Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference in Hamburg

11th-15th September, 2026

'A Changing Church in an Age of Migration'

'Men, Women and Faith on Shifting Ground: Rethinking Church Engagement in the Digital Age'

A summary of a Presentation by Dr Claudia Jetter, Humboldt University, Berlin

Because this is an account of her presentation by our Secretary, Canon Dick Lewis, from his notes, posted here so that you can get a feel for what she told us,
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If you want to follow up anything recorded here, please contact Dr Jetter at her University

Dr Jetter began her presentation with a few medial impressions from the past three years.

First: The Quiet Revival: In March 2026, the Bible Society stated that the "survey sample on which our report The Quiet Revival was based was faulty, and it can no longer be regarded as a reliable source of information about the spiritual landscape in Britain."[1] The statement was issued because of YouGov's failure to activate quality control technologies that protect the survey sample from a wide range of errors.

Nevertheless, Paul Williams, Chief Executive Officer of the Bible Society, insists that something's changing. He based this on his observation: "Over the past year we have seen an unprecedented public conversation about Christianity, with countless stories of a spiritual awakening among Gen Z, alongside greatly increased Bible sales in the UK, growing numbers of adult baptisms and confirmations, and increased attendance at evangelism courses."

Second: Germany, 2024: Release of the KMU *Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung* – the largest survey on church membership in Germany, conducted once every decade by the German Protestant Church – triggered fierce debates about fluid religiosity, increasing secularization, and the loss of relevance of the former two leading denominations, and attested that in Germany there will be an absolute majority of agnostics/atheists by the end of the 2020s.[2]

Third: United States, 2026: a report in the Guardian on 26th August this year issued the headline: "US Catholic churches see a record number of conversions: 'It's a real shift!'"[3] The article reports on two southern Californian churches that saw a significant rise in Gen Z attendees, church admissions and adult baptisms in the past year. It portrays a few young adults, their spiritual ways and the reasons why they had decided to join the Catholic Church, among them a desire for a shared community built on tradition.

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[1] https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/the-quiet-revival/statement-from-paul-williams. 26 March 2026. (Accessed 10 September 2026).
[2] https://kmu.ekd.de/. (Accessed 10 September 2026).
[3] https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2026/aug/25/young-americans-catholic-church-revival (25 August 2026. (Accessed 10 September 2026).

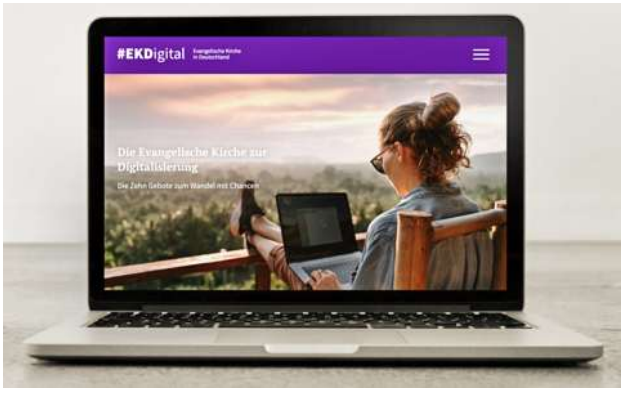
What is the result? More questions, really! Which is it? Is there more or less religiosity? Is there higher church attendance or - just as surprising - more young adults who join intentionally? Was it only Bible sales rather than any other religious material that increased and, if so, why?

As most sociologists say for the USA context, it is too early to speak about general trends because overall church attendance and membership developments do not show any significant changes yet. That does not diminish more local phenomena as the Southern Californian examples attest. Since Dr Jetter is not a sociologist but a religious historian and practical theologian by training, she could not give a definite answer backed up by numbers, but she promised to provide some information about Christian Content Creators (CCC) and religious discourses and practices online that also play into the mix of contemporary religion and (maybe even more importantly) into society's perception of religion and Church today.

Dr Jetter made one final remark before starting: 'My examples are from the German context as this is the one I'm most familiar with. I'll translate examples where necessary. In regard to practices and discourses: The examples mirror US American and most probably British examples of Christian Content Creators, as all CCCs partake in broader Western social media trends and aesthetics in their individual presentations. A possible difference, however, is the medial discourse about specific content creators from specific denominations, and there may also be a difference in interaction online between different discourse communities depending on whether they belong to the former German "State Churches" or to other independent denominations.'

Who is online?

"The" Protestant Church (EKD) online



Dr Jetter's referred to the Yeet-network: it is a digital support network (providing technological support, connecting CCCs with each other, etc.) It was launched in 2020 and is financed by GEP (German Protestant Publishing Company) and supports ***individual*** Christian Content Creators (CCC). Most CCCs are either ministers, theologians in training or Religious Education teachers. They share liberal positions in regard to gender and sexual ethics, for example, in accordance with the official positioning by the German Protestant Church. The connection to the EKD proves difficult because it requires these individual CCCs to adhere to a specific ethical code/stance. This makes CCCs representatives of an institution.

What do they post online?

Content ranges from insights into the life as a minister to issues concerning work-life balance, political positions, rituals, liturgy, theological reflections. Accounts usually have core issues/thematic interests. For example: Life as a minister, with cameras documenting preparation for funerals, weddings, baptisms; explanations of garments or liturgical celebrations, and so on. One example describes a mother/minister creating posts that reflect on the double burden of ministers as parents.

The aim of channels like these, Dr Jetter continued, is the production of dialogic content; their ideal is to "theologize" with the community (though most followers only consume the content and don't engage in dialogue). These CCCs want to make Christianity and those who work for the Church visible. So, for example, a Berlin-based minister posts about her work as a minister and some practical philosophical reflections about such things as intentionality in life. Sometimes, there are joint posts by Yeet members such as the one about the presence of God. In it, one member says that God's presence is felt when speaking the Lord's Prayer during service. Another recounts the calmness of a moment experienced in a Japanese garden that created his ideal moment of God's felt presence. Other members of the Yeet network stick to their "core themes", such as our next example – a gay minister from Cologne who mainly pots about LGBTQ+ issues. Meanwhile, a Protestant minister from Eastern Frisian (who is not part of the Yeet network but of the EKD-Nordkirche) has the biggest account among all trained ministers of the EKD at the moment; her focus is on her ministerial work while being the mother of four. In one post, for instance, she recounts how during a full day of work with a funeral and meetings, she forgot to drop her child off at a birthday party.

Structural problems of EKD-related ministers online:
"The Church" is an institution that includes millions of members, but social media content is communicated most effectively *by individuals*, Dr Jetter reminded us. This means that there can always be a potential conflict of stances (theological, political, ethical, etc.). On social media platforms, influence/"authority" is established via the creation of one authentic and relatable persona. Furthermore, the line between a person's office in the Church and their individual personal opinions and feelings can become blurred. So, she suggested, there needs to be some mechanism to curate a *personalized* account which emphasizes individual features/practices/positions etc. when a minister is not just a private person.

Then there are practical implications. Some CCCs try to provide pastoral care through direct messaging, yet it is impossible for the minister to be accessible digitally 24/7. All of this sometimes can be a hindrance for trained theologians in office to succeed online.

Who else is visible as a CCC online?

There are many Independent CCCs online. They belong to various Christian denominations but mostly are acting independently from any denomination. Dr Jetter contrasted two independent women posting Christian content. Both women make a living by producing their content and by selling Christian merchandize. Another example is a Roman Catholic man, who belongs to the charismatic movement in the church, and who founded the "Augsburger Gebetshaus", a 24/7 Catholic prayer house.

What are these many Independent CCCs like?
They are mostly conservative Christians and mostly lay people. One reason for this emphasis on conservatism may be that German Protestant State Church as well as the German part of the Roman Catholic Church have gradually adopted more liberal views, especially in regard to sexuality, over the past decades, and so have their ministers. Most CCCs from liberal Protestant Churches are trained clergy so there is less emphasis on lay participation compared to content creators from independent denominations (e.g. from evangelical traditions) where lay participation and lay ministry is the norm. In addition to that, "independent" CCCs are disproportionately visible digitally because having no attachment to an institution provides them with greater liberty in regard to content.

As some of them live from content creation, Dr Jetter pointed out, there is an economic interest that encourages them to reach out to a bigger audience. Further, evangelizing through personal, emotional

testimonies and by the use of new media has traditionally been more deeply rooted in evangelical traditions. This aligns well with social media mechanisms that also prefer personal and more emotional communication rather than "rational discourse"!

Even though members of independent churches only make a fraction of Christians in Germany, CCCs from these denominations are disproportionately visible.

Detour: What we see in Christian Content Creation in Germany is Polarized Discourse

What might be the reasons for this? Dr Jetter made a number of suggestions. One might be a disproportionate over-emphasis on selective groups of conservative CCCs in newspaper articles and on TV. Another might be a simplistic division into liberal/right-wing Christians. This kind of polarized discourse is further fueled by algorithmic interests to generate more traffic and by economic interests to reach the broader public. This kind of discourse creates the impression that Christianity online has become highly conservative or even right-wing and that *all* content that is produced (online) by Christians leads to strife.

So, what can we actually see online?

There seems to be a perception among conservative Christians online, that something is about to happen. It might be a new revival, or that Christ will come back soon. And, from an historical point of view, this seems similar to accounts of evangelical discourse around revivals in the 18th/19th centuries. It is a core part of evangelistic narratives.

What can we say by counting followers, views, likes etc.?

One thing is that the growth of specific influencers can tell us something about niches that have previously not been filled. We can see that some collaborations work well so, for instance, there is sometimes a blending of specific discourse communities (religious and political) and of specific brands (Dr Jetter contrasted "fitfluencers" with their emphasis on personal and physical health, and "Christfluencers" with their emphasis on personal and spiritual health).

However, we cannot tell very much about the impact

Everything to do with social media is very fluid so it is almost impossible to calculate numbers of followers, or what "groups" they might fall into regarding gender or community affiliations.

Further thoughts on Independent CCCs

Dr Jetter then showed a video posted by on Independent CCC on the meaning of grace. Despite being a lay person and a woman, this CCC interprets the Bible and theologizes upon the concept of grace and its implication for the individual's life ("Are we free to do all we want because of God's grace?"). She describes herself as a "conservative Christian woman" and her posts include a number of mental health issues. She has no formal theological education, holds no office in any particular Christian denomination and has no official church affiliation. Content creation is, for her, a job.

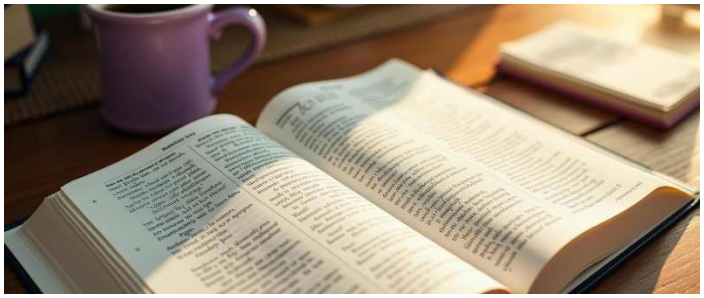
But even when we do not know the specifics about a CCC's community or personal involvement with a local church, she suggested that we can discern something from the way they curate their material:

- CCCs create a specific digital persona that communicates Christian content while complying with broader digital trends (and aesthetics) and rules of engagement
- CCCs present practices related to a particular Christian lifestyle
- CCCs participate in discourses about faith and practice
- They all participate in the continuing discourse about how to live life as a (good) Christian.

How they do this is interesting:

- Everything they do is Bible-centered and designed to display what living in close communion with God and the Word of God should be like
- These Bible-centred practices seem to be more central for "conservative" independent CCCs, and this may have something to do with the fact that many of them come from "evangelical" traditions where Bible reading and personal conversion narratives are emphasized more than in ecclesial traditions and by people with an institutional background.

Dr Jetter then offered some examples of Bible-centred practices



- Often "teaching" is accompanied by pictures of an open Bible (and coffee) on a table. Sometimes the Bible pictured has marked interpretations/reflections on a particular passage in the comment section
- Sometimes the CCC will appropriate Biblical roles, something described as *performed biblicism*, for instance by Seth Perry in 'Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States', who provides an interesting and insightful treatment of how people sought to authorize their religious behaviour by imbedding it in the imagined world of the Biblical text (Perry, 2018, 67).
  Dr Jetter cited an example in which a CCC, using Psalm 22, adopts the persona of David, thus interpreting, and also reclaiming, his experience as hers to better communicate her own interpretation
- Bible passages are used to weigh in on ethical discourse, most commonly gender, sexual ethics, LGBTQ+ issues, marriage, children, pornography and so on, all discussed from the angle of sexual purity

Dr Jetter then spoke of the gender-specific presentation of issues among conservative-leaning CCCs

- Conservative CCCs take care in making their presentations to adopt "traditional" gender aesthetics in relation to clothing, lighting, choice of colours for posts, and so on
- Quite often, a Gender-specific audience is addressed
- There are gender-specific choices of issues: for example, male CCCs seem to address pornography and video games more than female CCCs do
- Gender-specific emotional practices are employed: examples showed different presentations of significant moments in life – a woman might cry on a post while a man might rationally report a past event (even if was dramatic)
- There is often a high level of autobiographical narration

Community

Dr Jetter asked if we can say anything about religious communities online? What we can see is a gradual staging of a networked community with cross-media communication and joint ventures (podcasts, speaking events etc.)

There are only occasional references to offline communities such as local churches. What we rarely see (unless they are pastors from a specific congregation who post parts of their sermons online (and this may differ from the US context where it is more common for pastor-influencers from mega-

churches to become big online!) is any regular and direct reference to offline community and Sunday services.

Final Observations

- CCCs present highly individualized religious practices and focus on the personal relationship with God and their personal faith, rather than community

- CCCs with an office struggle more to create an individualized "brand" due to institutional affiliation because they are identified with the institution they represent, are influenced by its moral code, are often professional theologians and thus not private persons. This makes it more difficult to create a personal brand and be "authentic" in the way that social media require.

  However**,** an "influencer-minister" provides the church with an opportunity to connect with younger clientele and provide a way to communicate with "un-churchy" people

- On social media, there seems to be a tendency to present content in specifically gendered ways, at least among conservative-leaning CCCs

- There is a tendency to downplay confessional and geographical specifics

- Christian content online does not provide us with much information about religious engagement online (except for what we can see in reaction videos, or in commentary sections). In reality, only a fraction of followers actually engage in discourse; most just "consume" content

- Digital discourse communities are influenced by competing interests of individual CCCs, but also by algorithms, social media platform's economic interests and broader aesthetic trends

- There are few if any broader, reliable studies about religious engagement and gender among Christians online.

- What we can say for sure though is: Digital media has significantly raised the general public awareness of Christianity and more importantly of conservative-leaning, independent denominations and individuals who used to be a lot less visible before and who now regularly receive a disproportionate amount of attention compared to their actual number of members.

  This raises problems in regard to who dominates the public debate about religion/church. It also tends to lead to unnecessary public outrage while keeping blind spots somewhere else.

In the end, Dr Jetter concluded, we have to live with the in-between. The influence that State Churches formerly had over broader society may decrease; it will certainly shift. Nevertheless, churches and individual ministers may appeal in new, more personal ways to approach younger people. And this is important, if we believe the interviewee's responses in the Guardian article quoted at the beginning, as these young people emphasized the churches' ability to foster community offline and to provide a space for continuity in an ever-changing world.