many will not come back. [For] people with children with significant sensory issues, worshiping in-home is a better experience for their family. Many of our churches are not ADA-accessible ... there's a lot of barriers to in-person worship.

"We can be so much more discerning now than we could have been back before the pandemic," she continued. "There are ways that [digital worship] is inferior to in-person ... but now's a great time to be saying, as a church, 'How can we use these tools strategically?'"

PAIRING ONLINE AND IN-PERSON MINISTRY

Daniel Kirschbaum, ELCA director for Young Adult Ministry, said one question he heard asked most often during COVID was, "Is a real community something we could accomplish in a digital world?"

After helping launch Abide, an online small-group ministry for young adults, in 2020, Kirschbaum had an answer.

"Yes—100%, yes," he said. "Community and connection happened in a digital space because we were still able to create new relationships. They had, if anything, more [connection] to one another."

So, how will those connections change and develop in a post-COVID world?

Something Sullivan has emphasized time and again with his own digital skeptics is that Faith—and other similar congregations—are interested in digital worship not as a way of putting on a show but as a means of increasing connection.

"We don't want an audience, we want a church," he said. "That's also why we're always trying to encourage them to connect where they are. 'Building relationships that matter' is our [congregation's] tagline. You cannot love from afar. ... You can connect in terms of transferring information and concerns, but you've got to love up close and personal. And we're called to love God and love people. That has to translate into some real and tangible ways."

Faith encourages online followers to join a small group or to find other ways to connect to people in their area, Sullivan said. After the congregation

IT'S ABOUT, WHY DO YOU GO TO CHURCH, ANYWAY?

recently worked on a build with Habitat for Humanity, he mentioned it during a service. Subsequently, many of Faith's small groups around the country also volunteered locally with the organization.

Pre-COVID, Sammy Kelly and Michele Barra met while both serving at New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church in New Tripoli, Pa. They bonded over recognizing that digital media was a ministry, and that many congregations needed help navigating that ministry.

In 2019 they co-founded Digivangelism (digivangelism.org) to help spiritual communities reach people online. The company provides digital ministry guides, courses and reviews to help leaders "be church online."

Digivangelism exists to aid groups in building their digital media presence, yet Barra believes online resources should also support in-person endeavors.

"Churches who are going to thrive after this are going to be the ones who have both options open, who maintain a digital presence to give opportunities to those who geographically aren't close to them, who don't want to come anymore, or younger folks who it's not a timely convenience for," she said.

"[But] you can't work at a food bank digitally. You can't have a school backpack fundraiser digitally. It's not just about you, it's about, why do you go to church, anyway? To follow Jesus, to do what he says to do: feed the hungry, clothe the sick. And we do those things in relational, in-person ways."

THE METAVERSE AND BEYOND

Some ELCA congregations are already discussing what many see as part of the future of digital worship: expanding into the metaverse.

"I just got my first Oculus six to eight months ago," said Sullivan, referring to the virtual-reality headset. "As soon as I put my Oculus on, I thought, 'This is awesome. If it's awesome for me to play a game, then why wouldn't it be awesome for me to share the gospel?' I don't know yet how we're going to do that, but certainly I think that's going to be a next step for us."

Hope Palm Desert, an ELCA congregation in Palm Desert, Calif., sees the metaverse as the natural next step in expanding its online presence. Rick Bailard, online leader of Hope Palm Desert, noted that churches utilizing the metaverse aren't novel; Life.Church has existed solely in the metaverse since 2016.

"It's just a new world now," he said. "You're just not going to be able to do church as your grandparents did church 10, 15 years down the road. No one in their 30s or younger are going to go to a church in which the technology is so far behind."

Phil LaDeur, ELCA program manager for Innovation and Ideas, said his work is focused on how people outside the ELCA are finding meaning and belonging.

"The metaverse is one of those places where that's happening," he said. "Our team has spent time in the metaverse and are discovering some of the unique ways people are using that space to create community. For example, the deaf and hard of hearing community has a large presence in social [virtual reality] worlds. [Not only] can they educate people about [their] community, they create their own hangout space and sign in real time with other users."

Similarly, LaDeur said, neurodivergent users have entered the metaverse to create their own immersive worlds that convey their experience of the physical world to their friends and family.

The goal of utilizing any digital media, even the metaverse, isn't to use technology for technology's sake, Bailard said.

"If you're in [a] rural area where your people are still coming to church with [a] horse and buggy and that works for you, then do it," he said. "We're not saying there is one method, all online, you have to use it. We're just saying there's a big world out there, and if we can use technology to reach people we can't even see right now ... why would you want us not to do that?" †

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