One and a Half Metres from God:

Examining the effects of moving the church community online due to COVID-19 on personal religiosity at the Motion Church.

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Abstract

Facing a global pandemic, the Motion Church, which is an evangelical church situated in Utrecht, the Netherlands, was forced to move all church events online. The switch to online church impacted the way through which the community manifested itself. This thesis analyses the question of how and why moving the Motion Church community online impacted personal religiosity. Through the study of worship and Bible study as sensational forms, as well the different platforms used, it can be seen that the online community has led to a lack of intimacy and meaningful communication. For some members, it meant that it became more difficult to have religious experiences and a good relationship with God. This leads to the conclusion that being online has distanced people from God.

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Introduction

One and a half metres is a distance which will be bitterly remembered down the years. Had I been told six months ago, when I first chose my thesis topic, I definitely would not have expected this number to impact me so greatly. However, here I am dedicating my entire thesis to the importance of what this number represents to the religious community at the Motion Church. The importance of this number is that it has become symbolic for social distancing measures implemented against the Corona pandemic. One of these measures was that many events had to be moved online. In the case of the Motion Church, which was the fieldwork location for this thesis, the measure had a significant impact on the community because the community was also forced to move online. However, an online community manifests itself differently from an offline community, and this change led to people feeling more distanced from God. This is because, as this thesis will show, the community plays an important role in personal faith. By personal faith or personal religiosity, what is meant is how churchgoers experience their relationship with God and how they have access to God. This thesis will therefore analyse the relations between online community and personal faith by answering the question of how and why moving the Motion Church community online impacted personal religiosity. Nevertheless, the reason for the title choice 'One and a half metres from God' is because the number 'one and a half' represents the move online and its impact on the community, which in turn meant people became distanced from God as well as from each other.

Furthermore, it is necessary to take into account that this thesis was originally supposed to analyse the formation of personal identity amongst religious youths in a secular environment. The Motion Church was therefore chosen as it has an emphasis on pop-culture for the younger generations. However, the corona outbreak led to the thesis analysing a different aspect of the church because the pandemic revealed new interesting and relevant problems faced by the Motion Church. It is my hope that through this thesis, new insight can be obtained for how to deal with these problems. Additionally, despite the change of research theme, the Motion Church's evangelical nature still made it an ideal location to analyse the new topic, and so the fieldwork and methods were still applicable. The methods themselves will be discussed in further details in the methodology section of the thesis.

The fieldwork location was the Motion Church, a church situated in Utrecht, the Netherlands, that prides itself with being modern, open, and international.[1] It was set up by a couple, Pastor Rob and Pastor Beatrice, and has been a home to almost 200 church attendees. It is an evangelical church, meaning that the main goals of the church are to form and maintain a personal relationship with God and spread the message of salvation through Christ.[2] In addition, there is an emphasis on the importance of the word of God in the Bible.[3] It is also necessary to understand that within the context of the Motion Church the transcendent and its accompanying experiences refers to God and becoming close to Him. Moreover, the Motion Church can best be described as a church with a contemporary approach as it uses a lot of modern technology and pop-culture, such as having worship songs in a pop music style, or making references to popular TV shows. The contemporary element mixed with the evangelical aspects of the Motion Church is what initially intrigued me about the location because it was a different church experience than the more traditional ones I had attended when I was younger. I was also interested in learning how people could form personal relationships with God, as this was a new concept to me..

Unfortunately, midway through March a crisis spread across the globe under the form of a pandemic caused by a virus. The virus is named COVID-19, but is often referred to as the Coronavirus. It is a virus which manifests itself through flu-like symptoms and transmits rapidly, from coughs to merely touching the same door handle. As a result, many governments decided to take measures and bring their countries into partial or full lockdowns. In the Netherlands, the government opted for a so-called "intelligent lockdown", meaning that citizens were still allowed to walk around freely, but were encouraged to stay indoors and partake in social distancing. Restaurants, stores, and schools closed, either due to government orders or simply because general measures could not be followed if they chose to remain open.

In addition to the shutting down of sectors, the government also imposed a 'one and a half metres distance' rule, meaning that everyone must keep a minimum of

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[1] Camilla, Interview about online and offline experiences at the Motion Church by Marie Claessen, Skype, April 24th 2020.[10] ; Brennan, Voicenote 2 about community interactions with livestreams, Whatsapp, May 4th 2020; & Janneke, Interview about online and offline experiences at the Motion Church by Marie Claessen, Skype, April 24th 2020. [7].

[2] Tanja M., Luhrmann. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.13.

[3] James S., Bielo. *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study*. New York: New York University Press, 2009. 3.

one and a half metres from each other. Due to this, other rules extended to the gathering of people. From March 12th onwards, meetings with over 100 people were prohibited. This meant that the Motion Church could no longer hold their regular Sunday services, nor any other events. Although at the point in time at which I am writing this thesis the gathering measures have been made more flexible, during the time of my fieldwork this was not yet the case. The Motion Church was therefore forced to close its physical doors, but that did not mean that my time at the Motion Church was over. Within three days, the Motion Church had switched itself to being an online church, gradually expanding from only live streaming Sunday services on YouTube[4] to hosting Zoom[5] prayer sessions and Easter Brunch Instagram participation live streams[6]. Nonetheless, switching to online platforms means more than simply participating in church events through a screen. The dynamics of the church, such as its community and its role as a gateway to experiencing and establishing a relationship with God, were also changed during this switch.

These changes and their impacts will be analysed by looking at two different ways through which the community can affect religiosity. The first way, discussed in the first chapter, is how the community acts as an enhancer of religious experiences within worship. This will be analysed by studying how it amplifies the effects of music during worship, and how it creates an atmosphere for accessing God. This chapter will also look into the details of the specific online platforms used for online church and why they affect the community. The second way, as will be discussed in the second chapter, is how the community can provide insight and support for faith through Bible study and motivation. The different elements of community in Bible study, such as communication and intimacy, will be studied in both the offline and online context. This chapter will also cover the role of the community in providing motivation and why some members need it more than others. Through the discussion of these topics, the notion of personal needs in relation to others will also be covered.

Furthermore, the relation between religiosity and community will be studied through Birgit Meyer's theory on religion as mediation in which the concept of sensational forms play a central role. Meyer is a German anthropologist who is now a professor of Religious Studies and has written multiple works on sensational forms.

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[4] An online video-sharing platform on which people can livestream videos
[5] A video calling platform for meetings in big groups
[6] An online photograph-sharing platform which enables people to livestream themselves and add participants who can also livestream

Sensational forms are 'relatively fixed, [authorised] modes of invoking, and [organising] access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious [organisations]'.[7] They are ways through which the transcendent can be accessed from the immanent world.[8] Furthermore, Meyer describes collective rituals as sensational forms since they induce specific feelings in participants that help access the transcendent.[9] Examples of collective rituals as sensational forms at the Motion Church are worship and Bible study. These two practices will be used as context within which the consequences of moving online will be analysed. These practices are also good examples of the role of the community within sensational forms.

Worship and Bible study were chosen as examples because they are rituals during which God is made more accessible to the believer. Worship takes place on multiple occasions, such as during Sunday services or special worship nights. It makes God accessible because its purpose is to experience God and invite His presence into the building through songs. The community plays a central role in worship as it is most often done within a group (this shall be discussed in further depth in the chapter about community as an enhancer). Likewise, Bible study as a sensational form also renders God more accessible by providing insight into one's relationship with God, and it also shows the importance of the community. This is because Bible study consists of reading and discussing the Bible within a group, meaning that people can share ideas on how God works and how to build a relationship with Him. Since both worship and Bible study were moved online during the pandemic, they can be used, within the context of sensational forms, to understand how personal religiosity is affected by having a community online.

Moreover, the impact of moving church events online will also be analysed using concepts from Campbell's *Digital religion: Understanding Religious Practice In New Media Worlds* (2013), in which community online versus offline is discussed, and how the space of interactions has changed.[10] Offline church refers to church as a

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[7] Birgit, Meyer. "Religious Sensations. Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion" *Inaugural lecture, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,* 1 January 2006. 9.

[8] Birgit, Meyer."Mediation and the Genesis of Presence. Towards a Material Approach to Religion". *Inaugural lecture, Utrecht University*, 19 October 2012. 24.

[9] Birgit, Meyer. "Religious Sensations. Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion" . 9.

[10] Heidi A.,Campbell. *Digital religion: Understanding Religious Practice In New Media Worlds,* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

physical event which includes face-to-face interactions with other people and the environment. Online church, on the other hands, refers to a church which is manifested through online platforms such as YouTube or social media. This type of church does not have the element of physical interactions because all interactions happen behind a screen. The different spaces available for online and offline church are important ideas to understand because the change in platform affects how the community can manifest itself, which in turn can affect how the community helps religiosity.

Lastly, it is necessary to take into account that since fieldwork was done, my body was used as a tool for research, meaning that the data were influenced by my own experiences. This is especially important to take into account as I do not identify as religious and do not consider myself as having a relationship with God. Additionally, the interviews reflected church-goers' own experiences. The results are therefore specific to my experiences at the Motion Church, as well as the experiences of the members interviewed. However, this does not mean that the results cannot be used to understand the impact of corona measures on other religious groups.

Fieldwork Location

In order to better answer this thesis' question, it is necessary to understand the context within which it will be answered. In this case, the context is the Motion Church, its events, and its community. As aforementioned, the Motion Church is an evangelical church, meaning that it's main purpose is to help its members form and maintain a relationship with God as well as spreading the Christian word. Many of the events at the Motion Church are therefore aimed at building a community and having a connection with God.

The most prominent event is the Sunday service. The church holds Sunday services every Sunday morning at 11 o'Clock in its building. A Sunday service consists of multiple parts. There is first the worship at the start of the service in order to invite God and create a spiritual atmosphere. This is done through the communal singing of worship songs, through which God can be addressed directly. Worship is then followed by a prayer during which special thanks are given to God for good

things that have happened, and during which certain prayer points are asked for, such as someone's recovery. Both the thanking and prayer points are sent in by church goers throughout the week. After prayer, the sermon's theme is announced and the sermon begins during which the speaker, who is often one of the Key Team members, discusses a Bible theme or Bible passage. The sermon ends with another prayer before the donation round begins. One more worship song is sung and the service ends. Services usually last between one and one and a half hours, yet when the church moved online, services tended to be shorter, around one hour only. When referring to the livestreams, I will be referring to the service as a whole that was filmed like a regular service but with less members and no audience.

Although the services are the main events at the Motion Church, other events are also hosted. For example, the Motion Church has a youth group called ONE for young adults aged 18-25. Once every month, a worship session will be organised with the ONE group. There are also weekly prayer nights every Wednesday, and there are biweekly Connect meetings, which is what the Motion Church calls Bible Study small groups. The Connect groups are led by other church goers and are very casual. Unlike the other events which take place at the church building, the Connect nights take place in people's homes. Lastly, the Motion Church offers an Alpha course, which is a course to learn about the Bible and to teach people how to deepen themselves in their faith. There are also special events, such as Baptism and Baby Declaration, which can take place during service. Special services will also be held on special days, such as the Easter service. A significant part of every event is that before and after them, there is often time for socialising with other church members, usually with drinks involved, either a *Koffie Uurtje* for coffee, or a *borrel* with some alcoholic beverages and snacks. [11]

During the events and socialising opportunities, the community plays an important role at the Motion Church, as was shown when Brennan, a member of the Key Team and one of my interviewees, mentioned how being open to newcomers and not leaving anyone out is very important to the church.[12] This is because it allows a community to form, a community which can help one's journey to God, and which

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[11] The Dutch are very fond of bonding over drinks such as coffee during their *Koffie Uurtjes* (Coffee hour) or their *borrels*,which are usually pre drinks before dinner (often beer or wine) accompanied by typical Dutch finger foods. These moments are very important in the Dutch community for socialising and this is reflected by how the Motion Church also uses these occasions for social bonding.
[12] Brennan, Interview about online and offline experiences at the Motion Church by Marie Claessen, Skype, April 29th 2020. [26].

can help spread the evangelical message further. Moreover, as explained in an interview with Julia, the leader of the Connect group I was a part of, the community can be divided in two categories: the structured and the unstructured community.[13] The structured community refers to the groups and teams offered by the church, such as the Connect and Alpha groups, and the multiple teams that help the church function. These teams include the Key Team[14], the Baptism Team[15], the Worship Team[16], the Ministry Team[17], the Tech Team[18], and many others. From my interviews, I came to the understanding that the structured community is an easy community to get into since its structure requires less active intentionality. It is also easier to access because it is offered to newcomers.[19] This can be confirmed by my personal experiences and how I easily found my Connect group to belong to through the help of others. However, this only applies to a certain extent. Within the structured community, it is easy to access Connect groups and Alpha groups. Yet, in order to become part of a team, such as the Worship Team, more intentionality is required since sometimes selections are held, or one must already be embedded within the general community. The second type of community is the unstructured community. This is the community which one forms with others through casual conversations and socialising, during moments such as the *Koffie Half-Uurtje* before or after events. The unstructured community can often be a gateway into the structured community. For example, it was through the unstructured community that I came to find my Connect group. I started a casual conversation with a member of ONE during a worship night, who then put me into contact with Julia. However, access into the unstructured community requires more effort than if the group had already been set up with scheduled meetings, meaning that it is more difficult to access.[20]

The two different types of community are important to understand since both were affected by the pandemic. The unstructured community suffered since there

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[13] Julia, Interview 1 about online and offline experiences at the Motion Church by Marie Claessen, Skype, April 26th 2020.[14].

[14] The Key Team is the main team in charge of the Motion Church and consists of the Pastor as well as other members who also occupy positions of leadership in the church's other teams, such as the Worship Team or the Ministry Team.

[15] The Baptism Team is the team in charge of performing Baptism.

[16] The Worship Team is the team in charge of performing worship, such as the singers and musicians.

[17] The Ministry Team helps people with their prayers during and after events.

[18] The Tech Team is responsible for all the technological sides of services, such as light and sound. Now that the church is online, working with the camera is also handled by the Tech Team.

[19] Camilla, Interview. [8]; & Julia, Interview 1, [14].

[20] Julia, Interview 1, [14].

were no longer opportunities for casual conversations. Structured communities, on the other hand, suffered less in the sense that things were still being organised online. Nevertheless, the dynamics of this community were still affected by the move to online platforms. Therefore, by understanding the different types of community, it becomes easier to understand how moving online has impacted the community in general, which in turn will help answer the questions discussed in this thesis.

Methodology

The chosen methodology for this thesis was fieldwork. Fieldwork consists of the researcher being present around the group they are studying. This enables the researcher to embed themself in the group to get deeper insights into people's lived experiences. This is done through observations and interactions.[21] As Graham Harvey, a Religious Studies professor in the UK, states in his work "Field research: participant observation" (2011), it is one of the better suited methods for studying rituals and everyday performances.[22] It was chosen because it is applicable to this thesis' research topic, which is about lived experiences and personal religiosity.

The fieldwork done for this thesis lasted four months. During the first month and a half, the fieldwork was done in person as I attended multiple events from the Motion Church, namely the Sunday services, Connect group meetings, and a ONE worship session. The remaining two months and a half were done online due to the governmental measures against the coronavirus, and were done by attending online church events. These events took place on different types of online platforms. For example, the Sunday services were live streamed through YouTube, meaning that the communication only flowed in one direction because people at home could see those on the livestream, but those in the live stream could not see the people at home. The Connect events and prayer nights were hosted through Zoom. Since Zoom is a video-conference platform, it meant that interactions went both ways and people could engage with others verbally. The different online platforms affected my personal observations because communication did not function in a similar way to face-to-face interactions. For example, due to the livestream's communication being one-

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[21] Graham, Harvey. "Field Research: Participant Observation". In *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* ed. Stausberg, Michael, and Steven Engler (New York: Routledge, 2011), 217-244. 239.
[22] Ibid. 218-219.

directional, I was not able to interact with others. Similarly, Zoom calls also affected observations because I was able to observe verbal communication, but not non-verbal cues. This meant that the switch to online church may have impacted the research methods to an extent, as communication was impacted. However, these differences mirrored the problems faced by the church goers, and so provided better and more relatable insights into how online community differed from offline community.

Moreover, multiple methods were used for data collection, such as participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and small talk. The data collected during the fieldwork was also combined with literature covering the themes and ideas of this thesis. This was done in order to embed the findings within the theoretical framework of community and religious experiences online. In addition, all names mentioned in this thesis are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. One of the methods used for data collection was participant observation. These are observations made at the location of the fieldwork, and can be made either by observing events from the side, or by fully participating in them.[23] For my research, I attended the above mentioned events and took notes of my observations, personal experiences, and thoughts and feelings. The notes I took were based on the community I observed at the Motion Church, both during offline interactions and during online interactions, as well as on the content of events such as Bible study discussions or worship sessions. Participant observation was an important method for data collection because it provided me with observations within which I could frame the data from interviews and small talk. As explained by Harvey, participant observations are necessary to get a proper understanding of practices and lived reality because it is through these observations that a researcher is able to properly pay attention to details and to reflect on what they are observing.[24] It hence enabled me to experience the church similarly to church goers, and deepen my understanding of people's thoughts and feelings.

Furthermore, another method used for data collection was holding interviews. Interviews are useful additions to observations as they provide deeper insights into personal experiences which the researcher may not be able to experience themself. In the case of my fieldwork, since I do not identify as religious myself and am thus not able to experience the transcendent in the same way as other church goers do, interviews enabled me to understand how a relationship with God could be

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[23] Ibid. 219.
[24] Ibid. 217-219.

experienced from a believer's perspective. The style of interviews used were semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews consist of asking a set of main questions whilst also enabling the interviewee to expand on their answers, and for related topics to be discussed. They are useful for research specifically about experiences because they enable personal topics to be covered as well as still directing the main focus to the themes of the research.[25] Structured interviews do not give space for further discussion, and unstructured interviews are not focused enough on a theme. The benefits of using semi-structured interviews as opposed to the other types is therefore that semi-structured interviews provide freedom within a thematic framework. Since this thesis' research required specific themes as well as personal experiences to be addressed, semi-structured interviews were thus the most suitable option. Additionally, semi-structured interviews also allowed interviewees to take liberties in interpreting community and faith in their own terms. This is equally important to understand since people's own interpretations of topics provide insight into their lived realities. The members interviewed were found through the small group I attended, and through Brennan, one of the Key Team members. I had to resort to the snowball sampling method, which is when interviewees are found through other participants, since Corona meant I could no longer meet people at the church. I therefore needed Brennan to help me find members. The disadvantage of this recruitment method is that there is a bias-risk, considering that people were chosen by other members. Especially within the context of the interviews for which the aims were clear, there could have been bias by picking people who would provide model answers.[26] Nevertheless, considering the circumstances which made it more difficult to find participants, snowball sampling was the best option.[27] Furthermore, this method also meant that I was able to interview members of the Worship Team and Key Team, members who I may not have had the opportunity to meet during the church's events as they were usually busy pre-and-post service.

Data was also collected through small talk, which are casual conversations that are not necessarily planned nor recorded. When things were still offline, small talk would occur before and after services or Bible studies. After the switch to online

[25] James, Moyer, James Ambrose, Jane Ritchie, and Jane Lewis. *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. London: Sage, 2003.111.

[26] Anna, Davidsson-Bremborg. "Interviewing". In *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* ed. Stausberg, Michael, and Steven Engler (New York: Routledge, 2011), 310-322. 314.

[27] Anna, Davidsson-Bremborg. "Interviewing". 314.

events, small talk still took place before the Bible study when members were waiting for everyone to join the group call and to update each other on the corona situation. Moreover, the Whatsapp group for the Bible study became more active, and the conversations held on there could be paralleled to small talk. Small talk not only enabled me to grow closer to the community myself, which gave me better insight into how the Motion Church community is formed, but it also allowed me to get more genuine opinions on the corona crisis, faith, and personal experiences. This is because there were not the same restrictions there would have been during a formal interview, such as people being recorded or specific questions being asked. On the other hand, small talk makes it more difficult to get formal consent from people, a problem which one does not face during interviews.[28] This limitation was dealt with by anonymising small talk and ensuring that people were aware that I was a researcher.

Moreover, another important aspect to remember is that the switch to online events meant that there were additional ethical considerations to take into account with the applied methods. As discussed by Communication Studies professor Mark Johns in his work "Ethical Issues in the Study of Religion and New Media*"* (2013)*,* doing fieldwork online leads to two issues: identity and privacy.[29] Both of these issues applied to the fieldwork done in this thesis. For identity, it is difficult to know who is being studied online since identity can easily be faked or anonymised. This was the case during my fieldwork when I was studying the comments posted during the Sunday service live streams. Although there were names for those who posted, it was not possible for me to check if the names really corresponded with the person commenting. Furthermore, this also led to issues of privacy and consent. The people commenting may not have been aware that I was carrying out fieldwork. This is where the matter becomes complex. Johns discusses the difficulties of judging what should be considered as private and public.[30] The comments are public, since anyone can access the livestream. However, they are also personal comments posted during the Sunday service. My reading of the comments could then be compared to overhearing a conversation at Church. This would mean their content is private, and

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[28] Anna, Davidsson-Bremborg. "Interviewing". In *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* ed. Stausberg, Michael, and Steven Engler (New York: Routledge, 2011), 310-322. 310-311.

[29] Mark D., Johns. "Ethical Issues in the Study of Religion and New Media". In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* ed by. Heidi A. Campbell, London: Routledge, 2013. 238-250. 240.

[30] Ibid. 242-243.

not public. Nonetheless, officially, their content is made public since it is accessible to everyone through the internet. Similar cases arose during the Easter Instagram livestream. It was accessible to anyone with Instagram. However, it was aimed at people from the church. Is the information shared then public or private? This can also be extended to the live streams in general. When doing fieldwork in real life, church members can see me, and hence know that I am present and taking notes. They are therefore also more aware of what to keep private or public in relation to me. However, online, there is no way for the church members to know that I am there listening to them and doing fieldwork.

Lastly, another important ethical aspect to online fieldwork mentioned by Johns is that anything online can be traced back.[31] In a face-to-face interaction, words that have been spoken cannot be found again. However, as the saying goes, whatever is put on the internet is there forever, meaning that a comment or observation from a livestream can still be searched and found online. This in turn would mean that the privacy and anonymity of the individuals concerned would be put at risk, and that when reading this thesis, it could be possible to trace back the people mentioned, despite the pseudonyms, and be able to attribute opinions from this thesis to them. This could lead to harm if people have said things that could affect their position or reputation at the church. In order to deal with these ethical issues, I have made sure to anonymise and paraphrase comments, and have communicated with participants from interviews about what they felt most comfortable with.

Despite the ethical difficulties with doing research online, I did find it to be easier in the sense that there was less pressure during note taking as no one could see me take notes, so I was able to do so without coming across as rude or disruptive. Nonetheless, I preferred doing the fieldwork in a physical setting since communication is easier than through the phone. This is because communication through video calls or texting feels less personal and also leaves room for misinterpretation. In addition, it lacks non-verbal cues which is a crucial element of communication. It also made it more difficult to schedule interviews because I had to wait for planned Zoom calls or text people, which felt more formal than walking up to someone at the church to ask for an interview. Yet despite these issues, I was still able to use alternative methods to communicate, such as using voice notes on Whatsapp

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[31] Ibid. 244.

instead of texting or phone calls as it is more casual. Recording interviews was also made easier through video calls in comparison to face-to-face interviews because there was less sound interference and the quality of the sound was clearer through a screen recording than a microphone. Overall, even if I needed to adapt to the obstacles of online fieldwork, the fieldwork was not impacted to a major extent as I was able to work around them and come up with new solutions. The problems faced also paralleled the struggles faced by the Motion Church itself, and therefore improved my understanding of them because I experienced them too.

Chapter 1: Enhancing religious experiences through community

Accessing and building a relationship with God is an essential aspect of evangelicalism. The community can help with this, as it can enhance religious experiences. The community's role in enhancing religiosity, and how this role changed by moving online, will be analysed in this chapter within the context of worship. First the essential elements of worship, which are music and the community, will be discussed and then linked together using Meyer's theory on sensational forms,[32] David Howes and John Blacking's theories on music and religious experiences,[33] and James Bielo and Katja Rakow's theories of atmosphere and immersion.[34] These will provide a better insight into why the community in addition to the music is necessary for a religious worship experience. This chapter will then analyse how worship has changed by being moved online, and how despite attempts to build a community, the platforms used for the online Motion Church are not sufficient enough for community building. This will be done using Hutching's work on different online churches. Furthermore, in order to gain a better understanding of why the move online and the different platforms have had the effects they had on religiosity, Leach's theory on religious thresholds will be used. Lastly, the chapter

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[32] Birgit, Meyer."Mediation and the Genesis of Presence. Towards a Material Approach to Religion".
[33] David, Howes. "Sensation". *Material Religion* 7, no.1 (2009): 92–99; & John, Blacking. *'A Commonsense View of All Music': Reflections on Percy Grainger's Contribution to Ethnomusicology and Music Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
[34] James S., Bielo. *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park*. New York: New York University Press, 2018; & Katja, Rakow. "The Light of the World: Mediating Divine Presence through Light and Sound in a Contemporary Megachurch." *Material Religion* 16, no. 1 (2020): 84-107.

will close off with a discussion of why people may have different needs for the community and are therefore more or less affected by the lack of community during worship.

Community as a medium for the transcendent

Using Birgit Meyer's theory on sensational forms, it can be understood how the community can act as an enhancer of religiosity, specifically through the sensational form of worship, since community plays a significant part in worship. When referring to worship, I am referring to the specific moment during services or other events when people participate in worship behaviour, such as singing. There are two aspects to worship that must be taken into account in order to have a full understanding of how worship acts as a sensational form. The first aspect is the music and how it affects people, and the second is the community. However, the role of the community can only be understood once the importance of the music has been discussed. At the Motion Church, worship consists of singing worship songs, and as American anthropologist Tanya Lurhmann discusses in her work *When God talks back* (2012)*, this music acts as a form of prayer.[35] The music during worship is necessary to access God because according to Meyer, it is a medium through which the transcendent can be reached.[36] This can be further understood using anthropologist David Howes's "Sensation"(2009).[37] In it, Howes describes how music can lead to a form of auditory driving that enhances religious experiences and makes people feel closer to God because it can put people in an altered state of consciousness.[38]

Furthermore, at the Motion Church, it is not just about the music in general, but about the specific kind of music. The music at Motion Church can best be described as mainstream pop music, as the music is played by a live band consisting of guitars, keyboards, bass, and drums. In addition, the lyrics also resemble pop love songs. The lyrics are about God's love and strength, and are sung *to* God rather than *about* God, something which makes the song more personal and is specific to

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[35] Tanja M., Luhrmann. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. 4.
[36] Birgit, Meyer. "Mediation and the Genesis of Presence. Towards a Material Approach to Religion". *Inaugural lecture, Utrecht University*, 19 October 2012. 25.
[37] David, Howes. "Sensation".
[38] David, Howes. "Sensation". 95-96.

evangelical worship.[39] For example, one of the songs I sang during my time at the Motion Church was called *Way Maker* and was a song to God about who God is for us : 'You are Way maker, miracle worker, promise keeper. Light in the darkness My God, that is who You are'. The words are similar to a mainstream pop love-song sung for one's lover. As Lurhmann describes it, during worship, 'the singer wants [God] so badly that the lyrics sound like a teenage fan's crazed longing for a teen idol she can touch'.[40] The songs therefore have a very intimate and contemporary mainstream-music element to them, which differs from other churches according to some of my interviewees, such as Julia. Julia, who not only is the leader of the Connect group I attended but is also a musician in the Worship Team, described how at her old church, they did not worship in this style. However, when she attended a Christian music festival called *Opwekking*, which worships in a similar fashion to the Motion Church, she was able to worship and experience God personally. It was then that she knew that this type of worship was what she wanted in order to strengthen her relationship with God, and what eventually led her to enjoy Motion Church.[41] This demonstrates that it is not only music in general which can help with religious experiences, but also the style of the music and worship.

Additionally, observations have shown that the music leads to the body being used as a type of medium through which to access God, for example, by dancing. When I was still attending the church physically, people would sing along to the worship music and move their bodies along to it, shifting their weight from one leg to another. As the songs progressed, some would start raising their hands to the ceiling as if they were reaching for something. Others would hold their hands open with their palms up at their waist level, as if they were carrying a tray. During small talk, I was told that this was a way to reach for, and receive, God.[42] Worship at the Motion Church hence shows how people can access God through their bodies as a medium. Moreover, the physical act of singing also enables people to access the transcendent. Francesca, one of my interviewees who is a vocalist in the Worship Team,

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[39] Ibid. 5.
[40] Ibid. 5.
[41] Julia, Interview 1. [52]-[54].
[42] Lydia, Small talk during the Koffie Half-Uurtje, Utrecht, March 8th 2020.

commented on how singing is a way to get closer to God.[43] Body and song (dancing and singing) are thus used as media to render the transcendent more accessible.

Nevertheless, there is another aspect involved in worship which enhances the role of music and the body. This aspect is the community. Francesca elaborated on her point by saying that through song, 'we bring each other into harmony and we want to get closer to each other to praise God'. She also considered her role as part of the Worship Team to be to bring people along the journey to God via songs.[44] This implies that the community plays an important part in worship since there needs to be an element of togetherness during the singing. John Blacking, who was a British ethnomusicologist, discusses this in his work *A Commonsense View of All Music': Reflections on Percy Grainger's Contribution to Ethnomusicology and Music Education* (1987). In it, he analyses the use of music in inducing certain feelings, and states that music can only achieve this effect if there is a social element to it.[45] This suggests that although the music serves as a medium for the transcendent, its role is enhanced by the community thus indicating the importance of community during worship.

In addition, the relation between music and community as an enhancer links to the notion of atmosphere. In her work "The Light of the World: Mediating Divine Presence Through Light and Sound in a Contemporary Megachurch" (2020), German religious studies professor Katja Rakow emphasises the importance of the atmosphere created during worship through space, light and sound, as well as the people involved. [46] This is related to the concept of the vertical and horizontal dimensions, in which the vertical faith is the personal faith and the horizontal dimension is the community. The horizontal dimensions help to create an atmosphere within which the vertical dimension is amplified. James Bielo, an American socio-cultural anthropologist, mentions a similar concept in his work *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park* (2018), in which he discusses the importance of immersion in religious theme parks.[47] Although worship is not the same as religious theme parks, the concept

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[43] Francesca, Interview about online and offline experiences at the Motion Church by Marie Claessen, Zoom, May 11th 2020. [6].
[44] Ibid.[6].
[45] John, Blacking. *'A Commonsense View of All Music': Reflections on Percy Grainger's Contribution to Ethnomusicology and Music Education*. 30-31.
[46] Katja, Rakow. "The Light of the World: Mediating Divine Presence through Light and Sound in a Contemporary Megachurch". 104.
[47] James S., Bielo. *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park*.

of immersion is still applicable. People are able to immerse themselves in religious experiences through their senses such as sight, sound, and touch.[48] This shows that the physical surroundings play an important role in creating an immersive atmosphere. At the Motion Church, the community amplifies these senses which therefore creates the atmosphere within which the transcendent is easier to access. It is for this reason that it can be considered an enhancer of religious experiences.

Furthermore, my personal experiences at the Motion Church's Sunday services mirror this. In order to understand the effects of worship, I decided to sing and participate, despite my discomfort of singing. During the first services I attended, my singing was not enthusiastic and I had only been partially involved. Nonetheless, I decided that I needed to start fully participating in the songs in order to have a better understanding of worship. As I started doing this, I noticed that I unconsciously would start to move my body along to the music like the other church goers. It was only when I reminded myself to take notes of the worship that I became aware of the extent to which I was participating, and that the discomfort I had initially felt was no longer there. Upon consideration, I came to the realisation that this change of experience happened because of the surrounding community. The singing I was doing now was done as part of the group, not as an individual, and the moment I let myself become part of the group, I was able to embed myself within the worship experience. I would best describe these moments as entering a state of mind during which I lost awareness of myself, and during which I was not properly mindful of my singing and dancing. Had the music not been there, and had the community not been there to carry me into the music, I would not have entered this state of mind. The community had thus created an atmosphere which amplified the role of the music and helped me experience what I did. A conversation I had with a woman named Lydia showed that she had had similar experiences. During small talk after a Sunday service, Lydia explained that at her old church, people were less invested in worship and experiencing God. As a result, she found it harder herself to properly experience God during worship.[49] However, at the Motion Church, the community created an atmosphere which encouraged a more intense worship sensation. Both Lydia's and my own experiences therefore imply that the surrounding community acts as a medium of the transcendent and thus has an impact on the intensity of worship.

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[48] Ibid. 93.
[49] Lydia, small talk after Sunday service, Utrecht, March 8th 2020.

Moreover, the importance of the community in worship is also emphasised by Meyer's notion of how the body can act 'as a producer, transmitter and receiver of the transcendent'.[50] The individual body can be regarded as a receiver of the transcend through song. However, it is possible to view the community as a body in itself, which can receive the transcendent. Consequently, based on personal experiences and interviews, I would then argue that the community as a body can also be regarded as a transmitter of the transcendent. During the Sunday service of March 1st 2020, one of the worship songs was a very upbeat song in which I was very engaged. Three quarters through the song, the singers and drummers stopped, leaving only the piano, a guitar, and the audience to sing. The experience had been a strange one because the power of the song which came from the live band and singers had diminished, leaving instead the raw voices of the audience members who were all singing in different pitches and without harmonising. Although the initial energy of the song had disappeared, a new, more intimate energy had formed, one that felt more vulnerable. This was because the singers in the Worship Team act as a type of guide for singing along, so their silence meant that the audience was no longer being supported throughout the song.[51] A reason for why the energy changed was because the atmosphere itself had changed. It became an atmosphere of togetherness through which I had started to feel like I was one with the community, as if the room consisted only of our merged voices and nothing else. As a result, I experienced the song more emotionally. Reflecting back on it, it was at this moment that I had felt the closest to the community, and most immersed into the worship. Although I do not think I experienced God in that moment, I did experience the love and togetherness of the community. For me, this experience showed that the community had a large impact on how I experienced church. It also led me to believe that the community not only acts as a receiver but also as a transmitter because the vulnerable energy and loving emotions were transmitted to me through the others. This is mirrored by a comment made by Lisa, another member of the Connect group I attended, during our interview on the influence of others on worship. She explained that being with others makes the worship and experiencing of God more powerful.[52] This suggests that in a similar way

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[50] Birgit, Meyer. "Mediation and the Genesis of Presence. Towards a Material Approach to Religion". 28.

[51] Francesca, Interview. [6] & [16]-[18].

[52] Lisa, Interview about online and offline experiences at the Motion Church by Marie Claessen, Skype, May 3rd 2020. [22] & [66]-[68].

to my experiences, God was experienced through the community. It enhanced and transmitted emotions, and through this, transmitted the transcendent to the individuals. The community therefore plays a crucial role enhancing people's individual religious experiences.

Overall, this shows that the type of worship is important for religious experiences because it is linked to a special atmosphere, one which is created by the community through its role as enhancer and transmitter of the transcendent. The community's role in this also reflects on worship as a sensational form because it illustrates how God can be reached through it.

How switching to online service impacts worship and community

Nevertheless, after the corona outbreak and the imposed measures, all church events were moved online. For the Sunday services and its accompanying worship, YouTube was chosen as a platform. Services were live streamed on YouTube, meaning that they were posted as a regular video on YouTube at the same time as the service was happening in real life. As aforementioned, the community enhances religiosity by acting as a medium through which the transcendent can be received, and transmitted, as well as by creating a suitable atmosphere to do so. Yet with the shift to online church also came a change in how the community manifested itself. Consequently, this affected the creation of the atmosphere and impacted religiosity.

A question I had asked myself after having watched the livestream for the first time was therefore how the worship had changed compared to physical worship. The set-up had been changed with less singers and the music style had been made calmer. As a result, I had felt less immersed into the worship compared to face-to-face worship. One of the first songs had been "Raise a Hallelujah", a song which had been the most impactful to me due to its upbeat tune. During physical worship, I would find myself singing and dancing along, becoming engaged in the song faster than other songs. However, when the song was played during online worship, the song did not absorb me in the same manner and I did not experience the same intense state of mind as I had previously experienced. When I reflected on why this may have been the case, I realised that it was because I had no one to sing with. When talking to Lisa

about online worship, she mentioned feeling the same way. She said that singing alone was not the same and that as a result, she felt her connection diminish in terms of her experiences with God. This was because according to her, there is less strength in singing alone. From my own experiences as well as Lisa's, it can be seen that the lack of togetherness during online worship meant that the necessary atmosphere could not be created, and that there was no community to transmit sensations to members. As a result, religious experiences were hampered. This can also be understood in terms of the horizontal and vertical dimensions. Since the horizontal dimension of worship was affected, the vertical dimension of worship was also affected. The change in the nature of worship therefore also impacts worship's role as a sensational form because it is no longer enabling access to God in the same way as physical worship.

New manifestations of the community online

The previous section analysed how the lack of togetherness meant that the required atmosphere for religious experiences during worship was missing. In order to solve this problem, the Key Team tried to find new ways through which the community could be present during Sunday services. Brennan, who as a member of the Key Team was part of the decision-making process when the church was moved online, explained that one of the reasons why the Key Team chose to use YouTube and not different platforms, such as Facebook, was because YouTube has a live comment stream in which people can react synchronously to the video. The comment section is open to anyone watching the video, meaning that people can interact with each other during the service. This makes the community more accessible to people watching the service. The importance of these comments is not only that they provide a sense of togetherness throughout the event, they also act as a replacement for the unstructured community that takes shape during social interactions pre and post service. From personal experience, I myself felt less alone as I watched, because there were people reacting along to the sermon. When the speaker would make a joke, even if I was not surrounded by the sound of others laughing anymore, I could laugh along to the reactions of others in the live chat. Nevertheless, despite the aim being to replace face-to-face interactions, the comments were not a proper substitute for the physical unstructured community. During the interview with Lisa, she mentioned that she did

not find the comments a replacement for socialising, and it did not make her feel more connected to the people watching. She said that she felt this way because she could not know who was typing behind the screen. Even if people had their names up or introduced themselves, there was a lack of intimacy since it was not possible to know for sure who it was. Furthermore, Lisa said that she felt that the comments were a one-directional way of communication towards the main church account, so conversations were not really occurring amongst people. As a result, she did not feel like the community was present in the same way as regular services.[53] This impacted her experience since community is very important to Lisa. Before moving to Utrecht and joining the Motion Church, she felt like she was restricted by the mindsets of those around her which played a role in her losing her faith. However, after moving to Utrecht, she felt free to be who she wanted to be and was thus able to seek out God again. Moreover, during her interview, she discussed how she wanted to find a community to belong to, and how the Motion Church offered her a place where she could connect with people who thought like her and would challenge her.[54] This conversation showed that community, and the way in which she can communicate with it, is really important to her. Yet she was not able to experience this through the live comments.

Additionally, the community is not only important to her because she wants to belong, but also because it plays a role in her Sunday service experiences. Lisa explained that she enjoyed the worship music as it allowed her to grow closer to the others as well as God, and that she believed that her religious experiences were therefore affected by the community.[55] This demonstrates that being able to engage and interact with others is crucial for worship and personal religiosity at the Motion Church. This also suggested that the differences in how the community is available online can have a negative impact on faith.

The problem is thus that the online community is different, but the question is then why is it different? The answer can be found by looking at the online platforms chosen for services. The community requires communication, but the platform used by the Motion Church (YouTube and its comment section) limits this communication. As aforementioned by Lisa, this is because it is not as personal and does not create an

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[53] Lisa, Interview. [34].
[54] Ibid. [2].
[55] Ibid. [22].

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environment suitable for discussions.[56] I also noticed that the comments posted were different to discussions one would have before or after service. Most comments were short ones related to the service, such as adding 'amen' after prayers or simply asking questions about the content of the sermon. This would not be the content of conversations before or after the service. These conversations were usually deeper about the meaning of the sermon. In addition, in physical services, people also did not communicate openly with one another during the sermon. Instead, they were listening. They might whisper to those sitting next to them, but that was more private than publicly commenting on a livestream that can be accessed by anyone. The comment section is therefore a different form of communication than physically communicating with each other.

This links to the concept of how different platforms serve different purposes for communication. To better understand the effect of using different platforms at the Motion Church, Tim Hutchings' work on religious communities online can be used. In "Considering religious communities through online churches" (2013), Hutchings, an assistant professor at the University of Nottingham's department of Theology and Religious Studies, discusses the different platforms available for online communication, and how they encourage different forms of social engagements.[57]For his fieldwork, he studied two different types of online churches, the Church Online, similar to the Motion Church in that they use a video feed and chat room, as well as private conference calls, and St. Pixels, which has a specific chat room for the church.[58] In his findings, he found that the different platforms available affected the modes of engagement. The platforms used at the Church Online were more useful for services, and were not platforms on which people engaged in deep socialising. However, since St Pixels' platform was more catered towards socialising, it allowed for more focus on community bonding.[59] Hutching's results can be used to better understand why the comment section on YouTube during Motion Church services does not encourage socialising in the same way as meeting face-to-face would have. It therefore also explains why it became harder to engage within the unstructured

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[56] Lisa, Interview. [34].

[57] Tim, Hutchings. "Considering religious communities through online churches". In *Digital religion: Understanding Religious Practice In New Media Worlds,* ed. Heidi Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 164-172.

[58] Ibid.166-168.

[59] Ibid. 70.

community. One point which Hutchings makes clear from the start is that both churches have different visions on what the aim of the church is. Church Online's main aim is to share evangelical ideals, whereas St Pixels' aim is to share lives and interests.[60] St Pixels is therefore more focused on community building through sharing life. At Church Online, however, the concept of community is not linked to sharing lives, but to sharing information, meaning that conversations do not need the same level of intimacy. Hutchings also mentioned that in most cases, people who attend these online churches also physically attend a local church, or at least used to attend a local church, which implies that the online church is not their only church.[61] These two observations can be used to analyse the Motion Church. The Motion Church and Church Online use similar platforms for communication. This is because, like Church Online, one of the main aims of the Motion Church's livestream is to livestream the services and the evangelical message. It therefore makes sense that they would use the same platforms of social engagements as Church Online. Furthermore, Hutching's work implies that people already have a church community at their local church, so for the Church Online community, there is even less need to focus on socialising than for St. Pixels. At the Motion Church, this is similar. Even if the Motion Church is the local church itself, most people attending it already had their community before moving online. It is therefore not a new online church that requires a new community, but a continuation of what already was and that does not need to focus on community building. It is also important to look at the nature of the community at Motion Church before the switch online. Although people do come seeking fellowship, the majority of people I talked to during my interviews emphasised the importance of finding like-minded people to have discussions with. It is therefore more about discussions than building friendships. Moreover, as mentioned, the Motion Church aims to spread its word on a large scale and through this, broaden the community, which is similar to Church Online.[62] The community is therefore a side-element formed by the need to spread the word of God, and was not created with friendship as its main focus. This does not mean that community formation is not important at the Motion Church, but it does mean that the formation of the community stems from different aims. Instead, the main focus of the Motion

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[60] Ibid.170.

[61] Ibid.165.

[62] Brennan, Voicenote 1 about live streams from other churches, Whatsapp, May 3rd 2020.

Church going online was to have services online. This demonstrates that the reason for why the new online platform limits the community experience is because it was not chosen for the purpose of community building. The problem with this, however, is that although initially the platform would have sufficed based on the Motion Church's goals, it is no longer sufficient for church goers whose faith is starting to be affected by the lack of closeness to others.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that despite the comment section not being catered towards community building and leading to members feeling distanced, Brennan experienced the online comments positively. He said that he enjoyed seeing the community being present online and seemed to still experience a sense of togetherness as a result.[63] This differed to Lisa's opinions of the comment section. A reason for this difference could be linked to different needs being satisfied. Brennan, who is also in charge of the Worship Team, had been involved in almost all of the livestreams so far, meaning that he was still in touch with other members of the church. He still physically met up with the other Key Team members, Worship Team members, and Tech Team members every Sunday for the live streamed services. He hence still had face-to-face interactions with members of the church community. In addition, especially as a member of the Key Team, he was also responsible for ensuring that other people are not abandoned, so he had to keep in touch with others.[64] Therefore, Brennan was still very involved with the community. His needs for the community were hence more fulfilled than Lisa's, who was less invested since she did not physically see people from the Motion Church. This suggests that the fulfilling of needs is linked to the satisfaction one receives from the comments. Likewise, the comments were sufficient as a replacement of socialising to me because similar to Brennan, my community-related needs were already satisfied. This was because I came to the church for research, and not to find a community to belong to, something which had been Lisa's goals.

The next step would therefore be for the Motion Church to start looking into new platforms to enhance the community building for those who need it more. While this is something which the Motion Church has started to do, there are limitations to the plans. One idea to have a better platform for socialising was to host Zoom sessions

[63] Brennan, Interview about online and offline experiences at the Motion Church by Marie Claessen, Skype, April 29th 2020. [90] & [97-98].
[64] Brennan, Voicenote 4 about role as Key Team member, Whatsapp, May 28th 2020.

after the online services in order to replace face-to-face interactions. To access the Zoom call, one first has to send an email to the Motion Church. They will then get a response with the Zoom code to access the online event. This requires additional steps in comparison to simply walking around the foyer and talking to people. Moreover, it is more difficult to socialise through Zoom. When I joined the online Zoom prayer session, I did not know anyone. I was very nervous about logging in and showing my face to strangers, and what differed in comparison to turning up physically was that I could not simply go up to someone, shake their hands, introduce myself, and strike up a conversation. Everything on Zoom is visible to everyone who is present. There is little space for private conversations or casual small talk, especially if the people already know each other. Zoom is therefore good for a group of people that already exists. However, as a newcomer, it is difficult to socialise and be comfortable, more so than in a physical interaction. It is also more challenging because more intentionality is required to send emails and log on, in addition to having to converse with a whole group of people who already know each other instead of just one or two individuals. The threshold into the unstructured community becomes higher, therefore making it harder to access the community. This introduces a new problem when trying to find new online platforms for community building, which is the problem of accessibility.

Overall, the move to online church has impacted the community by forcing its interactions onto platforms that are not catered towards community building, making it more difficult to access, communicate, and relate to other members of the church. However, the extent to which this impacted people was dependent on people's needs. It is also necessary to note that the Motion Church-cases discussed in this section indicated that the community, although harder to access, had not disappeared fully. It had simply changed.

Different Thresholds

The previous sections discussed how community affects religious experiences and how moving the church to an online platform impacted this. However, it was also discussed that despite the community being manifested differently, there was still a community. This thus leads to the question of why, if there is still a community, changing it impacts religious experiences? This can be analysed through Edmund

Leach's concept of thresholds. Leach, who was a British anthropologist in the 20th century, discusses in his work "The Gatekeepers of Heaven: Anthropological Aspects of Grandiose Architecture" (1983) how there are thresholds to cross when entering religious buildings.[65] For example, when stepping through the door at the main entrance, one is entering from the human world into the transcendental world of God.[66] At the Motion Church, there is a similar concept, except that the threshold is not necessarily a physical one. Although the building for the Motion Church is a place for people to gather for religious events, during services, especially the online services when people cannot gather physically, it is often repeated that the Motion Church is not the building, but the people; it is not about the four walls, but about 'you and I'.[67] This implies that the threshold into the transcendent world at the Motion Church is not a physical threshold to cross, but a symbolic one into the community.

However, I still found the symbolic threshold to be paralleled by physical marks. When I first arrived at the church, I was greeted by flags and volunteers at the doors. As I entered, I walked into a foyer in which people were standing in different groups, having conversations and laughing over cups of coffee and tea. This was the *Koffie Half-Uurtje* (coffee half hour) and it was a moment during which the unstructured community could take form and where people were also friendly to strangers. I often arrived and would stand at the side of the room, sipping my tea and aimlessly scrolling through my social media whilst simultaneously observing the room for whom I could possibly strike up a conversation with. On multiple occasions, I would feel a tap on my shoulder and turn around to find a smiling individual introducing themself to me and welcoming me to the Motion Church. These were regular church goers and not the volunteers at the door since they were not wearing the shirts with the Motion Church logo. This behaviour differed from when I had been outside of the church building, such as on my way to the church from the bus stop. There had been people on the bus who, just like myself, were headed to the church. This could be inferred by the fact that we were all walking on a small path that leads directly to the church building. However, they acted as strangers. Yet the moment we entered the building, they started to socialise amongst themselves as well as with other church goers. What this demonstrates is that when entering into the church

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[65] Edmund R., Leach. "The Gatekeepers of Heaven: Anthropological Aspects of Grandiose Architecture". *The Journal of Anthropological Research* 39, no. 3 (1983): 243-264.
[66] Ibid. 251.
[67] Brennan Sunday Service, March 15th 2020.

building and crossing the door with the Motion Church flags and volunteers, one crosses a threshold into the Motion Church community. This is both a physical and a symbolic threshold to cross because the different rooms with physical people represented the step into the community.

When the *Koffie Half-Uurtje* was over and the service was about to start, people headed into the big service room that lies beyond the foyer. Although people were still talking and socialising inside the room, the moment that the worship began, an atmosphere of sincerity spread over the room, and people became more focused and less talkative. It was also during this period that I saw people entering a more focused state of mind, one in which they appeared to be absorbed by the atmosphere, and during which they were singing and listening along to the worship and sermon. As mentioned before, during worship, the transcendent becomes accessible, meaning that when entering the service room and starting worship with others, the threshold into the transcendent is crossed. Once more, this threshold is both symbolic and physical because even if the church is not the physical building, the stepping into the service room and its surroundings paralleled stepping into God's world.

What these observations have shown is that entering the transcendent world and experiencing God at the Motion Church consists of crossing two different thresholds; one into the community, and one into the transcendent world. Since the community helps to access God during worship, it suggests that the threshold into the transcendent requires the threshold into the community to be crossed first. During physical services, these thresholds are reflected by the physical building and community, and are also made more accessible by social interactions. Therefore, even if the thresholds themselves are symbolic, their physical element makes it easier to cross them. However, with the move online there is no longer the physical aspect for support, meaning that it has become more difficult to cross the symbolic thresholds. This can be further supported by the interviews I did with members of the Worship Team during which they mentioned that worshipping through the livestream is exhausting. These members were Julia and Francesca, who helped to produce the worship during live streams by playing instruments and singing. They both talked about why it was so draining, which was because there was no audience to react to and to feed off of and without this, it becomes more difficult to anticipate what the

audience needs.[68] Francesca also mentioned how it requires more energy to take the people along if they are sitting at home.[69] It is almost as if the energy has to physically pass through the camera, travel to households, and break through the screens to reach the people. The threshold to the transcendent, which the Worship Team is supposed to help others cross, is suddenly higher when there is no physical audience, and the energy required to cross it, which comes from communal worship and audience reactions, becomes harder to muster. Due to Julia and Francesca not being able to cross into the community, it became more difficult to access the transcendent.

Overall, Leach's theory provides insight into why having a different form of community online impacts religiosity. It impacts religiosity because in order to access the transcendent at the Motion Church, two thresholds need to be crossed, one into the community, and one into the transcendent world. However, due to the difficulties of forming a community online, the first threshold becomes harder to cross which in turn affects the ability to cross the second one. Since it is already difficult to worship alone, as was previously discussed, the impact of not properly crossing the first threshold amplifies the difficulties of accessing God during worship. It would therefore be good for the Motion Church to find ways in which the physical element that parallels the symbolic thresholds can be converted to the online world.

The necessity of community

However, not having a physical community present does not necessarily mean that one cannot access the transcendent and develop a relationship with God. It is therefore important to consider whether or not other people are actually necessary for experiencing God. Luhrmann emphasises in her work that worship, even if done with a group, is a very personal thing that is aimed at enhancing one's personal relationship with God independent of others.[70] This is similar to Camilla and Brennan's views that a relationship with God is personal, so the community should not have an influence on it.[71] Whether one is at home alone or in a place with many people, the relationship is the same, suggesting that the switch to online church without a physical community

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[68] Francesca, Interview. [6] & [8]; & Julia, Interview 1. [38].
[69] Francesca, Interview. [8].
[70] Tanja M., Luhrmann. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. 4.
[71] Camilla, Interview. [26].

should not impact religious experiences.[72] Nonetheless, Camilla did refer back to her point later on in the interview, saying that having other people around her actually did affect her relationship with God.[73] Likewise, Brennan expanded on his point saying that although others are not needed, the Bible does mention that people should worship and pray together, because it makes it more powerful.[74] This implies that the community can provide additional support to religious experiences, but is not a condition for it. In addition, Julia comments on this saying that this might be why some people find it harder to worship alone, because some may need the support more than others.[75] What this shows is that, despite Lurhmann's statement, personal religiosity is not fully independent from the community.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered different issues regarding the role of the community in religiosity during worship. The community acts as an enhancer of religious experiences by creating an atmosphere and being a transmitter of the transcendent. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the community is a necessary condition for experiencing the transcendent. Instead, it means that the community can be used as a tool to help people experience God better, something which some may need more than others based on personal needs.

However, due to moving the community online, religiosity is also affected. This is because the platforms used to transfer the Motion Church online are not catered towards community building and make it harder to cross the threshold into the community. As a result, it becomes more difficult to access the transcendent during worship, and undermines worship's role as sensational from. Therefore, this chapter demonstrates that religiosity is impacted by moving the church online because the move impacts accessibility to the community, and since the community is an enhancer of religious experiences, religious experiences are affected as well.

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[72] Brennan, Interview. [66].
[73] Ibid.[61].
[74] Brennan, Interview.[66].
[75] Julia, Interview 1. [44].

Chapter 2: Community as a source of insight and support to faith

The previous chapter assessed how the community helps religiosity by enhancing religious experiences. However, the community can also help religiosity by providing support and insight into personal beliefs. Through the community, people can understand their faith better, and hence work on improving their relationship with God. This chapter will first begin to analyse this by discussing how the community provides insight, and will then do so within the context of Bible study. This will be done using Lurhman's work on how the community provides gossip[76], and using Bielo's fieldwork on Bible study and its essential features: intimacy and dialogue[77]. The next section will discuss how these features were impacted by moving Bible study online, and how Zoom and faulty internet connections played a role in it. The second part of this chapter will focus on how the community provides motivation to pursue one's faith. It will look into the different forms of motivation through Corinne Ware's work on obligations in small groups[78] as well my own framework of motivation, and will also look at how the community may or may not have been able to provide these forms of encouragement when being online. It will also analyse why some church members required more motivation than others to pursue their faith during the crisis, which will be done using Robert Wuthnow's work on community and support groups[79].

Observations and feedback from the community

The community can act as a guide to access God and build a relationship with Him. One way this is done is through observations of the community. For example, in *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief and Experience* (1997), the authors describe that during worship, having the community present enables others to know

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[76] Tanja M., Luhrmann. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*.

[77] James S., Bielo. *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study.*

[78] Corinne, Ware. *Connecting to God: Nurturing Spirituality through Small Groups*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1997.

[79] Robert, Wuthnow. *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and Americas New Quest for Community*. New York: Free Press, 1994.

how to worship, since they can look at how others experience it.[80] This mirrors my own experiences because I first needed to observe how worship was done before understanding how to participate in it myself. Additionally, another way in which the community acts as a guide is by providing a type of feedback system to understand one's communication with God. Lurhmann discusses this form of feedback in the context of gossip[81] and how churchgoers would gossip about other people's claims of talking to God.[82] She mentions that many people experience God through thoughts and intuitions. During the interviews, I received similar responses.[83] What this means is that certain thoughts and images may 'pop into' someone's mind, and this is often attributed to God communicating with the individual.[84] For example, Lurhmann describes a situation during which the image of a child popped into a praying woman's mind, and she believed it was God sending her a message about the child of the woman she was praying for.[85] However, as was the case with the woman, it is difficult to know when thoughts come from God or when they are one's own.[86] One must therefore be able to make sense of their own thoughts and learn to differentiate them from God's. This requires a learning curve associated with understanding the origins of one's thoughts and intuitions. In this context, gossip is a form of communication which acts as a feedback system, helping individuals through the learning process because the gossip can help question or confirm the thoughts. This feedback system can also help people find answers to their faith in general. For example, Janneke, who was one of my interviewees and a church goer at the Motion Church, explained how being with others at church enabled her to find answers and deepen her new understanding of faith.[87] Without the community, she would not have found the answers to how to build a relationship with God. Likewise, Julia also mentioned several times how other people gave her new insights into faith, and helped

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[80] Benjamin, Beit-Hallahmi, and Michael Argyle. *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief and Experience*. New York: Routledge, 1997. 84.

[81] It is necessary to understand that gossip in this context is referring to a method of socialising. It is not a superfluous tool for belittling others. It serves the social purpose of communication between different members of a group on a more casual level than a proper discussion.

[82] Tanja M., Luhrmann. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. 62.

[83] Janneke, Interview about online and offline experiences at the Motion Church by Marie Claessen, Skype, April 29th 2020. [19]; Francesca, Interview. [24].

[84] Ibid.52.

[85] Ibid. 51.

[86] Tanja M., Luhrmann. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. 51-52; & Brennan, Interview. [32].

[87] Janneke, Interview. [17].

her understand religious concepts.[88] In summary, this therefore shows that the community plays a role in personal faith since it can act as a guide for improving one's understanding of, and relationship with, God.

Bible Study as method of sharing insights

A context within which the community's role as guide and insight giver can be analysed in more depth is the Bible study. As mentioned, Bible study is a sensational form because it provides access to God, and Bielo's work, *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (2009) can be used to better understand the importance it.[89] In his work, Bielo explains how Bible study is an important aspect of evangelicalism because the word of God plays a leading role in personal beliefs. This is because the Bible gives direct insight into God's word and gives information on how to pursue faith. The purpose of Bible study is hence to enable a deeper understanding of God and how He fits into a person's daily life through the reading and understanding of religious texts.[90]

As aforementioned, Bible Study at the Motion church is done within small groups called Connect groups who meet up biweekly during what they call Connect nights. These are set up by church goers and resemble a casual get together, sometimes accompanied by dinner. After the initial casual conversations whilst awaiting people to arrive, the evening turns towards studying the Bible. Usually, the person leading the Connect night would have chosen a topic and Bible passage(s) to discuss. Examples of topics covered by the Connect group I was a part of were the Fruits of the Holy Spirit and women in the Bible. We would read the chosen passage(s) and then talk about the meaning and implications of the passage(s). The night would eventually end and we would pray together before going home. My experiences as well as Bielo's work therefore indicate that a major part of Bible study consists of learning about the Bible. However, Bielo explains that studying the Bible by itself is not sufficient, there also needs to be an element of togetherness. According to him, Bible study is a place of collective reading, and the sense of togetherness is important because it enables members to share, discuss, and understand concepts

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[88] Julia. Interview 1. [44]-[50].
[89] James S., Bielo. *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study.*
[90] Ibid. 50.

related to faith.[91] Togetherness is also crucial for members to delve deeper into their own spirituality as it provides a safe space for discussions that can be very personal.[92] Through Bible study, the community thus helps to provide insight into faith through discussions of faith and God's words in the Bible.

Observations from my time at the Connect nights demonstrate Bielo's theory in a lived environment. For example, when studying Bible passages during the Connect meetings, different members had different interpretations of the passage, and a discussion would ensue. Members would give their input and discuss how they had not thought about it that way before. Following these different interpretations, discussions would eventually turn away from the actual passage towards general implications of the message in daily life. For example, during one of the Connect nights I attended, the theme was God's love and one member explained how she grew up in a Christian household and so always grew up knowing God loved her. Another member, however, explained how her family was not as religious, and that she discovered her faith later. The first member to talk was interested in how someone could grow up without feeling His love. This then led to a discussion about how to experience God's love in general. Through this conversation, the members were able to share their own views and get insight into other ways of experiencing God's love. This shows how for the members of the Connect group, Bible discussions helped people's relationship with God .

Nevertheless, according to Bielo, there is another important element to the relation between Bible study and the community, which is intimacy. In order for the group to engage in 'active, open, and reflexive [dialogues]' about faith, there needs to be intimacy amongst group members.[93] Additionally, Bielo also links group intimacy to spiritual intimacy because spiritual intimacy requires a group setting to grow in. As He describes it, 'the aim of meeting together is to grow spiritually through increased fellowship'.[94] The purpose of Bible study is thus not only to provide an opportunity to discuss faith together, it's purpose is also to create an intimate setting within which this faith can grow. This was also mentioned by Julia, who commented on how she liked the Connect groups because they formed a smaller community within the larger

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[91] Ibid. 51-52, 70.

[92] Robert, Wuthnow. *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and Americas New Quest for Community.* 109.

[93] James S., Bielo. *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study.*76.

[94] Ibid.80.

community of the Motion Church.[95] This in turn allowed her to be part of a more close-knit community within which she could develop her faith.

At the Motion Church's Connect groups, there is an emphasis on creating a comfortable setting so that this intimacy can be achieved, and some of the Connect groups are therefore catered towards specific people. For example, some were organised for younger church goers, others for only women. The Connect group I attended was led by Julia and was an international group for young women aged 18-25. Julia herself is Dutch but spent three years in Sydney doing Bible Studies before coming to Utrecht, which is why she felt that an international group for young women would be a good addition to the church. By catering towards specific groups of people, it is easier to create an area in which people are comfortable discussing personal topics and faith. In Camilla's case, an international environment was better since she felt she could not connect well with the Dutch.[96] This was because Camilla was an exchange student from Spain who came to the Netherlands for one semester to study. She had recently arrived in the country and had not had the time to properly immerse herself in the Dutch community. Reflecting upon my own experiences, I also felt more comfortable opening up within an international community than a purely Dutch one, since I spend most of my time in an international environment. The way in which certain Connects cater towards specific groups of peoples emphasises the importance of finding a comfortable group for Bible studies. However, during my last meeting with the members from my Connect, a discussion was started about the future of the Connect group I was a part of. Since it was catered towards young women who are international, it meant that members often changed because internationals tend to move more often. As a result, some girls found it difficult to form deeper connections with the others, which made them feel like it was harder to open up and talk about faith. This shows that for members of this group it is important to have a close-knit group for discussions during Bible studies.

Nonetheless, despite this concern, I would argue that the Connect nights I attended still created a comforting environment. People were very open and seemed to trust one another. Initially I had felt nervous about joining people I had never met during my first Connect night, but the atmosphere was very warm and friendly. I

[95] Julia, Interview 2 about Julia's position as Connect leader by Marie Claessen, Skype, May 29th 2020.[10].
[96] Camilla, Interview, [8] & [100].

recall having felt very welcomed, despite not even knowing the meeting's host. The other members and I engaged in a casual conversation about our studies over tea, and I remember it feeling as if I was catching up with old friends, even though we did not know each other for longer than thirty minutes. It felt more like a casual get together than a study evening. Due to this, I felt I was more comfortable opening up to the other girls. This was necessary because the conversations we had were very personal ones, such as covering our highest and lowest points of the week.

Furthermore, this intimacy also led to topics of faith being discussed. During our discussion of our highs and lows of the week, one girl opened up her own struggles which were very personal. She linked her high to her low, saying that her struggles had enabled her to grow closer to God. The other members agreed and discussed how suffering can lead us to develop a closer connection to God. This interaction helped her understand how she could use her problems to improve her and God's relationship. Similarly, during her interview, Lisa opened up about how she was struggling with her own bond with God, and how this was linked to her personal problems.[97] This was something which she had mentioned in one of the Connect nights as well. After talking about it, the other members were able to talk about their own experiences with these feelings and how she should learn to have faith in God in order to fix her relationship with Him. What these examples demonstrate is that communication about faith was facilitated by the intimate setting of the Connect group, as it stimulated deeper conversations between members. As a result, the Connect girls were able to improve their relationship with God. This links to Bielo's work because it shows how intimacy with a group can lead to intimacy with God through reflexive dialogue.

Overall, it can be concluded that the Motion Church community acts as a source of insight into faith, which can help people develop a better relationship with God. This can also be seen in Bible study as the community creates intimacy which in turn enables personal discussions about belief.

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[97] Lisa, Interview. [38]-[48].

<u>Bible Study Online</u>

Nevertheless, as with worship, Connect nights had to be moved online due to the anti-Corona measures. This impacted people's experiences at the Bible study nights because, as with worship, the community manifests itself differently online than offline. The meetings of my Connect group were moved online to Skype at first, and eventually were changed to Zoom as it is a more efficient platform for larger meetings. However, with this move came a few problems. Campbell highlights these issues when she mentions how 'the disembodied interactions facilitated by media may allow for social interactions' but that 'whether or not such engagements can produce truthful or authentic relationships' is the question.[98] Although communication is still enabled, it does not lead to the same meaningful interactions as during face-to-face Bible study. I have found two reasons for why this is the case with online Bible study at the Motion Church: the lack of intimacy and disjointed communication. The first problem is how intimacy was affected by having the Connect nights online. As discussed, feeling close to the small group members is a crucial aspect of Bible study. However, during multiple interviews, I was told the same thing: meeting online felt less personal than meeting face-to-face, and people generally did not enjoy video calls as a result of this.[99] Camilla expanded on this, calling online Connect cold and saying how Zoom calls lack non-verbal communication.[100] One cannot see the other person's body language and tends to focus one oneself more than on others. It is also difficult to get verbal cues, in the sense that it is difficult to know whose turn it is to speak. As a result, the members experienced online Bible study as less intimate and more awkward. Another example of how online Bible study was experienced as less personal in the Connect group was when Lisa wanted to discuss a problem she was dealing with. She was struggling with her housing situation, but since she was calling in from home, she had to type her problems so as not to be overheard. This made the conversation less personal because there were two methods of communication being used, both methods being one-directional. Lisa would type as others would verbally speak, so the communication was happening on two different levels. Additionally, typing takes more time and it is harder to express oneself through text than verbally, meaning that it was more difficult for Lisa to properly express her struggles. Had the

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[98] Heidi, Campbell. "Community". In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* ed by. Heidi A. Campbell, London: Routledge, 2013. 57-71. 67.
[99] Julia, Interview 1.[24]; & Lisa, Interview. [30].
[100] Camilla, Interview. [87].

Connect night occurred physically, this would not have been a problem because the Connect would have been held at a different location, one which would have been a safe space for personal discussions. However, by being online, the safe space does not manifest itself in the same way because it is easier for outsiders to overhear. The method of communication hence affected feelings of closeness. Furthermore, since the purpose of Bible study is to discuss faith within a tight-knit setting, as discussed by Bielo, the lack of closeness therefore also became a problem for personal faith. Without being able to be close as a group, it became more difficult for Connect members to parallel this intimacy with their spiritual intimacy.

In addition to problems of intimacy, online Connect nights were also affected by the logistics of using online platforms. This had an impact on the ability to engage in reflexive dialogue. One of these issues was the internet connection. Internet connections can often be unstable, but this problem was amplified for us by the fact that some Connect members were calling in from different countries. This was because as an international Connect group, some people had to travel back to their home country when the pandemic hit. Sometimes, people would freeze mid-sentence or were not able to hear what was being said. On one occasion, one girl had to phone call another girl who was on Zoom because her internet connection was not working. Although she could still be part of the conversation, she was no longer able to see our faces and it felt less personal because we were talking to her through someone else's Zoom and phone. Once more, conversation was happening on different levels (visual and auditory), which makes it more difficult to communicate properly. Another technological problem we faced was due to faulty microphones. In my case, my microphone did not always work. This became a problem for communication because I would speak but nobody would hear me. These problems meant that conversations became disjointed, and as a result, intimacy and dialogue were impacted negatively.

Moreover, another example of problems caused by the logistics of online meetings was that Zoom has a time limit. Without a subscription, any meeting with more than three members is limited to 40 minutes. Since Julia, who set up the meetings, did not have a subscription to Zoom, it meant that every 40 minutes the meeting would shut down, and that when the countdown appeared on the screen, people had to stop talking halfway through their point. Once a new meeting was set up, there would always be some chaos waiting for everyone to join again, meaning that the significance of what was being said was lost amidst the logistics of logging

onto a new session. Additionally, there were also problems with the links and the wait rooms in Zoom. When a person hosts a meeting, whoever joins the meeting gets put into a waiting room until the host accepts them into the meeting. Sometimes it was the case that the host would not realise there were people waiting and I once spent twenty minutes waiting to be accepted. There was also a time when Julia had to set up another meeting since the timer had ended, but I had not seen the new link, resulting in me missing out on fifteen minutes of the conversation as I waited for the new link. A situation during which these problems were highlighted was when we had two more minutes before the meeting would shut off, and we had reached the prayer signalling the end of the night. We decided it was not worth starting a new meeting and so decided to do a quick power prayer before the two minutes ran out. However, the prayer was not quick enough and got cut off half way through, meaning we would only see each other again in two weeks. Although the cutting short of the prayer had been agreed upon, it still felt like it lacked closure. This was not only an example of how the faulty technology hampered closeness within the group, it was also a direct example of how faith was affected, because the prayer was not finished properly. From the cases discussed, the problem of our online Connect nights can be better understood. The problem is that the community was faced with two superimposing issues that made the Connect nights feel less authentic. Maintaining an intimate community online is already complicated by itself, so the additional layer of problematic technology worsened the situation. These issues also meant that the Bible study's role as a sensational form was affected, because its elements enabling access to the transcendent were restricted. A point for future research would be to study how other Connect groups experienced this, specifically Dutch Connect groups. This is because the internet connections may have been better when all members lived in the same country, most likely also the same city, in comparison to my group's international element.

However, being online did bring some benefits. For example, Camilla, who as aforementioned had moved back to Spain, said that if the Connect nights were not held on Zoom, she would not have been able to participate. She also said that the Connect was the only link she had with the Motion Church since she was watching Spanish livestreams instead of the Motion Church's services.[101] Additionally, as Julia

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[101] Camilla, Interview. [34] & [45]-[46].

mentioned, having meetings through Zoom can be a lot more beneficial and efficient than meeting face-to-face.[102] This is because the host does not need to set up the meeting nor clean the room, and travel time is reduced for other members. She also expressed how she can just have dinner and settle down on her couch, and does not need to prepare for people coming over.[103] Nonetheless despite the efficiency, Julia does say that Connects are not something that can be replaced by online gatherings, unlike business meetings, and that she is excited to meet up face-to-face again.[104] This implies that the benefits are outweighed by the fact that it is less personal. This in turn indicates how important a comfortable group-setting is to Bible study, and how online Bible study cannot create the necessary setting for it.

Overall, the reason for why the Connect groups were impacted was because the core elements of Bible study, discussion and intimacy, manifested differently online than in an offline environment. As a result, the community during Connect nights could no longer act as a source of insight. As with worship, it is possible that if a different platform was used, there would be less problems. This is certainly the case with Zoom. Although Campbell mentions that moving the space of interactions does not affect the basic act of social exchange, personal observations have shown that this is not the case.[105] Even if the basics of interactions are the same, in the sense that online conversations involve the same physical actions of speech as face-to-face conversations, the medium through which the conversation takes place distorts the clarity of the conversation, and hence also undermines the Bible study's role as sensational form. It is therefore not a simple matter of moving something online, it needs to be adapted and better platforms must be found. The Motion Church should therefore focus on finding new platforms and methods to host Bible study.

Community as source of motivation

Another way through which the community provides support for faith is by acting as a source of motivation. As Lisa mentioned during smalltalk, being in a relationship with God is not always easy.[106] This also means that sometimes, things like going to

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102 Julia, Interview 2. [10].
103 Ibid. [10] & [20].
104 Ibid. [10].
105 Heidi, Campbell. "Community". 59.
106 Lisa, Smalltalk, Utrecht, March 10th 2020.

church or pursuing one's faith can be difficult. A good comparison to demonstrate this is one made in Lurhmann's work, which compares going to church to going to the gym.[107] Interestingly enough, this is a comparison which Janneke also made, saying that just like going to the gym, one needs motivation to go to church, and being with others provides this motivation.[108] This shows that the community provides support to attend the church and to better one's faith. Moreover, as stated in *Connecting to God: Nurturing Spirituality through Small Groups* (1997) by Corinne Ware, who is an assistant professor in ascetical theology, there are two other factors connecting motivation and community, which are accountability and discipline.[109] For the first factor, Ware refers to how one will be inclined to work harder if others expect things from them.[110] For example, one is more likely to go to church on a Sunday if people are awaiting them there. The latter factor, discipline, can be understood in terms of structure and religious duties, such as spending time on one's relationship with God on a structural basis. The notion of structure was also described by Janneke as well as Camilla, when they explained how the community provides a type of schedule in the week, which in turn helps structuring one's faith.[111] Janneke even discussed that her choice to start going to church on a weekly basis was to create a schedule.[112] Moreover, structure is linked to the community because the community acts as a motivator to adhere to the structure. These examples thus demonstrate that the community can act as a source of motivation by providing support, accountability, and discipline.

Additionally, these forms of motivations from the community can be further classified into two categories: motivation through obligations, which comes from the sense of obligation created by the community's expectations such as discipline and accountability, and personal motivation, which is an individual's free choice to do things and is motivated not by obligations and expectations, but by the community's support. However, switching church events online had an impact on the community and motivation. One of the reasons for this was because the factors of accountability and discipline were no longer present. Even if the church was still livestreaming

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[107] Tanja M., Luhrmann. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. 279.

[108] Janneke, Interview. [17].

[109] Corinne, Ware. *Connecting to God: Nurturing Spirituality through Small Groups*. 18.

[110] Ibid. 18.

[111] Janneke, Interview [17]; & Camilla, Interview. [61].

[112] Janneke, Interview. [17].

Sunday services at a regular time, there was no longer the obligation to attend, since members of the community would not know through a screen whether you were there or not. In addition, less effort needed to be put into watching the live streams. They could be watched from the bed or from the couch, meaning that there was no longer a proper schedule to adhere to. Motivation through obligations was therefore affected by moving online. Moreover, as previously discussed, social interactions have been reduced by the move online. The implications of this are that it becomes more difficult for the community to convey its support to an individual. This combined with the lack of motivation through obligations means that the community no longer acts as a motivator in the same way as prior to the move online.

The notion of others being hampered from providing motivation online can be analysed in more depth within the context of the intelligent lockdown. With the Dutch measures, people were told to stay at home, and most classes or jobs had either been put on hold or moved online. The consequences of this was that people found themselves an empty day to schedule in. This links to motivation because now that the days were free to be filled, it meant that it was up to individuals to decide how to spend this time, such as spending it to grow closer to God. There was thus no motivation through obligations anymore, only personal motivation. In Camilla's situation, she described how she no longer saw a structure to her days and as a result became lazy. She had no motivation through obligations, nor personal motivation. This led her to being too lazy to work on her relationship with God, which therefore meant she felt more distanced from Him.[113] Camilla's case shows that without discipline and accountability due to all events being cancelled, it is easy to lose motivation and hence separate oneself from God more. Nevertheless, the interview with Julia provided very different answers. Julia also found herself with an empty schedule like Camilla, yet it was this empty schedule which enabled her to implement a new ritual to her day: reading the Bible in the morning. As a result, she said that she became more dependent on God.[114] This new ritual shows motivation because she started it herself without feeling forced by others. Likewise, Francesca mentioned that she did not feel distanced from God exactly because there was less structure to life and so she was able to focus on God better.[115] These cases differ from Camilla's

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[113] Camilla, Interview. [26].
[114] Julia, Interview 1. [56]-[58].
[115] Francesca, Interview. [42].

experiences because the lack of structure made it easier to connect with God, and not harder.

The question would then be, why were some people able to find personal motivation to work on their relationship with God, even when there was no motivation through obligations, whereas others did not? The answer links back to the role of the community as a source of motivation in general. Since there is no longer motivation through obligations, because there are no physical meetings, the only form of motivation to pursue God becomes personal motivation. In Camilla's case, she did not feel as though she had the community to help her.[116] She was therefore not able to find this motivation. This would suggest that Francesca and Julia, who were able to find personal motivation, did have the community for support. The next question would hence be why Julia and Francesca felt they had more support from the community when Camilla did not. This can be answered by looking at the individual's investment in the community, more specifically, in the structured community, since this type has more social obligations due to its structured nature. As aforementioned, the online community has a higher threshold since it lacks intimacy. According to Campbell, an online community therefore requires emotional investment to exist.[117] In Camilla's case, this emotional investment was lacking. Camilla expressed during the interview how although she enjoyed the online Connect nights because she was able to catch up with the members, the Connect group would not be her priority once her life in Spain resumed. This is because she knew she was not going to come back to the Netherlands and would likely never see the Connect members again.[118] This illustrates how the community at Motion Church was a temporary solution during her exchange, and therefore did not require any more emotional investment once the exchange was over. For Francesca and Julia, the community is a permanent investment, meaning that even if things have moved online, both women were still more emotionally invested than Camilla.

In addition, as American sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow discusses in his book *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and Americas New Quest for Community*, people's needs related to the community are fulfilled better if one is

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116 Camilla, Interview[61] & [69].
117 Heidi, Campbell. "Community". 59.
118 Camilla, Interview. [34]-[36].

active within the community.[119] Camilla was no longer active other than joining into the occasional online Connect group. Francesca and Julia, on the other hand, were still active within the church community, as they were part of the Worship Team. Since the Worship Team still met up face-to-face on a weekly basis, it indicates that not only were Francesca and Julia active in the community in general, they were still *physically* active in the community. Relating this back to the notion of personal motivation, it therefore implies that Julia and Francesca were able to get support for this type of motivation from the Worship Team members. Moreover, they also still had motivation through obligations because they were responsible for the worship and therefore still had to live up to expectations. Julia and Francesca's motivation was therefore not affected by the restrictions of having a purely online community. The contrast between Julia, Francesca, and Camilla's experiences thus emphasises the relation between community investment and motivation.

Nevertheless, there is another element to consider when looking at investment in the community, which is one's investment in the community prior to the outbreak. For this, Lisa's case can be used to analyse the situation. At the time of the interview, Lisa explained that she was struggling with her faith, explaining how things had not been going well for her and that she did not know what God wanted from her anymore. This had also gotten worse during Corona because she felt lonely and hence struggled to get a perspective on the situation.[120] However, unlike Camilla, the Motion Church community was a permanent thing for Lisa as she had just moved to Utrecht and was keen on finding a place to belong to.[121] In addition, Lisa had become part of the Designed Team, which is a team aimed at female empowerment at the church, and still kept in touch with the team, as well as joining the majority of the online Connect nights during the pandemic. Compared to Julia and Francesca's cases, it would imply that Lisa would be close to the community and could use this to help her faith. Yet this was not the case. It is for this reason that it is necessary to study her investments in the community before the outbreak. Both Camilla and Lisa were new members to the church. Lisa had joined in the autumn of 2019 and Camilla had only joined for a month prior to the outbreak in March 2020. As a result, both felt as if they were not properly a part of the community. As aforementioned, Camilla felt like she had not

[119] Robert, Wuthnow. *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and Americas New Quest for Community*. 53.
[120] Lisa, Interview. [38]-[48].
[121] Ibid. [2] & [14].

gotten close to the community.[122] Likewise, Lisa expressed how she felt like she did not really have any proper connections at the Motion Church other than the members of the Key Team.[123] Julia and Francesca, on the other hand, had been part of the Motion Church for several years.[124] The lack of prior investments therefore explains why people feel less motivated because it shows that if one is not close to the community, it is harder to get support from it.

Overall, the importance of these cases is that they show how investment in the community at the Motion Church before the pandemic affects the members' relationships during the pandemic. This is important to understand as it gives an insight into why some members were more motivated to pursue their faith whereas others became more distanced from God. It also helps to understand the effects of social distancing and moving the community online, as well as the fact that these effects are not just results of being online, but also of one's position in the community in general. In addition, this relates to individuals having different needs for the community, something which was discussed in the previous chapter; people who are more invested do not need the online community as much as those who are not, so its restrictions are less of an obstacle. This links to a point made by Campbell in her other work, "Challenges Created By Online Religious Networks" (2004) in which she discusses how online religious communities are not a substitute, but a supplement to offline community.[125] For those already invested, the online community does not need to be as extensive because it is merely an addition to their existing community. However, for those who did not have the existing community, they become more dependent on the online community as a replacement for the offline community. The notion of different needs can also relate back to the issue of the used platforms. The limitations of online communication are minor if a person has different methods to communicate with others, because their needs for it are smaller. However, if online Connect nights are the only method for accessing the community, then the faults of the online community are amplified and have a bigger impact on the individual's ability to connect with others.

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[122] Camilla, Interview.[8] &[100].
[123] Lisa, Interview. [60].
[124] Francesca, Interview.[2]; Julia, Interview 2. [47]-[48]; & Julia, Interview 1. [6].
[125] Heidi, Campbell. "Challenges Created By Online Religious Networks". *Journal of Media and Religion* 3, no. 2 (2004): 81-99. 92-93.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed how the community acts as a source of insight and motivation for church goers at the Motion Church, and how this role is affected by moving the church online. Its role as source of insight is especially prominent during Bible study, which as explained by Bielo, requires closeness and dialogue. However, moving online has affected this. As a result, the purpose of the Bible study, and its role as sensational form, is undermined. Moreover, the community's role as motivator was also affected by moving online. There is no longer the commitment nor structure of going to church. Consequently, there is no longer motivation through obligations. Additionally, depending on one's investment with the community prior to the outbreak, personal motivation becomes more difficult because there is a lack of support on behalf of the online community. The impact on online community therefore impacted faith because it affected the two ways through which the community helps it develop.

Overall Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to answer the question of how and why moving the Motion Church community online impacted personal religiosity. This question was answered by first looking at the different ways through which the community plays a role in faith, and then by looking at how this role was affected by moving online. From the research, it can be concluded that the community impacts faith by acting as an enhancer of religious experiences. This is because it serves as a medium of transmission as well as a creator of atmosphere. It can further be concluded that the community also acts as a source of support for faith through insight and motivation. However, the findings have also shown that when the Motion Church was forced to move all events online, the community manifested itself differently because the online platforms used were not catered towards community building. This resulted in the community becoming less accessible, less intimate, and made communication more difficult. These changes also meant that the community could no longer be there for church goers in the same way as prior to the outbreak, and that the collective rituals of worship and Bible study were hence undermined as sensational forms. As a result,

some members became more distant from God. However, on the other hand, some members became *closer* to God through the pandemic. These were people who were more invested in the community, both prior and during the pandemic, and who were therefore less dependent on the online community. From this, it can be concluded that although moving the community online had negative impacts on personal religiosity for some, it only did so for people who were already not fully invested in the community. Nevertheless, the community's role in sensational forms was still impacted because even if not everyone was affected to the same extent, it did hamper relationships with God.

The results were found by analysing the community's role in the formation, sustenance, and development of believers' personal faith within two different contexts at the Motion Church, namely worship and Bible study. These were analysed because they are examples of sensational forms, and were therefore ideal to understand how the community helps to access God. In the case of worship the role of the community as an enhancer could be understood in more depth by first studying its importance to worship, which is that worship is about sensations which enable people to enter an altered state of mind. The community enhances these sensations and thus creates an atmosphere that facilitates access to God. It also helps people reach God by acting as a transmitter of the transcendent. The power of worship therefore lies in the community. In order to analyse how the community is a source of support, Bible study was used. Through the study of Connect nights, I was able to understand that the community provides insight to faith by providing an intimate setting for dialogue. Lastly, studying these church events has also permitted me to recognise the importance of the community for providing motivation to improve one's faith. Moreover These contexts were studied both offline and online, which provided insight into how the community changed when going online, and how this affected personal faith.

However, the results in this thesis can also be used to understand the limitations of my fieldwork. As was discussed in the chapter on community as a source of support, the shift to online Bible study affected the intimacy of the group, and the community experience was affected by how long people were a part of the community. Both of these factors can also be applied to my fieldwork. The interviews

were done through Zoom and Skype. This meant that there was less intimacy and that participants may not have been as comfortable opening up, similarly to how they discussed online Connect nights as feeling less personal. Additionally, similarly to Lisa and Camilla, I had also not been part of the Motion Church community very long before everything was moved online. This also adds to the lack of intimacy that may have affected the relation between the members of the Connect group and myself. Furthermore, shortly before the interview segment of my research was scheduled to start, the pandemic broke out and social distancing measures were imposed. As a result, I was not able to talk with people face-to-face while socialising and asking for interviews. Instead, I used the snowball sampling method and asked Brennan if he knew anyone who would be interested in doing an interview. This may have impacted the depth of conversation topics that were brought up in the interviews since the interviews were the first time the interviewee and I had met. The effects of the outbreak and moving online on the church community therefore also may have impacted the interviews for the same reason as it impacted the Bible study.

Another point of reflection is the literature that was used to analyse the fieldwork. The literature about online churches discusses churches who moved online by choice, meaning that the online church was made with the purpose of being online, or with the purpose of providing a supplement to face-to face church. Although the implications of being online are similar to that of the Motion Church, there are factors that differ. For example, being online for the Motion Church is not a supplement to the physical church, it is a replacement for it. This means that the way in which the Motion Church is manifested online differs from a church who is using online platforms as an addition to the original church because issues such as community formation need to be taken into account. Moreover, because the Motion Church's main purpose is to be a physical church and it did not have the necessary time to readjust to online church, the framework of moving online is different to churches who chose to go online and might have planned the move more meticulously in advance, or might have planned the move to be permanent. The situation of the Motion Church being forced to go completely online on short notice hence finds no precedence in literature, which is why the literature is only partially applicable.

The results from my research therefore leave space for future studies to look at the effects of being forced to move online in more detail. The corona crisis will most likely have a lasting impact on church communities, because even if measures are slowly being lifted, there is still the one and a half metres distance rule, and the community experienced a new social space to grow in. Research could be done to look into these effects and how in the long-term churches and their community could have been affected by the crisis. Another area that could be researched is the notion of online Bible Study. There is a significant amount of literature available on sermons, worship, and prayer online, but little on Bible study online. This could be because Bible study is often done in smaller groups which unless there is a pandemic, are able to meet up physically more easily than a bigger group for worship. Especially considering the importance of community during Bible study, studying Bible study within an online context could lead to insightful results about the important functions of Bible study communities.

Overall, this thesis has shown that the role of community is significant to personal religiosity, and that when the dynamics and manifestations of this community are affected by moving online, the personal faith can be affected as well. I also hope that it has provided insight to what the Motion Church's next step should be in regards to choosing online platforms if a crisis like the pandemic were to occur again. In the same way that members must socially distance themselves from each other by moving online, they are also potentially distancing themselves from God, illustrating how the one and a half metres distance from each other has manifested into a one and a half metres distance from God.

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