

“Reimagined, not Redundant”: Hillsong Church Online & Worship Practices

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Abstract

This article examines the worship practices of Hillsong Church Online in relation to the church’s historically kinaesthetic expression of worship and Daniel E. Albrecht’s ritual framework for Pentecostal ritual in *Rites in the Spirit*. This analysis will focus upon Albrecht’s distinction between the “celebrative” and “contemplative” modes of worship and praise and use this to highlight the important differences between these traditional microrites within a typical Pentecostal or Charismatic worship service. The emerging digital microrites examined are being developed and introduced by the Hillsong Church Online community and its leadership. Incorporating insights from key recent works within Digital Religion studies, the paper concludes by reflecting on how digitally embodied microrites are now being further reimagined for the future church.

Introduction

While online worship, and indeed Online Churches, began to emerge long before 2020, the global pandemic saw a dramatic and rapid increase in the number of religious communities seeking to establish themselves in the digital space. The landscape of Online Church expanded overnight. Nevertheless, many congregations participated in this expansion reluctantly and considered online services supplementary and a temporary alternative until their physical church services could resume. However, Hillsong's Global Senior Pastor, Brian Houston, has repeatedly affirmed that Online Church services will continue in some capacity once Hillsong Church can resume its physical services. As a result, scholars interested in the Hillsong Movement and those within the church community itself now have an excellent opportunity to explore what a digital expression of Hillsong Church might look like. This paper focusses particularly on the worship practices of Hillsong Church Online because they are situated within Hillsong Church's own traditionally kinaesthetic/embodied worship practices and seeks to engage and interpret these practices from the perspective of Daniel E. Albrecht's ritual framework (1999). This article aims to demonstrate that although Pentecostal ritual requires reimagining in the digital space, it has not become redundant.

Online Church Studies and Digital Methodology

My study here of Hillsong Church Online (henceforth HCO) adopts an ethnographic approach with an emphasis on my participant observation within the HCO community as well as interviews with key stakeholders of the HCO team.⁵ Interviewees were chosen on the basis of their roles with the HCO department through purposive sampling. Leaders consented to participate in this research with the knowledge that interview material or organisational titles might potentially compromise confidentiality but that their anonymity would be assured wherever possible without significant impact to the data.

As this methodology was instrumental to my dissertation on digital presence at HCO, many of the examples within this article have come from my own observations as both a congregant and team leader within HCO services. I have volunteered since 2019 as a "platform oversight" – a role that requires the rostering of volunteers to moderate live

⁵ This methodology has been excerpted from my own research project and MTh Dissertation; Young (2021), Thanks for Watching Joining: Religious Creatives and a Digital Theology of Presence at Hillsong Church Online.

stream chats and additional communication with the Pastoral Care team regarding chat member safety. While I have also participated at various times simply as a congregant and worshipper on HCO – both using the chat functionality in the online experience and not using it – the core focus of this paper will be to reflect upon my experiences as a participant-observer in the role of a chat moderator within the HCO team. While it might be argued that such a level of participation might influence the evaluative element of my research, it has certainly also increased my access to data – access that provided an emic view of the HCO culture which allows for more accurate and ‘thicker’ description (Varis, 2015, p. 62).⁶ There is also some debate whether people posting in chat rooms are posting “public” information (Sugiura et al., 2017, pp. 193–194). However a live stream, which is made available on YouTube, Facebook and its own open access platform, is quite a public forum by both physical and digital standards (Talip et al., 2016, pp. 92–93).

Digital Ethnography assists the study of Online Church communities because it appreciates the integration of online and offline spaces. While ethnography traditionally expects the researchers to be in the same physical space as the participants, the digital world allows the researcher to be in one location, the HCO content creators in another, and the participants entirely elsewhere (Walker, 2010, pp. 25–26, 30). As in, HCO may exist virtually through a website, but it is not isolated from the physical sites from which community members join for Sunday service.⁷

Digital Ethnographers (including, for example, Sarah Pink and Christine Hine) have developed a variety of methodologies for the effective critical study of online cultures, presented in edited collections such as *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*, as well as Hine’s *Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*.

Pink, for example, considers the shift in ethnographic practices where they become digitally mediated and offers five principles for digital ethnography – we should, she suggests, celebrate its multiplicity, non-digital-centric-ness, openness, reflexivity, and unorthodoxy (Pink et al., 2015, pp. 3, 8–14). These principles reflect both the transience of digital platforms and also their integration into everyday life and encourage researchers to consider the practice of Digital Ethnography as an invitation

⁶ Typically, one of digital ethnography’s challenges is the ability to ‘lurk’ behind a screen. While ‘lurking’ allows the researcher to observe the digital culture without risk of the community members modifying their behaviour for an outsider, this position is largely considered deceptive and unethical.

⁷ This is emphasized by Global Senior Pastor Bobbie Houston’s expression of “*One House, Many Rooms*” being reframed as “*One House, Many Living Rooms*.”

into new ways of knowing and alternative data collecting processes (Pink et al., 2015, pp. 8-14). In particular, Pink highlights the definitive need for reflexivity during data collection (Pink et al., 2015, p. 12). Such reflexivity is also characteristic of the Pentecostal worshipper currently adapting to the practice of online worship and ritual – which does not come without its tensions.

Hine's understanding of the digital world as it has been weaved into day-to-day living has been of considerable assistance to this study. She affirms that contemporary digital ethnography must consider the online and offline worlds? without disconnecting the two (Hine, 2015, p. 14). While some studies may presume online platforms to be escapist in nature, there is often no clean break between the offline and the online world of the individual interacting through the screen; at the very moment they are digitally engaged, the individual is also physically engaged in their surrounding environment (Hine, 2015, pp. 32-53). In the context of researching HCO, this has required the consideration of more than the open tabs of a live chat - but also the offline expressions that accompany a worshipper's online service experience.

'When Worlds Collide': The Online/Offline Integration of HCO

The integration of online and offline worlds allows HCO members to join services from various points around the globe. Quite a few of the attendees of Hillsong's Australian livestream services join in from North and South America, Africa, Asia, Europe, as well as wider Oceania. This is regardless of whether the service is streamed at a time suitable for their respective time zones. Therefore, many international attendees join in the middle of their night. While some attendees join HCO from their home or local cafe, others participate while in transit from one fixed point to another. People have commented on the service livestream chat that they are watching from the train or listening to the service in the traffic on their daily commute. I have also joined a service myself while in the air flying across Canada from Vancouver to Toronto. This multiplicity of offline environments would never have been a consideration in traditional Pentecostal worship practices. However, they must now be taken into consideration when establishing the limitations of digital embodiment and the reimagining of worship practices online.

In current Digital Religion studies, it has been noted that learning, employment and religion sectors are all migrating to online "third spaces" (social spaces separate from

work/home concerns) and during the pandemic, at a higher rate (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020, p. 3; Oldenburg, 1989). As a result, *social presence theory* researchers began to examine how individuals can feel closer to people who are geographically farther away than those with whom they experience face-to-face interaction (Lowenthal, 2010, pp. 129–136; Wilson et al., 2008, pp. 979–1002). Stuart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi use the language of “third space” to suggest that the “meaning-making” of conceptual projects like a website are just as constructible as meaning-making within physical spaces such as cafes, bookstores, bars, or churches (Hoover, 2015, p. 8). They refer to the “as-if-ness” of digital third spaces, which always require some level of decision-making with the individual or community practising online religion to act *as if* they are participating within a tangible sacred space (Hoover, 2015, pp. 13–16).

While Tim Hutchings does not utilize the terminology of “third space” in *Creating Church Online*, his research on the development of five “self-defined” online churches offers some significant insights into religious “third space” contexts (Hutchings, 2017, p. 12). Considering Hutchings’s research while conducting my own participation in these live streams meant that I needed to conceptualise my existence as a researcher in a “third space.” Therefore, I sought to document my own experiences of the moment while engaging with other congregants through a digital medium that interweaves with their ‘third space’ experiences.

Religious Responses to a Global Crisis

In response to Covid-19, many religious communities have had to establish themselves online, and over the last 18 months, this has prompted reflections on the challenges and opportunities in doing so. In *Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World*, Heidi Campbell offers a series of reflective essays from scholars and practitioners with personal experience in digital religion. This collection focus on discussing how physical religious communities reacted and innovated in response to the social distancing restrictions of the pandemic, as well as asking where this innovation has provoked challenges (H. Campbell, 2020, pp. 1–2). One contributor, Daniel R. Bare, speculates that: “those who are not so strident to embrace Christian corporeality in doctrine, will emerge from quarantine prepared to adopt online worship as the practical outreach methodology of the future.” (Bare, 2020, p. 38). While indicative of common attitudes toward digital worship, Bare’s assertion displays only a limited acknowledgement of the online integration into every

day life and the potential for digital worship realities that exist primarily in digital third spaces but still cultivate a corporeal experience for online congregants.

A comparative study of the responses to the pandemic by Asian and European church leaders conducted by Alexander Chow and Jonas Kurlberg highlights various expressed concerns from ministers that a church “digitally simulated” online risks damaging the Christian theology of embodiment and incarnation (Chow & Kurlberg, 2020, p. 2-3). Chow and Kurlberg note that the speeds at which church leaders were forced to move online meant that any theological and liturgical reflection on this transition very often came after the initial crisis responses (2020, p. 7). Yet, as Heidi Campbell and Sophia Osteen note, while moments of crisis enable religious communities to respond pragmatically and practically, they also open up a space for reimagining beliefs in practices and re-evaluating which practices lie at the heart of religious identity and community (Osteen & Campbell, 2020, p. 58). While Hillsong Church’s digital expression did not begin as a response to Covid-19, a similar reflection and reimagining has been undertaken by Hillsong Church through the development of HCO in the light of Australia’s social distancing restrictions.

Media as a Tool of Engagement (But Not Embodiment)

Though Hillsong’s official “Online Campus” was launched only in February 2019, the church had been represented online long before this, not least through over ten years of digitally streamed content on YouTube. The Digital Department of Hillsong Church could see potential in this content all along for the creation of Christian community, more than simple Christian witness.⁸ However, Hillsong Church leadership continued to emphasise the church’s physical gatherings until the pivot to online due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, the media in all its many forms has consistently shown itself to be an integral tool for evangelism. The internet was seen by many as an extension of what was already made available through television and radio (Austin, 2017, p. 23). In fact, through Hillsong Church’s involvement with transnational media, like the *Christian Broadcasting Network*, Hillsong’s brand began to spread beyond its initial locality (Hutchinson, 2017, p. 48). What began as Hills Christian Life Centre in a localized Sydney suburban congregation has transformed over the past 30 years into a global

⁸ Hillsong Church joined YouTube on April 30, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/user/hillsongchurchsydney>

phenomenon with many physical campuses around the globe connected to the Sydney hub (Hutchinson, 2017, pp. 47–48, 55). In 2018, two-thirds of the weekend attendance of Hillsong Church was in congregations outside of Australia (the Church has at time of writing 123 campuses and locations in total around the globe) (Alcorn & Houston, 2018). The global presence of the church has permitted Hillsong to continue growing outwards rather than face what Mark Hutchinson has called "the 'cold death' of self-enclosure" while also avoiding the "'hot death' of majority culture" (Hutchinson, 2017, p. 55). Today, this global presence continues to be assisted and extended by Hillsong Church's digital footprint. As a result, worship leaders and service MCs must now be conscious they are addressing a global audience. Nevertheless, the attitude toward digital media observed in these HCO services reflects contentment with broadcast media as a tool for evangelism, but not as a tool for bi-directional connection.

Hillsong Online Campus: A Pathway to Physical Church

Hillsong's Online Campus is the dynamic out of which the digital *community* of the church has formed. In February 2019, Hillsong Church launched its Online Campus on the Facebook and YouTube platforms. From its launch up until the 2019 Annual Report, Online Campus grew to reach a total of 99 countries – many of which do not presently have a physical Hillsong site (Hillsong Church Australia, 2019, p. 76). Hillsong Online Campus was established "to make room for those who consider themselves a part of the Hillsong family but cannot attend a physical campus." (Hillsong Church Australia, 2019, p. 76) This would ensure that physical services were still regarded as the fundamental form of gathering for a Sunday service, and ward off any potential complacency or disengagement that could germinate in a church community that could "tune in" for Church from the comforts of their bedroom. Pastor Brian Houston was adamant that the latter group would not be the intended community of Online Campus – instead, the Online Campus was for anyone who could not 'get to church' due to physical or health restrictions.⁹ Therefore, the volunteers and staff were encouraged to assist the online congregants in their walk with God – with the ultimate goal being that a member would eventually have their physical or health restrictions relieved so that they might join a physical Hillsong Church campus (Hillsong Church Australia, 2019, p. 76). While this may have been the mentality prior to March 2020,

⁹ This meant that Hillsong's *Church of the Air* – a previous project developed to offer livestreams of church for the population of outback Australia – would eventually come under Online Campus.

the adverse circumstances of Covid-19 required Hillsong Church to move its entire community online.

HCO: A Call to Reimagining Worship Practice

As reflected in Campbell's *Religion in Quarantine*, faith communities around the globe have wrestled throughout the pandemic with the break from their physical worship practices. Covid-19 has challenged event-based religious practices to become creative in their execution in an effort to not only abide by government laws but also to exhibit love for one's neighbour. In response to the initial lockdown protocols set out by the Australian government in March of 2020, Hillsong Church's Digital Department worked closely with a number of other staff members and their teams to present a digital platform for all Hillsong Church Services. While this may have appeared to happen overnight, the Digital Department of Hillsong Church had been preparing for a Hillsong Church livestreamed service to be available for some time:

“We had one guy working on it for a few months in the background, just because he felt God put [it in] his heart, then Covid hits, and we had it overnight, literally within a week, that was done.” (Paul, personal communication, October 23, 2020)

The Online Campus staff and volunteers have continued to serve as part of the HCO team. This has also included service teams for YouTube and Facebook live streams of the services made available on HCO. While this has been the pragmatic response of one megachurch to a set of unprecedented circumstances, it has presented a tension as compared with traditional Pentecostal worship practices of Hillsong Church as well as opening potential for reimagining how these worship practices might present themselves afresh in digital expression. I experienced this "reimagining" firsthand as a member of HCO and a live stream chat host volunteer moderator.

Where the Spirit Moves, So Do Pentecostals

Hesitance amongst pastors over the acceptance of livestream services as the "new normal" of worship practice for the foreseeable future is accentuated by the stigma attached to building faith communities online (Hutchings, 2017, p. 12/270). Tim Hutchings notes that the definition of *church* varies according to theological tradition; for some, the church gathers *wherever* Christians meet in the name of Christ; for

others, there must also be the performance of particular rituals – potentially *properly authorised* by religious leaders (Hutchinson, 2017, pp. 12-13/270). Particular to Pentecostal theology, it is important to acknowledge, is the *iconic* role of the human body within Pentecostal worship (Albrecht, 1999, p. 147). Noting that Pentecostalism is traditionally kinaesthetic in expression, Daniel E. Albrecht's *Rites in the Spirit* offers a framework for interpreting the liturgy of a Pentecostal service. The microrites of a Pentecostal worship service, as defined by Albrecht, present some interesting similarities and differences to the digital microrites which are being reimagined by the HCO community and its leadership. This will be examined following a review of the contextual factors that are unique to the megachurch Hillsong.

Hillsong Church's iconic liturgy developed in context of a "freedom of expression," which was developed in relation to the trans-Tasman charismatic renewal flowing between New Zealand and Australia in the 1970s (Austin, 2017, p. 22). This renewalist movement began to influence the then Assemblies of God of Australia (AGA) towards a tolerance of radical displays of joy found in the free worship and dancing of some of its congregations (Austin, 2017, p. 23). This *tolerance* was not gained without struggle and confrontation, however, as evident from the story D. A. Austin tells of the experience of preacher David (Paul) Yonggi Cho at the 1977 AGA Commonwealth conference in Melbourne, where: "although reportedly surprised at the dancing during worship, [Cho] did not condemn it ... Indeed, Cho threatened to leave when attempts were made to suppress this public display of joy." (Austin, 2017, p. 23) These public displays reveal a key characteristic of traditional Pentecostal logic: when it comes to ritual, "God is expected to move, *but so are God's worshippers.*" (Albrecht, 1999, p. 148)

Although Hillsong was founded in 1982 and has arguably moved away from many Pentecostal influences towards wider evangelicalism, due to these contextual factors it is still appropriate to evaluate the megachurch's liturgy via the lens of Albrecht, who emphasises in *Rites in the Spirit*, that while the bodies and gestural actions of Pentecostals have not been explicitly labelled as holy icons, they undoubtedly function in this way liturgically (Albrecht, 1999, p. 148). How these traditionally physical worship practices can be digitally expressed needs to be further examined alongside Albrecht's framework for Pentecostal rites and ritual.

Seeking to provide a comprehensive Pentecostal liturgical framework, Albrecht considers the “ordo” (or order of service) of a sample of three Pentecostal communities he studied in “Sea City,” California in the 90s (Albrecht, 1999, p. 24). Although Pentecostal liturgy is not commonly spoken about in Sunday service (and neither is high church terminology used, e.g. *rites* and *ritual*). Albrecht found use in these terms when considering the practices and experiences that composed the spiritual lives of congregants in his study. Albrecht separates the service into a number of foundational rites, including worship and praise, the pastoral message, and altar call and response (Albrecht, 1999, pp. 153–154). My interest here is primarily in Albrecht’s framework as it pertains to the rites. Still, it is important too to further examine his quest to identify the smaller “microrites” (particularly of the worship and praise time) while also highlighting the affective “modes of sensibility” that animate the liturgy as a whole.

Albrecht identifies microrites as the practices and gestures which work as building blocks to construct the shape of the foundational rites - such as worship and praise. (Albrecht, 1999, p. 176). Microrites provide the basic blueprint for Pentecostal praxis as they arrange the whole of the liturgy (Albrecht, 1999, p. 176). How these microrites are rearranged to form the blueprint of digital Pentecostal ritual can appear abstract partly due to its unfamiliarity and partly again due to a *perceived* detachment from the physical. Yet the transition to HCO has necessitated the reestablishment and the freedom to reimagine these microrites in the digital space. This reimagination by both the leadership and the congregation of Hillsong Church during their participation in HCO will be discussed below.

How these microrites form is significantly impacted by the “modes of ritual sensibility” to which they are oriented (Albrecht, 1999, p. 199). According to Albrecht, ritual sensibilities are responsible for more than the ritual’s technical success; they play a structural role, helping to bring them to life (Albrecht, 1999, pp. 177–178). These modes of ritual sensibility shape the worshipper’s experience of a rite - including the rite of worship and praise (Albrecht, 1999, p. 179). For example, the two modes which are inherent to the worship and praise rite are the “celebrative” *mode* and the “contemplative” *mode* (Albrecht, 1999, p. 184). As these modes define a typical physical or *offline* service, they must be reimagined to imbue the online service with comparable significance. Albrecht’s ritual framework is indispensable for considering how the modes continue to orient and animate the digital expressions of these

microrites within worship and praise. I will now discuss how the *celebrative mode* has been adapted to an online setting, as well as the challenges that have come with this reconceptualization.

The Celebrative Mode of Ritual Sensibility

The "celebrative mode of worship and praise" seems a fitting starting point for analysis; as Albrecht outlines, this is where most Pentecostal worship sets begin. The tone of this ritual sensibility is playful and fun (Albrecht, 1999, p. 181). This mode grants the worshippers permission to detach themselves from the requirements of everyday life which will remain outside the designated time and space during the Sunday ritual - the hope being that these responsibilities will be resumed with fresh perspective post-ritual (Albrecht, 1999, p. 181). Within the celebrative mode, Pentecostal worshippers are encouraged by one another and their worship leaders to be not only expressive but also innovative in their worship - to "sing unto the Lord a new song." (Albrecht, 1999, p. 181-89) often in physical services at Hillsong, this takes the form of dance moves or the congregation's playful additional vocalisations to the lyrics. Albrecht likens this mode to a musician's improvisation on the melody of a song (Albrecht, 1999, p. 181-89). Taking liberties to deepen Albrecht's metaphor, it should be noted that the masters of musical improvisation are those who know the original score inside and out. Their ability to call and respond to other musicians in the band is more than a copy of the riff played by their counterparts; it is a conversation. Likewise, in acting improv groups, the rule of improv is "Yes, *and* ..." There is an acceptance that the actions of others will have an effect on one's own movements and an invitation to participate afresh as one sees fit.

In the celebrative mode, Pentecostal movements and gestures are improvised; like children at the playground, there is no specific result desired beyond the creation and expression of joy (Albrecht, 1999, p. 181). However improvisational, these movements are still executed with a certain level of control displayed by the worshipper, which avoids the mode becoming chaotic and thus dysfunctional (Albrecht, 1999, p. 181-89). Being naturally improvisational and playful in their worship style, it is quite possible Pentecostal worshippers may be the perfect candidates to innovate microrites for the digital space.

The following are typical examples from Sunday services on HCO taken from participant observation. Once the service commences, Online church members often showcase this celebrative mode through their use of the live chat. There are generally several posts of confetti or dancing emojis. What may be considered *spam* by moderators at other points of the service is permissible *during this mode* as a playful response to the joy outpouring from the hearts of worshippers typically used to raising their hands in the air and jumping up and down in the mosh pit side of the stage. *The live chats are now the mosh pit – sans the inevitable elbow to the face.* Therefore, chat members improvise off of one another's responses – copying and pasting emojis and scriptures that relate to the present moment. There is no intended outcome from these actions; they are a digital replication of a physical activity, allowing congregants to immerse themselves fully in the digital service by participation rather than being distracted by other tasks such as household chores or their commute.¹⁰ Importantly, the celebrative mode can take place digitally beyond the chat spaces as well. For example, there are those who note that they continue to sing aloud and dance live in their living rooms – embracing the online/offline integration of the service into their everyday life. Worship leaders, as well as chat moderators, encourage congregants to engage through singing and dancing if their spaces allow, showing an understanding of the importance of this expression as a microrite, and part of the celebrative mode. Together the congregation sings a new song – by responding online by quoting and commenting on lyrics from the songs being sung by the worship band. These budding or emerging digital microrites harmonize with more traditional Pentecostal microrites as they align with the playfulness of the mode.

The Contemplative Mode of Ritual Sensibility

The other mode to be discussed in reference to the praise and worship rite is the contemplative mode. Having passed through the high energy of the opening praise song in the Sunday setlist, the contemplative mode often announces itself with a drop of energy levels and the introduction of musical keypads (Albrecht, 1999, p. 183). This ritual mode can appear somber and passive in comparison to the celebrative mode, but this passivity occurs as an expression of surrender rather than resignation.

¹⁰ There is no doubt God can still meet community members in their everyday tasks as they tune in and out to the Sunday service. While Online Church is often presumed to supply more distractions to the message, there are often as many distractions available during a physical service where one is surrounded by hundreds of other individuals.

Albrecht does not define contemplation in a literal sense but rather uses the term in light of its association with deep receptivity and openness to God (Albrecht, 1999, p. 183 ff. 14). Contemplative sensibility is often dominant during the worship rite - although it does also appear throughout the service in moments of prayer during the altar call and response at the end of a Sunday service - and is often most noticeable during the chorus of the second song (Albrecht, 1999, p. 184). Unlike the playfulness and improvisation that usually accompanies the celebrative mode, there is an anticipation and an active stillness that accompanies the congregation attentiveness to the presence of God (Albrecht, 1999, p. 184). Whereas in the celebrative mode, the worshiper has some control over their free play, the celebrative mode asks the worshiper to relinquish all control in the form of surrender (Albrecht, 1999, p. 184). The worshipers ready themselves in anticipation for what they cannot control - for who they cannot control - seeking the action and presence of God in their lives (Albrecht, 1999, p. 184). Like the energy that accumulates in the air before a lightning strike, there is an expectation of lightning striking, but there is no control over just where that might occur.

Within HCO services, this 'lightning strike' is not restricted by a physical location or time zone. During this mode, HCO chats change focus from playfulness to piety. Comments focus now on expressing adoration and affirming the lyrics of the worship song. There is an increase in cry-face and raised hand emojis, as well as the bubbling up of hearts and prayer hands from the corner of the Hillsong Church Online chat box inspired by Instagram Live - an application developed to increase the community's sense of participation in the service. Prayers are typed out, asking God to do what only He can and accepting that He is the one in control while the congregation actively waits on divine intervention. However, alternatively, some participants choose not to type in this moment. As recollected by one interviewee, their experiences of supernatural encounter during the live stream has been largely due to a sense of *arrestment* in the presence of what they referred to as the "raw beauty" of the moment which allowed them to "switch off autopilot" and "really engage in God's presence being already there ... I was taking notice." (Graham, personal communication, September 11, 2020) Another interviewee remembered an instance where they felt God's nearness, surrendering to the moment as mediated through the live stream:

It wasn't this "deep thing" it was just a need to focus. So, I put my phone down, closed my eyes, and I just started praying, started focusing, started reflecting, and it had been so long since I'd done that. Full transparency, I started to cry for a moment. It just felt like this ease. Like I was back. I remember praying "Oh God, You're right here with me! You're very close." So, worship is happening online, and all these other things, and I'm just [crying]. And I remember asking after, "why was that so emotional for me?" It was just such a connection with God. And my friend looked at me and said, "it's just been a while since you've been to the well." (Leo, personal communication, September 4th, 2020)

In response to this surrender, community members oftentimes reply in the chat that they are experiencing an encounter with God during these moments of service in ways that they never expected when they first linked into the service. An openness to these new (and evolving) microrites presents an avenue for expressing their encounter with God within the digital corporeal reality.

"To the Fullest of our Limitations": A Redefinition of Embodiment

Teresa Berger's *@ Worship* may offer some help here by constructing a framework for participation in virtual worship practices. Berger affirms that some online practices can instigate a multi-sensory experience that affects the body as much as, if not more than, traditionally offline practices (Berger, 2018, p. 46/163). Berger affirms that effective practices are those which allow human participation – whether online through clicks, or offline through rosary beads, each practice is just as *real* as the other, even though it is executed differently (Berger, 2018, p. 46/163). Acknowledging these differences in expression, Berger asserts that "There is no abstract, universal account of active participation, only concrete, particular, embodied active participants." (Berger, 2018, p. 46/163) To elaborate, she gives some examples:

An elderly man with senile dementia who follows a televised Mass in his care facility will participate in worship differently from the granddaughter who sits with him. An unborn child in her mother's womb attending Stations of the Cross in a brick-and-mortar church is present differently from an adult in the same church who happens to be blind...[or the] young man recently paralysed who cannot physically make his way

to his parish church any longer yet finds comfort in being present via Skype on an iPad that is taking his place in the pew... (Berger, 2018, p. 46/163)

Berger then proceeds to ask:

"is one participation 'fuller' than the others? Or are they all 'full' - including the digitally mediated presence of the paralysed young man - to the extent that individual human embodiments allow?" (Berger, 2018, p. 46/163)

Here, Berger suggests a sort of gradient of embodiment. While such a pattern does not negate the iconic kinaesthetic nature of Pentecostal worship, it does *challenge* the Pentecostal digital worshiper to worship in the 'fullness' of their own embodiment limitations.

Many in attendance of HCO services find themselves in similar situations to those mentioned by Teresa Berger. While some are limited solely by social distancing restrictions, many who would have been without community prior to the pandemic have now been invited to participate in worship in ways never made available to them before. The digital environment heightens the accessibility of the existing programs - for example, Hillsong's language translations team provides access to a much wider audience than previously possible - and now includes Auslan translations of morning and evening Sunday services. Therefore, these congregants can take part in the digital liturgy alongside other members of Hillsong who may have experienced (or perceived) embodiment in more tactile ways than are currently available. However, the present limitations around physical gatherings present Hillsong's global congregation with an opportunity to embrace the level of *fullness* offered by the digital expression, therefore erasing certain inequalities. Unfortunately, the obstructions to community and equality experienced prior to the pivot to online are unlikely to be resolved when physical services resume, and many of these individuals will likely continue joining online services rather than return to physical gatherings.

Conclusion

There will, of course, be some who object that the actions of Hillsong Church Online worshippers are a caricature of what worship practices *ought* to be. At this point, we must face the fact that religious communities will continue to negotiate the tensions in accepting these digital expressions of worship practices for years to come. At Hillsong, the lockdown restrictions have often been expressed as a "loss" to the community as

a whole. The reimagining of these practices is essential not only in response to the current pandemic but also for the ongoing inclusion of congregants who have been inhibited by past parameters of worship. This includes those who are incarcerated, disabled, and elderly. As the Pentecostal church reimagines their characteristically playful worship for the online media age and embraces digitally mediated worship as a viable pathway to spiritual encounter with the One they cannot control who reveals Himself in whatever way He chooses - be that brick-and-mortar or pixels and clicks - a whole new practice is opened up, even perhaps "unprecedented" in possibility.

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