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The Internet as Distinct and Extended Space for a Community of Christ Congregation Between
2020 and 2022

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Abstract

Internet technologies may provide new spaces for churches that are facing challenges in geographic spaces. These online spaces can be understood as *distinct* online spaces or as *extensions* of geographic space. We consider the Beyond the Walls online ministry provided by the Toronto Congregation of Community of Christ, a denomination with a growing global footprint and a shrinking population in the Global North. Examining worship services between January 2020 and January 2022, we consider the locations and languages represented in Beyond the Walls services, the distribution and social network of contributing individuals, and how services performed on Facebook and YouTube. We found that online ministry allowed Beyond the Walls to draw from a larger, more geographically and linguistically diverse population than in-person services could have, possibly responding to denominational concerns. We also illustrate the ways that this ministry corresponds with both *distinct* and *extended* understandings of space in online church.

Keywords

Community of Christ, COVID-19, digital religion, Facebook, YouTube, streamed worship services

The Internet as Distinct and Extended Space for a Community of Christ Congregation Between 2020 and 2022

Web and digital technologies may provide new spaces for churches that are facing challenges in geographic spaces. One such church is the Missouri (USA)-based Community of Christ, which announced in March 2024 that it had sold several historic artifacts and properties to a related denomination, the Utah (USA)-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One property—the Kirtland Temple—had been a contested space between the two faiths since the 19th century (Howlett, 2014), and its sale met with particular controversy. Community of Christ leadership acknowledged the emotional difficulty of this sale for church members but argued that it was a necessary step given ongoing trends in the denomination.

These trends were also related to space, including the increased globalization of the faith and its demographic decline in the Global North. In her reflection on the sale (Community of Christ, 2024a), a Zambian member of the denomination’s Council of Twelve Apostles—one of its highest leadership bodies—shared in church members’ mourning. However, she also frankly acknowledged that she had never visited the Kirtland Temple herself and suggested that while members of Community of Christ across Africa identified strongly with the denomination as a whole, they may not have the same connection to that space as North American members. Likewise, the denomination’s Presiding Bishopric (which oversees financial assets) acknowledged in its comments on the Kirtland Temple sale that certain geographic locations in the church were experiencing “a gradual aging of active membership and a drop in [financial] contributors for over four decades” (Community of Christ, 2024b, p. 2). Church leaders framed the sale as necessary for stabilizing finances as they prepared for denominational evolution.

In this study, we examine how the *Beyond the Walls* online ministry offered by the Toronto Congregation of Community of Christ responds to denominational concerns about geographic space. In response to a decline in local membership between the 1960s and 2000s, this congregation downsized to a smaller facility in the 2010s. In 2014, the year after this decision, the congregation reported a historic low point of only 22 distinct financial contributors (personal communication with John Hamer). As early as the following year, the congregation began experimenting with online and hybrid worship services. These services—streamed to Facebook and YouTube—potentially respond to space-related concerns. For example, they allow members of Community of Christ throughout the world to connect with the denomination, transcending geographic borders. Furthermore, these streamed services may be to the relief of shrinking congregations now too small to regularly organize their own services—or individual church members now geographically distant from any organized congregation. Drawing on Campbell (2010) and Hutchings's (2011, 2017), we explore the extent to which the internet serves as a *distinct* space or to *extend* geographic space for Beyond the Walls.

Background

Although the COVID-19 pandemic served as an introduction to online church for many (see Campbell, 2020), this phenomenon already had decades of history by that time. Hutchings (2017) lists diverse examples of online churches from the 1980s, from formal denominational efforts to a self-declared church within an online game. This diversity has continued since, as evidenced by interest in official online presence of religious leaders and organizations (e.g., Gazda & Kulla, 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013) as well as online communities with looser relationships to official bodies (e.g., Bunt, 2018; Campbell, 2021; Feller, 2018; Matas, 2025). There are also diverse ways of understanding these phenomena. For example, Hutchings (2017) established a

seven-dimension framework for his study of online churches, and Campbell and Evolvi (2020) review diverse theoretical—and other—approaches.

In this paper, we focus on a congregation's streaming of its worship services to an online audience and use *space* as a guiding consideration. To explain this focus on space, we here address the specific denominational context of Community of Christ and provide a brief history of online ministry in this denomination. Finally, we establish a conceptual framework that frames the internet as either a *distinct* space or an *extension* of space for online churches.

Geographic Space in Community of Christ

Community of Christ is based in North America but increasingly attentive to its global presence. Founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith, Jr. as the New York-based Church of Christ, the denomination repeatedly changed names and migrated to several different headquarters in the years before Smith's 1844 murder. In the decades following a subsequent succession crisis, Brigham Young led the largest body of church members to Utah and Joseph Smith III emerged in the American Midwest as leader of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which gathered populations that respected the Smiths but rejected Young. It eventually established church headquarters in Missouri and, in 2001, renamed itself Community of Christ; for the sake of simplicity, we use this name even when it would be anachronistic to do so.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Community of Christ expanded into the Global South beyond its base in North America and historical presence in Western Europe and French Polynesia (Scherer, 2016). This expansion had a considerable impact on the theology (Conrad & Shupe, 1985) and organizational structure (Draper, 1982) of the church, the latter including a rechristening of the church's "'General Conference' as the 'World Conference'" (Howlett, 2022, p. 8). However, related cultural indigenization and theological liberalization created tensions with fundamentalist

members of the denomination. These culminated in 1984, when Community of Christ opened its priesthood to women, leading to a loss of "half of its tithing, middle-class American members" (Howlett, 2020, p. 655). This, combined with the effects of secularization (Jorgensen, 2019) has led to demographic decline in North America, with implications for space; shrinking and closing congregations leave remaining members more geographically distant from their co-religionists.

Digital Presence of Community of Christ

Community of Christ leaders have recognized a need for evolution—including the use of online technologies—since the early 2000s. In a 2004 document, then church president Grant McMurray counseled the denomination that “You live in a world with new challenges, and that world will require new forms of ministry” (Community of Christ, 2017, Section 162:2c). While McMurray called for broad innovation, he may have implicitly referenced ongoing experiments, such as a “cybercongregation” that allowed participants “from many countries” to interact with each other (Robison, 2003; a church web board is also tangentially referenced in Russell, 2006). In response to growing online ministries, the denomination began in 2019 to develop policies for remote participation in communion; during the COVID-19 pandemic, these policies were expanded to other sacraments (Community of Christ, 2020). In 2021, then-church president Stephen Veazey warned against returning to a “‘normal’ church life that did not include a broad array of opportunities for online connection” (Veazey, 2021).

Community of Christ’s interest in digital technologies as a way of overcoming geographic distance is reflected in the broader literature on digital religion. In one review of that literature, Campbell and Evolvi (2020) noted that scholars in the field “have recognized the fact that the Internet offers possibilities to create venues of interaction that are ‘disembedded’ from local and geographical boundaries” (p. 9). This recognition is longstanding: Lochhead (1997)

described mainline Protestant churches' interest during the 1980s in developing bulletin board systems "which would be available nationally or even internationally" (p. 48) and argued that "an online liturgy" (and other events) organized in the wake of the Challenger disaster "demonstrated the power of the computer medium to unite a community... beyond the limits of geography" (p. 52). However, these observations have also met important resistance: Hutchings (2017) describes a fear in the 1990s and early 2000s that the "local church... was going to be replaced by computer-mediated pseudo-communities" (p. 4).

The Internet as Distinct or Extended Space

In this section, we introduce a distinction between the internet as *distinct* space and as *extension* of space, which will serve as a framework for this study. We draw in particular on two scholars' understanding. Campbell (2010) described the *e-vangelism* movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s as embracing "the internet as a tool" for these efforts while also framing "the internet as a mission field" (p. 139). Hutchings (2011, 2017) subsequently sharpened—without exaggerating—this distinction and applied it more broadly to online ministries. We build on both understandings while shifting their distinction from *tool* vs. *space* to two different kinds of space.

Our first category, the internet as *distinct* space, builds on these scholars' attention to spatial metaphors that situate the internet as a separate location with its own cultures (Hutchings, 2011, 2017). Although not mentioned by either Hutchings or Campbell, Benedict XVI also notably referred to online technologies as a *digital continent* (Catholic News Agency, 2009; see also Gazda & Kulla, 2013). This term emphasizes an understanding of the internet as separate from—rather than an extension of—offline locations.

The idea that the internet can serve as an *extension* of space serves as our second category. In Hutchings's (2011) understanding, a *tool* approach emphasizes the internet's ability

to "reach new audiences" (p. 1125) but tends to center an offline location as "the 'real' event" (p. 1126). We also understand this approach as including the creation of digital connections among geographically dispersed members of a primarily offline religious community (e.g., Cavalcanti de Arruda et al., 2022).

Purpose and Research Questions

Our purpose in this study is to examine the role of the internet as *distinct* space or *extended* space in the context of the Beyond the Walls services streamed by the Toronto congregation of Community of Christ between January 2020 and January 2022. To do so, we will answer the following research questions:

1. Which locations are represented in Beyond the Walls services?
2. Which languages are represented in Beyond the Walls services?
3. Who participates in Beyond the Walls, and how are they connected?
4. How do Beyond the Walls services perform on YouTube and Facebook?

Method

This is a descriptive study that draws heavily from *digital methods*: "the use of online and digital technologies to collect and analyze research data" (Snee et al., 2016, p. 1). Although digital methods are often associated with computational analysis of large datasets, we have also drawn from the traditional methods and objectives of qualitative research to prioritize a richer depiction of a single, compelling case.

Research Ethics and Positionality

Our research uses data publicly available on the internet and therefore does not qualify as *human subjects research* as defined by U.S. federal guidelines. We have nonetheless been attentive to the ethics of internet-based research (see, e.g., Markham & Buchanan, 2012); for

example, we avoid naming people we have identified within our data, except for two members of the pastoral team who agreed to be named. Recognizing the importance and complexity of insider and outsider positions in religion research (Decoo, 2022), we also acknowledge that the first author has contributed to Beyond the Walls services (though in a guest capacity and not during the timeframe of this study) while the second author has no connections with the congregation or denomination. We collaborated as authors to use personal familiarity to better inform our analysis while also ensuring that our conclusions were firmly grounded in our data.

Data Collection and Analysis

We identified 101 Beyond the Walls services streamed to Facebook and YouTube between January 26, 2020 and January 23, 2022. We then used the R programming language to *web scrape* information about each Facebook video (titles, views, “likes”, “loves”, comments, and shares) and to request from the YouTube API analogous information for videos on that platform (titles, views, “likes”, and comments). The Facebook view counts accessible through web scraping are rounded to the nearest 100, forcing some imprecision in our data.

We then reviewed each service (using the YouTube video for ease and consistency) to manually record additional data. We identified all contributions to each service (prayers, readings, sermons, etc.), the individuals who provided each contribution, and individuals' geographic location (city, region, and country). Individuals' names and locations were usually displayed on screen, and we considered these displays as authoritative. In early videos, where contributors were not consistently identified, we applied other identifiers (e.g., “anonymous_man_1”) and listed “Toronto, Ontario, Canada” for participants in the church building.

We made some exceptions to this pattern to avoid overrepresenting certain individuals in the data. We did not consider 6 services assembled from recordings of previous services, reducing our focus to 95 services. When an individual made multiple, small contributions of the same kind to a service (e.g., scripture readings), we treated those as a single contribution. Finally, we did not count any “welcome” segments in a service or any non-sermon contributions from a service's presiding minister. We weighed this last decision carefully: These contributions were most often provided by two full-time members of the Beyond the Walls pastoral team—John Hamer and Leandro Palacios—and our decision underrepresents their importance to the ministry. Conversely, however, including these contributions in our data could exaggerate how much the Beyond the Walls ministry drew on Toronto locals. Because unpaid and lay congregational ministry are of traditional importance in Community of Christ, and given the pastoral team's clear emphasis on inviting contributions from outside Toronto, we felt that “undercounting” Hamer and Palacios's contributions more accurately depicted the congregational and denominational context. Even after this exclusion, Toronto remains better represented in our data than any other single city (even without including its suburbs). Nonetheless, we acknowledge below where a different approach might have yielded different results.

We also recorded the language individuals spoke in. If an individual briefly greeted the congregation in one language before primarily speaking in another, we listed only the primary language. However, if an individual regularly switched between two (or more) languages, we recorded this as “Multiple.” We identified the most commonly used languages (e.g., English, French, Spanish, German) based on context clues and personal familiarity; for other languages (e.g., Hawaiian, Lingala, Tagalog), we relied on explicit identifications made during the service.

Our analysis of these data was entirely descriptive. We used the R programming language to determine totals within categories, patterns over time, and descriptive statistics. Additionally, we used UCINET, a network analysis program, to generate network graphs and descriptive statistics of the network. To do this, we transformed a two-mode network (connecting people to services) into a one-mode network (connecting people to people, via shared services).

Results

Before addressing our specific research questions, we here present a general overview of the Beyond the Walls ministry's evolution in response to COVID-19. The first worship service in our dataset (January 26th) was clearly a local service being streamed online, with all contributors physically present. However, the next three services involved guest sermons from ministers in Missouri or Utah (USA), and one of the communion prayers for the March 1st service was likewise offered from Utah. In short, the congregation had already clearly incorporated ministry from online participants.

By mid-March, COVID-19 was widespread in North America, and the Beyond the Walls ministry began to respond to the sudden availability of church members in other locations. The March 15th, 22nd, and 29th services featured contributions from outside Toronto, including from members of the Council of Twelve Apostles based in Illinois, Colorado, and Missouri, USA. Two apostles contributed smaller portions of the service that unpaid or lay ministers in a congregation might usually take care of, which seems to be an indication of the denomination's unprecedented dependence on online worship and the Beyond the Walls ministry's intentional efforts to reach Community of Christ populations across the world. (Similarly, the president of the denomination would deliver a sermon for Beyond the Walls in November of 2020). The "Beyond the Walls choir"—which does not figure into our data for practical reasons—also began

taking shape in March 2020; choir participants individually sang their parts, and the pastoral team then edited all contributions into a single performance that was played during the broadcast.

Figure 1—a monthly average of the percentage of contributions from Toronto, Ontario, and Canada—indicates the geographically diverse ministry associated with Beyond the Walls beginning in March 2020. As before, we note that these counts leave out many contributions from Hamer and Palacios. A week-by-week graph would be harder to read but show that individual services still sometimes saw more than 50% (or even 75%) of contributions from the province of Ontario. However, this province includes many congregations, and even that regional influence disappears in Figure 1's monthly averages. Indeed, it was even rare for most of the monthly contributions to this Toronto congregation to be from Canada.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Non-English contributions to services—which were accompanied by subtitles—began as early as the end of March 2020. The ministry's approach to plurilingualism evolved over the next few months before settling into regular subtitling in English, French, and Spanish (the three working languages of Community of Christ). If a contribution was not in one of the denomination's working languages, it was typically also subtitled in its own language. Figure 2 provides monthly averages of contributions by language. Like Figure 1, the focus on *monthly* averages obscures that some *weekly* services were mostly or entirely dedicated to a non-English language; similarly, we counted 35 different languages present in a May 2021 Pentecostal service. However, in the aggregate, English remained the dominant language of these services.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

This general overview provides context in which we can consider our more specific research questions. In the following sections, we consider specific locations and then languages

represented in these services. We then consider participants in Beyond the Walls before exploring how these services perform on the YouTube and Facebook streaming platforms.

Which Locations are Represented in Beyond the Walls Services?

Beyond the Walls services included contributions from 20 different countries. Table 1 lists the nine countries that were the source of at least five contributions over the course of the timeframe of our study. We treat French Polynesia as distinct from European France due to dramatic geographic distance and the important differences between Community of Christ's history and presence in each territory (see Vanel, 2010). Although Toronto is the home of the Beyond the Walls ministry, Canada was only the second-most represented country in these services, behind the USA. However, had we not chosen to set aside smaller contributions from the Beyond the Walls pastoral team, Canada would surely have taken first place.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

We also examined regions within the two most-represented countries, which are both large and federalized. Participants made contributions from 31 (of 50) different U.S. states and the District of Columbia; Table 2 lists seven states that were the source of at least 10 contributions. Participants made contributions from six (of 10) Canadian provinces but none of its three territories; Table 3 lists the five provinces that were the source of at least 10 contributions (there was also a single contribution from Manitoba). Had we considered smaller contributions from Hamer and Palacios, Ontario would have been even more dominant.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

Which Languages are Represented in Beyond the Walls Services?

Beyond the Walls services included contributions in 38 different languages, not including the distinct "Multiple" code described previously. Many of these languages were only represented one time; in fact, if we remove a May 2021 Pentecost service from the data, only 10 languages are present. Table 4 lists the five language codes that we applied at least five times. As with earlier examples, English would have been represented in an even higher proportion of the data if we had considered smaller contributions from the Beyond the Walls pastoral team; however, we expect this would also have been true of the "Multiple" code as we observed that Palacios often led welcome segments in combinations of English, French, and Spanish.

[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]

Who Participates in Beyond the Walls, and How Are They Connected?

We identified 307 different people who made 719 distinct contributions to Beyond the Walls services. The most frequent contributor—Leandro Palacios of the pastoral team—provided 51 contributions (about 7% of the total) despite our deliberate undercounting. We estimate that not doing so would attribute at least 17% of total contributions to him. John Hamer is even more severely undercounted by our methods; although he contributed to most (if not all) services, he typically contributed in ways we did not count. The second-most frequent contributor was a former pastor of the Toronto congregation who made 28 contributions to Beyond the Walls—about 4% of total contributions or, on average, one contribution every three services. However, as evidenced in Figure 3, most contributors participated a small number of times.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Social network analysis (SNA) explores how individuals in an organization are connected. In the case of our data, nodes represent individuals contributing to the service, and ties represent shared service participation. For example, persons *A*, *B*, and *C* (nodes) would have

a connection (tie) if they all contributed to the service on February 21, 2021. If person *A* participated in services on October 10 and June 27 of 2021, they would also have ties to contributors from those services. After uploading the data to UCINET, we created Figure 4, a graph depicting *shared service participation* connections between nodes. In this network graph, language is distinguished by color, while country is distinguished by shape. Among the 307 individuals, there were a total of 5,238 connections, shown in the network graph as gray lines. This means the average contributor had approximately 17 connections with other individuals through participation in a service. Furthermore, an individual would only need to go through 2.36 ties to be connected to an individual with whom they have no direct connection.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

How do Beyond the Walls Services Perform on YouTube and Facebook?

[INSERT TABLE 5 HERE]

Table 5 demonstrates how the average service performed on both YouTube and Facebook. Our findings suggest that the average Beyond the Walls service received over 3,800 views between the two platforms; however, Facebook appears to have gathered a larger audience, with the average service attracting nearly three times as many views there than on YouTube. Figure 5 suggests that this dynamic may have begun to change near the end of this study's timeframe, with Facebook views appearing to decline and YouTube views potentially on the rise (the bolder lines represent smoothed conditional means that more clearly indicate trends).

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

In terms of other platform metrics, services received roughly the same number of "likes" on each platform. However, this is misleading to compare directly; unlike YouTube, Facebook also allows users to react with "loves" as well as other reactions that were not possible to

webscraper; similarly, although Facebook and YouTube both have a sharing function, only Facebook treats it as a metric. We also briefly note that of the 95 videos in our dataset, only four (4.21%) were given the same title on both Facebook and YouTube.

Discussion

It is well known that the COVID-19 pandemic had a dramatic effect on churches, imposing stark geographic boundaries on worshippers. The Beyond the Walls online ministry allowed a Toronto congregation to transcend these boundaries and also respond to broader Community of Christ concerns about international identity and demographic decline. While lockdowns played an important role in the development of this ministry, Beyond the Walls's online presence has continued in the years since. The pastoral team (personal communication with John Hamer) reported financial contributions from 288 distinct people in 2024, more than ten times the congregation's low in 2014; in that same year, it reported an average of 1,106 accounts viewing its primary service on YouTube each week (they did not report Facebook view counts, feeling them to be unreliable). Future research would benefit from studying online churches (including Beyond the Walls) that emerged or came into their own during the lockdown era of the COVID-19 pandemic but that have evolved since; such research could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between that period and contemporary online churches.

In this section, we consider the Beyond the Walls ministry in the context of the *distinct* space and *extended* space framework that we introduced at the beginning of this paper. More specifically, we explore the ways in which this online church's relationship with the internet imperfectly resembles both conceptions.

Beyond the Walls as Distinct Space

There are important ways in which the evolution of the Beyond the Walls ministry could be considered as a migration into a distinct, online space. As noted in Table 5, for example, Beyond the Walls services received an average of 3,800 views. These numbers arguably qualify the ministry as a *megachurch*, traditionally understood as a (Protestant) church with at least 2,000 weekly attendees (Bird & Thumma, 2020). Indeed, Bird & Thumma (2020) report that the average U.S. megachurch attendance prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was 4,092, not far from the average Beyond the Walls viewership in our data. (However, we acknowledge that our data includes views outside the original "week" of each service, complicating this comparison).

Of course, it is not the numbers that suggest that Beyond the Walls occupies a distinct online space. Rather, it is the ministry's dependence on the internet to achieve those numbers. To be clear, many (U.S.) megachurches span multiple physical sites, and even more stream their services (Bird & Thumma, 2020). Nonetheless, we estimate that the physical space occupied by Beyond the Walls—a commercial condominium in downtown Toronto—would struggle to fit even 5% of the online ministry's attendees, making it remarkably distributed. In short, unlike a megachurch that may extend its physical location into the internet, this ministry must treat the internet as its primary location in order to exist in its current form. Furthermore, while the Toronto Congregation clearly prioritized offsite guest ministry in the months prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, the breadth of the ministry captured in our data also highlight the way in which Beyond the Walls lives online, despite connections to Toronto. As we observed, 307 different people contributed to the Beyond the Walls ministry over the course of two years. It seems reasonable to conclude that a Community of Christ congregation could not have gathered that much ministry from Toronto itself.

The prominence of contributions from Utah may also contribute to a *distinct* space understanding of Beyond the Walls. We argue that these contributions highlight Community of Christ's appeal to some disaffected members of the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a more liberal denomination with shared history (see, e.g., Stack, 2021). Because members of that church can be found throughout the world, the frequency of contributions from Utah is perhaps better understood as appeals to that population from an online space "disembedded" from local and geographic boundaries" (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020, p. 9). Furthermore, if Beyond the Walls can indeed be productively compared to megachurches, this status as "more liberal alternative" may be even broader. The denomination's ongoing efforts to define itself as a peace and justice church situate it in the liberal wing of North American religion. Although pockets of conservatism remain, Beyond the Walls is clearly not one of them; its full-time ministers are both openly gay, and the descriptions for streamed services emphasize an open, non-literalist approach to religion. The rarity of liberal megachurches (Bird & Thumma, 2020) makes it relatively unlikely that potential congregants will find one close by; by situating itself in an online space, Beyond the Walls potentially appeals to those congregants instead.

Of course, treating the internet as a distinct online space comes with potential drawbacks. After removing contributions from full-time Toronto ministers, we found more contributions from the United States than from Canada. While in keeping with the U.S. roots of the denomination, it raises a variation of a 1990s concern that virtual church communities would replace local churches (Hutchings, 2017). While our data suggest that Beyond the Walls makes a deliberate effort to provide a Canadian voice to the broader denomination (see the spikes of Canadian and Ontarian contributions in Figure 1), it is not unreasonable to ask whether so much guest ministry from elsewhere is diluting that voice. Even within the United States, contributions

are highest from Missouri and Michigan—two longtime Community of Christ strongholds; this further emphasizes the possibility that this online space could take on a generic denominational culture rather than one informed by local geographic and cultural context.

Beyond the Walls as Extension of Space

There are also important limitations to any understanding of Beyond the Walls as a distinct online space. For example, Beyond the Walls streams services to two different platforms, which not only suggests that it is not a *single* online space but also situates these platforms as *tools* that extend the ministry rather than where it naturally exists. While these tools clearly facilitate extension of space, emphasizing that they are tools raises questions about how they “shape the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 29). Indeed, we have previously noted that the pastoral team does not feel that the Facebook data they have access to is reliable; besides complicating our use of these data, this raises questions about the influence of platforms on this online church. Furthermore, Table 5 and Figure 5 demonstrate that Beyond the Walls has two (implicitly separate) audiences of different sizes and with different options for interacting with the ministry. Furthermore, that 91 of 95 services were posted with different titles on each platform suggests that the Beyond the Walls team treated platforms differently in some ways, echoing observations that digital church looks different on different platforms (Hutchings, 2017).

There are other reasons to think of Beyond the Walls as an extension of geographic space. Given the number and relative diversity of contributors, an average networked distance of 2.36 is surprisingly low, suggesting that a core group of contributors “bridges” connections between others. Hamer and Palacios—both geographically situated in Toronto—are the most obvious examples of these bridges. Because they emphasize bringing in outside ministry, they

are not quite the "central figure[s]" that Hutchings (2011, p. 1125) describes as typical of internet-as-tool online churches, but their consistent appearances from Toronto prevents us from considering Beyond the Walls to be a completely online phenomenon. Furthermore, because this network reflects shared service contribution, the network metrics do not necessarily mean that the average contributor feels a sense of closeness to their 17 connections, likely further emphasizing the centrality of the Toronto-based pastoral team.

Of course, we have noted how early Community of Christ experiments with digital faith communities emphasized the ability to bring people together from all over the world (Robison, 2003), focusing more on *extending* spaces into each other than on establishing a distinct online space. Indeed, we could consider geography in our data only because Beyond the Walls services prominently emphasized where contributors were joining from. The five contributions from Italy serve as a particularly compelling example of this. The first described the particular difficulties COVID-19 was posing in Italy, foregrounding local experience in an online ministry. Furthermore, four of the five contributions from Italy came from the only member of Community of Christ in that country (Mangelson, 2019). These emphasize how Beyond the Walls *extended* space to and from this location—and others. For all the virtual cosmopolitanism of Beyond the Walls, over 80% of contributions come from North America, and even the 27 contributions from French Polynesia may reflect the denomination's historic presence in that country (Vanel, 2010) rather than some new, internet-enabled expansion. In contrast, there is little presence from the locations in the Global South that sparked the denomination's interest in being a global church (Conrad & Shupe, 1985; Howlett, 2020, 2022; Scherer, 2016). It is difficult to consider Beyond the Walls as existing on a distinct "digital continent" (Catholic News Agency, 2009) when it is so clearly shaped by a geographic one.

We are confident that these limits to geographic transcendence are more an inevitable result of the tools being used than any deliberate exclusion. For example, Beyond the Walls is primarily synchronous, and time zone differences therefore makes extending ministry from certain spaces highly impractical. Although Beyond the Walls began offering “Late Edition” rebroadcasts of its services after the timeframe of our study, this only addresses the extension of Toronto into additional spaces, rather than the other way around. Even more salient is the possibility of the digital divide; just as remote participation in the denomination's 2023 World Conference from the Democratic Republic of Congo was ultimately not “feasible for technical reasons” (Community of Christ, 2023, p. 6). Furthermore, online ministries that could prop up a declining church in the Global North may be less necessary (or desirable) in the Global South, where the denomination continues to see growth.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic provided congregations and denominations with an opportunity to experiment with digital technologies and new ways of doing church. The Toronto-based Beyond the Walls ministry's increased emphasis on online worship services during 2020 and 2021 is particularly interesting for the way it also reflected broader denominational concerns of geographic diversity and demographic decline. We found that digital technologies allowed the Beyond the Walls ministry to draw on a larger population of ministers—and reach a larger audience—than the shrinking Toronto congregation would have otherwise had access to.

Beyond the Walls also illustrates the complicated relationship of online church with geographic space. We drew on Campbell (2010) and Hutchings's (2011, 2017) work to distinguish between online church as *distinct* space versus *extension* of space. Although these authors do not frame this distinction as irreconcilable (indeed, Campbell & Evolvi, 2020 reviews

scholarship that blurs these lines), we suggest that Beyond the Walls is noteworthy for the way that it blends both conceptions. On one hand—and in contrast with physical megachurches—the ministry is reliant on an online existence to draw from—and reach—large numbers of people. On the other hand, the salience of the ministry's Toronto location—and of many other geographic locations—keeps it from being understood as a fully online phenomenon.

Disclosure Statement

The first author has personal connections with the Beyond the Walls ministry but has conducted this research independently of those connections and does not stand to be personally advantaged or disadvantaged by the findings of this study. The second author reports no competing interests. We worked to ensure that our findings reflect the research data and not any personal viewpoints.

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Author Contributions

Spencer P. Greenhalgh was involved in: conception and design; analysis and interpretation of the data; drafting of the paper; revising it critically for intellectual content; and the final approval of the version to be published. Ray Celeste S. Tanner was involved in: conception and design; analysis and interpretation of the data; drafting of the paper; revising it critically for intellectual content; and the final approval of the version to be published. All authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Figure 1: Percentage of Contributions from Toronto, Ontario, and Canada Over Time

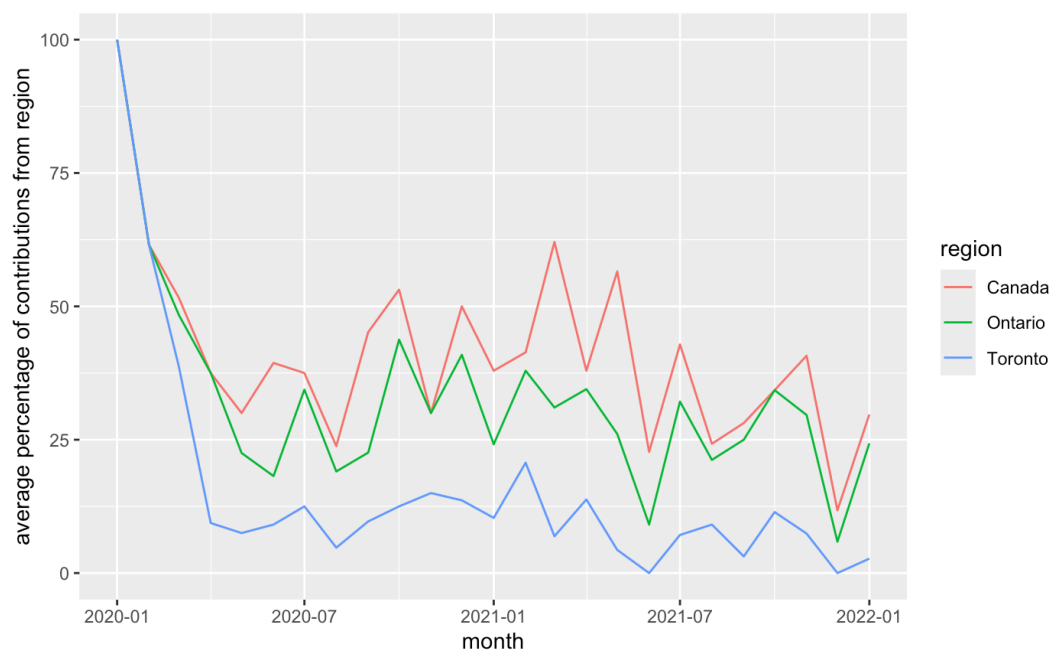


Figure 2: Percentages of Contributions in Select Languages Over Time

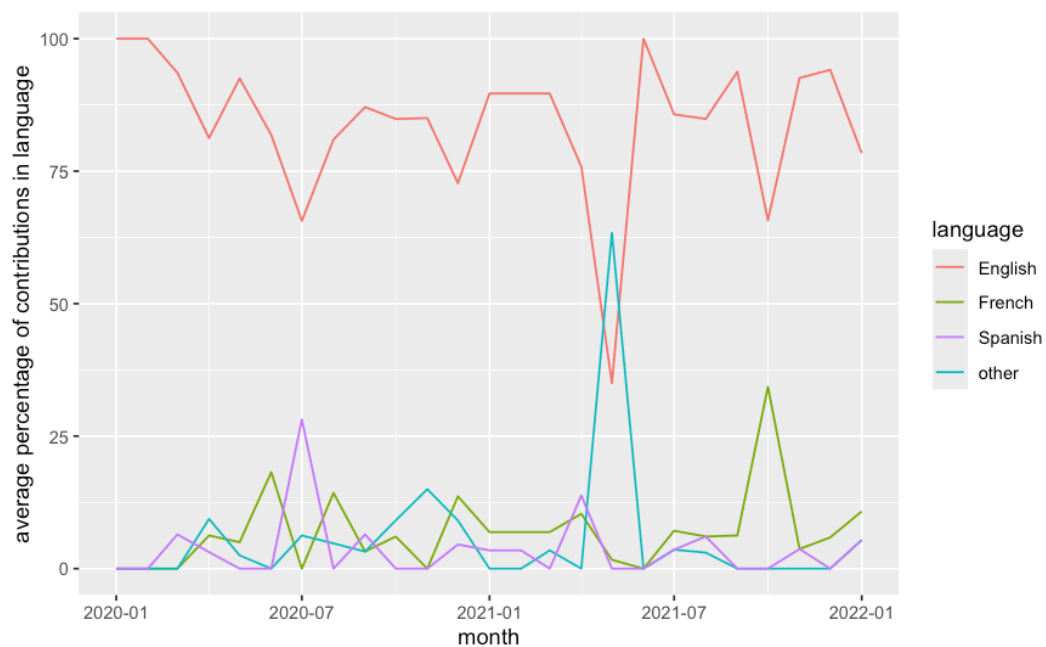


Figure 3: Distribution of Contributions Per Person

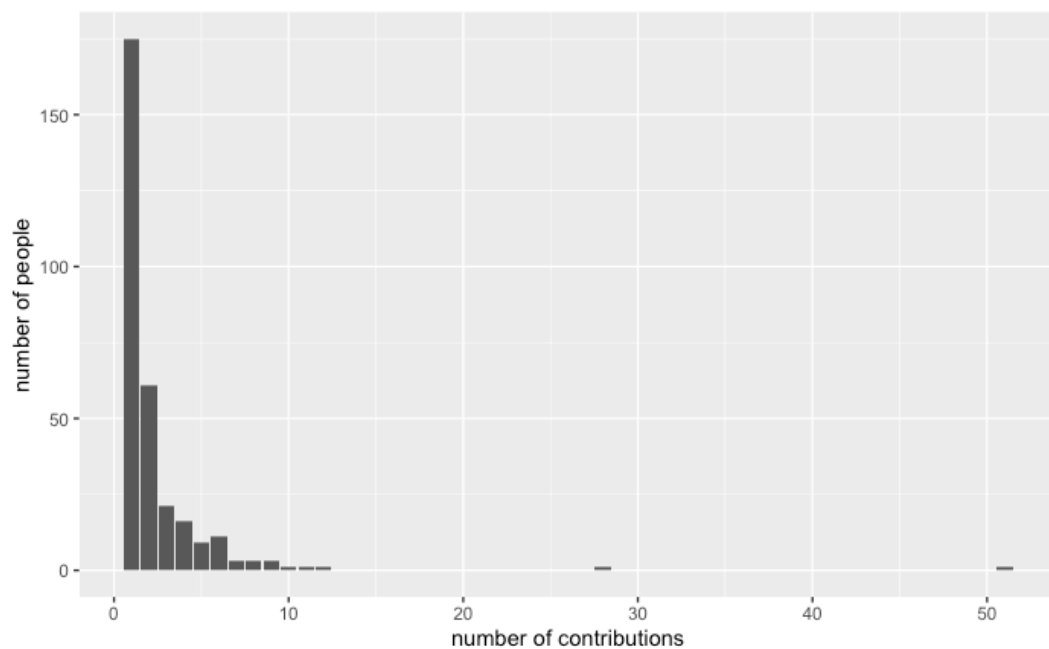


Figure 4: Social Network of Participants (With Indications of Language and Country)

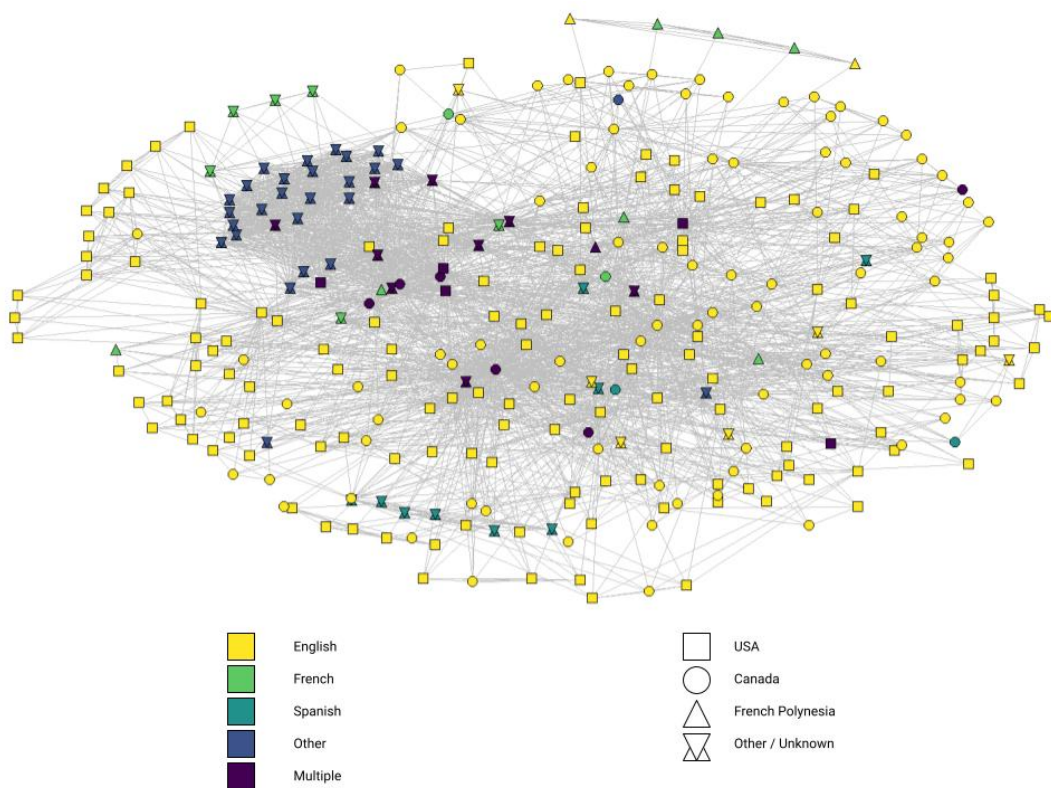


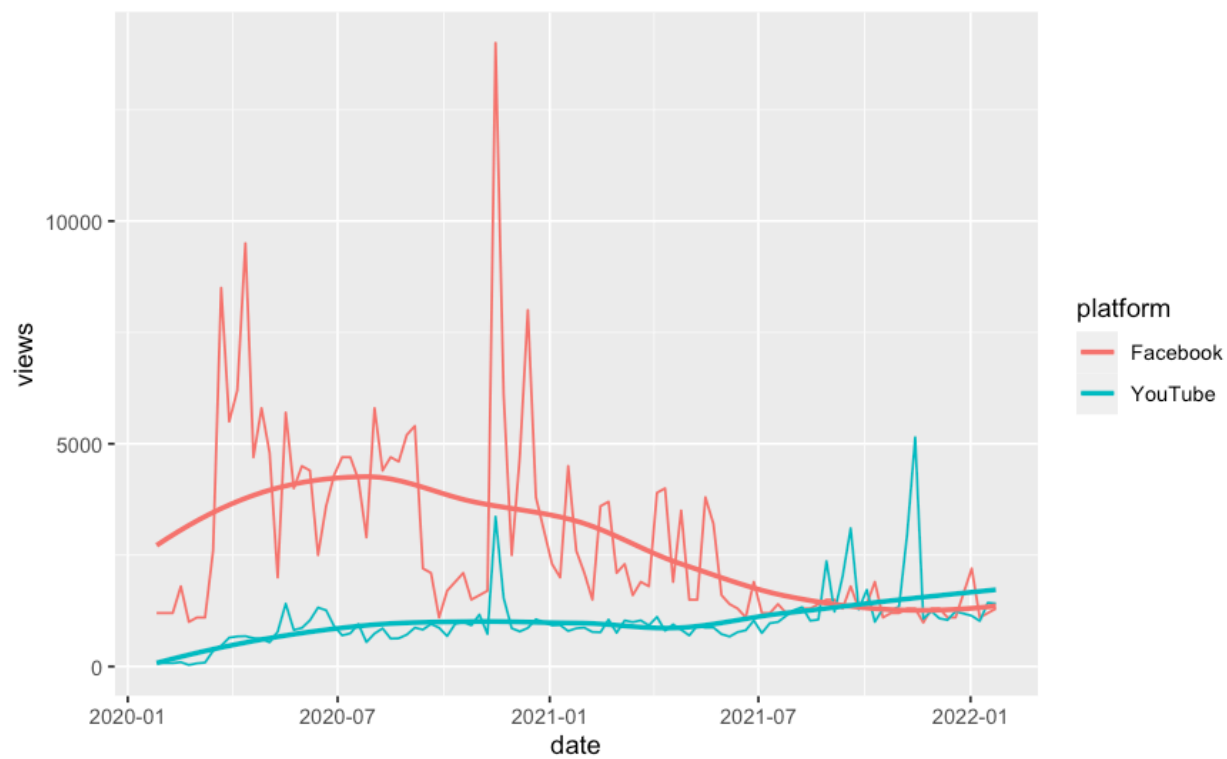
Figure 5: Views by Platform Over Time

Table 1: Countries with At Least Five Contributions to Beyond the Walls Services

country	number of contributions from country	percentage of total contributions
USA	317	43.72
Canada	265	36.55
French Polynesia	27	3.72
Belgium	11	1.52
El Salvador	10	1.38
Germany	10	1.38
UK	9	1.24
France	6	0.83
Italy	5	0.69

Table 2: U.S. States with At Least Ten Contributions to Beyond the Walls Services

state	number of contributions from state	percentage of U.S. contributions
Missouri	99	31.23
Michigan	39	12.30
Utah	19	5.99
Washington	15	4.73
Ohio	14	4.42
Oregon	12	3.79
Idaho	11	3.47

Table 3: Canadian Provinces with At Least Ten Contributions to Beyond the Walls Services

province	number of contributions from country	percentage of Canadian contributions
Ontario	204	76.98
Alberta	26	9.81
Québec	14	5.28
British Columbia	10	3.77
Saskatchewan	10	3.77

Table 4: Language Codes Applied to At Least Five Contributions

language code	number of contributions associated with language code	percentage of total contributions
English	580	80.00
French	53	7.31
Spanish	27	3.72
German	8	1.10
Multiple	5	0.69

Table 5: Beyond the Walls Performance on YouTube and Facebook

	total	Facebook	YouTube
average views	3852.13	2831.23	1020.90
average likes	84.06	44.28	39.78
average loves	50.01	50.01	NA
average shares	28.75	28.75	NA