

## **Theology of the Pain of God in the Era of COVID-19: The Reflections on Sufferings by Three Hong Kong Churches through Online Services**

### **Abstract**

Suffering is probably a suitable word to describe the experiences of Hong Kong Christians in 2020, who must endure the continuous impact of anti-extradition law protests, the imposition of the national security law,<sup>1</sup> and the COVID-19 outbreak. Employing digital ethnography, this article examines the church's response to the pandemic between 26 January, the first Sunday Service after Wuhan announced lockdown, and 31 May, before most churches in Hong Kong had reopened. Three churches serve as case studies: (1) Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong; (2) Flow Church, an evangelical parachurch established in early 2019 in response to the loss of church members after the Umbrella Movement; and (3) Shatin Baptist Church, a suburban megachurch known for its music worship. In light of their different denominational backgrounds and geographical positions, these three examples complement each other and demonstrate the range of responses of Hong Kong Christians to the pandemic. The article also sheds light on how churches, despite social distancing, collectively and creatively connect online with the suffering ones. Due to the lack of theological discourse regarding the pain experienced during this pandemic, this article also engages with Kazoh Kitamori's (1916–1998) theology of the pain of God to further develop the theological discourse raised in online worship, which may assist Christians globally in reflecting on this topic.

**Keywords**

Digital ethnography, digital theology, theology of the pain of God, world Christianity, Hong Kong, COVID-19

**Word limit**

6484

**Introduction**

‘When I wore a mask for the whole day, the sense of uncertainty was all brought back, the uncertain feelings created by wearing a mask for the whole day ... as a nurse who volunteered at the frontline in the SARS ward in 2003’, said Pun Chi-kong, a pastor at Flow Church and a former nurse, who described his experiences during the 2020 Chinese New Year, only days after the announcement of the COVID-19 discovery in Wuhan in late January (Flow Church 2020c). Pun’s words encapsulate the experience of many Hong Kongese.

2020 has been a difficult year for Hong Kong Christians—who have faced not only socio-political uncertainty since June 2019 due to the anti-extradition laws protests, but also the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted their lives since January 2020 when Wuhan announced its lockdown and a mass of Mainland Chinese citizens came to Hong Kong for medication. The trauma of the SARS outbreak in 2003 stimulated further anxiety about COVID-19, for both Christians and non-Christians alike.

In a city with one of the highest internet usage rates in the world (89.3 per cents), some Hong Kong churches were already recording Sunday Services and regularly putting them on the

internet, even before the COVID-19 outbreak (Internet World Stats 2020). Against this backdrop, this article intends to illustrate the different collective responses of Hong Kong churches via online services, whether it is through different approaches to the eucharist, music worship, or the advanced use of online technology to witness God in light of social distancing.

If I am to categorise this article's contribution through 'Religion in the Age of Social Distancing' (Baker, Martí, Braunstein, Whitehead, and Yukich 2020), ideologically, it ponders questions of suffering and pain. Regarding religious practice, it provides insights on technologically-mediated religious innovation. Methodologically, I apply virtual qualitative methods.

As a Hong Kongese who has been residing in the United Kingdom in 2020, I employ digital ethnography to examine church responses to the pandemic between 26 January, the first Sunday Service after Wuhan announced lockdown and 31 May, before most churches in Hong Kong had reopened. Three churches will serve as case studies: (1) Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, (2) Flow Church, an evangelical parachurch established in early 2019 in response to the loss of church members in local churches after the Umbrella Movement, and (3) Shatin Baptist Church (STBC), a suburban megachurch known for its music worship. In light of their different denominational backgrounds and geographical positions, these three examples complement each other and demonstrate the range of responses of Hong Kong Christians to the pandemic. The article also sheds light on how churches, despite social distancing, can collectively and creatively connect online with the suffering ones. Due to the lack of theological discourse regarding the pain experienced during this pandemic, this article also engages with Kazoh Kitamori's (1916–1998) theology of the pain of God to further develop the theological discourse raised in online worship, which may assist Christians globally in reflecting on this topic.

## **The Rise of Digital Ethnography during the Pandemic**

Digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2015) is not new to the field of religious studies. As Ruth Tsuria et al. (2017) illustrate in their article, the methodological approach of studying digital environments began in the early 2000s.<sup>2</sup> According to Sarah Pink et al. (2015, 7), digital ethnography ‘takes as its starting point the idea that digital media and technologies are part of the everyday and more spectacular worlds that people inhabit’. Regarding the field of digital religion, one of the earliest studies appeared in the late 1990s, written by Stephen O’Leary (1996), on the use of the internet as a sacred space for religious practitioners, and how its usage may enhance the religious experience of community.

The use of digital methods has become more prominent during the pandemic because lockdowns have limited the research mobility; ethnographers have had no choice but to move their participant observation to the digital realm.<sup>3</sup> This also highlights the tendency of communities, both online and offline, to connect via networks, which the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (1996) named ‘the network society’. Nonetheless, since the COVID-19 outbreak, different research institutions have established resources to facilitate digital ethnography. LSE Digital Ethnography Collective (2020) has gathered resources to enable anthropologists to catch up with the development of digital ethnography. Social Life (2020), a London-based social enterprise that is concerned primarily with qualitative research on urban communities, reflects on ways in which the pandemic has hindered their placed-based social research.

For research concerning online worship during the COVID-19 pandemic, Barna and Gloo (2020), an initiative that combines research on ecclesiology and digital tools, has conducted

research on churches in the United States focusing on the experiences of online churches during the first three weeks of lockdown. Moreover, Alexander Chow and Jonas Kurlberg (2020) have conducted interviews to investigate Asian and European responses to the pandemic and attitudes towards digital churches. In April 2020, Campbell (2020) has edited a volume to gather 30 responses from theologians in Europe and the United States on social distancing and online church operations. However, none of them employs digital ethnography for their research, nor do they focus on churches in Hong Kong. Thus, this article is one of the first studies to use digital ethnography to conduct research about online churches during the pandemic, focusing on Hong Kong.

As a Hong Kongese researcher considering the responses of Hong Kong churches to the pandemic, I was interested in how they handle suffering, while still carrying memories of the 2003 SARS outbreak and unsettling thoughts of the 2019 protests. Using digital ethnography, I participated online with other Hong Kongese during the pandemic, when they were not permitted to physically. Because Facebook—the platform most churches used to livestream their online services—has restricted the use of analytical software for automated access of its public content (Bastos and Shawn 2018), I took the manual approach (Radford 2019) to observe and record online services. This allowed me to fully participate in services, in the manner as other worshippers.<sup>4</sup>

### **2020: A Year of Suffering for Hong Kong**

One of the most asked questions among Hong Kongese in 2020 was ‘What have we done wrong to deserve this kind of suffering?’ This question appears not only in newspapers published by non-Christians, but also in sermons. In June 2019, Hong Kong began its first protest against the

extradition laws (Liu 2019), fearing the imposition of China's rule. This protest gathered two million people on 16 June 2019 (Griffiths et al. 2019). Despite the withdrawal of the bill in September (Chan 2019), the fear of instability seems to be a recurring theme in the three studied churches' online worship services, as if these concerns are already their daily experience. Still traumatised by the SARS outbreak in 2003, churches become refuges for Hong Kongese to ponder the question of suffering and to process their pain as a collective exercise among Hong Kong Christians.

In contrast to the SARS outbreak in 2003, the death rate from the COVID-19 pandemic has been much lower;<sup>5</sup> however, fear and pain are not necessarily proportional. It is understandable that Hong Kongese became extremely alert, knowing if or when they would be infected by the 'novel virus' in their highly dense city. This fear was reflected by panic shopping in early February, after the Chief Executive Carrie Lam 'appeared in public without one [mask] and said her officials shouldn't wear masks to save them for medical workers' (Marques 2020). Her gesture symbolises her support of the mask ban that has been in effect since 5 October 2019 regarding the anti-extradition law protests (BBC News 2019), and her misjudgement regarding the spread of the pandemic. Distrust of the government has increased exponentially due to the mishandling of the anti-extradition laws protests and the pandemic. Hence, although Hong Kong did not implement a lockdown until 28 March 2020 (Hong Kong e-Legislation 2020), its civil society had already initiated various actions to reduce the spread of the pandemic, such as wearing masks, washing hands, and suspending mass gatherings. Churches, amid suffering, have played an important role in providing material needs as well and spiritual guidance for those suffering in the city.

### **Three Case Studies of Hong Kong Churches**

The three case studies below—the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, Flow Church, and Shatin Baptist Church (STBC)—represent a spectrum of how Hong Kong churches have responded to the pandemic. For consistency, all online services were observed on Facebook pages that allow more interactions between audiences and page administrators. Digital ethnography was conducted between 26 January and 31 May (See Table 1 for details). Nineteen services were observed each church, a total of 57 for all three churches, along with some special events like Good Friday services and online concerts. These church services all occurred at different times, which allowed the author to attend three services each weekend; however, she did not join the Catholic services in real time due to time zone differences.

One major characteristic of Hong Kong churches' responses to the COVID-19 outbreak is their swift decision to move services online due to their previous SARS experiences in 2003. Most churches have suspended physical meetings since 1 February 2020 (Chan 2020; Hong Kong Shatin Baptist Church 2020; Lee 2020), when the Faculty of Medicine at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUMED)—the department that first located the virus origin of the 2003 SARS outbreak—warned that the first 14 days would be critical for stopping the spread of the novel virus (CUHK Medicine 2020).<sup>6</sup> For many Hong Kongese, CUMED is the pioneer of SARS-related disease research. Hence long before the legal ban on church services in March, most churches followed the advice of CUMED to suspend church gatherings in February.

### Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong

The Hong Kong Catholic Church (2020a) was established in 1841 as a mission prefecture and became a diocese in 1946. It currently has 403,000 members (Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong 2019), which is around 5.3 per cents of Hong Kong population (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administration Region 2020).<sup>7</sup> While the church has 51 parishes and conducts services in both Cantonese and English, for consistency in this study, only Cantonese services were observed, which were live-streamed at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Mid-levels, Hong Kong.

Unlike Flow Church and the STBC, which suspend services almost immediately after the outbreak in Wuhan, the Hong Kong Catholic Church did not do so until 13 February 2020 (Tong 2020). Instead, in early February, it provided stricter guidance on hygiene, especially for the Eucharist, due to the close contact between pastoral leaders and participants during the sacrament (Lee 2020). The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong (2020b) even invited medical doctors from the Hospital Authority to give a seminar to pastoral staff and lay leaders on handling masses during the pandemic. Since their suspension of physical gatherings, most worship has only been handled by pastoral staff and lay leaders.

Emphasising the material nature of the Eucharist, Kung Kao Po (2020), the official newspaper of the Hong Kong Catholic Church, established guidelines for spiritual communion (*shenling sheng ti*) and a spiritual communion prayer for online mass attendees to follow:

My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were



already there and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.<sup>8</sup>

This provides a buffer for how Catholics may enjoy communion with other church members and God during the pandemic.

### Flow Church

Flow Church is a 400-member, evangelical parachurch established in January 2019 that aims at believers who have lost faith in local churches following the latter's unresponsiveness to the Umbrella Movement. As claimed by its founder, John Chan, Associate Professor of Theology at the Alliance Bible Seminary, Flow Church is like the exile community in Babylon, determined to leave the old tradition of churches and follow God's will in its new journey (Mak 2019). Most volunteers in its online services appeared to be in their late 20s to 30s and tech-savvy. They used software like Switcher Studio to livestream and live-edit videos, and they even used Google's Jamboard for sharing sessions after online services, which is still relatively uncommon in online worship in the West.

Following the advice of CUMED, Flow suspended physical worship and shifted to online worship in late January (Chan 2020a). This has not been a problem for them because they had previously live-streamed their physical worship via Facebook due to space limitations at their rented place of worship. For Chan, digital media aids to extend the space of churches. God's presence should not be limited by material space; it should transcend body and materials (Chan 2020c). Therefore, Chan perceives online eucharist as 'real communion' (*zhenshi shengcan*), which connects believers together as one community (Flow Church 2020b).

### Shatin Baptist Church

Shatin Baptist Church (STBC) (2020b) is a megachurch in a suburban area of Hong Kong that welcomes 4,500 attendees every Sunday. Established in 1962, STBC was first sponsored by the Baptist Convention of Hong Kong as a church plant in Shatin. Part of a multi-site/satellite model (Stetzer 2015) with the motto ‘one church in multiple locations’ (*yi jian jiaohui, duo de fen tang*), the STBC’s mother church is at Siu Lek Yuen, with six satellite campuses in Ma On Shan, Jordan, Shatin Wai, and Taipo. The STBC represents how one megachurch from a major denomination<sup>9</sup> in Hong Kong responded to the pandemic.

Like Flow Church, the STBC (2020b) followed the guidance of CUMED to stop all physical gatherings from 1 February onwards. With a strong visual and audio team, the STBC has quickly moved all Sunday Services to online Saturday night services beginning on 2 February, and those online services were available on both its YouTube and Facebook channels from the end February of onwards. Furthermore, due to its emphasis on music worship, the STBC has partnered with several Protestant music organisations like the Hong Kong Association of Christian Music (2020) to respond to the pandemic through worship, as in the free, online concert ‘Cheering for Worshippers’ (*wei jing bai she daqi*) on 29 April. During this concert, its in-house composer and music minister Chu Ho-him shared his insight on 2 Timothy 1:6–7: ‘Indeed, we all have fear. It doesn’t matter. If we accept this fear and bring it to God ... God’s mercy will be with us and the storm will be over. ... If we are honest with this fear, it will become a momentum for us to seek God, to know the limitation of oneself and God’s mercy’. Hence, love, as a response to God, can be expressed by offering help to others (Lee 2020).

### **The Churches' Theological Reflections on the Pandemic**

Along with their congregations, both pastoral and lay leaders in these churches had trouble adjusting to the new reality. On top of handling practical issues concerning streaming online services, they also had to face the fear of instability continuing from the anti-extradition law protests. Overall, fear, memory of the past, and togetherness seem to be the three distinguishable themes in these online services, which elaborated below.

One clear pattern in the online services from the end of January to the end of May is that they followed a two-part process in understanding the COVID-19 situation: (1) describing the events triggered by the pandemic; and (2) developing a theological response to the pandemic, whether from the standpoint of individuals or of church communities. Even before the announcement of the COVID-19 outbreak at the end of January, Flow Church had already started a series on fear to ponder their experience amid the anti-extradition law protests. John Chan (2020a), Flow Church's senior pastor, discussed the phenomenon of pandemic in the Old Testament, using the example of when the Philistines captured the ark of God and eventually were all afflicted with tumours in Ashdod (1 Samuel 5–6). For Chan, the purpose of the pandemic itself is to glorify God (1 Samuel 6:5), whether it is for the Philistines, the non-believers, or for the Israelites, the people of God. However, Chan did not discuss how the Israelites may grieve for their loss during the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> For Peter Wai-man Choy (2020) of the Hong Kong Catholic Church, since all aspects of life are so penetrated by fear during the pandemic, which can be worsened by the tremendous flow of information, the key to overcome fear is to focus on God instead of these distractions. Following the example of Peter, James, and John who witnessed Jesus's transfiguration and responded to his call of not being afraid

(Matthew 17:6–7), those who encounter God during the pandemic should be encouraged to go forward, return to their workplaces, and testify of God.

As narrated in the introduction, the pastoral leaders all carry memories of the 2003 SARS outbreak that can be used to reflect on the current pandemic, especially testimonies from the medical workers. For example, Dominic Chan (2020), the former vicar of the Hong Kong Catholic Church, narrated the testimony of Joseph Sung (1959–), Professor of Medicine and Therapeutics (1998 onwards) and President of CUHK (2010–2017), who led medical teams in Prince of Wales Hospital in the fight against the SARS outbreak. Worship leaders of Flow Church and of the STBC both mentioned ‘Hong Kong’s daughter’ Joanna Tse-Yuen Man (1968–2003), a pulmonologist who died while serving SARS patients (Flow Church 2020a; Shatin Baptist Church Video and Audio Team 2020a). Both of their stories provide reassurance to the audience that, just as the SARS outbreak was controlled, one day, the COVID-19 pandemic will be over.

The memory of the past prompted these churches to walk together with the crowd during the pandemic. Since no one should suffer alone during the pandemic, practising love for one’s neighbour is as important as ever. Thus, these churches initiated several campaigns to help out the needy and the poor in Hong Kong society; for example, the STBC launched an event called ‘Share with Neighbour: Food Collection and Short-term Supply’ to request that church members collect masks to be delivered to single elderly and grassroots citizens in the area (Shatin Baptist Church Video and Audio Team 2020b). Although all Hong Kongese lacked in personal protective equipment (PPE) and hygienic items, like masks, hand sanitisers, and toilet rolls, this did not excuse offering help to those in need (Shatin Baptist Church Video and Audio Team 2020c). Showing a video entitled ‘Thank You Coronavirus’, Sou Ka Fai, Senior Pastor of STBC,

delivered a message on John 12:23–36 that ‘we are all connected’ during the pandemic. The main (life) goal for Christians is to seek God, especially during collective suffering (Shatin Baptist Church Video and Audio Team 2020b). Furthermore, ‘togetherness’ as a message shows that, despite the shift from physical worship to online worship, the church can still gather as one family. To illustrate this, Flow Church’s (2020c) members composed the song *Love in the Midst of the Pandemic*, to narrate their urge to walk together during the pandemic and their hope to meet again as a church in physical worship:

Love in the midst of the pandemic,

See you all on Facebook (YouTube) Live,

Despite wearing masks and the uncontrolled situation of the Coronavirus.

Walk together online on Saturday (Sunday),

Sing hymns interactively during the live worship, [because]

Worship should not be defined by day and night or the location.

Hallelujah, Emmanuel, Hosanna,

Hope that Flow Church (church) can see worship physically again.

In spite of social distancing, the church is still present as one family, although the medium has shifted to digital media.

### **Theology of the Pain of God**

Provided that fear becomes a prominent companion in the daily life of Hong Kongese, during my observation, it seems that the three studied churches lack a theological conceptualisation of negative feelings, in addition to the emphasis of togetherness and the limitation of human beings to understand the pandemic itself. As such, the Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori’s notion of

the theology of the pain of God may complement the current theological discussions in Hong Kong, considering their daily circumstances during this troubling time.

Indeed, Kitamori's *Theology of the Pain of God* is constructed based on Japanese drama, highlighting its accessible nature to both the upper class and the common people. In a similar way, online services, present in digital media, are also easily accessed by the Hong Kongese, although social media is not a form of art, nor does it focus on tragedy. Published in the post-WWII era when the Japanese were still processing their post-war sufferings, *Theology of the Pain of God* was a Japanese attempt to deal with pain. Although Hong Kongese did not experience the shame of Japanese invasion during WWII, I perceive that the suffering encountered by Hong Kong Christians has been intense during the pandemic and ongoing protests. Thus, Kitamori's theology of the pain of God is helpful for understanding one's relationship with God when pain is so present in one's everyday life.

According to Kitamori (1958, 53), 'by serving [God] through our pain, the pain of God rather saves and heals our pain'. This pain of God refers to the Father's sacrifice of the Son to save the whole of humanity. It is this kind of pain, which illustrated in God's love through salvation, that can heal our wounds. To understand one's suffering, one should first comprehend God's pain through the salvation of Jesus Christ. This is what Kitamori called the theology of the pain of God.

There are two dimensions to Kitamori's theology of the pain of God: (1) when our loved ones suffer and die, and (2) when we ourselves suffer and die. In both situations, we experience pain through suffering. The difference is that, in the former case, we become one with God the Father who lets his only begotten Son suffer and die, while in the latter, we become one with God the Son who entered into pain and died. For Kitamori, we can be united with God's pain by

experiencing suffering and, in turn, understand the love of God, who is willing to send his only beloved Son to suffer. This is what Kitamori (1958, 121) calls ‘love in the theology of pain’, where God understands our pain through his Fatherly, sacrificial love.

During the current pandemic, almost everyone on earth, or those they love, has somehow suffered. Kitamori’s theology of pain of God is useful in the way that it demonstrates how God relates to human beings suffering. Not only does God comprehend the suffering of human beings through the sacrifice of his only Son Jesus Christ, the theology of the pain of God also broadens our understanding of the love of God, who cares about the creatures amid their suffering. God, in this sense, is not totally detached from people on earth. Despite God’s transcendent nature as the creator of all human beings and the pandemic, God’s immanent character allows Godself to interact with them through their pain and suffering.

Complementing the theological analysis of the online services from the three studied churches, Kitamori’s emphasis on service for God’s pain suggests that, by taking up our cross, we can find life (Matthew 16:25) and our wounds will be healed (1 Peter 2:24). Our service can be meaningful and fruitful because God’s pain helps us bond with God’s love. This concept was elaborated in the Palm Sunday sermon from John Cardinal Tong, Apostolic Administrator of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, though he may not have previously read Kitamori. Tong (2020b) takes the example of Yeung Kwok-wun, a young female Catholic who served in Guangzhou during the late 1940s and early 1950s, to show how Christians can serve others during the global pandemic. During her imprisonment resulting from her Christian service, which was prohibited during that period, Yeung was willing to share her limited food portion with other prisoners, despite the ongoing nationwide famine both inside and outside the prison. For Tong, this type of service symbolises how one can take up their cross to serve Jesus.

Furthering Kitamori's discourse, Yeung's service can relate to God's pain in that, through suffering among human beings, she knew and experienced God's love and, in turn, shared with those around her.

Sung's testimonies as narrated in the Catholic Church's service, and Tse's by Flow Church and the STBC provide examples of Kitamori's (1958, 135–136) discussion of the Japanese word *tsurasa*, which he suggests is closest to the English term 'pain'. For Kitamori, this word, originally used in Japanese tragedy literature, signifies 'when one suffers and dies, or makes his beloved son suffer and die, for the sake of loving and making others live'. In other words, the sacrifice of oneself is perceived as love towards others. The same sort of mentality can be found in Sung's and Man's testimonies. Serving on the front-line day and night, for them, expresses love to the people they serve. Although long working hours can be seen as suffering, the end goal is rewarding because they can witness the healing process of patients. For Kitamori, serving God with all our hearts helps us to understand God's perspective, whose absolute pain is the sacrifice of the Son Jesus Christ. Though the narratives above are limited to medical staff in Hong Kong, all service during the pandemic can cause different experiences of pain. Through these pains, we can better understand God's love and pain in our daily lives.

## **Conclusion**

While the COVID-19 pandemic has been experienced globally, this suffering takes unique forms in Hong Kong due to its advanced use of technology, its previous encounter with the SARS outbreak, and its continuous protests since mid-2019 that have led to collective support among all members in civil society. Although this article focuses on online worship within the first few months of 2020 in one city, it shows how churches adapt situations through online services and



reflect with those suffering theologically. Despite its lack of concrete responses for how churches can deal with pain and suffering, except the emphasis on togetherness, one major contribution from Hong Kong's example is that it illustrates how a city that has never had a complete lockdown can worship through digital media and continuously connect with its people both online and offline.

Like other parts of the world where lockdowns restrict physical worship, online services become the only worship option for Christians. Thus, digital ethnography as a research method advances the conversation among global churches for how they can walk with their congregations online during this difficult time, while abiding by social distancing rules in their respective countries. Social distancing does not sound as distanced as one may think. People in the digital era can still connect online and share life together, whether celebrating the joy of having enough PPE or mourning the loss of loved ones.

As Kitamori (1958, 115) argues, 'pain can only be experienced by the living, not by the dead who are already freed from suffering'. I hope that, by the time this article is released, pain related to the pandemic will be over. This may seem overly optimistic to many since effects of the COVID-19 outbreak, such as the recession and the prolonged mourning of the lost ones, will be long-lasting. Nonetheless, the examples of online services provided by three churches in Hong Kong capture how these churches support their members and local communities materially, mentally, and theologically. Their service in solidarity with God's pain may have an everlasting impact on Hong Kong Christians and can perhaps be a model for the global church.

#### **Notes**

1. For details, see BBC News, 2020.
2. See also Campbell and Altenhofen, 2015.

3. There are issues concerning research ethics if research is to be conducted online; for example, how consent is achieved between the researcher and the online participants. For details, see Eysenbach and Till, 2001.
4. Being a participant in these online services, I have not revealed myself as a researcher during worship, apart from greeting others online. It is noteworthy that most worshippers, as I observed, have not discussed personal issues in worship.
5. According to the World Health Organization, the fatality rate of SARS in 2003 in Hong Kong was between 11 and 17 per cents, while that of the COVID-19 outbreak, as reported by Bloomberg in October 2020, is currently 2 per cents. See World Health Organization, 2003; Bloomberg Quicktake, 2020.
6. The term 'novel virus' was used from December 2019 until 11 February 2020, when the virus and the disease were officially named as SARS-CoV2 and COVID-19 by the World Health Organization. See World Health Organization, 2020.
7. This is calculated based on statistics from 7.5 million citizens provided by the Hong Kong government. See Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2020.
8. The translation here is from a Hong Kong Catholic laypersons' website called 'What Would Jesus Like' (2020).
9. Note that The Baptist Convention of Hong Kong (BCHK) is one of the largest denominations in the city, with 12 schools, a hospital, and 93 churches operating under the BCHK. For details, see Baptist Convention of Hong Kong, 2018.

### **Declaration of Interest Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Churches	Number of Online Meetings Observed	
	Sunday Services	Miscellaneous
Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong	19	Good Friday: 1
Flow Churches	19	Online Fellowship: 1
Shatin Baptist Church	19	Music worship: 1

Table 1 Participation Observation of Online Church Activities