

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF DIGITAL DISCIPLESHIP METHODS FOR
EFFECTIVENESS IN THE PHYGITAL CHURCH

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Daniel L. Tebo Jr.

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to investigate digital discipleship methods and their effectiveness in the *phygital* (physical + digital) church within various US-based evangelical networks. Throughout this research, a grounded theory study was generally defined as one “in which a researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p.13). Furthermore, the *phygital* church was defined as a group of 10-100 people who “utilize the strengths of physical church and the strengths of digital church” (Stadia Church Planting, 2020, p. 4) to gather for the purposes found in Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016). Whereas effectiveness was generally defined as “multiplying and sending [disciples], not [simply] gathering and counting” them (Ferguson et al., 2018). Faithful effectiveness and multiplication by today’s church ensures obedient fulfillment of Jesus’ commands in Matthew 28:19-20 (*ESV*, 2016) (Etzel, 2017). Nonetheless, through a robust collection and committed analysis of qualitative data, this researcher attempted to gain critical insights from digital church leaders; thus, generating a new model and best practice methods for digital discipleship and effectiveness in *phygital* church networks.

Keywords: digital discipleship, phygital church planting, effectiveness, grounded theory

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Dedication

“Guide me. Teach me. Use me.” This is the exact prayer that has been on my heart for years, and I am beyond humbled to see God faithfully move through it once again. This journey is just another awe-inspiring glimpse of His sovereign might and splendor. LORD, may you continue to receive the glory – now and forevermore. To my stunning bride, Hilary, there truly are no words to express my gratitude and absolute awe for you. Your relentless support, unwavering presence, and unconditional love are nothing short of God’s handiwork. I am so undeserving of such a companion; and yet, here you are... not going anywhere. You have blessed me beyond measure. Thank you, sweetheart. Thank you. To my children, Logan, Savannah, and Everett, I know some of your earliest memories will be of daddy sitting in front of the computer screen for what seemed like days that would never end. My prayer is that you will take those images and use them as an example of how to be obedient to God, even when it is not easy. His work is always worth the effort, kiddos. I promise. Always remember to love Him first and then others... Serve faithfully. That is truly the secret to life. Lastly, know I love each of you dearly and am blessed to be your earthly dad. To my parents, Daniel and Kimberly Tebo Sr., and in-laws, Robert and Wendy Howard II, tears fill my eyes as I recognize all I have accomplished in this life is due to your unending support and guidance over the last three and a half decades. I have become the man I am today because of your leadership, unending support, and love. Thank you for all you have done. I can never re-pay you. I dedicate this research to all of those above; and, lastly, to my brothers and sisters in Christ... Our world needs a strong and unified church devoted to the Way. May we never lose focus on His Great Commission and underlying commandments. Protect always, unify lovingly, lead boldly, and serve faithfully; for the time is near. Amen.

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To the United States Marshals Service, my colleagues, and the unparalleled leaders within, I would love to list each of you by name; but out of respect and security for you and your families, I trust you know who you are. You have each endured this pursuit beside me for the last several years and had the opportunity to witness God's work in my life firsthand... Whether it was sharing theological lessons while conducting countless hours of surveillance, traveling the globe to fulfill missions, or simply recalling how Jesus and His angels covered us on any given day, I trust you will continue to look to and trust Jesus in every situation. You have taught me brotherhood, community, ministry, and the overarching value of family in ways I will never forget. Thank you.

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List of Abbreviations

Augmented Reality (AR)

Coronavirus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19)

Digital Church Leader Questionnaire (DCLQ)

Digital Church Network (DCN)

English Standard Version (ESV)

Grounded Theory (GT)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Learning Management System (LMS)

National Association of Evangelicals (NAE)

Virtual Reality (VR)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

This grounded theory study aimed to investigate digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* (physical + digital) church within US-based evangelical networks. Due to the frequent shifts in technological advances, the twenty-first-century world moves at breakneck speeds, and the arena in which Christian ministry operates bears the brunt of its lasting impact. Simply put, “we live in a world where our digital technologies are increasingly intersecting with our spiritual lives. This is not only changing personal presentations of faith...but also the way we do church” (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 1). Additionally, through the lasting impacts of Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19), church leaders have been forced to embrace and adapt to cutting-edge digital innovations to ensure the survival of their pre-existing ministries; particularly, as it relates to disciple-making. Aaron Earls (2021) confirmed this suspicion during his 2021 Lifeway Research concluding, “U.S. churchgoers were less likely to be involved in small groups during the pandemic, but many added some digital and individual activities to their discipleship routines” (para. 2). These “fresh expressions” (Beck & Picardo, 2021, p. 9) of the church have challenged traditional church mindsets. Christian leaders must leverage these expanding technological protocols for the sake of the Gospel and the effectiveness of the Church (Anders, 2015); while continuing to seek the fulfillment of the Great Commission (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:19-20).

Nevertheless, a noticeable research gap surfaced. Church leaders have struggled to understand how to embrace these digital resources to actualize their deepest and truest potential. Online Community Pastor of Saddleback Church, Jay Kranda (2020) found that “90% of churches are streaming live services” (p. 28); however, Stadia Church Planting suggests many of

these churches struggle, “with the idea of doing online discipleship, as they view digital as a platform not capable of creating true disciples” (2020, p. 7). This continued divergence of content *without community* needed to be addressed before the prospects of true digital discipleship and church multiplication were lost forever.

Jeff Reed (2019), the former Director of Metaverse at Leadership Network, indicated this problem exists because church leaders have yet to understand and adapt to viable digital discipleship pathways, which when utilized correctly creates disciples who create disciples in digital and physical realms. To identify, understand, and implement a solution for this ongoing problem, this research investigated the understandings, perceptions, and practices as they related to digital discipleship methods and their pursuit of *phygital* church effectiveness. More pointedly, this research began with a review of the limited literature available for the topic and qualitative interviews were subsequently conducted with a small pool of digital leaders who sought to pioneer this groundbreaking ministerial approach. Next, the data was analyzed via grounded theory methods. By doing so, this research problem was continually examined and, ultimately solved by those who have encountered, combatted, and emerged victoriously for the glory of what God is doing in the twenty-first-century church. Simply put, the *phygital* church has begun uniting the missional-focused scattered church by way of a digitally networked community (Stadia Church Planting, 2020) and today’s Christian leaders must continue to embrace this opportunity due to the availability of sacred spaces (Cloete, 2015) and spiritual growth within (McCants, 2021).

To pave the way for this timely research, this researcher utilized the subsequent pages to present the overall research problem in a more palatable way for those who may not be familiar with the new concept of digital (or even “*phygital*”) ministry. A brief background to the problem

was given, while succinct research and an investigative plan for the same followed. Lastly, and most importantly, a thorough representation of key terms, assumptions, and delimiting factors have been presented to ensure the required framework was formed.

Background to the Problem

Much like Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press and the impact it had on the global Christian church via his 1461 Gutenberg Bible (Feldmeth, 2008), the ripple effect created by the ongoing digital revolution brings profound influence on the way the world operates today. Whether considering entire workplaces which operate globally via email correspondence from desktop and laptop computers or merely groups of friends and family who adopt personal communication methods via their individual smartphones or smartwatches, one thing remains certain: the internet has changed the world. Challies (2011) described this digital revolution as reaching the ends of the earth and affecting all interactions. For such a prominent theologian and Christian leader to acknowledge this impact, every Christian leader would be wise to deduce that the digital age matters and is impacting the church in rather critical ways. To ensure that impact leaves a positive influence, this researcher sought to conduct a grounded theory qualitative investigation into the best way to do just that; thus, allowing Christian leaders to spearhead their own digital operations in support of their pre-existing traditional physical gatherings or even initiate God-honoring church networks from within the digital space. Either way, the goal was to arrive at a disciple-centered church which effectively moved from digital to physical and from physical to digital.

All in all, through the Internet's ability to connect almost anyone, anywhere, at any time across the globe, it is proper to declare no matter how scattered a people group or organization may become, they likely hold the tools to gather right where they are to enhance their existing

relationships and missions alike, while also building new ones. To better understand this emerging ground, there were a few considerations that needed to be explored. First, leading theological issues had to be established; followed by the theoretical issues facing the church. Through this deeper analysis, a pre-existing survey of the problem began to surface. Lastly, this researcher held a unique relationship to the problem at hand, which after being shared, further supported the overall study.

Theological Issues

To understand the theological issues for digital discipleship and digital ministry, Scripture must be reviewed; for, Jesus commanded His followers before His ascension into Heaven to “go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:19). In this Great Commission, God sought “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...” (*ESV*, 2016, Ephesians 4:12-13). From there, Ephesians 4:16 implies this whole-body unity is what enables eternal strength and love. It was in this very spirit of unity that digital ministry found its roots. Cloete (2015) states, “technology could be viewed as secular, [however] it could at the same time create sacred spaces” (p. 1). It is in these sacred spaces that Smith (2015) believes, “Christians should establish a presence there, just as missionaries had always traveled to proclaim the gospel in new lands” (p. 9). However, the focus on missional evangelism is not the sole mission; nor is it the end of digital ministry. On the contrary, it is just the beginning. Friesen (2009) states, “the great challenge facing many of our families, organizations, and churches today is that we do not see relationally. We have lost sight of God’s networked kingdom. We need corrective lenses” (p. 18). Once this proper set of lenses is donned, a digital network comprised of an intricate set of nodes and links become visible and the theological

framework for digital ministry is born. Nevertheless, this is not to imply digital ministry merely replaces physical gatherings and its various expressions of church. In fact, digital ministry can and should reinforce and elevate physical gatherings. As Thompson (2016) indicates, “participating in the same virtual networks as others from my own church gives me a broader and deeper sense of the texture of these friends’ daily lives” (section 5). The truth is digital tools unite physical networks more intimately and this is the reason this research sought to understand this newer form of “*phygital*” church.

To continue, 2 Corinthians 5:17 (*ESV*, 2016) indicates the old has fallen away; whereas Revelation 21:5 further indicates Jesus makes all things new. Perhaps in that very same spirit, part of Jesus’ new method for the church today is the digital ministry field and its various tools. Digital ministry is challenging the way the church, in fact, does church (Friesen, 2009). Digital ministry is this exact invisible tool that presents in a very real, physical space for Christian leaders to embrace today.

Nonetheless, the issue becomes *how* to make a digital network an operable one that can move and function independently; or, better yet, strengthen and grow organically in *phygital* space (keeping the Great Commission in mind). Hutchings (2017) breaks the ice on this issue by stating, “each Internet user is linked into a pattern of weak and strong ties, including family members, work colleagues and friends, and these connections are activated and maintained through online communication as well as face-to-face and other forms of mediated contact” (p. 224). This researcher believes a theological basis for digital pathways exists but wanted to uncover themes related to intentional discipleship of the church as established in Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016). More specifically, what themes or missional pathways could carry disciples from online spaces to biblically founded, spiritually mature, and ultimately multiplied physical

communities. This overarching topic is further explored by Thompson (2016) and Lowe (2020) in the next chapter concerning digital network theology.

Theoretical Issues

Moving beyond the theological foundations into more practical domains, a proper theoretical approach to this research problem needed to be further founded. Of note, “in 2014 the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association recorded over six million online conversions connected to their website and resources, in contrast to only fifteen thousand converts made through face-to-face outreach” (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 1). This astounding fact showed that the application of the Internet far surpasses the reach and impact of any known traditional means to date. To begin exploring this theory within, Reed indicates, digital ministry “is not a virtual building where people meet. It is the distribution network empowering people to share the Gospel” (Reed, 2019, p. 3).

These networks consist of, “a set of nodes (which can be persons, groups, or organizations) and the ties between all or some of them” (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 7). From here the actionable goal of these networks aim, “to plug people into their local church, help grow partner churches in other states, and start home gatherings (think mini microsites) in cities far from their locations” (Krandall, 2020, p. 3). The bottom line is “community often starts online using digital assets and then develops into offline community within a local church, fostered by the role of an Online Pastor” (Krandall, 2020, p. 6). Nonetheless, the issue remained that little published research existed for digital discipleship solutions with regards to any focus on the *phygital* church context and its’ many networked possibilities.

This researcher noted that Miles (2020) uncovered solutions that, “range from alternative communities designed to engage non-practicing Christians, discipleship movements built around

scripture, biblical literacy/engagement movements powered by mobile applications, and multimodal methods found across social platforms” (p. 26); however, a firm theoretical formula for enhanced discipleship and multiplied edification was yet to be uncovered; hence the basis for this grounded theory study. Thomas (2014) went one step further and utilized the five components of witnessing, spiritual formation, belonging, worship, and prayer, found in Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016), as his criteria for his research; but continued to note, there was still “very little research done regarding the topic of online discipleship” (p. 208). He further suggested conducting a qualitative study to determine the effectiveness of digital ministry efforts as leaders sought to bridge the gap for physical communities (pp. 208-209). Considering these scholarly findings, this researcher carried the torch one step further to identify not only digital discipleship methods; but also, how those methods were multiplying Christ’s church into viable *phygital* church contexts.

Researcher’s Relationship to The Problem

This researcher holds a unique relationship with digital, and more pointedly, *phygital* ministry. Having served his entire adult life as a federal law enforcement officer, he has come to understand the unique demands of a profession that often precludes an individual from regularly attending and/or serving within a traditional church model. To elaborate, this researcher first served as a Special Agent within the United States Air Force Office of Special Investigations wherein, his duties often took him to undisclosed locations on the other side of the globe. His underlying mission objectives, the ongoing operational security requirements, and the overall demands of his multi-faceted role as a criminal investigator, a counterintelligence agent, and a protective security advisor all caused him to find unique ways to connect with the world around him – most notably his family and his Christian leaders back home. Special Agents, before the

digital age, were forced to rely on traditional mail via handwritten letters, audio-based telecommunications, and before that - telegrams; or, even worse, they resolved to merely accept their world as they could only physically see it around them.

Nonetheless, this researcher was blessed to use the full power of the Internet in many of his duty locations. At the single touch of a button, he was able to see real-time his newborn child moments after she was born, speak to his wife daily, and fellowship with other Christians who relentlessly pursued his sanctification and edification within – whether it be through general conversation, prayer, Bible study, or various devotional content. This researcher was also able to embark on the same Sunday experience as those of his home congregation(s) over the years due to modern day live stream and recording capabilities.

This researcher's exposure to digital ministry was not merely limited to a viewport back into the world of which he was once physically a part. Instead, it served as a solid place for new relationships in Christ to take root. In fact, this researcher's strongest mentoring relationship was first born through a Fellowship of Christian Athletes Endurance runner's online forum. Through a digital gathering of Christians, both young and old and varying levels of spiritual maturity, this researcher met Adam Fitzgerald in 2011. Adam first engaged with this researcher through a general prayer request posted to a discussion forum and through months of private messaging back and forth, a mentor/mentee relationship was born. Since then, this researcher and Adam have engaged on a weekly (if not daily) basis via digital means (FaceTime, iMessage, email, and other social media-based applications). The reality of this decade-long relationship, and ultimately brotherhood in Christ, is that this researcher and Adam have only met in person three times due to geographical separation; yet this relationship remains the strongest one this researcher has outside of Christ and his own marriage. Ultimately, this researcher can attest first-

hand to the power of digital tools in discipleship and edification of the entire church body.

Furthermore, while attending Liberty University's online program and completing a Master of Divinity degree online, this researcher has seen the power of relationships that have formed with fellow students, faculty, and administrators, all facilitated through online or digital classroom connections. Moreover, the importance of connections fostered through Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube as they connect people who likely would not have otherwise met cannot be overstated. This researcher has been introduced to countless Christians around the world who are devoted to what God is doing within and through digital space; namely, the Church Digital and the Digital Church Network (2022) founded by Jeff Reed. Their network seeks to train, equip, unite, and mentor leaders in several domains including digital-only, *phygital*, and metaverse pathways (Digital Church Network, 2022). Furthermore, this researcher has witnessed the efforts of Stadia Church Planting, the Leadership Network, the Underground Church Network, and Disciples Made as examples of other digitally based ministries. Many of these organizations and ministries have physical expressions tied to them, which, in effect, makes them *phygital* expressions of church.

Lastly, this researcher has been humbled and permitted by the grace of God to multiply and start his own informal *phygital* church called Servant Warrior Church. This network exists to develop disciples from primarily the law enforcement and military communities while they seek to protect, lead, unify, and serve those within their realm of influence. Through digital space, this researcher utilizes a private asynchronous platform and Zoom in which these disciples can engage daily in prayer, discussion/fellowship, and the reading/teaching of the Word. Upcoming plans include instituting physical gatherings of these Servant Warriors where they are co-located, thus, launching them into ministry together as they grow and multiply from digital space. It is

through engagements like this where, “virtual relationships can also become a means of spiritual formation: with accounts of people renewing their faith, or growing in intimacy with God, and developing greater confidence in everyday life” (Meadows, 2012, p. 173). It is just a matter of identifying, defining, and refining the effective model(s) to achieve these ends. The goal of this research, again, was to determine emerging methods and theories of those who have begun to apply them in such a *phygital* church context.

In mentioning these various church contexts, Dodge (2021) provides one of the most concise and thorough dissertations for an emerging church model and concludes:

[discipleship] characterizes the form and function of the micro-church as a gathering and scattering community. The micro-church is the church in its simplest form. It fulfills the three most elemental functions of what defines ‘church,’ the ecclesial minimums of worship, community, and mission. (p. 187)

Such a church model combined with the technological advances at the church’s disposal is “making it ever more possible to carry the resources of spiritual discipline into the routines of daily life” (Meadows, 2012, p. 179). This dynamic duo of micro-church and technology confirms, “when two or more people gather with the explicit purpose of sharing life deeply, they can help one another discern the presence and leading of the Spirit and hold one another accountable for the life of obedience” (Meadows, 2012, p. 179) and therefore the emerging *phygital* church model is of particular interest to this research.

Statement of the Problem

As demonstrated by the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the church must embrace the rise of technology and the resulting digital tools to connect, train, equip, and mentor its members (Stadia Church Planting, 2020). This research investigated the emerging themes of various *phygital* churches as they relate to digital discipleship methods and their pursuit of

edification and multiplication. Of note, this research was conducted on the leading edge of digital ministry and digital discipleship.

To date, very little research has been conducted with regards to utilizing digital tools to enhance and multiply physical gatherings of the church; specifically, those employed in conjunction with the first-century model of discipleship within the early church (*ESV*, 2016, Acts 2:41-47). On the other hand, critical resources to understand this problem do exist; for much research has been conducted on the emergence of digital church planting, digital evangelism, digital discipleship, and online church. There was also a recent re-focus on the first-century church model wherein Acts 19:23 (*ESV*, 2016) aimed to bring followers of the Way (Lockyer & Hirsch, 2021) to the frontlines again.

This valuable research was helpful when understanding the overall components of digital ministry and community building; however, it fell short in that these researchers did not focus on how to integrate the two for increased edification and multiplication. For far too long, Christian leaders have viewed the realm of digital ministry as an all or nothing approach; however, by acknowledging the deeper problem, it was this researcher's goal to bridge the gap and completely empower both digital church leaders and physical church models to fully integrate operations into a multi-faceted, two-way *phygital* highway as Kranda (2020) suggests.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to investigate digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* (physical + digital) church within various US-based evangelical networks. For the purposes of this research, a grounded theory study was generally defined as a study design “in which a researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p.13).

Furthermore, the *phygital* church was defined as a group of 10-100 people who “utilize the strengths of physical church and the strengths of digital church” (Stadia Church Planting, 2020, p. 4) to gather for the purposes found in Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016). Within this study, effectiveness was generally defined as “multiplying and sending [disciples], not [simply] gathering and counting” them (Ferguson et al., 2018, Foreword). Of note, since the focus of this study was to identify digital discipleship pathways for *phygital* effectiveness, it was important to clarify that the effectiveness of these digital discipleship pathways was not being measured. Instead, this research aimed to uncover how *phygital* leaders were pursuing effectiveness in this emerging context. Nonetheless, faithful effectiveness and multiplication by today’s church ensures obedient fulfillment of Jesus’ commands in Matthew 28:19-20 (*ESV*, 2016) (Etzel, 2017) and, through this collection and committed analysis of qualitative data, this researcher attempted to gain critical insights from digital church leaders. Doing so generated a new model and best practice methods for digital discipleship and effectiveness in *phygital* church networks.

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to examine digital discipleship methods for the *phygital* church and allowed for a greater understanding of edification and multiplication within those prescribed contexts.

RQ1. How do digital church leaders describe their understanding of digital discipleship methods?

RQ2. How do digital church leaders practice digital discipleship methods?

RQ3. How do digital church leaders measure the effectiveness of digital discipleship methods?

Assumptions and Delimitations

Research Assumptions

This qualitative grounded theory study explored digital discipleship methods as they contributed to the biblical multiplication of *phygital* church networks. This researcher assumed the digital church leaders interviewed were utilizing digital discipleship efforts in pursuit of a biblical network theology; and further assumed the interviewees would share their perceptions, experiences, and findings without withholding information for fear of organizational reprisal, negative connotation (given their official positions), or existing personality differences within their local church body.

Lastly, this research study assumed the research participants would have adopted specific definitions for discipleship and spiritual formation. Namely that discipleship is, “the process of guiding individual disciples to grow in spiritual maturity and to discover and use their gifts, talents and abilities in fulfillment of Christ’s mission” (Innovate Church, n.d.); while spiritual formation is “the process of being changed to be more like Jesus. It is the ongoing, gradual process of glorious transformation” (Dempsey & Earley, 2018, Chapter 1). These two ministerial efforts are undoubtedly integral to the Christian walk; however, they are not always encountered at the same level of practice in any given context. Specifically, while spiritual formation centers on the edification of the believer(s), discipleship is the overall action leading to multiplication of the church; therefore, any ministerial setting may find a varied range of applications for these terms. Nonetheless, the goal is to see both realms intersect for a completed fulfillment of Ephesians 4:11-13 and Matthew 28:19-20, no matter the experienced timeline within. Utilizing these definitions, the various research participants ultimately defined their own encounter of this phenomenon, and the extracted data reflected these findings accordingly.

Delimitations of the Research Design

This research study did not account for evangelism impacts or global church missions, but merely the development and multiplication of church networks utilizing the defined variables for the study. The delimitations of the study included the following:

1. The research was delimited by US-based *phygital* evangelical networks which ascribed to the following:

- a) Regularly scheduled events, gatherings, and trainings; occurring at least twice monthly.
- b) Exist as a decentralized network united under one biblical and theological framework.
- c) Devoted to the making of disciples as indicated in Matthew 28:19-20 (*ESV*, 2016) and Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016).
- d) Gatherings were between 10-100 people, at any given time.
- e) Expressed a desire to utilize digital means to enhance *phygital* expressions of the church.

2. Traditionally research populations are delimited to a certain geographic area. Due to the digital ministry focus of this research and the overarching span of global networks, this research was not delimited to a certain geographic area, but rather, the *phygital* domain as it was connected to the Digital Church Network (Digital Church Network, 2022). This indicates that digital-only, metaverse (virtual reality), and physical-only expressions were not considered for this study.

3. The research was delimited to digital church leaders between the ages of 21 and 60 years within the above-mentioned *phygital* church network.

Definition of Terms

The following list of terms have been provided for the purposes of better understanding the research problem, the population being observed, and the many varied dynamics present within digital ministry:

1. *Discipleship* – “the process of guiding individual disciples to grow in spiritual maturity and to discover and use their gifts, talents and abilities in fulfillment of Christ’s mission” (Innovate Church, n.d.)
2. *Digital Age* – the current age of society wherein, “instantaneous forms of communication, interaction, and response” (Thomas, 2014, p. 1) are utilized via digital tools.
3. *Digital Church Leader* – Originally defined as an “online pastor” by Kranda (2020), this is a person who “guides, nurtures, and spiritually shepherds’ people within the digital age” (p. 9)
4. *Digital-Only* – the type of digital ministry that “aims to create disciple-makers by utilizing digital tools and resources... in digital space, with no physical footprint” (Stadia Church Planting, 2020, p. 21).
5. *Edification* – the process of “building up” the body of Christ (Erickson, 2013, p. 960); both individually and collectively as Paul outlines in 1 Corinthians 12.
6. *Effectiveness* – “multiplying and sending [disciples], not [simply] gathering and counting” them (Ferguson et al., 2018, Foreword). Ultimately, ministerial effectiveness is about obedience to Jesus’ command in Matthew 28:19-20 (*ESV*, 2016) above all other factors (Etzel, 2017).
7. *Evangelical* – “one who believes and proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Elwell, 2001, p. 405).
8. *Grounded Theory* - a study design “in which a researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p.13).
9. *Metaverse* – the digital space; however, when applied further within the digital space, the “metaverse” consists of virtual reality platforms and online gaming communities.
10. *Micro-church* – a small group of people who gather for the purposes of prayer, worship, fellowship, the study of Scripture, and biblical mission (Dodge, 2021).
11. *Phygital* – this digital ministry approach seeks to leverage the strengths of both physical and digital ministry components to create disciple-makers, not just consumers of the Word (Stadia Church Planting, 2020).
12. *Servant Warrior* – a Christian who seeks to pursue biblical leadership, service, and protection in their individual realms of influence.
13. *Spiritual Formation* – evidence contributing to the multiplication and edification of biblical disciples. Ultimately, “the process of being changed to be more like Jesus. It

is the ongoing, gradual process of glorious transformation” (Dempsey & Earley, 2018, Chapter 1).

Significance of the Study

This research was critical in that it focused on the ways digital ministry could connect people across the globe while simultaneously launching them into physical expressions of church known as *phygital* churches committed to the Great Commission (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:19-20). To date, this researcher has discovered several pre-existing studies that touch on various areas of digital ministry, digital discipleship, digital ecclesiology, missional ecclesiology, and the models within.

For example, Thomas (2014) conducted a grounded theory study to identify best practices for online discipleship. Bagaas (2021) and Miles (2020) both examine ways to increase engagement and leverage digital networks. Grayson (2017) took the time to evaluate and compare digital leader traits to traditional leadership. Lewis (2020) and Diaz (2021) investigate Christian online educational systems and their digital characteristics within. Bourgeois (2013) and Craig (2020) seek to instruct leaders on how to engage in effective digital ministry practices.

Switching gears from online educational and discipleship theory and praxis, Mullins (2011), Thompson (2016), Byassee and Irwin (2021), and Beck and Picardo (2021) all dig into digital ecclesiology and the implications within. While Halter and Smay (2010), Sanders and Hirsch (2018), Sorrows (2020), Dodge (2021), and Lockyer and Hirsch (2021) all explore missional ecclesiology models. Nonetheless, it is important to note, none of these studies or works have successfully outlined digital discipleship methods for the furtherance of *phygital* church missions.

Consequently, this research was the first of its kind as it sought to interview existing *phygital* church leaders who were presently utilizing digital discipleship tools to develop their

congregants into mature biblical disciples who are edified and committed to multiplication. This research established a best practices approach and emerging theoretical construct for such methods and provided a voice for the *phygital* church network. Furthermore, this research uncovered a new model based on the grounded strengths and weaknesses of these findings for further study and praxis.

All in all, this research served as a foundation and eventual launching pad for Christian leaders and educators (both within ministerial roles and secular organizations alike) as they continue to train, equip, and mentor others in biblical discipleship, spiritual formation, and missions. For those who were already employing such methods, this research allows these leaders to adapt and refine their efforts for further impact and improvements in their missions and/or models. As far as those who were reluctant or unwilling to employ digital methods in their models, this research aids them in discovering the viability of digital discipleship for *phygital* praxis and guides their first/next steps. Lastly, for those struggling to move beyond digital-only spaces, this research indicates ways to launch into *phygital* expressions of their efforts; thus, propelling the global church further into God's Great Commission (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:19-20).

Summary of the Design

As both the interviewer and observer, this researcher sought to explore digital discipleship methods for effectiveness of the *phygital* church within selected US-based evangelical networks. Of note, "qualitative researchers must be well trained in observation techniques, interview strategies, and whatever other data collection methods are likely to be necessary" (Leedy & Omrod, 2015, p. 252); additionally, this researcher has had the opportunity to serve as a federal criminal investigator since 2009. Through his enhanced training and case

experience, he has conducted some of the most complex investigations known in current times and understands the importance of unbiased multi-angled observations while respecting the need for acute attention to detail. The primary goal of this research was to understand the perceptions of these individuals as they were experienced in the designated research area (2015).

This research utilized a researcher-developed and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved questionnaire, herein referred to as the Digital Church Leader Questionnaire (DCLQ), to conduct open-ended qualitative interviews through digital means to collect data. This data aided the researcher in answering the three established research questions. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and allowed for the interviewee to elaborate on their perceptions, beliefs, values, and experiences as they related to digital discipleship and effectiveness in their *phygital* contexts.

Furthermore, the researcher conducted unbiased observations and reviewed/collected numerous studies, publications, and other qualitative data during the same timeframe as these interviews to support the collective findings. This allowed the “researcher to be more of an observer rather than an interrogator” (Lewis, 2020, p. 29) and provided the greatest level of understanding of the environment within. In the end, prevalent themes and conclusions were established to gain generalized insights into the greater research topic under investigation. This researcher aimed to serve as a scholarly voice for those on the tip of the spear as it relates to the digital and physical mission field seeking to fulfill the Great Commission (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:19-20) as one global-impacting *phygital* church body.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Before this researcher could advance any further, a thorough comprehension of the theological framework surrounding digital ministry, digital discipleship, and the *phygital* implications within had to be investigated. To begin that review, this researcher first defined ecclesiology and discipleship through the lens of Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016) with several supporting biblical references and scholarly findings. Various key components establishing and edifying the church for what it is were noted, such as: baptism, teaching, fellowship, communion, prayer, and worship. This researcher then shifted to define discipleship and concluded the theological framework section by ascertaining the theological basis for *phygital* theology, digital ecclesiology, and digital discipleship alike.

Moving on, this literature review shifted gears to construct a theoretical framework wherein various concepts for the digital church were presented. Once laid out sufficiently, subsequent underpinnings unique to the *phygital* church model were outlined. Next, a wide array of digital discipleship theories and practices were explored more fully. From there, a robust theoretical survey of the grounded theory research method including its' components, techniques, and challenges were submitted to better outline the practical steps for launching applicable theories and outcomes.

Lastly, this literature review produced related thematic literature by presenting an understanding of digital church planting and sub-components within, such as: the gathered and scattered (yet unified) trait found within the modern church, the need for community-enabling over a consumer-focused *phygital* church, and disciple-focused multiplication of these networks. This researcher concluded with a quick look leading the digital church, both from afar and

through the dangers of digital isolationism, while also providing lessons learned from Christian online programs. All in all, this review laid the critical groundwork needed to establish the rationale (Galvan & Galvan, 2017) and dire need for Christian leaders to better understand the various uses and implications of digital discipleship as they seek to physically lead and faithfully serve in support of the Great Commission (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:19-20).

Theological Framework for the Study

To fully comprehend and appreciate this research as it relates to digital discipleship methods for *phygital* church effectiveness, several theological topics and sub-topics had to be examined within their proper biblical and historical context. To begin this investigation, this literature review sought to define ecclesiology while looking at the edifying components of the first century church in Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016). From here, discipleship was reviewed and then each topic was applied to its' own digital theology piece. These findings provided the critical framework needed to grasp the larger task at hand.

Defining Ecclesiology

Before the study of the church, or ecclesiology as defined by Kapic and Vander (2013), could be conducted, a biblical foundation establishing the church had to be reviewed. The root of ecclesiology is based in the Greek word *ekklēsia* and was first used by Jesus while telling Peter He was going to build his church *ekklēsia* on him (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 16:18). As one of the first disciples, Peter was specifically tasked with building the first congregation of those who trusted Christ as Messiah. Nonetheless, Peter's task did not begin immediately upon Jesus' declaration. Jesus still had much work to do within His earthly ministry and Peter's time would eventually come.

However, after Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus was recorded having been with His first disciples instructing them to wait in Jerusalem for they would "be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (*ESV*, 2016, Acts 1:4). Then, at Jesus' moment of Ascension, He declared once again that the Holy Spirit would come, and they would be His witnesses to the ends of the earth (*ESV*, 2016, Acts 1:8). A brief time later, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit faithfully came, and Peter was recorded as giving the first sermon of Jesus' divinity and rule over all creation. Peter truly became the rock Jesus said he would be in that moment; for, Peter called the people together, declared baptism for all who believed in the Messiah and in Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016), the church was formally born. In fact, prior to this time, *ekklēsia* had only been utilized in Scripture three times (each time by Jesus); and after the day at Pentecost, *ekklēsia* became utilized 111 times from Acts to Revelation (based on the *ESV* translation). This fact shows the unique tie-in between Jesus' disciples and the transcendent capability of the Holy Spirit. So much so that, "the church is often considered under the heading of pneumatology [the study of the Holy Spirit], and its essence is determined by the marks of the church" (Kapic & Vander, 2013, p. 44). Of note, the "marks of the church" refers to, "the four attributes of the invisible church: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" (2013, p. 73); whereas, some later Reformers further identify preaching, the sacraments of baptism and communion, church discipline, and social action as other viable marks as well (2013, p. 73). All in all, Ryken (2001) states the communion of the saints (and the ecclesiology within) is displayed by:

...a common body, connected by a common Spirit, entered by a common calling, destined for a common glory, serving a common Lord, based on a common faith, sealed by a common sacrament (baptism), to the glory of a common God, who is the Father of all. (p. 8)

Precedent literature demonstrates that for the church to be the church, there are no geographic or architectural boundaries and/or constructs required (Bagaas, 2021 & Cloete, 2015). The Holy

Spirit Himself transcends all human limits found in space and time. Therefore, this researcher would submit the church itself has freedom to move in non-traditional ways for the glory of the Kingdom; that is, if it remains united in righteous commonality under the kingship of Christ. Exploring this further, this researcher turned to Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016).

Establishing Disciples within Acts 2:41-47

Putnam, Harrington, and Coleman (2013) assert that “a disciple is a person who is following Christ (head); is being changed by Christ (heart); [and] is committed to the mission of Christ (hands)” (p. 51). This was the case for the early church as they were being transformed and ultimately led by the Holy Spirit; as seen during their baptism by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. After this critical event they, “devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (*ESV*, 2016, Act 2:42). They further served and provided for one another while praising God continually (*ESV*, 2016, Acts 2:43-47). Through these tenets, the disciples found themselves in a process which sought to, “grow [them] in spiritual maturity and to discover and use their gifts, talents, and abilities in fulfillment of Christ’s mission” (Innovate Church, n.d.). To better understand the components within, each of the early church disciplines will be reviewed individually. In the end, this survey of disciplines will cement the believer’s orthodoxy and orthopraxy thus allowing for the theoretical framework to be constructed (Ulrich, 2021).

Baptism. There are two baptisms that must be understood: baptism by the Holy Spirit and baptism by water. First, in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, “The Holy Spirit baptizes us into the body of Christ. . . It puts us in a relationship with Christ as head of the body and in relationship with all the members of Christ’s body” (Lowe & Lowe, 2010, p. 293) which edifies the entire structure (*ESV*, 2016, 1 Corinthians 12:12-14). This invisible embodied network will

be explored in greater length later in this review; nonetheless, for now, a general understanding of the need and execution of the Holy Spirit's baptism will suffice.

The second form is water baptism as seen in Jesus' water baptism in Matthew 3:13-17 (*ESV*, 2016) and Mark 1:9-11 (*ESV*, 2016). In fact, Jesus commanded such water baptism as part of his Great Commission (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:19-20). Notably, Erickson (2013) states:

It is almost universally agreed that baptism is in some way connected with the beginning of the Christian life, with one's initiation into the universal, invisible church as well as the local, visible church. Yet there is also considerable disagreement. (p. 1017)

Many theologians and scholars alike have argued whether water baptism is required to be saved by Christ; however, this researcher holds great weight in Acts 10:44-11:18 (*ESV*, 2016) wherein Peter witnessed baptism of the Holy Spirit over the gentiles in Cornelius' household and water baptism was merely pursued as an act of obedience to Christ. This example lends great support in the coming pages to the theology behind digital ministry and even more so for *phygital* ministry.

Teaching. This discipleship component of teaching within the early church is one of the staple disciplines; for without a teacher, there is no disciple. Jesus is the Master Teacher for the Christian church, and He commissioned many of His disciples to continue teaching His many lessons as reminded in the unity and gifting of the saints in Ephesians 4:11-13, 16 (*ESV*, 2016). The goal of these Christian teachers and leaders as disciples have been to follow "God's vision for his or her life, and influence others to follow God's plan for their lives" (Earley & Dempsey, 2013, p. 197). One biblical example is the edifying teacher-student relationship between Paul and Timothy (*ESV*, 2016, 2 Timothy 2:1-2). Lowe and Lowe (2010) point out it is "these reciprocal relationships [that] stimulate our growth in faith and that growth can only happen as we relate to one another as members of the ecosystem of the body of Christ" (p. 292).

Fellowship. Thompson (2016) notes early disciples were forced to “figure out what it means to follow [Jesus] without his bodily presence to guide them... [and] even though Christ is no longer present in physical form, Christians continue to speak of experiencing divine presence in embodied ways” (section 3). This premise is directly backed by Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:20 where He reminds Christians that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (*ESV*, 2016). At the end of the day, there is divine power in the gathering of His disciples and something to be said for the Holy Spirit’s power to transcend physical forms and distance. The early Christians understood this value in gathering and did so often. Also of note, the Greek word utilized in Acts 2:42 (*ESV*, 2016) for fellowship is *koinonia* which indicates “commonality, solidarity, and shared responsibility among households or individuals” (Mangum et al., 2014).

Communion. In addition to being in association with one another (fellowship), the early disciples also shared meals, or the “breaking of bread” (*ESV*, 2016, Acts 2:42) together. We see that Matthew 26:26-29 (*ESV*, 2016), Mark 14:22-25 (*ESV*, 2016), and Luke 22:14-23 (*ESV*, 2016) all recount the LORD’s Supper wherein Jesus taught His disciples to break bread in remembrance of His broken body upon the Cross and to drink wine in remembrance of His blood poured out for His people as the last sacrificial Lamb. This act is recounted often and outlined again by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 (*ESV*, 2016) with great sincerity to correct the error of the early church and restore the intended “unity and equality of the body of Christ” (Johnson, 2004).

Prayer. With regards to prayer, Elendu (2017) states, “Prayer is a dialogue between the heavenly Father and the Son made using the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the soul of man talking to God” (p. 68); and, therefore, “plays a critical role in

the discipleship process” (Thomas, 2014, p. 121). Prayer is one of the catalytic components a disciple seeks to attain maturity in faith (*ESV*, 2016, Ephesians 4:13) through all that they do. In this discipline, the disciple develops a vertical relationship with the Father and a horizontal relationship with others through intercessory prayer. Jesus modeled this to perfection throughout His priestly prayer found in John 17 (*ESV*, 2016). This invisible divine connection goes without saying and edifies the believer and the community alike.

Worship. The final component is that of worship. Wheeler and Whaley (2012) completed an extensive work on this topic and found that “the concept of worship is living an obedient life” (Introduction). Through this corporate approach and going beyond what the modern church often views as solely pomp and circumstance, the “Incarnational worshippers understand their faith to be an expression of what it means to be a follower of Christ” (Wheeler & Whaley, 2012, section 1). Furthermore, Old (2002) surmises, “True worship... serves, above all else, the praise of God's glory” (p. 2). It is this beautiful culmination of all components: baptism, teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer that ultimately provides a foundational approach for biblical discipleship wholly honorable to God.

Defining Discipleship

Now that a solid establishment of the corporate church and the components within have been explored, it is fair to state, discipleship needs to be defined. Dodson (2022) in his call for gospel-centered discipleship proposes a disciple maintains an identity as such; thus, leaving all else as a subservient role. This claim has merit within Genesis 1:26-27 (*ESV*, 2016); all mankind was made in the image of God and those who have proclaimed with their tongue and believed in their heart that He is LORD have been saved (*ESV*, 2016, Romans 10:9). Therefore, as image bearers of God, His righteousness stands available and expected to shine through His professing

disciples for the edification and glorification of His Kingdom (Kilner, 2015). Colossians 3:1-17 (*ESV*, 2016) outlines this process well in that Christ has called His disciples forth to a new life; and, as Lowe and Lowe (2010) concluded, it is “reciprocal interactions among and between the members of Christ’s body, no matter what form they may take, [that should] produce ongoing edification of both the individual and the community” (p. 291). Therefore, discipleship based on the *4 Chair Discipling* model will draw people to come and see (*ESV*, 2016, John 1:39, 46, 4:29), follow Jesus (*ESV*, 2016, John 1:43), fish for people (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17), and go to bear more fruit (*ESV*, 2016, John 15:16) (Spader, 2019).

In the end, Christian discipleship is “the process of learning the teachings of Jesus and following after His example... [while] making other disciples through teaching and evangelism” (Byrley, 2014). The overall objective is to send others back for a more productive harvest for generations to come (Spader, 2021) while seeking ways to be relational, intentional, and missional (Like Jesus Church, 2021) no matter what context the disciple should find him/herself in. Ephesians serves as the final puzzle piece to understand biblical discipleship in that:

...through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father... you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (*ESV*, 2016, Ephesians 2:18-22)

Digital Network Theology

By reviewing the theological framework so far it is clear “the body of Christ has always also been a virtual body” (Thompson, 2016, section 2) and God created all things interconnected (Lowe, 2020) with divine purpose. John 15:1-16 (*ESV*, 2016) presents Jesus painting a beautiful image wherein He is the True Vine and through His Holy Spirit, His disciples remain connected in Him completely unified and built up. Through this example, the world learns Jesus is not

limited to physical time and domain in the way mankind is and, through Him, mankind can traverse this invisible connection too. Ultimately, “the kingdom of God is a living reality that is present and active, though not always visible to the naked eye” (Friesen, 2009, p. 39) and through His Way (*ESV*, 2016, John 14:6), the world can be transformed (Friesen, 2009).

When this reality is embraced by twenty-first century society, the traditional physical ways of doing things become flipped upside down through the application of technology. Cloete (2015) asserts technology may often be viewed as secular, but it could at the very same time create sacred spaces. McCants (2021) states, “there are reports of unprecedented spiritual growth in virtual spaces” (p. 67) and Thompson (2016) supports, “churches need to become more creative about presenting themselves as part of the virtual body of Christ that encourages and cultivates attentiveness through actual events throughout the week” (Ch. 4). It is this exact call paired with Jesus’ teachings that enables the church to begin thinking outside of the physical box they have operated in for so long. Through this lens and the gift of technology, digital network theology and digital ministry gains a firm foothold on the theological canvas. Thomas (2011) goes a step further to state, “following Christ through the terrain of the virtual world involves being aware of the presence of God encoded into this infrastructure and seeking out these deep connections” (Ch. 2).

Friesen (2009) devoted his work, *Thy Kingdom Connected*, to the exploration of digital theology and uncovered physical relationships who leverage digital means are nothing more than a distinct array of nodes, links, and resulting networks that were constructed for the Kingdom of God. He stated, “the great challenge facing many of our families, organizations, and churches today is that we do not see relationally. We have lost sight of God’s networked kingdom. We need corrective lenses” (2009, p. 18). It is through these corrected lenses that many pioneering

Christian leaders have begun to explore the possibilities for digital ministry, specifically digital discipleship across the invisible highways within the Internet. Garner (2019) enthusiastically noted, “the development of digital media and technology provides one such context in which the followers of Christ faithfully bring the riches of Scripture and Tradition into dialogue with their experiences of this media world” (p. 29). Now it is up to the Christian leaders at home and abroad to figure out how to leverage these cutting-edge tools and bridge the gap between the seen and unseen, the physical and digital.

Phygital Ecclesiology and Discipleship

By acknowledging the viability of digital theology and digital ministry avenues, this researcher sought to focus in on one specific area and that was *phygital* church and *phygital* discipleship methods. Stadia Church Planting (2020) resolved to help “churches learn how to thrive, grow, and multiply – both physically and digitally” (p. 4) amid COVID-19. Thus, the term *phygital* was created by former Director of Digital Church Planting, Jeff Reed. Reed went on to establish two types of *phygital* church concepts (to be discussed in the theoretical framework section); it is important to note a refined focus on discipleship and relationships began to take form. What organizations like Stadia Church Planting and leaders like Reed were finding is exactly what Thompson (2016) surmised: “connections that began virtually [were able to be] strengthened by face-to-face interactions” (section 5); thus, a place for *phygital* church exists. Ultimately, *phygital* church began to prove as a two-way street and, if expected to thrive, must find best practices for digital discipleship; for, “virtual relationships can also become a means of spiritual formation: with accounts of people renewing their faith, or growing in intimacy with God, and developing greater confidence in everyday life” (Meadows, 2012, p. 173).

All in all, “digital relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ are just as potentially transforming as physical relationships” (Lowe, 2020) and “when two or more people gather with the explicit purpose of sharing life deeply, they can help one another discern the presence and leading of the Spirit and hold one another accountable for the life of obedience that flows from it” (Meadows, 2012, p. 179). Whether that is done more effectively physically, digitally, or *phygitally* is exactly what this research aimed to uncover. 1 Corinthians 14:12 states, “So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church” (ESV, 2016) and this will remain the heart of *phygital* endeavors – to seek the Spirit and edification in all components as outlined in Acts 2:41-47 (ESV, 2016) above. This researcher has had many personal conversations over the last two years regarding the theological soundness of digital ministry. Admittedly, the prevailing objection of opponents to the digital ministry field raise would be the concern of water baptism. That is the one spiritual discipline that still needs two people to physically gather if they are going to pursue obedience through Christ’s commands. Therefore, the *phygital* church was the delimiting factor within the realm of digital ministry and this research endeavor.

In the end, “theological reflection on technology is of great importance because it acknowledges that technology is more than just artifacts; it embraces human beings, their relationships and the values according to which they live” (Cloete, 2015, p. 3) and the need for spiritual formation “is a combination of this vertical connection that we have to Christ and the Spirit and the horizontal connection we have to other members of the body of Christ” (Galli, 2019). Digital ecclesiology and digital discipleship have demonstrated its ability to do just that and has been further explored through the theoretical framework section of this literature review;

thus, providing an existing knowledge base to better understand the research task at hand (Machi & McEvoy, 2016).

Theoretical Framework for the Study

While considering the theoretical framework built upon the theological understanding above, this review presents concepts for the twenty first century digital church and digital discipleship within. Various key pioneers and leaders have been introduced, as well as theories behind their efforts. This review then ties these two topics into the fresh *phygital* ministry expression of the church and gives a way ahead for this paradigm. Brief underpinnings of a Grounded Theory study have also been presented. Doing so, this researcher solidified the framework needed to move into other related topics and prepare the way ahead for the established research purpose.

Concepts of Digital Church

Online Pastor Angela Craig (2020) notes the early disciples of Jesus did not have formal buildings to gather; instead, they gathered in homes, markets, mountainsides, or wherever they could. She proposed the modern age often gathers via online social media platforms. Due to this fact, she noticed her ministry began to move from a traditional Sunday and Wednesday model of church to an online social media model where she began to minister to people anywhere at any time. This new concept of church opens the proverbial door to the digital church. When explored deeper and researched more intently, many digital church concepts have surfaced in the last five to ten years alone. This literature review covers just a few of those unified methods and lends support to the overall theoretical framework for this study.

All in all, the reality is, “we live in a world where our digital technologies are increasingly intersecting with our spiritual lives. This is not only changing personal presentations

of faith...but also the way we do church” (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 1) and for the modern church to remain relevant within these emerging twenty-first century technologies, the church must adapt new methodologies for discipleship and ministry (Anders, 2015). Smith (2015) further describes the Internet as new ground for digital missionaries to proclaim the gospel in new lands. This groundbreaking shift to do old business in new ways is not new to the church. In fact, much like the Roman roads in the first century, the adoption of the codex shortly thereafter, the printing press in the fifteenth century, and the telegraph in the nineteenth century, each of these components and ministerial avenues were utilized to edify and multiply the church in new and profound ways (Bourgeois, 2013). Nothing is different today for the possibilities found within the emerging digital church mechanisms. They should be viewed as tools that serve the fleshly body of Christ in powerful ways (Byassee & Irwin, 2020, p. 9).

Digital church leaders Jeff Reed and Chestly Lunday with the Church Digital and the Digital Church Network (2022) have suggested three pathways for digital church to materialize; they are metaverse expressions - which occur in virtual reality (VR) platforms (often via Oculus VR headsets), digital expressions – which consist of anything from social media networks and digital apps to online gaming, and then *phygital* expressions – which were the focus of this study wherein the strengths of physical and digital expressions were leveraged together and simultaneously. Pioneering leaders within each of these pathways are DJ Soto (Metaverse Pastor at VR Church), Jason Polling (VR Pastor at Cornerstone Yuba Church), Angela Craig (Online Pastor at Pursuit Church Live), and Jay Kranda (Online Pastor at Saddleback Church). Of note, this literature review did not uncover specific *phygital* leaders as this concept had yet to be flushed out within the digital church framework; hence, the intent of this research study was to better

understand the *phygital* church and its viable contributions to digital discipleship and effectiveness within.

Regardless of which specific digital church pathway is adopted, Mullins (2011) further concludes it is not the pathway or place, whether Internet or physical building, that makes up the church; instead, it is about the people of God gathering to live out His purposes. Thomas (2011) further declares it is the effort of “seeking God in both the real and the virtual worlds [that] makes us digital disciples” (Ch. 1). This truth is what undergirds all digital church model theory moving forward.

Moreover, the digital church does tend to remove proximity and social barriers for people to hear and receive the Word of God for the first time in this new technological era. Digital church concepts, in effect, draw people near and enable a conversation and relationship to begin for further development; or more simply, to engage in digital discipleship. Hutchings (2017) notes digital church has shown its ability to become part of people’s daily lives that is shared with friends, family, co-workers, and digital friends alike.

To delve into this concept further, Bourgeois (2013) conducted research from 2006-2008 to identify the best practices for digital ministry leaders in that given timeframe. With a theoretical framework that included an intense focus on technology, people, and process, Bourgeois concluded that disciples within his study sought not just meaningful content within the digital church; but also, meaningful interaction led by a devoted leader (and team) who endeavored to construct a network with proper planning and established discipleship goals. Nonetheless, all concepts and methodologies of digital church reviewed by this researcher uncovered that the digital ministry field and pioneering leaders within are united in effort and are

seeking to fulfill Jesus' Great Commission in new and improved ways; thus, meeting people where they are at and offering them the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Concepts of Digital Discipleship

Delving beyond the overarching concept of the digital church and its' framework, this researcher acknowledges the need for a thorough understanding of current theories surrounding the art of digital discipleship. As a recap, the varied components of biblical discipleship are effectively unearthed in Acts 2:42 (*ESV*, 2016), wherein, baptism, teaching, fellowship, communion, prayer, and worship all occur within a unified church body. Taking these components into account, Lowe (2020) exhorts digital church leaders to focus these efforts inward and outward to create impacting relationships and disciplines. Bourgeois (2013) further echoes it is these relationships, and not the technology, that should be the focus of digital church leaders. Simply put, the goal of digital discipleship is to lead one another to the conforming life of Jesus Christ (Anders, 2015).

One warning Anders (2015) provides is that due to the impact and saturation of digital technology, digital church leaders must find ways to use technology to drive people together and to God. If they do not, they risk culture and technology filling the God-size hole in their hearts with lesser, temporal things. Dunlow (2021) echoed this concern by acknowledging online activity was at an all-time high during the COVID pandemic and church leaders must be intentional in their efforts to combat distraction. However, Meadows (2012) submits "our mobile devices are making it ever more possible to carry the resources of spiritual discipline into the routines of daily life" (p. 179); therefore, all today's digital church leaders have to do is leverage this technology for the glory of God. Hutchings (2017) found that with the right digital pathway and devoted leadership, people within digital communities are enabled for powerful relationships

founded in biblical identity. In the end, “online experiences show us that we can give and receive care for one another, value interpersonal relationships, and interact with one another, thereby creating connections that form community” (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 79).

The next element to understand within digital discipleship is how and where digital disciples can and should engage in digital discipleship. Hunt (2019) notes digital discipleship is not limited to simply sharing Bible passages; but is a means to go beyond superficial discipleship and pursue the glory of God as His digital image bearers. Ultimately, to be a digital disciple means to carry the same levels of intentional, relational, and missional focus (Like Jesus Church, 2021) as a physical face-to-face disciple would.

As noted in the previous sub-section, digital church (and therefore digital discipleship) has successfully taken place within metaverse/VR platforms and digital-only platforms. Jones (2020) highlights effective methodologies for building and engaging in biblical community in and through social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Craig (2020) outlines the same approach to digital ministry. Undoubtedly, a single search within the Facebook Groups search bar will return a plethora of Christian digital disciple gatherings. Gould (2015) expands the horizon a bit by considering independent blogging platforms leading to social media networks, and even YouTube as viable platforms to produce community engaging content based on Scripture. Nonetheless, all of these are tools in which the Digital Church Network (2022) seeks to utilize and unite digital church leaders to digitally disciple others in accordance with Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016).

The question then becomes how exactly does a digital church leader effectively teach, pray, commune, fellowship, worship, and baptize disciples throughout cyberspace? Craig (2020) suggests utilizing a combined effort approach of asynchronous and synchronous digital

strategies. For example, a digital church leader can begin with an asynchronous platform such as a Facebook group to bring people together for fellowship. The leader can begin teaching there via recorded or live video posts. Individual worship links can be shared within this space. However, the next level is to construct synchronous events via platforms like Zoom where corporate worship, prayer, and even communion can be experienced together. From there one-on-one interactions are enabled via FaceTime, Zoom, and/or Facebook Messenger. This digital ministry strategy is easily adaptable and reciprocal for the digital church leader to execute.

Notably, the one area not mentioned from Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016) was that of baptism. Craig (2020) addresses this, in that, she ensures another person is physically with the disciple seeking to be baptized by water. She then trains them via video and assists in administering the act digitally, in real time. This researcher and literature review notes, this is the one discipleship area in which a physical element must be present to disciple another follower of Christ fully and obediently. Therefore, to have a purely digital-only church is possible; however, the digital-only church will always lack full potential in its' theological framework. This gives further understanding and framework for the *phygital* ministry being studied.

The New Paradigm: *Phygital* Ministry

To lay the groundwork for the emerging *phygital* church, it is pivotal to understand that prior to COVID-19, many physical campus pastors were beginning to live stream their Sunday services and were perceived to have been viewing the online congregation as a disconnected afterthought; that is until those viewers came to the physical campus for an encounter (Beck & Picardo, 2021). However, with the pandemic-induced mass governmental shutdowns and rise of social distancing protocols, pastors were forced to talk to the camera to reach their congregation and this caused leaders to consider the possibilities for a fresh expression of church. Ultimately,

“COVID-19 taught at a moment’s notice that if you are unwilling to adapt and evolve in methodology, you will cease to exist” (Beck & Picardo, 2021, p, 54). COVID-19 forced the entire church to consider the efficacy of digital ministry within their own experiences and context. McCants (2021) recalled turning on a webcam during the COVID-19 government shutdowns initiated an “entirely new, unexpected, up close and positive personal relationship dynamic” (p. 19) with his congregational members. It is this spirit and birth of the digital pulpit that challenges leaders to examine a new way of doing church in the days ahead.

With COVID-19 behind most folks and the new normal of life beginning to settle in, church leaders are left attempting to understand the proper way to integrate the two previously disconnected ministry skillsets. To rectify this, Hutchings (2017) reminds:

each Internet user is linked into a pattern of weak and strong ties, including family members, work colleagues and friends, and these connections are activated and maintained through online communication as well as face-to-face and other forms of mediated contact. (p. 224)

This realization calls to the surface that life in the twenty-first century is *phygital* and it is not going away any time soon. In fact, the business world was one of the first arenas to acknowledge this new world when an Australian marketing agency coined the term *phygital* in 2013 (Albertelli, 2021) and various sectors of society are attempting to understand and unite the two in harmony.

For the global church, Kranda (2020) notes Christian leaders must embrace both digital and physical; it is noted, “community often starts online using digital assets and then develops into offline community within a local church, fostered by the role of an Online Pastor” (p. 6). To negate this reality is to miss a prime opportunity to unite His people and make disciples of all the nations (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 18:20 & 28:19-20). Therefore, the question becomes what does a *phygital* ministry look like? One church consulting company, the Aspen Group, states it is

where, “the onsite and online experiences work in tandem, complementing one another creating a more personalized, memorable, and engaging guest experience” (Liautaud, 2020, para. 1).

However, this researcher notes the Aspen Group appears to be defining their concept of *phygital* ministry from only one point of view; that is the “*Phygital: Digital-Next*” (Stadia Church Planting, 2020, p. 20) context focused on strengthening an existing physical context through subsequent digital space.

On the contrary, there is another option for *phygital* ministry and that is the *Phygital: Digital-First* context. This approach aims at beginning as a digital-only expression and then shifting to a model with physical micro-sites all connected through the pre-existing digital network (Stadia Church Planting, 2020). Both *phygital* concepts are truly *phygital* ministries and seek unity between digital and physical. In the end, “online and offline communities could be viewed as two worlds we are living in simultaneously, which could cause tension for both worlds” (Cloete, 2015, p. 1) and it is up to the digital church leader to embrace and discern the best way to manage that tension in a blended model.

Going another layer deeper, Panzer (2022) in his recent text aimed to understand this hybrid way of doing ministry in a post COVID world. Panzer indicates this emerging church model was born because of what he calls the Digital Reformation, or the “gradual and continuous reimagining of what it means to be the church in the digital age” (Intro). Notably, Panzer submits the challenge within is for tomorrow’s church leaders to satisfactorily bridge the gap between the digital and physical mission fields. Furthermore, he deduces simply streaming physical worship services is not enough to fulfill the hybrid ministry role. Instead, church leaders “must find a way to maintain connections and networks” (Ch. 1) across the spectrum. Panzer does elaborate and state, “online communities connect through shared specific affinities” (Ch. 2) which indicate

church leaders could find value in building digital discipleship pathways around those shared frameworks. In theory, it is this hybrid focus on relational encounters that “accompany communities in day-to-day digital life” (Ch. 3). In the end, he proclaims hybrid ministerial efforts and pathways are absolutely required in the modern world and declares, “the lack of concrete examples demands continual experimentation and iterations” (Ch. 3). This is the exact heartbeat of this research at hand. It appears hybrid, or *phygital*, ministry is here to stay. Now church leaders must acknowledge and embrace it in its totality.

To summarize, digital ministry will never replace face-to-face community, but it can and should be a force multiplier for what God is doing in the physical modern church (Craig, 2020). The *phygital* age is here and church leaders must solve the problem of how to unite the body of Christ in and through sound digital discipleship protocols for furtherance of *phygital* ministry contexts. Given the surface-layer literature available, this researcher submits the timeliness of this study allowed him to forge scholarly investigation for the topic at hand and is exactly why a grounded theory study served as the clear and present missing link.

Grounded Theory Study

Components of Grounded Theory Study

Grounded theory is simply defined as a “theory derived from data gathered and analyzed in a systematic and rigorous way, as well as a method for generating such theory” (O’Leary, 2007, p. 107). Such theory is turned to by social scientists and scholars alike when groundbreaking theory must be inductively unearthed. This method stirs into existence when little context and content is known already about the given research topic. (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

The founding of grounded theory is attributed to Glaser and Strauss in the mid-1960s as they studied ill patients and whether they knew the knowledge of their impending death or not. Within their study, they created the constant comparative method which was, “an original way of organizing and analyzing qualitative data” (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 2) which focused on constant coding and analysis of the data resulting in inductive reasoning and letting the data interpret itself into a new model (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Of note, there have been several critiques, modifications, and adaptations to the original grounded theory model over the years. Three worth mentioning for the better understanding of this methodology are traditional/Glaserian grounded theory, evolved grounded theory adapted by Strauss with Corbin and Clarke, and constructivist grounded theory by Charmaz (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Each has their own unique procedural recommendations and protocols; however, all three seek to allow the collected data to produce a grounded data set which produces an emerging theoretical construct within the topic studied. Nonetheless, Glaserian grounded theory (GT) has three distinct qualities: 1.) it seeks to find the main recurrent variable in the first stage of the study, 2.) the researcher remains open minded and trusts the recurrent variable will resurface, and 3.) it avoids describing abstract concepts (Grounded Theory Institute, 2014).

Again, at the root of grounded theory is the comparative analysis effort which is pursued by the researcher to achieve three purposes: 1.) to obtain accurate/factual evidence surrounding the topic at hand, 2.) to generate empirical (data-based) generalizations, and 3.) to substantiate a single unit/concept for analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). In understanding that the goal of grounded theory is to allow the data to interpret itself and to create an objective reasonableness based on the research conducted, the next step is to understand the techniques and specific methods within.

Techniques for Grounded Theory Study

The Grounded Theory Institute (2014) describes the GT process as five sometimes simultaneously occurring steps consisting of preparation, data collection, constant comparative analysis, memoing, and sorting/theoretical outline. Moreover, it is important to note qualitative and quantitative data can be utilized within the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1999) and collected data can take many forms ranging from participation observation, interviews, videos, journaling, and artifact collection (Olsen & Rizk, 2022).

Preparation requires the researcher to have minimized any pre-conceived notions they may have had prior to approaching the research problem and be ready to participate as an active listener throughout the entire process (Konecki, 2018). Data collection processes can be daunting; but are critical for the remaining steps. Next, comparative analysis and memoing is a coinciding circular process that requires coding, integration of literature, and theorizing as the research progresses (Olsen & Rizk, 2022). Lastly, sorting and outlining keeps things organized and prepares the researcher for publishing their theory and findings at the conclusion of the research. This process, prior to writing, can continue time and time again until the researcher is unable to find new categories or theories within new data collection efforts (Olsen & Rizk, 2022).

Challenges within Grounded Theory Study

With regards to specific challenges within grounded theory, a few worth recognizing here are, again, that the researcher must seek to remain open minded and not place their own worldview and preconceptions into the analysis or study (Konecki, 2018). This researcher has no professional ministry background; however, as noted in chapter one, he does have exposure to

digital discipleship methods and how they can impact the physical world around him. He must maintain unbiased and in an active listening role throughout the duration of this research.

Next, this researcher acknowledges that the GT model can create flexibility within the results, and it may be viewed not as concrete as many other research models may conclude (Glaser & Straus, 1999). To combat that assumption, this researcher recognized this research study, and its adopted model, would be rigorous and require a lot of effort, time, and patience (Chun Tie et al., 2019) to achieve data saturation and uncover a viable and trustworthy emerging theoretical construct for generations to come. Given that there was no precedent or theory base for digital discipleship methods and the impact they have on *phygital* church effectiveness, grounded theory was the only logical method to adopt within this research effort.

Related Literature

With the basic theological and theoretical framework for the digital church and digital discipleship erected, there were still a handful of related literature topics that had to be reviewed as they contribute greatly to the *phygital* ministry and resultant effectiveness at hand. Those topics included church planting constructs such as a gathered and scattered (yet unified) structure, a community-focused resolve, and a well-founded biblical multiplication plan. Furthermore, an overview of leadership theory for digital spaces and battling isolationism within needed to be presented. Lastly, summative lessons learned from Christian distance education programs would need to be offered. Concluding this literature review with such sub-topics would provide this researcher with the best survey of existing material for the Grounded Theory study that lay ahead.

Digital Church Planting Dynamics

All digital church planting efforts hoping for a *phygital* manifestation of the church must be constructed for the online experiences to positively influence the offline lives of its members (Stadia Church Planting, 2020). This means a relentless focus on intentional interactions, relational community, and missional operations must be maintained. The leaders at Stadia Church Planting (2020) boldly suggest this twenty first century *phygital* model is found within Jesus' ministerial example given in John 6 (ESV, 2016). This premise has been further explored within the next three sections.

Gathered and Scattered; Yet Unified

In seeking to understand the phenomenon of the gathered and scattered church, this research points to Halter and Smay (2010), wherein they spend the fifth chapter of their book submitting the western church has traditionally existed in two separate (modalic and sodalic) arms of the church. Modalic referred to the local congregational church focused on the shepherding and teaching of its church members and sodalic was the traditional missional parachurch organization seeking to go out and bring people to the modalic arm. Halter and Smay submit the church, when following Scripture through the "go and make" commands in Matthew 28:18-20 (ESV, 2016), is both modalic and sodalic at the very same time. This is the unity Jesus described in His vine parable (ESV, 2016, John 15:1-17) and prayed for the night before His crucifixion (ESV, 2016, John 17:23). This is the missional and equipping ministry Paul taught and exhorted in Ephesians 4:11-13 (ESV, 2016). The church has always existed to be gathered (to know) and scattered (to go) for one unified purpose (ESV, 2016, Matthew 28:18-20).

Within this framework, it is this type of harmonious network that Campbell and Garner (2016) describe for a networked theology. Through relationships and people, links and nodes

begin to build the digital church (both seen and unseen). Kranda (2020) states it is up to the online church “to plug people into their local church, help grow partner churches in other states, and start home gatherings (think mini microsities) in cities far from their locations” (p. 3). This focus drives home the exact model Halter and Smay presented (2010) for the sake of this research – a biblical *phygital* expression of church.

Through her own digital church experience, Craig (2020) found that God utilized digital tools to create meaningful connections that united those who may not have otherwise had a physical place to gather into an overall community. Through this, Craig witnessed God gather the scattered into a unified technological church body just as Jesus had prayed for the night before His sacrificial death (*ESV*, 2016, John 17:23). Craig notes, digital and physical expressions were both complementary and should not be separated; just as Halter and Smay (2010) approached their modalic and sodalic model. Kranda (2020) also boldly endorses this method without reservation.

If ministry, whether missional and apostolic or physical and digital, were to be complemented and integrated in effort, the next component to acknowledge would be the unification power that binds it all together. Byassee and Irwin (2011) spend a great deal of time exploring how the Christian faith is a mediated faith from all angles. They submit Jesus taught through communion and baptism and His followers were to be reminded of His redeeming love, power, and grace. Although Jesus would not be physically with His followers in these communal acts, they would remain connected through this mediation. This is further explored with the coming of the promised Holy Spirit at Pentecost (*ESV*, 2016, Acts 2) and experienced in powerful mediated ways still today.

All in all, His scattered servants, “were made to step into the story, breaking out beyond our services, study groups, and strategy meetings. We were made for a story bigger than church, greater than culture” (Scott, 2018, section 7) and *phygital* ministry is a way to experience that calling. Stadia Church Planting (2020) exhorts digital ministry should not be the main gathering of the body but the equipping, sending, and multiplying arm of the physical gathering. Through digital tools (as described in the theoretical framework section above), digital church leaders are empowered to not only produce basic content for consumption; but community enabling relationships for the completed work of the Great Commission (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:18-20).

Missional Community over Content

According to Dean’s (2021) collaborative statistical survey, a staggering 4.48 billion people are using online social media platforms to engage with the world around them. This statistic has more than doubled since 2015; and of that 4.48 billion people, 99% of them are what would be considered mobile users. This means that of the almost 8 billion people on earth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), over half have direct access to the digital church at the single touch of a screen.

This incredible quantitative data confirms the internet is a place for being seen and known; ultimately allowing a new kind of community to form for many (Gould, 2015). Lowe and Lowe (2018) submit this desire for community may be why the internet has become so powerful. Nonetheless, to interact wisely with this phenomenon, a digital church leader must uncover two aspects: *content and missional community*. Kranda (2020) primes this exploration by exhorting students via a digital ministry webinar to maintain engagement over views. This vision shows that there is a difference between mindlessly streaming a one-sided sermon and

ultimately pursuing relational interaction on the very real, robust, multi-lane highway called the internet.

To understand these two pillars and how they are to interact, Bourgeois (2013) states, “a stream is the flow of digital content that our potential audience puts in front of themselves every day... They are the daily habits that we all have in the use of our devices” (p. 26). These streams are exactly what the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association used in 2014 to log “six million online conversions” (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 1); however, this pioneering research seeks to ask just how many of the six million new believers discovered community through their digital society; specifically, within their physical realities.

This is the exact technological nightmare Lockyer and Hirsch (2021) openly admit they did not know how to handle as church leaders today. They refer to this crisis as the tool vs. tyranny of technology in their book and further propose technology, if not used correctly, can hinder effective ministry and relationship. They fear a content-centered church “will often fail to share the experience of [one’s] life and love that our surrounding society so desperately needs” (section 16). This is exactly why Kranda (2020) proclaims the online church can and should build community and transition members to physical campuses as time goes by.

Bagaas (2021) took this problem a step further and concluded that enabling asynchronous and synchronous platforms for digital ministry rendered the greatest community engagement and edification among the members he studied. While Beck and Picardo (2021) also believed a refined focus on *koinonia* in and through digital means allows real relationships to form between those engaging with one another. This section of this literature review further reveals the gap for this research in that *phygital* reinforcement of such digital communities has yet to be studied and established for theoretical praxis in the digital church.

Nonetheless, other key scholars providing potential avenues for digital church leaders in establishing the *koinonia* mentioned by Beck and Picardo (2021) consist of Sanders and Hirsch (2018) as they seek to uncover missional pathways for the church. Their premise is to gather community around calling and then send them out on mission. This model construct supports Reed's (2020) focus on what he calls "the twelve vs. the twelve thousand"; in that, digital church leaders should focus on smaller intentional communities over what social media influencers seek in mass followings. Sorrows (2020) believes the present day is the perfect time to launch a micro-church strategy as it only requires Christ followers partaking in worship, prayer, fellowship, communion, and mission – all of which does not need a building. Each of these components and viewpoints appear to pave the way for a pioneering *phygital* discipleship model to emerge.

With regards to the need for community-focused digital discipleship pathways, Dodge (2021) adds to the discussion by establishing community and mission as two inseparable pillars within the church. This conclusion calls for all digital discipleship efforts to be missional at the end of the day, which often emerges as a physical form. Miles (2020) confirms this by stating, "the church has the opportunity to redefine how the church builds daily community through horizontal networks informed by an understanding of missional ecclesiology" (p. vi). Furthermore, Miles (2020) found many of the digital discipleship pathways she researched had attempted to utilize *phygital* networks in pursuit of biblical knowledge. Lastly, Tam's (2019) research concluded the new "lay-driven disciple-making paradigm has proven itself to be one of the most theologically sound and missiological effective strategies" (p.130) ever observed in the church.

These findings absolutely establish a need for examining *phygital* discipleship pathways in the modern church as digital church leaders desperately seek to understand how to reach, engage, commune with, and launch its members towards fulfilling the Great Commission (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:18-20). Live streaming and creating content are not inherently evil. In fact, they are introducing people to Christ (Campbell & Garner, 2016); however, digital church leaders would be remiss to stop there in considering the command to make disciples (who make disciples). Thomas' (2014) dissertation concluded that connecting people into community and meaningful relationships within was pivotal for the success of the ministry. To connect this catalytic sub-topic to the next, this research reviewed the idea of biblical multiplication within the church and connected it to digital discipleship ministry efforts in support of the *phygital* church model.

Multiplication: Disciples who make Disciples

Before delving into a couple pivotal texts exploring church multiplication, this researcher recalls Thomas' (2014) doctoral research. Within, Thomas concludes that all digital leaders he interviewed sought to make disciples who made other disciples. This is the exact goal of digital church multiplication. In fact, all discipleship, no matter the context, should seek to do just that in accordance with the call to multiply and send others out to do likewise (Ferguson et al., 2018). Throughout this sub-topic literature review, multiplication will be further defined, described as seen in various church models, and measured for veracity within overall church edification parameters.

To understand biblical multiplication, two things must be done initially. First, the church must listen to what Jesus said; and secondly, Jesus must be observed. As this research has uncovered thus far, Jesus commanded His disciples to go into all the world and make more

disciples (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:19-20). That means to make more followers who make more followers. Unfortunately, Chan and Beuving (2012) note many modern expressions of the church distort this command because it is solely the minister, or church leader expected to complete this command. However, if Jesus is truly listened to, then more disciples will disciple and do what Jesus commanded. Part of this comes down to the leadership needing to refocus and exhort such behavior; however, that has been explored further in the upcoming section.

The second tenet for biblical multiplication is to examine Jesus. In John 3:22 (*ESV*, 2016), Ferguson et al. (2018) reveals a key observation. The Greek phrase for “with them” (*ESV*, 2016) is *diatribō* and means to “spend, rub hard” (Brannan, 2020). This original language discovery shows Jesus spent so much intentional time with His disciples that He rubbed off on them (Ferguson et al., 2018). Jesus led His disciples to multiplication. He taught them and showed them by example. Multiplication was leader-led and follower-adopted from all angles. Ferguson et al. (2018) identified Mark 3:13-15 (*ESV*, 2016) as Jesus’ structure for disciple-making and multiplication. The authors declared a focus on the few over the many (just as Reed (2020) expressed), they prioritized relationships over curriculum, sending over attendance, and focused on enabling others above all.

When these pillars of multiplication are actualized and encouraged, digital church leaders begin to see evidence of a growing ministry. More importantly they create spaces that are not viral in the sense of a social media follower base; but more viral and impactful through the sense of disciple going (Ferguson et al., 2018). This is the core sense behind the twelve vs. twelve thousand mindset for digital discipleship and multiplication. In fact, Sanders and Hirsch (2018) use this mentality to construct their micro-church model wherein they start with ten equippers

and build to 100 leaders and then 1,000 missionaries focused on building more disciples. This is inverted from the classic church model seen in many modern churches.

All in all, biblical multiplication is commanded and modeled by Jesus alone. Through His intentional time with the disciples, He trained and equipped them to go forth and replicate exactly what He taught for the furtherance of the Kingdom. Multiplication is designed to be a leader driven movement and then adopted by all individual members in a unified mission (*ESV*, 2016, Ephesians 4:11-13). One multiplication measurement tool this researcher uncovered was the Church Multiplication Challenge assessment hosted by Exponential (2022). Regardless, when digital church leaders move from content to community and beyond message to multiplication, disciples are established, trained, equipped, and sent to fulfill the Great Commission (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:18-20).

Leading the Digital Church

By accepting the fact digital discipleship and the multiplication efforts within are all directly facilitated by digital church leaders, this literature review would be inadequate without a thorough understanding of the various leadership dynamics needed for digital ministry efforts. Anders (2015) identified seven key mission areas that leaders must establish for a successful missional and multiplying church. Those areas are facilitating individual worship, inspiring corporate worship, instructing through the scriptures, nurturing the Christian lifestyle, training, mobilizing, and deploying. All these tenets are directly supported by the early church's model in Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016) and through Jesus' actions over the Twelve during His earthly ministry. Furthermore, Viola (2008) notes the organic first century church focused and thrived on "the unique gifting, spiritual maturity, and sacrificial service of the member... [emphasizing] tasks rather than titles" (p. 154). This further indicates role speaks louder than position and

today's digital church leaders must be fully engaged and committed to the online community if the digital and *phygital* church is going to thrive (Bagaas, 2021). In essence, this reemergence of first century church character is becoming visible with these new twenty first century digital frameworks (Thomas, 2011).

From here, the question becomes how do leaders lead within this space? Anders (2015) suggests digital church leaders must be strategic, deeply rooted in the scriptures and resulting Christian lifestyle, and they must attack ministry methodology with a wide scope of approach while seeking to enable those they lead to become independent teachers of the same. This researcher notes the similarity of the leadership requirements for multiplication presented earlier. Craig (2020) calls for adaptive leaders in this new era of Christian leadership and ministry and believes only such leaders will be able to ensure the mission of the twenty first century church succeeds.

In recognizing the need for dynamic leaders who are strategic, adaptive, servant, and transformational, Kouzes and Posner (2017) establish the need for strategic vision and state, "All ventures...begin with the belief that what today is merely a yearning will one day be reality...Turning exciting possibilities into an inspiring shared vision ranks near the top of the list of every leader's most important responsibilities" (p. 97). Digital church leaders must spark the flame that is growing through digital space for physical church multiplication to become what it can and should be in the coming months and years. Through a contagious mindset and positive outlook, others will begin to adopt the same view of the possibilities within. Furthermore, Northouse (2019) presents adaptive leaders as those who "understand the complexities of the situation and obtain a fuller picture" (p. 273) as to how the organization and mission is moving ahead. Digital church leaders must again be willing to adopt such style and

vision as this pioneering stage continues to take form; specifically, within an attempt to bridge the gap between the digital and physical realms.

In recognizing applicable leadership styles for this mission area, another theory attributable to this literature review is servant leadership. Just as multiplication and leading within was modeled by Jesus' life in the previous section of this review, Jesus again gives a template for leading well through the digital space. In Matthew 28:20 (*ESV*, 2016), Jesus promised to remain with His disciples; and again, moments before His ascension (*ESV*, 2016, Acts 1:5), He explained the mediated connection He would utilize was that of the Holy Spirit. In that very Spirit, part of the triune sovereign Godhead (*ESV*, 2016, Genesis 1:26), Jesus enabled and guided His disciples to serve and guide others (Malphurs, 2003); just as He did while serving on earth as a servant leader (Forrest & Roden, 2017). Malphurs (2003) further elaborated that servant leadership is practiced through humbled service to others. It is not based in self-seeking motive; but rooted in a love for God and others that propel them. This humbled, mediated approach to digital discipleship is what enables digital church leaders the ability to connect and pour into others via the tool of technology. If the strategic vision, adaptable perspective, and servant heart is present, the medium in which the leadership travels become irrelevant.

Lastly, the transformative power of leadership in digital space must be acknowledged. Blackaby and Blackaby (2001) describe biblical leadership as spiritual leadership. These scholars submit, "Spiritual leadership...is something God must assign...they become leaders through the opportunities the Holy Spirit provides as they strive to become the kind of people God desires them to be" (p. 285). Grayson (2017) further developed this idea in her doctoral work by offering three traits for transformative digital leadership. They are openness, transparency, and digital communication (p. 48).

All in all, through right vision, mindset, heart, and approach, traditional leadership models and theories within become adapted and utilized by today's digital church leaders as they seek to teach, train, and equip multiplying disciples for the glory of God. However, this researcher acknowledges that the one hurdle to this approach is that of digital isolation and lack of transparency from the followers within the digital community.

Battling Digital Isolation

In dealing with the issue initiated by digital isolationism, this researcher has uncovered two specific instances of isolation the digital church leader must be prepared to lead in and through. First, in times of an epidemic, and, secondly, the constant pull from technology to operate through such in a false façade. Grayson (2017) referred to this as the “cloaked” follower (pp. 52-54). Regardless, digital church leaders must adopt the three traits of openness, transparency, and digital communication proffered by Grayson (2017) and remain hyper-vigilant to the space in which he/she is leading through these varying dynamics.

Dunlow (2021) in his attempt to understand digital discipleship methods during the impactful COVID-19 pandemic concluded that during a time of much isolation, “digital discipleship provided many churches with an effective ministry... [where] they could connect... bring people together, give the church a sense of community, and helped to strengthen the faith” (p. 470). However, Lorea et al. (2022) furthered these observations to conclude spiritual communities would adapt to and often adopt *phygital* gatherings “to recreate a culturally informed sensory epistemology with the constraints and the possibilities offered by new technologies” (p. 182). All in all, creating online space during social isolation serves as a starting point for relationship and discipleship pathways (Campbell & Calderon, 2007).

On the other side of the proverbial isolation coin is the issue often found in modern society and specifically digital spaces. Ryken (2011) refers to this as the “pride of individualism” (p. 11) and Shirley (2017) outlines social media and its’ distant nature can often be, “counterproductive to the goal... authentic community demands face-to-face interaction” (p. 388). Through these recognitions, Shirley believes the solution should be physical gatherings and interactions; and, therefore, digital church leaders must seek out (at a minimum) digital video messaging/communication interactions to curb the issue, while also seeking out ways to foster authentic physical connections at the same time.

Regardless of the isolation catalyst, the solution to both has been to seek *phygital* means when and where possible. Thomas (2011) tackles this by recognizing what he calls *remote intimacy*, wherein digital space can create a false level of relatability creating the façade of *knowing of* versus truly *knowing* the personal on the other end of the digital device. Thomas states, “if you have remote intimacy with someone, consider meeting in person” (Ch. 3). Furthermore, to combat this isolationism, Campbell and Calderon (2007) suggest a need for demonstration of care, shared value, communication, and connection within relationships. It is this focus that digital leaders need to profess their desire for the community’s growth and sanctification (Earley & Dempsey, 2013). Chan and Beuving (2012) conclude that following Jesus is not an individual journey but, “the proper context for every disciple maker is the [collective] church” (p. 37). Furthermore, “God has not called [leaders] to make disciples in isolation” (Chan & Beuving, 2012, p. 37). In the end, digital church leaders must rely on their ability to constantly practice adaptive, strategic, and servant leadership. When they resolve to do so, the community will be protected, served well, and led through proper digital discipleship methods; often found in *phygital* spaces.

Lessons from Christian Distance Education

The final sub-topic this literature review will consider is that of Christian online education systems and the scholarly findings with regards to edification through digital space in support of physical mission. This area has been reviewed and considered due to the lack of existing *phygital* ministry research studies. By delving into the established world of Christian online/distance education, this research gleans valuable parallels for this research study as *phygital* church leaders are interviewed about their experiences. Two authors, Lewis (2020) and Diaz (2021) have been considered and highlighted in this literature review.

Lewis (2020) concluded there were a handful of thematic findings in his research that assisted with the spiritual formation of online education programs. Of particular significance for this research study were the overarching themes of focused connection points for creating accountability, teachers becoming engaged with and challenging the students while providing them furthering opportunities, the embracing of technological tools, and attempting to adapt to and adopt emerging best practices. Lowe (2007) concluded this approach required a “horizontal (social) and vertical (spiritual)” (p. 124) focus by the theological program and further found that “formation is influenced by the electronic environment, and thus it is crucial that theological educators not only include technology in the classroom, but also address this issue in the way in which theological education is delivered” (p. 134). Furthermore, Diaz (2021) concluded technology needed to be reflected on often and many of the students he observed did not find value in digital technology for physical praxis of their faith. These earlier findings submit technology impacts spiritual formation, but leaders must be intentional for *phygital* integration if the research gap in this study is going to be addressed satisfactorily.

Interestingly, these studies also bring to bear some of the findings extracted by Etzel et al. (2017) wherein the link between theology and theory is undeniable. Etzel et al. indicates, “a more comprehensive vision for online ministry training” (p. 183) must include theologically based spiritual formation focal points intended for the integration of the online student’s local church ministry context. The authors go a step further and suggest these focal points must be on the student’s physical setting versus solely the virtual community. When the digital curriculum aims to engage the physical and the entirety of the individual, more impactful learning begins to occur. This research aimed to analyze if these findings would bridge effectively from the academia realm to the ministerial.

Nonetheless, the online Christian education system findings above have proved beneficial for the current research study; as the issue remains the same: How can digital technology be intentionally embraced and utilized by adaptive transformational leaders to ensure positive physical results? This grounded theory research sought to uncover viable digital discipleship pathways for the *phygital* church and develop effective theoretical constructs for the same. Moving ahead, this researcher compiled the literature review findings while providing the rationale for this study.

Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature

Rationale for the Study

This researcher’s passion for this research problem and subsequent literature review were undergirded by personal exposure to digital technology and the various disciple-making efforts within, while also further reflecting on the impact Christian online learning platforms have had on his personal development. Furthermore, he has witnessed how these experiences have directly impacted his physical reality as he seeks to lead, serve, and protect within his home, workplace,

and surrounding community. Nevertheless, he has also observed confusion by his local church leaders as they sought how to employ digital discipleship methods for *phygital* edification and multiplication. The researcher's own population was not the only one struggling with these concepts as even Thomas (2014) concluded a theme emerging from his doctoral work proved church leaders were consistently seeking ways to connect those in online discipleship pathways with the local church. This raised questions on how to best address the topic of digital discipleship for *phygital* adaptation; thus, a subsequent research profile and literature review was born.

This grounded theory study sought to investigate digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* church within various US-based evangelical networks. Before this research study could be attempted, several theological and theoretical components had to first be sufficiently explored with regards to ecclesiology, discipleship, and digital theology within. Furthermore, related literature, such as digital church planting dynamics and digital leadership applications needed to be reviewed so that the problem would be better framed as digital church leaders would be interviewed about their experiences, perceptions, challenges, and setbacks. In the end, this researcher sought to understand and uncover new theoretical frameworks for emerging digital discipleship methods as they seek to bridge the gap into physical reality while furthering the Great Commission (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:18-20).

Gap in the Literature

While seeking to uncover the gap found in the literature and pursuing scholarly support for the current research study, this researcher noted a glaring disconnect between the digital and physical realms exists within various ministerial pursuits. It is up to tomorrow's digital church leaders to resolve the problem and ensure the success of the Great Commission (*ESV*, 2016,

Matthew 28:18-20) through these evolving *phygital* spaces. Cloete (2015) boldly states there is a need, “to address the gap that exists with regard to a religious response to the use of technology” (p. 1). Furthermore, Ogden (2003) notes with regards to general discipleship, “we must first assess the gap between where we are and where we are called to go” (p. 21). This premise shows generic discipleship is a leadership problem that is constantly evolving. Furthermore, when digital technology is applied to it, the context gets even more dynamic and challenging; so much so that Lockyer and Hirsch (2021) admittedly claim they do not know how to leverage the tools of technology well. Now is the time to spearhead the charge against this widening research gap and propel the missional church into the twenty-first century with confidence in their leadership abilities, vision casting, and overall mission effectiveness.

Profile of the Current Study

This research sought to investigate digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* church within various US-based evangelical networks. Through a qualitative focused grounded theory study, this researcher sought to derive “a general, abstract theory” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p.13) for digital discipleship best practices aimed at *phygital* multiplication efforts. The multiplication efforts are concentrated on “multiplying and sending” (Ferguson et al., 2018) in support of Jesus’ command to go and make disciples (*ESV*, 2016, Matthew 28:18-20). This research profile has become one of the first of its kind and suspects further research to be generated herein for many years to come.

Conclusion

To conclude this literature review, several key matters have been addressed and contributed to the structure of this research profile. A definition and exploration of what components establish the church, as supported in Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016), were examined.

Those biblical components of baptism, teaching, fellowship, communion, prayer, and worship must exist for the church to be the church. Furthermore, those components are the basis for discipleship efforts in the pursuit of edifying, uniting (*ESV*, 2016, Ephesians 4:11-13), and multiplying the church. It is those components that produce a ministerial effectiveness as described by Etzel et al. (2017). From there, digital theory was applied to those characteristics and the digital church was justified through those scriptural bases.

Moving beyond a theological framework, theoretical pillars were presented as they related to the digital church. Through the emerging concepts of the digital church and digital discipleship tenets within, the *phygital* church was explored in what limited frameworks exists for it. A review of grounded theory study, in preparation for a more detailed analysis in Chapter Three, was also presented.

Next, a multi-angled approach was taken for the related literature and sub-topics. Digital church planting and its sub-theory of gathered and scattered, yet unified, was surveyed. Missional community as it related to moving beyond digital content and biblical multiplication were also established. Finally, leadership – both in praxis and known theory – was explored for the digital church leader. Discipleship, specifically digital discipleship, was outlined as an ever-changing and evolving leadership problem requiring next-level leaders of tomorrow who are more than willing to tackle these issues head on. This vigorous review allowed for a rationale to be established and an investigative gap to be discovered and established (Galvan & Galvan, 2017).

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research conducted herein contained many moving parts. This chapter presents the general research problem and its overarching purpose while providing three thorough and succinct research questions designed and utilized to guide this qualitative grounded theory study. More specifically, this chapter outlines the research setting, research participants, various assigned roles, and the ethical considerations within. By providing this methodological framework early and up front, the required data collection methods and instruments leading to a resultant comprehensive analysis begin to surface. In the end, the goal of this research study was to investigate the use of digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* church as presented by various US-based evangelical networks.

Research Design Synopsis

The Problem

As the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic revealed, a growing gap between effective ministry and the rise of technological advances has emerged. This phenomenon presents what some are calling a “Digital Reformation” (Panzer, 2022) and today’s church leaders must begin to embrace this leadership challenge if they are going to effectively lead the Church in and through the twenty first century (Stadia Church Planting, 2020). This timely research investigated the emerging themes of various *phygital* churches as they relate to digital discipleship methods in their greater pursuit of edification and multiplication; thus, providing an effective ministry model for tomorrow. This research was conducted on the leading edge of digital ministry and digital discipleship while the church considers this new way of approaching ministry.

To frame this challenge through an ancient biblical lens, this research utilized the first-century model of discipleship provided by Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016) and Acts 19:23 (*ESV*, 2016). By doing so, the findings bring followers of the Way (Lockyer & Hirsch, 2021) to the forefront once again. Utilizing these scriptures as the home base of research operations enabled a bridge between ancient to modern discipleship pathways (Ogden, 2003) while also closing the distance on the daunting religion and technology gap (Cloete, 2015). For far too long, Christian leaders have viewed the realm of digital ministry as an all or nothing approach; however, it was this researcher's goal to bridge this chasm and completely empower both digital church leaders and physical church models alike to a newer, multi-faceted way of doing *phygital* church (Krandall, 2020).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to investigate the digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* (physical + digital) church within various US-based evangelical networks. For the purposes of this research, a grounded theory study was generally defined as a study design “in which a researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p.13). Furthermore, the *phygital* church was defined as a group of 10-100 people who “utilize the strengths of physical church and the strengths of digital church” (Stadia Church Planting, 2020, p. 4) to gather for the purposes found in Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016). Whereas effectiveness was generally defined as “multiplying and sending [disciples], not [simply] gathering and counting” them (Ferguson et al., 2018, Foreword). Of note, since the focus of this study was to identify digital discipleship pathways for *phygital* effectiveness, it is important to clarify that the effectiveness of these digital discipleship pathways was not being measured. Instead, this

research aimed to uncover how *phygital* leaders were pursuing effectiveness in this emerging context. Nonetheless, faithful effectiveness and multiplication by today's church ensures obedient fulfillment of Jesus' commands in Matthew 28:19-20 (*ESV*, 2016) (Etzel, 2017) and, through this collection and committed analysis of qualitative data, this research attempted to gain critical insights from digital church leaders. Doing so generated new theories and best practice methods for digital discipleship and effectiveness in *phygital* church networks.

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to examine digital discipleship methods for the *phygital* church and allowed for a greater understanding of edification and multiplication within those prescribed contexts.

RQ1. How do digital church leaders describe their understanding of digital discipleship methods?

RQ2. How do digital church leaders practice digital discipleship methods?

RQ3. How do digital church leaders measure the effectiveness of digital discipleship methods?

Research Design and Methodology

As documented earlier, this research endeavor employed the qualitative grounded theory (GT) method to the research problem and sought to generate an emerging theoretical construct for greater study and practical implementation. Nonetheless, before conducting such research, this researcher had to first outline the design, nature, history, and general use of GT before the implementation of and rationale for GT could be reached for this pending research design and framework.

Of note, GT research is often carried out under the qualitative research canopy. However, it does often utilize both qualitative and quantitative datasets during its span of

collection and analysis efforts (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Leedy and Ormrod (2015) note, “qualitative researchers must be well trained in observation techniques, interview strategies, and whatever other data collection methods are likely to be necessary” (p. 252). Succinctly, GT is defined as a “theory derived from data gathered and analyzed in a systematic and rigorous way, as well as a method for generating such theory” (O’Leary, 2007, p. 107). This definition paints the picture that GT is truly rooted at the ground level of research where problems within are often unexplored and/or simply not yet understood by a scholarly base; thus, making it frequently ground-breaking and pioneering within its specific area of application (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

GT was originally founded in the mid-1960s by Glaser and Strauss and proved itself as “an original way of organizing and analyzing qualitative data” (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 2) through its constant coding and analysis. This cyclical research process, paired with the researcher’s role of inductive reasoning, cleared the way for the new model to emerge for both practical use and further study (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). There are often three varied approaches when considering a GT research methodology. Those are a traditional/Glaserian grounded theory, an evolved grounded theory adapted by Strauss with Corbin and Clarke, and the constructivist grounded theory approach as described by Charmaz (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, GT establishes an investigative baseline for future studies and creates a more robust data pool for deeper examination. Glaser and Strauss (1999) support this by indicating it is through grounded theory’s inductive comparative analysis efforts wherein the researcher seeks to fulfill three main purposes: 1.) to obtain accurate/factual evidence surrounding the topic at hand, 2.) to generate empirical (data-based) generalizations, and 3.) to substantiate a single unit/concept for further analysis. Going a step further, the Grounded Theory

Institute (2014) describes the GT process as a five-part, often simultaneously occurring, endeavor consisting of: preparation, data collection, constant comparative analysis, memoing, and the sorting of theoretical outlines. This overall chaotic process can (and often does) repeat until the lead researcher is unable to find new categories and/or theories within the latest data collection efforts (Olsen & Rizk, 2022). This experience is called *theoretical saturation* and only results when the most recent collected data fails to provide any new insights supporting and/or changing what was already previously discovered (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021).

For the purposes of this specific research, this researcher adopted the Glaserian constant comparative method since there is currently no precedent established or theoretical base developed for digital discipleship methods while considering the *phygital* church's effectiveness. Another reason this research methodology was applied was due to the sheer fact the researcher has served almost 15 years as a criminal investigator and has acquired highly specialized training in gathering evidence to solve complex issues, as well as further advanced training in qualitative interviewing techniques. All in all, GT approach was the best way to provide the ground level model for the topic at hand and this researcher relied on this method and his prior experience to achieve those ends.

In the end, by embracing GT's three main methodological pillars and the general process outlined above, this research sought to 1.) uncover the main recurrent variable of the study, 2.) maintain a researcher's open mind, and 3.) resist adopting abstract concepts (Grounded Theory Institute, 2014). Through this process, this researcher undoubtedly uncovered emergent themes for the established research setting, its participants, and the greater digital ministry field.

Setting

Due to the global nature of internet-based communications and the infrastructure of the growing metaverse, this study was restricted in technological domain versus normal traditional geographic boundaries. In fact, this research was limited to *phygital* US-based evangelical networks identified through the leader's membership within the Digital Church Network, an online community space for digital ministry leaders. By utilizing this digital leader hub, this researcher gained direct access to various digital ministry leaders ranging from metaverse based expressions of church, digital-only contexts, *phygital* networks, and influencer focused pathways. Each of these contexts were viable means for digital discipleship; however, due to the nature of this study, only *phygital* leaders were considered.

A *phygital* network is one where the organization seeks to leverage the strengths of both physical and digital ministry components to create disciple-makers, not just consumers of the Word (Stadia Church Planting, 2020). Furthermore, to be classified as a *phygital* network for this study, the selected network had to consist of 10-100 members and the formalized leadership team would seek to routinely implement the ministerial elements of teaching, fellowship, communion, prayer, and worship as presented in Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016). Of note, baptism is also provided in this scripture; however, due to the unresolved conflicts of how a *phygital* church can or should best implement baptism, this element was not surveyed or considered in this research study. Lastly, all *phygital* networks utilized in this research was ascribed to an evangelical theology, or denomination; meaning, they "believe and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Elwell, 2001, p. 405) and the leadership of the network held a professional endorsement through a ministerial credentialing body.

Participants

With regards to the specific population for this research, study participants consisted of solely digital/*phygital* network leaders who also held ordained or licensed ministerial credentials from an evangelical endorsing agency. These leaders were identified and confirmed as fulfilling a leadership role directly responsible for leading, teaching, and/or directing discipleship efforts within the network/setting described above. These leaders maintained this specific leadership role for a minimum of six months at the time of this study. Each of these participants were further be between the ages of 21 and 60 years of age and demonstrate agreement with the statement of faith as adopted by the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE, 2023). Gender, race, ethnicity, and citizenship were not considered as factors in this study; however, they would be noted for investigative record keeping. All participants were fluent in the English language; meaning they will be able to read, write, speak, and comprehend English without issue.

As for the specific sampling technique utilized for this study, the researcher relied on theoretical sampling as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1999). This researcher notes, by allowing the research questions and the sought-after data to define the required participants, this sampling technique allowed for the best participant pool to be identified. As stated, this study sought a general demographic and began with a sample pool of 4-6 *phygital* network leaders. Through each qualitative interview and the subsequent GT coding analysis involved (to be outlined more thoroughly in the coming pages), more leaders were identified, and the participant demographics would ebb, and flow as needed to successfully generate a practical theoretical construct at the conclusion of the study. Nonetheless, the researcher would interview participants until theoretical data saturation could be achieved. Doing this would ensure investigative data integrity and only further support the trustworthiness of the entire study. Lastly, all individual

participants would be described via a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and protect the identity of the participants involved in the study.

Role of the Researcher

With the primary goal of this research aimed at understanding the perceptions of *phygital* network leaders and the construct guiding their use of digital discipleship for *phygital* effectiveness, this researcher's primary role was as the interviewer and observer throughout the course of the study. Due to this responsibility and first level of interaction, it is worth noting Konecki (2018) indicates the researcher must absolutely maintain an open mind and prohibit personal worldviews and/or preconceived notions from influencing the data during the collection and analysis phases of GT. Theoretical sampling and comparative analysis are powerful research tools; but, due to the possibility of researcher influence and subsequent bias, many scholars have placed reduced trust in the GT methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Nonetheless, this researcher recognized these challenges; especially given his unique exposure to digital discipleship methods in his own life and did notably approach these challenges with a decade and a half of professional law enforcement training and experience. Throughout those experiences, he demonstrated he could in fact remain an objectively neutral fact finder and investigator throughout the course of this study. His previous criminal investigations have required a relentless respect for, and appreciation of, the legal statutes and policies placed over him. He maintained the same level of objectiveness while serving as this research study's interviewer, observer, and data collector.

Any discovered relationships to the *phygital* network leaders and or the data collected were set aside from the investigative objectives at hand and bias was not allowed to surface in the research findings. Furthermore, all relationships were openly disclosed within the final

research findings. This researcher recognized this study, and its adopted GT model, would be rigorous and required a lot of effort, time, and patience (Chun Tie et al., 2019) to achieve integrity-backed data saturation and he was ready for the task at hand.

Ethical Considerations

With regards to the ethical considerations in this research study, this researcher ensured pseudonyms were correctly utilized to protect the identity and data collected from the established research setting and participants; doing so supported the ethical considerations of this research design. Furthermore, during each step of the data collection and analysis phase(s), this researcher relied on his previous training and experience wherein he was charged with the proper handling and use of confidential information. Furthermore, in addition to confidentiality, this researcher ensured there was no coercion, exploitation, and/or undue harm caused to or near the study's participants by maintaining all transcripts of interviews and documents collected on an encrypted solid state hard drive, which has been secured within the researcher's home office for a minimum of five years. Lastly, all investigative steps, tools utilized, and data obtained were successfully presented and approved by the Institutional Review Board prior to any adoption and/or execution of this research study and methods described herein.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

This study utilized a constant comparative grounded theory research design to investigate the digital discipleship methods intended for effectiveness in the *phygital* (physical + digital) church within various US-based evangelical networks. This method was applied because the constant comparative method has been solidified as, "an original way of organizing and analyzing qualitative data" (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 2). Unlike other linear and cascading qualitative research methods, which often choose an $A+B+C=D$ approach to collection and

analysis, Grounded Theory (GT) seeks to employ inductive evaluation by way of an iterative agenda to construct order from the apparent chaos (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021). This laborious process allows the collected data to interpret itself; thus, formulating emerging theoretical construct in the arena being researched (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Another way of understanding this collection method is through Charmaz's (2006) insight that GT simply "asks how" (p. 187) the observed population is constructing and executing the phenomenon being studied. By remaining open to the various instruments available and the methods outlined, this researcher learned all he could about the research problem and become enabled to extract the prevailing themes for use in a more grounded theory.

Collection Methods

Recognizing the collection methods to be utilized in this study, this researcher first acknowledged collected data could take many forms ranging from direct participation, through indirect observations, structured interviews, videos, journaling, and/or artifact collection (Olsen & Rizk, 2022). For this study, this researcher primarily relied on semi-structured interviews and an accompanying IRB approved, Digital Church Leader Questionnaire (DCLQ) to begin the iterative GT cycle. As analytical coding began and themes started to surface from the *Microsoft Teams* recorded/transcribed interviews, this researcher continued to return to these tools as well as other pertinent document reviews and experiential field notes/observations until the collected data resulted in theoretical saturation as required by GT (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021).

Instruments and Protocols

Since GT requires the researcher to "abductively [move] back and forth between empirical materials and efforts" (Clarke, 2019, p. 6), this researcher sought to initiate this investigative plan through the utilization of a Digital Church Network (DCN) online recruitment

post (Appendix A). This recruitment post allowed the researcher to identify digital church leaders seeking digital discipleship pathways for *phygital* effectiveness who also fit the population criteria previously established. From here, the researcher compiled the leaders interested in the study and utilized email (Appendix B) to provide the participants with the IRB-required information form (Appendix C). After review, the researcher scheduled the interviews and utilized the IRB approved Digital Church Leader Questionnaire (DCLQ) (Appendix D) to conduct semi-structured interviews via *Microsoft Teams* online video conferencing software. These instruments, collectively built around the three research questions in this study, were utilized to kickstart the comparative analysis cycle and provide “information rich” (Patton, 2002, p. 40) truths in search of the greater grounded theory sought. Again, given the iterative nature of GT research, these instruments ebbed and flowed as the researcher considered other field observations, document reviews, and the like. To better understand the impact of each of these instruments, this researcher outlined each tool and its intended protocol for this study before turning to the specific data analysis procedures to be employed by this study.

Digital Church Leader Questionnaire

The Digital Church Leader Questionnaire (DCLQ) served as the primary framework of this GT comparative analysis research as it provided the researcher with a tool to begin data collection and outlined the three established research questions (Patton, 2002). The questionnaire was broken into three topic areas, wherein, each research question was fully explored and flushed out by the interviewee in each researcher-led interview. The first topic area to be aimed at defined digital discipleship and *phygital* ministry as the interviewee understood them. The second area enveloped the interviewee’s experience and utilization of digital discipleship for *phygital* ministry networks. The final question topic area was established to seek out the

interviewee's considerations for effectiveness of digital discipleship methods as they each applied them to *phygital* church networks. Of importance, all questions were structured to maintain an open-ended response, as to ensure maximum input and freedom in answers from the interviewee's individual point of view. As a final note with regards to the DCLQ, the overseeing researcher ensured each interviewee's questionnaire was labeled with a pseudonym to ensure identity protection of the interviewee and maintaining confidentiality.

Semi-structured Interviews

In conjunction with the DCLQ, this research study utilized semi-structured interviews to solicit critical experiences, insight, understandings, and perspectives of the research problem and phenomenon in question (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To delineate between unstructured and semi-structured interviews, it is important to note semi-structured interviews often have a tool (much like the DCLQ) keeping the interview on its proverbial train track. The questions within the tool were aimed at understanding "the world as seen by participants" (Patton, 2002, p. 21).

These interviews each lasted approximately 45-60 minutes in length and were recorded/transcribed through *Microsoft Teams* online software. These interviews were initially conducted individually with 4 digital church leaders. After a total of 6 interviews and a related document review were complete, *theoretical saturation* was successfully obtained. This interview/review process took just under a month from the beginning of this research study and consisted of over twenty hours in data collection and analysis efforts. To reinforce the accuracy of the data derived from these interviews, the transcript was forwarded to the interviewee for final review and feedback. As a reminder, to maintain confidentiality of the interviewees, the transcriptions were labeled with pseudonyms which were assigned to each participant at the start of the study.

Observations

In addition to the interviews and their accompanying DCLQ questionnaire, this research study further relied on the researcher's own observations and field notes as he actively attended various digital discipleship events and/or trainings offered through the Digital Church Network's digital community platform. If events were listed as physical gatherings and were within the researcher's local/commutable range, the researcher attempted to attend those in-person events as well. By partaking in these experiences, the researcher became "more of an observer [instead of] an interrogator" (Lewis, 2020, p. 29) and gained valuable insight on the research problem studied. Furthermore, those observatory experiences allowed for a more robust coding and analysis of the emergent themes extracted during the data analysis phase of this study. The researcher sought to maintain an accurate, complete, and unbiased record of his experiences, while including applicable materials in the appendices of this study; as well as ensuring no personally identifiable data was published in his acquired field notes.

Document Analysis

The final instrument this research study employed was that of document analysis. Outside of the interview transcripts previously outlined, this researcher continued to look for emerging research on this topic under consideration and maintain a thorough regard for the documents emerging on the *phygital* ministry front. For example, at the time of this research proposal, this researcher was made aware Sprout Digital was amid a rather robust five-year digital ministry research project. The findings of this timely research bear applicable fruit to this specific research study and were considered as timelines would allow. In addition to Sprout Digital's work, if the researcher uncovered any other applicable publications they were reviewed and

considered in the very same manner. Doing so ensured the most complete thematic findings and theoretical conclusions were offered at the conclusion of this study.

Procedures

Before engaging in this research study, the researcher sought permission from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study outlined herein. This researcher ensured all aspects of the study remained ethical and that they fell within the established expectations of the PhD program to which the researcher is enrolled as a candidate. In addition to these requirements, the researcher safeguarded the research data and identities of the participants by utilizing pseudonyms, encrypted external hard drives, and physical security measures within his own home office.

With regards to the specific process and procedures for this study, after IRB approval was successfully obtained, this researcher utilized the approved recruitment post (Appendix A) to begin identifying viable interviewees for this study within the DCN sample population. The list of interested digital church leaders was compiled and the welcome email (Appendix B) along with the information form (Appendix C) were sent to each of the interested parties. The researcher then reached out to the interviewee again and scheduled the *Microsoft Teams* interview which further utilized the approved DCLQ (Appendix D). Upon completion of the interview, the researcher sent the initial transcription to the interviewee for final review and approval. All communications were safeguarded and saved accordingly. This researcher completed the first 4-6 interviews within the first two weeks following IRB approval. Subsequent interviews were conducted as the data analysis and sample pool dictated.

In addition to the interview process, this researcher simultaneously attended DCN hosted and recommended discipleship functions as they became available. The subsequent researcher

field observer notes were compiled for further analysis in the same method as the interview transcripts above. Furthermore, any applicable and discovered documents that provided further grounded theory bearing on the greater research problem at hand were thoroughly reviewed and saved for analysis in the same manner. All in all, these data collection efforts were conducted in a span of 2-4 months to which final iterative data analysis began almost immediately as directed by the established GT research methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Data Analysis

Regarding the GT data analysis process, there are four required components needed for a successful GT study to derive its final conclusions. Those mechanisms are *theoretical sampling*, *open coding*, *axial coding*, and *selective coding*. Each of these milestones lead the comparative analysis and circular memoing within to a landing zone consisting of a firm integration toward an extracted theory (Olsen & Rizk, 2022). For this to occur, the researcher must remain an active listener and observer throughout the entire process (Konecki, 2018); and it is for this reason the researcher chose the multiple instruments highlighted above. Nonetheless, this qualitative GT study engaged in data analysis almost immediately upon the first round of data collection, or *theoretical sampling*, because comparative analysis and memoing is a coinciding circular process that requires coding and theorizing along the entire way until a generalized theory can finally be established (Olsen & Rizk, 2022).

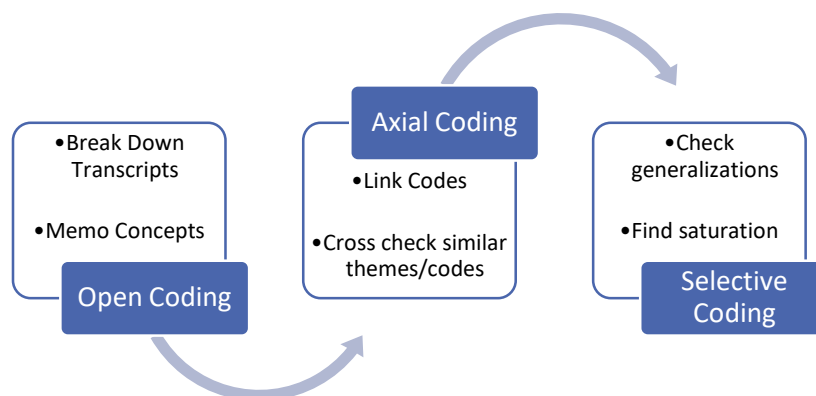
Analysis Methods

As mentioned above, there are three main coding mechanisms required within a GT study (Chun et al., 2019). These mechanisms are *open coding*, *axial coding*, and *selective coding* (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021). Each of these coding types hold a specific role and purpose; however, it is imperative to understand how iterative they truly are within the praxis of such a

study (see Figure 1). Fortunately, modern technology has enabled researchers to leverage the ability and availability of digital tools and this researcher has found the Delve software suite was designed to assist researchers with these types of GT coding endeavors. This online software was utilized in its entirety for the duration of this research analysis (delvetool.com).

Figure 1

Data Analysis Diagram for Grounded Theory



Open Coding

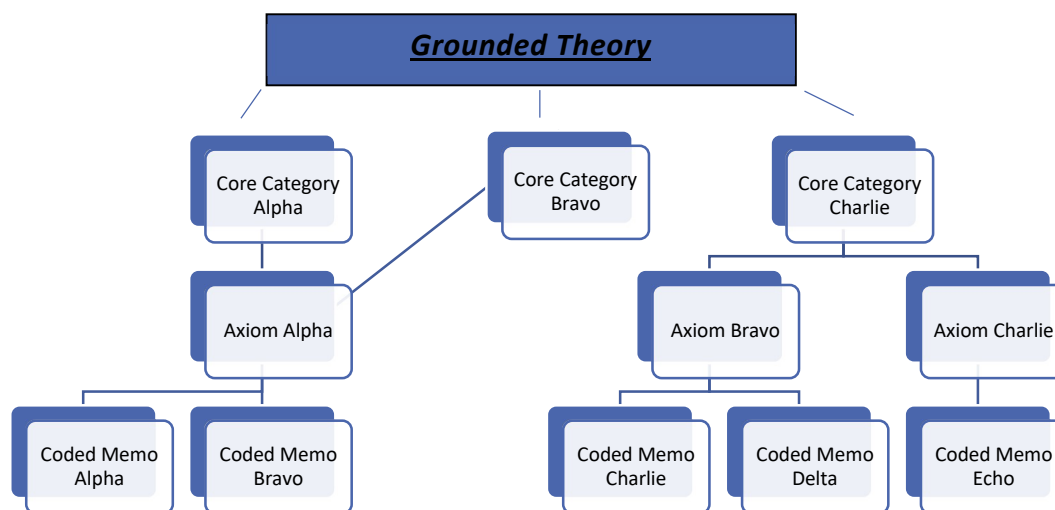
The first phase of coding consists of *open coding*. In this phase, data is broken down and compared against other collected data to identify similar themes, or *codes* (Chun et al., 2019). In this study, this researcher uploaded the acquired *Microsoft Teams* interview transcripts and any field notes to the Delve software suite. The Delve subscription software assisted this researcher with identifying common themes and frequently used terms or similar discipleship pathways. This in and of itself is the heartbeat of the constant comparative method this GT study utilized (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021) throughout the course of this study. Once these codes were bookmarked and saved in the form of coding memos with the Delve software, further data collection by way of interviews and observer notes was conducted.

Axial Coding

The next phase of coding consists of connecting the thematic codes obtained through *open coding* into more generalized similar groups (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021). Simultaneously, subsequent rounds of theoretical sampling continued to provide more codes for *open coding* while the next level of axioms began to take form (see Figure 2). This is known as *axial coding*. Each group of data was checked for either contradiction, expansion, or support of the existing codes (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021) and the data was filed accordingly. This cyclical process continued until the analytical findings begin to return data supporting the previously collected data without varied results.

Figure 2

Sample Diagram for Grounded Theory Coding



Selective Coding

The final stage of coding within the constant comparative method for GT is that of *selective coding*. This is the stage of the research where enough data, or *theoretical saturation* begins to become self-evident. The returned common themes, known as *core categories*, bear the weight of the collected analyzed data and all data sets are interlinked accordingly (Chun et al.,

2019). Nothing will be left out and no open questions or unknowns will remain. From these *core categories*, the researcher is then able to construct an emerging theoretical construct for the overarching data being studied (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021).

Trustworthiness

Creswell and Creswell (2017) assert “qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants” (p. 181). Patton (1999) more simply declares “qualitative analysis is a creative process” (p. 1190) and, due to this reality, many begin to question the veracity of qualitative research. Digging deeper, with respect to GT studies, “decisions made by the researcher are particularly susceptible to researcher bias, which means that stricter adherence to systematic precautions strengthens the integrity of the final product” (Hudson, 2020, p. 96). Recognizing these truths, this researcher further considered the need for credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability throughout the duration of this research study.

Credibility

Credibility extends trust to the research when others agree the method is appropriate, the results are reasonable, and the included interpretations are plausible (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Two key methods a researcher can obtain more credibility for their research are through triangulation and extensive time in the field (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). For the purposes of this research study, this researcher utilized both techniques. Triangulation was obtained through multiple sources of data (interviews, field notes, and document reviews) and the nature of GT research itself required an extensive amount of time devoted to the collection and analysis process before a grounded theory can be derived.

Dependability

Regarding dependability, or the simple characteristic of research which “accounts for the ever-changing contexts [thus, urging] one another to provide in-depth descriptions” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 239), this researcher has conducted a thorough literature review demonstrating all facets of theory and theology needed to undergo this study. Furthermore, his research design and underlying research methods have been created in a way that allows for the reader to easily replicate the study as illustrated. To confirm this position and overall dependability of the study, this reader relied on trusted peer reviews and supervisor panel throughout the course of the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability acknowledges obtaining complete objectivity in research data is likely improbable; and therefore, should instead seek to enable other researchers to “draw similar conclusions from similarly collected and analyzed data” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 239).

Within the law enforcement realm, this component requires officers’ adherence to the standard of objective reasonableness. This standard consistently inquires after an exercised use of force if other officers, given the same set of known facts, would respond similarly in the same situation. This scenario sufficiently sums up the use of confirmability under a research study. To obtain confirmability in this proposed study, this researcher maintained not only the investigative plan above, but also an audit trail wherein all steps were recorded and safeguarded for review and confirmable replication, if needed. Per IRB guidelines, data retention will be maintained for three years from the date of the study.

Transferability

Transferability is the last component for qualitative research trustworthiness and seeks to evaluate how flexible the research design is and if it can easily be applied to other settings

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is comparable to generalizability within established quantitative research design. Nonetheless, to ensure transferability, this research study sought to maintain its roots in biblical discipleship as depicted in Acts 2:41-47. By doing so, this research study provided multiple discipleship pathways that could be applied through other metaverse platforms and digital ministry centers alike. Furthermore, the extracted conclusions will be of value to traditional physical ministries as they seek to better understand digital ministry and explore implementation in the same.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the qualitative grounded theory design and method to be implemented herein as this research seeks to investigate emerging digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* (physical + digital) church within various US-based evangelical networks. Through an established setting, population, and approved set of research questions, this researcher has ensured timely, ethical, and contributable theoretical constructs were derived from the data collected. A constant comparative analysis method was adopted and executed as the iterative collection and coding evaluation was conducted. In the end, an emerging theoretical construct was concluded thus enabling the *phygital* church of tomorrow to better execute the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20, *ESV*).

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative grounded study was to investigate emerging digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* (physical + digital) church within various US-based evangelical networks. Chapter One provided the research gap surrounding the implementation and adaptation of digital ministry as it relates to the advantages of a newer *phygital* church model. Sufficient information outlining the theological and theoretical issues to the research problem were also provided, while the researcher further outlined his own personal experiences related to *phygital* discipleship. This chapter was critical to this research as it paved the way ahead for this academic research to be conducted and investigated as the church seeks to achieve ministerial effectiveness throughout the twenty-first century.

Chapter Two provided a complete literature review covering all topics and sub-topics as they related to the development of digital-only and *phygital* church models. Topics such as ecclesiology, a study of Acts 2:41-47, digital discipleship, digital church planting, leadership challenges within, and lessons learned from Christian educational systems were all explored. A thorough look at grounded theory research techniques was also provided, as this specific research study began to lay a critical pioneering foundation for the space of digital ministry within the area of academic research.

Chapter Three provided a grounded theory research investigative plan for this study. By utilizing three guiding research questions, a researcher developed (and board approved) Digital Church Leader Questionnaire (DCLQ), and several semi-structured interviews, investigative data would be collected that would lead this researcher to an emerging theoretical construct for establishing a *phygital* highway for effective discipleship in today's church. Nonetheless, this

present chapter offers the findings of this grounded theory study. In the following pages, a review of this study's protocols, various collection measures, and data parameters were offered. Finally, by way of researcher created tables, an in-depth presentation of the conducted analysis was tendered; thus, delivering the overall findings of this study.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

This study pursued existing digital church leaders' perceptions of digital ministry and their influences on the larger *phygital* church. By establishing their expressed beliefs and understandings, this researcher could then delve deeper into their implementation of modern technology towards measuring effectiveness within. In the end, this study would gain critical insight allowing for the establishment of a new theoretical framework that would lead to an effective *phygital* discipleship model for the church today.

The protocols and investigative measures outlined here below were implemented to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do digital church leaders describe their understanding of digital discipleship methods?

RQ2. How do digital church leaders practice digital discipleship methods?

RQ3. How do digital church leaders measure the effectiveness of digital discipleship methods?

Data Collection

Upon IRB approval, this researcher implemented Appendix A (Recruitment Post) and solicited research participants through the 900+ member, U.S. based Digital Church Network. As interest emails were received, this researcher utilized Appendix B and C (Email to Participants and Information Sheet) to ensure each participant met the established parameters of the study and scheduled an online semi-structured interview via Microsoft Teams. Each 45–60-minute one-on-

one interview was conducted at a mutually agreed upon time and utilized the Digital Church Leader Questionnaire (DCLQ) (Appendix D) to guide the interview. The DCLQ was comprised of three topic areas and ten total questions. These established sections sought to explore the interviewee's definitions for digital discipleship and *phygital* ministry, their utilization of techniques within, and their attempts to measure effectiveness of their efforts. These topic areas became critical to answering each of the RQs in this study.

Each of the semi-structured interviews conducted (six in total) were consensually recorded and transcribed. A transcription of their individual interview was sent to each participant to ensure accuracy of their testimonies. Furthermore, the approved transcript was uploaded to the online, password protected Delve qualitative analysis software suite. Each transcript was coded for prevalent themes throughout the duration of the data analysis, in accordance with the grounded theory research method (Chun et al., 2019). Also of note, each transcript was assigned a pseudonym to ensure participant confidentiality.

Given the nature of this study employing the grounded theory method, it is imperative to note the data collection was conducted throughout three cyclical investigative phases. The first phase (Phase I) sought to establish initial open codes of the data and consisted of four interviews (Interviews of Ashton, Blake, Casey, and Dakota). These interviews and analysis of their transcripts took approximately ten hours to collect and analyze.

Phase II of this study consisted of two more interviews (Interviews of Ender and Fenix) and included an investigative document review of Resona Research Solutions' 55-page document titled "*Sprout Digital/Stadia Church Planting Online Church Research Report*" (2021). This phase of the study allowed the researcher to solidify the previously acquired open codes because 100% of the Phase II data supported those initial codes and only three more sub-

categorized codes were developed within. The data analysis conducted in this phase resulted in created axial codes. This phase consisted of eight more hours of investigative work.

Lastly, Phase III of this research study consisted of the final data analysis and checking to ensure *theoretical saturation* (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021) was achieved. Within these final two hours of qualitative data parsing, the researcher was able to satisfactorily extract final data-derived selective codes, satisfactorily uniting all data under these resultant codes. A total of 20+ hours went into this research study before an emerging theoretical construct for effective *phygital* discipleship could be established.

Demographic and Sample Data

As outlined by this study's participant information sheet (Appendix C), all participants were required to have met a set of pre-determined qualifications. Those qualifications were:

- Between the ages of 21 and 60
- Able to read, write, and speak the English language
- Hold a *phygital* church leadership position for a minimum of six months or more
- Hold ministerial credentials from an evangelical endorsing agency
- Agreement with the statement of faith as adopted by the NAE (2023)

In addition to these individual qualifications, all participants needed to be an active member of the Digital Church Network and have served within a US-based evangelical network. The investigative steps and protocols utilized ensured the participants fulfilled each of these parameters. Of note, three church leaders did express interest in participating in this research study; however, upon further review of their experience and background, it was determined to include those individuals would have undermined the parameters of this study, compromised investigative integrity, and were therefore not included.

Data Analysis and Findings

Within this section, each of the three research questions have been presented as they were addressed in the DCLQ during each of the semi-structured interviews. Interviewee quotes and relevant paraphrases have also been offered to provide insight to the understandings, implementations, and measuring of effectiveness inside each of the examined topic areas. Lastly, researcher-developed tables have been constructed and included to show the resultant grounded theory codes throughout each of the three research study phases previously outlined. In the end, the researcher has provided generalized observations and findings as they relate to effectively bridging the gap between digital ministry and *phygital* church models.

Research Question One: Defining Digital Discipleship and *Phygital* Ministry

The first area of exploration with each of the research participants consisted of understanding their beliefs surrounding the topic of digital discipleship. By asking how they would define digital discipleship and resultant pathways, several tenets of digital discipleship were uncovered. Namely, all the research participants agreed that digital discipleship efforts were no different than traditional expressions of discipleship. Instead, the “digital” component had more to do with the approach of efforts vs. that of the overall intent.

Opening, **Ashton** indicated, “the most meaningful relationships that I have are [further] augmented with digital tools.” This indicates digital discipleship is the same as the physical church expression of discipleship, as it is simply an add-on to previously known methods. He continued to describe his relationship with his wife as an example, noting they live together in the same house but are not always in each other’s physical presence. When that occurs, they utilize digital tools like text messaging to fill in their relational gaps throughout the day. By doing so, they are leveraging modern tools and pursuing efficiency in their relationship. He

concluded by asking, “why wouldn’t I fill in those gaps that we have six days out of the week (for most churches) ... with digital tools?” **Casey** echoed this sentiment with, “discipleship has been something that the church has been doing since the very beginning, since it was literally published, and digital is just a more efficient means.” **Dakota** further expanded on this by suggesting digital tools “foster relationships and connections” and **Fenix** simplified this definition by stating digital discipleship is being “right where you are, right when you need us.” All in all, this research inquiry uncovered digital discipleship is a modern approach to traditional discipleship, it simply pursues efficiency without forsaking the impact, its efforts are geared toward continual, reliable engagement around the clock, and it augments the existing physical world.

The second area of investigation considered *phygital* church networks and the tenets within. At the foundation all interviewees rallied around the premise that “digital enhances the physical [and] the physical enhances the digital” (**Ashton**). This intentional and synergistic approach to discipleship allows **Blake** to really walk “through every day of life with that person, just like [he] would be if [he] was in person with them.” **Ashton** encouraged other leaders to combine the two (physical + digital) as it “mirrors the *phygital* reality that all of us live in anyway.” He believed “if you start digitally, then you naturally want to interact physically, and if you have a good physical experience, you want to augment that digitally.”

Ender further explored this idea of synergistic ministry and submitted he found intentionality as a key to *phygital* contexts because when he made himself available online at the same time every week the people he served knew where they could contact him, and those digital connections would often lead to physical face-to-face interactions. **Fenix** encouraged “the *phygital* church is just a church that is being relevant to meet people in the moment where they

are and to take them through a discipleship pathway” and this posture allowed for the greatest impact in discipleship efforts. At the end of the day, “while the mission hasn’t changed, the way that the church has functioned has changed... In the climate of the 21st Century, that entails working within a culture that functions digitally and physically at the same time” (Resona, 2021). Considering this theme, **Ashton** stated he believed it was critical for church leaders to find ways to break down modern barriers like time zones, geographic distance, and even language limitations through *phygital* discipleship endeavors.

The third question within this topic area sought to understand the interviewees’ understanding of effectiveness for *phygital* networks. Collectively, all research participants alluded to a need for immersive connections and unified relationships before any level of effectiveness could be declared. This research area was fully flushed out in the final section of the DCLQ via RQ3; however, to understand the definition of effectiveness early on, all participants pointed to the need for evidence of biblical obedience. **Ashton** cemented this when he referred to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) and asked, “What is the goal of teaching? It is the obedience.” Further extracting data within this topic, **Fenix** noted too many digital church leaders appear to be preoccupied with a digital footprint and less concerned with leading people through a discipleship pathway. She further noted the goal should be to move a person from being a consumer to becoming a contributor who will eventually step out in faith as a creator. This is the obedience-minded metric she utilizes to measure effectiveness in her ministry.

In addition to obedience-focused effectiveness, the initial coding data revealed a need for collective immersive experiences. **Ashton** described a scenario where a youth group member went to a church camp. At camp, he was baptized and on fire for the Gospel when he returned

home. He submitted this occurred only because relentless immersive hours of biblical teaching and discipleship were conducted in a three-to-four-day period *with* other believers. He stated, “no wonder he's making those types of discipleship decisions and making that type of obedience.” There is an inherent requirement for collective immersion leading to obedience if any ministry endeavor is to be effective.

The final area within this research question asked the interviewees to express digital discipleship considering what they know concerning biblical discipleship. Starting this analysis off, **Ashton** stated, “Jesus told us to make disciples and he said that he would build his church. But for whatever reason, we feel like it's our job to build the church, hoping that Jesus will make disciples, and this is backwards.” The data collected in this sub-area revealed there needs to be a renewed focus on discipleship over church planting and growing. The Sprout Digital document found “the church needs to find a way to stay connected in conversations that occur more than once or twice a month” (Resona, 2021) which supports how Jesus went to meet people where they were; as **Ender** reminded the researcher when he referenced the Samaritan woman (John 4), or when **Ashton** explained how Jesus used a boat to project His voice to the crowds.

All in all, Acts 2:41-47 shows the modern church how the early disciples did discipleship. **Ashton** took this scriptural reference and asked, “Why wouldn't we use digital tools to augment those very deep and meaningful relationships on the daily?” By pursuing biblical discipleship today, **Casey** notes, “digital discipleship is the unique way that we can use modern digital means to help people become more like Jesus” and in this very effort we must faithfully remember Jesus did not command His followers to “go and make worship services and go get attenders” (**Fenix**). On the contrary, we must “go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (*ESV*,

2016, Matthew 28:19). Church leaders should be mindful that just because the toolset may change, does not mean the original mission has changed.

Research Question One Summary

Upon reviewing the themes extracted within topic area one for RQ1, there were a plethora of open codes established (Table 1). From here, nine succinct axial codes were developed uniting those initial codes. After Phase III analysis, this researcher was able to produce five selective codes that answered the question of: “How do digital church leaders describe their understanding of digital discipleship methods?” The resounding answer was digital discipleship methods must be innovative, immersive, synergistic, relational, and adaptable. The implications for these resultant codes will be further linked and explored in Chapter 5.

Table 1

RQ1 Data Collection & Analysis: Defining Digital Discipleship and Phygital Ministry

	Tenets of Digital Discipleship	Tenets of Phygital Church Networks	Tenets of Effectiveness	Relation to Biblical Discipleship
Phase I Collection <i>Open Coding</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rooted in Discipleship • Leverages Modern Tools • Pursues Efficiency • Daily Walk vs Sunday Only • Augments Existing World • Social over Isolated Focus • Digital Conversations • Consistency + Reliability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synergistic (Both/And) • Two Way Street • Unifies Audiences • Transcends Boundaries (Geo, Finances, Language) • Daily Walk vs Sunday Only • Community Focused • Shared Experiences • Physical Meetups • Need for Physical Contact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes Connections • Fosters Relationships • Intentional Dialogue • Ease of Access • Compels Obedience • Meets Perceived Needs • Immersive • Open-minded • Disciplined/Dependable • Available/Adaptable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptability • Apprentice o Christ • Constant Process • Holy Spirit-Filled • Acts 2 Structure • Knows the Flock • Relational • Make Disciples, Don't Build the Church • Reproductive
Phase II Collection <i>Axial Coding</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses modern tools simultaneously • Seeks to unify individuals into engaged social community • Continual 24/7/365 process across various boundaries • Produces reliable physical encounters 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates and fosters Christ-modeled relationships • Adapts methods to maintain intentional access • Produce obedience of Scripture (Mt 28/Acts 2) • Consistent immersive process for deficiencies • Individual first, then whole body 	
Phase III Analysis	<i>Selecting Coding: Innovative, Immersive, Synergistic, Relational, Adaptable</i>			

Research Question Two: Utilization of Digital Discipleship for *Phygital* Ministry

In answering the second research question, three questions were included in the DCLQ to extrapolate the various methods digital church leaders were using to engage in digital discipleship for *phygital* ministry. The first area asked how they were implementing those intended methods. This question generated the largest batch of open codes within this research study. In short, there are numerous digital tools to which current digital leaders are pursuing digital discipleship for a *phygital* context. For example, **Casey** found that the popular WhatsApp messaging platform “ties all of [their] in-person groups together” and he was finding great benefit to using such an app in a marriage ministry he was leading. In addition to this example, the research participants all went beyond simply streaming a physical Sunday sermon and worship set online and discussed how text messaging services, live two-way video calls, podcasts, and social media platforms were utilized in their efforts. **Casey** described all these tools as “*grace bridges*” where digital leaders should find tools to bridge the distance between their disciples wherever they are. **Ashton** unknowingly supported this thought as he described how he had come to value friendship and relationship over mere educational efforts found within online platforms.

Nonetheless, **Ender** contributed greatly to the area of strategic implementation in that he noted digital leaders must “be willing to meet when they are available to meet.” He demonstrated this by sharing how he was launching an online group targeted by time zones as there was a physical group in Africa seeking to grow as disciples through his digital tool. **Ender** likened this example to how Jesus would adapt His leadership style to Peter, James, and/or John a bit differently than He did with the rest of the disciples. This biblical support encouraged **Ender** to be available and adaptable at the end of the day.

Supporting this theme, **Fenix** shared how her ministry was supporting *phygital* groups in Uganda, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Nigeria and her methods of implementation required adaptable availability and intentionality. She further linked how her own US-based house church was connecting to the group in Uganda by sponsoring children and their expressed needs along the way. None of these ministry attempts would be fruitful without the use of digital tools (namely text and video-based platforms) focused on *phygital* outcomes.

The second question in this topic area asked the research participants to share what other ways they had seen digital discipleship efforts considering *phygital* ministry contexts. This question again garnered a rather large list of digital tools ranging from remote groups, AltarLive, Facebook Groups, Metaverse (AR/VR) spaces, and even various gaming/streaming services to engage in digital discipleship efforts. **Ashton** noted he would “use whatever tools at [his] disposal” to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). He referred to Paul utilizing the technology of his day, letter writing and the Roman road systems, to be missional and encouraged digital church leaders to do the same today. He believes, “it is our responsibility to open our eyes to the tools that are all around us so that we can minister to other people and take them one step closer to Jesus.” Lastly, he expressed his concern for church leaders backing themselves into a corner with one or two favorite digital tools and that by doing so, “we do ourselves and the gospel a disservice, because tomorrow, you know, it's going to be another tool that we're going to have to navigate.” He even went a step further to state, “I'm not going to limit myself to my favorite pet tool like I see many people do in church where the pet tool is the Sunday service.” All in all, the research data collected to this point shows there are countless tools at the church’s fingertips, and it is imperative leaders today find ways to utilize them for the advancement of the Kingdom of God. Sprout Digital supported this by writing, “most aspects of

life in our society function in a *phygital* manner; and having churches operating in this manner was a natural extension of our lives” (Resona, 2021).

The last section for this topic asked the participants what possibilities they could foresee for digital discipleship methods and the responses were intriguing. Both **Ashton** and **Blake** immediately shared their ideas and uses for technologies such as Neuralink and Augmented Reality. **Ashton** admitted the technology was not fully developed yet but the initial research of Neuralink could provide a way for humankind to communicate to each other without words. He was excited to see the possibilities to transcend all language barriers and to minister to anyone by thought alone. He expressed how this could have negative implications, but was excited to think about the Kingdom applications, nonetheless. **Blake** was intrigued by the possibilities of AR glasses stating, “you could give everybody these glasses and you can actually walk them through Jerusalem” without leaving your home.

Another possibility in **Ender’s** point of view was more immediate and local to the topic as he would “love to see physical churches who made the investment in their money [for streaming equipment] turn around and let someone... take all of that equipment and use it to reach people who have nothing to do with their church.” His point offered concern to expensive camera equipment sitting in a physical church sanctuary six days a week being unused, when instead it could be used to further the Gospel and make disciples along the way throughout the week. Lastly, **Fenix** believed a more physical method could be utilized moving a digital-first ministry to a *phygital*-next church wherein physical micro-expressions could come to the forefront; thus, replicating the first century model of a house church. In the end, “churches need to find a way that leverages digital ministry so that it enhances and supports physical ministry, allowing a more holistic approach to ministry” (Resona, 2021).

Research Question Two Summary

Regarding RQ2, “How do digital church leaders practice digital discipleship methods?”, there were almost forty open codes developed. From that robust dataset, nine axial codes were established, and five finalized selective codes were assigned. The resulting answer to RQ2 is the utilization of any digital discipleship method requires an innovative and missional focus, committed leadership, synergistic applications, and a micro-macro approach as needed (Table 2).

Table 2

RQ2 Data Collection & Analysis: Utilization of Digital Discipleship for Phygital Ministry

	Implementation of Methods	Observations of Methods	Possibilities for Methods
<p>Phase I <u>Collection</u></p> <p><i>Open Coding</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility for Engagement • Pathwright LMS • Live Streaming Sunday Service • Unrestricted Access • Podcasts • Social Media Content • Devotional Material • Grace Bridges • Text Messaging Services • Focus Groups w/ Text Messaging • Geofenced Physical Gatherings w/ Remote-In Options • Time zone Gatherings • Live Video Fellowship (Zoom, Teams, Hangouts, FaceTime) • Seek Relationship over Education • One on One Encounters • Affinity Groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remote Groups • AltarLive • Facebook Groups • WhatsApp Groups • Metaverse – VR/AR • Social Audio Platforms • Community Engagement/Service • Make Disciples vs Church Building • Pet tools are not best practice • Remain Flexible and Adaptable • Minister to, do NOT Entertain • Gaming and Streaming Platforms • Choose space/time wisely • Pathway over Footprint 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Augmented Reality • Neuralink • Gatherings for Feasts • For Righteousness or for Unrighteousness • All Tools must be used as Jesus’ Boat to project reach • Utilize live-stream tools for other methods during week • Global phygital connections • Digital first, phygital next • Micro-Church Network
<p>Phase II <u>Collection</u></p> <p><i>Axial Coding</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize asynchronous-based platforms to support synchronous events • Ensure consistent leaders are always available • Meet people where they are and guide next action steps • Develop individual disciples through relational pursuits/programs • Diversify digital tools to train and equip, not entertain • Consider location/time boundaries before implementation 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider new technologies • Connect tradition with tech • Stay rooted in biblical application
<p>Phase III <u>Analysis</u></p>	<p><i>Selective Coding: Committed Leadership, Missional Focus, Synergistic (Async + Sync) Tools, Innovative in Praxis, Micro-Macro</i></p>		

Research Question Three: Measuring Effectiveness of Digital Discipleship for *Phygital*

To sufficiently explore and answer RQ3, the third DCLQ topic area presented each research participant with three applicable sub-questions. The first question asked the digital church leader to describe their attempts in measurement for digital discipleship within a *phygital* ministry context. As alluded to in the definition section under RQ1, all interviewees converged on the notion of obedience for establishing effectiveness. However, several themes were prevalent within that selective code.

The first theme considered the existence and often ill-hearted focus on *vanity metrics*. These metrics are “indicators of activity, not discipleship” (**Fenix**) and are often reported as likes, views, or even duration of views. Instead, digital church leaders should not seek to go viral (**Blake**) and should simply “stop talking about vanity metrics” (**Ashton**). Alternatively, they should seek a different metric funnel where individuals move from simply attending, to giving their undivided attention, to stepping into obedience (**Ashton**); or, as **Fenix** described earlier, the goal is to move from “consumer to contributor to creator.” At the end of the day, “we want to intentionally have someone that we are discipling to teach what we're teaching to the next group so that we're handing off the baton” (**Ender**). That means if members are sharing/commenting, enrolling/completing, and producing testimonies then a more qualitative metric begins to take root at the heart of measurement efforts. One other potential measurement that could help bridge the gap between vanity and qualitative is that of cost effectiveness. **Dakota** noted, “we can actually carry out more ministry in the same amount of time with the same amount of manpower and sometimes with even less dollars than we could in person” through digital methods. If time and money can be saved while developing obedience stories, then this is a valid sign for ministry effectiveness.

The next question sought to examine the results of these expressed attempts for measurement and revealed further support for testimonies of obedience becoming the maximal point of impact for effectiveness. **Casey** declared, “the story metric of effectiveness is one that is very helpful because you can't argue a story.” He continued to say he has heard how digital discipleship efforts have manifested physically by interfering with what would have become a completed suicide, preventing marriages from ending in divorce, or simply filling a critical need at the time it was most needed. **Blake** recalled how he saw an online attender physically drive into the very next service just to be obedient and become baptized. **Casey** also discussed baptism but said he remembered a time where an online attender could not come to the physical location due to being in Hospice. Being made aware of the situation and desire to be baptized, **Casey** trained one of the Hospice workers to baptize the member on her death bed.

These are all stories of obedience and lend credibility to the effectiveness of digital discipleship efforts within a *phygitally* focused church. Going a step further, **Ender** shared how by being real and intentional through digital tools there was a member who previously utilized a pseudonym began using their real name, as they felt safe and accepted to do so. This was yet another qualitative metric supporting the measuring tool of obedience and story. **Ashton** reflected on the metric of obedience and stated how important it became for clearly applying this measuring metric to all digital ministry efforts. If there is a tool that does not produce a story, then leaders should adapt and try a different one. Furthermore, with digital tools we can “get to a higher frequency and a more daily and ordinary expression of church than we ever could, than using the prevailing model of once a week” (**Ashton**).

The final question on the DCLQ revolved around the greatest challenges facing digital discipleship and *phygital* church networks moving forward. The research participants provided

many great insights, but they greatly encompassed the concerns of misunderstanding and complacency demonstrated by many existing church leaders. **Blake** and **Ender** both independently shared how they have encountered different church leaders who have doubted the legitimacy or just simply misunderstood the impact of digital relationships and digital ministry to date.

Casey submitted “the greatest threat right now is complacency” and the desire to “go backwards...to a world that no longer exists” as another substantial challenge. Many church leaders seem to want to return to a pre-COVID world that was not as apt to use digital tools for ministerial pursuits; however, that does not seem to be the reality. He closed the thought by suggesting “most church leaders are hunkered down in the upper room like the [first] disciples” were after Jesus’ crucifixion and are unwilling to step out of their comfort zones. The last challenge presented by **Ashton** considered the hurdles of multiple language barriers and many differing time zones of digital members and he suggested digital church leaders should continue to find ways to overcome those unchanging elements while continuing to move ahead.

Research Question Three Summary

RQ3 sought to ask, “How do digital church leaders measure the effectiveness of digital discipleship methods?” Within the six extracted transcripts and completed document reviews, this researcher sorted through 30 open codes, assigned 10 respective axial codes, and uncovered five applicable selective codes to answer this unanswered question. In the end, to effectively measure digital discipleship efforts in the *phygital* ministry context, tomorrow’s digital church leaders must continue to seek testimonies of obedience (**Casey**), develop leaders (**Blake** and **Ender**), and pursue unity within the church (**Ashton**). All these components are further revealed

within Table 3. Implications and further application of these research findings will also be explored within Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

Table 3

RQ3 Data Collection & Analysis: Measuring Effectiveness of Digital Discipleship for Phygital

	Attempts to Measure	Results of Attempts	Perceived Challenges
<p>Phase I Collection</p> <p><i>Open Coding</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vanity Metrics (Attendance, Likes, and Duration) • Shares/Comments on social media platforms • Enrollments and Completions • Qualitative Metrics through Stories/Testimony • Expressed Desire/Feedback • Efficiency Metrics (Time and Money Saved) • Funnel – Attendance, Attention, to Obedience • Funnel – Consumer, Contributor, to Creator • Grow leaders into new spaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testimonies are Undeniable • Digital Baptisms – first time in building • Families Restored, Lives Saved • Daily Expressions of Faith • Spiritual Disciplines Established • Community Growth, New Leaders • Also, not enough Data Collected, Time Surpassed • Vanity metrics are only indicators, not signifiers • Anonymity broken down by relationships forming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time Required to Develop • Manpower (Workers) • Misdiagnosing the Need • Complacency of Leaders • Stigma/Perceived Biases • Fear of losing control • Legitimacy of ministry framework • Attempt to go Backwards • Language and Time Zones • Evaluate effectiveness over wasted effort • Global Praxis
<p>Phase II Collection</p> <p><i>Axial Coding</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obedience, testimony, and action over vanity metrics • Seeking to find daily stories of faith • Numbers are only an indicator of potential growth • The rise of emerging leaders • Anonymity being left behind 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time • Manpower • Misunderstandings • Retrograding • Language/Global Connection
<p>Phase III Analysis</p> <p><i>Selective Coding</i></p>		<p>Obedience Testimonies Leadership Growth Daily Fruit Global Nexus</p>	

Core Observations

As stated by Creswell and Creswell (2017), “qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants.”

This is exactly what this researcher has done and through a robust, three-phase investigative plan and coding process, he utilized inductive techniques to construct order from chaos (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021). Of note, he also did not quit until the collected data failed to produce new information surrounding the research problem, thus successfully obtaining *theoretical saturation* (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021).

To summarize the research study findings, this researcher utilized all previous tables to construct a comprehensive results chart (Table 4). A careful analysis of the collected data revealed 15 selective codes that would lend critical insight to the definition, applied methods, and resultant evidence for digital discipleship as applied to a *phygital* ministry context. These codes were then synthesized to create a wholistic approach to *phygital* discipleship efforts. These core observations as they relate to a *phygital* mission, tools, and vision will be presented as a new theoretical framework and model within Chapter 5.

Table 4

Resultant Selective Coding

	<u>Phygital Discipleship Defined</u>	<u>Phygital Discipleship Applied</u>	<u>Phygital Discipleship Evidence</u>
Selective Codes	Innovative Immersive Synergistic Relational Adaptable	Committed Leadership Missional Focus Synergistic (Async/Sync) Tools Innovative Practice Micro-Macro	Obedience Testimonies Leader Development Daily Fruit Global Nexus

Evaluation of the Research Design

The aim of this qualitative grounded theory study was to investigate digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* (physical + digital) church within US-based evangelical networks. To complete this task, three guiding research questions were established to acquire the

understood definitions, implemented methods, and accepted effectiveness of those *phygital* ministry efforts. This study engaged over 900 members associated with the Digital Church Network and sought to recruit qualified research participants meeting five key participant criteria. Nine digital church leaders expressed interest in participating and three were found not to qualify. To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, six digital church leaders participated in semi-structured interviews and were guided by the Digital Church Leader Questionnaire (DCLQ). Furthermore, applicable documents reviews were also conducted. This study abided by the established guidelines of Liberty University's Institutional Review Board through the duration of this study.

Data Collection Trustworthiness

The two data collection techniques utilized in this study were semi-structured interviews and researcher-conducted document reviews. To ensure these techniques maintained the trustworthiness required within a scholarly-level research study, the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were all preserved throughout the entire design, execution, and analysis phases of the study.

Credibility

As Leedy and Ormrod (2015) outline, a successful research study is deemed credible when a researcher accurately triangulates and spends extensive time in the research field of his/her topic. For this study, the researcher relied on *Microsoft Teams* to record the semi-structured interviews and then provided the transcript to each participant to ensure accuracy of the captured data. Then, throughout 20 hours of research analysis, this researcher employed Delve professional qualitative software to compare the multiple themes provided between the various participants. Furthermore, the researcher read and uploaded a published report on digital

discipleship to Delve's analytic suite. This was yet another source of information to triangulate the various angles of approach reviewed during this study.

Dependability

In seeking detailed information for the surveyed research area at hand (Leedy & Ormrod), this researcher maintained his investigative plan and procedure in accordance with the sole methods and tools approved by Liberty University's Institutional Review Board. There was zero deviation from this authorized proposal. In addition, this study was overseen by two of Liberty University's founding subject matter experts on Church Ministry in the Digital Age and they were consulted throughout the entirety of this research study. Furthermore, the researcher strictly followed the format of the DCLQ for every interview conducted which ensured each participant was asked the same questions, in the same way, and zero deviations were allowed.

Confirmability

To ensure this researcher acquired "similar conclusions from similarly collected and analyzed data" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 239), this researcher, again, ensured strict compliance with the IRB's approved research plan. Of note, the researcher did not ask any questions not listed on the DCLQ and kept any clarifying questions to a minimum. The researcher made sure he explained the interview protocol and questionnaire to each participant prior to the start of their interview. Doing so, ensured all participants received the same questions without researcher bias or personal interest. This consistent approach can be seen within the recorded transcripts. Lastly, all email traffic with the individual research participants was securely saved in an online inbox and the recorded audio/text transcriptions were further maintained on a researcher controlled and password protected electronic drive. No hard copies were ever produced.

Transferability

To maintain the transferability of this completed research study and ensure its ability to be applied to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), this researcher kept the collection methods straightforward and ensured the tools utilized were widely available. Notably, Microsoft Teams is readily available to others and the Delve qualitative software is an online subscription service accessible to all. Throughout the course of this study, the researcher kept a list of other potential research situations saved in his digital files and continued to consider how this research could be applied in those capacities for the betterment of emerging ministry models and future opportunities. This further research list will be provided within Chapter Five, should future researchers desire to complete the work in those areas.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of this research study, presented the various protocols and parameters utilized to conduct the study, established the demographic requirements of the research participants, and published the investigative action plan in its entirety. Next, the data analysis and findings were given in comprehensive detail. Through this information, applicable open codes, axial codes, and selective coding were assigned and the researcher provided tables and participant narratives to support the inductive analysis. In the end, all three research questions were answered, and the resultant theoretical construct was prepared for full extraction in Chapter Five. Lastly, an evaluation of this research study's trustworthiness with respect to its credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability was provided. In the next chapter, this research study's conclusions, implications, and applications will be offered. Doing so will set the stage for this study's emerging theoretical construct as it influences the future of *phygital* ministry efforts worldwide.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This study investigated digital discipleship methods as they pursued *phygital* effectiveness within US-based evangelical networks. To accomplish this task, various digital church leaders were interviewed, and their responses were transcribed. These data transcriptions led to many key insights as they contributed to the ultimate creation of a model for *phygital* ministry and discipleship within.

In this chapter, a review of the research purpose as well as the research questions have been provided. These components served as the guiding lights for this research study. Next, the researcher has provided the critical implications, applications, and conclusions garnered by this study. To better present these findings, the researcher grouped these topics under the three observations outlined in the previous chapter. Those areas were: 1.) defining digital discipleship, 2.) utilization of digital discipleship, and 3.) measuring effectiveness of digital discipleship. Of importance, each of these observations were examined in relation to their *phygital* ministry efforts. From there, the conclusions were assembled, and the established research gap was bridged to construct a *phygital* highway for effective discipleship. Lastly, this chapter concludes with the limitations of this research study and recommendations for future studies were offered.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to investigate digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* (physical + digital) church within various US-based evangelical networks. For the purposes of this research, a grounded theory study was generally defined as a study design “in which a researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p.13).

Furthermore, the *phygital* church was defined as a group of 10-100 people who “utilize the strengths of physical church and the strengths of digital church” (Stadia Church Planting, 2020, p. 4) to gather for the purposes found in Acts 2:41-47 (*ESV*, 2016). Within this study, effectiveness was generally defined as “multiplying and sending [disciples], not [simply] gathering and counting” them (Ferguson et al., 2018, Foreword). Of note, since the focus of this study was to identify digital discipleship pathways for *phygital* effectiveness, it was important to clarify that the effectiveness of these digital discipleship pathways was not being measured. Instead, this research aimed to uncover how *phygital* leaders were pursuing effectiveness in this emerging context. Nonetheless, faithful effectiveness and multiplication by today’s church ensures obedient fulfillment of Jesus’ commands in Matthew 28:19-20 (*ESV*, 2016) (Etzel, 2017) and, through this collection and committed analysis of qualitative data, this researcher attempted to gain critical insights from digital church leaders. Doing so generated a new model and best practice methods for digital discipleship and effectiveness in *phygital* church networks.

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to examine digital discipleship methods for the *phygital* church and allowed for a greater understanding of edification and multiplication within those prescribed contexts.

RQ1. How do digital church leaders describe their understanding of digital discipleship methods?

RQ2. How do digital church leaders practice digital discipleship methods?

RQ3. How do digital church leaders measure the effectiveness of digital discipleship methods?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

This study produced a plethora of findings and themes as they related to digital discipleship efforts for *phygital* ministries. Each research question was aimed at understanding how digital church leaders defined, utilized, and measured their respective digital discipleship efforts considering *phygital* networks. While taking these findings and comparing them to the precedent literature review in Chapter Two, a new template for the future of *phygital* ministry was uncovered. This section reviews those findings under the three observation areas supplied and begins to construct an emerging model which this researcher has called the “*phygital* highway for effective discipleship.”

Observation One: Defining Digital Discipleship

Upon reviewing the coded data obtained by the digital church leader semi-structured interviews and the internal use of the Digital Church Leader Questionnaire (DCLQ), this study explored definitions and an understanding of digital discipleship. Furthermore, it narrowed in on five resultant characteristics needed for effective digital discipleship in *phygital* ministries. Those traits indicated *phygital* discipleship must be innovatively focused, immersive in experience, synergistic in approach, relational in nature, and adaptable in praxis.

The literature review charted in Chapter Two supported these findings in that Campbell and Garner (2016) found “we live in a world where our digital technologies are increasingly intersecting with our spiritual lives. This is not only changing personal presentations of faith...but also the way we do church” (p. 1). Casey paralleled this premise and expanded to state, “digital discipleship is the unique way that we can use modern digital means to help people become more like Jesus.” There ultimately was no difference in traditional understandings and definitions of discipleship when considering digital discipleship except the innovative means

found within today's modern methods. Furthermore, **Casey** indicated digital discipleship was “just a more efficient means” to carrying out previously understood discipleship methods.

Building upon the innovative means and adaptable praxis, Craig (2020) gave insights to how she found herself moving from a traditional Sunday and Wednesday preaching/teaching rhythm to a modern social media model that allowed for constant access and communication. This claim echoed **Fenix's** simplified definition of digital discipleship exhorting digital church leaders to serve people right where they were and to remain available whenever they were needed. The readily available nature of digital tools has far-reaching implications for the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) should tomorrow's digital church leaders simply use the tools at their fingertips to be innovatively focused and relationally grounded (Byassee & Irwin, 2020).

Leaders today are enabled to create immersive church experiences in daily life should they merely put the time and effort into them. Ferguson et al. (2018) points out that Jesus spent so much intentional time with His disciples that the Master rubbed off on them. This same type of immersive transformation awaits Christians in the digital church experience today should mature disciples powered by the strength of the Holy Spirit show up to lead them.

Lastly, digital discipleship efforts must remain synergistic in their approach for “digital enhances the physical [and] the physical enhances the digital” (**Ashton**). Adopting this approach allows leaders to mirror the already existing reality of the modern world (**Ashton**). Thomas (2011) supports this by expressing “seeking God in both the real and the virtual worlds makes us digital disciples” (Ch. 1). It is this revelation and implied synergistic augmentation that ministry leaders should boldly lean towards. Just as the Trinity is synergistic (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and the Christian life is about horizontal and vertical axioms (Galli, 2019), discipleship in the modern world must use digital and physical expressions to reach its fullest potential in the

individual believer and the overall corporate body of Christ. Gone are the days of traditional weekly church experiences and arrived are new ways to grow, edify, and unify church congregants with the global body of Christ. This strategic shift in single-mode discipleship to multi-faceted digital discipleship brings great application matters to bear; specifically, as it related to people's daily lives (Hutchings, 2017). Those applications have been further explored within the next observation point.

Observation Two: Utilization of Digital Discipleship

The second area of observation for this study encompassed the utilization of digital discipleship methods while considering their implication over emerging *phygital* networks. This grounded theory extracted data led the researcher to discover digital discipleship methods require a continuation of the previously observed innovative mindset; however, a missional focus, a commitment to and thorough biblical leadership, synergistic tools, and a micro-macro approach must be present in today's application of those methods.

These findings were supported by the precedent literature review when Craig (2020), Gould (2015), and Jones (2020) all expressed utilization of social media tools (namely Facebook, YouTube, and many other popular platforms). However, their approaches were just beginning to break the surface of the matter and with mobile devices beginning to carry spiritual disciples into the daily experience of a disciple (Meadows, 2012) there are deeper matters to consider. Even **Casey** found that a popular text-based platform known as WhatsApp allowed for all their physical groups to connect beyond face to face; **Fenix** submitted a more dynamic approach could be adopted. **Fenix** stated ministerial efforts could focus on a digital-first approach that would lead to a *phygital*-next expression of church.

By committing to this innovative mindset, utilizing various synergistic tools that are asynchronous and synchronous (Craig, 2020) simultaneously, and by developing intentional relationships on digital platforms, the participants would naturally begin to build relationships within physical proximity of others and the ministry would truly become *phygital* in its daily identity. Resona (2021) supported this by affirming, “churches need to find a way that leverages digital ministry so that it enhances and supports physical ministry, allowing for a more holistic approach.” When digital church leaders focus these multi-angled efforts properly relationships and disciplines within begin to truly form (Lowe, 2020).

To elaborate on this resultant impact on relationships, it is imperative to note this research revealed a key connection between the synergistic tools used and the bilateral impact had on relationships as described by Lowe and Lowe (2010). When digital church leaders utilized digital tools to augment pre-existing physical relationships, the augmentation experienced was tangible. **Ashton** demonstrated this in his personal reflections regarding the positive impact these *phygital* endeavors had on his own marriage. Not only do digital discipleship efforts strengthen a disciple’s relationship with others but their own spiritual formation is increased (Meadows, 2012). Ultimately, fellowship is strengthened (Beck and Picardo, 2021) and deeply-rooted organic relationships begin to thrive.

Furthermore, this study found a need for digital discipleship efforts to focus on Reed’s (2020) “the twelve vs. the twelve thousand” approach. Within this model, leaders start small with building and training equippers, who move/transform into a larger group of leaders, and then missionaries begin to emerge committed to the Great Commission (Sanders & Hirsch, 2018). **Ender** embraced this mindset stating if leaders are “willing to meet [online] when [disciples] are available to meet” growth and impact explode. **Ender** indicated how their ministerial digital

efforts have led to physical groups beginning to form on completely different continents than where their home base of operations exists. Adaptability and availability committed to intentional relationships and biblical discipleship truly bridge the gap into stories of effectiveness; and that is exactly the component where the third observation of this study has been examined.

Observation Three: Measuring Effectiveness of Digital Discipleship

This final area of observation consists of measuring effectiveness for digital discipleship efforts within *phygital* networks and serves as the launching point for the resultant model derived from this research study. As stated in Chapter One, the research gap fueling this study recognized that many of today's church leaders simply do not know how to leverage digital tools for maximum effectiveness in the physical church and there is great potential within the emerging *phygital* highway (Krandall, 2020). The hesitation of church leaders as it relates to digital discipleship tools is often because they do not know how to employ digital tools (which was addressed in the first two observation points) or they merely do not know how to measure those tools for effectiveness.

To support that claim, one look at the Billy Graham Evangelical Association shows how this organization tried to quantify its effectiveness in 2014 by the number of "online conversions" they obtained by their efforts wherein they boasted six million converts for Christ (Campbell & Garner, 2016). This researcher recognizes and celebrates lives proclaiming Christ as King; however, he further confidently asks, "How many of those converted proceeded to experience effective discipleship?" Unfortunately, that answer remains unknown this side of eternity. The problem is there are no readily available measuring tools for true digital

discipleship. That is until now. This research study learned the following factors directly attribute to measuring effective digital discipleship in *phygital* networks today:

- **Obedience** in accordance with the commands directed by Scripture
- **Testimonies** of obedience expressed therein
- **Leader Development** wherein discipleship endeavors are replicated and multiplied
- **Daily Fruit** as found in Galatians 5:22-23
- **Global Nexus** wherein disciples are united and edified with other believers

These measuring criteria enable leaders to migrate away from dreadful *vanity metrics*, which are the number of views, likes, shares, and even duration of views for a sermon, message, talk, and/or other digitally created content. Kranda (2020) indicates this is where a need to maintain engagement over views becomes prevalent. Ferguson et al. (2018) further states a need for missional discipleship over becoming “viral” must be established. Dunlow (2021) also indicates effective discipleship must “bring people together, give the church a sense of community, and [help] to strengthen the faith” (p. 470). All these statements from the initial research literature review are helpful in reframing the way today’s church leaders engage in measuring effective discipleship.

Fortunately, this research study and the resultant data lends much help towards allowing tomorrow’s leaders to stand on a new set of metrics. First, **Fenix** declares vanity metrics are “indicators of activity, not discipleship.” The goal should be to move people from “consumer to contributor to creator” (**Fenix**). This is the heart of Kranda’s (2020) call for engagement over views. Moving an individual from someone watching a video stream to creating stories for the Kingdom of God is one way a digital church leader knows they have truly been effective in discipling a follower of Christ. **Casey** boldly declared, “the story metric of effectiveness is one

that is very helpful because you can't argue a story!" He continued to describe a time where an online attendee could not come to the physical location due to being on their own deathbed in Hospice, but they expressed through digital means their desire to be obedient through baptism. Hearing this confession, **Casey** trained one of the Hospice workers on the spot through a camera on how to perform a baptism and this new follower of Christ received baptism before leaving this earth and entering glory. This is the type of story every digital church leader should chase for properly measuring digital discipleship methods. Craig (2020) echoed this exact possibility in her earlier work, *Online Jesus*.

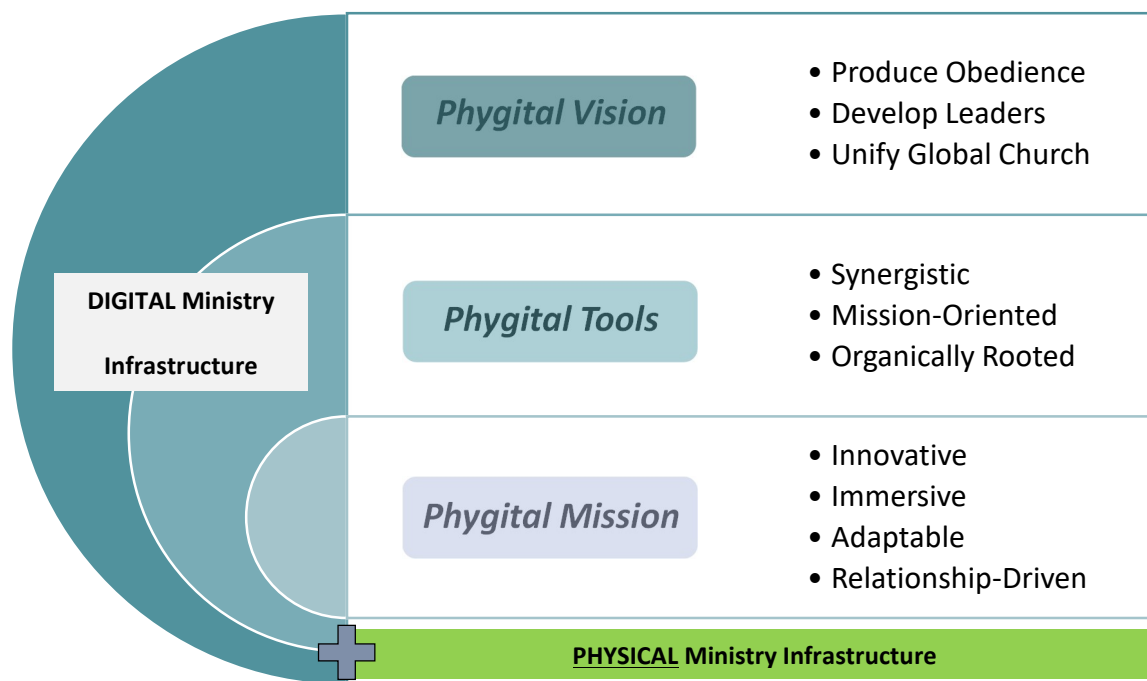
Furthermore, **Ashton** presented how important the measurement of story has become in his experience and stated if he finds a digital tool that does not produce a story, he will discard it without hesitation, adapt his efforts to another one, and employ it while monitoring its effectiveness. He also stated this pursuit of a story can be chased everyday via digital tools, whereas traditional physical expressions are often relegated to one to two times a week. This constant daily implementation and feedback of obedience through story also serves as a great offensive shift against any isolation forming in or against the disciple (Chan & Beuving, 2012). This is pivotal for today's church leader to understand as this researcher has heard various ministry leaders say they refuse digital ministry because the person on the other end of the screen/keyboard is isolated and true connection cannot be established. The truth is the disciple does not have to be isolated if the leader is purposely engaged and drawing the disciple out into an actionable story of obedience. All this data stands to reason this research study has found that digital discipleship for *phygital* contexts become effectively measured when digital church leaders seek testimonies of obedience, develop new leaders, find evidence of the Holy Spirit's

fruit (Galatians 5:22-23) within its members, and the leader relentlessly pursues unity within the global church body.

Phyigital Highway for Effective Discipleship

With the research findings and implications for digital discipleship in *phyigital* networks established, this research has far-reaching applications as it relates to a new theoretical framework, the *phyigital* discipleship highway (Krandall, 2020), and an emergent model within. As Beck and Picardo (2021) asserted, “COVID-19 taught at a moment’s notice that if you are unwilling to adapt and evolve in methodology, you will cease to exist” (p. 54). It is in this spirit that this research study has culminated in the creation and implementation of one of the first-ever *phyigital* ministry models.

Within this model, the researcher has taken the various analyzed findings concerning digital discipleship definitions, methods, and measuring for effectiveness and allowed the data to interpret itself in line with the grounded theory research methodology (Olsen & Rizk, 2022). In doing so, he arrived at *theoretical saturation*, meaning the collected data failed to provide any new insights from what was already previously discovered in the research cycle (Delve & Limpaecher, 2021). From here, he was able to derive “a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p.13). This *phyigital* ministry model, to be known as the *Phyigital Highway for Effective Discipleship* (Figure 3) is depicted on the next page. Furthermore, after the offered model illustration, the researcher provided practical *phyigital* discipleship examples to further encourage the testing and implementation of willing leaders to employ this model in their own ministry settings. These offerings are intended to lessen the blur of digital to physical and physical to digital efforts.

Figure 3*Phygital Highway for Effective Discipleship*

By taking this study’s finalized coded data (Table 4), and effectually flipping it upside down from the extracted definitions, methods, and effectiveness qualities, this researcher was empowered to synthesize the findings and apply them to a model for a brand new *phygital* ministry concept. In doing so, the attributes generated a resulting dynamic where “onsite and online experiences work in tandem, complementing one another creating a more personalized, memorable, and engaging guest experience” (Liautaud, 2020, para. 1), or in the case of church ministry, producing all-around disciplined and more effective disciples of Christ.

To examine this model in detail, the previously established characteristics needed for digital discipleship were applied as the traits required for a *phygital* ministry’s mission statement. All discipleship efforts within that ministry must become innovative in their approach, immersive towards the end-user, adaptable in the application, and relationship-driven (as biblical discipleship requires). An example of a *phygital* ministry mission statement could be: “We

provide daily experiences through digital tools to meet you in your faith and we further seek to develop organic relationships in Christ.” This statement is innovative by using digital tools, immersive with the availability of daily engagement, adaptable by meeting people where they are in their faith, and relationship driven as Jesus exemplified.

Next, to achieve the *phygital* mission, a proper set of *phygital* tools must be employed. This pioneering model, as supported by the research findings, requires tools that are synergistic, mission-oriented, and organically rooted. As this study has shown, there are a surplus of possible tools that achieve these three intertwined attributes. Ultimately, it relies on the ingenuity and imagination of the digital church leader and the leadership of the Holy Spirit to choose the right ones. As **Ashton** indicated in his interview, the digital church leader should constantly be examining the effectiveness of their chosen tools considering the results (or lack thereof) for obedience. Possible tools this researcher would suggest using consist of private social media networks like Circle or Mighty Networks and video conferencing software like Zoom. These tools allow for digital church leaders to control their space and develop organic environments without external advertisements and permits for the members to engage synergistically through asynchronous and synchronous meetups, both in-person and online. These components further support the earlier established mission statement and fosters biblical relationships with discipleship-focused teaching.

To round out this theoretical construct, the need to measure digital discipleship effectiveness through biblical obedience, testimony, and overall story supports the creation of a *phygital* vision. The established vision must produce this obedience, develop leaders, and seek to unify the global church. This is the *phygital* component where the organization can truly seek to

become the first century church in the twenty-first century world (Lockyer & Hirsch, 2021 and Thomas, 2011).

All in all, it is up to the digital church leader to commit to the proper time and effort needed to align these various *phygital* components. This model does allow for the church leader to start with a mission statement and progress to a stated vision; however, it also gives freedom to start with a vision and move to a mission statement. The one non-negotiable within this model, no matter how it is implemented, is that all efforts must remain biblically rooted; just as the research findings indicated. Furthermore, this researcher urges the leader to thoroughly map out the tools, pathways, and driving attributes within before executing any constructed plan. After all, it is never wise of leadership to execute any plan with too much thrust and not enough vector to where they are headed.

One final note about the *Phygital Highway for Effective Discipleship*, this research has shown time and time again (both throughout the literature review and within the findings) that true *phygital* ministry is synergistic. This means if the existing ministry context is primarily physical in nature, the church leader should select digital tools that will augment and strengthen the physical members experience in their current locations. This could be utilizing digital chat tools to connect physical members throughout the week or offering self-paced learning curriculum for the physical member to study between physical gatherings. On the other side, if the original context is digital in nature, there should be digital tools that allow for physical expressions to be created and strengthened. For example, a digital church congregation may be given an online tool to map out their individual physical locations. Through this digital pathway, physical members begin to build local gatherings born out of the digital landscape. True *phygital* ministry is not an “either-or” approach to discipleship. No, in fact, it is an “and-both” outlook. If

church leaders are faithful to engage this model, the Digital Reformation as described by Panzer (2022) will see its culmination as all glory is given to Christ.

Research Limitations

One known limitation of this study revolves around the participants of the study. To elaborate, the participants were limited to the individual experiences and resultant stories they could recall during the recorded interview with the researcher. Furthermore, the participants were limited in their responses to the categories and questions provided on the DCLQ. There is a potential for wider responses and topical data if these formal research parameters were not set before them. On the other hand, the researcher notes “decisions made by the researcher are particularly susceptible to researcher bias, which means that stricter adherence to systematic precautions strengthens the integrity of the final product” (Hudson, 2020, p. 96). Therefore, this research was limited to the established research parameters to safeguard the integrity of the study.

There is also a potential for limitation considering the newness of the *phygital* term within the general ministerial audience. Many church leaders are still learning the adaptation of *phygital* inside ministry, let alone how the digital-first/physical next, hybrid, and digital-next ministry focuses are applied. The researcher did take time to explain the definition of the term to support full understanding before the DCLQ was applied. Lastly, this study was confined to US-based evangelical networks. The study participants were also limited to the registered Digital Church Network (2022) members. Due to this fact, potential participants in other countries and or other Christian faith traditions/denominations have yet to be interviewed.

Further Research

In consideration of the study findings and the expressed limitations of the study, the following recommendations for further research are given:

- Consider developing and measuring digital and/or *phygital* discipleship efforts through a quantitative lens. Consider obedience as the item to be quantified.
- Employ mixed methods study for digital and/or *phygital* discipleship efforts. Consider obedience as the item to be quantified.
- Explore timed-phase study for disciples transitioning through the various digital discipleship stages (consumer, contributor, and creator).
- Explore obedience metrics as they relate to individual spiritual components (baptisms, physical visits to a campus, launching of a micro-campus).
- Compare digital-first/*phygital*-next and physical-first/*phygital*-next expressions.
- Investigate digital discipleship methods outside of US-based networks.
- Study the use of digital tools and methods in unifying the global Christian church.
- Consider the willingness to use digital tools across various denominational and Christian faith traditions (Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, etc.)
- Study the use of digital tools and methods towards their ability to unite microchurch expressions throughout an area/region.
- Consider the ability of digital ministry tools to break through time zones and/or pre-existing language barriers.
- Explore the ability of *phygital* ministry models to unite otherwise divided church communities.
- Examine the use of digital ministry tools by various age groups.

- Investigate the use of discipleship methods within the metaverse and/or augmented reality platforms (VR Church).
- Investigate physical church leadership and determine what factors are keeping them from adopting and implementing a *phygital* discipleship model.

Summary

The aim of this grounded theory study was to investigate digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* church within various US-based evangelical networks. By coming to fully understand the experiences and methods of these digital church leaders, this research was able to bridge a research gap noticed between today's church leaders and their ability/willingness to integrate their operations into a new *phygital* (physical + digital) highway (Krandall, 2020). Through several semi-structured interviews and applicable document reviews, adequate data surfaced to provide a list of best practices and even further allowed for a new model to be derived.

This emergent theoretical construct, labeled the *Phygital Highway for Effective Discipleship* provides tomorrow's church leaders with a solid foundation to build their *phygital* ministry infrastructure upon. Within, leaders learn their mission must become innovative in their approach, immersive towards the end-user, adaptable in the application, and relationship-driven (as biblical discipleship requires). Their chosen tools must be synergistic, mission-oriented, and organically rooted; and their overall vision must produce obedience, develop leaders, and seek to unify the global church if they want to stand successful in their Kingdom endeavors. The largest finding from this research results in the mere fact digital discipleship is only declared effective if stories of biblical obedience are derived from the efforts within. Without this derived testimony, the digital church leader is encouraged to re-evaluate and adapt accordingly.

With regards to next steps and the future of *phygital* ministry, today's church leaders must accept the reality that digital ministry and its many tools will not disappear anytime soon. On the contrary, due to technology's dynamic and ever-changing appearance, church leaders must embrace this landscape, examine these integrated pathways from all angles (*digital-first, physical-next and physical-first, digital-next*), align them with established biblical truths, and boldly forge the way ahead as tomorrow's adaptive, synergistic, and innovative leaders. In the here and now, church leaders must research and collaborate with others regarding current effective methods and develop others as they make disciples who make disciples. To wait any longer means complacency will come to bear, and from complacency yields lukewarmness, and from lukewarmness comes death. Existing church leaders need to embrace and encourage the next generation of leaders to tackle these challenges head on. No longer should it be acceptable to ignore this viable ministry opportunity. No longer should leaders shy away from the unknown and the intensive manhours which come with these *phygital* ministry constructs. Instead, leaders need to embrace this daily immersive expression of church. By doing so, they will see unprecedented unification and edification of relationships within the global church. *Phygital* ministry is not something to shy away from just because its "new" to church language. Once the layers are peeled back, it becomes evident these methods are no different than using the many tools available to the church over the course of history (letters, missionaries, the road systems, the printing press, etc). It is simple an evolving way to carry out the first-century mission of God's church. Perhaps the next step is to explore metaverse church and augmented reality tools. Either-way, God's commands and the Great Commission remains unchanged.

One final note, Jesus called His disciples to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20) and He further desired unity of His followers (John 17). Digital church leaders must never lose sight of

this as they explore these cutting-edge tools to cast a vision worthy of the King's command (Colossians 1:10, 1 Thessalonians 2:12, and Ephesians 4:1-3). Also, these ministerial efforts in the twenty-first century are not easy. They require perseverance, great labor, intentionality (often at a cost), and demand selfless service to others. Now is the time to explore the many future research suggestions provided within this chapter. If leadership is unwilling to do the work now, they truly do run the risk of becoming irrelevant in today's digital world and that shall become one of the greatest downfalls in the twenty-first century church. Tomorrow's digital leader should not falter; for Jesus has already shown the Way. It is merely up to the digital church leader to decide if they are going to abide well by the might of the Holy Spirit, answer His call, and glorify the Christ into all of eternity. Afterall, *obedience* is the key.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT POST

A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF DIGITAL DISCIPLESHIP METHODS FOR
EFFECTIVENESS IN THE PHYGITAL CHURCH

Attention Digital Church Leaders:

I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to investigate emerging digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* (physical + digital) church within various US-based evangelical networks.

To participate, participants must be between the ages of 21 and 60 years of age, read, write, and speak the English language, have held a *phygital* church leadership position (as a pastor, teacher, or discipleship lead) for a minimum of six months or more, currently hold ministerial credentials from an evangelical endorsing agency, and agree with the statement of faith as adopted by the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE, 2023).

Participants will be asked to participate in a brief interview. Per best practice standards, this interview will be audio and video recorded and then transcribed. All information collected will remain confidential. This entire process is estimated to take approximately one hour in total. Participants may be asked to answer a few additional interview questions if more data is needed. Participants will have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy.

If you meet the study criteria and would like to participate in this study, you are invited to contact Daniel Tebo at [REDACTED].

An information sheet will be emailed to you after you express interest in participating.

APPENDIX B**EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS**

Dear _____,

Thank you for your expressed interest in this study on emerging digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* (physical + digital) church within various US-based evangelical networks.

The next step is for you to review the attached information sheet.

I will contact you to schedule your digital church leader interview. This interview (approximately one hour of your time) will take place digitally via Microsoft Teams; and will be audio/video recorded to allow for proper transcribing and further data analysis to take place. I will provide you with a copy of your interview transcript for review/record.

I want to thank you again for agreeing to participate in this pioneering research as we seek the best way(s) to digitally disciple the body of Christ in and through *phygital* church networks!

APPENDIX C
INFORMATION SHEET

Title of the Project: A Grounded Theory Study of Digital Discipleship Methods for Effectiveness in the Phygital Church

Principal Investigator: Daniel Tebo, Ph.D. Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be between the ages of 21 and 60 years of age, read, write, and speak the English language, have held a *phygital* church leadership position (as a pastor, teacher, or discipleship lead) for a minimum of six months or more, currently hold ministerial credentials from an evangelical endorsing agency, and agree with the statement of faith as adopted by the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE, 2023):

We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.

We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.

We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful people, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential.

We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life.

We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.

We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please note, taking part in this research project is voluntary. It is important to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to investigate the digital discipleship methods for effectiveness in the *phygital* (physical + digital) church within various US-based evangelical networks. Existing research indicates church leaders are struggling to understand how to embrace digital resources to actualize their deepest and truest physical potential (Panzer, 2022). This study will seek to establish a best practices approach and theory for such methods and provide a voice and theological base for the *phygital* church network.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in a web conference interview that will be audio and video recorded. During the interview, you will be asked to answer questions related to your own experiences with digital discipleship and *phygital* ministry. (Time: 60 minutes)
2. You will be invited to review the interview transcript and make any corrections or clarifications so that your transcript accurately expresses your intentions. (Time will vary)
3. Because this is a grounded theory study, more data may be desired. You may be contacted again by the researcher to answer additional questions. This will be entirely voluntary on your part.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include contributing to the field of research related to this topic and providing personal insights that may help other ministry leaders in their own contexts.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify an individual subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. However, if data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept completely confidential through the use of pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and hard drive and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be transcribed using a live transcription feature. Transcriptions of audio and video recordings of these interviews will be stored on a password-locked computer and hard drive for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these transcripts and recordings.
- Researcher notes and handwritten memos will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office, and the researcher only will have the key. After three years, all hardcopy data will be shredded.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Daniel Tebo. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Steve Lowe at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

APPENDIX D

DIGITAL CHURCH LEADER QUESTIONNAIRE (DCLQ)

Topic 1: Defining Digital Discipleship and Phygital Ministry

These questions relate to Research Question #1 of this study:

How do digital church leaders describe how they understand digital discipleship methods?

- How would you define digital discipleship and digital discipleship pathways?
- How would you define *phygital* church networks?
- How would you describe effective digital discipleship considering *phygital* networks?
- Describe your understanding of digital discipleship as it relates to biblical discipleship.

Topic 2: Utilizing Digital Discipleship for Phygital Ministry

These questions relate to Research Question #2 of this study:

How do digital church leaders practice digital discipleship methods?

- Describe how you have implemented digital discipleship methods in a *phygital* context.
- Describe how you have seen digital discipleship methods in other *phygital* contexts.
- Are there other methods you would like to see utilized for *phygital* discipleship? Explain.

Topic 3: Measuring Effectiveness of Digital Discipleship Methods for Phygital Ministry

These questions relate to Research Question #3 of this study:

How do digital church leaders measure the effectiveness of digital discipleship methods?

- Describe how you have measured digital discipleship methods for *phygital* ministry.
- Have your experiences proven effective with regards to discipleship in *phygital* ministry?
- What do you believe are the greatest challenges facing digital discipleship and *phygital* church networks?

APPENDIX E
IRB APPROVAL

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 4, 2023

Daniel Tebo
Stephen Lowe

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-85 A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF DIGITAL DISCIPLESHIP METHODS FOR EFFECTIVENESS IN THE PHYGITAL CHURCH

Dear Daniel Tebo, Stephen Lowe,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office