

CYBERSPACE MINISTRY: CHALLENGES FACED BY CLERGY IN KENYA DURING THE COVID19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to identify challenges posed by cyberspace ministry to clergy in Kenya. The study also aimed at making recommendations on how to overcome the challenges identified so as to improve the experience of clergy's discharge of cyberspace ministry. Practice of organised religion has been greatly impacted on, and probably permanently modified, by COVID19 pandemic. Almost all churches in urban areas turned to online and digital platforms to run their ministry and mission. Some examples of these include online worship services, virtual holy communion and bible study sessions. Some churches especially those in urban settings adapted in a dynamic way and were able to create bespoke online activities for different demographics e.g. fun and interactive online service for children and teenagers.

A qualitative methodology and interpretive paradigm were adopted. Self-administered questionnaires were disseminated to participants online and digitally through emails, social media and text messaging services.

Findings showed that 70% of churches and ministries ventured into cyberspace ministry

after the onset of the pandemic. The rate of uptake from urban clergy before and after the onset of the pandemic was double that of rural clergy. Challenges faced by the clergy were mainly indicative of operational unpreparedness and lack of technological capacity. Less than a third said they faced theological issues which is indicative of lack of week operational capacity and poor cyberspace infrastructure.

This study recommends that both clergy and laity need to embrace the new 'normal' by embracing cyberspace ministry. There has to be deliberate strategic planning on how to overcome the challenges posed by the new 'normal'. This study is important because it shows that more research needs to be done to help identify innovative ways of overcoming challenges of cyberspace ministry, improve the experience of cyberspace ministry for both the clergy and the laity and to help religious organisations and governments formulate cyberspace ministry policies and strategies.

Key Words: Cyberspace, Covid19, Clergy, Laity, Ministry

INTRODUCTION

Faith is believed to play a major role in giving people a sense of home during life's most difficult moments such as pandemics and natural disasters (Kowalczyk et al, 2020). Studies show that religion not only gives people coping mechanisms (Braun et al, 2021), but it also reduces stress and anxiety related to death, dying and bereavement (Jackson et al, 2018). In spite of this empirical evidence on the importance of practicing one's faith during difficult times such as pandemics, the potency of the virus meant that religious activities involving mass gatherings had to be restricted so as to minimise physical distance and close contact between people (WHO, 2020).

As social beings, humans desire to stay connected (Wildman et al., 2021). However, the outbreak of Covid19 pandemic challenged physical and social interactions. The pandemic paved the way for other ways of social interaction between clergy and laity through digital and online media (Sulkowski & Ignatowski 2020).

The increasing digitalization in the 21st century has created changing ways where people interact and act online. Digital transformation has seen exponential growth in cyberspace with machine-readable information and digital data over the internet.

In Kenya, regular church attendance and in-person involvement in ordinances was severely disrupted by lockdowns, curfews, cessations and other government restrictions. By a presidential executive decree, congregational meetings such as church meetings were halted on 15th March 2020. The Cabinet Secretary for Health banned all social gatherings including religious gatherings of any type on the same date. The impact was felt by the pulpit and pew alike. One year later, Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta restricted travel in the capital Nairobi and four surrounding counties one week before Easter weekend as Covid19 infections soared to alarming levels.

As churches and ministries went online to hold services during the pandemic, they learnt something surprising: practicing religion in cyberspace works. Almost all participants said they used more than one platform with the majority using Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube. Personal blogs, podcasts and bespoke church or ministry apps had the least uptake.

In March 2020, there were 8,978,000 Facebook users in Kenya with 25 to 34 year olds being the largest user group (36.8%). After one year of lockdown, in March 2021, Facebook users had risen by 20.6% to 10,830,000. People aged 25 to 34 remained the largest user group (36%). In March 2022, total users had increased by 46% to 13,099,900 in two years. However, the largest user group had changed to 18-24 year olds who accounted for 35.9% of total users (Napoleon Statistics, 2022).

Purpose of the study

The study's aim was to identify challenges posed by cyberspace ministry to clergy in Kenya. The study also aims at making recommendations on how to overcome the challenges identified so as to improve the experience of cyberspace ministry.

Objectives:

- To identify cyberspace ministry challenges and make recommendations of how to overcome them
- To establish the impact of the Covid19 pandemic in uptake of cyberspace ministry in Kenya.
- To identify the main cyberspace ministry platforms used by clergy in Kenya.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was done using 550 clergy participants in Kenya. Self-administered questionnaires were used as research tools and were disseminated to participants online and digitally through emails, social media and text messaging services from August to December 2021 and from April 2022 to August 2022. To

accomplish the intended purpose, quantitative and qualitative methodologies and interpretive paradigm were adopted.

Before filling out the online questionnaire, prospective participants were first informed the objectives and purposes of the study through a preamble in the questionnaire. The questionnaires were designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Qualitative information from clergy participants to the open-ended, questions was used to identify and develop themes. This was also a methodological triangulation strategy to help draw convergent validity on challenges of cyberspace ministry.

The questionnaire was structured into three parts each with its own response frames. The first part collected the ministerial geographical setting (either urban or rural). It also collected data relating to when they started cyberspace ministry (either before or after onset of the pandemic), the congregation size in numbers and average age of the laity as the only demographic characteristic. The second part obtained data on cyberspace platforms which included Facebook, YouTube, Websites, TV, radio, podcasts and WhatsApp. The last part collected data on challenges faced within a predefined response frame.

There was no inclusion and/or exclusion criteria *per se*. Self-selected (volunteer), opportunity and snowballing sampling methods were used to obtain Christian participants. Participants freely chose to participate and they were therefore motivated and co-operative. There are no ethical issues since no pressure was put on people to participate who may not have wanted to.

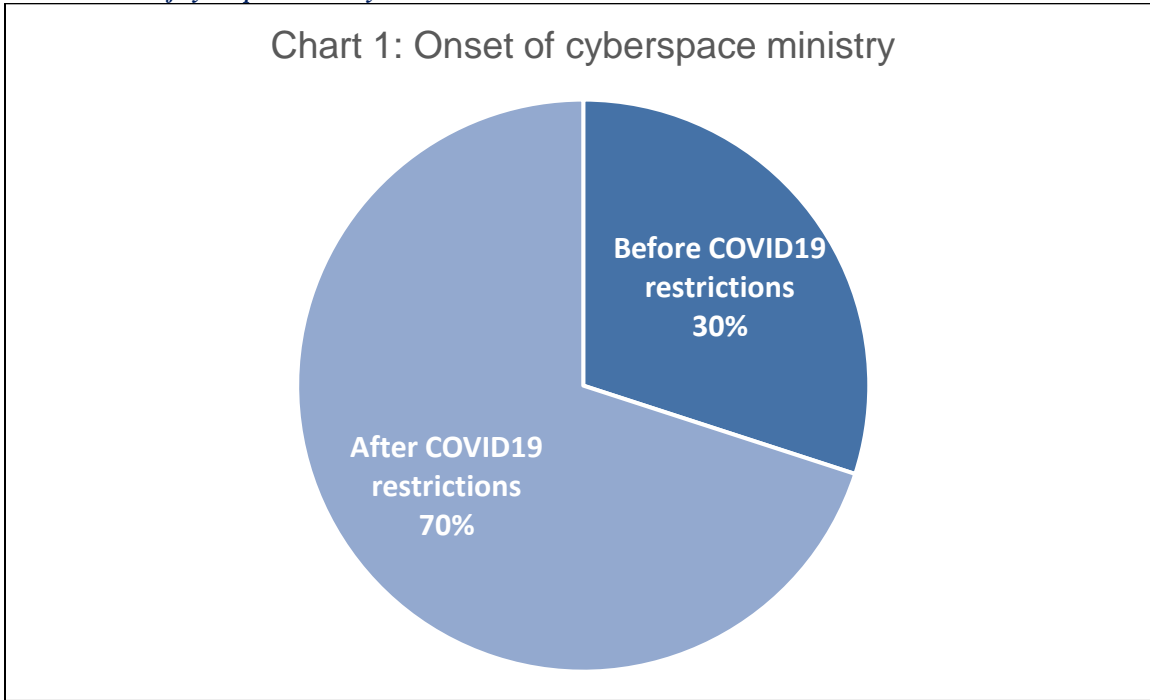
RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Charts and Tables

i). Table 1: Geographical setting

Geographical Setting	<i>n</i>	%
Urban	365	66.4%
Rural	185	33.6%
Total	550	100%

ii). Chart 1: Onset of cyberspace ministry



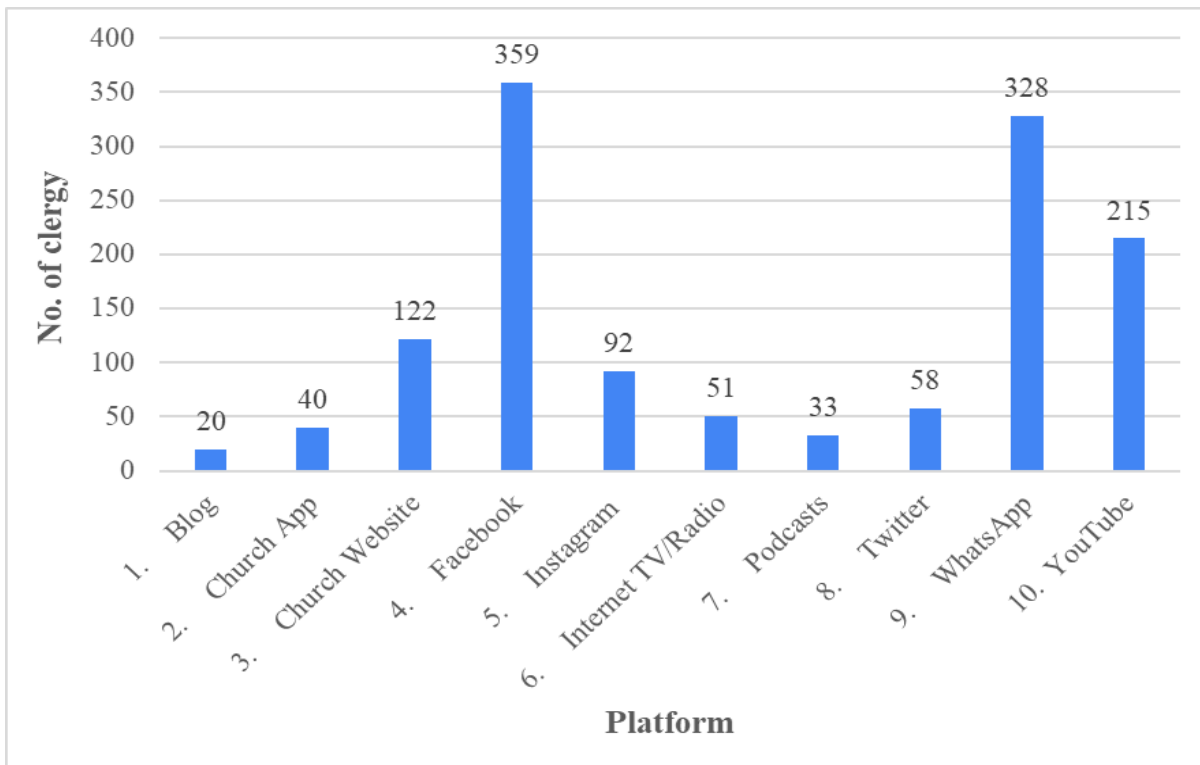
iii). Table 2: Onset of cyberspace ministry based on geographical setting

	Urban		Rural		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Before onset of Covid19 pandemic	105	63.6%	60	36.4%	165	30%
After onset of Covid19 pandemic	260	67.5%	125	32.5%	385	70%
Total	365	66.4%	185	33.6%	550	100%

iv). **Table 3: Challenges faced by clergy**

Challenges	<i>n</i>	%
1. Church members unable to access internet ministry	308	56.0%
2. Digital illiteracy (laity)	195	35.5%
3. Resistance by laity	236	43.0%
4. Inadequate/lack of ICT audio-visual tools and equipment	290	52.7%
5. Faith and doctrinal challenges	155	28.2%
6. Internet access/unreliable network	275	50.0%

Chart 2: Cyberspace platform



Discussion

Table 1 shows stratification of the participants based. 365 out of 550 clergy (66.4%) indicated that they were based in urban areas whereas 185 (33.6%) said they were based in rural areas. On average, the number of participants in urban areas was about double that of rural participants.

In Kenya, the criteria for classifying urban areas Kenya's urban areas is based on the provisions of the Urban Areas and Cities Act 2011. According to the Act, urban areas include cities, municipalities and towns. An urban area is also defined as a locality with well-established infrastructure, a total population of at least 2,000 people (Macharia et al, 2021) a population density exceeding 1,000 people per square mile (Nabutola, 2011).

Rural areas are defined as localities with a population of less than 2,500 people and density ranging from as high as 999 per square mile to as low as 1 person per square mile (Nabutola, 2011). According to the World Bank (2022), rural population should be calculated as the difference between the total population and the urban population.

In the 2019 census, 31% of Kenya's population (14,831,700 people) was enumerated in urban areas and 73% (32,732,596 people) in rural areas (KNBS, 2019). This means the rural population in Kenya is more than double of urban population.

The findings of this study are therefore inversely correlated to the census statistics. Whereas the number of people in rural areas are more than double those living in urban settings, this study indicates that the number of clergy engaging in cyberspace ministry in urban areas is double that of rural areas.

Chart 1 and Table 2 show *when* clergy participants in the two geographical locations ventured into cyberspace ministry. (The response frame in the questionnaire was either *before* or *after* the Covid19 pandemic).

Before the onset of Covid19 pandemic: Only 165 clergy (30%) said they were already in the cyberspace ministry before the Covid19 pandemic. 105 out of these (63.6%) were based in urban areas whereas 60 (36.7%) are based in rural areas.

After the onset of Covid19 pandemic: 385 (70%) clergy said they took up cyberspace ministry on the agency of lockdowns caused by the pandemic. 260 (67.5%) were based in urban areas whereas 125 (32.5%) were based in rural areas.

This study indicates that there is a positive correlation between geographical location and uptake of cyberspace ministry before and after onset of the Covid19 pandemic. More clergy in urban settings were already in cyberspace ministry before the pandemic than their rural peers, and the rate of uptake from urban clergy was higher after the onset of the pandemic.

The above findings can be used to underpin the main technology and capacity challenges faced by the clergy as show in Table 3. 52.7% of the clergy said they lacked adequate ICT and audio-visual tools and equipment to run an effective and efficient cyberspace ministry. Half of the clergy (50%) had no reliable internet and 56% said that their laity were unable to access engage with cyberspace ministry due to lack of either internet and/or reliable devices such as phones, tablets or computers. 35.5% admitted that they struggled with laity digital literacy levels. Interestingly, Kenya is one of the leading countries in Africa in terms of digital literacy and currently boasts of 100% mobile phone technology penetration in the entire country (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2020). A study done by Pew Research (2019) just before the Covid19 pandemic shows that 89% of adults in Kenya own a mobile phone 8% share ownership and just 3% do not own a mobile phone. The study further cites that with 30% own a smartphone with internet connectivity and 50% own just a basic phone with simple calling and texting functions.

The other main challenge experienced by the clergy was laity's resistance to embrace cyberspace ministry. 43% of the clergy said that they struggled with this. Some participants said that many laities complained about the cost of buying data bundles to enable them last through a virtual or online church meeting such as Sunday worship service. Most resistance was by rural laity over 55 years of age some of whom did not engage with cyberspace ministry for entire duration of the lockdown.

Changing the status quo is a complex process. Some clergy also said that whereas the majority of the younger laity welcomed transition to cyberspace ministry with initial enthusiasm, they soon became "zoom fatigued" and found the aspect of being glued to a phone, tablet or computer screen boring, monotonous and vexatious. This was in addition to their weeklong school/college classes or workplace meetings. With time, they started losing concentration and many opted not to have their videos on during virtual meetings because they were distracted doing other things.

There was also a perceived weakening in faith of the laity and a sudden exposure to a plethora of doctrines. 28.2% of the participants felt that their laity's faith was weakened by lack of in-personal congregational worship meetings, usual bible studies and prayer meetings. They were also concerned that due to the upsurge in cyberspace ministry, many of their laity were now exposed to an unmitigated floodgate of all manner of teachings and doctrines. These findings are consistent with those of a recent study done in Asia which indicates that one in every five Christians (20%) felt a quantifiable decline in their faith due to Covid19 lockdowns and restrictions on assembling (Sahgal & Connaughton 2021).

Being actively involved in religious practices is attributed to building up of one's faith and strengthening of their sense of hope and meaning in life. Some Catholic clergy said that not partaking sacraments, especially Eucharist (Holy Communion) was almost disastrous to their laity's faith. According to the Catholics, the sacrament of Eucharist is spiritual food for the soul which strengthens the believer and frees "them from venial sins" (House, 1992, p. 125). Weakening of faith especially during life's difficult times is associated with unhealthy behaviours, loss of hope and despair which then leads to unhealthy habits (e.g. excessive drinking, drug abuse and substance misuse) and higher risks of suicide and mental health issues (Koenig et al., 2011).

Sahgal & Connaughton, (2021) argue that impact of life's difficult times on faith are tied to people's own levels of observance. They also argue that's this relationship is inverse with those who are less religious being more likely to say that Covid19 weakened their faith than their more religious brethren who are most likely to say that their faith was strengthened.

Conclusion and recommendations

Cyberspace ministry is a new normal in Kenya and in the world. Clergy in Kenya faced many challenges after the onset of the pandemic such as lack of reliable internet service, lack of quality audio-visual equipment, poor laity digital literacy, fixed mindsets and resistance to change.

Rural areas in Kenya are generally lagging behind in adoption of cyberspace ministry because they have poor communication and transport network as well poor electricity connectivity. Cyberspace ministry is expensive to install and maintain. 70% of the clergy went into it after the onset of the pandemic. They therefore had to incur unforeseen expenses in purchasing requisite equipment. They also incurred expenses related to hosting virtual meetings and/or live streaming via social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. Poverty levels are also higher in rural areas and therefore affordability of internet bundles for the laity is also a challenge.

Cyberspace ministry mainly done via platforms where laity can engage at their own convenience appear to be on the increase and churches now have websites and apps that are enabled for downloading of sermons, uploading of testimonies and also paying of tithes, offerings and other financial donations.

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