

## **Extract of Research Proposal for MA Digital Theology Dissertation.**

The ability to identify oneself in belonging to and being of membership within a church has up until now, been limited to the confines of serving in onsite capacity. However, there is no doubt that there has been a shift over the last five years into one that could allow membership to be moved into a hybrid expression.

Over the years I have seen people attend a Sunday service, stand up, sit down, say the words, yet do little in service and community within the church. I have also seen a church member who was unable to attend onsite church activities due to severe health conditions but even when she could attend, accessibility was difficult. Despite this, throughout the pandemic as the church went online, she was able to serve the church in more ways than before - offering videos of prayers, readings, poetry, fellowship and more, without the risk to her health but able to be more a part of the church than she would do previously.

If the UK Church is to step confidently into the digital age, the question must be asked and is the subject of this research proposal - Should the future of UK Baptist church membership be explored and renegotiated to adapt to a post pandemic digital age?

The change of what it means to belong or be a part of an individual local church, how one established membership with them and its importance upon our cultural identity has changed over the last decade with significant impact over the last 3 years in the wake of the global pandemic. The increasing use of technology in many different aspects of our lives has caused a change in the delivery, community and engagement of a life of faith to many Christians. Not only are we more equipped to oversee our own quiet, discipleship time but we are also now able to engage with other Christians or evangelise to non-Christians in numbers never seen before. Now an individual can connect with a church not only the other side of their city, but the country and even opposite ends of the globe.

Through my professional work, I have engaged with a number of ministers, elders and church leaders who have ferociously maintained that membership within a church is only permitted when the individual attends and engages with the church onsite within the church building. My frustration with the general perception of digital use within church is the assumption that due to my age, the reason for being a digital advocate stems from a laziness and resistance to attend church. Yet with a number of online churches being started since the pandemic, this offers a more level experience and attention given for all involved. But the difference in hybrid to those attending an onsite service through online often feel like lower members or less valued by the church with limited interactions and engagement with those attending online, as I have personally experienced this in my own exploration of church communities through online.

There are great opportunities to create new relationships between online and onsite, adapting to the sociological changes we face, especially for the younger generations who are digital natives. The question must be asked not when but how we explore the legality and formalisation of Baptist church membership and the desire of belonging for an individual to a church community that may be delivered through an online means.

I believe that there are biblical roots as to why digital is not simply a fad to be disregarded by church leaders but the next steps of our Church culture in the 21st century. The Trinity offers the perspective that diversity is not ungodly. The separation of the preacher is nothing new with Paul and his letters often stating he wished he could be onsite with them but for various reasons he faced, he was unable to. This did not make his teachings less valued but simply a different form of communications.

Nonetheless with the potential of digital, there is debate challenging the advocacy of digital expressions of church. I have even personally tried to grapple with the statements emphasising embodiment within the Bible especially when looking at God creating mankind, Jesus taking human form, the commentary of the Body of Christ. There are questions of how the sacraments might be administered through digital means or how does baptism work online? There is also the significance stated on gathering which has until recent times been interpreted as onsite gathering. I do not deny these points and would suggest this is why online is an addition to church rather than a new production. Yet they are challenges that cannot be easily replicated within a digital environment and must be carefully reflected upon.

For this research I will explore and consider the necessity of negotiating the future of the UK church membership with particular focus in regards to the Baptist denomination and the meaning of belonging to church communities in the post pandemic digital age. The aim is to understand if there is the possibility of transformation in how membership and belonging within a church in a more traditional ecclesiology should be adapted to suit a new enlightenment. To inquire if the language and legal nature of the Baptist constitution allow for digital to be interpreted within it? It will be difficult to ascertain a definitive answer in the short time in writing this Masters dissertation, but will hopefully explore through current digital theological research and literature as well as reflecting upon Baptist ecclesiology and history to evaluate this area of what 21st Century church membership and community may look like. My intention is to examine current research from theologians and academics exploring what church in a digital age looks like with key areas such as hybrid and online church as well as the cultural indications that society may expect or be prepared for some flexibility in the delivery of church.

There is the hope that the sudden requirement of increased use of digital and technology due to the global pandemic has caused a change in understanding, appreciation and use with church life not simply to those who are already in support of tech but for all those who may engage with it. Has there been an ethnographic change in a spiritual life with digital especially for those in the western world, of younger generations? Does the digital native gen Y and Z have a chance to significantly influence the landscape as they emerge into leadership roles and promote the opportunities? It is not about restructuring the entire ecclesiology of the western and predominantly Baptist UK church but to explore a new expression of faith that links with both online and onsite and creating a space that is welcoming and open to different forms of membership.

My hypothesis is to ascertain if the language within the Baptist constitution allows for an individual to be in membership with a church that may be thousands of miles away but allows them to connect with other Christians, worship, be taught the scriptures, and grow in their discipleship. Despite the questions that arise on embodiment and physical connection through gathering that are voices not only from others but within my own theological reflection, is a future of quality and nurturing hybrid churches possible?

I believe that my age, my digital preference as well as experience and profession whilst still questioning the biblical teaching on gathering, embodiment and connection with others, will offer a different insight into the current landscape of the research.