

# Sacred Spaces Online

## The Rise of Virtual Religion and Technology Adoption in CITAM Ngong Church

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### Abstract

There is a consensus that the growth of technology in Kenya facilitated the spread of religion within the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article investigates how technology reshaped religious practice in Kenya during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on CITAM Ngong Church. Based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork, the study examines how religious actors created virtual spaces to sustain worship in the absence of physical gatherings. Using Rogers' diffusion and adoption theory, it analyzes how generational access and resource availability influenced participation in online religious life. Findings show that technological adoption was a complex and inherently social process. Further, the adoption of digital platforms was a socially negotiated process, shaped by age within and across the congregation, technology access, and differing understandings of spiritual presence online. The study argues that these virtual spaces function not only as practical substitutes during lockdowns but also as emerging cultural and spiritual sites of place-making that reframe narratives of divine action, transcendent presence, and communal belonging.

### Keywords

COVID-19; religious virtual space; technology; generational access; Kenya

### Introduction

Crises can serve as catalysts for innovation and adaptation, compelling individuals and establishments to adopt new approaches. The COVID-19 pandemic created urgent circumstances that forced people to reconsider existing practices and develop creative solutions (Munyiswa et al. 2025; Humbe 2023). Religious virtual space is an electronic environment that visually mimics complex physical spaces where people can interact closely. The religious virtual space reflects immanent processes of cultural place-making. It is a space that includes the practice of specific narratives regarding divine action, transcendent presence, or supernatural reality in the immanent world with the help of technology. The restrictions to

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contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the social distancing requirement, meant that socializing in the religious sphere had to move to a religious virtual space as prompted by people's desire to deconstruct, construct, and reorganize their religious experiences. Most dimensions of human engagement, including church services, embraced virtual modes of streaming live church services (Humbe 2023; Maseno 2022).

Consequently, the creation of a religious virtual space has been a novel and innovative aspect experienced by several churches. The 'how' of this creation and adoption of technology differs between various churches. This article examines the creation and adoption of virtual space in Christ Is the Answer Ministries (CITAM) Ngong with a focus on technology adoption and generational divide in accessing the technology. This study employed ethnography for a period of six months, in which the researcher was immersed in the church context. Everett Rogers's diffusion and adoption theory (Rogers 1995) is used to explain the adoption of technology within this church during Covid-19. This article demonstrates that during a crisis people must re-evaluate existing practices across various domains, including business, healthcare, governance, and social structures, so as to develop creative solutions. Crises serve as powerful forces for change, innovation, policy shifts, and societal adaptations. While they bring challenges, they also provide opportunities for growth and transformation. Those who adapt effectively often emerge stronger in the aftermath of a crisis. In general, though crises bring challenges, they also provide opportunities for growth and transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a powerful force for change, driving innovation and societal adaptations. The rest of the article will briefly introduce the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya and the CITAM Ngong Church and highlight Rogers' diffusion theory and its applicability for a religious virtual space. Further, the study will cover the methodology and the findings obtained from fieldwork.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic in Kenya**

The COVID-19 virus was unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. The *World Health Organization* (WHO) disclosed that coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that may cause illness in animals or humans (WHO 2023). Covid-19 affects the respiratory system, exhausting it to eventual collapse along with other vital organs. People catch COVID-19 if they breathe in droplets from a person infected with the virus or by touching these objects or surfaces, then touching their eyes, nose, or mouth (Ministry of Health 2020).

In Kenya, the Ministry of Health first confirmed a coronavirus disease case in Nairobi on the 12<sup>th</sup> March, 2020. The Republic of Kenya Ministry of Health further, in an update on coronavirus on February 13, 2020, cautioned persons to avoid close contact with people suffering from acute respiratory infections. In addition, anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness, such as fever, coughing, difficulty in breathing, and sneezing, was to report to the nearest health facility for assessment (MOH Press Release 2020).

The coronavirus pandemic created a twofold crisis by combining a health threat with economic turmoil. Further, the crisis emphasized material differences and national and ethnic tensions. The pandemic also affected intergenerational relations between the elderly and the young. The young were accused of carelessly spreading the disease among the elderly. This affected face-to-face interactions in social spaces such as churches, streets, family gatherings, and cultural events (Grasso et. al. 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya and elsewhere led to a dramatic shift toward remote work, remote church, and e-commerce. Research indicates that during crises, organizations and institutions that embraced new technologies tend to perform better in the long run (Rodgers 1995).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted face-to-face congregating and gatherings in Kenya, affecting religious practices and social interactions. A sustained discussion of how religious experiences in Kenya changed during COVID-19 is provided in Maseno (2022). It is clear that government-imposed restrictions, including lockdowns, curfews, and social distancing measures, led to profound changes in how people in Kenya interacted, worked, and worshipped. This disruption had far-reaching consequences, influencing digital transformation, economic activities, and societal norms (Maseno and Chirongoma 2024).

The sudden closure of places of worship in Kenya profoundly impacted churches across the country (Maseno 2021). For example, the Ministry of Health in Kisii County ordered the closure of churches in Birongo Ward in Nyaribari Chache Sub-County following an upsurge in COVID-19 cases among church members and the surrounding community. In a letter to church leaders in the Ward, the Nyaribari Chache Sub-County Public Health Officer, said that all places of worship will remain closed for fourteen days beginning Friday, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2021 (Kenya News 2021). Religious institutions in Kenya faced unprecedented restrictions as places of worship were closed or required to operate under strict guidelines. The government limited the number of attendees at religious services, prompting many churches and mosques to shift to online worship (The Elephant 2021).

In general, COVID-19 in Kenya had an impact on the religious experiences of many. The digital transition was challenging for religious leaders and congregants, especially in rural areas with limited internet access. Some churches adopted hybrid models, combining small in-person gatherings with virtual services to maintain spiritual engagement (Bwire 2023). At the same time, the impact of COVID-19 was felt on religious and non-religious gatherings, such as weddings, funerals, and community meetings, many of which were either postponed or conducted under strict regulations. It is clear that Kenyan cultural norms, which emphasize communal support during significant life events, were disrupted (Mandillah et al. 2022). The limitations on funeral formalities particularly affected communities that practice extended mourning ceremonies, with implications for social cohesion and emotional coping mechanisms.

In times of uncertainty and change, the phenomena of prophecy, eschatology, and the miraculous tend to be emphasized because options are often limited for the majority who seek comfort, understanding, and motivation. Some Christians during this period looked for prophecies about the pandemic, its duration, end times, survival options, and the like (Maseno 2021). However, despite the challenges, or perhaps because of them, COVID-19 sped up the adoption of digital platforms for communication, work, and religious services. Many church institutions adopted virtual meetings through Zoom, Google Meet, and other digital tools. In the next section, I introduce CITAM Ngong, the church, my research case study.

### **CITAM Ngong Church**

CITAM has its roots in the *Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada* (PAOC), a result of revival witnessed in Canada during the early 1900s, which spread to Kenya as the *Pentecostal Assemblies of God* (PAG) in 1918. The very first missionaries of PAOC in Kenya were Rev. Otto Keller (1888–1942) and his wife. Nyang’ori mission served as its headquarters. CITAM churches that are located within an urban setting are in Nairobi City, Kisumu, and Nakuru. Others in smaller towns include Kiserian and Ngong. CITAM church Ngong was started in July 2003 within the precincts of Ngong town. It started with a tent as the house of meeting with Rev. Mutua as the pioneer senior pastor. Mutua was succeeded by Rev. Jesse before Rev. Ngaira took over. The Assembly later transitioned from the tent to a sanctuary whose completion was realized in 2017. This transition from tent to a built sanctuary was termed as moving the Ark, as popularly promoted by Bishop Oginde (CITAM 2016).

CITAM embraced the use of digital technologies in worship long before the COVID-19 pandemic set in and disrupted in-person worship services. It used the virtual space for religious engagement in tandem with in-person service.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Technologies mediate the body and the world around us, and religions, like every other socio-cultural activity, are and have been mediated in some way. This recognition brings to sharp focus that technologies of sensation structure the felt life of a religion, telling us much about how people build and maintain their worlds and what roles religions play in the ongoing work of cultural construction (Morgan 2013). Heidi Campbell shows how online and offline religious practices are necessarily interconnected. She asserts that people continually negotiate their roles in online spaces where technology is key and is theologically interpreted (Campbell 2012).

Technology adoption is a complex, inherently social, cultural, and developmental process where individuals construct unique yet malleable perceptions of technology that influence their adoption decisions. According to Rogers, there are five stages in the diffusion and adoption theory. These stages are: First, the knowledge stage, where the religious community and group will begin to learn and know about the new innovations and technologies that are available and whether these can be applied in their setting. Here, the main idea is that the religious community is aware of and knowledgeable about the technology. Second is the persuasion stage. The religious community and its leadership, through interaction with others, present a view of the technology and eventually form an attitude about that technology. Third is the decision stage, where there is a drive by the congregation and religious community, together with its leadership, to seek additional information on the technology so that a decision is made whether to adopt it or not.

Fourth is the implementation stage. Here the religious community and its leadership, in view of having obtained additional information on the technology, attempt to regularly use it. Through the regular use of this specific technology, more information is sought and acquired about its reliability and effectiveness. The last stage is that of confirmation. Here, the religious community and its leadership continue to use the technology for an extended period (Rogers 1995). In this way, they either reject or justify the same based on evidence about its benefits or limitations (Straub 2009). Successfully facilitating technology adoption must address cognitive, emotional, and contextual concerns.

This theory is not without critique, some of which is that it seems more patterned to Western societies, whereas this study is not carried out in the West. The theory also relies heavily on individual decision-making, yet technologies to be used by large numbers of people, especially in organizations or communities, are adopted collectively. The theory does not address the possibility that adoption may be restricted because people lack access to resources and not because they are resistant to the technology. Cognizant of these critiques, the use of the theory is nuanced to note the collectivity of the religious community in taking up technology and also that the congregation in question is largely a well-to-do congregation whose membership has access to resources individually and corporately to utilize various technologies.

### **Religious Virtual Space**

The definition of religion has undergone broad changes among scholars. Previously, religion was defined as a system of ideas to which believers assented, the belief and worship of supernatural powers that affect human beings' daily lives. It was also said to be a collection of

cultural systems, beliefs, and worldviews that relate humanity to an order of its occurrence (Smart 1968). This article operationalizes religious virtual space as a space that reflects immanent processes of cultural place-making. It is a space that includes the practice of specific narratives regarding divine action, transcendent presence, or supernatural reality in the immanent world with the help of technology (Campbell 2012). Campbell has posited the blurring between online and offline religious engagements. Here, the notion of a disembodied religion has been overtaken, and scholars agree that emotional and sensory engagements occur during online religious activities. In this way, both the physical and digital selves engage and are not separate (Campbell 2012).

Restrictions to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the social distancing requirement, meant that socializing in the religious sphere had to move to a religious virtual space as prompted by people's desire to deconstruct, construct, and reorganize their religious experiences. Most dimensions of human engagement, including church services, embraced virtual modes of streaming live church services. This was not without shifts in authority. New forms of religious authority emerged online to foster both a decentralization and a re-centralization of authority.

Technological access will influence the creation of religious virtual spaces, as this article will consistently indicate. Religious virtual space, therefore, is an electronic environment that visually mimics complex physical spaces with virtual objects where people can interact with each other (Saunders et al. 2011). Clearly, these spaces reconfigure religious experience, ritual, and identity in ways that are not merely imitative but transformative. It presents a unique religious environment of its own: an environment in which individuals and religious communities are continuously producing, consuming, and internalizing information (Maseno 2022). Even though some churches in Kenya had earlier adopted social media platforms to run their services.

## **Methodology**

The choice for CITAM Ngong for this research was because of its pronounced connection to the CITAM main office, Church CITAM Valley Road, on matters of online church. The CITAM Church virtual footprint is one of the greatest across Pentecostal churches in Kenya. The choice for this church was because CITAM Ngong embraced a virtual presence even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In their analysis of religion and social media use in the era of COVID-19 (Kilonzo and Omwalo 2021), they describe CITAM as having 'one of the most social media savvy ministries', attesting to advanced adoption of digital technology in this church. Also, CITAM Ngong is in an area in the outskirts of Nairobi city and its membership consists mostly of persons who reside in the locality. Furthermore, access and formal permission to carry out research in this congregation were granted by the deputy bishop of CITAM, which made it an even more apt site.

This study incorporated approaches from ethnography. Ethnography involves contact with a given community and concern for day-to-day events as well as direct or indirect participation in their activities (Agar 1980). Since contact with a given community or group and concern for day-to-day events as well as direct or indirect participation in local activities is pursued, fieldwork has also been said to be the name for 'doing ethnography' (Agar 1980). Ethnography as a research method enlarged the database for theological reflection in congregational spaces and brought to the fore voices in the context of CITAM Church, which is historically localized and culturally specific (Maseno 2022).

More specifically, the researcher used ethnography as a means of data collection. For six months, the researcher immersed herself in the CITAM Church social setting to observe, participate, listen, and engage with various members of the congregation and gained a deep

appreciation of individuals' perspectives and interpretations (Bryman 2004). Qualitative techniques were also deployed during the study since there is nobody who just lives online (Miller 2018).

The researcher made several visits to the church over a period of 6 months. The first visit to the church was on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2021. The researcher was able to observe the entire service. Further, on 14<sup>th</sup> October, the researcher proceeded to map the church premises and entire grounds, noting the architecture and the buildings and landscape of the facilities. It was clear that the church is well built, with grandeur and modern architecture. The compound overflowed with cars, most members driving into the service with their families. It was also clear that this was a middle-class church whose members understand English, as no translation was provided, save for Kenyan sign language, during church services.

Within this period, the researcher attended several first services, which started at 7:00 am for prayer and intercession. They also attended and were active participant observers of the youth services and first service, which often officially started at 8:30 am. The researcher was also able to sit in for the second services, which typically began at 11:00 am and where the main family, teens, and Sunday services were run simultaneously.

The researcher interacted with the CITAM Ngong youth ministry, whose target is the youth and young adults and takes care of their spiritual needs through Sunday church services. At CITAM Ngong, youth also have programs for the ex-candidates, the university students, and others. In several of the sessions, it was possible to engage with the robust outreach programs through drama, mission, and outreach, such as evangelism programs, local and international missions, music, and dance.

The researcher conducted interviews with the leaders of different ministries, such as youth leaders, the IT director, and the senior pastor. The researcher was also immersed in golden agers groups and Bible study groups that had members of different ages, where the researcher sought to know which technologies CITAM church used to reach their congregations, any enhancements to these technologies, their benefits and limitations, and the content transmitted. In adopting ethnography, this study ultimately generated thick descriptions deriving from the interactions.

In general, the study adopted ethnography to understand the adoption of the virtual space in CITAM Ngong. Through ethnography, the researcher could critically assess the available technologies in this congregation, their preferences, adoption across generations, and their impact within the emerging virtual contexts (Miller 2018). This methodological choice provided an understanding of ways in which the virtual context interacts with the physical to produce knowledge and meaning (Underberg and Zorn, 2015). In analyzing the data, the researcher focused on stories and accounts of how people constructed meaning. Further, recurrent themes and patterns from the stories were examined to understand the adoption of virtual space. Effort was made to develop an appreciation of congregational online activity, which can only be understood relative to changes that have taken place offline (Dicks et al. 2005).

## **Findings**

This section will highlight the findings of this article with regard to technology adoption and generational access. The key respondents from the ICT team leadership, the senior pastor of the church, youth leadership, safari group members and the golden agers (Members over 50 years of age) leadership, availed the information regarding CITAM Ngong.

### ***Technology Adoption in CITAM Ngong***

According to O'Brien's study, whereas the use of digital technologies for religious engagement in the COVID-19 era is not new, COVID-19 made digital religion more visible and accessible. Increased visibility and accessibility translated to more people being reached, including those who may have had no interest in following a particular church service but ended up doing so because they were reached through online communication. Digital religion has thus 'opened itself up to the masses' (O'Brien 2020). While conducting research, it was mentioned by the ICT team lead at CITAM Ngong that they planned for technology in the congregation before they were able to implement the new innovation. The ICT lead stated that the choice of equipment in the control room for sound, lighting, and live transmission required prior planning to carry out efficient digital transmission during the pandemic.

In CITAM, it was noted that the technology and applications currently in use included WhatsApp, M-PESA, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Zoom, Instagram, Hope TV and Hope FM Stations. To adopt these in the form of a process, software, or any innovation, there was an immediate need to increase the knowledge of church leaders and the congregation. A youth stated, 'The young were quick in trying out new applications. They were among the first to take up but also were able to teach fellow youth and their parents how to engage on the various platforms' (Youth 4, Interview 14/10/2021).

### ***Adoption Process***

The church leadership was key in the adoption process because of budgetary issues that would emerge. Church leaders would therefore be helped to understand the varieties of applications, hence building a knowledge base, which is the first stage in innovation adoption. Rogers' theory shows that adoption is a process with some classified as early adopters and others as late adopters (Rogers 1995).

The adoption process is personal and heavily based on emotion. A big hindrance to adoption is the perception of the innovation by the congregation. From fieldwork, it was clear that amid emotion, church leadership and membership had to concretize what they would need to adopt over a series of meetings and move on to make a rational decision on the way forward. Theologically, the congregation was to take note of how technology would transform religious practice, worship styles, and the understanding of community. CITAM Ngong membership found itself in a place where religious practices and rituals, such as the Eucharist, were transformed when carried out online (Maseno 2024). The understanding of community and spiritual engagement in CITAM Ngong shifted when close members could not physically be present for funerals and weddings of each other. They had to rethink how to support one another in the midst of curfews and bans on large gatherings. It was important to articulate to the congregational leaders what they needed to do at the implementation of this innovation.

### ***Persuasion and Implementation Stage***

Any innovation and technology requires that the people be convinced that the innovation and technology are good in religious terms (Hoover 2006). For the technology to be adopted, the people must know that this is good for them and effective in the long run. This could include advertising to the congregants the benefits of the technology to prepare the people for the change that is coming and why it is coming so that they have a positive attitude. In the wake of COVID-19, the need to connect and keep religious communities together was great, and early adopters of technology such as CITAM Ngong were quick to lead the way. In relation to their faith, the shift to online church services provided an opportunity for virtual religious spaces that carried spiritual significance (Bwire 2023). These spaces were more than one,

such that any church leader was required to up their skills and delivery if they wanted to have a consistent following. In relation to faith, virtual religion added to the variety from which members could choose (Gathogo 2023). One youth stated, ‘I was able to teach my mum how to operate across various apps so that she would also access services not only from Facebook’ (Youth 7, Interview 14/10/21). In relation to their faith, CITAM Ngong congregants were also exposed to online services which decentralized and individualized worship experiences. This was appreciated by others, whereas others were concerned that virtual services, diminish accountability, discipleship, and the sense of belonging in congregations.

### ***Generational Access in CITAM Ngong***

In the minds of the adopters, a number were concerned about the perception of the technology. In CITAM Ngong, where we had many elderly persons, interaction with them made clear that the religious virtual space did not seem real and wholesome. According to one, ‘It is cumbersome to operate some gadgets, and I miss the personal touch which I appreciated during in-service worship’. The older generation was affected even more, because for a while even when the services resumed, the Ministry of Health directed that the elderly, above 60, and those with underlying conditions should keep away from crowds, including the church. Therefore, in the Kenyan case, it was the older persons who had the new way of doing church for a longer period.

Research findings in the CITAM field showed that a number of the older members did not find religious virtual settings equivalent to the face-to-face gatherings. Their previous understanding and past experiences of what fellowship is, being prayed for and with, and the Eucharist were not compatible with what was being offered in the virtual space. Pursuant to this, it was also clear from fieldwork that the complexity of the technology was a hindrance for adoption. One golden ager stated, ‘Not all applications are important for me. I am able to join Google meetings and Zoom meetings, WhatsApp groups, do Mpesa money transactions, and also work on Facebook. These other new applications are not for a person like me’ (Golden ager 3, Interview on 21/10/2021). The elderly in CITAM found some apps, like Instagram and TikTok, too technical to operationalize, hindering their use of these technologies. A majority of those who were on apps were on the common applications like WhatsApp, Facebook, M-PESA, and Zoom. This is a clear generational divide within the congregation. Rogers’ theory shows that it is possible to have some as early adopters, in the case of youth, but also have the late majority who would need more prodding to take up new applications. Whereas the youth in the Church embraced and were able to use the varied social media applications with ease and fun, the older generation were limited in their adoption. ‘The pandemic has amplified the changed circumstances of the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and recreated a neo-modern spirituality that is mediated in social media’ (Kilonzo and Omwalo, 2021:8).

### **Conclusion**

This article explains the adoption of technology in the context of CITAM Ngong church during COVID-19 and demonstrates that technology adoption is complex and inherently social. Also, that generational access remains a factor in the uptake of technology (Rogers 1995). The adoption of new media technology for church services in Kenya presents both opportunities and challenges. While digital platforms facilitate evangelism, inclusivity, and outreach, they also raise theological concerns about the authenticity of worship, rituals, ecclesiology, spiritual authority, and community engagement and the Eucharist rituals in the virtual space (Maseno 2024). As CITAM Ngong continues to navigate this transition, there is a need for a deepened theological framework and discourse that integrates technology while preserving the core aspects of Christian doctrine and practice.

Older members of the congregation were slower adopters of virtual technologies. From the ethnographic work, an analysis of generational access to technology showed that younger people demonstrated agility and were active on various platforms. In CITAM Ngong, many participants were on multiple apps, and the church itself embraced a religious virtual space.

The theoretical framework is Rogers' diffusion and adoption theory, which explains the adoption of technology within CITAM Church during COVID-19 and that any access to the right technology requires good resources to run technology, which in turn influenced the use of the religious virtual space. Rogers shows that innovations spread through a population over time in stages and that knowledge should be available, people should be persuaded about the technology, and they can make a decision about the same before they move to implement and confirm the technology (Rogers 1995).

Generational divide in accessing technology has an impact on the embrace of virtual religious spaces. When COVID-19 lockdowns were introduced and religious meetings banned across the country, all religious actors had to devise ways to reach their members, given that they could no longer do so physically. In CITAM Ngong, access to virtual space by the elderly and the youth was different even as the adoption of the same was varied.

This study contends that virtual spaces are not disembodied spaces, nor are they temporary or utilitarian solutions to physical absence during lockdowns. Rather, over time and even after the pandemic, they continue to evolve into meaningful cultural and spiritual landscapes where new interpretations, engagements, and forms of place-making occur. Within these digital environments, CITAM Ngong members reimagine and reassemble narratives of transcendent presence beyond traditional boundaries and cultivate authentic expressions of communal belonging. These dynamics signal a transformative shift in how sacred space, identity, and spiritual connection are being reconfigured in the digital age.

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