A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF THE VIRTUAL CHURCH ON THE PRACTISE OF CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY

Stephen Obock Oloo

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century is undoubtedly characterized by advancement in technology and globalization. The use of; WhatsApp, Tweeter, Facebook, blogs, e-mails and online chatting tools has become a common phenomenon in the 21st century as means of communication and platforms for social interaction and business operations. The Church, being part of the global society has also been impacted by these developments in the social networks.

Tele-evangelism has significantly been used by churches and church related ministries in advancing the gospel and reaching out to many across the globe. The 21st century has witnessed an emerging phenomenon where some churches are not just using the websites and internet services to make announcements, advertise their programs and share the gospel to those in the social platforms, instead some have gone completely virtual in their operations lacking any physical interaction with their membership. They are establishing internet congregations and creating online sacred space and spiritual communities and essentially eliminating the need for assembly.

The church has traditionally been the place where Christians gather for spiritual nourishment. It is through the assembly of believers that the church has administered important activities and functions such as baptism and the Holy Communion among other practices. The unity of the local church has also been historically sustained through discipline and appropriate leadership structures at the local church. The clergy have historically been expected to be men and women known to the congregants and of high moral standing in the society. To many people, the physical gathering has been the only means to demonstrate commitment to the body of believers through attendance of functions organized by the Church.

The online social capabilities have enabled the establishment of virtual churches which have effectively eliminated the need for a physical assembly. The research problem is hinged on the elimination of the Christian physical assembly which is a key historical practise by the church that has been followed by Christians for centuries. How can we have and do Church without the physical assembly?

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The presence of God has been associated with Mathew 18:20 "*For where two or three gather in my name, there am in the midst of them" (KJV).* The promise applies to the public worship by believers. The virtual church opens a new perspective as far as the above scripture is concerned. If the Christian assembly is important, can we achieve assembly without necessarily having a physical meeting? What is the impact of eliminating the physical assembly from the Christian experience? This research attempted to address these questions among others that are related directly to the physical assembly. This is a qualitative research whose main objective was to critically evaluate the impact of the virtual church as an evolving ecclesiology in the 21st century on the physical assembly. The research sought to analyse the impact of eliminating the assembly and to propose ways of integrating the virtual reality in the church. The researcher used the reconstructive aspect of phenomenology to suggest ways of integrating the virtual church into the historical and biblical practise of Christian assembly.

The researcher used the phenomenological framework found in Hegel's work "The Phenomenology of Spirit" and complimented this approach by using the four-fold schema model suggested by Daniel Akin and discussed in detail under section 3.1 of this report. Phenomenology views religion as a social and cultural phenomenon and attempts to rationalise religious diversity via the universalising concept of divine essence. The researcher also attempted to analyse the operations of the virtual church and how it is affecting the Christians' physical assembly. To achieve this, the researcher randomly interacted with members from selected virtual churches using e-mails and online chats. Responses from members on the online chats and e-mails received were critically analysed by reference to biblical text and scripture

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