Adapting or Adopting Digitisation: The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) during Covid-19 Lockdown (2019 to 2022)

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic became an eye-opener for the church to reconsider technology due to the lockdown and its impact on the church. From 2019, when the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 as a global pandemic, the global church space and its functions were greatly affected. This forced the church to look at alternatives to ensure that it continued to maintain its sacred space as well as its offering of worship services to all Christian believers. The church needed to find new ground to perform its functions. Telephones, newspapers, radios, as well tape recorders have long been in existence and were already explored by the church, but during the Covid-19 pandemic, the main question was: How does the church enhance its own space, and how does it function in the new era of digital technology? The existence of social media meant that the church had to go digital and enhance its offerings of worship on other network systems rather than the traditional. The internet eased this movement by the church from the traditional way of doing things. This article will focus on how the church in South Africa began to embrace the digital world in enhancing its mission to the larger society, as 4IR was at the same time making inroads in public and private spaces. Popular social media platforms (such as Facebook, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Twitter, WhatsApp, and so forth) were providing much-needed alternatives at a critical point in history—the Covid-19 pandemic. These platforms became the alternative means to ensure that worship services continued, as well as other church gatherings such as synods, councils, retreats and conferences. The spread of Covid-19 afforded the church enough room, time and space to venture into expanding its mission digitally, thereby entering into the world of technology that was new to it.

Keywords: Covid-19; church; e-church; Facebook; internet; online; social media; radio; technology; television; worship

Introduction

World history has evidence of pandemics that, in some cases, date to the church in antiquity and even to the early church during the Antonine (165–180 AD) and Cyprian (249–262 AD) eras. This is evidenced in the Protestant Church with Martin Luther and John Calvin, who had to adjust their ministerial activities so that they were socially responsible (Garrison 2020).

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) had to revisit its day-to-day functions during the Covid-19 pandemic, which affected every country in the world. This was a moment of deep reflection by churches globally to revisit their purpose and mission. This article intends to demonstrate how the MCSA adjusted its day-to-day functions to adapt and recontextualise itself to adopt the digital world, which was already influencing the African cultural and religious landscapes. The following will be points of discussion: methodology; background on the origin and context of the Methodists' origin in England under John Wesley; the MCSA embracing technology; how digitisation shaped the MCSA during Covid-19; the e-church; and how the MCSA resurrected itself during lockdown.

Methodology

The adopted research methodology for this article was qualitative. Data collection was, in many instances, focused on the grey areas (unpublished but consumed material), church newsletters, public newspapers, archived material, and church correspondence. There will, however, be no participatory interaction or interviews with human participants. Some data were sourced online (internet), while other material will be data sourced from archives.

Background

The establishment of the Methodist movement dates to the 18th century during the Industrial Revolution in England. This was the period when manual labour was being replaced by machines, and the migration of people from the countryside into the cities was taking place (Rupert 1970); machines became the technology of that time. The church also had to adopt and adapt to the new way of life and doing things differently. Leapfrogging to the 20th and 21st centuries (especially the last decades of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century), the global environment continued to change at a fast pace, which posed a threat and a challenge to the contemporary church. This fast-paced change of life forced the church to either adapt, adopt or perish. Looking at the Methodist Church in the South African context (its establishment in 1820 by the British Settlers and its expansion through the efforts of William Shaw), it was mainly by travelling from one place to another using the cattle cart that they expanded the church mission. This context was quite different from that in England, despite a few similarities, such as unemployment and migration from the countryside to the cities in search of a better life and survival. The difference then was mainly the technology that still required

human intervention and interaction to enable it to operate successfully. Current technology is at the fingertips and requires less human intervention and interaction, as it is mainly electronic and accessible to many. The infiltration of technology in the latter centuries (20th and 21st) means that the world, in essence, is going through a technological revolution, which is becoming part of people's everyday lives (Magezi 2015, 1).

Before focusing on the church, it is important to look at how technology has impacted the continent of Africa and how it has been received. Without a doubt, there is no turning back to old ways of doing things, but to move on and embrace and accept technology as it is making life easier for many people. However, the easing of life through technology does not mean that everyone is ready to embrace it. The MCSA is caught up in this environment of a fast-changing world and cannot escape the existence of information technology. Technology has taken over the driving seat in enhancing how people live and interact. The expansion and use of technology in Africa has seen a huge migration from the old telephone lines to new mobile phones across the continent (Magezi 2015, 1). More people in Africa have access to mobile phones than any other form of technology at their disposal; as a result, digital innovation has also become cheaper and easier to use by all different kinds of people, irrespective of their social position.

The Ancient Church Responds to Pandemics

The ancient church grew significantly because of its actions during the Antonine (165–180 AD) and Cyprian (249–262 AD) plagues. The church at this time did not employ social distancing during those pandemics; however, their refusal was not so that they could hold worship services, but mainly so that they could care for those who were sick and bury their dead. Everyone who was healthy (other than Christians) fled. Therefore, these pandemics showed the "pagan" world through the actions of the Christians who remained and highlighted how the Christian faith was a powerful new way to live (Pellowe 2021).

How the Church Reacted or Responded to Pandemics in the Past

The church has had to deal with different contexts of pandemics and plagues for thousands of years, and social distancing, quarantining, and even wearing masks have been the various ways humanity responded over time (Garrison, published April 17, 2020). The closing of churches (for example, in Canada) for in-person services was not a new arrangement.

In some parts of the world, like Britain during the 1918 influenza pandemic in Birmingham, history shows that churches were closed during the pandemic. The church resorted to the local newspaper like the *Birmingham News*, which offered to print sermons, service outlines, scriptures and announcements sent in by various clergy to help people worship at home.

On Monday, October 7, 1918, Alabama Governor Charles Henderson ordered that schools, churches and theatres be closed to avoid the spread of the Spanish influenza. This situation was similar to the recent Covid-19 pandemic, where the spread of the coronavirus forced the closure of most houses of worship, schools and entertainment since March 15, 2020.

The MCSA Embracing Technology

The MCSA is a member of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), and as such, it is equally bound by the collective agreement regarding the Covid-19 regulations. The SACC held a series of meetings in an attempt to resolve the problem of the closure of the church and the impact it had. The MCSA had to seek an alternative pathway to ensure that people's spirituality was attended to religiously (SACC Newsletter, 20 March 2020). On June 16, 2020, the SACC held a virtual meeting to discuss how to implement the restrictions that were announced by the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, and how the general church was going to comply in tackling the spread of the coronavirus. Resulting from this meeting, which was virtual or online, the General Secretary of the SACC, Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana, issued an official letter to all member churches about what was discussed and the position taken by the ecumenical body. At this moment in time, the church was faced with disagreements from some church leaders who voiced their disapproval of the restrictions that included social distancing and the banning of large gatherings. This meeting called for churches to seek other means of continuing with worship services. In the meantime, other churches were exploiting the existing social media platforms to keep the faithful engaged. There were mixed feelings around this as some church leaders felt that the internet would disadvantage those who could not afford the connection. In attempting to resolve this matter, the SACC engaged in talks with the Public Broadcaster to accommodate different Christian traditions, as well as other religious traditions, to have a slot afforded for a moment of worship that would allow the faithful to hear a familiar approach to worship either on radio or television (SACC Newsletter, 5 September 2022).

As time went by, it was becoming evident that the pandemic was going to be longer than anticipated and the lockdown would be extended. This situation propelled many ministers in the MCSA to embrace technology and no longer shy away from it. As already indicated above, there is no evidence that ministers in the MCSA had mixed feelings about embracing technology. In all its units, the MCSA started to see technology as playing a pivotal role in retaining its own traditions and structures, and thereby adapting and adopting to new technology. Currently, the MCSA has adapted and adopted the hybrid model, which accommodates people with their preferences for gatherings and meetings. Church conferences, district synods, Manyano conventions, youth gatherings and many other gatherings are still open to virtual and face-to-face mode.

How Digitisation Shaped the MCSA during Covid-19

Like any other church and those affiliated with the ecumenical body, the MCSA exists within a society influenced by culture, which acts as a catalyst for shaping that society. Technology can be viewed as "culture-making activity, which human beings exercise [with] freedom and responsibility" (Schuurman 2022). In essence, "media carries more than just content; it brings with it new ways of thinking, working, and communicating" (Marshal McLuhan, quoted in Schuurman 2022). The debate is deepened further by John Culkin (quoted in Schuurman 2022) that "we shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us" and this, in turn, implies that not only do our tools shape us, but they also shape the way people worship and how the church grows its mission through technology (quoted in Schuurman 2022). Digitisation for the MCSA became a tool for worship during the Covid-19 lockdown. Many ministers resorted to social media platforms to access their congregations and members. For many members, the social media platforms gave them the chance to worship within their spaces, especially on Sundays. For older people, it was at first not easy to accept that they could worship through social media platforms. For access to these platforms, members of the MCSA with the right gadgets could easily attend their worship services at their convenient times. Electronic gadgets and network connections were, in simple terms, rendering a new environment to the church, which could be referred to as an e-church.

The E-church

In the contemporary world, the MCSA still has a long way to go regarding the use of technological gadgets. Currently, people use their gadgets such as mobile phones, computers and tablets, and there is minimal utilisation of gadgets to post church information on social media platforms. Like in any faculty of life, there are sceptics towards changes and the church is, in many instances, very cautious about the use of this space. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the MCSA, like other churches, had not deeply committed to modern digital devices, such as smartphones and computers, for use in their meetings and worship services. There is, in fact, no hard evidence to suggest that some ministers in the MCSA were opposed to the adaptation and adoption of digitisation—or even the use of the internet. However, many of these ministers did not adopt the digital platforms at the same time. Some adopted the use of different digital platforms earlier, while others started later. It is important to also bear in mind that the adoption of digital devices was not only about the nuts and bolts of the matter (Schuurman 2022, 1). For the MCSA, there have, through the course of time, been various methods of praise and worship, which include the clapping of hands (mainly adopted by Black people) and those using the organ pipes (adopted mainly by White people). On the other hand, the presence of the Bible and the use of hymn books in the pews were common in some worship services, and rare in others, as they would be using large screens for projecting the text, hymns and images. In some instances, others would download the scriptures and consult their smartphones to look up scriptures.

During the lockdown, which started on March 20, 2020, the MCSA issued statements with regard to forms of worship services that could be explored. This led to a series of meetings between the presiding bishop and other district bishops of the MCSA. The leadership of this church engaged in several meetings urging its ministers in different circuits to be innovative and come up with new methods of holding meetings and worship services. The Presiding Bishop, Purity Malinga, acknowledged that this was not business as usual and that under the Covid-19 regulations, the church had to ensure that it saved the lives of people and complied with the Covid-19 protocols. As a result, the bishops of the MCSA throughout the Connexion met on March 29, 2020, under the leadership of the Presiding Bishop, Purity Malinga, via a teleconference to discuss how the church could do its business during the lockdown under the Covid-19 pandemic (Communique: MCSA Response to Covid-19). The meeting itself was a demonstration by the church leadership that it is indeed possible to continue the business of the MCSA using an online platform. This meeting was convened due to the schedule that had been arranged long ago to host the various MCSA Synods throughout the Connexion. At that time, gatherings were restricted to no more than 100 people; hence, the teleconference meeting was an option that was convenient to the leadership of the MCSA.

Presiding Bishop Purity Malinga gave some directives (Methodist Church of Southern Africa. 2020, 26 May 2020; Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2020b, 27 May 2020), which were to be upheld as per government pronouncements. In those directives, she encouraged ministers to be innovative and devise ways and means of meeting their congregations' spiritual needs. Some other ways that were proposed included the e-worship that was possible and creative, with other alternatives to be explored as opposed to physical gatherings. Circuits within the MCSA normally hold Quarterly Meetings, which in the past were face-to-face and would now (during lockdown) require a different approach and means of gathering. This meant that guidelines had to be drafted by individual circuits to ensure the smooth running of the day-to-day business of the church. The directive from the Presiding Bishop was that creative methodologies, such as live-streaming and recordings, be utilised to ensure that no one was left out during the important time of the church calendar (Communique: MCSA Response to COVID-19).

MCSA and the alternative

Towards the month of April 2020, many churches in South Africa were preparing for Easter, and the MCSA was not an exception. As it was a norm with some churches to embark on Easter pilgrimages, the situation was different this time, and it was apparent that pilgrimages were not going to take place at all. Various social media platforms became the tool for the church to use as an alternative. Several churches recovered themselves by exploring the virtual means to ensure that Easter services continued. Despite the lockdown, church services were online and functioning fully, and church leaders were observing the lockdown.

The MCSA looked at itself and explored the alternative, which was to turn the negative situation into a positive one. This alternative pathway enabled the MCSA, as it explored social media platforms and offered daily prayers through WhatsApp, Facebook, Zoom, and many other digital methods. Other alternative ways explored included video recordings and audio devotions. The Sunday worship services saw the MCSA ministers going live with their sermons to their members with access to the internet, as well as sharing written sermons via WhatsApp (Matiwane, *Sunday Times*, April 12, 2020). This further saw Presiding Bishop Malinga hosting an Easter service, which was broadcast on a digital satellite (DStv) channel. To demonstrate that the MCSA managed to resurrect itself during Covid-19, the Limpopo District Office on June 2, 2020, held its official meeting on Zoom to address the situation of the church as an alternative pathway to reach its people (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa. 2020c).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the MCSA had committed itself to saving lives as well as containing the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. This commitment by the MCSA ensures that the church embraces technology and acknowledges that it has to be on par with the ever-changing world and adapt to the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR). The mission of the church continues, even in difficult times, as change embraces new innovations and changes that come with it. It is imperative for the church in general to adapt and adopt new technology as the way to go. The latter statement is focused on the fact that the next generation (youth) is digitally literate, and they have access to anything by clicking a button. Like in the past, the church is able to adopt and adapt digitisation and continue its mission to evangelize. The new technology will equally enable the church to fulfil its mission at a cost that will be affordable and not hamper its day-to-day business.

In adapting or adopting digitisation, the MCSA has had to ensure that all the districts under the Connexion accept the new dawn and adopt as well as adapt to the use of electronic networks to continue with its functions on a daily basis. This new tool and electronic adoption mean MCSA worship services, meetings, communication, and contact will migrate from physical contact to virtual integration. Going virtual is now bringing new possibilities to worshipping communities. Already, the MCSA started to emerge, and it has bridged the gap that almost diminished the worship services of the MCSA and other churches.

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