

VIRTUAL CHURCH TASK FORCE

I. Background and mandate

Remember what it was like in March 2020? Church leaders in the CRCNA and around the world scrambled to discern how they might continue ministry “online” as the COVID-19 pandemic began to force churches to close their doors for in-person gatherings. Many congregations faced questions they had not had to consider before:

- Can we update our website and livestream our worship services?
- Can we post prerecorded sermons on our church websites, Facebook, or YouTube?

Dave Adamson might be correct as he writes, “COVID-19 lockdowns didn’t start the online church—they just forced it to go mainstream.”¹ Whatever the case, the pandemic ushered in a new reality for nearly all congregations in the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

As a result, important questions emerged within the CRCNA about the opportunities, pitfalls, scope, and limitations of online ministry and the concept of a “virtual church” or “digital church.”² Various leaders began wondering about questions like this: Temporarily streaming services is one thing, but does a continued, online-only presence of “church” fit within the parameters of our confessions and polity as a denomination?

Seeing the ministry opportunities that virtual church planting might open up and sensing the call of God to virtual church planting, Redeemer CRC in Sarnia, Ontario, with the support of Classis Ontario Southwest and in partnership with Resonate Global Mission, began in 2022 to plant “Redeemer Online,” led by Rev. Corey Van Huizen (see redeemeronline.church).

Questions emerged within Classis Ontario Southwest. These questions also came to Synod 2023 by way of an overture sent by the council of Wyoming (Ont.) CRC. Among its three recommendations, the Wyoming CRC council asked synod “to declare that a ‘virtual church’ (i.e., a ‘church’ which by design ‘meets’ only online) is not a church” on the ground that “a ‘virtual church’ does not meet the biblical and confessional criteria for a church in the areas of worship, pastoral care, fellowship, and the sacraments” (Overture 13, *Agenda for Synod 2023*, p. 400).

In response, Synod 2023 instructed “the Office of General Secretary to oversee the creation of a report that gives thought to and a theological framework for the possibilities and parameters of a virtual church: ‘A church

¹ Dave Adamson, *MetaChurch: How to Use Digital Ministry to Reach People and Make Disciples* (Cumming, Ga.: Orange, 2022), p. 3.

² As the task force engaged in its work, it became apparent that “digital church” is a more commonly used term than “virtual church” to describe churches that, by design, meet only online. For the sake of consistency with preceding CRCNA discussions on this matter, however, we will continue using the term “virtual church” in this report.

which, by design, meets only online” —and the report would need to meet the following guidelines:

- a. This report will require input from (at least) a faculty or staff member of Calvin Theological Seminary, Resonate Global Mission, and Thrive.
- b. This report should address the marks of the true church articulated in the Belgic Confession.
- c. This report might address similarities and differences between online ministry and a virtual church, exploring opportunities and pitfalls for each.
- d. This report should be presented to the COD for discernment.

(Acts of Synod 2023, pp. 979-80)

Synod’s response became the mandate for the Virtual Church Task Force, which began meeting in the fall of 2023. The task force submitted a progress report to the COD in February 2024, and the COD approved a recommendation to expand the team’s mandate to “address the important theological, missiological, pastoral, and polity implications of a virtual church” (*Agenda for Synod 2024*, pp. 29-30). The COD also expanded the membership of the task force, which now includes the following persons: Rev. Ben Gresik (chair), Rev. Jerry An (ReFrame Ministries staff), Rev. Young-Kwang Kim, Rev. Zachary King (ex officio), Elizabeth Koning, Rev. Steve Kooy, Dr. Derek Schuurman (Calvin University faculty member), Rev. Timothy Sheridan (Resonate Global Mission staff member and reporter), and Melody Van Arragon (recorder).³

II. Introduction to the topic

Reflecting on the COVID-19 pandemic, James Emery White makes clear that many Christian leaders in North America now see the pandemic as an “accelerator.” In other words, the pandemic accelerated realities that were already present. He writes, “The pandemic accelerated and widened the effect of two profound cultural changes that hold enormous import for the life and mission of the church: the new reality of a post-Christian world and the digital revolution.”⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic forced all of us “online” in a way that we had not experienced before and accelerated the digital revolution already under way in the world.

As our task force began its work, it increasingly became clear that there were many questions to consider as we explored and discussed our mandate. What opportunities might ministry online open up for us and our mission? What have we already seen God do through the pandemic and

³ A staff member of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (a joint ministry of both Calvin University and Calvin Theological Seminary) provided consultation for this project as well.

⁴ James Emery White, *Hybrid Church: Rethinking the Church for a Post-Christian Digital Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2023), pp. 4-5.

our efforts to continue ministry online? What might we lose if ministry online is not matched with in-person, face-to-face community?

Our task force had the opportunity to hear firsthand stories from three practitioners within the CRCNA who are engaging with high intentionality in various forms of digital ministry. We were encouraged by these innovative ministries emerging within the CRCNA, and our conversations helped give shape to our discussions by grounding them in the lived experiences of CRCNA ministries.

We heard how God is drawing people to Christ through the ministries of Redeemer Online Church and its efforts to reach lost and unchurched people through its digital content. We heard about the intentional steps Redeemer Online is taking to lead people from being passive consumers of digital content into discipleship relationships and in-person connections with other followers of Jesus in their contexts.

We heard how God has established and grown Living Hope Community Church in Ajax, Ontario, a church planted during the pandemic that began doing all of its ministry online (livinghopecommunity.ca). Living Hope has also begun in-person worship gatherings but continues to offer most of its ministry programs online through digital content and media.

We also heard how Reclaim-App is using digital ministry to connect with people outside the church with its ministries that seek to offer safe spaces of calm and connection with God, with neighbors, and with self (see podcasts at reclaim-app.buzzsprout.com).⁵ Reclaim-App has created digital opportunities for weekly practices that integrate Christian spirituality, holistic wellness, prayer, and conversation. And these have led to ongoing discipleship opportunities with people who want to explore the Christian faith.

III. Discussion of the topic

A. Key terms and scope

It is important to bring some definition to the following key terms we have been using here:

- **church:** the gathering of God's people for the purpose of the worship of God, discipleship, formation, and mission
- **virtual/digital church:** “a church which, by design, meets only online.” Our research has revealed that “digital church” is a preferred term because “virtual church” is increasingly being used to describe churches that exist in worlds created by virtual-reality technologies.
- **hybrid church:** a mix of online and in-person opportunities for worship, discipleship, formation, and mission
- **livestream worship:** in-person worship that is shared online in real time (often as part of hybrid church)

⁵ See “Reaching Seekers Online” by Cassie Westrate, Resonate Global Mission (Aug. 30, 2023); crcna.org/news-and-events/news/reaching-seekers-online.

- **ministry, ministries:** the way or ways in which the body of believers lives out its call of discipleship, formation, and mission

The scope of our report is limited by our synodical mandate. Synod 2024 reiterated the limited scope of this report when it adopted the following two recommendations:

That synod note that the mandate of the “Report on Virtual Churches” is limited to virtual churches and not online permutations of traditional in-person churches.

That synod encourage the Virtual Church Team to highlight the portions of their work related to online portions of traditional in-person churches or hybrid churches. *(Acts of Synod 2024, p. 903)*

B. The marks of the true church as articulated in the Belgic Confession

Article 29 of the Belgic Confession outlines the marks of the true church when it declares the following:

The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults.

Our task force discussed the implications of this article for virtual churches; we also interviewed church planters Corey Van Huizen (Redeemer Online Church) and Mark Jallim (Living Hope Community Church), digital church practitioner and advocate Jeff Reed, and Calvin Theological Seminary professors Mary Vanden Berg, Ron Feenstra, and Lyle Bierma. We concluded the following:

Pure preaching of the gospel is something that can be done by virtual churches, under the supervision and oversight of ordained officebearers, as is done in physical churches.

Pure administration of the sacraments seems to be more complex. On the one hand, nobody we interviewed had any theological reasons to believe that online administration of the sacraments is impossible. On the other hand, there are important considerations to keep in mind:

- The elements administered should be real, tangible elements and not virtual representations of the elements.
- Of the two sacraments in the CRCNA, the administration of the Lord’s Supper in public worship has proven to be the easier to adapt to the virtual church setting. We continue to commend to the churches the wisdom offered by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship in its important article on church polity and online sacraments.⁶ This article is a call to continue to reflect on our theology of the sacraments in our public worship services.

⁶ See “Church Polity and Online Sacraments in the Christian Reformed Church” by Kathy Smith (Mar. 7, 2020); worship.calvin.edu/resources/articles/church-polity-and-online-sacraments-christian-reformed-church.

- The administration of baptism in virtual settings is less well explored. The matter of “pure administration” has conventionally been understood to refer to the use of approved liturgical forms and theological teaching and the authorization of the presiding officebearers. In-person administration by an ordained pastor or elder who shares it virtually could help ensure that these characteristics of pure administration are carried out.

The practice of church discipline seems to be fraught with additional challenges and dynamics that many experience in physical, in-person churches. It was noted by our task force that many congregations in the CRCNA already struggle with this practice, given the limited time in which members engage with each other and the changing dynamics around congregational engagement. Our task force sensed that virtual churches would face additional challenges in the practice of church discipline, perhaps most notably with regard to the ability in digital spaces to curate and project an image of oneself that may or may not resemble one’s embodied self. One practitioner suggested that his experience has demonstrated a higher intentionality and increased opportunity for practicing discipline than he originally anticipated through the virtual church connections he is forming.

On the whole, our task force agreed that it is not impossible for a virtual church to embody the three marks of a true church, as outlined in the Belgic Confession. However, it is critical that virtual churches be very intentional in explaining how they will administer sacraments in good order and how they will engage church discipline, given the challenges we have noted.

C. Additional reflections on the teachings of the Belgic Confession

Article 27 defines the holy catholic church as “a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers, awaiting their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.” This church “is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world.”

This article seems to imply that the invisible church is spread and dispersed throughout the world in the forms of individual Christians and visible local congregations. Can this also apply to a virtual church of Christians gathering online for worship, discipleship, and fellowship?

Article 28 calls believers “not to withdraw from [this church], content to be by themselves, regardless of their status or condition” but dutifully “to join this assembly wherever God has established it.”

Might this admonition not to withdraw apply to someone who is unable to participate in a physical church but can join a virtual church that gathers online?

Moreover, when considering the phrase “wherever God has established it,” how might we interpret God's establishment of a church in a digital age? Might there be room to consider digital platforms as spaces where God can gather his people?

D. Theological perspectives

As our task force met, we began to identify theological questions and implications for a virtual church. According to our mandate, we engaged faculty members of Calvin Theological Seminary with our questions. During our interviews with three CTS faculty members, we discovered four things important to note.

First, while some members of our task force initially wondered how the doctrine of the incarnation might have implications for virtual churches, we learned that from a theological perspective there really is not a 1:1 relationship between Jesus' incarnation and the shape of the church, so theorizing about implications of the incarnation for virtual churches could seem like a theological stretch. As Ron Feenstra pointed out, even people in front of their screens participating in a virtual church are physically embodied as they do so.

While we appreciate this kind of concern for theological precision, our task force noted that the incarnation of Jesus is an "extraordinary endorsement" of embodied human existence and community.⁷ Moreover, as is practiced in missiological conversations, the incarnation of Jesus is a powerful invitation to an embodied presence in our local communities as we follow Jesus on mission.

Second, all agreed that virtual churches offer a missional opportunity to reach people with the gospel who may not, for various reasons, have access to a physical, in-person gathering of Christians in their community.

Third, while at times we wondered as a task force if virtual churches might promote a modern form of Gnosticism, we learned that there are no theological reasons to believe that virtual churches are inherently Gnostic or would necessarily lead to a modern form of Gnosticism. We recommend that, wherever possible, people meet in virtual spaces that allow for real names, real voices, and real images of the participants rather than the use of completely virtual avatars or "handles" that may be completely different from reality. We also note the need to be on guard against any tendency towards neo-Gnosticism in virtual worlds.

Fourth, from a theological perspective, all of the faculty we interviewed indicated, in varying degrees, that while virtual church may not be the ideal way in which the body of Christ *ordinarily* gathers for worship, formation, and mission, there are no confessional or theological reasons to declare that this way of gathering as a church is not a church.

E. Insights from a media studies perspective

Our task force had the opportunity as well to consider the expertise of and research done in the area of media studies by Quentin Schultze. The following is a summary of some helpful wisdom we gleaned from this interaction.

⁷ See Craig M. Gay, *Modern Technology and the Human Future: A Christian Appraisal*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Academic, 2018), p. 176.

The church has been disrupted by significant shifts and developments in technology in the past, and it is important to recognize this historical reality so that we approach the advances of our digital age well. For example, the development of print technology in the 16th century and the development of the automobile in the 20th century had massive implications on the church and its ministry. There is a tendency during such times for both utopian and dystopian responses. We need to be careful not to fall into either one of these reactionary tendencies.

The digitization of media is both bringing people together in new ways and pushing people farther apart—at the same time. It is important to discern the impact that this push-and-pull dynamic might have on our ministry efforts. In today's consumerist society, digital tools, while offering connection, can accelerate the trend toward echo chambers and polarization. While they can help bring together people who otherwise could not meet, they can also cater to individual preferences, leading to fragmented communities. This reality clashes with the church's fundamental value of God gathering his diverse community, encompassing all ages and experiences, through his Son, Jesus Christ, in and by his Spirit. It is important to discern the impact that this push-and-pull dynamic might have on our ministry efforts.

Different technologies offer help for different applications. Media studies would encourage the church to think about the specific technology it is using, what the purpose of that technology is, and what the potential consequences of using the technology might be. In essence, all media platforms are value-laden and include biases that will inevitably shape the participation and experience of the users. Churches should consider that online meeting platforms that were designed for business, academic, or entertainment purposes may not necessarily serve the church well.

There is wisdom in learning to discern the function that is needed for ministry settings and to find the media technology that can best fit that function. We note John's words in 2 John 12: "I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face. . . ."

In times of technological disruption, experimentation is essential. There are not necessarily good or clear answers for many of the questions we might ask. However, leaving space for experimentation and learning to evaluate those experiments with ministry rubrics that help ministry leaders reflect on and evaluate ministry experimentation in the digital world can be invaluable for growth in wisdom and learning. We would continue to commend Quentin Schultze's work on the kinds of questions we should be asking.⁸ Ministry leaders should be aware that experimentation comes with risks of problems and failure, so it should be done with caution and high intentionality.

⁸ See "Lost in the Digital Cosmos: Trying to Ask the Right Questions" by Quentin Schultze (Feb. 16, 2000) at christiancentury.org/article/lost-in-the-digital-cosmos.

F. Insights from a neuropsychology perspective

Our task force also had the opportunity to interview noted neuropsychologist Warren Brown and to hear of his emergent research on cognition and neuropsychology. The following is a summary of some of the wisdom gleaned and significant concerns raised through this conversation.

There are real limitations placed on our experience of community if our experience of church takes place solely through digital media. It is difficult to experience the reality of being an integrated and relationally connected body through online interactions. Without physical, bodily interaction, an important element of the human experience of relational community is missing.

It is difficult for online communities to serve as a full expression of the shared life of the kingdom of God in their local context, something that seems vital to the church's mission in the world. Without an embodied community in a shared physical space, important elements of this vocation are difficult to experience.

Studies are indicating that online spaces present real limitations on some basic human functions such as empathy, emotional regulation and expression, the imitation and modeling of Christian behavior, the building of mutual trust, and the expression of appropriate care. The experience of a virtual church will likely be that there is a much lower ceiling for these kinds of activities and interactions than an in-person church gathered in a shared physical space. Discernment and wisdom are needed to acknowledge this limitation.

G. Insights from some CRCNA practitioners' perspectives

As a task force, we had opportunities to interact with three different CRCNA practitioners engaged in virtual church ministry right now, and all of these practitioners are connected to and supported by Resonate Global Mission. Two are planting churches, and the third is building community through online and digital engagement. The following paragraphs share insights and wisdom we gleaned from these conversations.

It is clear that there are some people who can access an experience of Christian community online through digital media who may not want to or may not be able to do otherwise. This population can include (1) people who are spiritually far from the church and unlikely to enter a physical church building; (2) people who have had a negative, harmful experience with Christianity or the church; (3) younger generations who are natively online and spend a lot of time online; (4) persons with disabilities; and (5) people who are in contexts where they face persecution and the threat of violence if they associate with a Christian community or gather in-person.

It is clear that important missional opportunities are being discovered and explored by engaging with people online through digital media. Some examples we heard about include the following:

- Digital media increases the capacity to reach beyond a particular people group/community/geographical location.
- Digital media tends to reach people who would not/could not attend a conventional church.
- Digital media can help people experience faith in a new setting and in a new way.

It is also clear that some real pitfalls and challenges are being experienced and navigated. Among those mentioned are the following:

- Digital media and online engagement can generate passive consumers of content.
- It can be challenging to have high intentionality in follow-through engagement with people who use digital media and online content.
- It can be challenging to develop care and “one another” interactions in online spaces.
- It can be challenging to engage in discipleship and discipline with people who are physically distributed in many places but engage together through digital and online media.

For ministry practitioners discerning how to engage in digital media and online community in a way that leans into some of these opportunities and seeks to bridge some of these challenges, the following insights may be helpful:

- Design content that is aimed at people who are disconnected, disaffiliated, and unlikely to attend physical, in-person churches.
- Offer people opportunities to indicate that they want more engagement, and be sure to follow up with them in a timely fashion (for example, invite them to “subscribe” to some of your online content).
- Offer possibilities like email lists, comments, responses, and/or giving opportunities as next steps beyond subscribing/following that indicate a desire for more engagement.
- Consider inviting people who are engaging to join with you in one-on-one discipleship conversations. One practitioner does this to engage in spiritual coaching and in gospel-centered discipleship, depending on the interest level of the person being engaged.
- Practitioners spoke of the surprising capacity of text and video calls within which genuine pastoral care can happen and be experienced.
- Encourage people who engage deeply to find a way to connect with others and to consider gathering in-person with other Christ followers in their context.

IV. Summary of conclusions

As we reflect on the interviews we conducted, the reading we did, and the discussions and discernment we engaged in as a task force, we want to summarize our conclusions.

Blessings, opportunities, and challenges

It is clear that there are blessings and opportunities emerging for ministry leaders who are engaging with virtual church ministry. New groups of people are being reached with the gospel who are not being reached through physical, in-person churches. Content is being developed by CRCNA practitioners that aims to contextualize the gospel and Christian faith for digital media and for online contexts. We have much to learn from people who are on this missional edge in our denomination. Disciples are being formed, and even the beginnings of new communities of Christ-followers are emerging through intentional efforts to use digital media in the formation of online communities. For these and many others, we give thanks.

There are challenges and limits to virtual churches. Some important aspects of human functioning and some elements of relational communities are hindered by experiences that are exclusively online. Some core elements of church experience, like the practice of mutual care and discipline, are difficult to experience through online communities. Many questions do not have clear answers at this point as the church continues to navigate the massive disruptions and changes brought on by the acceleration of the digital revolution. We are very much still living in the midst of quickening developments. Questions about the advancements of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and the experience of the metaverse and virtual reality are just some of the emergent realities that are raising numerous questions.

V. Recommendations to Synod 2025

In light of our findings and the summary of our conclusions, we offer the following recommendations to Synod 2025.

- A. That synod acknowledge that while churches “preferably” gather in person for worship, fellowship, and mission, there should be room for intentional and ongoing experimentation within the CRCNA for digital ministry, including the planting of virtual churches.⁹
- B. That synod further encourage classes and calling churches to pray for, partner with, and offer intentional support for church planters who are navigating the unique challenges of digital ministry.
- C. That synod encourage classes and emerging church plants within the CRCNA that are experimenting with digital ministry and virtual churches to network with each other for shared learning and discernment.
- D. That synod direct the office of General Secretary to work with denominational agencies to be a resource to classes and churches that are considering how best to support virtual churches and virtual-church planting. This would include, but not be limited to, helping these classes and/or churches network with others in our denomination who are also experimenting.

⁹ It is important to note that virtual churches would fall under the Church Order rules for emerging churches and would require the supervision of a local church council, as outlined in *The Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* regarding Church Order Article 38.

E. That synod encourage virtual-church plants, along with their parent church(es), to provide a clear ministry plan to their classis, including especially how they plan to fulfill the marks of the true church in their context.

F. That synod declare the mandate of the Virtual Church Task Force fulfilled and dismiss the members with thanks.

Virtual Church Task Force

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