CYBERCHURCH

NEIGHBORHOOD OF OTHER/S (*Kapwa*)

AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL MODEL FOR A DIGITAL AGE

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The internet revolution, often likened to the Industrial Revolution in its sweeping societal impact, has radically transformed how communities gather, communicate, and express identity. In this emerging digital context, the question arises: How might we reimagine the role and mission of the Church? This book responds by proposing the *Cyberchurch – Neighborhood of Others/Kapwa* as a model for faith communities that inhabit and minister within cyberspace.

To explore this, the study first maps diverse online church expressions, tracing their contexts of emergence and examining their relational ties—or lack thereof—to local congregations. It then engages the themes of *neighbor*, *other*, and the Filipin@ concept of *kapwa*, drawing on inclusivist perspectives that honor difference and relationality. Through the application of these thematic lenses, a reinterpretation of the Good Samaritan parable is offered as a blueprint for ethical encounters in digital spheres.

Guided by Avery Dulles's typology of church models, the book articulates the theological contours, strengths, and limitations of the *Cyberchurch – Neighborhood of Others/Kapwa*. This model is rooted in Scripture— particularly Matthew 18:20:"[F]or where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them"— affirming that meaningful spiritual fellowship can flourish even when physical gathering is not possible. Likewise, the parable of the Good Samaritan gains renewed relevance as a call to be good neighbors along the highways of cyberspace.

This vision of cyberchurch invites deep relational connections, ethical solidarity, and spiritual community in the digital realm. Yet it also confronts a pressing challenge: the digital divide, which risks excluding those without internet access from full participation in this evolving ecclesial form. As such, this book is both a theological reflection and a call to action—for churches, educators, and digital practitioners to build inclusive, compassionate, and justice-oriented cyberneighborhoods where all may belong.

Praise for Cyberchurch— Neighborhood of Others/*Kapwa*

Jacoba and Brazal offer a compelling ecclesial exploration of the nature of digital church life, packed with methodological and theological insights that chart a pathway toward an emerging communicative theology grounded within a uniquely Asian conceptual frame. Readers will be inspired to advance theological thinking regarding cyberchurch, social communication theory, and ecclesiology in general.

The deep engagement with Filipino notions of *kapwa*, *loob*, and other indigenous Asian forms of understanding offers a rich lens for theological anthropology and ecclesiology. Scholars will appreciate the authors' fluency in diverse literatures, which are highly fruitful for theological or social scientific work. Practitioners will discover considerable riches in the very accessible, practical, and missiological tone. No less importantly, pastoral leaders will find it an accessible and highly informative guide for ministry, whether in social communications, evangelization, or church life in general.

Bryan T. Froehle, Ph.D., *Professor of Practical Theology Palm Beach Atlantic University, USA; Past President of the Association of Professors of Mission Co-author, Global Catholicism: Between Disruption and Encounter (Brill, 2025)*

The digital revolution has reshaped how Christians worship, connect, and share the Gospel. The future of the Church is no longer confined to walls — it is hybrid, a living communion that moves between face-to-face and online spaces. This book dares to imagine that future. It proposes the *cyberchurch* as a neighborhood of others/*kapwa* — a Church rooted in solidarity, diversity, and radical welcome. It is not primarily an empirical study, but a theological reflection on how we might creatively envision the church in the digital age. The reflections are inspired by the Filipino context, where the word *kapwa* refers to the Other who is both the "one of us" and the "not-one of us." Inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan, it envisions communities that choose compassion over exclusion and dialogue over echo chambers.

In an original and inspiring way, the authors encourage us to look for ways in the digital world that go beyond the northern paradigms of power, domination, and competition, and to build new communities of solidarity, respect for diversity, and attention to the marginalized. This book boldly confronts the challenges

of today's digital society and seeks a new model for making the life of the church community as fruitful, creative, and fulfilling as possible. For pastors, educators, and seekers in a connected world, this is an invitation to reimagine the Church for the digital age — not as a virtual substitute for reality, but as a vibrant, ethical, and transformative communion of faith.

Roman Globokar, PhD, *Associate Professor of Theology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; Author, Educational Challenges of Schools in the Digital Age (2019).*

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Introduction

The *Digital 2025* report by We Are Social and Meltwater reveals a profound shift in global connectivity and digital engagement. With over 5.56 billion people online and 5.78 billion mobile phone users worldwide, digital platforms have become the primary arena for interpersonal communication and information dissemination (We Are Social and Meltwater 2025). In the Philippines, as of January 2025, there were 97.5 million Internet users, representing 83.8% of the population (DataReportal 2025).

This exponential growth highlights not just the ubiquity of digital technologies but also their transformative impact on societal structures and human interactions. In 1998, Barna Group predicted that by 2010, 20% of the population would rely primarily or exclusively on the Internet for religious input, marking a critical moment in the shift toward virtual religious spaces (Campbell 2010). Internet-based Christian communities known as 'online churches' started flourishing dramatically in the early 2000s.

The year 2004 signaled a dramatic shift in online church development. The Methodist Council in the United Kingdom funded the experimental "Church of Fools," a 3D virtual church space where avatars interacted in real-time. It attracted significant media attention and averaged 8,000 visitors daily during its first two weeks (Campbell 2010).

The article by Heidi Campbell and Alessandra Vitullo (2016) on "Assessing Changes in the Study of Religious Communities in Digital Religion Studies" charts the development from the 1990s to 2016 of academic research and perspectives of online religious communities (including cyberchurches) in four stages.

In the initial stage of research on digital religion, scholars concentrated on individual online communities to catalogue the novel technologies and strategies they employed to attract members. Early research was preoccupied with a fundamental question: could the religious groups forming on the internet be legitimately classified as communities, and if so, were these communities authentically religious? Academics tended to conceptualize the online activities of religious groups as distinct from their offline practices. This perspective existed in contrast to the views of the members themselves, who perceived their digital religious involvement as a direct extension of their offline engagement (Dawson and Cowan 2004).

Initial scholarship on the Internet's social impact, emerging in the mid-1990s, was largely speculative and divided into two opposing camps: a utopian perspective that championed its potential and a dystopian one that feared its consequences. Optimists advocated for its use to enhance church ministries and create new avenues for spiritual connection, while skeptics dismissed online religious experiences as inherently inauthentic. The predominant view at that time was that the internet is a "disembodied space." There was also the widespread belief that the physical world was real, but the online world was only a digital copy, not truly real.

The second phase is the categorization stage. During the second research phase, a consensus emerged acknowledging that participants themselves viewed online religious communities as authentic, despite their novel social and communicative structures that differed from traditional ones. Scholars subsequently worked to catalog the defining characteristics of these communities. Online religious groups demonstrated a fluid and dynamic nature that frequently challenged conventional religious boundaries and authority structures. The anonymity of the online environment was found to reduce social constraints, fostering more open discourse, for instance, on taboo topics like sexuality.

Christopher Helland (2018) pioneered a shift in scholarly perspective by introducing a critical distinction in his article "Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas," which established a new framework for understanding nuanced religious expressions on the internet. Helland's typology categorizes religious websites into two distinct types. The first, "religion online," functions as an information website; a one-way channel for providing religious information, similar to TV or radio, with no interactivity. The second, "online religion," is highly interactive, allowing users to engage in discussions, share beliefs, and take part in virtual rituals. He has since refined this model, acknowledging that many sites now blend both functions (Helland 2018). Alternatively, interaction often occurs on popular unofficial sites, while official organizations use the web primarily for one-way communication, viewing it as a tool rather than a social space.

The third phase marked a significant shift, recognizing that digital tools were not just creating new online communities but were also being adopted by established offline groups to enhance their ministry and member services. During this third phase, scholarly inquiry expanded beyond examining online religious expressions to investigate how established offline religious communities and organizations were both utilizing and being transformed by digital technologies.

This stage emphasized conceptualizing online and offline religious engagement as an integrated continuum rather than separate realms. Scholars argued that most users perceive their digital and physical social networks as deeply

interconnected. This led to theorizing on the negotiation between religious communities and new media.

In what can be considered a fourth stage, research focuses on the intersection and blending of online and offline religious practices and discourses, examining how members combine their practices across both worlds. Scholars recognize the internet is a part of everyday life, not separate from it. For religious groups, it provides a tool to extend their community, allow movement between physical and digital spaces, and experiment with new forms of communication that can impact both realms.

Unlike many other Christian denominations, the Catholic Church has formulated a relatively unified and structured stance on the Internet over the past decades, while also establishing a notable online presence (Mc Donnell, et al., 2012). This perspective has been articulated mainly through documents issued by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications and the annual World Communications Day messages from Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. Although these views reflect the Roman Catholic tradition, they often align with broader Christian perspectives on the Internet, especially regarding shared theological foundations.

The Catholic Church's longstanding tradition of adopting new technologies for both social and ecclesiastical communication is theologically grounded, dating back to Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* (1957), which framed technology as a divine gift for humanity's empowerment.

The most prominent focus in the Catholic Church's official discussions about the Internet is its potential and significance as a tool for evangelization. It is important to note that in most of church documents on communications from 1970 to 2005, the focus had been on communications media as a tool or means of evangelization. Pope John Paul II, in the 36th World Communications Day Message, "Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel" started speaking of the new media more as a digital space or arena or the web as "an ambience to inhabit" (2002).

The Church is challenged to grapple with and to radically rethink how to effectively communicate the Gospel in a digitally dominated world. Babin and Zukowski (2002) argued that the Church needed to fundamentally adapt its teaching methods to effectively engage with the emerging digital culture. The emphasis on evangelization through the internet continues more than a decade later in *Evangelii Gaudium*, where Pope Francis, urged a discernment of the Holy Spirit in interpreting contemporary signs and embracing new methods of evangelization (Francis 2013, §14).

The convergence of digital behavior around mobile devices and the rising influence of Artificial Intelligence underscore the urgency for the church to innovate its approach. This entails not only utilizing digital platforms for outreach but also engaging deeply with the ethical implications of digital evangelization. The digital era demands a theological radicalism that embraces these technologies while remaining steadfast in the Gospel's core message of compassion, justice, and community.

The transmission of Christian faith remains the ultimate purpose of new evangelization and the wider mission of the Church. Countries with long-standing Christian traditions require a renewed proclamation of the Gospel to foster a transformative encounter with Christ, one that moves beyond superficiality and routine. In May 2014, Pope Francis once again underscored this challenge, telling participants at the Pontifical Mission Societies that "[E]vangelizing at this time of great social transformation requires a missionary Church impelled to go forth, capable of discerning how to deal with various cultures and peoples' visions" (Francis 2014).

Campbell and Vitullo's (2016) review of literature on online religious communities' spans from the 1990s to 2016. In 2019, the world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced religious communities to go online. Campbell's anthology *Religion in Quarantine* (2020) focused on the ways religious institutions navigated the mandatory transition from physical gatherings to digitally mediated forms of worship, community, and ritual, as well as the lasting effects this period of isolation and digital innovation might have on the vitality, structure, and practice of religion in the United States moving forward.

Post-pandemic five years later, it seems the hybrid church is here to stay. According to Pushpay's 2024 State of Church Tech report, based on an interview of 170 priests across the US, approximately 75% of the surveyed Catholic parishes offered a hybrid worship model, integrating both in-person and online services. The five main factors motivating greater technology use are evangelization, fostering connection, promoting acceptance, ensuring transparency, and building community (Pushpay 2024).

Similarly, in the 2022 survey of mainline churches of Scott Thumma et al., 32% of congregations using a hybrid worship model experienced growth of at least 5% since 2019. In contrast, only 6% of churches offering solely in-person worship saw similar growth, and none of the exclusively online congregations reported growth. Furthermore, churches embracing the hybrid mode were more inclined to explore innovative approaches to ministry. They tended to attract more young adults while having fewer older members, resulting in a more balanced age distribution. Additionally, these churches were more likely to maintain

religious education programs across all age groups in virtual or hybrid formats. (Thumma 2023)

Employing correlation/regression analysis, the study of Agnes Brazal and Teresa Camarines of women's reception of cyberchurches in the Philippine context projects a significant increase in the level of engagement in 10 online religious activities post-pandemic (Brazal and Camarines 2023), suggesting that the future of the Church is hybrid, operating both in-person and virtually in a continuum (Thumma 2023).

At this point, the time is ripe to address how this ecclesiological phenomenon challenges and reshapes our view of the Church and its mission of evangelization. As Antonio Spadaro asks: "What impact has the Internet had on the ways in which we understand the Church and ecclesial communion?" He noted that cyberspace is an "anthropological space" that reshapes how we think, relate, and express faith (Spadaro 2014, ix, 3–5). Avery Dulles, in his landmark 1974 book *Models of the Church*, discussed various models of the Church that have emerged in various contexts: Church as Institution, Herald, Mystical Communion, Servant, and later, Community of Disciples. This last model synthesized relationships across the previous four and offered a potential framework for a comprehensive ecclesiology (Dulles 2002).

What model of Church is emerging in our current digital era? This book proposes the model of Church as *cyberchurch,* a neighborhood of "others/*kapwa*" as a fresh expression of being Church in the digital era. Dulles defined a model as "a relatively simple, artificially constructed case that is found to be useful and illuminating for dealing with realities that are more complex and differentiated" (Dulles 1974, 29). This work followed Dulles's trajectory by proposing a model of *cyberchurch* emerging from digital contexts. A model, as he argued, could be symbolic or conceptual or both. The proposed model is both conceptual and symbolic: *cyberchurch* is a conceptual construct, and *neighborhood of others/kapwa* is a symbolic imagery.

A Google search conducted in July 2025 for the term "cyberchurch" yielded approximately 118,000 results, while "church online" produced roughly 1.42 billion results, reflecting the sustained growth and visibility of virtual Christian communities. These figures underscore the increasing relevance of digital ecclesial expressions, particularly as churches continue to invest in hybrid worship formats, online sacramental practices, and global digital outreach (Google Search 2025).

Supporting these digital footprints are robust engagement data: by 2025, over 50% of practicing Christians in the U.S. have participated in online church services, and the global online church economy, valued at USD 7 billion in 2022, is

projected to grow at a compound annual rate of 8% through 2030. Projections indicate that virtual participation may exceed 35% of worship gatherings worldwide by the end of 2025. These shifts mark not a marginal trend but a transforming ecclesial reality (Gitnux 2025; Sci-Tech Today 2025).

The term *cyberchurch*, coined by Patrick Dixon in 1997, refers to "an electronically linked group of believers aiming to reproduce in cyberspace aspects of conventional church life," or "the body of all Christians who interact using global computer networks" (Dixon 1997).

Cyberchurch, from a ministry perspective, has been defined as a space enabling worship, Christian education, evangelization, and community on the World Wide Web. Some argued that emotional investment and authentic online interaction are important features as well of a *cyberchurch*. It could operate independently of any local church or denomination and need not participate in every traditional ministry function.

This book employs the term *cyberchurch* inclusively, encompassing all these interpretations, including those still transitioning from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 interactions, particularly as catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These communities expanded rapidly since the early 2000s.

Investigative Focus

This book explores the central question: How can one describe a model of Church as a cyberchurch neighborhood of others/*kapwa*? The discussion is guided by several framing questions:

1. What would a mapping of today's online religious communities or cyberchurches reveal?
2. What insights might a critical analysis of the concepts "neighbor/hood" and "others/*kapwa*" uncover? How can these ideas be reinterpreted within the digital context?
3. How might Luke 10:25–37 [29], particularly the question "Who is my neighbor?", be revisited in the cyber-context, and what implications does it offer for envisioning Church as a neighborhood of others/*kapwa*?
4. What are the key features, strengths, and limitations of a model of cyberchurch conceived as a neighborhood of others/*kapwa*?

Rather than approaching these questions from an empirical or case-study perspective, the book aims to construct a theological and conceptual model that responds to contemporary digital realities and ecclesial concerns. The digital realm offers new ways to encounter difference, to dwell with otherness, and to reimagine neighborliness beyond physical geography. The goal is not merely to describe existing communities but to creatively imagine the Church in a digital world.

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations and Methodology

The theoretical grounding of this book is Dulles's model theory, a rich approach to ecclesiology developed across multiple works. In *Models of the Church* (1974) and *Models of Revelation* (1983), Dulles adopts a method of analogical reasoning and model-building to describe the Church and the nature of Revelation. In *The Craft of Theology* (1995), he reflects further on his theological method, especially the use of models as dynamic, interpretive tools.

In his essay "Models in the Theology of Avery Dulles," Terrence Merrigan notes how theology, like other scientific disciplines, has come to accept models as essential constructs in conceptual discourse. Critically constructed models foster dialogue, enrich theological imagination, and open new avenues for understanding ecclesial identity. Merrigan wrote, "The short answer to the question of why models are necessary at all is the fact that both the Church and Revelation are, ultimately, 'mysteries,' that is to say, realities about which we cannot speak 'directly' but only 'indirectly'" (Merrigan 1993, 145).

Dulles identified biblical metaphors, such as vine, flock, and temple, as early instances of analogical description. Through theological reflection, these metaphors evolve into formal models that illuminate certain dimensions of church life, while necessarily obscuring others. No model is exhaustive. Each opens access to part of the truth, and for that reason, multiple models must co-exist and be held in tension (Dulles 1974, 13).

This book builds on Dulles's method to propose a new model of Church: the cyberchurch as a neighborhood of others/*kapwa*. In line with Dulles's evaluative strategy, the model will be examined according to the following ecclesiological elements:

- Goal: What is the purpose and mission of this church?
- Beneficiaries: Who is served or reached?
- Bonds: What unites the members as a community?

These elements will be measured using Dulles's seven theological criteria: (1) Basis in Scripture (2) Basis in Tradition (3) Ability to foster corporate identity and mission (4) Capacity to promote virtues and Christian values (5) Resonance with contemporary religious experience (6) Theological fruitfulness (7) Fruitfulness in engaging those outside the Catholic Church (Dulles 1974, 14–18).

The methodology employed also aligns with the synthetic model of theologizing (Bevans 2002), particularly that of José de Mesa and Lode Wostyn (1990), which guarantees cultural sensitivity and contextual relevance. Their method of correlation between human experience and the Christian tradition offers a way to think theologically about lived realities. In this case, the lived reality is cyberspace, its relational textures, its openness to otherness, and its challenges to ecclesial community.

Contemporary Human Experience (Context)	DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE TWO POLES	Christian Tradition (Context)
=Experiences of members of cyberchurch =Profiling of cyberchurches =Discourses on neighborhood/*kapwa*	=Rereading of the parable of the Good Samaritan in the digital era =Evaluation of cyberchurch vis-à-vis Dulles's Seven Criteria	=Discourses on the Parable of the Good Samaritan = Dulles's models of Church and criteria in the determination of authentic models
Cyberchurch Neighborhood of Others/*Kapwa*		

The theological method guiding this book is rooted in the *hermeneutical circle*, as elaborated by de Mesa and Wostyn. Theology, in this framework, is a dialectical engagement between two poles: the lived experience of the present and the historical faith experiences expressed in the Christian tradition. It is not a one-way application of doctrine, but a dynamic interplay between "an analysis of the present" and "an analysis of the historical experience" of Christian life, together with hermeneutical reflection (de Mesa and Wostyn 1990).

On the side of human experience, this book considers the cyber-context and its challenges, the lived realities of online churches, and the evolving discourses on "neighbor," "others," and *kapwa,* especially as these terms are reimagined in digital spaces. Discourses on neighbor, neighborhood, and others/*kapwa* are

examined through interdisciplinary dialogue—drawing from sociology, postcolonial, and digital studies. Filipin@ concepts such as *kapwa* and *pakikipagkapwa* offer rich insights into relationality and mutual recognition. *Kapwa* is the Filipin@ term for "other." However, unlike the English term "other," which is the opposite of "the same," *kapwa* includes both the "one of us" and the "not-one-of us." *Pakikipagkapwa* (relating to the same/other) is a Filipin@ value that at its highest level involves solidarity (John Paul II 1987, 29–30) with the *kapwa's* struggle for justice (Enriquez 1978). These indigenous frameworks resist binary thinking and affirm shared humanity (Brazal and Lacsa 2022), making them vital in the reimagination of inclusive *cyberchurch* communities.

On the side of Christian tradition, the Gospel, particularly the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), serves as a theological anchor, alongside Avery Dulles's framework for evaluating ecclesiological models. The dialogue between the contemporary human experience and the Christian tradition results in a reinterpretation of the parable in the digital context.

A postcolonial lens has been applied in analyzing discourses on neighbor/others/*kapwa* as well as the parable of the Good Samaritan. The use of discourse analysis in theologizing, as developed by Brazal, was employed (Brazal, 2019). This explores the following questions: 1) What are the different ways of talking about the cultural text? 2) Who are the main proponents of these discourses (based on ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, etc.) and whose interests do these discourses promote? 3) What is the socio-economic-political-disciplinary context of the production of these discourses? 4) How have these discourses been consumed (appropriated, contested, negotiated)? 5) How have these discourses regulated or shaped conduct?

This reading foregrounds the experiences of the marginalized and interrogates power structures embedded in interpretations. It is attentive to discourses emanating from the margins or beyond the Northern paradigm.

The methodological choice to begin with human experience is deliberate. In contrast to neo-scholastic approaches that often absolutize tradition, this method allows the contemporary situation to challenge and reshape our interpretation of Scripture and ecclesiology. As de Mesa and Wostyn (1990) argued, "the answer to the challenges of the contemporary situation is not already fixed". The cyber-context, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has introduced profound shifts in how people gather, worship, and relate, demanding a rethinking of what it means to be Church.

For the hermeneutical circle to be fruitful, two conditions must be met. First, the questions arising from the digital context must be substantial enough to provoke a reexamination of inherited theological frameworks. Second, theology

must abandon the notion that new questions can be answered with fixed responses from past systems. Scripture, while normative, is historically situated and subject to interpretation. (de Mesa and Wostyn 1990) Likewise, past models of the Church must be seen as contextual and provisional, not absolute (Dulles 2002, 13–14).

This interpretive journey is guided by both a hermeneutic of appreciation and a hermeneutic of suspicion. It seeks to uncover both the liberating and oppressive elements within the cyber-context and within online churches. The same dual lens applies to Scripture: the parable of the Good Samaritan will be examined not only for its life-giving insights but also for the ways it has been domesticated or misapplied. The process unfolds in three movements.

First, the inquiry begins with the lived concerns of people in the digital age. Literature and testimonies from active participants in cyberchurches will be mapped and analyzed. The insider's perspective is crucial: those immersed in online worship practices possess a deeper understanding of their symbolic language, rituals, and communal bonds. The authors' own participation in online worship offers a vantage point for faithful interpretation.

Second, the pole of contemporary experience engages the Christian tradition in mutual dialogue. The parable of the Good Samaritan will be examined through narrative and historico-critical exegesis, then reinterpreted considering cyberculture and the evolving discourses on neighbor, others, and *kapwa*. This interaction reveals new dimensions of the tradition and its relevance to today's challenges.

Third, a new theological articulation emerges as tentative, contextual, and symbolic. The proposed model of *cyberchurch* is qualified by the phrase "neighborhood of others/*kapwa*." This framing is essential because racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and classism do not vanish in cyberspace simply because it is virtual. The virtual is not the opposite of the real; rather, it exists in a continuum with the concrete. *Cyberchurches* risk fostering echo chambers of like-minded individuals unless intentionally shaped as inclusive neighborhoods of others/*kapwa*.

This model of cyberchurch as neighborhood of others/*kapwa* will be evaluated using Dulles's criteria for ecclesiological models: scriptural foundation, grounding in tradition, capacity to foster identity and mission, promotion of Christian virtues, resonance with contemporary experience, theological fruitfulness, and relational fruitfulness beyond church boundaries (Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 14–18).

This model is not a fixed blueprint but a *tentative theological interpretation,* one that remains open to revision and deepened understanding through ongoing dialogue. As de Mesa and Wostyn (1990) emphasize, "no one can claim to have a

definitive answer. Constant interaction with the situation necessitates ongoing reflection."

The hope is that this theological vision will not remain abstract but will inform and transform the actual practices of faith communities navigating the digital frontier.

Focus and Boundaries of the Inquiry

This book centers on selected online Christian communities. It does not include religious expressions from other traditions such as Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism. The mapping of cyberchurches in the following chapter will feature representative samples chosen for their distinct contexts and typologies, offering a lens into the diversity and complexity of digital ecclesial life.

Why This Book Matters

A better understanding of how digital neighborhoods influence our well-being is of great interest to Christian educators, ministers, catechists, and researchers who seek to develop ecclesiological models responsive to the needs of the digital person. As Hans Kung expressed in *The Church*, "Every age has its own image of the church, arising out of a particular historical situation; in every age a particular view of the church is expressed by the church in practice, and given conceptual form by the theologians of the age" (Kung 1967, 23).

This book hopes to contribute to the development of a new model of church in the cyber-era, since to date, no one has yet conceptualized the cyberchurch as a model of church. Most publications have focused on specific issues in online religious communities, such as ethics, authority, formation of enclaves, the relationship between religion online and offline, management of religion websites, and online worship, rather than conceptualizing an overarching model (Campbell 2010; Cheong 2014).

The cyberchurch is not merely a digital adaptation of ecclesial life but a theological space where the ethical demands of neighborliness, communion, and alterity converge. By recontextualizing the parable of the Good Samaritan within digital culture, this book affirms that proximity in cyberspace can be just as morally charged as physical encounter. The cyberchurch, therefore, must resist the gravitational pull of homogeneity and instead cultivate a *koinonia* that is porous to difference, attuned to marginal voices, and committed to ethical presence. In doing so, it becomes a church not only *in* the digital world but *for* the digital Other, embodying a communion that is both inclusive and transformative.

Chapter One

Mapping Religious Communities Online Based on the Context of Emergence

Chapter One maps religious communities online based on their context of origin: 1) alienation from traditional church structures; 2) migrant contexts, such as those in the Middle East, where public worship is restricted or inaccessible; and 3) the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted physical gatherings globally. This chapter illustrates how cyberchurches emerged to meet a specific need for spiritual connectivity when physical interaction was limited.

Alienation from the Church

Occasionally, we hear remarks such as "I am done with the church," "I do not need to go to church… my relationship with God is personal," or "The church is a [hu]man-made invention, not God's idea." These statements reflect a growing number of people bailing on institutional congregations. Even those who once led congregations often cease attending, convinced that God's presence is universal and unconstrained by a building.

Some critics go further, claiming that "sermons are schemes gotten up to turn the poor human's thought away from the present life to some dim, mysterious future world, where all his sufferings here will be made up for, and in this way to prevent his trying to better himself and his class by overthrowing the system of slavery which our present method of business entails" (Perry 1899). Such perspectives underscore a deeper alienation rooted in the church's perceived complicity with social and economic injustice.

Despite this estrangement, many former churchgoers still seek spiritual community. Internet-based congregations offer an alternative form of connection, enabling worship, dialogue, and fellowship without the barriers of geography or institutional hierarchy.

A striking example is the Diocese of Partenia, a *titular see without borders* in the Roman Catholic Church. Established on 13 January 1995, Partenia became renowned through the online ministry of Bishop Jacques Gaillot. Transferred from the residential Diocese of Évreux, Gaillot had supported controversial positions

defending Church critic Eugen Drewermann, advocating for married priests, endorsing condom use, and adopting a lenient view on homosexuality and abortion that clashed with the teachings of the Church's magisterium.

French bishops reproached him for making pronouncements contrary to Catholic teaching. The president of the episcopal conference appealed that he, "if not to retract, then at least to cease making declarations opposed to the teachings and doctrine of the Catholic Church." After his expulsion from Évreux, Gaillot launched an Internet site named Partenia to continue sharing his ideas until 2010. In his farewell sermon, Gaillot proclaimed:

As far as I am concerned, in communion with the Church, I will pursue my way, bringing the Good News to the poor. The Gospel is a message of freedom and love. To proclaim God, today, is to fight for the people's freedom whoever they are… The Church must be the Church of those who are excluded and not a Church that excludes (Partenia n.d.).

Gaillot's online ministry exemplifies how cyberchurches can become sanctuaries for the marginalized; spaces where faith is enacted as liberation rather than exclusion. In January 1995, thousands took to the streets in France to show support for Jacques Gaillot, then bishop of Évreux. They viewed Gaillot as an advocate for the poor, a champion of AIDS patients, gay people, and other social outcasts, as well as a friend to non-believers and a vocal critic of certain Church teachings. The Vatican, judging him disobedient to authority and harmful to Church unity, "relocated" him to the titular see of Partenia, a desert diocese that had effectively ceased to exist thirteen centuries earlier (Partenia n.d.). Gaillot's reassignment made international headlines. French Catholics and observers across Europe and the United States expressed outrage, seeing in Gaillot a hopeful sign of a more open and compassionate Church (Partenia n.d.).

Leaving his seat in Évreux, Gaillot spent a year living in the Dragon Street squat in Paris among immigrant families whose legal permits had been cancelled by new legislation. He joined associations defending the rights of undocumented migrants and the homeless, earning the title "bishop of the poor and excluded." He frequently intervened on behalf of political prisoners and human-rights activists abroad (Partenia n.d.).

Gaillot insisted that modern media be harnessed to communicate with today's world. In 1996, the Partenia website was launched from Zurich, quickly offering content in seven languages: a forum, personal "logbook" entries, Bible reflections, and interventions on contemporary issues (Partenia n.d.).

Partenia today exists only as a virtual diocese, conceived as an open space of freedom where dialogue with all people is possible. Its ethos mirrors the Gospel of John's closing remark that Jesus performed "many other signs" not recorded

in Scripture, reminding us that our own witness is always limited and incomplete. Unknown men and women "become signs of Jesus in their own way," sharing life in his name (Partenia n.d.).

In May 2000, on the Jubilee year, the president of the French Bishops' Conference invited Gaillot to an ecumenical gathering in Lyon. His letter, later made public, stated, "It is important that Catholics and, more so, public opinion know that the communion that unites us like brothers is real, even though it is lived in a particular manner." He concluded, "You do remain our brother in the episcopate" (Partenia n.d.).

Migration Context

A second major context within which the cyberchurch developed is in the migration context. Globalization and technological innovations in transport and communication systems have accelerated the transnational and trans-regional movement of people. Contemporary migration occurs for diverse reasons: economic opportunities, family reunification, displacement due to conflict or persecution, natural disasters, or educational and professional aspirations.

Migrants often maintain close social, emotional, and cultural ties with their countries of origin (International Organization for Migration 2005). The Internet has emerged as a powerful medium for sustaining these transnational relationships. It enables migrants to transcend the limits of geographic distance and time zones, fostering emotional intimacy, religious solidarity, and cultural belonging. In this context, cyberspace becomes not only a communication tool but a sacred medium, a "digital hearth" where identity, memory, and faith are nurtured across borders (Campbell and Tsuria 2021).

Many migrant Christians, empowered by digital technologies, participate in, or establish cyberchurches to maintain continuity in faith and community. These online churches function not only as virtual sanctuaries but also as platforms for missionary outreach. Migrants engaged in digital evangelism, sought to reconnect with others "at the margins," and shared their religious convictions across borders and time zones. As digital media scholar Mia Lövheim (2013) suggested, the Internet became a space for "mediated belonging," where faith, identity, and connection were negotiated in a transnational world. In this light, cyberchurches in the context of migration served as hybrid spaces that bridged the physical and virtual, the local and global, and the personal and communal. They embodied what Antonio Spadaro (2014) called the "networked Church," which was capable

of extending sacramental, pastoral, and missional functions beyond traditional ecclesial structures.

Cyberchurch Experience of Filipin@ Migrants in the Middle East

Filipin@ cyberchurch life was vibrantly present in the Middle East, as documented by Agnes M. Brazal and Randy Odchigue (2016, 188–90) in their case study on Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). In countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran, where Christian worship in public was restricted, digital platforms remained accessible, serving as crucial avenues for spiritual and communal practice.

While Christian religious items and public religious gatherings are often prohibited, penalized by arrest or deportation, religious websites are generally not blocked. Brazal and Odchigue (2016, 188) described how migrants turned to platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, email, and live-streamed liturgies to sustain a spiritual connection with their home churches. These digital services, some interactive, others live-streamed or recorded, provide essential spiritual nourishment.

In contrast, the United Arab Emirates offers greater religious freedom, allowing public worship for Filipin@ migrants. Yet, digital worship still plays a vital role for those living far from the churches, as there are not that many. Some respondents however reported feelings of "incompleteness" or a downgraded experience when participating in Eucharist online, noting the absence of embodied presence and sacramental bread (Brazal and Odchigue 2016, 190). Time-zone differences further complicate real-time participation, leading migrants to request downloadable recorded services for greater flexibility (Brazal and Odchigue 2016, 190).

Despite these challenges, the OFWs' resilience emerges in their commitment to digital religious life. By leveraging cyberspace, they overcome physical and institutional barriers, forging virtual faith communities that sustain their spiritual well-being and sense of belonging (Brazal and Odchigue 2016, 190).

St. John Neumann Migrants Center Facebook Page

In the Philippines, a vibrant cyberchurch linked to the National Shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help in Baclaran, Parañaque, is the St. John Neumann Migrants Center Facebook page. The Center was established to serve Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and their families, especially those who are vulnerable to abuse, illegal recruitment, and human trafficking. It aims to create a culture of hospitality and solidarity that transcends physical borders (Brazal and Lacsa 2022, 3–5).

The Center evolved from the increased number of letters and petitions sent by migrants and their families to the Baclaran Shrine. It now provides services beyond the spiritual: psychological support, pre-departure and post-arrival counseling, skills training, legal assistance, and social reintegration (Brazal and Lacsa 2022, 5–7). Its pre-departure counseling highlights relational and emotional preparation, including topics such as single parenting, financial management, prayer, and digital communication.

Through its Facebook page, the Center offers migrants access to important information about their rights, repatriation processes, and legal resources. It also facilitates communication between migrants and their families, and allows them to air grievances and seek guidance, even on government services (Brazal and Lacsa 2022, 8–9).

In 2018, the Center launched an online mentoring program for distressed migrants, especially those at risk of abuse or unjust detention. This initiative, initially managed using only a cellphone, has grown into a 24/7 operation involving volunteers across different time zones, including partners in the Middle East. Migrants in dire situations, such as abuse or contract violations, are guided step-by-step through repatriation processes. Upon arrival in the Philippines, they are received by Center staff, temporarily housed, and assisted in filing legal claims (Brazal and Lacsa 2022, 10–12).

During the pandemic, case management shifted to online platforms such as Google Meet. Families of migrants joined online case conferences. The Center continued support even during quarantine by coordinating with hotel facilities and providing virtual psychological and emotional counseling (Brazal and Lacsa 2022, 13–14).

Sr. Sophia Cinches, a religious sister at the Center, offered crisis intervention and stress debriefing to returnees. Through both face-to-face and digital channels—such as Messenger and Facebook—she assisted migrants in processing their emotions and documenting their experiences for follow-up care (Brazal and Lacsa 2022, 14). Livelihood assistance and skills training, including massage therapy and micro-entrepreneurial support, help in the reintegration of abused or displaced migrants. Masses for OFWs and their families are held every last Friday of the month and broadcast online. Novena services and Eucharistic celebrations are also streamed and recorded for those in different time zones (Brazal and Lacsa 2022, 15–16).

The "Bienvenida-Despedida" rituals for departing and arriving OFWs reinforce the Center's commitment to pastoral care. Devotees, including migrants, are also encouraged to engage in social missions in line with Baclaran's *debo(mi)syon* spirituality, a blend of devotion and mission (Cueto 2017, 205–207).

The Center also responds to structural issues such as the Kafala system, which binds migrant workers in exploitative employer-employee relationships, particularly in Middle Eastern countries. Through its digital presence, the Center becomes a space of refuge, connection, and healing for migrants navigating oppressive systems (Robinson 2008).

COVID-19 Pandemic

The event that ultimately pushed churches to shift online was the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 12, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. In response, nations swiftly enacted measures to shut down borders, businesses, restaurants, cinemas, schools, and universities, and suspended all forms of public religious worship and services.

Following the Health Ministry's orders, Poland's Christian leaders quickly canceled public masses, guided by religious and moral principles. The church council of the Baptist community halted Sunday services out of reverent responsibility before God and a profound concern for communal welfare. For the Catholic clergy, the decision to comply with stay-at-home orders and to pause sacramental gatherings emerged from a deep commitment to *neighborly love,* a theological imperative rooted in relational responsibility. Similarly, the Augsburg and Evangelical Reformed churches articulated the same theological rationale, underscoring health, human dignity, and a shared duty to halt the virus's spread.

When churches closed, and religious leaders became physically inaccessible for guidance, many turned to prayer. This shift is evidenced by a global surge in Google searches for "prayer," particularly in economically developing countries (Bentzen 2021). Churches, despite government-imposed lockdowns, sought creative ways to remain connected with the faithful, ensuring that physical isolation did not translate to spiritual separation. Since public in-person worship was restricted, churches proposed alternative means for congregations to reconnect with both the faith community and the ecclesial body during lockdowns, social distancing mandates, and stay-at-home orders.

They embraced digital technologies, social media, Facebook Live, live streaming platforms, YouTube, public television, and radio broadcasts to cultivate spiritual connectedness and liturgical presence online (Cheong 2014; Campbell 2020). Whether prepared or not, church leaders had to pivot from offline, physical-space worship to cyberspace, an emergent liturgical frontier employing three strategic modes:

- Transferring: shifting traditional liturgy directly to an online platform with minimal alteration.
- Translating: modifying worship to include interactive components, often resembling a talk-show format.
- Transforming: facilitating participatory, dialogical experiences where members actively share faith-life narratives and offer prayers during or after the virtual gathering.

The first two strategies typically reflect one-to-many communication, whereas the third fosters many-to-many relational dialogue. The specific digital liturgical approaches adopted by religious denominations often mirror their underlying theological and ecclesiological commitments. For instance, traditions with sacramental or hierarchical emphases may lean toward transferring, preserving liturgical form and clerical authority, while denominations rooted in participatory, pneumatological, or liberationist theologies may embrace transforming modes that prioritize communal agency, storytelling, and spiritual co-creation. These digital choices are not merely technical adaptations but theological enactments, revealing how each community understands presence, authority, and relationality in the digital Body of Christ.

Yet this digital horizon is not universally accessible. In regions like Shandong Province, China, government restrictions prohibit online preaching and digital religious outreach, amplifying spiritual isolation and persecution among Christian communities.

A survey on church leaders' responses to the COVID-19 crisis revealed that the digital transition had posed minimal difficulty for pastors of larger congregations, many of whom had already integrated online platforms prior to the pandemic (Faith & Leadership 2023). In contrast, pastors of small churches had faced considerable hurdles in adapting to online ministry, often while navigating unfamiliar technological terrains.

This disparity was clearly illustrated within the Free Methodist church in Michigan, which includes both large and small parishes. During an early pandemic Zoom conference among pastoral representatives, Steve Evoy poignantly described his role: "My role in the Zoom conference was to represent pastors serving small churches in rural areas who were living in the digital dark ages" (Evoy 2020). His statement underscores the significant digital gap experienced by clergy serving less-resourced communities.

Further compounding the challenge was the need to support older congregants, often more vulnerable and socially isolated, in learning how to engage with

digital platforms. This pastoral concern surfaced at St. Thomas Episcopal church in Texas, where ministers struggled to ensure the technological inclusion of aging members.

Within this landscape, an ethical imperative emerges; larger churches are called not only to optimize their own digital capacities, but also to embody *pakikipagkapwa* (relating to the same/other in solidarity) by extending technological and ministerial assistance to smaller congregations. Likewise, tech-savvy clergy and younger community members take on a vocational role as *digital Good Samaritans*, bridging generational divides and enabling holistic communion within the sacred cyberspace (Campbell 2020; Cheong 2014).

Supporting the assertion that the digital church is not merely a temporary solution but a lasting ecclesial evolution, Wesleyan pastor Carey Nieuwhof of Ontario reflects on a profound shift in congregational engagement. He noted:

> People who were unaware or disengaged from the church a month ago are leaning in now. I have people in my own life who have attended a service now who never came to a building before. Our church has seen a 500 percent Sunday 'attendance' spike since the pandemic grew. And, yes, people are texting in their decision to follow Jesus, and we are opening up digital discipleship pathways and groups for more people than we have ever connected before… If you care about people in the future church, you will care about the digital church. (Nieuwhof 2025)

His reflection illustrates the spiritual elasticity of digital space where ecclesial outreach extends beyond traditional boundaries and fosters radical accessibility. Further corroborating the phenomenon of expanded digital reach, Fr. Luciano Felloni of Kristong Hari Parish (Roman Catholic), Novaliches, Quezon City, Philippines, reported a dramatic rise in attendance at weekday online Masses during the pandemic. Where physical gatherings typically drew around 100 participants, livestreamed liturgies via Facebook surged to a minimum of approximately 3,000 viewers (Sorilla IV 2020). This exponential increase reveals not only the transformative power of social media in facilitating spiritual communion but also reflects the Filipin@ faithful's desire for connection amidst isolation. Such digital engagement reaffirms the Church's capacity to adapt liturgical presence across boundaries, bridging physical distance while nurturing relational bonds through mediated sacramentality.

In the Scottish context, Albert Bogle (2020), Minister in the church of Scotland, acknowledged that initial ecclesial interest in creative approaches to worship,

particularly in theological education and ministerial formation, was primarily driven by declining attendance and waning participation in traditional training programs, rather than a belief in the inherent value of digital ministry. However, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated engagement with livestream services and reframed digital space as a vital locus of mission. A similar trajectory can be observed in the Spanish Catholic Church, where digital practices, initially treated as supplementary or temporary, became essential pastoral strategies during the pandemic, reshaping ecclesial identity and outreach in ways that continue to influence post-pandemic ministry (Gauxachs et al. 2021).

Bogle recognized this moment as a catalytic opportunity for the church to cultivate networked communities with a focus on "those on the edge of faith… those who are not far from the Kingdom of God… who have been disengaged or disconnected from Christianity" (Bogle 2020). His insight invites theological reflection on digital ministry not as a utilitarian stopgap, but as an authentic expression of ecclesial presence reaching those marginalized by geography, history, or spiritual distance.

Worth noting from the above narratives are those who are not joining the church's religious services. Failure to level up in creative ways of reconnecting with these individuals may risk losing them entirely, including the few who remain. Bogle (2020, 9) argued that it is high time for "turning the month's flavor into a staple diet." Similarly, Brazal and Camarines emphasized that the digital reconnection to church communities during the pandemic should be sustained beyond the crisis, advocating for a continued online presence that fosters religious participation, social engagement, and worship, while complementing rather than replacing traditional liturgical practices (Brazal and Camarines 2023).

Coming from an Indian Country in Rural America, John Floberg (Episcopalian Priest, Standing Rock Church, North Dakota) expressed his affirmation of offline liturgical celebrations while also citing the benefits of online services. His concern lies in the limiting factor of going online; it excludes faithful members who cannot afford computers, TVs, smartphones, or reliable internet connections. He further observed that even when people "view" online services, a "significant percentage are not watching the whole thing" (Floberg 2020, 17–18).

Nevertheless, he profoundly appreciated Zoom meetings and worship via Facebook Live, which enhanced interaction during liturgical celebrations. David Silverkors (Parish Priest, Catholic Uppsala Diocese, Sweden) described Europe's general religious landscape, including Sweden, as one in which people are increasingly disconnecting from traditional organized religion. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the Swedish worshiping community began seeking online services. Although it was not his parish's usual practice, Silverkors

realized that the online community was just as genuine, honest, and authentic as the offline congregation. He also noted that live-streaming services during the crisis and continuing to do so would benefit neighbors who cannot attend local church services due to health limitations, time constraints, or geographical distance (Silverkors 2020, 41–42).

Stephen Garner (Dean and Lecturer in Theology at Laidlaw College, New Zealand) pictured the current pandemic's reality as forcing Christian churches to move traditional practices into the digital space. While many churches have gone full swing into creating websites and broadcasting services through satellite and social media, many still struggle to engage their community creatively with new technological skills.

As an authority on communication within the church context, Moisés Sbardelotto emphasized the importance of the communication process in transmitting religious celebrations and worship online. For many religious groups, the default response has been to conduct more liturgical or para-liturgical rites in the digital space to bridge the isolation gap, particularly through platforms such as Facebook Live, television, and radio. However, Sbardelotto cautioned against the danger of media clericalism or "clericalist exhibitionism," warning that ministers may forget the human presence on the other side of the screen: "a person with a 'face,' not just an object or passive spectator or another number for viewing rates." He stressed that in going online:

> it is necessary to consider the communicational and interactional process that is established in the digital environment…this is essential to help the faithful live the rite and experience the sacred…more important to make it possible to build networked interpersonal relationship and not just gather 'people to listen' or 'people to see '…in order to establish a humanized and humanizing relationship with human persons. (Sbardelotto 2020, 72–73)

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, exposed digital literacy gaps among clergy. As theology professor Katherine G. Schmidt observed, while some parishes smoothly transitioned due to prior experience with live-streaming, others scrambled to transmit services to their distanced parishioners, revealing uneven readiness for digital ministry (Schmidt 2020, 74–76).

Heidi Campbell's initial survey of over 1,500 pastors in the United States found that many felt "forced" into online ministry, though they eventually gained confidence with digital tools (Campbell 2020, 10; Thumma 2023). These shifting dynamics underscore the relevance of the Pontifical Council for Social

Communication's 2002 document, The "Church and Internet," which emphasized both the "opportunities and challenges" posed by the Internet for ecclesial mission. It recommended media education for all ministers, and quoted Pope John Paul II's exhortation in his 1990 World Communication Day Message: The Christian Message in a Computer Culture "Church leaders are obliged to use 'full potential of the computer age to serve the human and transcendent vocation of every person and thus to give glory to the Father from all good things come'" (John Paul II 1990).

The prevalence of non-functional websites and broken links in parish portals is symptomatic of deeper digital literacy issues. Schmidt insists that digital life is not a mere appendix but a constitutive part of modern existence. The pandemic cast pastors and ministers into what some described as a form of "digital exile." And yet, Williams-Duncan and Oliver offered a hopeful image:

> When there was no other way to be present to their congregations, these leaders entered a strange land and discovered they could still sing the Lord's song (Psalm 137). We believe those who have learned to flourish in digital exile will find their ministries enriched when returning to Jerusalem and continuing to practice their new competencies. (Williams-Duncan and Oliver 2020, 84)

This imagery calls for a reimagining of ecclesial resilience, where adaptation through technological competence serves relational, theological, and liturgical continuity. In the United Kingdom, the onset of COVID-19 prompted churches to shift rapidly from offline services to virtual Church gatherings, an unprecedented move for many of the country's major Christian traditions. Spiritual life in the UK has long been intertwined with physical church attendance for worship, fellowship, and ministry. Yet in March 2020, government-mandated lockdowns shuttered religious buildings, disrupting the communal rhythms of worship in shared sacred spaces.

In response, ministers acted swiftly to deliver services through digital means, effectively transforming their homes or offices into extensions of the church. These private domains, previously secular, became virtually linked to congregants' own homes, forming what Bryson et al. described as a new configuration of spatial meaning. They introduce the notion of "intersacred" space, that is, homes connected for common worship, and "infrasecular" space, a site used for both sacred and secular purposes (Bryson et al. 2020, 362).

The distinction between the two lies in their spatial and relational dynamics. "Intersacred" space emerges when individual domestic environments are

temporarily linked through virtual worship, forming a distributed sacred network. This connection transforms private homes into nodes of communal liturgical presence, even if only for the duration of the service. It is sacred by virtue of relational intentionality and shared spiritual focus across digital boundaries.

By contrast, "infrasecular" space refers to the hybridization of sacred and secular functions within a single physical or digital site. For example, a living room that hosts both Sunday worship and weekday entertainment, or a Zoom account used for prayer meetings and business calls, embodies this dual-purpose character.

Infrasecularity reflects the blurred boundaries of modern life, where sacred practice is embedded within, and often competes with secular rhythms and infrastructures. While intersacred space emphasizes connection and communion, infrasecular space highlights coexistence and negotiation between spiritual and everyday uses.

Drawing from Della Dora's (2018) post-secular lens, this shift marked a spatial reconfiguration in which the boundaries between the sacred and secular were blurred, challenging the pre-pandemic dichotomy of "worship space" versus "home". With congregants' homes reimagined as places of worship, new inclusive dynamics emerged. These virtual spaces began to welcome not only previously embedded members who had relocated but also "strangers from without" who lacked prior connections with the congregation. As the authors observed:

> …these [spaces] has become more inclusive to welcome everyone, including 'dislocated' visitors who were previously locally embedded but have relocated, or they may be 'strangers from without' who have no direct connection with the congregation (Bryson et al. 2020, 363).

This temporary geography of home offers a compelling illustration of how crises can catalyze theological and spatial reimaginings where hospitality extends not only through physical proximity but through virtual presence rooted in shared faith and digital communion.

Concluding Remarks

Over the past years, there have been efforts to transform offline worship into online modalities. Initially, many Christians hesitated, questioning the nature of digital community, the sacredness of virtual worship, and the privacy of online

churchgoers. Concerns were raised about the efficacy of the internet as a medium for evangelization and its impact on ecclesial authority and accountability.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a dramatic shift. Christians across denominations adopted digital platforms to sustain worship, pastoral care, and theological engagement. Evangelical communities, which emphasize the celebration of the Word, preaching, singing, and praying, were already active online before the pandemic, but the crisis accelerated broader adoption. While online worship may not be able to fully replicate the incarnational dimension of liturgy, it offers new possibilities. Homes, offices, and even hospital rooms became sacred spaces, temporarily bridging the gap between the secular and the sacred. Online worship is not a replacement for in-person gatherings, but a complementary modality that expands access and redefines ecclesial presence.

This chapter mapped various types of cyberchurches based on their emergence. The phenomenon of cyberchurches demonstrates the creative evolution of Christian communities in digital space, responding to alienation, migration, and crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. From their roots in early bulletin board systems and online forums in the 1980s and 1990s, cyberchurches expanded into livestreams, social media, and immersive virtual worlds. Technology has expanded the reach of Christian communities, enabling the church to cross borders of geography, time, and circumstance. Cy-berchurches make it possible for believers to participate in worship from anywhere in the world, whether as migrants working overseas, students living abroad, missionaries in distant fields, or families separated by mobility and crisis. They also offer continuity and belonging for those the physical church often struggles to serve: the sick, disabled people, the elderly, and the socially marginalized. Through livestreams, recorded services, and interactive platforms, cyberchurches create spaces where spiritual nourishment, pastoral guidance, and communal fellowship are possible even in isolation.

Chapter Two

Mapping Religious Communities Online Based on Institutional Affiliation

Cyberchurches may also be categorized by their institutional affiliation: 1) those connected to a local church; and 2) those independent of institutional ties. Whether anchored to a concrete church or operating independently, they face the challenge of evolving beyond echo chambers of like-minded individuals to become inclusive neighborhoods of others.

Cyberchurches Linked to Local Churches

I-Church

One prominent example of a cyberchurch linked to a local church is the i-church, established by the Diocese of Oxford in England. According to its website, i-church "provide[s] a Christian community for those who wish to explore Christian discipleship, but who are not able, or do not wish, to join a local congregation" (The Guardian 2004). The initiative was led by Reverend Richard Thomas, Director of Communication for the Diocese, who had prior experience with online interfaith work. Thomas proposed the concept in 2004, and it was launched as part of the Diocese's experimental "Cutting Edge Ministries" scheme.

Covering the counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Oxfordshire, the Diocese of Oxford recognized the need to create a spiritual community for people who primarily relate online. As Thomas stated, "we would be failing in our mission if we didn't provide a spiritual community for people who relate with each other primarily through the Internet" (Thomas 2004). He emphasized that i-church was more than digital access; it was a serious effort to foster Christian community through structured spiritual practice: "You're going to have to commit to a rule of life which involves an agreed amount of prayer, an agreed amount of study and an agreed amount of social action… it is designed to be a serious attempt to bring people together in community relating through the internet" (Thomas 2004).

Thomas outlined a two-tiered model of membership for i-church, emphasizing the need for a committed inner core tasked with designing culturally attuned resources to attract more transient visitors, while also preserving tradition and stability (Hutchings 2010a, 348). The design ethos promoted self-direction and resonance with contemporary online cultures yet sought to collaborate with traditional parishes: "drawing on its strengths, and contributing to its riches" (Hutchings 2010a, 349). As the community grew, i-church encouraged members to use their real names and organized them into intimate "Pastoral Groups" led by authorized leaders.

These groups fostered trust and accountability through forums and a shared chatroom, with worship styles that prioritized simplicity, text-based liturgy, spontaneous prayer, and lay-led services—practices still central to i-church today (Hutchings 2010a, 352–355). However, sustaining pastoral leadership proved difficult. The first web pastor resigned due to the emotional and temporal demands of one-on-one care and limited resources. His successor, balancing duties as both pastor and web designer, also stepped down, affirming that the dual role was unsustainable (Hutchings 2010a, 356).

Before resigning, he created a Council of Advisors to help manage the community until a new appointment could be made. When a new web pastor assumed the role in 2005, the leadership experience exposed internal tensions and dynamics. Accepting a high-profile role provided critical insight into church structure, but also provoked concerns about bias and trust, particularly regarding perceived favoritism, representational imbalance, and theological alignment. Some trustees questioned whether the new leader's digital orientation might privilege certain demographics, such as younger, tech-savvy members, over others, or whether prior affiliations influenced decision-making. These concerns required face-to-face engagement with trustees to clarify intentions and gain feedback, as trust in church leadership is often built through relational transparency, shared discernment, and demonstrated accountability over time (Hutchings 2010a, 357).

These member testimonies, as recorded by Hutchings, offer a textured glimpse into the lived ecclesial realities within i-church, revealing both its pastoral potential and theological tensions. Esme, a participant with disabilities, described i-church as a providential response to her need for accessible worship, noting that it allowed her to "worship from [her] own home" and affirmed the presence of "true churches on the internet" when led by an authorized minister (Hutchings 2010a, 359).

Her reflection frames i-church as a space of inclusion and spiritual continuity, enabled by digital mediation. In contrast, Peter dismissed i-church as primarily a

"social activity," not a genuine expression of church membership (Hutchings 2010a, 360). This divergence reflects broader tensions in digital ecclesiology; while some members considered the absence of Eucharistic celebration a key theological deficiency, many still engaged deeply with worship and community life online (Hutchings 2010a, 360–361). These varying testimonies highlight differing theological imaginations about presence, sacramentality, and pastoral legitimacy in digital church settings, and raise essential questions for discerning authentic ecclesial experience in virtual spaces.

Martha's testimony, as recorded by Hutchings, further illustrates the deeply personal and pastoral dimensions of i-church, especially among individuals alienated from traditional ecclesial structures. Having been away from parish life and a non-practicing Christian for over thirty years, Martha joined i-church without prior familiarity with modern computing, her last encounter dating back to the era of punch-cards (Hutchings 2010a, 361). Yet she quickly embraced the digital community, finding renewed spiritual rhythm through active participation in Bible reading and daily worship.

Her commitment to spending two to four hours online each day centered not on theological discourse, which she deliberately avoided due to aggressive "expert" debates, but on meaningful relationships and meditative worship that helped her "tune out everything else" (Hutchings 2010a, 361). The strong communal bonds she developed led her to declare, "they would kill me if I left," affirming a sense of belonging she had long been denied. Martha's decision to screen calls during services and her affirmation that i-church was her "only church" underscore the emotive resonance and spiritual depth that virtual fellowship can offer, even in the absence of sacramental norms. Her story challenges conventional boundaries of parish life and affirms digital ecclesiality as a locus of grace and solidarity.

LifeChurch.TV

LifeChurch.tv, on the other hand, stands as a compelling model of digital ecclesial innovation, blending media fluency with strategic outreach across physical and online platforms. Initially launched as a website-based sermon archive, LifeChurch quickly recognized the transformative potential of online engagement through testimonies received from viewers. One staff member recalled, "We realized God was using that," prompting the development of a full-scale Internet Campus designed to nurture an online community around digital content (Hutchings 2010a, 362).

Today, LifeChurch offers over 90 weekly services across five platforms, each designed for easy access and spiritual relevance, featuring worship music and life-

changing messages hosted by volunteers through real-time chat (Life.Church 2021a). As an evangelical megachurch headquartered in Oklahoma, LifeChurch's multi-campus model spanning locations in eight states relies on the central broadcasting of sermons from Pastor Craig Groeschel, supported by synchronized worship, ministry programming, and a prominently curated website interface.

The .tv suffix is not just an address but a core element of the church's brand identity, signaling its prioritization of media presence and accessibility. With segmented web navigation, high-quality visuals, and content tailored to distinct user profiles, the website fosters user confidence and ecclesial curiosity (Hutchings 2010b, 14). Beyond its platform, LifeChurch's ministry extends through weekly YouTube uploads, youth-oriented YouVersion Bible teachings, and storytelling-driven sermons that link everyday concerns with theological reflection. This intentional integration of online tools reflects what Hutchings calls the church's "opportunity to be part of what God is doing," a theological conviction that anchors technological innovation in missional purpose (Hutchings 2010a, 362).

Life.Church's Online ministry exemplifies the convergence of digital accessibility, communal outreach, and spiritual formation across diverse platforms. Through its suite of online services available 90 times weekly across multiple devices, participants are invited into an immersive worship experience with music, teaching, and prayer support from trained volunteers (Life.Church 2021a).

Its design encourages global connection through initiatives like the Global Facebook Group (GFG), where thousands discuss faith-related questions in a supportive digital environment, and the "Start a Life Group" (SaLG) program, which promotes intimate spiritual growth either in-person or virtually (Life.Church 2021b; 2021c). Life.Church's commitment to the missional use of technology allows members to volunteer remotely and engage in ministry that mimics physical church experiences, including chatroom fellowship before and after services, private prayer sessions, and decision moments like raising a digital hand in response to a call to faith (Hutchings 2010a, 362; Life.Church 2021a).

The platform's infrastructure reflects a hybrid of transfer and transformation strategies, replicating embodied rituals while innovating through blog content, Second Life spaces, multilingual chat tools, and real-time geo-mapping of online congregants (Life.Church 2021c). Sermon notes can be saved and emailed, and social media tools like pre-scripted status updates extend evangelism beyond the site itself. With these strategies, Life.Church has moved from imitating its physical campuses to creating a dynamic online model that fosters relational discipleship and global participation.

Life.Church's online environment cultivates a unique blend of interactive worship, charismatic teaching, and global connection, but it also reveals

vulnerabilities within digital ministry. One defining feature is its chatroom, where members share personal experiences, praise sermons and music, and offer spiritual encouragement. However, sustained dialogue remains limited.

The chatroom is also vulnerable to hostile intrusions, including explicit solicitations. Hutchings links this to Life.Church's use of Google AdWords, which redirects search traffic from pornographic terms toward church Online (Hutchings 2010a, 363).

Viewer engagement varies: some members express musical preferences that conflict with worship aesthetics, while others describe transcendent moments where "you don't even see the monitor," but feel spiritually transported through the worship leader's presence (Hutchings 2010a, 364). One participant recounted singing aloud during services, waking his parents, and wishing he could dance if space allowed.

Pastor Craig Groeschel's sermons anchor Life.Church's appeal. Delivered through close-up video shots, his preaching blends humor, candor, and theological depth. His "blatant honesty" on topics such as sex, money, and spiritual disillusionment resonates with viewers who feel local churches lack such vulnerability (Hutchings 2010a, 364–365).

LifeGroups offer relational depth often missing in megachurch structures. Small-group discipleship is strongly emphasized, with a staff member declaring, "You cannot do Christianity as an individual," reflecting Life.Church's communal ecclesiology (Hutchings 2010a, 366). Internal data reveals 8,600 digital "hand raises" ("hand raises" are symbolic click-based responses during streamed services that indicate a viewer's personal spiritual decision, such as committing to follow Christ or requesting prayer) and more than 1,500 follow-up kits mailed in 2009. Weekly attendance grew from 50,000 in 2008 to over 200,000 in 2009, with 1.2 million unique devices connected across 140 countries (Hutchings 2010a, 367). Pastor Groeschel's vision reflects this momentum: "Right now we're reaching tens of thousands... before long I honestly believe it will be millions and millions" (Hutchings 2010a, 368).

The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life: Virtual Architecture and Ecclesial Presence

The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life sits atop a sunlit hill on Epiphany Island, a tranquil virtual space surrounded by clear blue seas and customizable weather. Snow falls only during the northern hemisphere's winter season, at the discretion of the cathedral's stewards (Robinson 2008). This cathedral exists within *Second Life*, a persistent, immersive online virtual world launched by Linden

Lab in 2003. Unlike traditional video games, Second Life has no fixed objectives or levels; instead, it functions as a user-generated metaverse where individuals known as "residents" create avatars, build environments, and participate in various forms of social, economic, and spiritual life. Within this context, the cathedral serves as a digitally constructed sacred space, replicating the architectural and liturgical atmosphere of a traditional church while embracing the creative possibilities of virtual design. Visitors arrive in diverse forms, from tattooed centaurs to middle-aged parishioners, gathering for casual conversation, organized discussion, private prayer, and corporate worship (Gelfgren and Hutchings 2014, 67).

Architecturally, the Cathedral is modeled in traditional cruciform style, with a long nave, short transepts, and a half-domed apse. A square tower rises from the crossing, supported by flying buttresses. Inside, wooden pews, stained-glass windows, an altar, an incense burner, a pulpit, and a brass eagle lectern evoke Anglican liturgical heritage (Gelfgren and Hutchings 2014, 67–68).

Founded in June 2007 by Rev. Mark Brown, the Cathedral was envisioned as a space where Second Life residents could explore or deepen their faith in God. Brown entered Second Life in 2006 for research and discovered a small group called "Anglicans in Second Life." He proposed the creation of a virtual church, became its pastor, and was later ordained curate and priest by Bishop Tom Brown of Wellington (Robinson 2008). Services are held daily in the Cathedral or the Meditation Chapel, with weekly Bible studies and occasional courses and discussion groups (Knisely 2009).

Prayer is not confined to scheduled services; visitors engage with the sacred space at all hours, supported by an active pastoral care team. The Cathedral's mission is to bridge Anglican tradition with contemporary digital society, offering a space for spiritual exploration and relational encounter (Gerns 2010). As Hutchings notes, the Cathedral's architecture and ministry reflect a desire to maintain continuity with offline Anglican identity while embracing the affordances of virtual ecclesiology (Gelfgren and Hutchings 2014, 67).

The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life exemplifies a digital ecclesial community where individuals from different countries and theological persuasions come together to glorify God. It is widely recognized for its welcoming spirit, pastoral care, and commitment to love and service, and is considered an integral part of the worldwide Anglican Communion (Robinson 2008).

As a distinctively Anglican church within Second Life (SL), the Cathedral serves Anglicans, those who share Anglican heritage, and seekers from other denominations. Helene Milena, a long-time leader in the community, articulates its mission: "We are in a different environment, a virtual environment... but we, like Anglican churches in real life, are a community of Christians which worships and

prays together at regular times" (Gerns 2010). The Cathedral offers pastoral care, prayer support, sermons, and Bible studies, though it currently does not administer sacraments. It remains under the guidance of real-life Anglican bishops and strives to operate within canonical norms (Knisely 2009).

The Cathedral's leadership team upholds the values of the Anglican Communion, which comprises 44 autonomous member churches across more than 160 countries, representing approximately 80 million members worldwide (Anglican Communion Office 1998). While each national church is self-governing, they recognize the Archbishop of Canterbury as a spiritual leader. Communion-wide dialogue occurs through the Anglican Consultative Council, the Lambeth Conference, and periodic Primates' Meetings (Anglican Communion Office 1998).

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Anglican Consultative Council, the Lambeth Conference, and the Primates' Meetings are collectively known as the Instruments of Communion, serving as consultative bodies that foster unity across the Anglican Communion's 44 autonomous provinces (Anglican Communion Office 1998).

The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, first articulated by William Reed Huntington in 1870 and adopted by the Lambeth Conference in 1888, outlines four foundational elements of Anglican identity: (1) the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as "containing all things necessary to salvation"; (2) the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed as sufficient statements of Christian faith; (3) the two dominical sacraments Baptism and the Lord's Supper administered with Christ's words and ordained elements; and (4) the Historic Episcopate, locally adapted to the needs of diverse peoples (Episcopal church 2024; Wikipedia 2025).

While the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life does not currently celebrate sacraments, its leadership acknowledges the theological complexity of sacramental presence in virtual space. Conversations around digital sacramentality continue to evolve, especially within fresh expressions of church, which often adapt ecclesial norms to suit emerging contexts (Robinson 2008).

Anglican theology resists centralized dogmatic authority, favoring a more dialogical and interpretive approach to ecclesial discernment. This ethos is rooted in Richard Hooker's seminal work, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594), where he proposed a tripartite framework of Scripture, tradition, and reason. While Scripture retains primacy, Hooker argued that when its meaning is ambiguous, tradition and reason serve as necessary guides for interpretation. This triadic method has shaped Anglican theological identity, allowing for contextual engagement and pastoral flexibility. Contemporary scholars, such as Guyer (2010),

further emphasize the role of personal experience, especially as mediated through prayer and communal reflection, as a fourth, though informal, lens in Anglican discernment.

This method is especially vital for Anglicans in Second Life, who navigate theological questions in a virtual environment where ecclesial boundaries are porous and new ethical dilemmas arise. For example, the Communion's teaching on sexual ethics is outlined in Lambeth Resolution I.10, which affirms marriage between a man and a woman, calls for pastoral sensitivity toward LGBTQ+ persons, and rejects the blessing of same-sex unions. At the same time, it commits to ongoing dialogue on these issues (Anglican Communion Office 1998).

The Cathedral's digital architecture reflects its theological ethos: a Tudor-style parish house, a conference hall, a bridge spanning a chasm to a smaller chapel, and contemplative spaces like gardens, a labyrinth, and a jetty, all designed to evoke sacred presence and relational hospitality (Gelfgren and Hutchings 2014).

Brown explained the Cathedral's architectural traditionalism as a deliberate response to the disorienting nature of virtual worship: "It is a trick, a perception trick… it tricks people into believing that actually it's a real cathedral," he said, noting that some users pray there daily before work (Hutchings 2010a, 67).

The Cathedral's design draws on familiar ecclesial symbols such as naves, pews, stained glass, and liturgical furnishings to evoke continuity with the Anglican tradition and reassure visitors through spatial familiarity (Gelfgren and Hutchings 2014, 67–68). Its worship program includes Morning and Evening Prayer, Compline, Sunday services, Bible studies, and discussion groups totaling 23 weekly events across time zones, led by volunteers and leadership team members (Robinson 2008).

Hutchings observes that these services resemble those of i-church, with liturgical prayers, responses, and spoken sermons. Avatars participate through "poseballs," allowing them to sit, kneel, and stand during worship. Brown emphasized the emotional depth of spontaneous prayer sessions, which often extend beyond ten minutes and include intercessions for loved ones with cancer (Hutchings 2010a, 68–69).

Members expressed appreciation for the Cathedral's recognizable worship style. Sunday Compline was described as "a restful service" and "a wonderful way to transition from one week to the next." The visual presence of avatars reinforced communal worship, with some saying, "we like the feeling that we are 'in' a church" (Hutchings 2010a, 69).

Beyond corporate worship, many visitors sought private prayer spaces within Second Life (SL). Gardens and peaceful areas were favored, with users reporting that they "often come to SL to do [my] Real Life (RL) prayers." Others testified that Second Life enhanced their spiritual practice, helping them pause and reconnect with God amid daily concerns (Gelfgren and Hutchings 2014, 70).

Services at the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life are almost always preceded and followed by informal conversation, with groups often gathering in the main square. When Hutchings first entered Second Life in the summer of 2008, it was not uncommon for Mark Brown to lead the crowd in avatar dancing. Even without such energetic activities, conversations could last for hours (Hutchings 2010a, 69). One participant, Sarah, reflected, "what motivated me to stick around was really the opportunity to meet people," especially those with shared interests and "a similar religious sensibility" (Hutchings 2010a, 69).

This prioritization of relational connection distinguishes the Cathedral from more programmatic models like i-church. As Hutchings notes, while many online churches attract participants seeking to satisfy religious curiosity or address specific spiritual needs, Cathedral attendees were primarily drawn by a desire to encounter fellow Anglicans within the virtual space of Second Life. Yet in the process of seeking ecclesial familiarity, many reported unanticipated spiritual enrichment, experiencing moments of prayer, reflection, and divine encounter that transcended their initial intent (Hutchings 2010a, 69–70).

The Anglican Cathedral, on the one hand, and i-church and Life.Church.tv, on the other, represents two distinct models of institutional relationship within digital ecclesiology, each with its own advantages and limitations. The Cathedral, which began as a lay-led initiative later granted episcopal oversight, reflects a bottom-up approach that fosters grassroots innovation, relational authenticity, and contextual responsiveness to digital culture. This model empowers participants and allows for organic community formation, though it may initially lack theological accountability, sacramental access, and institutional support. In contrast, i-church was sponsored from the outset by the Diocese of Oxford, offering immediate legitimacy, doctrinal coherence, and access to ecclesial resources. Life.Church.tv is another prime example of the second model of institutional relationship, where the digital campus is fully governed by the central church leadership and reflects its theological, pastoral, and programmatic DNA. While this top-down model ensures stability and alignment with denominational identity, it may inhibit creative experimentation and feel programmatic to digital-native users seeking relational spontaneity.

The Cathedral in Second Life stands out for its emphasis on friendship and relational connection as central to its ecclesial identity. Unlike Life.Church.tv,

which prioritizes personal challenge and encouragement within a centralized framework, the Cathedral emerged as a grassroots initiative where participants sought out fellow Anglicans in a virtual space, not merely for religious content, but for companionship, shared presence, and spiritual intimacy.

Both the Cathedral in Second Life and Life.Church.tv have cultivated relatively stable, close-knit congregations of several dozen members, surrounded by a wider cloud of transient visitors (Hutchings 2010a, 70). Life.Church.tv pioneered the "online campus" model, now adopted by over 50 large churches across the United States (Steinbrueck 2024).

Together, these three cyberchurches i-church, the Cathedral of Second Life, and Life.Church.tv demonstrate the diversity and vitality of online religion, each offering distinct theological, relational, and institutional frameworks for digital ecclesial life.

Cyberchurches in the Philippines Linked to the CBCP or Local Parishes

Cyberchurches linked to concrete parishes are typically considered part of the second model, often referred to as the "online campus" or hybrid extension model. This model involves a local church establishing a digital presence not as a separate entity, but as an extension of its physical ministry.

Long before the pandemic, in 2011, Filipin@ migrants abroad and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) launched an online portal containing prayers for the dead, catechesis, and homilies by Pope John Paul II, enabling Filipin@s worldwide to participate in Undas (All Saints Day and All Souls Day) rituals digitally (Uy 2011). These national holidays along with Holy Week, are marked by deeply communal and familial celebrations in the Philippines. To engage younger generations, the CBCP also created a Facebook page called "*Usapang Undas*," offering trivia and reflections on the significance of these feasts (Uy 2011).

Most online churches in the Philippines are parish-linked, unlike independent cyberchurch models abroad. Before the pandemic, millions of Catholics and Protestants gathered physically for liturgical celebrations. However, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, border restrictions and health protocols necessitated a shift to live-streamed Masses via Facebook Live, YouTube, and parish websites (Sorilla IV 2020; BusinessWorld 2020). The CBCP issued directives encouraging dioceses to provide live transmissions of the Eucharistic celebration and other

liturgical services, emphasizing the importance of spiritual communion within families and Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) (BusinessWorld 2020).

The pandemic and the shift of religious activities online have also impacted popular religious practices. The Holy Week of 2020 marked a pivotal moment: for the first time, public gatherings were suspended, prompting a transition from embodied communal worship to domestic and digital liturgies. Filipin@ Catholics adapted by celebrating Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil from home, guided by online broadcasts and pastoral instructions (Sorilla IV 2020). This shift not only reconfigured liturgical space but also opened pathways for creative digital expressions of faith.

One popular devotion among Filipin@ Catholics is the Visita Iglesia, a Holy Week tradition of visiting 14 churches on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. In response to the mobility restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the CBCP launched the Visita Iglesia Online portal, originally intended for Filipin@s in non-Catholic countries, seafarers, the sick, and those who would traditionally participate in the Holy Week pilgrimage but cannot physically visit churches. The digital portal allowed them to virtually engage in the devotion, preserving spiritual connection despite their confinement (CBCP News 2020). The portal also enables virtual church visits, Stations of the Cross, and streamed liturgical celebrations. For those unable to receive Holy Communion, the Spiritual Communion Act was encouraged (Nonato 2020).

Other Holy Week traditions were also digitized. The *Pabasa*, a continuous recitation of Christ's Passion, was adapted into downloadable audio formats for remote devotion. In place of traditional in-person retreats, podcasts provided contemplative reflections on the Stations of the Cross, allowing believers to engage spiritually from home (Nonato 2020). In the years that followed, platforms like Roblox became sites of devotional innovation, exemplified by the virtual *Traslacion* of the Black Nazarene hosted by Roblox Filipin@ Catholics (RFC), where thousands of players participated in a simulated procession in partnership with the Quiapo Church (Casucian 2024). Such practices reflect the growth of cyberchurches, where virtual environments serve as extensions of sacramental imagination and communal piety, sustaining religious participation even beyond the constraints of physical presence.

Beyond Catholic circles, other religious groups adapted creatively. The autochthonous *Iglesia ni Cristo* maintained in-person Sunday services with social distancing, while Jehovah's Witnesses opted for livestreamed worship (BusinessWorld 2020). Major Catholic parishes, such as the Basilica Minore del Sto. Niño de Cebu, streamed weekday and Sunday Masses via Facebook Live

and YouTube, with most urban parishes maintaining active social media schedules (Lumbre 2020).

This digital shift reflects a broader ecclesial response to the pandemic. Churches across traditions refused to close their doors spiritually, instead navigating cyberspace to reconnect with believers. Fr. Luciano Felloni of Novaliches, however, warned that virtual-only ministry could risk nominalism and spiritual disengagement.

Independent Cyberchurches:
Virtual Belonging Beyond Institutional Borders

Independent cyberchurches are online religious communities that operate autonomously, without formal affiliation to established denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church. These churches often emerge in immersive virtual environments, offering spiritual engagement to individuals who are geographically isolated, institutionally disillusioned, or spiritually curious.

Daystar Adventist Community Church in Second Life

A compelling example is the Daystar Adventist Community Church, a purely virtual congregation established in 2010 within *Second Life*, a 3D online world that enables users to interact through customizable avatars. Founded by Bob Curtice, Theo Zelin, and Pheona Avon, Daystar was envisioned as a Seventh-day Adventist presence in cyberspace, inspired by similar initiatives from other Christian denominations (Tyler 2020).

In this digital sanctuary, worshipers gather in a simulated church, watch sermons (often by Doug Batchelor), and engage in fellowship before and after services. The church offers a lifeline to diverse participants: the bedridden, the spiritually displaced, and seekers from restrictive religious environments.

One poignant story is that of LightWave, an avatar representing a man from a country with limited religious freedom. After discovering Adventist teachings online, he found Daystar in Second Life and began attending Sabbath services even at 2 a.m. local time. He described the experience as deeply transformative: "These avatars are my family now… I feel mentally like I'm physically with other believers. For me, it's my underground church" (Tyler 2020).

Daystar has thus become more than a digital replica of a church; it is a sacred refuge, a space where spiritual belonging transcends physical and political boundaries. As Curtice reflected: "There is a real person behind the avatar, and the Holy

Spirit reaches that person's heart anyway. God has no limit on whom He can connect with" (Tyler 2020).

Umbrella City Cyberchurch

The Umbrella City Cyberchurch (UCC) is another example of an independent cyberchurch. It emerged in 2014 during the Umbrella Movement, a 79-day protest against Beijing's proposed changes to Hong Kong's school curriculum, which citizens perceived as aimed at ideological indoctrination. Protesters famously used umbrellas to shield themselves from tear gas and police force, transforming the umbrella into a symbol of justice, unity, and freedom across diverse faith communities (Kam 2019).

In 2019, UCC reactivated its presence during the Anti-Extradition Law protests, opposing legislation that would allow Hong Kong citizens to be extradited to mainland China. UCC members, inspired by their Christian convictions, feared the bill could be weaponized against political dissidents, human rights advocates, and religious leaders. Their activism was rooted in a theology that affirms the dignity and rights of the neighbor, especially those endangered by authoritarian policies (Chu 2019).

UCC functions as a network church, disseminating its theology through online platforms like Facebook, while also hosting physical gatherings. Its mission is to "construct, reflect, and practice Umbrella Theology," a theological framework born from the protest context that seeks to reclaim Hong Kong's core values and embody Christian ethics in public life (Umbrella City Cyberchurch 2014). As one of its pastors, Patrick Chu, declared: "There is a clear right or wrong here, for the human conscience. The five demands that the protests are requesting are achievable" (Chu 2019).

UCC's theology is not confined to cyberspace; it manifests in embodied solidarity, street-level activism, and prophetic witness. It stands for the endangered neighbor, echoing the biblical call to justice and mercy in the face of systemic oppression.

Cyberchurch.co.uk: Social Networking as Digital Ecclesiology

The website www.cyberchurch.co.uk exemplifies a cyberchurch model that closely mimics the functionality of mainstream social networking platforms such as Facebook. Upon registration, users create personal accounts that allow them to connect with other members, participate in group chats, and engage in Bible sharing and spiritual discussions (Weerakoon 2008).

Beyond interpersonal interaction, the site offers a variety of faith-based resources, including Bible studies, religious music, and thematic interest groups. These features have fostered a stable and active online community, with members regularly visiting the site, maintaining communication, and cultivating a sense of belonging in a digital ecclesial space (Weerakoon 2008).

This framework embodies what Kamal Weerakoon terms the "missionary fellowship" model of cyberchurches: digital spaces where the Christian community is actively focused on outreach rather than passive consumption, grounded in the gospel and facilitated by online connectivity. The site's design encourages users to initiate engagement, a crucial element for sustaining meaningful fellowship online. As Weerakoon noted, "Cyberchurches are the church of God colonising netspace with the gospel of Christ… Let us continue to testify to our saviour in this new, exciting world of the Internet" (Weerakoon 2008).

Independent Cyberchurches: Typologies and Tensions

While cyberchurches linked to concrete parishes often fall into lay-led extensions or institutionally sponsored models, independent cyberchurches operate outside formal ecclesial structures, emerging from grassroots digital communities or charismatic leadership. These churches are not tethered to a physical parish, denomination, or centralized authority, and they vary widely in theological orientation, governance, and relational dynamics.

Typologies of Independent Cyberchurches

Type	Description	Example	Relational Focus
Charismatic-led	Founded by a digital preacher or influencer with a strong online following. Often sermon-centric and personality-driven.	YouTube-based ministries, TikTok evangelists	Low to moderate; often parasocial
Platform-based communities	Emergent groups formed on platforms like Discord, Reddit, or Second Life. Often decentralized and dialogical.	Cathedral in Second Life, Discord prayer servers	High; friendship and mutuality

Type	Description	Example	Relational Focus
Thematic micro churches	Small, niche communities are organized around specific theological, social, or cultural themes.	LGBTQ+ affirming cyberchurches, Filipin@ diaspora prayer circles	High; shared identity and solidarity
DIY ecclesial collectives	Informal gatherings led by laypersons using open-source tools (Zoom, blogs, podcasts). Often experimental and fluid.	Podcast-based house churches, WhatsApp prayer chains	Moderate to high; depends on intentionality

Independent cyberchurches present a compelling reimagining of spiritual community in the digital age. Their strengths lie in fostering relational depth, where friendship and shared vulnerability often take precedence over formal programming. These spaces are notably accessible to marginalized groups such as overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), LGBTQ+ Christians, and those disillusioned with institutional religion, offering inclusive and flexible modes of participation.

The Risk of Cyber-Exclusion: Digital Divide

The term "digital divide" gained widespread traction in the mid-1990s, largely due to the U.S. NTIA's *Falling Through the Net* report. This publication brought significant attention to the inequities in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) based on income and location (Schweitzer 2023). The digital divide refers to the uneven distribution or quality of access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) in society, encompassing both material access and digital literacy (van Dijk and van Deursen 2023). Despite global advances, over 2.5 billion people still lack reliable Internet access, meaning that nearly a third of the world's population remains excluded from the transformative benefits of digital connectivity (Smith, 2025).

Universal and inexpensive access to the Internet is embedded within the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 9, which calls for resilient infrastructure, inclusive industrialization, and innovation. Target 9.c specifically urges states to "significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries" (United Nations

2015). A report from the World Economic Forum underscores that the challenge is "large, complex, and multidimensional," involving infrastructure gaps, affordability barriers, and digital literacy deficits (World Economic Forum 2023).

People remain offline for four primary reasons that are deeply interrelated. First, infrastructure remains inadequate, and reliable Internet connections are not widely available, particularly in rural and underserved regions. Second, affordability continues to limit access; expensive devices and high connectivity costs prevent low-income populations from engaging online. Third, many individuals lack the requisite digital skills, awareness, and cultural readiness to participate meaningfully; older adults often face digital illiteracy, and in some contexts, the Internet is viewed with suspicion or perceived as culturally disruptive. Patriarchal culture contributes to a gender digital divide, with women in low- and middle-income countries having 15 percent less access to mobile internet than men (World Bank Group 2025).

Fourth, local adaptation and content relevance remain insufficient: "The vast majority (80%) of online content is only available in 10 languages, which only about 3 billion people speak as their first language" (World Economic Forum 2016).

These barriers – availability, affordability, relevance, and readiness – form a complex web of exclusion. Tackling them demands multifaceted interventions, including infrastructure development, inclusive digital literacy initiatives, culturally sensitive content creation, and policy frameworks that uphold digital equity. The persistent linguistic gap, in particular, highlights the urgency of fostering localized content ecosystems that reflect the richness of diverse identities and languages.

In *Ethics in Internet* (§10), the Pontifical Council for Social Communications expresses grave concern about the digital divide, including the gender digital divide, describing it as "a form of discrimination dividing the rich from the poor, both within and among nations, on the basis of access, or lack of access, to the new information technology." The phenomenon is interpreted as a contemporary rearticulation of the persistent divide between the 'information rich' and the 'information poor,' exposing not merely a technological disparity but a deeper question of justice and inclusion. It highlights the ethical and ecclesial challenge posed by the unequal distribution of access to new means of communication and expression, whereby some are empowered as participants in the digital commons while others remain structurally marginalized (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002).

This framing by the Vatican not only critiques technological inequality but also elevates it to a moral and theological concern. By naming the digital divide

as a form of discrimination, the Church articulates a call to action rooted in solidarity, justice, and the inherent dignity of every person.

In his Message for the 36th World Communications Day: Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel, Pope John Paul II emphasized that equitable access to digital technologies is essential to prevent the internet from becoming "another intractable source of inequity and discrimination" (John Paul II 2002, §6). He advocated for extending internet access to underserved populations, either directly or through integration with more affordable traditional media. Echoing this concern, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in the document "The Church and Internet" urged that cyberspace be developed as a universally accessible resource, offering comprehensive information and services free of charge and in multiple languages, while stressing the responsibility of public institutions to uphold inclusive digital infrastructures (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002, §10).

Concluding Remarks

This chapter categorizes various forms of cyberchurches based on their institutional affiliations, revealing a spectrum of relationships with established ecclesial structures. These online communities reflect distinct modes of ecclesial connection, each presenting unique advantages and challenges. Cyberchurches closely tied to traditional institutions benefit from doctrinal consistency, sacramental availability, and organizational resources. However, their embeddedness within formal structures can limit adaptability and risk fostering exclusionary tendencies that alienate digitally native or marginalized groups. Loosely affiliated or hybrid cyberchurches, by contrast, enjoy greater flexibility and creative freedom, fostering innovation and contextual responsiveness. Yet, they often face governance ambiguity and fragmented ecclesial identity, especially when institutional support is uneven or conditional.

Examples such as i-church in Oxford, Life.Church in the United States, and the CBCP's Visita Iglesia Online in the Philippines illustrate how parish-linked cyberchurches replicate or adapt existing ecclesial practices. These models provide institutional stability, clear leadership, and sacramental continuity, extending pastoral care to those unable to attend physically, particularly during lockdowns or in diaspora contexts. In the Philippine setting, initiatives like the St. John Neumann Migrants Center Facebook page exemplify how cyberchurch can integrate faith and advocacy, offering pastoral support alongside legal aid and psychosocial services for Overseas Filipino Workers.

In contrast, independent cyberchurches operate without direct denominational control. These communities prioritize innovation, inclusivity, and accessibility, often engaging those alienated from traditional structures. Whether charismatic-led, grassroots, or platform-based, independent cyberchurches excel in cultural fluency and theological agility. However, their lack of oversight can result in doctrinal inconsistency, leadership accountability gaps, and sacramental discontinuities, raising questions about legitimacy and sustainability.

Digital environments across these models may resemble social networks, immersive 3D worship spaces, or activist platforms that blend spirituality with political witness. The key distinction lies in accountability: institutionally linked cyberchurches retain traditional authority and sacramental legitimacy, while independent communities, though capable of articulating coherent theological orientations, operate apart from formal ecclesial oversight. In doing so, they often cultivate experimental ecclesial practices, fostering alternative forms of koinonia and reimagined modes of belonging that both parallel and challenge conventional paradigms of church and community. These developments resonate with Rizopoulos's insight that true ecclesial identity is constituted in communion rather than institutional form, and echo Hans Küng's assertion that the essence of the church must be continually reinterpreted in light of new historical and cultural conditions.

Finally, the reality of digital exclusion must not be ignored. This raises an urgent theological imperative: the church is called to ensure that the "digital Body of Christ" remains a space of hospitality, solidarity, and inclusion. To be faithful to its mission, cyberchurch must not be reduced to convenience or entertainment, but recognized as a sacred locus where the Gospel reaches the "Other".

Chapter Three

Neighbor/hood and the Cyberchurch of Others/ *Kapwa*

This chapter analyzes discourses on neighbor and neighborhood through the lens of the "other" and the Filipin@ concept of *kapwa* (the one-of-us and the not-one-of-us). The first part explores the following questions: 1) What can an analysis of discourses on neighbor/hood and "others/*kapwa*" yield? 2) How can "neighbor" and "others/*kapwa*" be reinterpreted in the cyber-context? Appropriating an inclusivist understanding of kapwa, enriched by Emmanuel Levinas's concept of the Other, the last section explores the cyberchurch of *kapwa*.

What Is a Neighborhood?

A neighborhood is about *relational proximity*, the shared space where individuals, families, and entire communities live alongside one another in the rhythms of daily life. As Kuppinger (2013, 30) emphasizes, proximity combined with "everyday engagements" nurtures the interpersonal bonds and cultural negotiations that constitute the fabric of social life. These engagements shape both identity and belonging in deeply contextual ways.

Yet, proximity does not always generate solidarity. The infamous report on the 2001 northern England riots revealed that racialized and religious communities often inhabit "parallel lives," occupying the same physical space while remaining socially and spiritually segregated (Cantle 2008). Neighborhoods, therefore, can also be sites of tension and contestation, as seen in university prayer rooms that become flashpoints for inter-religious friction (Smith 2016) or stadiums that amplify collective passions and exclusionary identities.

What sets neighborhoods apart from formal religious spaces or even digital ones is their inescapability. One may choose to leave a church or log out of a cyberchurch, but a neighborhood imposes presence. It is a space where cultural, generational, and religious differences are negotiated daily, often without resolution.

Neighborhoods as Shaped Space

Neighborhoods are not static containers of human life but *shaped spaces* culturally, politically, and spiritually inscribed geographies that reflect the hopes, exclusions, and negotiations of those who dwell within them.

Robert Orsi's assertion that "city folk do not live in their environments; they live through them" (1999, 44) is especially salient in postcolonial urban contexts, where religious and ethnic communities, shaped by colonial legacies and economic inequities, must creatively inhabit and transform space. Orsi argued that the neighborhood becomes the site where existential and theological questions, such as " *Who am I? What is possible? What is good?* are enacted in situated, communal ways. These questions are not asked in abstraction but within the physical, social, and symbolic textures of place. The neighborhood, then, becomes not merely a backdrop but a dynamic actor in moral and theological formation.

In the Philippine context, where Catholic symbols coexist with indigenous rituals, Muslim prayer calls, and Pentecostal revivals, neighborhoods become arenas of *religious bricolage* where multiple traditions collide, adapt, and reconfigure. Thus, neighborhoods are places where people not only dwell, but also contest imposed hierarchies, whether colonial, ecclesial, or capitalist, by transforming space through rituals of resistance or hospitality.

Neighborhoods are where that history is lived, where faith is negotiated in proximity to the *Other*, and where the possibility of peace, justice, and divine encounter is continually reimagined.

Neighborhoods as Reachable and Relational Space

Neighborhoods are not only shaped spaces; they are reachable relational spaces. They are accessible zones where proximity enables encounter and interaction.

Religion is performed in real time, entangled with family life, economic survival, and socio-political contestation. The Philippine neighborhood, for example, often includes both the visibility of Marian images and the invisible presence of animist practices, creating liminal zones of faith that are reachable and relational in their very informality.

Indeed, neighborhoods are arenas of reachable relational agency, where residents (especially those on the margins) co-create moral order through everyday action. Even in contexts marked by inequality or religious hegemony, communities craft forms of solidarity that resist formal exclusion. For example, informal neighborhood prayer groups in urban poor Filipin@ communities, often led by women, challenge patriarchal and clerical structures by asserting the authority of

lived spiritual care. These spaces are reachable precisely because of physical proximity and they are belonging-oriented, not institutional, or abstract.

Neighborhoods as Interaction Systems

Neighborhoods are not passive containers of residence but dynamic *interaction systems*, animated by social networks, symbolic meanings, and moral economies. In sociological terms, they are spaces where communal relations are forged and maintained, often in tension with broader political and institutional forces.

Gerald Suttles (1972) described two main kinds of neighborhoods. Some are like close-knit families or communities, where people know each other well and share a strong sense of belonging. Others are more divided into separate parts, where people do not interact as closely but are still connected through larger systems like schools, markets, or transportation. Together, these two kinds show that neighborhoods serve a double role: they are both personal and communal (inward-looking) and also connected to wider society (outward-facing). In this way, neighborhoods link people's private sense of identity with bigger institutions, bridging what feels familiar with what feels outside or different.

Neighborhoods in the Digital Era

In today's digital era, the idea of a neighborhood has expanded beyond its traditional physical limits, transforming into a web of online communities and groups that foster connection and a sense of belonging similar to that of local neighborhoods. Digital platforms have birthed new modalities of proximity, community, and belonging. These virtual spaces are not limited by location but are instead united by common interests, shared values, and mutual goals. They embody a contemporary form of community—one that is always within reach, no matter where you are in the world.

As with geographical neighborhoods, digital neighborhood is a shaped space. Racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, classism can produce segregated communities online. Algorithms on platforms like Facebook or Google produce filter bubbles by personalizing content based on your preferences, search history, and location. As a result, a person may become shielded from content that challenges one's interests or beliefs, leading to a narrow, often one-sided view of the world. This effect can be intensified when individuals remove or block others who hold differing opinions, further reinforcing their own ideological or cultural echo chamber. Various groups of people with opposing views can thus lead parallel lives in cyberspace.

Digital neighborhoods are reachable relational spaces. Unlike global social media networks that link users across the world, what are called hyperlocal platforms intentionally focus on small, defined geographic areas (Carter 2025). This purposeful limitation fosters online interactions that enhance real-world community ties rather than substitute them.

What makes these platforms special is their fusion of digital ease with neighborhood relevance. Instead of browsing posts from distant acquaintances or international influencers, one learns about nearby neighbors who need help with childcare or repair, or that a new community garden is being launched just a few blocks away. Platforms like neighborhood-specific Facebook groups empower residents to exchange local updates, address community matters, and coordinate events. In many urban settings, these tools have helped rekindle a sense of neighborhood connection among individuals who might otherwise feel isolated.

Aligned with this, urban religious life increasingly takes on hybrid dimensions. Barangay Facebook groups announce Mass schedules or livestream novenas. Prayer chains circulate via Messenger. YouTube-based Bible reflections are shared among neighbors. These interactions extend reachability beyond physical borders and create digital meshworks of spiritual intimacy. From a postcolonial perspective, these digital "neighborhoods" may serve as spaces of resistance and healing for those historically excluded or marginalized by colonial urban planning and ecclesial gatekeeping.

Digital neighborhoods are also interacting systems. The internet has its origins in the personal computing counterculture with the 1960s utopian, communal, libertarian, democratizing undercurrents. Remnants of this culture of first-generation users can be found in those who oppose network commercialization today (e.g., Wikipedia). The internet, however, has developed not just as a forum for the exchange of ideas but as a marketplace, conditioned by market forces and where news is transmitted for profit. Fake news, for instance are powerful driver of profit (Haenschen & Paul Ellenbogen 2016).

People occupy a dual role in the digital marketplace: they are both consumers and products (Dicastery for Communication 2023). As consumers, they receive personalized ads and sponsored content shaped by data analytics. At the same time, their personal information and user profiles are packaged and sold to companies aiming to target them with even more precision.

Neighbor, Levinas's Other, and Nature as *Kapwa*

Who is my neighbor in the digital space? Filipin@s associate the term *kapwa* with neighbor in its Christian sense. Within Filipin@ thought, the concept of *kapwa* (fellow/other) is interpreted in two primary ways. An exclusivist view defines *kapwa* only as those within one's own group or the "one-of-us" (Ramirez 1993, 11; Labor and Gastardo-Conaco 2021), while an inclusivist perspective extends it to everyone, including the not-one-of-us, grounded in the belief in our shared inner self or *loob* (Santiago and Enriquez 1976, Clemente et al., 2008, Yacat 2017).

For Enriquez, underlying the concept of *kapwa* is the "unity of the self with the other" or the shared identity. Jeremiah Reyes posits that within an animist and tribal pre-colonial context, *kapwa* initially referred to those from within the same tribe. But with the arrival of Christianity, its meaning became more inclusive. (Reyes 2015)

This Indigenous value for the *kapwa* finds expression in the practice of *pakikipagkapwa*—active engagement with others not as strangers but as fellow beings whose dignity is intrinsically linked to one's own. Carmen Santiago and Virgilio Enriquez (1976), a pioneer in the development of an indigenous viewpoint in Filipin@ psychology, have identified different levels of *pakikipagkapwa* or relation with the "not-one-of-us" (*ibang tao*) and the "one of us" (*hindi ibang tao*) category.

Under the not-one-of-us category are relating on the level of civility (*pakikitungo*), level of mixing (*pakikisalamuha*), level of conforming (*pakikibagay*), and level of adjusting (*pakikisama*). Under the one-of-us category are the level of mutual trust/rapport (*pakikipagpalagayang-loob*), level of getting involved (*pakikisangkot*/*pakikibaka*), and level of fusion, oneness, and full trust or solidarity (*pakikiisa*). *Kapwa* is the sole Filipin@ concept that embraces both the outsider and the insider.

Enriquez suggests that while Filipin@s do recognize distinctions between insiders and outsiders—similar to other ethnic groups—they tend to be more fluid in how these boundaries are drawn. Filipin@s acknowledge the existence of strangers, foreigners, and individuals from different religions or cultures, yet these "others" are not necessarily viewed as complete opposites or adversaries. This approach differs from Japan's uchi-soto framework, where the "uchi" (inside, including family and home) is clearly defined in contrast to the "soto" (outside), which is often seen as a rival.

Patricia Licuanan (1990) names *pakikipagkapwa-tao* as among the most significant Filipin@ values shaping national character. It manifests in everyday acts

of compassion (*pakikiramay*), mutual assistance (*bayanihan*), deep emotional attunement (*pakikiramdam*), and relational trust (*pagtitiwala*). These values reflect an ethical ecology where moral responsibility is co-constructed and community-centered.

The *Alay Kapwa* (literally, Offering to the One-of-us and the Not-one-of-us) campaign, launched in 1975 by Cardinal Julio Rosales, reflects the Church's attempt to inculturate Catholic social teaching within the Filipin@ moral imagination. It invited believers not just to give alms but to recognize the suffering Other as *kapwa*, as co-bearer of divine image and destiny (CBCP 1975). Here, the theological imperative is incarnated in local idioms: solidarity with the "least, the lost, and the last" becomes an act of becoming Church.

Similar expressions are found in the media. The long-running TV show *Kapwa Ko, Mahal Ko* (literally, My Fellow, My Love; 1975–present), and its digital outreach efforts, exemplify mediated forms of Christian social action. Its continued relevance even through platforms like Twitter and podcasting signals how the ethic of *kapwa* remains adaptive in cyberspace. As broadcast journalist Orly Mercado noted, "We do not fall short even though we serve many *kapwa*," testifying to how digital tools amplify rather than replace embodied solidarity (Lapeña 2010).

This relational worldview resists rigid dichotomies between self and other and instead foregrounds an inclusive, participatory understanding of human interrelatedness. As Enriquez (1992) argued, *kapwa* is not simply about empathy or tolerance, but a radical identity-in-solidarity. It is a moral imperative grounded in shared humanity.

The ethos of *pakikipagkapwa* is particularly salient among Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), whose lives straddle multiple geographies. The *Lingkod sa Kapwa Pilipino* (literally, Service to Fellow Filipin@s) program, launched in 1989 by the Commission on Filipinos Overseas, is a government initiative that channels donations and assistance from overseas Filipin@s toward education, health, livelihood, small infrastructure, and technology transfer projects in the Philippines. What emerges is a theology of "glocal" neighborliness rooted in the local but expanding into global moral geographies.

Similarly, Anna Patricia Non's 2021 community pantry movement exemplifies this cyber-enabled moral practice. Rooted in *bayanihan* (communal unity and participation) and *kapwa*, her viral signage "Give according to your ability, take according to your need" became both an ethical creed and digital witness. It signaled not only social care but theological depth: a Eucharistic model of just distribution, animated by grace and generosity (Espartinez 2021; CNN Philippines 2021).

This foundation of sameness among *kapwa* fosters a deep ethic of solidarity and responsibility, also embodied in terms like *utang na loob*, understood not simply as a debt of gratitude, but more deeply, a debt to our common humanity (de Mesa 1987)cyber

Yet, this very strength contains a weakness: the potential to absorb the other into one's own perspective. Here, the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas is essential, as his concept of the Other's absolute alterity acts as a safeguard against this assimilation. His "thou shalt not kill" is a command to preserve the other's difference (Levinas 1969). Enrique Dussel expands this, arguing that this ethical call comes most powerfully from the faces of the poor and oppressed (Dussel 2013).

However, the *kapwa* framework questions the extremity of Levinas's view. Following the philosopher Jacques Derrida's logic, some foundational recognition of a common humanity (*loob*) is necessary to even perceive the ethical summons from the Other (Derrida 2001). A truly transformative ethics, therefore, resides in the balance between our shared identity and our respect for irreducible differences.

The Filipin@ *kapwa* needs Levinas's alterity to prevent its ethics of solidarity from sliding into a homogenizing assimilation that fails to respect true difference. Levinas's ethics needs the Filipin@ *kapwa* to answer the question of how we are capable of recognizing and responding to the Other, by providing a foundation in a shared humanity (*loob*). The most robust ethical position, therefore, emerges from holding these two ideas in tension: an ethic that begins with the recognition of a common humanity (shared *loob*) but is fundamentally governed by the uncompromising respect for the Other's radical difference (alterity), especially as embodied in the concrete faces of the oppressed and marginalized. This synthesis ensures that our care for the *kapwa* is not an extension of our own ego but a genuine, transformative response to the unique and inviolable person before us.

Transposing Levinas's Other to Cyberspace

For Levinas, the "face" is the primary way we encounter the Other. While it begins with the literal, physical face, it quickly transcends mere appearance. The face is the entire expressive presence of the other person, their gestures, speech, and posture. It is more than any image or photograph can capture, possessing an "invisibility" that defies representation.

Crucially, this face is how the "Infinite" (or the ethical Good) is revealed to us. It is an imprint within us that accuses our self-centeredness and opens us to the possibility of change. Although this profound ethical call originates from

within, it can only be accessed through our external, tangible encounter with another person's face.

However, Levinas's ethic of the face becomes complicated in the era of avatars and anonymous usernames. The digital "face" may be a cartoon, an emoji, or a meme. Can a true ethical response emanate from digital encounters? Lucas Introna argued that virtualization erodes morality because a digitized face loses its power to challenge our selfishness (Introna 2003). However, Richard Cohen counters that Levinasian "proximity" is a moral, not physical, closeness, noting that we can even ignore the ethical demand of someone standing right in front of us (Cohen 2001). Laurie Johnson offers a middle ground. Since Levinas defined the "face" as any expressive medium (like gestures or clothing), Johnson (2020) argued it need not be human. An avatar or computer interface can function as a face if it expresses the Other's alterity and calls the self to respond, generating a proximal ethical relation. The conclusion is that because Levinas's face transcends physical form, its ethical appeal can operate through any medium, be it an avatar, a photograph, or an in-person meeting.

Benda Hofmeyr, in her article "Is Facebook Effacing the Face?" (Hofmeyr 2014), argued that the ethical power of the "face" is not diminished in virtual spaces. She contends that the face can be obscured just as easily in physical interactions as in digital ones. Its moral force does not originate from the mode of its revelation (be it physical or mediated) but from a transcendent realm "beyond Being." Therefore, a genuine connection is not a meeting of physical bodies or digital profiles, but rather the recognition of a fundamental, pre-ontological kinship between the self and the Other. Extending this logic, Hofmeyr suggests that even video-game avatars can serve as the face of the Other, as the essential "face-to-face" encounter is a symbolic, ethical event based on moral responsibility, not a literal, empirical one.

Nature as *Kapwa*: Interweaving Ecology and Technology

Brazal (2003, 57-61) argued that indigenous Filipin@s also relate with non-human earth beings as *kapwa*, in line with its non-dualistic worldview that regards the "other" as part of the self. The indigenous world is believed to be inhabited by environmental spirits regarded as "beings who are not like us," but with whom one needs to negotiate and co-exist harmoniously. For example, permission is obtained from the spirits before cutting down a tree or pouring water from the porch. (Demetrio 1991, 195)

Gabriel Casal, who tried to reconstruct Filipin@ precolonial culture from a critical study of ethnic traditions of today, discusses how the Palanan Agta treats nature itself, as *kapwa*, asking forgiveness from the insects he disturbs, thanking

the tree and the river for their yield, and the soil for producing root, grub, and tuber (Casal, 1986, 25).

In line with this more fluid human-non-human boundary, the social, cultural, and technological boundaries are likewise not distinctly separate categories. The Bagobos, an indigenous ethnic group in Mindanao, and the Sama of Cagayan de Tawi-tawi, for instance, believe that both animate and inanimate objects (including human-made ones) possess a soul. Warriors give names to their personal weapons not as ownership of the object but to recognize its animism, and they show a reverential attitude toward their weapons. (Brazal, 2014). The human-made tool is treated too as a *kapwa*.

Pakikipagkapwa can thus be reimagined as a virtue that embraces plurality, fosters solidarity across differences, and provides resources for addressing contemporary challenges, including those posed by ecological crises and digital technologies. *Pakikipagkapwa* is more than interpersonal solidarity. It is an invitation toward a re-enchanted world where all beings are seen, not as isolated units, but as part of an interwoven *loob* (inner self): a sacred weave of presence, vulnerability, and shared life. In the face of climate crises, digital alienation, and global inequalities, *pakikipagkapwa* is a call to ethical imagination. It compels us to ask: Who is my *kapwa* in a virtual world? How do we sustain communion across ecological and cyber boundaries? *Pakikipagkapwa* insists on holistic justice care for both the Earth and each other, offline and online.

Reinventing *Pakikipagkapwa* as Postcolonial Ethic of Resistance

Pakikipagkapwa, as relating justly with the one-of-us and the not-one-of-us, need not be merely a cultural nicety; it can be a form of resistance. In a postcolonial context where the Filipin@ self has been historically fractured by Spanish, American, and global hegemonies, reclaiming *pakikipagkapwa* constitutes a decolonial act.

Enriquez (1992) critiques how colonial psychology privileged individualism over relationality, fragmenting the Filipin@ moral psyche. *Kapwa*, then, is not just an ethic of neighborliness; it is a political theology of remembering the dismembered self through collective solidarity. A community or individual may feel a "dismembered self" when colonization, migration, or displacement splits their identity between different traditions, values, or languages.

Unlike Western conceptions of the self and other as separate entities, *kapwa* assumes a shared inner self, where the boundary between the individual and the communal dissolves (Enriquez 1992). This intersubjective relationality serves as

a powerful ethical lens for digital interactions. It suggests that every online post, meme, or theological statement is not merely self-expression, but a disclosure of one's shared being with the other/s.

A "cyberethics of *kapwa*" acknowledges that digital interactions, though mediated, carry the weight of relational responsibility (Brazal 2020). If the "Other" is *kapwa*, then cyber-engagement must reflect *pakikiramdam* (sensitivity), *paggalang* (respect), and *bayanihan* (solidarity). She also argued that in the digital world, *hiya*— traditionally understood as shame must be transformed as a virtue—sensitivity to the face of the Other; an ethic of respectful self-limitation considering the Other's presence and dignity online. This virtual *hiya* parallels Levinas's concept of "the face," reinterpreted as the Other's summons, even though screens. What emerges is a cyberethics shaped not by anonymity, but by relational accountability.

Furthermore, the cyberneighborhood of *kapwa* challenges the algorithmic tendency to curate echo chambers. It demands radical hospitality to strangers and attentiveness to the silent pain encoded in digital silences. The cyberneighborhood of *kapwa* confronts the structures of digital inequality that reproduce global hierarchies of race, class, and language. The digital church and digital neighborhood can easily become echo chambers for Western perspectives. As Musa Dube (2000) insisted, we must attend to the "voicelessness" imposed by dominant structures, even in supposedly democratizing technologies. A digital neighbor ethics requires platform accountability, multilingual accessibility, and the promotion of grassroots theologies that rise from embodied struggle. Dube further argued that digital globalization mirrors colonial missionary logic: it proclaims a "good news" that frequently centers Western norms, languages, and aesthetics (Dube 2000). Dube insisted that theology in digital spaces must reject imperial epistemologies and instead uplift the wounded memories and embodied knowledges of colonized peoples. In this way, the digital neighbor is not a passive recipient of content but a bearer of prophetic resistance.

Thus, the postcolonial discourse on the "other/*kapwa*" demands an online ecclesiology that values encounter over branding, mutual vulnerability over digital perfection, and collective liberation over individualized faith performances. This is what it means to be a neighbor in digital space: to treat the face behind the screen not as data, content, or opposition, but as kapwa, sacred other, divine presence.

In such spaces, memes become more than entertainment. They are, in many cases, vehicles for digital prophecy. They offer satirical resistance, biblical reinterpretation, and theological critique. A meme that juxtaposes Jesus' washing of feet with exploitative church leadership structures is not merely irreverent; it is a form of lay homiletics accessible, participatory, and provocative. The meme culture

becomes a digital ecclesial space where the *sensus fidelium* (the sense of the faithful) is publicly performed.

Still, the ethical tensions remain. The ease of digital participation also leads to what Byung-Chul Han (2018) called the "expulsion of the other," where we block, unfriend, or cancel those who offend our sensibilities. Being a neighbor in a digital space, then, demands resilience, grace, and a reimagining of patience as a spiritual discipline. It requires us to resist the algorithmic pressures that foster division and to lean instead into practices of listening, storytelling, and reconciliation.

To be a neighbor in digital space is to engage in a kind of cyber-discipleship, a commitment to follow Christ in contexts where embodiment is not physical but relational and mediated. The church must retool its ethical teachings to equip believers for this terrain. This is not a retreat from theology, but a profound expansion of it.

Toward a Cyber Ecclesiology of *Kapwa*

From these cultural and theological trajectories, a cyber ecclesiology begins to take shape, one that envisions the church not as a bounded institution but as a neighborhood of *kapwa*. Drawing from Levinas's ethics of alterity, which foregrounds the face of the "Other" as the site of ethical responsibility, this model finds resonance in the Filipin@ relational concept of *pakikipagkapwa*. As mentioned earlier, Brazal argued that *pakikipagkapwa* can be reinvented to foster inclusive dialogue and mutual recognition in pluralistic contexts (Brazal 2004, 50–70). This reinvention is especially pertinent in cyberchurch environments, where anonymity and fragmentation often threaten genuine relationality. A cyber ecclesiology of *kapwa* thus calls for intentional presence, radical hospitality, and dialogical engagement, values that resist the commodification of online interaction and reassert the Church's vocation as a space of encounter.

In a world increasingly mediated by digital interaction, *pakikipagkapwa* is invited to evolve beyond spatial and blood-bound proximities. The neighborhood is no longer confined to *barangay* boundaries or kinship lines; it now includes virtual spaces where people encounter one another through screens, comments, shared prayers, livestreamed liturgies, and emojis of empathy. The *kapwa* is now also the one who shares bandwidth, not just *kanin (rice)*. The digital is not merely a tool; it becomes a space of relational expansion.

This resonates with what Figer (2010) describes as *digitally enabled pagkakapit-bahay* (neighborliness), where Filipin@ migrants, OFWs, or those alienated by ecclesial structures find renewed belonging in online worship and prayer

fellowships. This digital reconnection is not a thin simulation of presence but a thickening of relational possibilities. Even in physical isolation, *pakikipagkapwa* is expressed through the intentionality of presence, commenting "praying for you," or sharing a Mass link to one's kin (*kamag-anak*) in the province.

Theologically, this broadening invites the church to incarnate itself more radically: to move from *bayanihan* as physical labor-sharing to *bayanihan ng diwa* (solidarity of spirit) through digital accompaniment. The challenge is to avoid mere performance of presence (*pakitang-tao*) and instead foster genuine *pakikipagkapwa* rooted in *loob*, conscience, and compassionate praxis. When an online church community prioritizes presence over metrics, dialogue over likes, and *pakikiramay* (compassion) over algorithms, it embodies a decolonial ecclesiology, one that resists commodified, neoliberal forms of digital religion.

This vision critiques how traditional ecclesial institutions have, at times, failed to be *kapwa* to the disenfranchised. The poor, the LGBTQ+ community, Indigenous peoples, and even dissenting voices have often found more welcome in online spiritual communities than in rigid parish structures (Lasquety-Reyes 2015). Rather than replicating institutional hierarchies in digital form, this model envisions ecclesial life as a web of intersubjective connections, animated by *loob* (inner self) and *pakikipagkapwa* (relationality). In this way, the church becomes a living network of ethical responsiveness, grounded in Filipin@ wisdom and open to global theological currents.

In this regard, *kapwa* (fellow/other) can become a prophetic lens through which to confront clericalism, exclusionary piety, and moral gatekeeping. It echoes the liberating words of Jesus: "I no longer call you servants... but friends" (John 15:15). Friendship with the marginalized, enacted digitally and analogously, is gospel praxis. A Filipin@ cyberchurch rooted in *kapwa* offers not just a technological adjustment, but a theological shift: from institution to relation, from proclamation to presence, from hierarchy to *barkadahan* (fellowship) with Christ at the center.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter is a theological, cultural, and ethical retrieval of *kapwa* not merely as a Filipin@ cultural value but as a foundational anthropological grammar for imagining a church in the digital era. Rooted in Indigenous cosmologies and rearticulated through ecclesial witness, *pakikipagkapwa* emerges here as a critical hermeneutic of relational solidarity: one that resists domination, affirms shared dignity, and disrupts colonial hierarchies through mutual moral presence.

Traditionally, "neighbor" has been circumscribed by spatial proximity bounded within villages, parishes, or communities demarcated by ethnicity, class, and land. However, as urban migration, diaspora, and digitization destabilize the givenness of territory, the meaning of neighborhood demands theological re-thinking. As Anselin and Williams (2015) argued, a neighborhood is no longer merely geographic but socially constructed and contextually fluid. This is partic-ularly true in the cyber context, where presence is mediated, and relationality disembodied.

Yet, within this very fluidity lies the possibility for deeper ethical engage-ment. The Filipino concept of *kapwa* radically redefines the neighbor not simply as one who shares our space, but as one who shares in our *being*. *Kapwa* names a shared personhood that transcends binary oppositions of self and other, native, and foreign, online, and offline. In doing so, it subverts colonial logics that stratify persons into insiders and outsiders. As Katrin de Guia (2005) explains, *kapwa* "does not divide but relates, generating a moral imperative rooted in a spirituality of belonging.

This praxis of *pakikipagkapwa* becomes even more urgent in the age of dig-ital capitalism, algorithmic isolation, and post-truth politics. Digital space is not neutral; it is shaped by structures of power and exclusion (Campbell and Tsuria 2021). Yet, Brazal (2020) has persistently argued, digital technologies can also be reclaimed as sites of encounter, empathy, and mission. Through *kapwa*, Filipin@ theology offers a counter-narrative to neoliberal individualism and technological alienation by grounding digital ecclesiology in embodied relationality.

To become *kapwa* in cyberspace is to engage in a cybertheological praxis that:

- Centers the marginalized, those algorithmically invisibilized and socially excluded, from LGBTQ+ persons to displaced migrants.
- Refuses digital apathy, embracing an ethic of responsiveness where sol-idarity is practiced through advocacy, care, and presence.
- Decolonizes theology, privileging Indigenous and non-Western frame-works that affirm connectivity not as utility, but as communion.
- Reimagines church as a *network of presence,* a "cyber-neighborhood" where grace flows through hashtags, livestreams, and solidarity posts (Campbell 2012; Bogle 2020).

Theologically, this aligns with Levinas's (1969) insistence that the face of the Other calls forth an infinite responsibility, a call that the digital Other can still issue, even though pixels. As Richard Cohen (2001) explains, ethics is not

annulled by mediation; rather, it is intensified by the strangeness of the encounter. In this light, *kapwa* functions as a Filipin@ response to Levinasian ethics: an indigenous lens that makes the ethical demands of presence legible within our cultural and spiritual lifeworlds.

To be *kapwa* is to embody a theology of the *Other* not as an abstract ethical command but as a lived, spiritual vocation. It is to be church not merely *on* the digital highway, but *for* and *with* those who journey through it. In reclaiming *kapwa*, Filipin@ theology offers the global church a vision of neighborhood that is relationally thick, spiritually rooted, and cyber-spatially expansive.

Thus, the cry of other/*kapwa*–the digitally displaced, the colonially silenced, the algorithmically muted–must become the church's collective concern. As such, the future of ecclesial life may not lie in returning to old forms of proximity but in reimagining presence, neighborhood, and solidarity anew. For in the face of the Other, whether beside us or behind a screen, we encounter not only our *kapwa*, but also the God who always comes to us through the *Other*. Levinas and contemporary Filipin@ Christian thought both see the human Other as reflecting the Divine, but they ground this connection and the ensuing ethical responsibility in fundamentally different ways.

For Levinas, the Divine is radically transcendent and absent, leaving only a "trace" in the face of the human Other. Our infinite responsibility for the Other arises from this encounter with alterity, not from a shared identity. In contrast, in Filipin@ theology, as exemplified in Edmundo Guzman's thesis, humanity shares in God's loob or inner self. Through the concept of *kaloob* (gift/shared inner self), creation is understood as an extension of God's own inner self (*loob*). Therefore, the Other images God and commands our responsibility precisely because we all share in the same divine *loob*, making us all part of God's family.

Chapter Four

Who is my Neighbor? Re-reading Luke 10:25–37 in the Cyber-Context

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis points out how true encounter is lacking in today's world. Despite increased connectivity, we have not become true neighbors. He wrote, "Life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions" (§66). This chapter theologizes on what it means to be a neighbor using the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It offers a re-reading of Luke 10:25–37 in the cyber-context, with particular attention to the lawyer's question: "Who is my neighbor?" The parable of the Good Samaritan, which Jesus uses to respond to this question, will be examined within both its literary and historical dimensions, followed by a focus on the narrative's immediate context. The chapter also investigates how discourses or exegeses on Luke 10:29 "Who is my neighbor?" have emerged across diverse identity frameworks, production contexts, and social receptions, shaping moral conduct within various communities. Finally, the parable will be interpreted through the Filipin@ lenses of *kapwa* (one-of-us and the not-one-of-us) and *pakikipagkapwa* (relationality), culminating in a rearticulation of neighbor and neighborhood as they manifest on the cyber-highway.

The Text (Luke 10:25–37): Literary and Canonical Context

The Gospel according to Luke is dated to the period of 80–85 CE. This gospel was written for a Gentile Christian audience represented by Luke's addressee (Theophilus 1:1–4). It presents a message of universal salvation, accessible to all people, Jews and non-Jews.

The general outline of Luke's Gospel presents eight major sections:

1. a prologue (1:1–4).
2. infancy narrative (1:5–2:52).
3. the preparation for the public ministry of Jesus (3:1–4:13).
4. the Galilean ministry of Jesus (4:14–9:50).
5. the travel account—Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (9:51–19:27).

6. the ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem (19:28–21:38).
7. passion narrative (22:1–23:56a); and
8. resurrection narrative (23:56b–24:53).

Luke 10:25–37 is part of the fifth Lucan Gospel section—the travel account—and is divided into two parts: the first relates the Lawyer's Question (10:25–28); the second narrates the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:29–37), which is found only in Luke. The New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition of the Bible presents the passage as follows:

> 25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27 He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." 29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' 36 "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Narrative Placement and Thematic Boundaries

The passage in Luke 10:25–37 opens with the Lucan narrative signal *kai idou* ("and behold"), marking a rhetorical shift in the discourse. This episode directly follows the disciples' return from their mission in Galilean towns and villages (Luke 10:1–20) and precedes the story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42),

situating it firmly within the travel narrative toward Jerusalem (Wright 1996, 385; Carbajal Baca 2021, 15).

Narrative criticism emphasizes how the evangelist strategically deploys literary elements such as characterization, plot development, and dialogical tension to invite readers into the moral and theological thrust of the passage.

The encounter in Luke 10:25–37 begins with a lawyer who "stood up to test Jesus" by asking, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25, NRSVCE). Although Jesus was widely recognized for preaching, healing, and praying, the lawyer approached Him not to learn with sincerity, but to challenge Him intellectually. His posture— "stood up"—suggested a defensive stance, asserting his role as a *nomikos*, someone well-versed in the Law (Bratcher 1982, 183). Yet Jesus, discerning the lawyer's intentions (cf. 1 Sam. 16:7), redirects the conversation and positions the lawyer as a student: "What is written in the Law?" He then leads the lawyer to recite the Shema (Deut. 6:5; cf. Deut. 11:13) and the commandment to love one's neighbor from Leviticus 19:18, also quoted in Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14, and James 2:8.

Jesus responds, "Do this and you will live," indicating that the Law is not merely textual but an embodied commitment to covenantal relationship, a lived pathway toward eternal life. The lawyer's question about inheriting eternal life reflects a common Jewish belief rooted in texts such as Daniel 12:2: eternal life is seen as an abundant, divine existence that transcends human effort (Low 2020).

The term *test* (Hebrew: *nacah*) evokes narratives such as Exodus 17:2–7, where the Israelites tested Yahweh at Massah and Meribah, betraying their lack of trust. Likewise, the lawyer's question echoes the desert temptation of Jesus, in which He responds, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Deut. 6:16; cf. Matt. 4:7). Low notes, "If we test God, we treat God as if He is inferior to us" (Low 2020). Jesus reverses the test, placing the lawyer's own motives on trial and revealing the challenge of truly living by the Law.

The lawyer remains, spiritually speaking, an outsider still needing transformation by Jesus' message of inclusive discipleship. His desire to justify himself exposes pride and the tendency to perform rather than embody the Law (Compelling Truth 2020).

By quoting Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18, Jesus unites the two great commandments. Bomkamp (2022) affirmed that "To love God with all your heart... is to love your neighbor likewise," highlighting the intrinsic link between divine love and neighborly compassion. The First Letter of John reiterates this: "Whoever does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). Love of God manifests in concrete neighborly love (Mt. 25:31–46).

The Lawyer's Dilemma and the Contested Meaning of Neighbor

Jesus' response to the lawyer, "Do this and you will live," evokes Leviticus 18:5, "The person who does them shall live by them," further echoed in Ezekiel 20:11, 13, and 21. This imperative place emphasis on enacting the Law rather than merely knowing it. The lawyer, however, recognized the impossibility of fully living out *agapao*, a selfless and unconditional love.

Faced with Jesus' call to action, the lawyer falters and, seeking justification, asks, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). His question reveals a restricted understanding of the concept *plesion* (neighbor), which in Second Temple Judaism was theologically and socially contested.

According to Fichtner, *plesion* ranges from "friend" or "companion" to a general "fellow human being" (Fichtner 1964, 312; Fichtner 1985, 872). Its Hebrew counterpart *rea'* (רֵעַ), found in Leviticus 19:18, implies association, partnership, or communal proximity. In the Septuagint, *plesion* is linked to *rea'*, often denoting an Israelite bound by covenantal obligations (cf. Prov. 13:20; 28:7).

In contrast to the Hebrew conception of *rea'*, the Greek πλησίος (*plesios*) connotes physical nearness, "near" or "close to" as seen in John 4:5 and other Septuagintal uses. *Plesion* in Luke carries both spatial and relational nuances. It appears three times in Luke 10:25–37:

1. In verse 27, where the lawyer quotes Leviticus 19:18b,
2. In verse 29, when he questions Jesus about the boundaries of neighborly love,
3. In verse 36, Jesus reframes the concept by asking who became *a neighbor* to the wounded man.

In this framing, Jesus upends the lawyer's presupposition: proximity alone does not define neighborliness. Instead, *plesion* shifts from being merely someone nearby to someone who embodies active compassion. Historically, Jews excluded Samaritans and foreigners from the category of *neighbor*, treating them as the "other," despite geographical closeness. The term *plesion* encompasses diverse meanings in Scripture:

- "Friend" (1 Chr. 27:13; Deut. 13:7),
- "Lover" (Jer. 3:1, 20; Hos. 3:1),
- "Companion" (Job 30:29; Prov. 17:17),
- "Fellow" (1 Sam. 28:17; 2 Sam. 12:11).

Thus, *plesion* in its Septuagint rendering typically refers to someone within covenantal Israel, an insider in Yahweh's household. The lawyer's restrictive interpretation aligns with this ethnocentric view. Commentators like Joachim Jeremias (1972) argued that the lawyer's question is not definitional but ethical: it inquires who falls within the scope of moral obligation. Bernard Brandon Scott (2001) insists that the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates an ethic that transcends tribal boundaries. Similarly, Marcus Mescher (2013, 9) proposed a pedagogy of neighbor-formation that challenges inherited biases and nurtures solidarity. As such, the lawyer's question "Who is my neighbor?" is posed within a context where *plesion* is narrowly applied to fellow Israelites. Jesus, however, responds by reconfiguring *neighbor* as not an identity one possesses but a vocation one fulfills.

Divine Justification and Compassion Beyond Borders

Only God can justify those who humbly acknowledge their failure to fulfill the Law of love. This core teaching unfolds in Luke 18:13–14, where the tax collector, beating his breast in contrition, prays inside the Temple, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" Jesus affirms, "I tell you…the tax collector, not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home." Unlike the tax collector, the Pharisee dared to isolate and condemn the tax collector as the "other," someone undeserving of God's presence. Ironically, in God's compassionate justice, it was the Pharisee who remained the true outsider within the sacred space. Both the lawyer in Luke 10 and the Pharisee in Luke 18 exhibit a theology of separation rather than solidarity, attempting to uphold their self-righteousness by demeaning the dignity of the "other."

To rationalize his narrow interpretation of neighbor, the lawyer asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29), hoping to validate his narrow interpretation. Jesus responds not with a direct answer but with a parable that subverts the lawyer's expectations. The reference to 2 Chronicles 28:8–15 offers historical resonance, portraying Samaritans rescuing Judeans with compassion and dignity, clothing, feeding, healing, and bringing them to Jericho. This Old Testament backdrop mirrors the Samaritan's actions in Jesus' parable.

The victim in the parable, beaten and left for dead along the Jericho Road, is left intentionally anonymous. While some suggest the victim is a Jew, David Thang Moe argued for preserving the anonymity to support Jesus' inclusive ethic: compassion transcends religious and ethnic identities (Moe 2019, 441).

The Non-Responders: Priest and Levite

Priests, descendants of Aaron, served as intermediaries between the people and God, offering sacrifices and safeguarding religious purity (Num. 3:10). The priest in the parable sees the wounded man and walks away (Luke 10:31). Though Jesus gives no explicit reason, scholars propose ritual purity concerns (cf. Num. 19:11) or fear of violent reprisal, from robbers who may still be lurking nearby, using the injured man as bait for a second ambush (Keathley in Austin's Commentary). Ironically, this priest, aware of laws such as Exodus 23:4–5 which command helping even an enemy's donkey, fails to extend basic human compassion to a fellow traveler.

The Levite, a temple assistant (Num. 3:5–9), also passes by (Luke 10:32), albeit with slightly greater engagement, he "came over and looked," yet still walked away. The commentary by Criswell suggests caution on the Levite's part: the injured man might be a lure for robbers. The Levite's behavior reflects risk aversion masked as ritual diligence.

The Samaritan: Compassion in Motion

Jesus then introduces the Samaritan as a dramatic contrast. While the priest and Levite distance themselves, the Samaritan "came upon him…and felt compassion" (*esplanchnisthe*) a visceral term evoking deep empathy (Luke 10:33). Keathley notes that, unlike the others, the Samaritan moves toward the victim (Luke 10 Commentary). The gradient of engagement is striking:

Actor	Action Sequence	Social Role
Priest	Sees → Passes by	Religious elite
Levite	Approaches → Looks → Passes by	Temple assistant
Samaritan	Approaches → Sees → Feels compassion → Acts	Marginalized "other"

The Samaritan's response is holistic; he soothes with oil, disinfects with wine, bandages wounds, offers transport, and pays for care. In choosing presence over purity and proximity over prejudice, he walks in solidarity with the vulnerable.

David Thang Moe (2019, 444–45) offers a compelling triad: heart (compassion), feet (border-crossing), and hands (healing action). Compassion is the catalyst for ethical movement. Green, cited by Moe, emphasizes the Samaritan's

compassion as the narrative's turning point, in stark contrast to the inaction of the religious insiders.

In the end, the lawyer is compelled to acknowledge the Samaritan as "the one who showed mercy" (Luke 10:37). Jesus then offers his final directive: "You go, then, and do the same." This call reframes *plesion* not as a static identity but as a vocation of radical neighborliness.

Mercy as Vocation

In Luke 10:36, Jesus reorients the lawyer's question "Who is my neighbor?" toward an active ethical focus: "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor…?" Constable rightly notes that Jesus shifts the attention from the recipient of care (the victim) to the one who enacts compassion (Constable 2020). The lawyer responds, "The one who showed mercy," though notably, he avoids naming the Samaritan explicitly. This may indicate lingering prejudice. If so, the lawyer still stands apart from Jesus' inclusive vision. Alternatively, his response may signal a growing awareness of the ethic Jesus is teaching: an opening toward transformative discipleship

"Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37b): Mercy as Motion

The first imperative, "go," intensifies the second command to "do," propelling the ethical call forward. It invites a movement beyond tribal boundaries toward *plesion*, not as a static identity but as a vocation. The phrase "go and do likewise" marks a transition from a fixed notion of neighborhood (rea) to a dynamic, mercy-driven ethic of solidarity. Here, the neighbor is not defined by closeness but by compassionate action.

Mescher (2013, 34) affirms William Spohn's insight: applying the Samaritan's example requires discernment attuned to socio-political realities. Patrick O'Connell adds that the imperative compels disciples to examine how they may perpetuate unjust systems that create suffering (Austin Commentary). Quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., O'Connell contends that true discipleship requires not only charitable response but systemic transformation: to "resist and reform the road to Jericho." Mescher sharpens the parable's theological thrust:

Being introduced by a question about eternal life means that the Samaritan's example and Jesus' parting words to 'Go and do likewise' cannot be interpreted as a suggestion relevant only for emergencies…Rather, with this story, Jesus

teaches about the deepest longings of the human heart and the profoundest meaning of human life (Mescher 2013, 34).

Compassion in the Lucan narrative is not episodic heroism but habitual grace—an ethic embodied in attitude, speech, and relationships.

Transforming Structures, Not Just Individuals

This ethic aligns with the prophetic vision in Micah 6:8: *"to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."* The parable of the Good Samaritan becomes not only a call to individual conversion but a summons to reconfigure the systems that perpetuate exclusion and neglect.

The Samaritan stepped out of his way to accompany the wounded man: *"He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him"* (Luke 10:34). Yet his mercy did not end with immediate aid. He ensured the man's full recovery, signaling a commitment to sustainable intervention. In today's context, this requires listening that goes beyond surface-level appearances. It demands attention to the structural violence that underlies the suffering of the poor, the marginalized, and the earth.

Here, the innkeeper emerges as a crucial figure often overlooked but deeply symbolic. The Samaritan enlisted the innkeeper's help to ensure the man's continued care. This act reveals that mercy is not a solitary endeavor but a collaborative one. The innkeeper represents the social actors, institutions, and systems that must be engaged to sustain healing. Like the Samaritan, we are called to dialogue with other experts from diverse disciplines, grassroots communities, pastoral and professional theologians, to understand the roots of injustice and discern faithful responses.

In addressing these issues, we must collaborate with the church, government, and civil society groups locally, regionally, and globally, as well as with other Christian traditions and religions. The Samaritan's promise to return and reimburse the innkeeper underscores accountability and long-term commitment. It reminds us that ethical listening includes evaluating whether our interventions have truly addressed the violence or neglect.

To "go and do likewise" is to move from reactive charity to proactive justice. It is to recognize that healing requires not only compassion but coordination, not only presence but partnership. The innkeeper, then, becomes a theological signpost: mercy institutionalized, solidarity sustained.

Expanding the Meaning of Neighbor:
From Legalism to Compassion

Jesus radically expands the definition of *neighbor*. While the lawyer (v.29) asks about the object of love, Jesus (v.36) reframes it around the subject of love. The shift is theological and existential: the question is no longer "Who is my neighbor?" but "What does neighbor mean to us?" and "How do we love?"

For Jesus, "love your neighbor" encompasses even adversaries and those who despise us (Luke 6:27–28, 33–36; 14:12–14). By contrast, the lawyer's conception of love appears transactional, directed only toward those who might qualify as neighbors. Marshall identifies that the lawyer's inquiry was not merely "Who is my neighbor?" but rather "What constitutes a neighbor within the bounds of neighborhood?" (Marshall in Bird 2007, 435). Through the Samaritan's merciful actions, he does not merely identify as a neighbor; he becomes one in practice. This shift is not based on social proximity or shared identity, but on ethical response. In Luke's telling, Jesus redefines *plesion* (neighbor) not as a fixed category but as a dynamic role one assumes through compassion. The Samaritan's decision to act mercifully transforms him into a neighbor, making the concept relational and performative rather than cultural or theological. In doing so, the Lucan Jesus dissolves any ambiguity surrounding who qualifies as a neighbor: it is not about who is near, but who draws near in mercy.

According to the Lucan Jesus, *plesion* must be understood not through purity codes but through the double commandment of love (cf. Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5). The imperative "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37b) highlights not only the ethical act of "doing" but also Jesus's authority as *the Teacher* (v.25) who reinterprets Scripture and redefines discipleship. This interpretive authority echoes Jewish narrative traditions such as 2 Chronicles 28:8–15, where Samaritan figures criticized by the prophet Oded demonstrated radical mercy by feeding, clothing, and healing Judean captives before escorting them safely to Jericho (2 Chr. 28:15). The parallels to Luke 10:34–35 are striking and may have informed Jesus' choice of characters in this parable.

Parallels in Luke 10:34–35 (Good Samaritan) and Broader Theological Themes

Verse	Action by the Samaritan	Symbolic/Theological Parallel
v.34a	*"He went to him and bound up his wounds"*	Echoes Isaiah 61:1 — "He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted." Suggests healing ministry, possibly prefiguring Jesus' own mission.
v.34b	*"Pouring on oil and wine"*	Oil and wine were used in temple rituals (cf. Leviticus 2:1–2). This evokes cultic imagery, suggesting the Samaritan performs priestly functions—ironically, unlike the actual priest and Levite who passed by.
v.34c	*"Then he set him on his own animal"*	A gesture of substitution and burden-bearing, reminiscent of Christ bearing humanity's suffering (cf. Isaiah 53).
v.35a	*"He took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper"*	A concrete act of provision and trust, symbolizing ongoing care. Some patristic interpretations see this as a metaphor for the sacraments or the Church's role in sustaining the wounded.
v.35b	*"Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you"*	Suggests eschatological promise—Christ's return and reward (cf. Luke 12:43). The Samaritan becomes a figure of divine mercy and future restoration.

Moreover, the lawyer's question in verse 29, "Who is my neighbor?" exposes legal, cultural, and theological boundary-making. John A. Fitzmyer interprets the question as an attempt to define precisely "where does one draw the line?" (Fitzmyer 1985, 886). Philip F. Esler argued that the lawyer's inquiry reflects Judean efforts to delineate who belongs within one's moral and religious sphere, and who can be justly excluded (Esler 2000, 335–36).

Jesus counters this legalism by extending neighborliness beyond restrictive space. Arland Hultgren observes that Jesus shifts the paradigm from an exclusivist law-centered ethic to a boundary-breaking compassion ethic, insisting that "whoever responds to human need is a true neighbor" (Hultgren 2000, 98).

While the victim's ethnicity is not disclosed, Jesus's choice to keep anonymity reinforces an inclusive ethic. The road between Jerusalem and Jericho becomes a

metaphorical and literal liminal space, a place without name or protection, occupied by "border people" like the Samaritans, and potentially the thieves. Jeanne Steven-Moessner contrasts the characters vividly: "The robber shows the infantile if not immoral position: what is yours is mine. The priest and Levite depict the narcissistic worldview: what is mine is mine. The Samaritan…what is mine is yours" (Stevenson-Moessner 2003, 285).

In this parable, Jesus portrays a merciful Samaritan unaffected by purity codes or exclusivist categories. The Samaritan does not merely act ethically; he embodies divine compassion. Love, as movement toward the other, forgets the self and enters the infinite through the finite. Human nature, in this light, reveals "a finite reality [humanity] with a capacity for the infinite [divinity], a thirst for the infinite."

Interpreting Neighborliness: Amy-Jill Levine's Provocative Lens

Amy-Jill Levine (2006), a scholar of Jewish Studies with deep familiarity with Christian traditions, offers a compelling hermeneutical approach to parables. Raised in a Catholic neighborhood while remaining a committed Orthodox Jew, Levine brings interreligious sensitivity and historical nuance to her readings of Jesus' teachings. Her dual perspective contributes richly to understanding the subversive nature of the Good Samaritan parable.

Levine contends that parables are not sanitized moral tales. Rather, they are provocative narratives intended to indict, disturb, and invite re-reading. Echoing the aphorism that "religion comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable," Levine suggests that listeners today may miss the parable's sting by filtering it through modern ears rather than those of a first-century Jewish audience (Maxwell Institute 2022). She emphasizes that parables demand reinterpretation across time, inviting what she calls "the spark of the divine" through human creativity (Levine in Tokens Podcast 2022).

In examining Luke 10:25–37, Levine offers sharp critiques of the lawyer's intentions. While he initially asks about eternal life, Levine argued that the lawyer seeks legal minimalism, a one-time act securing salvation, while Jesus points him toward lifelong discipleship marked by love. The lawyer's follow-up question, "Who is my neighbor?" is not neutral. According to Levine, it is effectively asking, "Who am I allowed to hate?" (Perper 2011).

Jesus's response was offered not through a direct answer but through a story, thus becoming a formal accusation. Levine notes that the Hebrew word for "neighbor" (רֵעַ, re'a) shares the same root consonants with "enemy,"

complicating binary distinctions of inclusion and exclusion. In this light, the parable reframes not just who qualifies as a neighbor, but how love must transcend tribal boundaries and purity codes. Jesus invokes Jewish law, yet prioritizes love over legalism, remembering the imperative to love the stranger as well as one's neighbor (cf. Lev. 19:34).

Social Subversion and Storytelling

For Levine, the structure of the parable moving from priest to Levite to Samaritan is equivalent to a narrative descent into social unthinkability: "It's like going from Larry to Mo to Osama bin Laden," she quips, underscoring the Samaritan's outsider status (Levine in Tokens Podcast 2022). Her remark provocatively highlights the radical nature of Jesus' casting choice. The Samaritan's compassion unsettles Jewish expectations about purity, identity, and piety.

Levine also challenges interpretations that justify the priest and Levite's avoidance as concerns over ritual impurity. She explains that, while contact with a corpse incurs impurity, Jewish law (e.g., Mishnah Berakhot 3:3) still binds even the ritually pure to bury the dead. Moreover, since the priest is journeying *away* from Jerusalem, ritual constraints are unlikely to apply. Their inaction, then, cannot be excused by law.

The Samaritan, like the one named in 2 Chronicles 28 responds to need with mercy. He provides oil and wine, transportation, and a financial pledge, even expecting possible extortion by the unnamed innkeeper. Levine further suggests that the innkeeper's silence reflects a narrative economy: attention remains on the Samaritan's action rather than conjectures about potential corruption.

A Provocative Compassion: Levine and the Samaritan's Indictment

Levine's interpretation of Luke 10:25–37 deepens the parable's capacity to provoke theological and ethical reflection. Drawing from Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermon on the Good Samaritan, Levine highlights a shift in the Samaritan's moral calculus. King rearticulates the possible reasoning in the mind of the priest and Levite: "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" With the Samaritan, this becomes "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" This rhetorical inversion unveils the Samaritan's radical compassion, a love that bypasses calculation, "gets us in the gut," and emerges as visceral empathy rather than intellectual assent (Tokens Podcast 2022).

Levine connects the parable's shock value to the audience's memory of Samaritans in 2 Chronicles 28:8–15 a passage of brutal violence and eventual reconciliation. Ancient Samaria was historically complicit in war crimes, including

mass murder and rape. Yet in 2 Chronicles, through prophetic confrontation, the Samaritans cared for their Judean captives and escorted them to Jericho. Levine suggests that Jesus is tapping this narrative, challenging his audience with a memory of mercy from enemies, a move that "messes up the categories" (Perper 2011).

This category collapse is precisely the parable's purpose. Jesus reframes the lawyer's legal question, "Who is my neighbor?" into the moral counterquestion: "Which of these three became a neighbor?" Unable to utter "Samaritan," the lawyer says, "The one who showed mercy." Levine notes this rhetorical reluctance as a moment of indictment, revealing the lawyer's moral discomfort and inherited prejudice.

Levine interprets the parable's structure as two dialogical units: first, the quest for eternal life (vv. 25–28), and second, the definition of neighbor (vv. 29–37), both punctuated by Jesus' injunction: "Go and do likewise." The parable's moral arc thus culminates not in abstraction, but in action, mercy enacted in real life, beyond liturgical purity or tribal borders.

Updating the Cast: Interreligious and Political Provocation

To expose the parable's enduring sting, Levine offers a recontextualized casting: the victim as an Israeli Jew; the priest as an IDF medic responsible for delivering medical care and health services to members of the Israeli military; the Levite as a member of the Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian church U.S.A.; and the Samaritan as a Palestinian Muslim sympathetic to Hamas. The juxtaposition scandalizes modern sensibilities yet exposes the parable's original rhetorical force. Jesus creates a moral rupture by recasting the hated Other as the hero.

Levine warns that reducing the Good Samaritan to a simple moral example strips it of its original provocation and theological depth. The parable challenges listeners by casting a religious outsider, the Samaritan, as the one who fulfills the law of mercy, confronting cultural and theological boundaries. Rather than offering a tidy answer to "Who is my neighbor?," it reorients the question toward relational action, demanding a radical redefinition of neighborliness. Luke 10:25–37 should be read as a parable proper, a story that destabilizes boundaries and forces ethical reorientation. The narrative does not merely illustrate a point; it enacts the transformation it demands. As Jesus tells the lawyer, "Do this and you will live," not just eternally, but relationally by turning enemies into neighbors through merciful embodiment.

The Samaritan's unsolicited care enacts Lev. 19:18b in its fullest sense: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Thus, as Levine concludes, the genealogical "outsider" proves to be a neighbor, while the religious insider's falter. This reversal binds the lawyer and today's communities to "do likewise," extending mercy even to antagonists, and welcoming the unpredictable reach of divine compassion.

Other Lenses in Re-reading the Parable

This section elaborates on Levinasian and liberationist perspectives, and a Filipin@ reading through the lens of *pakikipagkapwa*.

Levinasian and Liberationist Perspectives

Luke 10:25–37 recounts the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which a man is beaten and left for dead by robbers. Representing the religious establishment, a priest and a Levite both see the victim but deliberately avoid offering aid. It is a Samaritan, an ethnic and religious outsider, who stops, tends to the wounded victim, and ensures his ongoing care. The narrative unfolds in four key moments:

1. The Samaritan sees the wounded man (Luke 10:33)
2. He recognizes the Face, a wounded Face (v. 33)
3. He is moved with compassion.
4. He acts by tending to the man and providing for him (Luke 10:34)

The above sequence illustrates a profound ethical logic: from visceral recognition to responsible action, reflecting a Levinasian structure of moral response. For Emmanuel Levinas, the Face (*visage*) of the Other is not simply a physical or aesthetic object; it is the presence of alterity, a manifestation of vulnerability that calls forth responsibility. The Face demands a response that precedes rationality and intention, interrupting the self with its silent imperative (Young 2021). Levinas wrote that the Face says, "Thou shalt not kill," invoking an absolute ethical obligation (Levinas 1969).

In this parable, the Samaritan does not calculate or weigh his options. Instead, he reacts at once and compassionately. Levine (2014, 104) describes this response as *visceral* or *pre-reflective*: "You don't even have to think about it," she notes. "Your body, your visceral system, forces you to act." This echoes Levinas's

view that responsibility precedes cognition, that ethics appears in embodied proximity to the Other.

Visual interpretations of this moment reinforce its ethical dimension. Rembrandt's etching *The Good Samaritan* (1633) portrays a poignant scene: the Samaritan gazes into the eyes of the wounded man, evoking the intimacy and immediacy of Levinasian responsibility.

However, in this parable, alterity is not limited to the victim; it also applies to the Samaritan himself. The Greek term *plēsion* and the Hebrew *reaʿ* refer to one's neighbor, typically defined as a fellow member of one's ethnic or religious community. The Samaritan, by contrast, stands for a people historically viewed with suspicion or hostility by Jews (Levine 2006, 148). This outsider would not conventionally qualify as a "neighbor."

Although Enrique Dussel does not directly discuss the Good Samaritan parable, his philosophy of liberation, centered on the ethical primacy of the excluded "Other," offers a powerful lens through which the Samaritan's actions can be interpreted as a radical embodiment of exteriority and ethical responsibility (Dussel 2013, 51; Dussel 2008, 15). The Samaritan's compassion embodies a radical solidarity that transcends identity boundaries. The lawyer's inability to name the Samaritan in Jesus' question "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor?" (Luke 10:36–37) marks a resistance to this inversion.

This dual alterity of both the victim and the Samaritan reshapes the ethical contours of the parable. Neighborliness is no longer tied to proximity, kinship, or doctrine. It is defined by presence, compassion, and responsible action. The Samaritan does not belong, yet he becomes the neighbor through his ethical choice.

In Levinasian terms, the Face of the Other transcends identity politics. In Dussel's framework, it deconstructs power relations and reorients the ethical center toward the margins. The Gospel's message becomes not merely about doing good, but about being claimed by the Other's suffering, and responding from a place of relational depth.

A Filipin@ Re-reading of the Parable through the Lens of *Pakikipagkapwa*

Kapwa, as we have noted, is a core concept in Filipin@ psychology that translates not just to "others" but to a shared inner self. It is the fundamental recognition that "I am one with the other." A person with *kapwa* does not see a separate "self" and "other," but rather a shared identity and humanity. It is a feeling of interconnectedness. *Pakikipagkapwa* is the active manifestation of *kapwa*. It

means" being one with others" or "relating to others as a fellow human." It is the act of treating another person not as an outsider, stranger, or object, but as an extension of one's own humanity. As discussed in chapter Two, Levinas's concept of the alterity of the Other provides a counterbalance to the danger of assimilating the other into one's own perception and interests in this concept of *kapwa*. *Pakikipagkapwa* implies empathy, solidarity, and treating others with dignity.

In the parable (Luke 10:25-37), we see both in the priest and the Levite a failure in *pakikipagkapwa*. They saw the wounded man on the road as "other," a stranger, a problem, a ritual impurity, or even a potential danger. This mental separation allowed them to create distance, both physically and morally. Their identity as religious figures were defined by separation from what was unclean, which overrode their fundamental identity as a *kapwa* (fellow human). They prioritized their own safety, schedule, and ritual purity over the shared humanity of the dying man. They acted from a place of "I" versus "him," which is the antithesis of *kapwa*.

In Filipin@ relational ethics, even the other demands a humane response, even just a minimal *pakikipagkapwa* in the form of civility *(pakikitungo)*. We have noted different levels of *pakikipagkapwa,* both with the one-of-us and the "not-one-of-us." From a *kapwa* lens, the failure of the priest and the Levite is more profound: they actively refused *pakikipagkapwa*.

In contrast, the Good Samaritan is the embodiment of *pakikipagkapwa*. Despite being a cultural and religious outsider (Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies), the Samaritan did not see the wounded victim as an "other." When the scripture says, "he saw him, and he had compassion," it describes the moment of recognizing the *kapwa*, a fellow human being in suffering.

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) resonates profoundly with Filipin@ tripartite values of *pakikidama* (empathy), *kagandahang-loob* (gracious goodness), and *pakikiisa* (embodied action). The Samaritan's care, described in layered detail—he sees, approaches, bandages, lifts, and pays reflects *pakikidama* not as sentimentality, but as empathic presence that moves one beyond observation to response. His *kagandahang-loob*, gracious goodness, reveals itself in uncalculated mercy, expecting nothing in return. And *pakikiisa,* the tangible expression of compassion, manifests through bodily and material gestures of healing. The Samaritan's action is active, costly, and personal *pakikipagkapwa*: an act of profound solidarity. He approached (*nakipagkapwa*): He crossed the physical and social boundary that the others would not. He treated his wounds: He involved himself intimately in the man's pain. He brought him to an inn and cared for him (*pakikirama*)): He invested his time and presence. He paid for his recovery: He invested his own resources for the sake of his *kapwa*, with a promise of more.

The Samaritan's action reveals more than generosity; it reflects an incarnational ethic: *pakikidama* as the capacity to suffer with, *kagandahang-loob* as the spiritual interiority that discerns dignity, and *pakikiisa* as the courageous praxis of mercy. In Filipin@ theology, these dimensions converge in *pakikipagkapwa*, the relational recognition of the Other not as object of pity, but as co-bearer of divine likeness (Genesis 1:27).

Moreover, this neighborliness extends beyond human proximity. In ecological terms, it implies kinship with creation, echoing *Laudato Si'*'s vision that "everything is interconnected" (no. 91). In the last chapter, we discussed how Brazal (2003) proposed a postcolonial and feminist rereading of *pakikipagkapwa* that transcends anthropocentric boundaries, aligning it with ecological justice and interfaith dialogue. In her framework, *kapwa* becomes a theological lens through which creation is not objectified but embraced as a co-subject, an extension of the self in communion with the divine and the Earth.

Meneses (2019) deepens this trajectory by interpreting *pakikipagkapwa* as a moral imperative in response to biodiversity loss. Drawing from *Laudato Si,* she argued that ecological degradation mirrors the societal marginalization of the vulnerable. Her work challenges Filipin@ Christians to recognize the *non-human other,* flora, fauna, and the Deaf community, as *kapwa*, deserving of empathy and inclusion. This ethical expansion resists utilitarian views of nature and affirms a theology of shared vulnerability and mutual flourishing.

Gaspar (2010), in *The Masses Are Messiah*, invokes ancestral spirituality to articulate a sacred web linking creation, spirits, and people. His decolonial theology retrieves Indigenous cosmologies where rivers, forests, and mountains are not resources but relatives. Gaspar's vision of *makakalikasan* (ecological) spirituality calls for a contemplative solidarity that listens to the groaning of the Earth as prayer and prophecy.

Thus, when the lawyer asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29), Filipin@ theology answers with radical inclusivity: the neighbor is every wounded body—human, ecological, digital, and spiritual. In this view, *pakikipagkapwa* becomes a sacramental act, a participation in divine relationality that heals not only social fractures but ecological and spiritual alienation. It is a call to embody mercy across boundaries, to be together with all creation in the unfolding of God's reign.

Neighbors on the Digital Highways

Pope Francis referred to the parable of the Good Samaritan in his 48th World Communications Day Message, "Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter". He sees in the parable a lesson in compassionate

communication necessary to practice a spirit of neighborliness in our engagement with modern communication platforms and the digital world. Being "passersby on the digital highways" is insufficient; meaningful engagement requires transforming superficial links into genuine interpersonal encounters. When we choose to communicate, and when we recognize the other not simply as similar to ourselves but are willing to step into their experience, we enter into a relationship—we become neighbors.

It is, however, the document "Towards Full Presence" (Dicastery for Communication 2023) that reinterprets more fully the parable in the digital context, underlining how both personally and as a faith community, we are called to engage as "loving neighbors" in our journey along the "digital highways". The word "inherit" in the question "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" evokes the legacy of the promised land—not merely a physical location, but a deeper, enduring symbol. It represents something each generation must uncover anew, offering a lens through which we can rethink our place and purpose in the digital age.

The document identifies the following pitfalls in the digital highway: the digital divide, the social media divide resulting from polarizing platforms, the creation of filter bubbles by artificial intelligence algorithms that hinder users from truly encountering the other or those who are different from themselves, and the aggressive and negative speeches that encourage extreme behavior. When people fail to recognize one another as fellow human beings and instead reduce others to opposing viewpoints, it reflects yet another facet of the "throw-away culture" that fuels the spread—and acceptance—of global indifference. Like the scribe (or the lawyer) who sought to define boundaries around who qualifies as a neighbor, we can fall into the tendency to seek excuses for our indifference—constantly dividing people into categories of "us" and "them," distinguishing between those we feel obligated to respect and those we believe we can disregard. The parable encourages us to make a conscious choice to move beyond our comfort zones, to make the first move to extend ourselves to connect with others in meaningful ways.

"Towards Full Presence" further underlines the need to look through the eyes of the wounded man in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who in today's context would be the digitally wounded and marginalized. Lastly, it speaks of how our attention can also be robbed by "information overload" and "social interaction overload". We need silence as a digital detox that ensures a space for focus and discernment.

In light of the above reflections, cyberspace becomes the new Jericho Road. Every disciple must navigate it with the same mandate: to "do likewise" (Luke 10:37). Globalization and ICT have compressed time and space, allowing people

to be "near" despite geographical distance (Le Duc 2015, 134). This proximity is evident in global responses to natural and human-made disasters, where aid and solidarity transcend borders.

Digital Solidarity and the Church's Mission

Digital neighborliness calls for a new form of globalization, one rooted in solidarity and compassion. The Samaritan's border-crossing love is reflected in the Church's preferential option for the poor, grounded in the equal dignity of all people created in God's image. Concrete examples include:

- The Diocese of Partenia, led by Bishop Jacques Gaillot, who advocated for marginalized groups.
- The St. John Neumann Migrant Center's Facebook page, which supports abused migrant workers.
- The Timog.com community in Japan, fostering Filipin@ solidarity abroad.
- Churches using online platforms to fund community pantries during the pandemic.

These initiatives embody the Samaritan's ethic: crossing boundaries to care for the wounded in the digital ditch.

In an increasingly digitized society, the moral imperative of *pakikipagkapwa* an embodied form of Filipin@ relational ethics, extends into cyberspace as a theological praxis of digital solidarity. Brazal (2020) invokes *mukha* (face) and *hiya* (shame) to critique the ethical rupture caused by cyber sexual violence, arguing that technological anonymity often erodes accountability and relational integrity. She challenges theological communities to reimagine pastoral care and ethical responsibility in online spheres, urging a justice-oriented response grounded in mercy and kinship. This is a call to cyber-solidarity, where *kapwa* confronts virtual harm and cultivates compassion across screens (*Francis* 2019, §87). Such neighborliness resists privatized charity and affirms communal transformation.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we reread Luke 10:25–37 with a focus on the lawyer's pivotal question: *"Who is my neighbor?"* Through literary and historical analysis, we situated the parable within the Lukan journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:27), a narrative

arc where the reign of God unfolds progressively and pedagogically. The parable is framed by the double commandment of love of God and love of neighbor, revealing their inseparability in the ethical vision of Jesus.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the terms *plēsion* and *rēaʿ* for "neighbor" typically referred to someone from the same ethnic, tribal, or religious community. Samaritans, due to longstanding conflict and perceived religious impurity, were excluded from this category. Yet Jesus radically redefines neighborliness by casting the Samaritan as an outsider and enemy as the moral exemplar. This redefinition signals a love that transcends boundaries, offering a fresh interpretation of the Law to his Jewish contemporaries.

Narratively, the parable employs rhetorical and dramatic devices to provoke the audience toward ethical action: *"Go and do likewise."* While the story has been widely adopted and romanticized in secular contexts by politicians, hospitals, and humanitarian campaigns, its original force is far more subversive. As Levine reminds us, parables are not simplistic moral tales but provocations that challenge cultural assumptions. The Samaritan's extravagant care, including his open-ended financial commitment, disrupts expectations and reframes love as boundary-breaking solidarity. In modern contexts, the Samaritan may be likened to the undocumented migrant, the religious minority, or the socially stigmatized, those least expected to embody compassion.

Through the lens of Levinas, the parable becomes a profound ethical summons. The *Face of the Other,* the stranger, the wounded, the marginalized, calls us into responsibility. This encounter is not optional; it is constitutive of ethical life. Christians are summoned to respond to the stranger not merely with empathy but with concrete acts of love that mirror divine compassion.

Pope Francis echoes this call in *Fratelli Tutti*, diagnosing a world fractured by consumerism, historical amnesia, and moral decay. He warns of a "throwaway culture" that isolates and dehumanizes. In this context, the Good Samaritan becomes a prophetic figure not only for his mercy but for his refusal to be paralyzed by fear or indifference. Francis deepens the parable's challenge by drawing attention to the unseen figure: the robber. He argued that passive complicity—our silence, our cynicism, our failure to act—makes us accomplices to injustice.

For Filipin@s, the path of the Good Samaritan resonates deeply with *pakikipagkapwa*. This indigenous ethic affirms that all beings, human and non-human, seen and unseen, are *kapwa*, co-persons. *Pakikipagkapwa* is not merely a social courtesy; it is a spiritual disposition that recognizes the sacred interconnectedness of creation. A Filipin@ Good Samaritan would extend care not only to the wounded traveler but also to the land, the spirits, and the community embodying a holistic solidarity.

In our digitized world, the Jericho Road has migrated to cyberspace. The cyber-highways are littered with wounded victims those subjected to cyberviolence, verbal abuse, and digital exploitation. The absence of physical proximity often leads to the minimization or denial of harm. Yet the psychological and spiritual wounds inflicted online are real and enduring. The Levinasian *Face of the Other* can be encountered in digital spaces, calling the church to respond with the same urgency and compassion as the Samaritan.

The *cyberchurch* emerges as a new neighborhood, a relational space where solidarity with the *kapwang iba* (the marginalized other) is cultivated. It invites us to be neighbors not only to those like us but especially to those unlike us. In this digital context, the parable of the Good Samaritan remains a living challenge: to cross boundaries, to risk compassion, and to build communities of care.

Chapter Five

Cyberchurch – Neighborhood of Others/*Kapwa*: An Evaluation

This chapter traces the evolution of cyberchurches, contrasting perspectives about online religious communities, and argues that online religious communities can be considered as "church." It then synthesizes the characteristics of the cyberchurch – neighborhood of others/*kapwa* in terms of the following questions: What is its goal? Who are its beneficiaries (who benefit from this cyberchurch)? What are the bonds that unite its members? It evaluates this model of the Church according to the seven criteria Avery Dulles identified: 1) basis in Scripture; 2) basis in post-apostolic tradition; 3) capacity to give Church members a sense of corporate identity and mission; 4) capacity to foster virtues and values generally admired by Christians; 5) correspondence with the religious experience of people today; 6) theological fruitfulness; 7) capacity to foster good relationships with those outside their group.

Evolution of Cyberchurches

The development of Internet-based Christian communities known as 'online churches' traces back to the 1980s, when evangelical groups began experimenting with bulletin board systems (BBSs) to host forums and outreach programs. Howard Rheingold observed that religious BBSs in the San Francisco Bay Area allowed coreligionists to "commune in traditional ways via nontraditional media" (Rheingold 1993, 147).

David Lochhead noted that the Presbyterian church (USA) was among the first to establish online networks for ministers to exchange sermons and theological insights (Lochhead 1997). Although neither Lochhead nor Rheingold used the term "cyberchurch," the Church of England's 1985 document *Cybernauts Awake!* introduced the concept of an "online church," where worshippers could engage "in spirit and truth" without distraction from physical appearances (Church of England 1985).

Lochhead later documented the first online Christian service following the Challenger space shuttle disaster, organized via Presbynet, a Presbyterian

discussion network. The memorial liturgy included scripture, meditation, prayers, and interactive segments for communal reflection. This event demonstrated the power of computer-mediated worship to transcend geography and denomination (Lochhead 1997).

With the rise of the World Wide Web, cyberconnectivity became a daily reality. In 1997, Patrick Dixon coined the term "cyberchurch" to describe emerging online congregations (Dixon 1997). By the early 2000s, internet-based Christian communities gained traction through institutional support, social media, and virtual worlds.

The 2001 international conference on religion and the Internet held in Copenhagen marked a turning point. Scholars from various countries gathered to explore how digital platforms shape religious experience. Heidi Campbell emphasized the Internet's role as a *spiritual medium*, capable of altering communal and individual understandings of spirituality (Campbell 2005). She defined spirituality as the human search for "meaning and significance."

The year 2004 likewise signaled a dramatic shift in online church development. The Methodist Council in the United Kingdom funded the experimental "Church of Fools," a 3D virtual church space where avatars interacted in real-time. It attracted significant media attention and averaged 8,000 visitors daily during its first two weeks (Campbell 2010).

It was also in 2004 that Wilson introduced the term "internet church," describing its core resources as websites, forums, and chat rooms. He argued that the internet church can fulfill the functions of traditional churches, including worship, teaching, and community building (Wilson 2004).

Campbell identified three dominant strategies among religious leaders navigating online ministry:

1. Transfer Strategy: Replicating offline worship services online, often via livestreams. This is common among mainline denominations such as Methodist and Episcopal churches.
2. Translation Strategy: Adapting rituals and space to fit digital formats, often resembling talk shows. This is typical of nondenominational and interdenominational churches.
3. Transformation Strategy (implied): Innovating new forms of worship native to digital platforms.

These strategies reflect the evolving nature of cyberchurches as they seek to balance tradition with technological innovation. Campbell observed that the *transfer* and *translation* strategies primarily mirror or simply modify traditional worship practices. Both approaches aim to replicate essential components of Christian worship, such as singing, scripture reading, and preaching in recognizable digital formats (Campbell 2010). These strategies offer continuity for congregations familiar with established liturgical rhythms, preserving the familiar amidst technological adaptation. In contrast to the first two models, the third strategy, transformation, uses the shift to online platforms as a catalyst to reimagine what public worship and "being church" could mean. Churches employing this strategy began redesigning their services around perceived congregational needs rather than replicating existing rituals.

Campbell notes that the traditional praise and worship structure, often referred to as the "praise and worship sandwich," with upbeat songs, emotional sermons, and reflective music, was replaced by more intimate, conversational formats called the "fireside chat model" (Campbell 2010, 115). In this model, pastors and senior ministers sat on couches as if speaking casually with congregants, reflecting vulnerably on their personal experiences during the pandemic. These digital gatherings prioritized real-time dialogue: viewers were encouraged to submit prayer requests and thoughts via social media, live chat, or text messages, fostering a sense of communal presence even across screens.

The transformation strategy not only altered the format but also challenged theological assumptions about worship space and authority. Leadership became more accessible, conversations more participatory, and spiritual engagement more responsive. The church, once bounded by architecture and hierarchy, began rediscovering its essence as a relational and adaptive community.

Perspectives on Online Religious Communities/Cyberchurches

The emergence of cyberchurches or religious communities that gather and worship primarily through digital platforms has elicited a wide range of scholarly reactions, oscillating between enthusiastic endorsement and critical skepticism. Early enthusiasm for the internet as a religious medium was notably expressed by Stephen O'Leary (1996), who envisioned cyberspace as a "sacred space" capable of fostering new forms of spiritual community. O'Leary saw the internet as a democratizing force, enabling religious discourse beyond institutional boundaries. However, his optimism waned in later years, as he recognized the internet's role in facilitating radicalization and extremist manipulation. Højsgaard and Warburg (2005) echoed this concern, documenting how digital platforms have been exploited by extremist leaders to disseminate ideological

propaganda and recruit followers, thereby undermining the ethical integrity of online religious spaces. Others rejected the authenticity of any online religious practice, with the firm distinction that the physical world was authentically real, while the online realm was merely a simulated digital copy.

Basing himself on the intensive study of the leading sociologist of the Internet, Barry Wellman, Spanish scholar of the information society, communication and globalization Manuel Castells states that virtual communities are not unreal; rather they are "different forms of community, with specific rules and dynamics, which interact with other forms of community." Virtual communities operate in another plane of reality, employing speed with the pervasiveness of personal communication (Castells 2011). In opposition to the early 1990's theory that stressed the radical distinction between the virtual and the real, online and offline time-space are actually mutually constitutive and form a continuum. The virtual is not the opposite of the real. Activities online are supplemented by activities offline and vice-versa. They are complementary rather than opposite or dichotomous. Campbell (2013, 65) further argues that online technology use and choices cannot be easily disembedded from offline contexts and so requires looking at how offline practices guide online beliefs and behaviors. Cyber communities supplement rather than replace physical communities. Relationships that are formed in virtual communities can be strengthened in offline encounters and vice-versa. Online activities complement and enhance offline activities and vice-versa.

Another central tenet of the early 1990s was the conception of the internet as a "disembodied space." Liturgical scholar Teresa Berger (2016) challenges the critique of the virtual as "disembodied". She points out that Christian worship is inherently material, grounded in the presence of worshippers' bodies. Her central argument is that every digital interaction entering a virtual world, browsing a website, or using an app is a bodily practice that requires a physical form to initiate. Consequently, she asserts that digital space can never be a truly disembodied or dematerialized phenomenon.

Andrea Vicini and Agnes Brazal (2015) also critique a cyber-anthropology that conceives the internet and the virtual as bodiless (cybergnosis), with its corresponding danger of preference for the Internet over the messy and complicated human life. They argue that the "Body of Christ" metaphor, by emphasizing embodiment, sacramentality, difference, and solidarity, can guide our reflection on corporeality and on the human. By underlining embodiment, this metaphor suggests a rejection of cybergnostic anthropologies that would separate the body from the self or foster fleeing from suffering bodies.

Some also argue that online religious communities threaten the established order of religious leadership (Barker 2005). Doris Jakobsh (2006) argues that the internet functions as a "third place" for Sikh religious engagement, where virtual sangats (online congregations) foster new modes of ritual participation and theological discourse. This digital shift often sidelines traditional institutions like the Akal Takht and Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), as authority becomes increasingly mediated by online actors who gain legitimacy through technological fluency and interpretive influence rather than institutional sanction.

A similar dynamic is observable in Christian communities. Digital platforms often decentralize leadership, empowering charismatic influencers and algorithm-driven voices that bypass denominational structures and theological accountability (Campbell & Teusner, 2024).

This fragmentation risks reducing pastoral authority to popularity metrics, challenging the legitimacy of ordained leadership and sacramental tradition. As a result, sacred practices are not only fragmented across platforms but also reinterpreted by diverse voices, reflecting a postmodern turn toward individualized and decentralized religious expression. On the other hand, others point to how the internet can also serve as a tool for existing religious leaders to amplify their control and legitimize their authority (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai 2005; Cheong 2014). The internet can serve institutional interests, allowing churches to amplify control through curated content, livestreamed sermons, and digital tithing systems. Such tools may reinforce hierarchical authority, but they also risk commodifying worship and reducing spiritual formation to passive consumption.

Moreover, the cyberchurch raises critical questions about embodiment and sacramentality. Christian worship is deeply incarnational, rooted in physical presence, communal fellowship (*koinonia*), and tangible rituals such as the Eucharist and baptism. Virtual gatherings, while accessible, may dilute these dimensions, offering connection without communion (Detweiler 2013). Digital ecclesiology must grapple with the tension between accessibility and relational depth. Ultimately, cyberchurch invites a reimagining of Christian community, not as a replacement for embodied church, but as a complementary space that must be critically engaged. Authority in this context is not merely about control, but about cultivating accountable, theologically grounded leadership that honors both tradition and innovation.

Despite these reservations, other scholars have embraced the creative possibilities of digital religion. Campbell (2004) highlights how platforms like MUDs and gaming environments facilitate spiritual exploration and community formation. Hutchings (2017) documented the development of Christian

communities that exist solely online, such as i-Church and St Pixels, demonstrating that digital ecclesiality can foster genuine worship, fellowship, and theological engagement. His ethnographic work revealed that online churches often serve as "third spaces" where existential vulnerability and spiritual longing are met with relational support. Furthermore, cyberchurches also empower marginalized religious voices (Campbell and Golan, 2011).

Religious Community Online as a Church

The concept of what truly defines a "church" (ecclesiality) is a key issue for new, fluid online Christian communities. Brazal and Randy Odchigue have tackled this in their article "Cyberchurch and Filipin@ Migrants in the Middle East" (2016)

From a Catholic perspective, the most detailed framework for ecclesiality comes from the Second Vatican Council, particularly its documents *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §§41-42, *Lumen Gentium* §§23 & 26, and *Christus Dominus* §11. These texts outline essential elements for a true church: a Eucharistic assembly led by a bishop, the preaching of the Gospel, apostolic ministry, and a loving community. This traditional model, however, creates a significant problem for online churches, as the Council's vision did not anticipate digital fellowship, raising unresolved questions about administering sacraments and ministry in cyberspace.

Nevertheless, the Council also offers more flexible statements. For instance, *Unitatis Redintegratio* §3 acknowledges that many elements that build up the Church can exist outside the visible Catholic structure, including Scripture, faith, grace, and other gifts of the Spirit. When read alongside the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* §8 that the Church of Christ merely "subsists in" rather than is exclusively identical to the Catholic Church, these ideas provide a starting point for recognizing cyberchurches.

Therefore, while it would be difficult for an online church independent of physical churches to claim it is where the church of Christ fully "subsists," it might be valid to argue that it contains genuine fragments of sanctification and ecclesial life.

Mark Driscoll argued that cyberchurch might serve only as a ministry extension, an addition to physical places of worship (Bohannon 2010, 21). Driscoll's skepticism stemmed from the absence of sacramental practices, particularly the "breaking of bread," as depicted in Acts 2:46–47. Yet such practices, while central to traditional liturgy, do not exhaust the Church's capacity to gather meaningfully. As Scripture notes: "Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising

God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (Acts 2:46–47). This passage affirms that worship includes communal nourishment, not limited to geographic proximity. This view risks undermining the deeply relational quality inherent in cyber neighborliness. The cyberchurch is not merely supplemental; it embodies a new model of ecclesial presence where the Church subsists.

Likewise, Brandon Donaldson, online pastor of Lifechurch.tv, also sees the internet primarily as a tool: "The Internet is just some instrument we produced, and I think all churches should use it" (Buckner 2010, 24–25). While pragmatic, this view misses the fact that the internet does not merely transmit, it creates. Digital religious communities often share deep common interests and values. For many, cyberchurch offers a sense of home, a "family of invisible friends," where spiritual friendships emerge from shared vulnerability, grace, and belonging.

Cyberchurch as Sacrament

The emergence of cyberchurches, religious communities that gather primarily through digital platforms, has prompted both enthusiasm and caution within Catholic theological discourse. While digital technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for evangelization and pastoral outreach, Catholic theology, grounded in sacramental realism and incarnational liturgy, presents a measured response that affirms the necessity of physical inter-personal communion.

Pope John Paul II (2002, §3) recognized the internet as a valuable tool for evangelization, yet he firmly asserted that "while the Internet can never replace that profound experience of God which only the living, liturgical and sacramental life of the Church can offer, it can certainly provide a unique supplement and support in both preparing for the encounter with Christ in community and sustaining the new believer in the journey of faith which then begins." This concern reflects the Church's longstanding commitment to the incarnational mystery, wherein grace is mediated through tangible signs and communal presence.

Berger (2016), however, pointed out that Christianity employed both physical and non-physical means to mediate presence. Physical examples include the Eucharist serving as a stand-in for the Church community or blessed oil representing a bishop. Non-physical mediation occurs through prayers that mention the Pope or connect the living with the saints. This framework extends to Divine self-communication, which is inherently mediated.

Berger, building on Philipp Stoellger's theological media theory, argued that God's self-communication unfolds through diverse "media practices." This culminates in the ultimate "change of medium," where the divine Word becomes flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, a moment Stoellger describes as the radical

embodiment of divine self-disclosure (Stoellger 2016). Similarly, Andrew Byers describes this as "TheoMedia," a multi-faceted expression of God in creation and prophecy to the definitive medium, Jesus Christ (Byers 2013). Sacraments physically mediate God's presence (e.g., through consecrated elements), while prayer provides a non-corporeal channel. Moving beyond traditional sacraments, Berger proposed that digital spaces and technologies can also serve as channels for divine grace.

While official documents from major Christian traditions did not explicitly deny Christ's presence in digital spaces, they offered no affirmation or encouragement for the idea. Drawing on the concept of mediated presence, Berger challenged the Church to be more open to the possibility that virtual spaces could serve as channels of Christ's presence and grace. A constructive cyber-ecclesiology must resist both naive optimism and rigid sacramentalism, embracing a relational, ethical, and incarnational approach to faith in the digital age.

Characteristics of the Cyberchurch Neighborhood of Others/*Kapwa*

The Goal

The cyberchurch neighborhood of others/*kapwa* gathers the faithful around the Word and the Eucharist, especially those physically distant, socially marginalized, or excluded due to life circumstances. It embraces those alienated from the Church because of disability, theological difference (as exemplified by Bishop Jacques Gaillot), or identity, such as LGBTQ+ Christians seeking spiritual refuge and authentic community. It reaches migrants who yearn to remain connected to their home parishes, and believers in contexts where public worship is restricted. In times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, this neighborhood becomes a lifeline for communion, transcending walls and regulations to uphold the sacred rhythm of worship, prayer, and presence.

Beneficiaries of the Cyberchurch

The beneficiaries of the cyberchurch, neighborhood of others, are the *kapwa*, those interconnected members of both dominant and marginalized sectors of society. This includes individuals alienated from traditional ecclesial structures, migrants, including those prohibited from public worship, persons geographically distant from a parish, people with disabilities, and workers who are frequently mobile. During the pandemic, especially, the digital church became a sanctuary for the faithful (Feldstein 2017; Pew Research Center 2004).

Empirical studies affirm the benefits of online church participation. The Pew Research Center (2004) reported that 64% of American internet users engaged in religious or spiritual online activity, with many testifying to renewed faith through these platforms. Campbell and Delashmutt (2014) showed that the use of technology by multi-site churches fostered greater belonging among members, reinforcing ecclesial solidarity.

For migrants and refugees, the cyberchurch functions as a spiritual and social lifeline. It enables them to remain connected with families, participate in liturgical life, and access online pastoral services, sometimes even legal and humanitarian aid through institutions like the St. John Neumann Migrants Center (Brazal & Lacsa 2022).

During lockdowns and health crises, digital worship emerged as a tool of inclusive ministry. Elderly, sick, and homebound individuals received spiritual care through livestreamed Eucharistic celebrations, sustaining their sense of belonging in the ecclesial body (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi 2014). This digital presence, while mediated, embodied the Church's call to *pakikipagkapwa* through accompaniment and solidarity. Moreover, the cyberchurch helps mitigate physical limitations. Where worship spaces can hold only a few hundred, livestream platforms may host thousands, allowing greater access to liturgical and para-liturgical events (McKenna and West 2007).

The youth, often estranged from institutional religion, find affinity in online religious communities. McKenna and West (2007) noted that many participants in cyberchurch settings were not active in formal congregations yet discovered spiritual companionship online.

While the digital divide continues to hinder access for economically disadvantaged or marginalized populations, the cyberchurch must assume a prophetic stance, advocating for universal internet access as a fundamental right (Feldstein 2017). Despite these limitations, even those without digital access are affected by our networked world. For instance, parishes and religious groups raised online funds to assist those impacted by the pandemic, reflecting the Church's preferential option for the poor in a digital context (Francis 2020). The cyberchurch can model the Good Samaritan crossing borders to serve *non-members* and the *excluded*. It can expand the theology of communion into a digital horizon of *pakikipagkapwa*, rooted not only in doctrinal fidelity but also in compassionate presence.

Bonds That Unite the Members of the Cyberchurch

The bond that unites the members of the cyberchurch is their shared fellowship as neighbors traversing the digital highway. As fellow Christian travelers, they journey toward a common eschatological destination: the promotion of God's reign and the cultivation of relational communities, whether online or in-person, in solidarity with the suffering *kapwa*. In this light, *pakikipagkapwa* extends into cyberspace, forming connective threads of grace across digital landscapes.

This image is enriched by the notion of unity within the cyber-body of Christ, which transcends concrete embodiment (Vicini and Brazal 2015). The cyber-body encompasses the Eucharist, the Church metaphorically, and the eschatological Body of Christ in creation. The cyberchurch or cyber-body of Christ thus becomes a sacramental node that unites members both virtually and concretely.

The Pontifical Council for Social Communications (2002) observes that new media platforms allow the Church to strengthen internal bonds, deepen engagement with the modern world, and participate in the global discernment of pressing human challenges. This aligns with a theology of communicative grace where each interaction nurtures unity not by uniformity, but through dialogical truth.

John Paul II (1990) prophetically described the Church as a "network woven by Eucharistic communion," emphasizing that ecclesial unity is not built on algorithms of similarity ("likes") but on theological truth. Through the Internet, believers are "attached to the body of Christ," welcoming Others as neighbors, revealing the Church's openness to relational transformation in digital contexts.

Here, *kapwa* serves as theological scaffolding for cyber-communion: the suffering, excluded, and disconnected are grafted into the cyber-body not as passive recipients, but as active interlocutors and agents of grace. The unity in the cyberchurch is not merely functional or social, it is sacramental, eschatological, and radically inclusive.

Evaluating a Cyberchurch – Neighborhood of Others Based on Dulles's Criteria

To evaluate a cyberchurch – neighborhood of others/*kapwa*, we can apply the seven criteria proposed by Avery Dulles. These include: (1) a foundation in Scripture; (2) a grounding in post-apostolic Tradition; (3) the ability to provide Church members with a strong sense of corporate identity and mission; (4) a tendency to promote virtues and values generally esteemed by Christians; (5) relevance to the contemporary religious experience; (6) theological fruitfulness; and (7)

effectiveness in helping Church members engage meaningfully with those outside their community (Dulles 1987).

Basis in Scripture

In the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew records Jesus saying, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20, NIV). While this verse is part of a broader discourse on reconciliation and ecclesial authority, it nonetheless affirms a foundational truth: God is present when believers gather in intentional communion. It is not a definitive ecclesiological blueprint, but it underscores the relational dynamic of divine presence.

Critics may argue that the cyberchurch or any form of online worship is not explicitly found in Scripture. However, this critique reflects a narrow hermeneutic. By that logic, neither cathedrals, Baptist churches, nor Reformed congregations are found in the biblical text. Scripture does not offer a fixed institutional definition of "church." Instead, it provides a rich tapestry of metaphors and theological images.

Paul Sevier Minear, in his seminal work *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, identifies ninety-six distinct metaphors used to describe the Church. He emphasizes that "none of these metaphors are definitions, and none capture the full dynamics and reality of the Church. They are images that depict the Church in all God's immensity" (Minear 2004, 16, 92). This insight invites us to view ecclesial models, whether physical or digital, as theological expressions rather than rigid constructs.

The cyberchurch, as a contemporary model, functions as one such metaphor. If it facilitates a genuine encounter with God, nurtures fellowship among believers, and embodies the mission of the Gospel, then it resonates with the biblical imagination of the Church. As one reflection puts it, "God works when individuals work together," and this collaborative spirit is not confined to physical proximity (Faithlife 2020).

Dulles emphasizes that the Church is essentially a *community* a worshiping body of believers who, through faith, become a sign and instrument of union between God and humanity (Dulles 2002, chap. 13). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus declares, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt. 18:20). This passage was not given in the context of a church building or formal liturgical structure but speaks to the spiritual reality of God's presence in communal faith.

The New Testament abounds with references to the early Church meeting in private homes, emphasizing relational intimacy over architectural formality.

For example, Paul refers to "the Church in their house" when greeting Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor. 16:19; see also Rom. 16:5). These *house churches* exemplified the early Christian structure, small, covenantal gatherings characterized by fluid organization and face-to-face fellowship (Snyder 1991, 166). The Church is also referred to as the "people of God" (1 Pet. 2:9), a term that broadens the notion of Church beyond physical space toward spiritual identity. Paul further refers to the Church as existing in a city (1 Cor. 1:2), a region (Acts 9:31), and universally (Eph. 5:25; 1 Cor. 12:28). The clear implication is that the *ekklesia*, the biblical term for Church, does not require a dedicated building to fulfill its essence.

Wayne Grudem reinforces this understanding by asserting that in the New Testament, "church" (ekklesia) applies to groups of believers at various levels, whether a few gathered in a home or the universal body of Christ. "It is the people who gather together," not the structure, which constitutes the Church (Grudem 1994, 857). The Greek term *ekklesia*, meaning "assembly" or "gathering," was used in Greco-Roman contexts for civic gatherings in public places (Thayer 1970, 195–96). Paul's usage of the term affirms that the early Church was centered on people, not places.

Considering this, the idea of Christians gathering via digital platforms, as in the cyberchurch, does not violate the biblical concept of Church. The digital space can enable prayer, shared Scripture reading, exhortation, and communion in Christ's name, much as early house Churches did. Christ's promise of presence among gathered believers (Matt. 18:20) is not spatially restricted. Just as believers understand the spiritual intimacy of praying together over the phone across great distances, they can recognize the same presence of Christ in online worship communities.

Moreover, the Church, as the body of Christ, is not bound by physical constraints. As Paul wrote, "Christ is the head of the church, which is his body" (Col. 1:18). Believers share a heavenly citizenship (Phil. 3:20), and their unity transcends geography. In biblical usage, "church" always refers to the people, not the place.

While the New Testament affirms the importance of the Church "coming together" (1 Cor. 11:18; 14:26) and warns against forsaking the gathering (Heb. 10:25), the essence of such gatherings lies in the spiritual acts they embody: teaching, prayer, fellowship, and breaking of bread (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7). These can take place meaningfully in physical or virtual spaces. The theological focus, therefore, must be on the body of believers rather than the building, on *who* gathers rather than *where* they gather. Cyberchurch, if it cultivates genuine community, spiritual formation, and communion with Christ, remains within the bounds of biblical ecclesiology.

Basis in the Post-Apostolic Tradition

The cyberchurch as a neighborhood of others/*kapwa* can be linked to the concept of Church as the cyber (body) of Christ. Both emphasize the invisible nature of the Church, its unity in Christ while still acknowledging its visible structures. Church Fathers such as Augustine elaborated on the Body of Christ as an invisible communion that unites Christians. Augustine spoke of both the earthly and heavenly Church, including angels and the souls of the departed, affirming that the Body of Christ is not visible in its essence (Walker 2014, 10).

Similarly, Thomas Aquinas argued that the Body of Christ is not essentially visible. He described the Church as a "divinizing communion with God, whether incompletely in this life or completely in the life of glory." The Holy Spirit binds the members of the Church, while visible structures like sacraments and ecclesial laws play a secondary role in fostering an interior union with God through divine grace (Aquinas 1981, *Summa Theologica*, *Tertia Pars*, Q. 68, Art. 1)

However, from the time of Emperor Constantine, the Church's institutionalization led to an overemphasis on its visible aspects. In the early 20th century, Belgian Jesuit Emile Mersch revived the theology of the Mystical Body of Christ and differentiated between the institutional Church and the mystical body, consisting of those who embody Christ's life (The Roman Forum 2022).

In 1943, Pope Pius XII published the encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*, in which he identified the Mystical Body of Christ with the Roman Catholic Church (Pius XII 1943). The Second Vatican Council, in *Lumen Gentium*, reaffirmed the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ but diverged from *Mystici Corporis* by distinguishing between the hierarchical structure of the Church and the Body of Christ. It likened the institutional Church to Christ's human nature and the Body of Christ to His divine nature, refraining from equating the Body of Christ solely with the Roman Catholic Church (Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, §§ 8, 32).

In cyberchurches linked to local dioceses or parishes, there is a continuum between the Church online and offline. Both visible and invisible aspects of the Church are manifest. In contrast, independent cyberchurches often emphasize the invisible element of unity in Christ (Amiri 2020). However, the Eucharistic theology that underlies traditional ecclesiology holds that Christ's presence is real yet invisible, mediated through spiritual communion (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*).

Sense of Corporate Identity and Mission

The cyberchurch, understood as a neighborhood of others/*kapwa*, demonstrates a capacity to foster a sense of corporate identity and mission, especially among the young, the digitally connected, and even those on the margins of

technological access who still benefit from its digital overflow. The critical ecclesiological question is this: *Can the cyberchurch give church members a genuine sense of their corporate identity and mission?* This question goes to the heart of ecclesiology, as it probes whether the cyberchurch can truly be considered Church.

Digital religion scholar Heidi A. Campbell affirms that "religious community is possible online but is different from traditional ideas of community" (Campbell 2010). Digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs allow users to articulate religious identities apart from institutional structures. In these spaces, individuals often form loosely structured yet spiritually significant collectives in what Barry Wellmann and Manuel Castells call "networked individualism" (Campbell 2020).

However, this fluid identity formation can pose challenges. Paul McClure's analysis of the 2010 Baylor Religion Survey (administered by Gallup) revealed that increased internet use correlates with disaffiliation from organized religion and decreases in religious exclusivism. Time spent online was positively associated with skipping religious services and holding more pluralistic, relativized religious views (McClure 2017). In other words, the more people are immersed in the digital world, the more likely they are to redefine their sense of ecclesial belonging outside traditional frameworks.

This poses a potential risk for ecclesial unity, as corporate identity may be reshaped by personalization, and mission could shift from conversion to connection. Yet this shift is not necessarily a deficiency. Ecclesiologically, the Church's mission is not limited to proselytization. It includes dialogue with others, those economically excluded, culturally marginalized, and religiously different. This aligns with the *Missio Dei*, the divine mission that is incarnational, dialogical, and participatory (Bosch 1991).

Pope Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti*, critiques a society where persons, especially the vulnerable, such as the unborn and the elderly, are no longer regarded as inherently valuable. He describes a "throwaway culture" marked by food waste and a loss of fraternal values, resulting in "a kind of cynicism" that isolates people and erodes solidarity (Francis 2020, 18–19). In this context, the cyberchurch – neighborhood of others becomes a prophetic witness embodying the mission of presence, solidarity, and mercy, especially for society's victims.

This vision echoes the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), in which mission is not recruitment but compassion, not proclamation alone but accompaniment. The cyberchurch, by mediating this witness digitally, becomes Church not by proximity but by neighborliness. Its ecclesial identity is rooted not in institutional authority but in koinonia, the Spirit-enabled communion of mutual care and shared purpose (Acts 2:42–47).

Thus, while the corporate identity of cyberchurch communities may be less sacramentally institutionalized, their missionary thrust as digital neighbors embodying Christ's compassion is both authentic and urgent.

The Capacity to Foster Christian Virtues and Values

The cyberchurch as a neighborhood of others/*kapwa* fosters Christian virtues such as *solidarity, participation, and equality*, while exemplifying the Gospel's preferential option for the marginalized and excluded. Central to this is Jesus' *Parable of the Good Samaritan* (Luke 10:25–37), where the one who fulfills the command to "love your neighbor" is not a priest or Levite, but a Samaritan, a religious outsider. In doing so, Jesus redefines "neighbor" to include those outside religious and ethnic boundaries, challenging ecclesial communities to extend compassion beyond in-groups.

This narrative resonates deeply with cyberchurch models, where digital space allows communities to form across traditional boundaries of class, race, gender, and geography. Online churches often prioritize inclusion, reflecting the Kingdom value of radical hospitality, especially to the "other," the unheard, unseen, and unrecognized members of society.

Computer-mediated communication in cyberchurches also opens new paths for collaborative engagement. Research indicates that in digital neighborhoods, hierarchical roles tend to flatten. For instance, the line between teacher and learner, or between clergy and laity, becomes more flexible. Knowledge production and theological discourse are no longer confined to ordained elites but are shared by people alike across platforms (Watanabe 2007). Such a participatory dynamic reflects the ecclesiological principle of the *sensus fidelium,* the spiritual insight of all the baptized contributing to the life of the Church (Congar 1985).

This is especially evident in the shifting role of women in cyberchurches. Traditionally, women's ecclesial participation has been limited to domestic or auxiliary roles. Yet in online communities, women not only contribute to theological discussions but also exercise leadership, pastoral care, and liturgical creativity. Digital media has thus blurred the line between the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible, creating new spaces where marginalized voices, particularly those of women, emerge and lead (Campbell 2020).

The decentralization of cyberchurches can raise ecclesial concerns. The traditional Church has long operated with unidirectional authority structures, where teaching flows from the magisterium to the faithful. However, the internet disrupts this flow by enabling peer-to-peer exchanges and decentralized religious

discourse. This challenges churches to rethink how authority and mission are exercised in a networked environment.

Nonetheless, this disruption should not be viewed solely as a threat. Ecclesiologically, the Church is a communion of charisms and ministries. The Second Vatican Council affirms the co-responsibility of all the faithful for the mission of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, §30). The cyberchurch – neighborhood of others actualizes this co-responsibility by democratizing participation and fostering virtues of shared discernment, inclusion, and empowerment.

In addition, scholars like Eszter Hargittai emphasize the importance of bridging digital divides not only between rich and poor, but also across generational, educational, and religious lines (Hargittai 2003). The cyberchurch, by advocating digital inclusion and access, embodies these values in its ecclesial witness. Thus, the Christian virtues and values traditionally tied to sacramental communities are not lost online, but potentially reconfigured, intensified, and broadened through the medium of digital culture.

Correspondence with the Religious Experience of Humanity Today

The cyberchurch as a neighborhood of others/*kapwa* reflects the lived religious experience of two key demographic groups in the digital age: digital natives and digital immigrants.

Digital natives: multitasking discipleship

Digital natives, those who have grown up immersed in digital technologies, encounter the world through customizable, instantaneous, and interconnected platforms. Marc Prensky observes that digital natives "think and process information fundamentally differently" from previous generations. They are proficient in parallel processing, multitasking, and gaming logic, favoring speed, nonlinearity, and collaboration (Prensky 2001).

These tendencies shape how they engage with religion. A digital native may watch a sermon, check Bible verses on a smart mirror, and join a global Bible study all before breakfast. Their religious engagement is not confined to physical buildings or weekly gatherings but is embedded in daily rhythms mediated by wearable tech, apps, and AI-based tools. Their worship spaces are *liminal*, existing between analog and digital, sacred, and mundane.

The question then arises: Can traditional churches engage a generation accustomed to personalized digital interaction? The answer lies not in imitation but in incarnational adaptation, the willingness of the Church to go where the people are, including virtual spaces. Digital natives do not necessarily reject God; rather,

they disengage from Church forms that no longer speak to their experience. As Campbell argued, this disconnection is not a matter of rejection but of dislocation; they are not disconnected from God's church, but from churches that have failed to contextualize their presence online (Campbell 2010). They seek authenticity over authority, community over hierarchy, and fluidity over formality.

Digital immigrants: adaptation and accent

By contrast, digital immigrants, those born before the digital revolution but who have adopted its tools, often retain an "accent" in their digital literacy. Prensky describes this as a cognitive and behavioral distinction: digital immigrants may prefer print, question digital sources, or feel uneasy about multitasking environments (Prensky 2001). Still, many have learned to navigate digital ecclesial life, albeit with caution and critical distance.

Ecclesiologically, digital immigrants embody the Church's hermeneutical tension between tradition and innovation. They remind us that continuity with the past is essential even as the medium of communication changes. Their slower adoption of digital technology should not be dismissed as resistance but recognized as a call to careful discernment, a vital charism in a fast-moving world.

Religious digital creatives

In her ethnographic research, Campbell identifies a group she terms religious digital creatives, that is, individuals leveraging digital tools to craft faith expressions outside institutional boundaries. These include online missionaries, Christian influencers, tech-savvy theologians, and web pastors. Through blogging, vlogging, podcasting, and live streaming, they create spiritual experiences that are personalized, participatory, and translocal (Campbell 2020).

Theologically, their work calls the Church to reimagine the relationship between charisma and institution. Are their innovations seen as rivals, threats, or opportunities to expand the Church's missionary frontier? The ecclesial model of the cyberchurch, neighborhood of others, invites a dialogical approach, where institutional Churches partner with grassroots digital movements to co-create spaces of faith.

The blurring of boundaries between clergy and laity, producer, and consumer, sacred and secular is not a dilution of ecclesiology but a recovery of the Church as *communio*, a body where all gifts and charisms serve the building up of the whole (1 Cor. 12:7–12; *Lumen Gentium* §30).

The future cyberchurch neighborhood may look like this: waking up to Scripture displayed on smart mirrors, being discipled via podcast sermons during

a self-driving commute, or offering pastoral care through digital avatars in a VR chapel. Far from being speculative fiction, this is already the direction technology is pointing, and the Church must prayerfully discern how to inhabit it.

Ultimately, the Church's mission is not to preserve forms but to proclaim the living Christ. As a pilgrim people, the Church must journey through digital deserts and cyber frontiers, bringing with it the life-giving Word of God, not confined to stone temples but alive in hearts, networks, and neighborhoods of others.

Theological Fruitfulness

The cyberchurch neighborhood of others/*kapwa* presents a fertile ground for theological reflection and innovation, offering a space where ecclesial communities and theologians can explore new paradigms of faith, presence, embodiment, and mission in the digital age. Far from being a threat to traditional theology, the cyberchurch challenges theology to remain dynamic, contextually aware, and engaged with contemporary culture.

Cyber-anthropology and the cyborg

In the field of theological anthropology, digital environments invite a rethinking of what it means to be human in the cyber-context. Donna Haraway's seminal "Cyborg Manifesto" reimagines the human person as a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of flesh and machine, who negotiates identity through technology (Haraway 1991). This provocative metaphor opens theological questions: *Can the human person be understood as imago Dei while embedded in and extended through digital media?* If embodiment is increasingly mediated by devices, what then does it mean to be the body of Christ in cyberspace?

This leads to challenging but necessary inquiries into Christological embodiment. Can one speak of a "cyborg Christ" a Christ whose presence is mediated digitally, sacramentally present in virtual space? While this may seem speculative, it touches upon historical debates about real presence and the nature of sacramentality. Catholic theology, rooted in the principle *sacramenta propter homines* (sacraments are for humans), must wrestle with the question of whether the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist can occur or be meaningfully participated in and through an online liturgy (Johnson 2020). This is not merely a technical question but an ecclesiological and anthropological one, asking what kind of communion is truly formed online.

Cybermission and missiology

In the area of missiology, the cyberchurch also pushes boundaries. What does it mean to be a cybermissionary in a world where geography, time, and culture are no longer barriers to evangelization? Traditional models of mission focused on sending bodies across borders; cybermission involves sending messages, presence, witness, and accompaniment across networks. As Marshall McLuhan once noted, "the medium is the message," and today's medium is immersive, participatory, and non-hierarchical (McLuhan 1964).

Digital missionaries may never set foot on the ground they evangelize, but they engage deeply through narratives, digital testimonies, livestreams, and acts of solidarity. In this way, cybermission calls the Church to return to a *kerygmatic* mode focusing on proclamation, relationality, and presence. The Second Vatican Council's *Ad Gentes* emphasizes that mission is rooted in the mystery of God's own sending, the Father sending the Son, and the Son sending the Spirit (Vat. II, AG §2). In digital contexts, this sending unfolds through algorithms and hyperlinks, yet still testifies to Christ's abiding presence among the people.

Capacity to Foster Good Relationships with Outsiders

The cyberchurch as a neighborhood of others/*kapwa* offers a significant opportunity to foster positive relationships with those outside traditional ecclesial boundaries, grounded in a theological openness to the presence of grace beyond the visible confines of the institutional Church. This corresponds with a Catholic theology of inclusivity, rooted in Vatican II's affirmation that "elements of sanctification and truth are found outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church" (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* §8).

Perils and Potentials of Cyberchurches

The cyberchurch neighborhood of others/*kapwa* presents both promising potential and discernible limitations, as observed in the experiences of its participants and leaders. These tensions reflect the theological and pastoral complexities of translating ecclesial life into the digital domain.

This model draws deeply from the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Here, Jesus redefines neighborliness through the compassionate act of a Samaritan, someone marginalized and viewed with suspicion by the Jewish religious elite. The implication is clear: grace and moral insight are not restricted to the religious in-group. This vision resonates powerfully with cyberchurch spaces, where people of diverse backgrounds, faiths, and ideologies converge,

converse, and even collaborate on issues of shared moral concern such as justice, peace, human dignity, and ecological care.

In traditional ecclesiology, the Church is called to be both catholic (universal) and hospitable. The cyberchurch actualizes this by welcoming the "other" not as a threat, but as a fellow seeker of truth. Through blogs, forums, live chats, and virtual prayer groups, Christians of different denominations, Muslims, Buddhists, secular humanists, and atheists can encounter one another and engage meaningfully on spiritual and existential matters.

Theologically, this reflects a missional posture of hospitality, one not focused primarily on conversion, but on communion, listening, and mutual transformation. As Henri Nouwen explains, hospitality is "not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place" (Nouwen 1975, 51). The cyberchurch offers precisely such a space, enabling the faithful to bear witness to the Gospel while being transformed by the stories and experiences of others.

In this sense, the capacity of the cyberchurch to foster relationships with those outside its group is not accidental but essential to its ecclesial identity. It is a Church that goes to the margins, not just physically but digitally embodying Pope Francis' call for a Church of encounter and mercy (Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* §24).

Perils: Identity and Authenticity

A recurring concern among cyberchurch participants is the ambiguity surrounding the real identities of fellow members and digital leaders. In virtual worship spaces, self-presentation is highly malleable, and platforms often lack robust identity verification mechanisms. While empirical data remains limited, anecdotal reports and informal surveys within digital faith communities suggest that a significant portion of users potentially upwards of one-third, have expressed discomfort or uncertainty regarding the authenticity of others' online personas. This concern is especially pronounced in contexts where pastoral authority, theological guidance, or communal trust hinge on perceived transparency and relational integrity.

Individuals can pose as faithful Church members or even leaders while engaging in unethical or misleading behaviour offline. This raises serious questions about accountability, ecclesial authenticity, and the credibility of the digital witness. The absence of concrete presence makes it easier for individuals to misrepresent themselves. As Campbell notes, online religious engagement fosters virtual interactions, which may blur traditional moral and communal boundaries (Campbell 2013, 48). For instance, there have been instances where married men posing as single have approached women online with romantic or exploitative

intentions. Others have solicited funds for fabricated projects under the guise of online ministry. These incidents reflect the vulnerability of digital ecclesial communities to deception and exploitation.

In addition, infiltration by members of other religious groups with proselytizing intentions presents an ecclesiological risk. Groups such as the "Jesus Only" church (Oneness Pentecostals) or Jehovah's Witnesses have used cyberchurch platforms to subtly convert participants, exploiting theological illiteracy among lay Christians (Lang 2003). This reflects a broader challenge of catechesis and doctrinal formation in digital spaces, where charismatic persuasion often outweighs theological depth.

Potentials: Accessibility, Inclusion, and Cross-Cultural Engagement

Despite its pitfalls, the cyberchurch offers distinct advantages that traditional churches often struggle to provide. One of the most evident benefits is transcending geographical and temporal boundaries. Cyberchurches are available 24/7, allowing participation across time zones. Pre-recorded or asynchronously delivered content ensures that liturgies, teachings, and fellowships are accessible at one's convenience. This fulfills a pastoral need, especially for migrant workers, night-shift employees, or those in remote areas.

Moreover, the cyberchurch promotes intergenerational interaction in a manner rarely seen in local churches. In many traditional Ethiopian and Eritrean church settings, strict hierarchical and generational norms often restrict interaction between elders and younger members, reinforcing clerical authority and limiting intergenerational dialogue (Lusini 2020). Cyberchurch settings, however, allow a 70-year-old grandmother, her son, and her granddaughter to serve together in leadership or worship. This breaks down generational silos, fosters dialogue, and revitalizes liturgical experience with multivocal participation, which theologians might call polyphonic ecclesiology (Schillebeeckx 1981).

Gender inclusivity is another compelling strength. While many institutional churches maintain gendered hierarchies, particularly in liturgical roles, the cyberchurch frequently allows and encourages women to lead. This is particularly significant for female migrant workers in the Middle East and Mediterranean regions, who may be barred from leadership in local parishes but find voice and agency in the digital congregation. The cyberchurch, in this case, affirms the ecclesial dignity of women and aligns with Pope Francis' call for "a more incisive female presence in the Church" (Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* §103).

Furthermore, educational, or socioeconomic status is less visible online. In contrast to physical churches where class, profession, or credentials may

influence roles and recognition, the digital church levels the field. Participation becomes based more on presence and engagement than on pedigree. This affirms the Pauline vision of the Church as a body with many members, each indispensable regardless of social standing (1 Cor. 12:12–27).

Concluding Remarks

The cyberchurch, neighborhood of others/*kapwa* represents a dynamic and emerging ecclesiological model that gathers the faithful in cyberspace around the Word, the Eucharist, and a commitment to radical neighborliness. It is not, in the first instance, an "institution" or a "visibly organized society," but rather a communion of people, a *communio fidelium* whose unity is primarily pneumatological, relational, and missionary. This model of church articulates itself both internally, through shared faith, and externally, through bonds of doctrine, worship, digital liturgy, and ecclesial association.

Its primary beneficiaries include those alienated by ecclesiastical structures, whether due to theological divergence, gender identity, physical or geographic displacement, or systemic exclusion. Migrants, disabled people, the homebound, the LGBTQIA+ faithful, and even those offline but spiritually hungry are embraced in this cybernetic ecclesial horizon. It affirms the right to digital access as a theological issue: the right to belong, to be reached, and to participate in the community of faith in a digitally mediated world.

Central to this vision is the reimagination of the church as the cyber (Body) of Christ, a communion that traverses servers and screens but remains grounded in the Eucharistic and pneumatological unity of the Church. As Matthew 18:20 affirms, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst," and this gathering may very well be virtual, but the presence of Christ remains real (Matt 18:20 ESV).

The Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10:25–37) becomes the paradigmatic narrative for this model. The Samaritan, socially marginalized, religiously othered, embodies the ethic of compassion without regard for identity boundaries. So too does the cyberchurch extend neighborliness across digital highways, engaging those wounded by religious trauma, patriarchy, racism, or classism. This approach embodies Enrique Dussel's concept of the Other as the ethical and theological locus of reflection and praxis. Rooted in his philosophy of liberation, it resonates with the preferential option for the poor, reimagined for the digital era where exclusion and invisibility persist in virtual ecclesial spaces.

Where institutional ecclesiology often emphasizes conformity, sacramental validity, or canonical legitimacy, the cyberchurch prioritizes relationality, inclusion, and dialogical presence. Its mission is not expansionism but encounter. It does not exist to grow numerically but to witness to the compassionate presence of Christ, especially to the wounded and the excluded. In this way, the cyberchurch is deeply prophetic, critiquing unjust power structures and cultivating inclusive Christian praxis. Theologically, this model opens fertile ground for reflection:

- In theological anthropology, what does it mean to be human in a hybrid (concrete and virtual) ecclesial context?
- In Christology, can we speak of the "cyborg Christ" a presence not bound to flesh but mediated through data, code, and community?
- In liturgical theology, how do we understand the real presence in virtual sacraments?
- In missiology, what does it mean to be a cybermissionary, proclaiming the Gospel not through territory but through connectivity?
- In ecclesiology, how can we sustain unity and order in a fluid, borderless community without replicating hierarchical rigidity?

While there are valid critiques, such as risks of disembodiment, misrepresentation, or theological ambiguity, the model's positive contributions outweigh its pitfalls. Its theological value lies in disrupting traditional boundaries, in de-centering clericalism, and in expanding the Church's understanding of community, grace, and participation.

Above all, the cyberchurch – neighborhood of others/*kapwa* reminds us that the Church must not retreat into nostalgia or territorial defensiveness. Instead, it must be missionary, dialogical, and inclusive, drawing near to the "not-one-of-us" and recognizing in them the face of Christ. Like the Samaritan on the road to Jericho, the cyberchurch bends down in compassion across platforms, time zones, and digital divides to anoint the wounds of the world with the oil and wine of Christ's mercy.

Chapter Six

The Cyberchurch in Dialogue with Dulles' Church Models

Dulles's *Models of the Church*, first published in 1974 and expanded in 2002, remains a foundational text in contemporary ecclesiology. In this work, Dulles articulates five initial models of the Church: institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, and servant, each reflecting distinct theological emphases and historical expressions. In the 2002 expanded edition, he introduces a sixth model: the Church as a community of disciples, which emphasizes personal commitment to Christ and communal witness in the world (Dulles 2002, 191–214).

Through these six models, Dulles offers a multifaceted and historically grounded framework that reveals the complexity and adaptability of ecclesial identity across diverse contexts. His methodological approach encourages readers to move beyond reductive or singular perspectives, fostering a more comprehensive and dialogical ecclesiological conversation. This pluralistic lens has proven especially valuable in ecumenical discourse and in assessing the Church's mission in a rapidly changing world.

This chapter discusses Dulles's six models of the Church and the ways they can find new expressions in the digital era, as well as enhance the model of the cyberchurch – neighborhood of others/*kapwa*.

Church as Institution

The institutional model of the Church envisions it as a *societas perfecta,* a fully self-sufficient, hierarchical organization endowed with all necessary means for its mission. This perspective highlights the Church's juridical constitution, sacramental systems, and clerical governance, portraying its members as subjects within an authoritative ecclesiastical structure (Dulles 2002, 35–50). Historically dominant from the late Middle Ages until the Second Vatican Council, this model cultivated a strong sense of Catholic identity, centralized leadership, and doctrinal unity. Yet, as Dulles (2002, 40) observes, institutionalism tends to reduce the Church to its visible structures, where roles of teaching and learning, governing and being

governed are sharply divided. This dualism risks suppressing mutuality and organic growth, stifling the Church's capacity for relational engagement.

Furthermore, Scripture and the practices of the early Church resist the rigidity of such institutional frameworks, favoring diverse and charismatic expressions of ecclesial life (Gaillardetz 2023, 72).

Considering these critiques, our previous discussions on cyberchurch invite a constructive reframing of institutional ecclesiology. Cyberchurches challenge hierarchical and juridical norms by embodying decentralized, relational networks of faith. Whereas the institutional model privileges vertical authority and physical sacraments, cyberchurches foster horizontal participation, digital rituals, and lay-led spiritual engagement. They often arise in liminal spaces, driven by charismatic leadership and community-driven mission rather than canonical mandates.

This shift compels theologians to explore ecclesiology beyond visible structures. Cyberchurches highlight the theological significance of presence without proximity, digitally mediated sacramentality, and communion without conformity. Rather than supplanting institutional models, cyberchurches press toward their renewal. They invite integration where canonical stability coexists with charismatic spontaneity, and juridical frameworks are balanced by prophetic and pastoral creativity.

In this evolving landscape, the Church's institutional identity remains valuable, but it must be animated by relational depth and cultural adaptability. Especially in digital contexts, the Church as a neighborhood of others/*kapwa* offers promising pathways, emphasizing mutuality, co-presence, and participatory solidarity. Such paradigms can transform institutional power into relational presence, inviting a Church that governs not merely through law, but through love.

Church as Communion

The model of the Church as Communion foregrounds the Church's identity as a community of interpersonal relationships, rooted in love, forgiveness, and mutual commitment. Emerging partly in reaction to the institutional model, some Protestant traditions adopted this framework from an anti-hierarchical stance, while Catholic theologians retained structural integrity without succumbing to institutional rigidity (Dulles 2002, 51–53).

This model prioritizes relational presence over juridical control, emphasizing the Church as a living organism animated by the Holy Spirit. Two biblical images anchor this vision: the Church as the Body of Christ (LG §§8, 11, 23, 28, 32, 33, 43) and the Church as the People of God (LG §§9–17). As Dulles notes, "the mystical body of Christ is a communion which is at once inward and external, an

inner communion of spiritual life (faith, hope, and charity) signified and engendered by an external communion in the profession of faith, discipline and sacramental life" (Dulles 2002, 51). This duality affirms both spiritual intimacy and visible unity, making the Church a sacrament of communion.

The strengths of this model lie in its resonance with the human longing for intimacy, participation, and shared mission. It decentralizes authority, fostering a more democratic and charismatic ecclesiology that values the Spirit's gifts in all members. It also carries ecumenical potential, drawing from biblical motifs cherished across Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholic traditions. The Second Vatican Council affirmed this communal vision, describing the Church as a "communion of disciples with each other" (Vatican Council II 1964, *Lumen Gentium*, sec. 1). In this light, ecclesial leadership becomes a facilitative role, discerning, organizing, and empowering the diverse charisms within the community. As St. Paul exhorts, "Do not quench the Spirit...but test everything and hold tight to what is good" (1 Thess. 5:19–21). The Church as Communion thus becomes a relational space where justice, peace, and joy are not abstract ideals but lived realities.

However, this model is not without limitations. Its emphasis on spiritual intimacy may obscure the need for outward missionary engagement, and its strong identification with the Body of Christ risks conflating the Church's divine vocation with human fallibility. Moreover, tightly knit communities may inadvertently foster exclusivity, alienating those who do not immediately belong. The challenge remains to link spiritual depth with inclusive practices that extend belonging beyond familiar boundaries.

These limitations are not unique to the Body of Christ model. The People of God image, while emphasizing communal journey and covenantal identity, may likewise obscure the Church's outward mission if spiritual intimacy becomes insular. Its emphasis on belonging risks idealizing unity and reinforcing exclusion, particularly when ecclesial identity is conflated with institutional boundaries. The challenge remains to ensure that communion, whether mystical or historical, is always oriented toward mission, justice, and radical hospitality.

Digital ecclesial communities often embody the Communion model more naturally than the Institutional one. They prioritize relational presence, shared leadership, and charismatic participation across boundaries of geography and tradition. Cyberchurches, while lacking canonical structure, manifest the Spirit's activity in lay-led worship, digital sacramentality, and mutual care. They reimagine communion not as proximity but as presence, where intimacy is mediated through screens yet sustained by shared faith and mission. In this sense, the Church as Communion offers a theological framework for understanding

cyberchurches not as anomalies, but as authentic expressions of ecclesial life in a networked age.

Church as Sacrament

The model of the Church as Sacrament affirms the Church as the visible sign and effective instrument of Christ's ongoing presence and mission in the world. If Christ is the primordial sacrament of God—God's self-communication in human form—then the Church, as his mystical body, becomes the sacrament of Christ (Dulles 2002, 62). This sacramental identity is not merely symbolic; it is ontological and missional. The Church does not simply represent Christ; it makes Him present through its communal life, sacramental celebrations, and prophetic witness. Church members, animated by the Spirit, become Christ's body, mouth, eyes, ears, heart, hands, and feet for others, mediating divine grace in tangible ways.

This model synthesizes the Church's visible structure, its liturgy, hierarchy, and canonical order with its invisible reality, the indwelling of Christ in the faith, hope, and love of its members. Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* describes the Church as "like a sacrament, a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (LG §1). This reflects the Incarnational logic of Christianity: just as Christ united divinity and humanity, so too does the Church unite the spiritual and material dimensions of salvation history.

The strengths of this model lie in its holistic vision. It affirms the Church's missionary vocation as "light of the world" and "salt of the earth," calling its members to embody the kingdom values of unity, truth, love, integrity, justice, reconciliation, peace, and joy. It also fosters ecumenical dialogue, as sacramentality transcends denominational boundaries and invites shared participation in divine life. Moreover, it provides a theological foundation for ecclesial renewal, emphasizing that the Church must continually reflect the grace it signifies.

However, the model is not without limitations. As Dulles notes, it has struggled to gain traction in Protestant thought, where sacramentality is often viewed with suspicion or reduced to symbolic ritual (Dulles 2002, 66). Additionally, the model lacks precise criteria for discerning the divine versus the merely human aspects of ecclesial life. This ambiguity can lead to idealization or cynicism, either viewing the Church as wholly divine or dismissing it as merely a flawed institution.

In the context of cybertheology, the sacramental model offers fertile ground for reimagining ecclesial presence in digital spaces. Cyberchurches, though lacking physical sacraments, often embody sacramentality through relational

presence, symbolic rituals, and communal witness. The Church as Sacrament, then, must expand its horizons to include digital expressions of grace, where Christ's presence is mediated not through bread and wine alone, but through pixels, prayers, and prophetic engagement online.

Church as Herald

Avery Dulles's model of the Church as Herald envisions the ecclesial community as fundamentally constituted by the proclamation of the Word of God and its reception in faith, drawing from the biblical image of a royal messenger announcing a king's decree (Dulles 2002, 82). Rooted in the prophetic tradition and apostolic preaching, this model affirms the Church's vocation to proclaim the gospel with clarity and urgency, offering congregations a strong sense of identity and mission.

Its emphasis on witness, however, may marginalize the Church's responsibility for social transformation and justice (Gaillardetz 2008, 133), a concern echoed in liberationist ecclesiologies such as Segundo's (1973, 129).

Cyberecclesiology can reframe the model of Church as Herald by recognizing the internet as an anthropological space where faith is encoded and embodied, challenging the Church to integrate proclamation with relational presence, sacramental mediation, and ethical praxis (Spadaro 2014, 3–17; Ugboh 2023). Thus, a cyber-heraldic ecclesiology must evolve beyond static proclamation to become a digitally engaged, justice-oriented, and incarnational community of witness.

Church as Servant

The Church as Servant, as articulated by Dulles, reimagines the Church not as a dominant institution but as a humble participant in the human journey, deeply embedded in the world's struggles and hopes (Dulles 2002, 81–91). This model draws inspiration from Jesus, the *diakonos* par excellence, whose ministry was marked by compassion for the marginalized and a radical solidarity with the suffering. It aligns with the vision of *Gaudium et Spes* (§4), which calls the Church to read the "signs of the times" and respond to the needs of humanity through dialogue and service.

The servant model emphasizes the Church's vocation to be an agent of social transformation, echoing the Great Judgment Parable in Matthew 25: 31–46,

where Christ identifies himself with "the least of these." This model possesses the potential to foster a spirituality of justice, mercy, and prophetic engagement.

However, the model lacks a robust biblical foundation as an ecclesial identity. While *diakonia* is richly present in Scripture, it often refers to mutual aid among believers rather than a defining trait of the institutional Church (Rahner 1969; Bonhoeffer 1954). Furthermore, the term "servant" can imply subordination. According to feminist theologian Natalie Watson, rather than dismantling systems of sin and abuse, the servant model has the opposite effect: it strengthens women's servitude in a patriarchal Church and society (Watson 2008, 466–67). This can happen when the Church encourages silence and submission, which can have the unintended consequence of excusing abuse of women.

A cyberchurch, neighbourhood of others/*kapwa*, foregrounds justice for the marginalized, and thus refocuses on Christian servanthood rather than on servitude. Christian servanthood places others before oneself to advance an egalitarian community.

The Church acts as a servant in digital spaces by advocating for justice and providing online pastoral care. This "cyberchurch" offers spiritual support through digital tools like video counselling and prayer chats, while also mobilizing people around causes like mental health and climate justice. In all its online actions, the Church aims to embody compassion and solidarity. The Church as Servant must evolve into a relational theology of presence embodied both offline and online, animated by compassion, and rooted in the incarnational logic of Christ.

Church as Community of Disciples

Dulles's sixth ecclesiological model, the Church as a Community of Disciples, emerges as a unifying paradigm that integrates and critiques the preceding five models: institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, and servant (Dulles 2002, 195–220). Rooted in the biblical narrative of Jesus' public ministry, this model foregrounds the Church as a fellowship of individuals personally called to follow Christ, embodying his teachings through radical commitment and relational praxis. Discipleship here is not merely instructional but vocational, demanding a transformative reorientation of life that places Christ above familial, material, and ideological attachments (Matt. 10:37–39).

As Hans Küng affirms, discipleship entails active participation in Christ's mission, not passive adherence to doctrine (Küng 1967, 305). Dulles acknowledges the model's strengths in fostering evangelism, ethical witness, and spiritual

authenticity, particularly in its emphasis on proclaiming the Word and calling individuals to conversion. However, he cautions that this model can drift toward isolationism, where the Church becomes overly focused on verbal proclamation and doctrinal purity, potentially disengaging from broader social, sacramental, or communal dimensions of ecclesial life. It may also foster idealism, presenting the Church as a perfect bearer of divine truth while overlooking its human limitations, historical failures, and the need for ongoing reform. In this way, the model risks portraying the Church as a detached voice rather than an embodied community of grace, accountable to both its mission and its context. Discipleship, he argued, must be sustained by divine vocation and situated within the broader ecclesial reality, a Spirit-filled, sacramental, and juridically ordered body (Dulles 2002, 219).

In dialogue with cyberecclesiology, the Community of Disciples model finds renewed depth and applicability. Digital ecclesiology expands the understanding of discipleship into an interactive, networked vocation, where relational presence, shared leadership, and online sacramentality emerge as vital expressions of communal faith (Jacoba 2025). As Spadaro notes, the internet is not merely a tool but an anthropological space, a locus for theological encounter and ecclesial formation (Spadaro 2014, 16). Within this digital context, discipleship is no longer confined to physical proximity; it unfolds through digital solidarity, virtual accompaniment, and algorithmic discernment. Cyberchurches, online catechesis, and virtual liturgies illustrate how discipleship is mediated through pixels and presence, sustaining communal identity in decentralized spaces, and responding to the isolationism and idealism that Dulles cautioned against.

The model thus invites a reimagining of ecclesial vocation, one that is dialogical, participatory, and incarnational, responsive to the signs of the times and the rhythms of grace in digital culture.

Concluding Remarks

In the context of the cyberchurch, each of Dulles's six ecclesiological models finds renewed expression in the digital culture. The Church as an Institution persists through decentralized governance, platform-based leadership, and algorithmic protocols that maintain order and accountability. In the cyberchurch, institutional structures are no longer confined to physical hierarchies but operate through digital platforms that facilitate leadership, decision-making, and community oversight. Governance unfolds through decentralized mechanisms such as moderated forums, algorithmic content curation, and participatory protocols that ensure transparency and responsiveness. These digital systems uphold ecclesial

order by balancing communal agency with automated regulation, allowing the Church to remain institutionally coherent across dispersed and networked environments.

In the digital age, the Mystical Communion model offers a renewed vision of the Church as a spiritually connected community that transcends physical boundaries. It affirms that authentic ecclesial life can flourish online when rooted in sacramental tradition and doctrinal clarity. This model provides a compelling framework for inclusive and justice-oriented ecclesiology, especially in contexts shaped by digital culture and global connectivity. It invites theologians and faith communities to embrace communion as both mystical and mediated, grounded in grace and open to innovation.

As Sacrament, the Church mediates grace through virtual liturgies and online rituals, affirming presence and participation even across physical distance. In the cyberchurch, sacramentality is not diminished by digital mediation but recontextualized through virtual liturgies that engage the faithful in embodied worship across screens and networks. Online rituals, whether synchronous or asynchronous, create sacred spaces where grace is encountered through symbolic action, communal prayer, and mediated presence.

The Herald model thrives in digital spaces through multimedia evangelization and algorithmic reach, extending the Gospel's proclamation beyond traditional boundaries. In the cyberchurch, the Herald model finds dynamic expression through livestreamed preaching, short-form theological content, and interactive digital storytelling that amplify the Church's evangelistic voice. Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and podcasting serve as contemporary pulpits, while algorithmic reach enables the Gospel to penetrate diverse audiences across linguistic, cultural, and generational divides. This model resists reduction to mere information delivery by cultivating authentic engagement, theological dialogue, and spiritual formation in the digital public square.

As Servant, the Church advocates for justice to foster equality. It engages in digital pastoral care, online advocacy, and virtual accompaniment, embodying justice and compassion in networked communities. In the cyberchurch, the Servant model flourishes through responsive digital ministries that prioritize care, justice, and relational presence. Online pastoral care, whether through prayer chats, video counselling, or social media engagement, offers spiritual support in moments of vulnerability, affirming the Church's commitment to accompaniment in virtual spaces. Simultaneously, digital advocacy mobilizes faith communities around issues like mental health, climate justice, and human rights, transforming the Church into a compassionate agent of solidarity within the algorithmic rhythms of online life.

Finally, the Community of Disciples model deepens through shared leadership, relational presence, and spiritual formation in interactive, decentralized environments, where discipleship unfolds through digital solidarity and discernment. Together, these models reveal how ecclesial identity and mission adapt meaningfully within the anthropological space of the internet.

Dulles warns against the temptation to reduce the Church to a singular conceptual framework. No isolated model can adequately capture the Church's theological, spiritual, institutional, and historical complexity. To engage this multifaceted reality, Dulles proposed a method of "mental juggling," whereby multiple models are held in dynamic tension, allowing their interplay to reveal the richness of ecclesiology. This approach resists reductionism and fosters a theology of complementarity rather than competition. Each model contributes distinct insights while also exposing limitations that are counterbalanced by others. The task is not to privilege one image over the rest, but to recognize that diverse models have emerged across historical and cultural contexts to illuminate the Church's identity as the Body of Christ. Such theological agility is essential for responding to the evolving signs of the times.

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