


Article

What Comes Next: Continuing the Digital Ecclesiology Conversation in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: This essay seeks to add to the emerging conversation regarding digital ecclesiology. In short, digital ecclesiology is an ongoing conversation not only about how congregations use technology but craft digital spaces for worship and ministry. This essay will seek to add in four ways. First, this essay will explore the concern of techno-ontology. As articulated by Ashley John Moyse, techno-ontology occurs when humans lose their identity to technology by being conformed to the limits of technology. Concerns such as “Zoom fatigue” and content proliferation will be given attention here. Next, this essay will explore a homiletic response which was adopted largely wholesale, whether done so critically or uncritically, during the COVID-19 pandemic—conversational preaching. Then, this concern will come into focus through a brief textual analysis of Hebrews 10:19–25. Finally, a way forward—the “what comes next”—will be considered and proposed. This way forward will be articulated in two forms. First, there will be the overall ecclesiastical, or congregational, focus. Second, there will be the specific homiletic and liturgical focus. The essay will conclude with an invitation for continued conversation.

Keywords: digital ecclesiology; techno-ontology; conversational preaching; technology; disability; pastoral care; discipleship



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1. Introduction

The conversation about digital ecclesiology, accentuated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, remains an emerging one. The term was first coined by Elizabeth Drescher in a 2012 interview (Drescher 2012), popularized by the Aqueduct Project (Armstrong 2019), and quantified by Heidi Campbell in a pre-COVID publication (Campbell 2020). Digital ecclesiology is not only an ongoing conversation about how congregations use technology but also about how to shape digital spaces for ministry and worship. As such, concerns abound. The question driving this essay is to what extent the conversation of digital ecclesiology remains warranted. This essay seeks to address some of the concerns that have developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, explores how the church has responded to these concerns, examines what scripture says regarding digital ecclesiology, and proposes a way forward for the conversation.

2. The Problem of Techno-Ontology

Humanity has always had a tenuous relationship with technology. The very same radiation invented to cure cancer was also weaponized to mercilessly annihilate millions with the push of one button. Films in the *Terminator* and *Matrix* franchises, as well as individual films like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, *Minority Report*, and *Ex Machina*, demonstrate both the potential for good and also evil of technology. On a lesser extreme, the roles of creator and created bounce back and forth. For example, humanity created cameras and cellular telephones and social media apps. Yet, these creations are used by users to create an online persona. Recent research into use of social media by teenagers demonstrates the continued concern that even moderate use of social media is leading to an acceleration of wide-spread mental health issues among young persons

(Vogels et al. 2022). Technology is becoming more and more pervasive, and even those who advocate for its use (such as this author) cannot help but become a bit suspicious of its continued usefulness and effectiveness.

The concern bubbling just below the existential surface is not necessarily technology itself but how technology dehumanizes the very humans who brought technology into existence, what Ashley John Moyse terms as “techno-ontology”. Moyse argues that we must discern the industrial, moral and political techniques that are used to “instrumentalize human life, reducing human being to a brute materiality, a *bare life*” (Moyse 2021, p. xix). Moyse further argues that we must condemn “technocratic ideations of control over nature and people that have forged economic programs (i.e., industrial capitalism) and political structures (i.e., corporate-military-industrial complex) that are complicit in the technological determining of the material structures of the world, and that define what is possible—specifically, what is possible for the perpetual progress and profit of economic programs and corporate structures themselves” (Moyse 2021, p. xxi).

According to Moyse, techno-ontology occurs when human lose our identity to technology by being conformed to the limits of technology (Moyse 2021, pp. 22–23). On one hand, colloquially speaking, we become nothing more than a face on a screen. In order to meet ever-growing demands of connection, especially during the recent pandemic, we commit to more and more meetings only to find ourselves dreading each successive meeting—leading to what Zoom’s founder Eric Yuan coined “Zoom fatigue” (Charter 2021). On the other hand, we become more than our brand content. In order to remain relevant, also especially during the pandemic, we churn out more and more content in order to remain engaged with fans, subscribers, and patrons—leading to what has been labeled as “content proliferation”, which it is now being revealed actually hurts one’s brand (Arshad 2019).

What is needed is “a form of ethical or humanizing performance that moves beyond the hegemony of our technological society and toward a kind of educative, and therefore transformative, material social practice” (Moyse 2021, p. xxii). The reality of our present moment is that the presence and use of technology cannot be avoided or ignored. The challenge is how we, as users of technology, address the crisis of technology while also developing an ethical practice. This is where Felicia Wu Song’s notions of “digital ecology” and “counterliturgy” deserve some attention before going any further, as they provide conceptual railing for the forthcoming conversation. The notion of “digital ecology”, drawing on Postman’s influence, serves us “a particular and powerful story about who we are as human being and how we should live together” that “conforms us into its narrative image as we more deeply embed its artifacts and practices into our most fundamental ways of being and living out our days” (Song 2021, p. 32). Much like Moyse’s concept of techno-ontology, Song’s concept of digital ecology connects the meaning we allow ourselves to experience to our devices. The more “likes” we receive, the better we feel about ourselves. Song’s response to this is what she calls “counterliturgy”—spiritual practices that draw from long-standing Christian tradition that reconnect us with “the work of the people” enacted, in this case, through technological applications (Song 2021, pp. 143–46). In other words, the church seeks to use technology to facilitate an ethical ecclesiology that seeks to offer an embodied faith to disembodied participants.

3. An Attempt at Adaptation

The closing of houses or worship across the globe in March 2020 forced the Christian faith to take an innovative stance. How would worship, preaching, pastoral care and discipleship occur when we could not be in shared space? The idea of preaching online was not entirely new, as some congregations have been broadcasting their services and sermons almost since the television became a staple product of the American household. However, it was niche. Only larger congregations with big budgets (or televangelists whose entire shtick was pandering to television audiences [Reid and Hogan 2012, pp. 53–65]) were engaged in such activity. Or, at least, so it was assumed.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced countless Christian congregation to adapt to the new reality or close—in some cases, close permanently. Preachers scurried to set up recording studios in their offices or determine safety protocols for conducting worship services in empty sanctuaries. Personally, despite my own training in theatre and competency with technology, I put little thought into how my small congregation would transition to digital worship. I thought about the *service*, not how that service would be facilitated. I simply set up our tripod in the sanctuary, adjusted my iPhone accordingly and pushed the “Live” button on our Facebook app. It took me a couple of weeks to realize that the words on the screen behind me were actually backwards to those viewing the service.

This indicates the assumptions that many made during the transition from in-person to online worship. It fell under the category of “what they do not teach you in seminary”. Additionally, while these moves demonstrate adaptability in the face of an unknown crisis, much of what was done—and continues to be done—uncritically. An example of this uncritical homiletic and pastoral reflection is what many have called this kind of preaching—*conversational*. The use of term denotes style of the delivery, not necessarily the structure of the sermon. Filming a sermon in advance allows for a more “conversational” (i.e., relaxed) style of delivery. For example, Isaac Adams encouraged preachers to be more “conversational” because everyone knows that no one is home in the sanctuary, thus there is no need to be so formal (Adams 2020).

In all fairness, there is nothing wrong or inappropriate with adopting a less rigid and more natural way of communicating. Preachers should preach authentically. In fact, as Jacobsen has noted, preachers who delve into more conversational approaches to preaching should be commended because of the vulnerability that is made present when the preacher invites more participation in the sermon (Jacobsen 2018, pp. 29–33). Additionally, these comments are not intended to minimize the countless caring pastors who took to the airwaves to shepherd their scattered and huddled flocks. In another context, praise would be offered at this innovation.

The issue being taken here is with the assumption that preaching is more “conversational” because it is offered online. The use of Zoom, Google Meets, BlueJeans and similar platforms allowed for preachers to actively engage in conversation. However, from the dozens of sermons reviewed, sermon delivery was overwhelmingly monological. The problem seems to go back to what is colloquially referred to as the “untrained homiletic” present in so many who preach. It is no surprise that some who preach lack any kind of theological or homiletic training. It is also no surprise that many who do preach and have such training have only *one course* in homiletics, a course which is often a shared course in liturgics. Therefore, it should be no surprise why preaching remains shackled to traditional and antiquated forms of deductive exposition (Neal 2020, pp. 32–50).

If preaching that is offered in digital gatherings is going to be “conversational”, then this approach to preaching must be able to be defined and evaluated. Words matter. Something cannot be classified as “conversational” simply because the tone is more relaxed or participants ask questions. That is merely communicative common sense. Preaching that is deemed to be “conversational” must be planned that way. The conversational approach to the preaching moment must be intentional, authentic and process-oriented. By intentional, we mean that the sermon structure employed must allow for the multiple voices present to share in the teaching and learning moment of the sermon. By authentic, we mean that this cannot be forced neither upon the text nor upon those present. It takes time for a congregation familiar with passive participation to move to active engagement in preaching. Additionally, by process-oriented, we mean that this form of preaching should move the congregation along in discipleship.

At its core, the New Homiletic movement was a reaction against and response to the monological exposition models of preaching that had dominated Christian pulpits for the better part of a century, since the publication of John A. Broadus’ *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* in 1877. Preaching remained largely rhetorical, deductive and content-driven. The founders of the New Homiletic movement still believed in rhetorical form

and that sermons must come from scripture. However, beginning with H. Grady Davis, who technically pre-dates the movement, these homiletic scholars sought to determine the *function* of the text (Davis 1958). In other words, what was the plot that was driving the sermon? What was the point, the “so what?”

This emphasis on plot both renewed interest in literary studies of the biblical text while also developed interest in more narrative forms of preaching—as seen in the writings of Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry and Charles Rice, and more recently in the writings of Alyce McKenzie, Frank Thomas and Paul Scott Wilson. One such method of more narratively-focused preaching was what would become known as “conversational preaching”. In short, preaching is “conversational” when it engages the larger congregation in the process of theological discourse. As Ahmi Lee has noted, while there are a variety of models that fall under the category of “conversational preaching”, each of the primary models shares “the conviction that the preacher does not have a monopoly on interpretation and needs others to understand what Scripture means today” (Lee 2019, p. 37). Lee also notes that “conversational preaching”, as now understood, is not quite as new as it might seem. Noting D. Stephenson Bond’s work on interactive approaches to preaching, Lee draws attention to the influences of African American preaching (i.e., the emphasis on the relational and transactional nature of the sermon between preacher and congregation), Quaker preacher (i.e., the direct connection to God that is available to anyone who is discerning the Spirit) and testimonials (i.e., the equalizing of all believers) (Lee 2019, pp. 37–38; cf., Bond 1991, pp. 54–71). These influences develop a homiletical context that welcomes all and honors each voice.

There are three main models of “conversational preaching”: John McClure’s model of “collaborative preaching”, Lucy Atkinson Rose’s model of “conversational preaching”, and Wes Allen’s model of “ecclesiological preaching”. Each model will be discussed in turn and then they will be evaluated collectively. First, McClure argues that the goal of preaching is a transformative moment that further shapes the countercultural nature of the congregation. “Collaborative preaching”, drawing from collaborative leadership theory, seeks to empower congregants to become disciples who are actively engaged in God’s missional enterprise with the “hope to build the kind of strategic prophetic, evangelistic, and pastoral commitments that are needed in our churches today” (McClure 1995, p. 12). The problem that McClure is responding to is spiritual apathy and a lack of institutional commitment, with the institution being the kingdom of God and not necessarily the physical congregation. The concern here is seeing the preacher as an employee who serves the congregation rather than seeing the preacher as a leader of a volunteer organization. McClure’s response is to metaphorically relocate the nature of the sermon from the lecture hall to the town hall. Rather than simply dispense theological content, the preacher seeks to invite the congregation to engage in missional collaboration. The preacher does this by using “integrative power” (forming power alliances that benefit the community) and “nutritive power” (allowing others to assume positions of leadership responsibility), which leads to the public expression of faithful discipleship and missional practice as the congregation takes responsibility for taking the gospel to their communities (aka, spheres of influence) (McClure 1995, p. 13).¹

Second, Rose argues that conversation between preacher and congregation is essential to healthy ecclesiological functioning, however our shared language and experience are inadequate to the task of properly speaking about God (Rose 1997, pp. 89–91). The problem that Rose is responding to is the view that the preacher serves as a purveyor of theological fodder, that sermons are intended to provide advice and answers like a theological “Dear Abby” column. This, then, affords the preacher a significant amount of power over the congregation, which can lead to disastrous consequences. Rose’s response is to metaphorically flatten the pulpit into a table and invite the congregation to join the preacher for a gathered reading of and conversation about the text. Preaching, then, seeks to “gather the community of faith around the Word where the central conversations of the church are refocused and fostered” week to week (Rose 1997, p. 4). The goal in this

model of preaching is not see a single sermon as the final word or to see the preacher as the keeper of secrets but to recognize that “a variety of points of view, learning processes, interpretations, and life experiences” exist in the congregation and should be heard and honored, as it builds community and connectedness among the congregation (Rose 1997, p. 96).

Third, Allen argues that the church is missing out on the epistemological shifts occurring as we exist in the space where postmodernism overlaps with modernism. Much as those who ushered in the Enlightenment era believed humanity shuffled off the ashes of premodern superstition and mythical thinking, Allen sees postmodern persons shuffling off the ashes of Enlightenment rationalism and distrust of religious experience. He believes that people are no longer interested in having truth explained to them but desire an opportunity to engage in “multilayered conversations” about “the relevancy of the gospel” (Allen 2005, pp. xii–xiii). The problem that Allen sees is that the church has two choices before it. On one hand, the church can remain in its traditional stance against these epistemological shifts, thus refusing those caught in these shifts the pastoral opportunity to engage in conversation about these very real concerns. On the other hand, the church can engage in a new stance that fosters conversation that allows for faithful adherence “to the ancient Christian traditions” while also embracing aspects of postmodern Christianity (Allen 2005, p. 5). Allen sees the congregation as a continuation of the historical “ecclesiological conversation”, where the church is engaged in an egalitarian “giving and taking” of meaning-making (Allen 2005, pp. 16–17).

As has been demonstrated thus far, discussions regarding “conversational preaching” should be more about method than technique, that preaching should be more conversational in tone. This is a given. Preaching that is truly conversation, regardless of which method is employed, should intentionally do four things (Beck and Picardo 2021): First, conversational preaching should move from monologue to dialogue. In truth, preaching is always a dialogue. What is meant here is an active dialogue where the preacher and congregation engage verbally in discourse related to scripture and theology. Second, conversational preaching should frame the sermon as a guided conversation. Conversational preaching must still be about *something*. Perhaps the lectionary is followed or a book is voted on or meaningful political and cultural topics are selected. Yet, the conversation must focus on something that is both significant and relevant to the congregation. Third, conversational preaching should make good use of questions. Rather than speaking directly all of the time, Jesus often taught in metaphor and through questions (Perkins 1990, pp. 38–61). Preachers, especially those who engage in conversational models, must learn to ask questions that guide conversations well. Finally, conversational preaching should involve multiple voices. Not every voice in the congregation may be able to be heard in every sermon. However, the power of place should be de-centered so that all are welcome into the conversation.

It should be noted that this is largely hypothetical. Not to say that it cannot be done, done well and done regularly. It is simply to say that it is not done often. Aside from a scattering of samples in the books mentioned above and a few samples available online, this method remains largely untried. In many ways, the very concerns expressed by McClure, Rose, and Allen are still prevalent in the church today. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic did offer us an opportunity—an opportunity that some took and their preaching has been revolutionized. Some took the opportunity, through using more of a Bible study format, yet have switched back to more traditional forms of preaching now that their congregations are open again. However, if the church is not careful, it will miss a vital opportunity to minister to those who are otherwise disconnected from the church except through digital avenues. Thus, at the halfway point of this essay, the question hanging in the air is posed: *Is digital ecclesiology and continuing forms of digital worship, pastoral care and preaching still warranted?*

4. Defining COVID Ecclesiology

The New Testament includes a significant focus on communal discipleship, of which attending worship with other fellow Christians is an important component. Following Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14–36), the *ekklesia* ("assembly") began meeting on a daily basis for prayer, teaching and fellowship, which would have included the sharing of the Eucharist (Acts 2:42–47). Over three thousand converts engage in worship and evangelism, activity which soon grows the Jerusalem *ekklesia* to over five thousand (Acts 4:4). Following the first tinges of internal conflict and external persecution (Acts 4:5–8:3), the *ekklesia* begins its diaspora into the Greco-Roman world, just as Christ commanded (Acts 8:4–8; cf., Matthew 28:18–20; Luke 24:46–49; Acts 1:7–8). Proclamation continues. Baptisms occur. Congregations are established. An example of this practice can be seen in Paul's ministry in the free city of Philippi (Acts 16:16–40).

Yet, during this missional fervor, the apostles neglected to define *how* the *ekklesia* should function. To this point, only one additional passage beyond what has been noted thus far is a single summary statement in Acts 20:7: "On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight".² The remainder of the Book of Acts focuses on Paul's journey to Rome, to preach before the emperor. Luke's account is decidedly lopsided, focusing on the ministry of only a handful of select missional members of the *ekklesia*. Thus, as is often noted, Luke's focus is theological rather than historical—more about articulating what the church is about than what happened in the room (Tannehill 1990, pp. 3–4).

During this time, issues arise within these fledgling faith communities, issues which are addressed in letters from Paul, Peter, James and other early Christian leaders. These issues are located within specific congregations, which are addressed through specific teachings called letters. These letters were not intended to be binding on all, only to those to whom the letter was addressed and only as the author's authority was recognized. Paul addresses theological concerns. Peter addresses concerns over persecution. John addresses Christological concerns. Concerns are connected to discipleship, to fidelity to God. Yet, little attention is given to ecclesiastical concerns—save a few passages in 1 Corinthians and the debated Pastorals.

The Letter of Hebrews is not one that comes readily to the forefront of theological discussion. It is not Pauline. In fact, it seems to contradict—or, at least, conflict with—Paul. It is steeped in Jewish theology and requires an acute awareness of intertextuality. That being said, its writing demonstrates an expert hand with Greek rhetoric and its message is quite clear: "The readers are on the verge of taking action which Hebrews regards as nothing less than denial of the Christian faith. His object is to persuade them to change their minds and desist from the disastrous course. The theology is the argument which he develops to achieve his object. Hebrews, even more than Romans, is a sustained argument, and the theology is liable to be misrepresented if it is detached from the argument" (Lindars 1991, p. 2).

The situation that lies under the surface is fidelity. In light of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the violent diaspora of the Jewish people, Jewish Christians consider abandoning the Christian faith—what Lindars calls "the primitive kerygma" (Lindars 1991, p. 25). The rhetorical tone is pastoral, one that lacks theological abstraction and focuses on discipleship and commitment to the faith given to all through Jesus Christ (Koperski 2002, p. 202). Some to whom the author is writing are lacking in confidence while others are lacking in commitment. As Koperski notes, "the danger is that they have become fearful, no longer willing to trust in the promises of God who is faithful" (Koperski 2002, p. 203).

The theme of faith courses throughout the letter, beginning in Hebrews 3 and moving steadily towards its climax in chapters 10–12. The beginning of Hebrews 10 concludes the author's discussion on the importance of Christ's role in atonement, arguing both for how the continued use of a sacrificial system never quite fulfilled God's desire for divine covenant or community and how Christ satisfied this need through his life and

“voluntary self-offering” (Isaacs 2002, p. 119). This leads into the pericope of interest for our thoughts—10:19–25. This pericope constitutes one single sentence in the Greek text and employs three exhortations (10:22, 23, and 24). The focus is on “Christian fidelity . . . grounded in a belief in the steadfastness and loyalty of God to His people” (Isaacs 2002, p. 122). The concept of “faithfulness” applies both to believers and to God (e.g., 1 Thess. 5:24; 2 Thess. 3:3; 1 Cor. 1:19, 10:13; 2 Cor. 1:18; 1 John 1:9).

God’s faithfulness is demonstrated through the incarnation of Christ (see Heb. 4:15–10:18). Hope in Hebrews is grounded in God being “faithful” (*pistos*; 10:23). The “negative contrast” to God’s faithfulness is seen in those “who have abandoned the fellowship” (10:25) (Isaacs 2002, p. 124). However, instead of dwelling on the “negative contrast,” the emphasis is on “how to bring out the best in his or her fellow Christians”—something which “is best done in the context of the community gathering together for worship” (Peters 1999, p. 63). This desire is drawn from Christ himself, both the example of his life and how its impact has transformed the disciple community. The pericope ends on “a positive note of encouragement addressed to those who have not defected but remain within the community” (Isaacs 2002, p. 124). As the *ekklesia* progresses toward the eschatological conclusion of God’s mission, it does so with hopeful expectation.

Additionally, yet, this hopeful expectation can, at times, turn to fearful impossibility. Due to the King James Version’s unfortunate rendering of 10:25 as “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together”, this exhortation for the gathering of the community of faith has been wielded as a bludgeon to intimidate nominal observers into dedicated participants. In the current COVID ecclesiology, this passage is being used to harken online congregants back to vacant pews. For example, in June 2020, church researcher Thom Rainer argued that, despite the continuance of the pandemic, Hebrews 10:25 is a “mandate” for in-person worship (Rainer 2020). As congregations re-opened, it was the responsibility of each congregant to put aside fear and return to their appointed place within the church’s walls. Additionally, Ron Giese makes his argument quite plain when writing about online worship: “Online church is not church. This is a contradiction, not an oxymoron” (Giese 2020, p. 366). Although he does note that some aspects of church life (i.e., Bible study and administrative communication) can occur in digital spaces, Giese argues that one cannot belong, in an embodied sense, through virtual participation. This position was not only affirmed but also doubled-down on by noted evangelical leader John MacArthur. In his ongoing series “Bible Questions and Answers”, a member of his congregation asked him about online church, to which he responded: “Zoom church is not Church. It’s not Church. It’s watching TV. There’s nothing about that that fulfills the biblical definition of coming together, stimulating one another to love and good works, coming together” (MacArthur 2021). Additionally, this is not a position held solely by conservative evangelicals, as noted by Anglican priest Tish Warren Harrison, who caught significant attention for her *New York Times* editorial published in early 2022 where she argued that it was time to move away from online forms of worship of worship because it “diminishes worship and us as people” (Warren 2022; cf., O’Lynn 2022).

The challenge here is with the ethical application of this singular teaching. It is generally agreed, even by conservative pastors (i.e., Kurz 2020; Branson n.d.), that the context of Hebrews 10:25 is the concern over abandoning the Christian faith, not over missing worship services. However, as the above examples indicate, this interpretation does not seem to be applied to worshipping through digital avenues. This presents as an inappropriate and, therefore, unethical interpretation. Thompson argues that the debate is over how one interprets *egkataleipontes* in 10:25, noting that “[t]o ‘abandon’ the assembly is to reject the privilege of drawing near to God’s sanctuary and to throw away the boldness (10:35) to enter the way opened up by Jesus, the high priest” (Thompson 2008, p. 206; cf., Yuh 2019, pp. 863–82). Thompson also notes that, here in 10:25, Paul uses *episynagoge* rather than *ekklesia* for his referent to the Church in order to accentuate the “eschatological gathering of God’s people” that the Church represents (cf., 2 Thess. 2:1, the only other time Paul uses this word) (Thompson 2008, p. 206). This, then, would seem to allow for

the current sociological concern as a valid approach to remaining connected to the larger local congregation. The person who is unable to attend in person, whether due to physical, emotional or social inability, seeks intentional communion and community through digital avenues, such as the livestreamed worship service, Zoom Bible study, or tele-pastoral care call.

5. A Proposal for Moving Forward

To bring this essay to a close, a way forward is here proposed. The present reality is that the present reality is different than the present reality of March 2020. This is not simply a philosophical observation of the passage of time. The world has shifted significantly, and this shifting is still occurring. The world remains in flux from COVID-19 and the sociological fallout connected to the pandemic. We, as a species, for those who choose to see, are more aware of how we treat one another and the planet on which we reside. Humanity, in many enclaves, is using its ears to hear, to listen, to change (cf., Matt. 11:15).

Part of this shift is in how we understand the nature and function of ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. Questions about whether one can attend worship and hold membership in a located congregation as a virtual participant are no longer hypothetical. The work being done in digital ecclesiology is on the cutting edge of this conversation. Heidi Campbell has been on the frontline of the digital ecclesiology conversation. In a recent essay, Campbell sums up well the shift toward digital models of church in the early days of the pandemic: (1) Those who were readily critical of digital models of church went generally silent in the wake of going online, however (2) the same church leaders realized that moving online does not immediately develop community (Campbell 2022, pp. 59–60). The problem, as Campbell rightly understands it, is that contemporary incarnations of community are locked in hierarchical and performative modes, modes that do not handle change or challenge well. In the digital world, however, community is more dynamic and adaptable, responding to change and challenge with an organic sense of fluidity—even in a single meeting. In her summation, Campbell argues that moving forward, the local congregation should see itself more as a network spread over a geographic area but united through relationship (*koinonia*) rather than affiliation (*ekklesia*) (Campbell 2022, pp. 71–72).

A way of operationalizing Campbell's concept of digital ecclesiology would be Ryan Panzer's paradigm of the congregation as a "tech-shaped culture." In seeing the disruptive power of technology as a force for change in ecclesiastical functioning, wise church leaders will develop "fluency in current technology" in order to guide members of the faith community in making meaning of their faith in digital culture, regardless of how technological competent the individual members are (Panzer 2020, p. 7). Building on Campbell's earlier work on digital ecclesiology, Panzer argues that this can be accomplished by building this "tech-shaped culture" on a foundation of connection, collaboration and creativity. By connection, Panzer discusses how the congregation remains networked together organically, regardless of whether they are online or offline. By collaboration, Panzer argues that leadership should move away from hierarchical modes of power dissemination to cooperative modes of authority sharing. The focus shifts from passive observation of a few to the active participation of the many. By creativity, Panzer focuses on how creativity democratizes the community's ability "to build and share experiences, often in the form of a story" (Panzer 2020, p. 122). Taken together, connection, collaboration, and creativity allow for the "tech-shaped" church to move in multiple directions when it comes to administration, evangelism, pastoral care, and discipleship. If Panzer is correct, the "tech-shaped" church will lead the way into God's missional future.

Finally, in crafting this way forward, attention must be given to the practice of preaching in the digital church. This conversation, as noted in the above discussion about what "conversational" means, matters because how concepts are defined are important. However, as also noted above, this conversation is largely hypothetical because what preaching will look like in a post-COVID church is only in its infancy. As Deanna Thompson has so deftly noted in her work about how digital avenues enhance pastoral ministry in times

of disability or health impairment, the church “has always been and will always be a virtual body” (Thompson 2016, p. 33). As such, the church can—and should—minister more effectively to those who become disconnected from the networked community. This is where Kathy Black’s concept of the “healing homiletic” can be useful, both here for a moment and perhaps in future conversations. In her concept, the preacher must articulate a concept of theodicy that locates God in the suffering, speaking words of grace and mercy to the one suffering (Black 1996, pp. 12–13). However, the preacher must demonstrate great care when employing metaphor because commonly used metaphors, such as blindness or deafness, are often employed negatively in homiletic speech (Black 1996, p. 54). Instead of employing disability metaphors negatively in perpetuity, Black recommends highlighting how the disabled person responds in faith (Black 1996, p. 184). Rather than exhort those watching online to return to their empty pews, preachers should invite engaging virtually to actively participate in the liturgy and preaching, demonstrating how God is working in the midst of the extended community.

6. Conclusions

As this essay comes to a close, awareness is given to how much still needs to be said. It is hoped that this essay has moved the conversation about digital ecclesiology a little further down the road. These thoughts are offered from a position of hopeful imagination. More conversation is needed, especially in regard to the pedagogical training of future church leaders. Additionally, this conversation needs qualitative and quantitative studies on discipleship in digital church—not in terms of the digital church as a replacement for the in-person community but to validate (or invalidate, which must remain an option to thorough research) the effectiveness of the digital church.

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Notes

- ¹ Shauna K. Hannan has recently offered a fresh perspective on McClure’s concept of “collaborative preaching” that holds to many of McClure’s original missional considerations, Hannan (2021).
- ² Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition © 2021 by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States.

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