

EDITORIAL

Special Issue: Grassroots and Indigenous Digital Faith-based Activism

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Human societies are being transformed by digital technology. Global connectivity and digital automation bring new opportunities, while social media algorithms and hateful content are reshaping political engagement and mental health. Amid countless examples of toxic digital discourse, grassroots and indigenous faith-based organizations are using digital technologies to advocate for justice. These activists draw on contextual wisdom and religious resources to name inequities, invite solidarity and call for change. Hence, the digital becomes a space of transforming mission in which faith-based activism expresses ecclesial witness.

Inter-disciplinary academic research of these grassroots and indigenous digital expressions of witness intersects with the scope and focus of *Ecclesial Futures*. This journal exists to investigate God's mission in the world, particularly within local Christian communities and the systems that support them. Researching digital faith-based activism yields insights into theologies generated "on-the-ground," the role of lay leadership in local Christian communities and the relationship between a local church and its 'world' or context. Focusing on digital activism by indigenous communities allows reflection on the place of local churches formed outside of Christendom.

Hence, the seven articles in this issue of *Ecclesial Futures* investigate digital activism as it embraces vulnerability and power imbalances in Christian witness. First, regarding theology generated "on-the-ground" in local contexts, the articles provide case studies from grassroots and indigenous contexts by non-Western Christians, including those from Africa, Hong Kong, Oceania, and tribal India. Second, the activism examined in the case studies is the work of lay people who use digital skills to bear witness on social media platforms. Historically, ecclesiology has centred worship, and contextualization has worked with liturgy. In this issue of *Ecclesial Futures*, we glimpse lay leaders using communicative skills honed in visual and digital environments to engage in public mission. Third, the content the activists create is local theologies, emerging not from traditional parish churches and denominations but activist communities of prophetic praxis. The social media content offers windows into how these Christians understand God's mission in a rapidly changing

world. Fourth, several of the articles engage critically with the colonizing tendencies of modernity, including digital surveillance, climate justice and approaching online algorithms and digital platforms in dialogue with theological language of powers and principalities.

Before I introduce each of the seven articles in more detail, let me chart how this special issue began. My hope is that the narrative provides readers with an example of how special issues develop and research projects can evolve over time.

Background

In the European summer of 2024, I was grateful to be awarded a research fellowship with the Institute for Advanced Studies (IASH), Edinburgh University. For three years between 2021 and 2024, IASH invited research proposals investigating decoloniality.¹ Between 2021 and 2024, I had undertaken research on the future of theological education for the Anglican Province of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. Spanning multiple cultures and five nation stations, climate justice was a major topic of conversation, particularly for communities in the Diocese of Polynesia. Thus, the IASH Research Fellowship was an opportunity to attend to the calls for climate justice I heard during the research, while thinking further about faith-based digital activism across Oceania.

In my research while at IASH, I utilized a case study approach that began with the praxis of Pacific communities. My aim was to engage with decoloniality not as a theory but as a reality present in the call of indigenous communities for liberation and justice. A faith-based lens was consistent with the priority of the spiritual in indigenous Pacific worldviews and the history of Christian mission between Oceanic (is)lands. Case studies of grassroots faith-based activism would foreground indigenous agency and offer ways to locate decoloniality in the waters of the Global South.

As my IASH research fellowship ended, I pondered how to broaden the work. The use of case studies seemed a helpful way of inviting engagement by researchers from other local contexts. Bringing grassroots and indigenous case studies into conversation with one another is consistent with the call for a “derived etic” (Hwang 2006: 80–1) and a way to theorize decolonial digital activism from culturally specific samples of grassroots and indigenous faith-linked activism.

I was grateful to receive further support from IASH, including space within their 55th anniversary celebrations in April 2025 to host a colloquium, calling for papers that addressed the theme of *Grassroots and indigenous digital faith-based activism*.²

1 <https://www.iash.ed.ac.uk/ipd/about>.

2 <https://www.iash.ed.ac.uk/news/call-papers-grassroots-and-indigenous-digital-faith-based-activism>.

Appropriately for research focused on digital activism, IASH provided digital technologies to enable an international conversation.

Following the colloquium, the presenters discussed next steps and observed congruence between digital activism and online and open-access publishing formats. *Ecclesial Futures* was approached, noting the congruences between digital faith-based activism and the scope of the journal, given how the colloquium papers researched Christian praxis outside of Christendom, elevated the role of lay leadership in digital activism and analysed the relationship between a local church and its 'world' or context. The proposal for a special issue was workshopped by the *Ecclesial Futures* Editorial Board. Nigel Rooms, as Co-editor, administered the peer-review process to ensure double-blind peer review. The result is this issue of seven articles.

Faith-based Activism Articles

Rathiulung Elias KC, in "The Falcon in the Web: Ecclesial Witness in Digital Ecologies of Northeast India" begins with a definition of "indigenous" as a cosmological-philosophical orientation characterized by rootedness to land, embedded relational ontologies and non-fragmentary understandings of human-nonhuman life. The article examines ecological work among the Zeliangrong-Inpui community, in Manipur, India, to conserve the Amur Falcon. Interviews, digital ethnography and analysis of online content provided by the Rainforest Club Tamenglong (RCT) demonstrate a faith-informed and indigenously relational approach to ecological stewardship. RCT use digital media to share stories, indigenous art and local rituals. Digital platforms enable advocacy and a witness that is trans-local across global networks. However, digital contexts are shaped by unequal power. The dynamics of surveillance logics and algorithmic authority make RCT vulnerable to further experiences of marginalization. Rather than withdraw, RCT rework their agency through practices. These involve the use of Christian language, including the theological concept of stewardship, cultivating platforms for knowledge sharing and valuing intergenerational collaboration, as elders share ecological and cultural wisdom with technologically skilled and younger activists. Hence, the article engages themes central to *Ecclesial Futures*, describing the lived theology and lay ecclesial witness of RCT, ecological responsibility, and how indigenous activists choose to participate and represent their culture as they navigate digital contexts. The article makes a distinctive interdisciplinary contribution that brings together digital ethnography, indigenous ecological knowledge, and eco-theological reflection.

We remain in Tribal India for our second article. **Taimaya Ragui**, in "Digital Initiative, Indigenous Heritage: A Catalyst for Digital Theological Discourse and Digital Activism", explores how revisiting and recovering Indigenous heritage can initiate processes of decolonization. Ragui defines decolonization as a methodology to

recover Indigenous knowledge through amplifying the voices of Indigenous communities. The article examines how Indigenous Christian Tangkhul Naga artists enact digital activism: Rewben Mashangva, who incorporates Indigenous folk and blues, and Asa Kazingmei and Easterlight Zimik, who blend traditional attire with modern fashion. The article locates colonization first in history and then in conversations with analysis of online content, particularly YouTube videos of music and live performance, Instagram photos of fashion and digital art. Finally, Ragui brings his examination of colonization and contemporary music and fashion by indigenous artists into conversation with developments in digital theology. He argues that “digital activism” needs to include the use of digital tools to recover Indigenous heritage, enable self-representation and liberate local communities from colonial ideological captivity. Hence, the article engages themes central to *Ecclesial Futures*, describing lived theology, lay ecclesial witness expressed in digital cultures and outlining how indigenous initiatives can free local theologies from colonial ideologies. The findings of the article are persuasive and highly original. Digital platforms can play a significant role as indigenous communities decolonize. Digital activism involves recovery as well as protest.

In our third article, we move from Tribal India to Hong Kong. **Ann Gillian Chu** and **Rachel Siow Robertson**, in “Joys in Online Religious Spaces: A Study of Hong Kong Local and Diasporic Online Christian Communities”, argue that the emotion of joy is a digital activism. In Hong Kong, the digital hashtags #deltaδmovement and #基督教文化運動 (Christian Cultural Movement) evolved as a way for people to share their experiences, including during the COVID-19 pandemic and waves of migration during 2019–2021. Online communities emerged around the two hashtags as places to reflect on the difficulties of not being able to meet in person. Chu and Robertson used digital ethnography to analyse social media posts on Facebook and Instagram and the role of the hashtag #deltaδmovement. They define these online communities as grassroots, given they were often lay-led. Chu and Robertson use a framework of cognitive, emotional and social to examine how the two hashtags allowed people to express religio-social viewpoints on social media.

Their argument is two-fold. First, the grassroots online community that evolved supported the sharing of pain, navigating disagreement and positive expressions of joy through camaraderie and creativity. Hence, participating in online discourse around the hashtags resulted in wider participation, identification in diversity and demands for difference. Second, this participation, which Chu and Robertson describe as “change-inducing,” can be developed in theological terms. The language that emerged enabled experiences of joy in challenging circumstances to be shared, and was made possible through online interactions. Hence, Chu and Robertson define this online participation as a “discursive” activism and theorize the cognitive, emotional

and social elements as a theological experience of joy which creates a space for actions that would not otherwise be permissible.

The fourth article turns to the Pacific Ocean, and the realities of rising waters on the (is)lands of the world's largest body of water. As the Co-editor of this journal and the curator of this special issue, I also have made a contribution, not least because of how this project was initiated and my own passion for it. Thus, if readers will forgive me, I will use the first person when describing my article here. In "The Visual Grammar of Online Faith-linked Climate Activism: Case Studies of Grassroots 'Moana' Theologies in Oceania," I argue for a climate justice conversation located not in Western thinktanks but in Pacific waters. I draw on "visual grammar" analysis to investigate the visual content of three faith-linked groups in Tonga, Solomon Islands and Fiji. The argument is that images from social media, websites and a music video express an online activism that is immersive, communal and prayerful. These "digital" eco-theologies are brought into dialogue with established Oceanic or "moana" eco-theologies, to argue for a Pacific eco-praxis that offers a rich and distinctive contribution to global eco-theologies. The article offers new models for how Christianity might engage with climate change and understand digital activism. First, for wider definitions of digital activism that include prayerful and intergenerational forms of participation. Second, for global eco-theologies, the need to place Pacific activist communities at the centre of global climate conversations. Third, for ecclesial mission, acceptance of new forms of lay leadership and the valuing of charisms of digital storytelling, citizen science and video making, to call for climate justice.

A fifth article takes us to Africa. **Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke** in "Digital Activism and the Making of a Decolonial Public Theology: Revisiting the 2020 #EndSARS Protest as a Theological Provocation" examines the role of digital activism in Nigeria. During 2020, the hashtag #EndSARS was used to coordinate protests against systematic police brutality in Nigeria. Okpaleke defines coloniality as "leftover colonial structures" that replicate colonial exploitation and domination and locates the #EndSARS protest as a decolonial move, utilising digital tools like social media to critique the colonial structures of power and influence in contemporary Nigeria. Okpaleke continues his digital reflection by turning to the online commentary of a Nigerian pastor, who described the #EndSARS protest as originating in digital activism and mirroring the incarnational framework: "The word became flesh." The article then develops the implications of an incarnational hermeneutic and what it means to make the (online) visible. Okpaleke argues that the online activism of the hashtag #EndSARS revealed two moments of theological provocation. First, an incarnational hermeneutic which demands that churches speak prophetically against injustice. Second, the need for "grievability," defined as visible ecclesial action that enfleashes solidarity with those experiencing dehumanization. The article argues for a Christianity that is reclaimed through radical commitment to abundant life and social

transformation in postcolonial Africa. While much discourse locates digital cultures as universal, the originality of the article lies in the framing of digital activism through incarnational and decolonial lenses, as a theology from below and originating in the digital that enfleshes Christ.

A sixth article offers a case study into the role of prayer among Christian climate activists in the Global North. **Tobias Adam**, in “Defiant Hope: Intercessory Prayer as Spiritual Resistance to Hopelessness in the Climate Crisis,” focuses on ecclesial practices, specifically intercessory prayer. The article uses participant observation and interviews to study an evangelical prayer network, *Climate Intercessors*. Digital technologies are tools, an essential backdrop which bring people from different churches and geographical contexts together in activating through prayer for climate justice. Adam places his findings about the nature of intercessory prayer into conversation with several other empirical case studies and argues that intercessory prayer fosters solidarity, helps to process climate anxiety, and cultivates defiant hope. The place of “defiant hope” for these praying activists is brought into dialogue with Jürgen Moltmann’s theology of hope. Adam argues that the *defiant hope* is located in small signs in the present, rather than a promised new world. Intercessory prayer is a way to face the future squarely, without denying human responsibility. The article provides an interdisciplinary, empirically informed theological reflection, offering highly original insights into how contemporary Christian communities engage missionally with the climate crisis. A feature is how Adam challenges a secularized framework of activism, whether online or offline. Another is the role of the digital in bringing activists together.

A final article provides a very different way of theorizing digital faith-based activism. **Jonas Kurlberg** in “Digital Powers and Principalities, Decolonization, and Faith-Based Activism” provides a highly original contribution, not of a single case study but rather of the technological environments that shape faith-based digital activism. Central is Walter Wink’s theological framework of “powers and principalities,” which Kurlberg uses to analyse digital technology and online platforms. What results is a conceptual vocabulary to account for the spiritual dimensions of technological life. A postcolonial digital activism involves analysis of the powers at play in empire building within and through the digital. The argument is built in conversation with Kwok Pui-Lan, who offers the possibility of decolonial ecclesial practices, including resistance, deliberate power redistribution and nurturing transnational communities of sharing and listening. Kurlberg applies this to digital activism, suggesting digital platforms that might be ethically healthy and the importance of being present with alternative stories and voices. These practices are suggested as ways that grassroots and indigenous digital faith-based activists might resist and subvert colonial dynamics embedded in digital technologies. The originality of the

article lies in how the language of powers and principalities works to both identify evil and seek redemption.

Research Trends for Grassroots and Indigenous Faith-based Activism

While the digital is everywhere, faith-based activism is an understudied practice in all theological fields. The seven articles offer rich, robust and theological generative conversations. Given this is a special issue, let me draw together shared themes and indicate possible future trajectories for research.

First, all seven articles in different ways challenge Eurocentric approaches to technology and theology. The range of case studies, including research from Nigeria, Hong Kong, Northeast India and Oceania, broadens the geographical and cultural scope of ecclesial and theological scholarship, and provides valuable knowledge-making in a field of study that is dominated by Western interests. The articles by Elias, Ragui and Taylor document indigenous ecological knowledge and describe unique epistemologies that understand knowledge as communal, interrelated and holistic. Adam and Kurlberg demonstrate ways in which Eurocentric faith and scholarship can open itself to be with and learn from the Global South. Hence, this digital faith-based activism special issue broadens global understandings of digital theology as they document how hashtags and visual images have been used to elevate indigenous agency. However, further case studies reflecting on grassroots faith-based digital activism in Latin America, the Caribbean and other African countries are needed.

Second, the articles demonstrate how activism is formed in and through solidarity. Several examples challenge the notion that the digital is a tool that creates distance and barriers. Elias KC describes the work of RCT as shaped by solidarity that includes care for the environment and the marginalized. Okpaleke eloquently describes the “grievability of all lives” and how digital activism makes visible local, decolonial provocations. Adam describes how the practice of intercessory prayer works to create solidarity with the experiences of the climate-impacted in the Global South. Further work is needed to understand whether these movements toward solidarity are enduring and behaviour changing, or temporal.

Third, several of the articles demonstrate the presence of the affective and the place of emotion, both in digital activism and as a theological resource. Elias KC writes of the importance of attending to the affective and relational dimensions of postdigital worlds. Chu and Robertson develop joy as a theological category, with cognitive, emotional and social elements. Okpaleke describes the 2020 #EndSARS protests as a space for the celebration of faith. Further research into the role of emotions in digital activism and how participants respond would be welcome.

Fourth, categories of visibility and invisibility. My article works with a methodology in which online visual representations are interpreted as enfleshments of public eco-theologies. Okpaleke uses an incarnational logic, suggesting that the digital world can en flesh Christ and transform ecclesial witness. Adam argues that intercessory prayer is a way of engaging present realities. In these articles, digital hiddenness is revealing itself. Central to Christian theology are notions of the hidden being revealed and affirmation of Christian witness as an enfleshing the Gospel. Further research is required to understand the role of the digital in relation to categories of visibility and invisibility and theological understandings of Divine revelation made tangible in material bodies.

Fifth, the articles use a range of methods and methodologies. Six of the articles work “from below,” centring case studies. Most of the articles gather online data from websites and social media platforms including Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Some of the authors use interviews to thicken their data, including Elias KC, Ragui and Adams. However, there is little considered reflection on the theological dimensions of these methods and the role of the interpreter in analysis. Gathering data from digital platforms involves, as Kurlberg reminds us, engaging with powers and principalities. There is a need for further research on the opportunities and limits provided by different methods for studying digital activism as public theology, including how research might account for diverse interpretations of digital activism and the ethical complexities embedded in all contextual research.

Sixth, the articles describe the value of lay leadership in digital activism. The New Testament offers several descriptions of gifts and graces given by God’s Spirit to source and resource the life of the church (including Romans 12.4-8; 1 Corinthians 12.4-11; 1 Corinthians 12.27-30 and Ephesians 4.7-12). Obviously, none mentioned geo-tagging, developing hashtags or curating digital content. Yet these contemporary charisms are essential to the digital activism described in this special issue. Are digital skills merely utilitarian tools? Or might the church need to think about how it forms and commissions digital activism as Christian witness? Further research would aid understanding of how ecclesial bodies might be involved in the purposeful formation of digital gifts and graces.

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