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Phygital Disciple-making: A Response to the

PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic affected every aspect of human life and resulted in new “social distancing” norms. One direct result of that isolation was high mental distress, impacting crucial aspects of people’s lives and interactions. After its first lockdown in mid-March 2020, India and many other countries took many temporary measures to keep the population safe. Among these was the temporary closure of worship centers and schools. These communities had to find new ways to operate and fulfill their mission.

Disciple-making is at the core of the Christian faith. The teacher-student relationship is essential to introduce students to Jesus while helping them trust and follow Him. The essence of that process is teaching all that Jesus taught His disciples and modeling it in everyday life. Learning and growth is a lifelong journey that relies on social interactions.

Since the popularization of the Internet, socialization has been happening in the phygital¹ world, a virtual space that bridges the gap between the physical and digital worlds. This model of human interaction intensified

during the pandemic. In 2022, the authors of this article conducted a quantitative study of Seventh-day Adventist church members in India. Using simple random sampling, a questionnaire was distributed among the sample population by electronic media (i.e., e-mail, WhatsApp, and Messenger). A total of 372 responses were recorded for data analysis using percentage, mean, median, mode, and correlational methods. This study’s guiding research questions were: *How did the pandemic affect human interaction regarding social distancing and mental distress? How did that affect Christian religiosity? What missiological response would address the fallout from the crisis and prepare for the future?* Applying the findings, the study supports phygital disciple-making as one method of dealing with social distancing during the pandemic, the mental distress it caused, and how to navigate new social configurations.

The Experience of “Seeing but Not Touching”

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in history’s greatest and most extensive isolation events. Lockdowns were used to stop the virus from spreading.² The pandemic’s

influence on humankind was severe, as the deadly virus took millions of lives. The whole globe was put under lockdown. People lost their lives, jobs, basic necessities, easy access to medical care and education, and the virus caused deprivation in every aspect of life.³ During this crisis, people were secluded in their homes. This seclusion led to several mental health issues and heightened negative emotions such as loneliness, shame, guilt, and fear. An article by Hwang et al. published in *International Psychogeriatrics* reports that:

“Being lonely has several adverse impacts on mental health. Reduced time in bed spent asleep (7 percent reduced sleep efficiency) and increased wake time after sleep onset have been related to loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2002; Fässberg et al., 2012). Increased depressive symptoms may also be caused by loneliness, poor self-rated health, impaired functional status, vision deficits, and a perceived negative change in the quality of one’s life (Lee et al., 2019). A systematic review of suicide risk also found that loneliness is associated with both suicide attempts and completed suicide among older adults (Fässberg et al., 2012). Loneliness, along with depressive symptoms, are related to worsening cognition over time.”⁴

Besides loneliness, shame and guilt are two distinct, unpleasant, self-conscious emotions the pandemic elicited.⁵ The threat of the deadly COVID-19 virus raised doubts, fear, and confusion in people’s minds.⁶ This has been identified as one of the contributing elements to spiritual deprivation, the perception that God’s presence and intervention in the world are no longer active.⁷

Unlike birds and other animals, which are known for “territoriality,” a social-distancing behavior, humans are more likely to practice “physical distancing,” merely distancing but not claiming territory. However, the distancing causes isolation and communication deprivation, which have dissocialized individuals. Fear of the unknown has been inculcated in everyone, creating suspicion and “guesstimation” about others. Sikali mentions that social distancing poses the risks of increased social rejection, more impersonality and individuality, and a loss of community. It negatively impacts learning and growth and prevents people from adequately socializing, an essential human need. These measures sent a

powerful psychological message: fear of others and the notion that members of the community are possible carriers of dangerous viruses and life-threatening illnesses.⁸

Mandy Oaklander observes that handshakes are only one type of contact that has vanished because of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ Hugs, high fives, tentative back pats, shoulder squeezes, and all the other little points of touch that humans use when standing closer than six feet apart have also become less common. Likely, the effects of social distancing will still be felt long after the pandemic has subsided. In a collectivist society such as the Indian one, where human contact is highly valued

and people express themselves by touching, hugging, shaking hands, and even touching feet,¹⁰ social distancing tends to have a bigger impact.

Technology, over time, had already facilitated physical distancing. People have worked from home, used various technologies to attend school virtually, stayed in touch with family and friends, or even shopped for medicines and groceries.¹¹ However, the stay-at-home policies implemented during the pandemic led most of the world to adopt the notion of “seeing but not touching.” The question remains: How will human beings, as social animals, function after the stay-at-home policies have ended? Once physical contact has resumed, will fear of contact with

others remain?¹² People depend on one another for many things, including interaction, functioning, and survival.

The Inception of Virtual Rendezvous in Education

The COVID-19 pandemic presented obstacles that necessitated a complete transition from conventional in-person to virtual or digital learning and engagement for all population sectors. The large-scale adoption of virtual rendezvous in education became essential to keep teachers and students connected amid the crisis. Consistent with the Adventist philosophy of education, school leaders sought to incorporate discipleship, which prioritizes comprehensive, wholistic growth, during this period of change. Instructors adopted technology as a tool for not only imparting information but also for helping students develop analytical reasoning abilities and emotional acumen amidst these challenging circumstances.

Through the effective, practical application of digital tools, students could engage virtually and discover future

Consistent with the Adventist philosophy of education, the incorporation of discipleship, which prioritizes comprehensive, wholistic growth, was successfully assimilated into this period of change.

opportunities as they navigated through various online platforms designed for e-learning. Therefore, although these technological tools cannot entirely substitute for the inherent value of face-to-face classroom engagement, they offered promising avenues for augmenting educational encounters during this period and continue to do so, as students have returned to in-person learning.

During the pandemic, connecting virtually offered hope—the opportunity to see and hear others, to keep working despite the conditions, and to reduce the spread of the virus. Many businesses were also able to save money since employees could not travel.¹³ While the circumstances initially necessitated these virtual rendezvous, this method of communication may have lasting value even after the situation has returned to normal. The innate adaptability of the educational process, and the tools used to facilitate teaching and learning, enable us to customize and consider students' complex and dynamic needs. Therefore, “educating during crisis” has opened new possibilities whereby we can leverage existing technological resources available today for academic progress now and in the future.

For many students, educators, and educational administrators, the pandemic exacerbated concerns about access to education and even decisions about the viability of pursuing higher education and professional training. According to various reports, the closure of schools during the pandemic may have impacted more than a billion children globally.¹⁴ Schools were swiftly closed with no time to plan how to proceed. Educators and students had to adjust quickly to new and ever-changing situations.¹⁵ Virtual educational meetings and activities became widely employed, indicating a shift to new cyberspace frontiers.¹⁶

According to Li and Lalani, even before COVID-19, the education technology market was already growing. It is expected to reach a total market size of \$354 billion by 2025. Since COVID-19, there has been a substantial increase in the utilization of language applications, virtual tutoring, video conferencing tools, and online-learning software.¹⁷ Sherman reported in 2020 that Zoom video-conferencing software jumped 30-fold in April as the COVID-19 pandemic forced millions to work, learn, and socialize remotely.¹⁸ According to Zipia.com, Zoom had 10 million daily meeting participants in December of 2019, but by the end of 2022, 300 million people attended meetings on Zoom every day.¹⁹

Anderson, Rainie, and Vogels reported on research that asked 915 innovators, developers, business and policy leaders, researchers, and activists to consider what life would be like in 2025 after the global pandemic. Respondents said that relationships with technology would deepen as larger segments of the population became

more reliant on digital connections for work, education, health care, daily commercial transactions, and essential social interactions.²⁰

It is evident that although technology's capacity to connect people may not be new, the impact, influence, and implementation of a virtual lifestyle became evident during the pandemic. Almost every aspect of life had to be adapted to the new reality during the crisis.

The Impact of Social Distancing on Christian Religiosity

The socially isolated lifestyle also had its impact on religiosity. Online worship services were the most emblematic change during the pandemic. In the United States, a survey pointed out that while 91 percent of churches closed their buildings to the public, more than 80 percent of assiduous Christians indicated that their church was offering internet or television services, and 57 percent of these adults were watching programming in this way due to the pandemic.²¹ This includes young people who remained at home during school closures.

During the pandemic, religious venues were closed in India, and all religious activities were suspended until the Indian government released Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). Religious services were then conducted using the SOP respecting social distancing and other norms. Despite different views on the issue, a few churches in India started to conduct online worship in August 2020.²² In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the congregations adopted online platforms to conduct their worship services and other functions, using Zoom, Google Meet, and YouTube.

A Quantitative Study Among Seventh-day Adventists in India

A quantitative study of Seventh-day Adventist church members in India was conducted to describe the impact of social distancing on people and their spiritual lives. Using simple random sampling technique, a Google Forms questionnaire was distributed among the sample population by electronic media (i.e., e-mail, WhatsApp, and Messenger). The Cronbach's Alpha of the 25 items measured on the 5-point Likert scale is 0.841. A total of 371 responses were recorded and analyzed. Descriptive statistical mean and percentage analysis were major tools used in addition to qualitative content analysis.

In the sample demographics, 69 percent were male, 30 percent were female, and 0.3 percent declined to reveal their gender. Almost all the respondents (93 percent) were in the age group of 18 to 36 years old (7 percent were older than 37 years of age). In addition, 83 percent were single, and 88 percent did not have children. That indicated that most of the respondents were young people (or young adults) and unmarried. Other



relevant information: Most respondents had been Christians for most of their lives; a total of 96 percent were members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and 67 percent said they had attended an Adventist school.

Limited Socialization

Four major observations were made based on the responses, the first relating to limited socialization. Ninety percent of the respondents said that the social structure had changed how people connect. Another 63 percent said the pandemic affected their societal relationships with their neighbors.

Although social media and other online communication platforms were helpful during the pandemic crisis, they were limited in their ability to replace the emotional support received from the actual presence of people. Maslow identified two needs that those resources could not satisfy: the need for social connection and love from others.²³ That social disconnect gives rise to frustration, anxiety, and anger, among other negative emotions, which are not beneficial for one's mental health.

Confidence in God

Respondents were asked if the pandemic gave rise to doubts about the existence of God or any other doubt in general. While most responded that the pandemic did not give rise to any doubt (more than 60 percent average), the remaining respondents expressed feelings of doubt and fear resulting from the crises (40 percent). Of this group, a surprisingly small portion (9 percent) responded assertively that the pandemic gave rise to doubts about the existence of God. Doubt and unsurety

are the first steps in forming a gap in a relationship and can result in mental distress. Specifically, unsurety about the existence of God implies that the person questions how such a pandemic can occur if there is a God in control. This state of mind quickly results in frustration and possible depression. The 40 percent who expressed feelings of doubt and fear may not be in constant doubt about the existence of God but circumstantial doubt due to the crisis. Other surveys have shown that doubting one's faith during a crisis is a very common phenomenon.²⁴

According to Hall, "The COVID-19 pandemic tests everyone's spiritual wellbeing, atheists and believers alike. . . . People in spiritual distress often no longer believe the world is a safe place. They might lose hope and have a difficult time finding meaning and purpose in what's happening to them. For a religious person, that often takes the form of losing faith in a loving and merciful God after witnessing a tragic event. But even those who don't pray to a higher power still usually have some belief in how the world works which gives them a sense of safety and security. Serious illness and tragic events can challenge these anchors and throw a person into turmoil."²⁵

Doubts and questions are not necessarily deleterious to developing one's faith; it all depends on how these doubts are addressed. Left without intervention and support, this state of mind may lead to frustration and other negative feelings. A significant concern is that although the church and schools typically offer help during these times, this was challenging for church and education leaders during the pandemic.

Greater Proximity to God

Collected data from the authors' study revealed that this pandemic brought a small percentage of people closer to God. Although it may seem like a positive outcome, the follow-up question is this: Why did people come closer to God in such perilous times? The answer is *fear*. The pandemic created much panic worldwide. There was no cure for the disease, uncountable deaths, a scarcity of resources to sustain life, and uncertainty about everything else. The pandemic fostered deeper contemplation about life in the minds of many people.

It was essential to determine whether it is conceivable for people to feel alone and experience a spiritual void despite their perception of having an intimate relationship with God. An average of 20 percent in the authors' survey responded that they felt that way despite coming closer to God during the pandemic. The data showed that people could be far from God when they think they are close to God, and all these phenomena are cognitive states that lead to frustration and anxiety.

Scope of Discipleship

Questionnaire responses to the authors' survey revealed that respondents had great expectations of their pastors as their spiritual guides. This included the campus pastor, chaplains, and religious leaders in schools. There was a positive correlation coefficient (value of +1.0) as far as the respondents' expectation that the spiritual leader should call them or listen to their struggles at least once a week. People look up to pastors and spiritual leaders as counselors and guides during challenging times. They rely on words of encouragement and promises from the Word of God to help lighten their troubled minds and reaffirm their faith and confidence in God.

Collected data also revealed a positive correlation coefficient (+1.0) about respondents' desire to have their church friends talk to and physically meet them occasionally. Students on college and university campuses also benefit from this type of interaction with one another and community members.

Virtually, if Not Physically

One central and core observation in the authors' survey was the respondents' desire to develop and grow in their relationship with God. Although the pandemic has been frustrating and has kept people distant from one another, 90 percent of respondents said they wanted to get closer to God. About 70 percent of the respondents would prefer an online worship service if they could not meet in a physical church. This is the scope and opportunity for virtual discipleship in practice.

Phygital Disciple-making as a Missiological Response

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested people's faith and left religious leaders with many challenges. According to a Pew Research Center survey released in December 2021, 29 percent of U.S. adults said they had no religious affiliation (an increase of 6 percentage points from 2016), with Millennials leading that shift.²⁶

Each generation is characterized by a crisis, according to academics. The Vietnam War impacted Baby Boomers, the AIDS epidemic impacted Generation X, and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack and the 2008 economic crisis impacted Generation Y (also known as Millennials). Now, scholars point out that the COVID-19 pandemic will be defining for Generation Z (those born between 1995-2012). These are possible influences of the crisis on the development of these young people: a more independent political position, a more pointed sense of inclusiveness, and an even more entrepreneurial and creative attitude. Finally, this generation will be even more interested in volunteering than Generation Y.²⁷

However, all this will continue to happen in a different social space. Generations Z (ages 12 to 28 years) and Alpha (0 to 11 years) youth were born in a digital world. They have only known a world with computers and mobile phones. Technology is an extension of their way of knowing and relating to the world. Additionally, for them, the face-to-face and virtual dimensions function as one reality (phygital). After all, social media is not just a place to share information but, above all, to be social.

One common objection to using social media for worship or discipleship points to the limitation of virtual socialization—the absence of physical contact. But, as Mulinshas suggested, “to argue that face-to-face connection is the only valid form of spiritual relationship is to argue that our spiritual connection with God, not yet face-to-face, is lacking or somehow ‘less real.’ The Spirit of God transcends space and distance. He is able to usher His presence into the lives of those who earnestly seek Him. One day in heaven our connection with our Creator will be greatly enhanced. We will see Him face-to-face. But until then, our connection with God is every bit as real and profound, or He would change the way we interact with Him because He wants to connect intimately with His children.”²⁸

Successful discipleship in the digital space requires intentional efforts to build relationships and maintain connections. For online discipleship to thrive, digital disciples must be engaged and trained. Digital discipleship must move beyond posting Bible passages on social media platforms, sharing links to resources, or colorful posters announcing an event or concert. For ministry in the digital space to be successful, it must “place itself into the context of the digital lives of youth and young adults.”²⁹

To do this, there must be planned efforts to build meaningful connections through conversations about living as a young person or young adult, discussions about beliefs and doubts, and assurances that behind the digital platforms are genuine, faithful individuals that care. Hunt emphasizes that “youth and other faith leaders should think of the digital space as ministerial oratories, places that are limitless in how the teachings and traditions are shared and how far they may reach.”³⁰

Two other vital observations: (1) effective communication depends on the language employed and the medium used to reach people in various demographics, and (2) discipleship assumes a journey shared by faith leaders and their disciples, which includes navigating the digital world.³¹

The possibilities for online discipleship are almost endless (see Resources for Digital Discipleship). But it depends on the strategic positioning of the church and its schools in ways that allow them to answer questions, provide comfort, meet needs, empower members and students, support social media influencers, build digital communities, and show Jesus’ love compellingly.³²

Conclusion

It has been suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic is not a blizzard but the beginning of a little ice age—“a once-in-a-lifetime change that is likely to affect our lives and organizations for years.”³³ There is no going back to normal; *change* is the operative word. And possibly the most difficult change for people is “to set aside confidence in their current playbook as quickly as possible.”³⁴ While retaining the essential values and beliefs, it is time to tap into the current creative potential to develop a new vision.

On the one hand, during the period of confinement with COVID, many people had more time to re-engage with forgotten projects and hobbies, deal with personal challenges, and reflect on decisions and relationships, including spiritual ones; on the other hand, pastors and religious leaders also had the opportunity to reflect on fundamental ecclesiastical understandings. In times of crisis, when facilities and comforts are no longer available, there is the possibility of rediscovering the true essence of

systems and organizations. The timing is fundamentally important for a decision: to recover beliefs and make meaningful changes or to preserve the status quo?³⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused much devastation around the world. A positive outlook, however, can attempt to identify opportunities in that context. As people were forced to learn how to navigate the virtual environment in many dimensions of life, includ-

Resources for Digital Discipleship

Jamie Jean Schneider Domm, *Digital Strategy for Reaching Young Professionals* (Columbia, Md.: North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, 2020). The author, the digital strategist for the North American Division, prepared this free resource to facilitate the use of digital tools and social media to reach the 18- to 30-year-old demographic. Available for download here: https://www.sdadata.org/uploads/8/1/9/8/81986746/final_digital_strategy_for_reaching_young_professionals_august_2020.pdf.

_____, “**5 Steps to Becoming a Digital Evangelist**” (2020): <https://www.sdadata.org/digital-evangelism-blog/category/digital-discipleship>. Schenier Domm outlines five steps educators and others involved in ministry can use to engage on digital platforms and social media: (1) Determine your target audience and platforms; (2) Develop a strategy; (3) Research relevant content ideas; (4) Make time for engagement and community building; and (5) Engage in digital door-knocking.

Seth Pierce, *Social Media 101* (Lincoln, Neb.: AdventSource, 2020). This resource is a well-crafted guidebook for anyone stepping into the social-media landscape. It is designed to answer a variety of questions, such as what social media is, which platforms work best for different audiences, social-media etiquette, and how to use the various platforms effectively. Pierce provides practical, clear guidelines for engaging online. Available from AdventSource: <https://www.adventsource.org/store/adult-ministries/communication/leadership/social-media-101-40326>.

Rachel Lemons Aitken, “Digital Discipleship,” *Ministry* 91:5 (2019): 23-25: <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2019/05/Digital-discipleship>. Rachel Lemons Aitken, founder of Digital Discipleship in the Australian Union (South Pacific Division), offers food for thought for anyone making a foray into digital discipleship. While the emphasis is specific to churches, many of the principles can be applied effectively in education.

The North American Division’s Social Media and Big Data website (<https://www.sdadata.org/>) offers many tips, videos, and links to informative blog posts for those using social media to connect and engage in ministry.

The Trans-European Division’s *Communication and Media Guide* is another practical resource with templates and guides to create an effective social-media presence for discipleship. Available for download here: <https://ted.adventist.org/news/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/TED-Communications-Media-Guide-2.0-INTERACTIVE-COMPRESSED.pdf>.

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists offers several opportunities for training in the area of digital discipleship. Visit <https://connect.adventist.org/digital> to learn how to become a Digital Missionary, and view “Social Media 101: Why Be Online and Why Now” with the team from Adventist World Radio: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jil4eZWKn8>.

ing religiosity, perhaps that combination of physical and digital can have a lasting effect by providing a viable environment for fruitful spiritual growth. ✉

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