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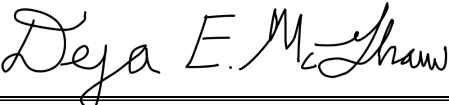
by

Deja McGhaw

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science in Digital Marketing
at
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CHURCHES CAN INCREASE MEMBERSHIP AMONG MILLENNIALS AND
GENERATION Z BY USING SOCIAL MEDIA

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Art and Design Department
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Science
at
Lindenwood University

By

Deja Erin McGhaw

Saint Charles, Missouri

December 2020

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Churches can increase membership among Millennials and Generation Z by using social media.

Deja McGhaw, Master of Science/Digital Marketing, 2020

Thesis Directed By Professor Andrew Allen Smith, Digital Marketing Program Chair

This project examines how churches can increase membership among Millennials and Generation Z on social media. The final deliverable is a 45-minute webinar offering tips for churches to create effective and relevant content online. This webinar will be housed on a website created called Social Media for Churches. It features many videos and resources to help churches with social media such as trends, recommendations, practical tips, and free tools for content creation.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

This project is dedicated first to the keeper of my soul, Jesus Christ. He has placed this gift and passion inside of me. In everything I do, I want to make sure I give it back to Him with a greater harvest than received. Acknowledgments of help from my husband, Tyler McGhaw Sr. who has stayed up long hours to show his support for me. Also, to our baby boy TJ who gives me a great drive to do my best by simply smiling.

Acknowledgments of help from my Committee Chair, Andrew Allen Smith. He has encouraged me throughout my graduate career. Also, to my committee, Krista Tucciarone, and Michael Mason. Thank you for always giving your feedback that helped greatly. I would also like to thank my classmate Kim Nash. She has been my study buddy and prayer partner throughout this journey!

I also thank my supportive family and friends. Special love to my Grandmother, Betty Mosby, Mom, Erica Ewing, and Dad James Ewing Sr, and my loving in-laws Mom Deb, and Dad Milton McGhaw. I'm so blessed to have a huge support system

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Introduction

Only one in five churchgoers attend online church services during COVID. Over the years, churches have experienced a decline in membership and religious affiliation. Pre COVID, there was also a greater trend of young people not attending church. During the current pandemic, 50 percent of practicing Christian Millennials are not tuning in to online worship services, according to Barna Group (*Why Millennials Aren't Watching Your Streamed Worship Services*). This is quite a surprise considering 82 percent to 90 percent of Millennials use social media. Many pastors are wondering how they can capture the people of all walks of life and especially, the younger demographic, bringing them back to Christ and church online. This project provides a guide on how churches can broaden their reach on social media to grow by way of communicating effectively. It features research that spans from 2019 until late 2020 compiled on a website that can be used as a resource to churches. Resources include a webinar, focus group, one on one interviews, and tools to help create social media content.

This subject of helping churches on social media is dear to me because I too am a Christian Millennial. I am what people described as a pew baby; someone who was born and raised in the church. I have seen several shifts in technology and attendance in the church. I have witnessed my peers leave the church in flocks, and on social media, you would be surprised that they ever knew God. I have heard personally pastors asking how they can win the younger generation back to Christ, and it makes my heart sensitive even more to the subject. For years I have helped churches on social media, and this project is to help churches, leaders, and Pastors become steps ahead in reaching young people. Knowing why young people are leaving the church, and now online streams will be beneficial in creating content to serve as a solution to this issue.

Literature Review

The Christian Church is founded on the teachings of Jesus Christ. He gathered disciples who later became known as Christians. The first Christians were commissioned to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world. Before Jesus ascended, He instructed them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the father had promised, the Holy Spirit. In the book of Acts, after many years of prophecy, this promise was fulfilled. The day the Holy Ghost fell upon the first Christians is known as The Day of Pentecost. This phenomenal experience is also considered the birth of the First Church.

Churches gathered in homes and spread rapidly across the world. Today, there are many (physical) churches. In the United States, Christianity is the top religion. Pew Research reports that it makes up 70.6 percent of the population. Non-Christian Faiths make up 5.9 percent, those who are considered unaffiliated are at 22.8 percent, and nothing at all is at 15.8 percent. These numbers show that Christianity is important to many. In fact, Pew Research also reports that, in the Christian Faith, 58 percent of Catholics consider it especially important, as well as 79 percent of Evangelical Protestants and 85 percent of Historically black Protestants consider it especially important. There are both positive and negative reasons for going, and not going, to church.

Some positive reasons for going to church helps are that it boosts the immune system, lowers blood pressure, and helps a person live longer. Weele, an epidemiologist with the Harvard School of Public Health, through his study of regular churchgoers that spanned over two decades. This was demonstrated by Tyler K. Vander. The consequences of not attending church include

the opposite of having good health. Frequent churchgoers also have a larger social circle and more support than those who do not attend.

Studies also show that people who go to services regularly are less likely to be depressed. In a study done by the *Journal of Religion and Health*, it was discovered that of the 100,000 women (about the seating capacity of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum) over the age of 50 that were surveyed, 56 percent were more likely to have a positive outlook on life. The author of the study, Eliezer Schnall, found that regular religious practice can help foster a positive worldview and has other psychological and social benefits. A separate study from this shows regular churchgoers were five times less likely to commit suicide. The church truly has physical and spiritual benefits.

One thing the pandemic has taught many people is that the church is not just a physical building, but it is something inside of an individual as well. There are many types of physical churches, though. There are small storefront churches, mega-churches, and even online churches. However, though Christianity, the highest-rated religion over the years, has experienced a decline, in the younger generations.

Recently, due to the coronavirus (COVID19), churches have had to switch entirely virtual. Prior to COVID19, studies from Pew Research and Barna group reported a trend with church membership and affiliation declining. This is a known fact amongst all generations, but it is the highest amongst the younger generations, Millennials and Generation Z.

Millennials ages in 2020 range from 24 to 39 and Generation Z ages in 2020 range from 23 and under. Right now, there is no endpoint yet determined for this group, though there is a wide range of ages with the two youngest cohorts. They both have the technology, and digital life, in common. Millennials are considered digital pioneers, and Generation Z are considered

digital natives. To give a clear representation of this group, the majority use Snapchat the most. The main users on Snapchat are between the ages of 13 and 34 years old. People under the age of 25 spend the most time on Snapchat. Snapchat may have the challenge to penetrate older demographics (Zephoria Digital Marketing). Regarding religion and America's youth, there is a decline in their religious affiliation and church attendance.

Younger adults (those between the ages of 18 and 34), men, and college graduates are more likely to self-identify as religiously unaffiliated, while older respondents (age 35 and up), women, and those with less than a college education are more likely to identify as Christian. Research centers, such as Barna Group, and Pew, are conducting studies that track the trends of youth and younger adults. Prior to COVID19, several studies showed the decline of this group's affiliation and membership. With younger churchgoers, the importance of the church is also declining.

Boomers are more likely than both Gen X and Millennials to be formal members of their congregation, with nearly seven in 10 churched Boomers (68 percent vs. 48 percent churched Millennials and 51 percent churched Gen X) confirming membership. Younger generations of churchgoers were also more likely to mention "not applicable," which suggests that the category of membership isn't even part of their church's nomenclature (Barna Group).

The President of Barna, David Kinnaman, believes that Americans are not joining much of anything these days, and the tradition of church membership is not as compelling as it once was. Efforts now are geared at building up a greater church community, and young people are the target. Barna Group research recommends that congregations contain a wide variety of desires that will be centered around digital and in-person gatherings. Most churchgoers don't prefer digital gatherings. About half (52 percent) of churchgoers say that their preference is for physical gathering. One-tenth (9 percent) say their preference is for digital gatherings and a third

(35 percent) prefer both. Alejandro Reyes, CEO of Digital Napkin and executive pastor at New Vintage Church, and Haley Veturis, director of digital engagement at Bayside Church believe that this is a sign that churches need to move forward in the digital space. What matters though, is that churches have to take digital engagement seriously.

Social media has created meaningful systemic changes to the status quo of the church at large. We're still treating it as something that we should just hand over to our intern, and I just don't understand that." Now that churches have been thrown into online services, "it should never come off your plate." Reyes also encourages churches to rethink their staff roles to adapt to digital. With fewer in-person options and a need for new ways of connecting, leaders should work to define and redefine roles. By responding to the current hunger for digital content, say both Reyes and Veturis, the church can set itself up for successful online connection—even after physical distancing is a thing of the past (Barna Group).

In late May 2020, Barna Group also collected data that showed one in three practicing Christians stopped streaming church during the early months of the pandemic. This trend is being labeled as a digital dropout. It is led by practicing Christian Millennials. Current studies show that 50 percent of practicing Christian Millennials are not tuning in to online worship services at the time. Millennials want to be active not just consumers and for them, online services now are about consumption. Millennials want the church to feel like a church experience. They want to experience a worshipful environment. Many have children of their own now, and this puts pressure on them to watch. They are babysitting, and need something for the kids to do as well.

Research Methodology

This study uses qualitative research methods of focus groups and one-on-one interviews. The focus groups consisted of two groups, Group A and Group B. Group A contained ages 35 and up, and Group B included everyone under the age of 35. Group A did have an exception. One youth pastor was 32 years old. Both groups were asked the same questions, so that data

could be analyzed on the connections and disconnections. There were a total of 8 questions related to changes in attendance amongst generations, how churches have adapted to technology, expectations with social media for churches, and building community. Both focus groups were asked these questions during a recorded Zoom session. The sample questions are listed in the analysis and results section below.

The one-on-one interview featured a well-known social media strategist for churches and a pastor who does an excellent job on social media with his church. These interviews were also conducted on Zoom and both participants were asked the same questions so that data could be analyzed on the connections and disconnections.

Studies from Research Centers, such as Barna Group and Pew, were also considered. This secondary data helped create the webinar that features trends for churches' social media strategy. Other tools used included Canva to create the webinar presentation, eBook, and Final Cut Pro, and Premiere Pro for all video editing.

Analysis and Results

For reference, Group A represents the group of Pastors and Youth Pastors. Group B represents the group of Millennials and Generation Z. The analysis and results of the survey are after the questions:

1. What does your church congregation demographic look like? How has your congregation changed over the last 10 or 15 years? Have you noticed a difference in your congregation?
2. What is your perspective on the adoption of digital media for churches?

3. Social Media has always been important, especially for young people, but now since COVID-19 a lot of churches are embracing it even more. What is your take on using social media to reach the masses? How are you targeting the youth audience?
4. What do you think should be done differently pertaining to young people and the church?
5. Do you have a social media strategy? How and what? Have you seen any success? (What do you think of your church social media strategy)
6. Do you follow your churches, social media pages? If so, how do you take part in their post? Are they on your favorite networks?
7. Who are people (Preachers) or ministries on social media that you think are doing a great job on social media?
8. What do you expect from a church social media page? How is your church building community on social media that caters to young people?

Older generations have a greater presence in church than younger ones. For question one, both focus group participants stated that they have more older generations in their congregation than Millennials and Generation Z. In Group A, three out of the seven pastors stated they've had a mixed congregation. One pastor was very detailed with his congregation's demographic outlook. His church consists of 50 percent Baby Boomers, 20 percent Generation X, 20 percent Millennials, and 10% Generation Z. In Group B, the majority mentioned the congregation at their church has more older people than younger. Only one mentioned that their church has more young people than old. When asked the second part of the question, the majority said that 10 years ago, there were more young people at their church. They also noticed that their age group no longer seems connected to the church (ages within the Millennial and Gen Z scope). They believe that younger adults aren't getting married and having kids like older

generations and it was also mentioned that younger people are not enforcing spiritual discipline as the older generation did with their children.

Not too many churches were adapted to technology and social media pre-COVID.

For question two, three out of seven pastors mentioned that they did not have to adapt to technology and social media because of the pandemic because they already had a presence on it. One pastor felt that the church adapting to technology should not be the case. “Churches should not have to adapt. Churches seem reactionary and on the huff for change. It should not have been an adaptation but a pivot” (Group A Participant). Churches are adapting but don’t have the experience of using that platform. Group B had mixed thoughts in their regards to churches adapting to technology and social media. One out of the six participants felt that having a church that consists of primarily older generations makes it harder for them to adapt. Another participant mentioned that they personally, as a young person, do not adapt well to churches being on social media. “Church helps hold you accountable. I’m young and I don’t like church on the internet” (Group B participant).

Millennials and Generation Z prefer physical worship over digital worship. Many participants also agreed that worship isn’t the same as church online. A participant that happens to be a part of Generation Z, mentions it’s hard for their age group to attend church online because they have a choice. To them, they don’t necessarily have to watch service as opposed to being made to go to the physical church. Two out of six mentioned that their church has always been innovative, but since the pandemic has gotten better with their quality.

Pastors and congregants agree that social media is vital for churches. For question three, Group A pastors concluded that social media is a vital tool to reach people. One however felt that is a great tool for evangelism but not a model for discipleship. Another pastor mentioned

that they get a greater response from the unchurched on social media. Those who know little about God, appreciate the small group settings over the traditional congregation. Though the majority agreed, one pastor sees social media as a convenience and a distraction. Another pastor elaborated that you have to be social on social media when reaching people.

Group B's response had mixed views. One participant believed that it is a part of end-time evangelism. It has to take place to set the stage for Christ returning. Another responded that the internet has its pros and cons. They believe the pandemic has made them realize how important it is to be together at church and that they dislike church online. All participants in this group mentioned they prefer physical church over the online church.

Young people desire to be involved in major church decisions and events. For question four, Group A all agreed that young people do need to be more included in the church, and especially while the church is online. They also believe that they should build relationships with them and get to know them better. The group also agreed that young people should not only be "working" in the church but also making key decisions.

Young People desire relationships with their older leaders. Group B responses also mirror those of Group A. They would like to do more events that allow them to be involved. Right now they feel that the church isn't doing anything to keep their interest. They want seniors and elders to be more relevant and learn how to communicate with them. Some mentioned during the pandemic that no one has reached out to them, and doing so would show them that their leaders care about them. They expounded that without a true relationship they will not pour their heart out or participate fully. All participants also mentioned they desire a relationship with their church leaders and want to be trusted by them.

Many Pastors are unaware if they have a social media strategy. For question five, Group A, out of seven pastors, only two Pastor's churches has a social media strategy for their church. One mentioned they use a lot of humor and social issues in their strategy along with some of the pastor's personalities. Their goal is to go get them inside of their community so they can ultimately come to church. Another church strategy is based on people's issues and needs. In Group B all participants felt that their church has a social media strategy that is successful. Success to them meant more people joining the church, and professing salvation.

The majority of Pastor's look to larger churches for social media inspiration.

Question six, seven and eight, did not get asked verbally to Group A on Zoom. This was due to the fact of running out of time. However, a Google Form survey went out instead. Only three out of the seven participants responded. All three pastors mentioned they do follow their church social media pages and engage with them. Their responses to question seven, two out of the three who responded are inspired by the social media pages of large churches, and Pastors. Only one mentioned they look to local churches. Question eight on Google Form had an error that did not allow Pastor's to respond to it. All pastors were notified and asked to try again. Only one pastor responded to that question. They mentioned on social media they expect churches to connect, give updates, and interact.

Many young people support their church social media pages. For question six, all participants mentioned they like, comment, and share with their church social media pages. Their reason for doing so is to be a light and witness to their friends who don't know God. "I want people to know I am serious about the church. I've had friends tell me they were the reason they came to church" (Group B participant).

Many young people desire for their church leaders to be “real” on social media showing the human side of them. For question seven, the majority of Group B participants mentioned they follow Sarah Jakes (preacher) because she is relatable. They desire anyone who is relatable and shows that they have a life outside of the church. You can see through people and if they are telling the truth or not, said one participant. Other names mentioned were Michael Todd who is also a youthful preacher.

Young people desire to see more than just a Sunday morning stream on Social Media. For question eight, all of Group B participants mentioned they want to see encouragement, updates, more young people doing things on the social media pages such as preaching and praying. Three out of six youth mentioned the only thing they have for young people during the pandemic is youth group meetings on Zoom.

Conclusion

Churches can grow and capture young people by communicating with their congregation on social media effectively. Young people want to feel involved and trusted by church leadership. Church leaders should really add young people to more prominent roles in leadership, and especially during their services. They have to be pulled into the experience because they do not just want to sit. With more than half of Millennials no longer tuning into Sunday services on social media streams, the focus has to be driving engagement with them during the week, and Social media for churches goes beyond just posting a live stream service. Millennials are not just sitting back and consuming worship services. Millennials want the church to feel like a church experience. They want to experience a worshipful environment. Generation Z wants to know that their leaders care. Churches, pastors, and leaders should also include digital care in their

social media strategy. Reaching publicly and responding privately. Once these things are taken into action, churches will be able to grow and have loyal disciples.

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