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Strategic Social Media for Small Congregations

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STRATEGIC SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SMALL CONGREGATIONS

by

Heather R. Sparkman

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts in Digital and Web Design

at

Lindenwood University

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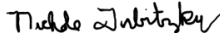
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STRATEGIC SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SMALL CONGREGATIONS

Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the College of Art and Design

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at

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By

Heather Rebecca Sparkman

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Abstract

Title of Thesis: Strategic Social Media for Small Congregations

Heather R. Sparkman, Master of Arts, 2021

Thesis Directed by: Dr. Jason Lively, Professor of Art, Design, & Media

Utilizing social media to draw and build a community of followers is the typical work of the modern Influencer and large organizations. But for a small church, using social media may seem like a wasteful or exasperating experience due to the sheer work that is involved in the enterprise and inconsistency brought on by a lack of strategic thought. The development of this assessment and philosophical metric focuses less on statistical metrics and more on stable principles that relate to values, context, and culture.

Keywords: social media; metrics; church.

Dedication

It is with great love and appreciation that I dedicate this work to my parents, Wayne and Janet Sparkman. Their encouragement and support have been more than imaginable, and I am forever indebted to their love and belief in my dreams. I also wish to thank my loving community of friends and family, who have carried me along the journey with enthusiasm in my pursuit of another degree along with belief that this course of study can have value, truly living out community by delivering meals, hugs, and plenty of feedback. And to the family at Old Orchard Presbyterian Church of Webster Groves, MO. It is for you and because of you that I desire to bring this research to life, in the belief that our little "church on the corner" has much to share with the world.

Thank you to Dr. Jason Lively, Dr. Nicole Torbitzky, and Prof. Andrew Allen Smith for your support and encouragement in this endeavor. May I carry with me the lessons of wisdom and insight.

The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world deep hunger

meet. – Frederick Buechner

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The prevailing outlook today on the topic of social media is a jumbled mixture of facts, myths, and feelings about the power, wonder, and even damage that can be done by a set of tools that has brought the world together in ways previously undreamt of by humanity. Social media tools are often praised for their potential to do amazing feats of good, yet they have also revealed the shocking ugliness and sometimes devastating depravity of fellow humans. Phrases such as "Social Media" or "The Internet" are often used as a shorthand to decry the experiences of awkward, disconcerting, or even painful interactions between media users—an unfortunate dismissal of the technology and short-circuiting of a deeper conversation around expectations of human-to-human interaction through digital media. The underpinning belief of this research is that there is a better path for social media interaction, particularly when it pertains to the church. This paper seeks to demonstrate that a successful social media strategy not only provides beneficial points of engagement with existing congregants and new community members—such as posts meant to encourage members and build up their faith, or content that details helpful information such as meeting times or changes in previously scheduled events—but that it also has the potential to contribute something of deeper value, something substantially more meaningful than simply details, facts, or even pretty pictures.

The distinction that should be made is that while the utilitarian value of social media may be self-evident to church staff and members, the ability to see the relational power and cultural value is often hidden beneath the more common rhetoric that presents social media platforms as a waste of time[1] and made up of meaningless content—or even worse, damaging to the body and

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[1] See Figure 1 for a recent example of Reformed Baptist cartoonist Paul Cox, using anthropomorphized images of three of the most common platforms, interpretating a quotation on time and eternity from nineteenth-century pastor and writer Octavius Winslow.

the eternal soul. This is an especially powerful argument inside of the church today, and many

are struggling to determine how their participation helps or hinders their personal and spiritual

life, contemplating if their participation in social media platforms might even contribute to a

worsening of many of the societal tensions that have arisen in the last four to five years. The

significance of the question is such that it becomes necessary to build a more helpful framework,

teasing apart the structure of these platforms, their utility, and personal choice and wisdom in

well-being, from the complete condemnation of the platforms and tools. The rhetoric forces the

question, what—if anything—makes this worth doing?

Figure 1 - Octavius Winslow Illustration by Paul Cox of RefToons

And it is true—as with most any other form of entertainment or media, whether looking

at the modern problems of children watching violent television and playing questionable video

games, or a far older but similar fear of the influence of novels on young women[2]—an individual

must engage in these activities with an awareness of how to best steward the resources of their

time and energy, particularly in relationship to their personal relationships, responsibilities,

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[2] When the novel first appeared on the scene in the eighteenth century, it was considered, by the thinkers of the day, to be a major threat to the moral well-being of the young – particularly young women. Epistolary novels and Gothic novels such as *Pamela* painted a picture of unwell and predatory men ruining the honor and purity of innocent girls. Not much has necessarily changed but the medium through which the damage has been done.

concerns, and interests. It is important to recognize that time and energy are a commodity of sorts, that emotional and mental health are vital to living a in a holistic manner, the conversation must be had, and boundaries must be established by each user in accordance with their own needs. There are already many discussions available that delineate what it might look like to establish good boundaries dealing with the personal consumption habits of social media. Some of those discussions are quite good, establishing concepts of wisdom and thoughtfulness, while other resources will only present a long list that amounts to an instruction of "What Not to Do" and leave the matter at that, failing to address the questions of personal balance and discipline with respect to the creative, relational, and cultural value of social media and platforms. This project will touch on these questions lightly, but attention will be mostly given to this consideration in the context of producing content for others and not the personal consumption of the practitioner.

The argument of this paper is that a church staff need not invest hours of valuable time in creating or curating social media content for their community. A social media practitioner might be tempted to believe that a social media campaign for a church of 150 members should rival those produced by larger, more substantive organizations and businesses. Rather, this paper will argue that through careful consideration of the local community and the tailored development of a social media strategy, the metric detailed here will give the local church more than enough to work with to execute a meaningful and successful campaign. Whether the strategy in question is executed through the work of paid staff who add social media to their regular duties, or through the efforts of qualified volunteers, the question will arise, what is the appropriate framework in which to produce content that is going to succeed? How can success be determined for a smaller congregation when numerical returns on engagement might not be especially instructive? The

content should engage with existing church members who are already connected to the church on

social media platforms, and it should also connect the church with new or interested community

members. Developing a strong strategy should save church staff and volunteers significant time

and energy in deciding what sort of content to create, allowing them to focus their time and

creative energy on making a striking post that attracts the intended audience, rather than shooting

blindly for a target of something that works and succeeding only a fraction of the time.

It could be easy to assert that the question at hand is whether a church should even bother

to develop social media content, rather than focusing on what kind of content will work best for a

particular congregation and community. It is true that some, if not many, in leadership will need

to see a clear demonstration of the value of even having a social media strategy and digital

presence for a local church. As of February 2021, The Pew Research Group found that 72% of

American adults[3] used some form of social media. When The Pew Research Group began

tracking this statistic in 2005, it first reported a usage rate of only 5% in American adults,

indicating that social media usage has seen a growth of 67% in adults over the course of the

intervening sixteen years. With nearly three out of four adults using some form of social media

platform, partnered with what seems like a reasonable assumption that the numbers will

continuing to grow going forward, social media should be seen as a reasonable choice for both

engagement and information dissemination within a church context. Part of the work of a social

media strategy is to take numbers like this, and the breakdown of platform usage across different

demographic categories such as gender, age, race, and income to properly determine the focus of

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[3] Additionally, the February 2021 number is over 80% for adults between 18-50, Pew reporting that with 84% of 18-29 year old's using at least one social media site and 81% of 30-49 year old's. Less than half of the 65+ respondents use a social media platform (reporting 45%) which creates an excellent example of why a social media strategy is always only a part of the overall goals for a congregation, and in fact a SMS in this context could include non-digital elements.

content development work. Again, this research should prevent using excessive energy and time on content that would not work from the beginning because, unfortunately, no one in the targeted audiences is there to engage with it or appreciate the content. Instead, this will direct content towards the appropriate group or groups that a church desires to reach.

When looking at the value of a content strategy, it is important to consider the kinds of content that can be shared across chosen platforms. A very basic form of content would include general information. Basic, in this context, does not necessarily mean simple, whether simple graphics or simplistic captions. It does mean that the content is centered around any information regarding meeting times, point people, cost, websites, or other clear-cut details: Who Should I Contact? Where is the Event? What Should I Bring? This information is generally self-evident to the content creator and should not need significant work on their part to gather or create those details. However, while many organizations use social media in this way, and while it will be an important component of a social media strategy, there is a need to remember that informational posts should not form the bulk of the content in the sense that simply posting data dumps will not contribute to a healthy engagement. Taking some time to craft thoughtful, winsome posts will still be necessary, even when writing about seemingly simple information. This can still be executed through a witty caption or with an arresting photograph, or a short video featuring a member or staff might be the most engaging form of content. That is the creative element of this strategy: working out what will best communicate to this group and disseminate information.

A second category to explore with church staff and volunteers would be content that is designed to engage existing members of the congregation and to support the work of ministries that are already active in the church. Determining how this can be divided between some of the traditional groupings of a church's ministry, for example the generational classifications of

Children, Youth, and Adult ministries, could create more or less work as determined by the

ministry team. This could also be seen as an opportunity to highlight ministries with smaller

attendance that would like to grow; or those unsung ministries that quietly and faithfully take

care of the church, giving face and voice to the teams who facilitate hospitality by making coffee

every Sunday morning or who tirelessly take care of property maintenance. The phrase "plug-in"

is often used to describe getting people connected to a specific ministry or a group of people, and

social media posts can help facilitate that process of plugging-in by showing off the variety of

opportunities available in the church, highlighting people who are in involved (and importantly,

not necessarily leaders), while providing details on how to connect.

A third category in the strategy is content that is oriented to people who are outside of the

congregation. Some of this content might be directed towards members of nearby neighborhoods

or the community in which the church is situated, offering insight into the ethos and practice of

the congregation, and hopefully building goodwill with them through improved communication.

For those people who are looking for a church family, or who have questions about the faith,

content could also be directed to help these intended recipients to connect with the congregation

and individuals within it. Offering a sense of the culture—or, the flavor of the congregation, so

to speak—can be a kindness to those who want to know more about the church before making

the vulnerable trip inside the walls of the building. Specific content can help to explain anything

from unique elements of the weekly worship to complicated parking rules, and these posts can be

added to folders or 'highlight' reels to gather the information together so that it will be easily

accessible to newcomers. This sort of attention to detail speaks volumes to strangers about the

hospitality and thoughtfulness they can expect in person.

Admittedly, the distinctions between these three categories are blurry, as many in a church will concede, ministry can be messy. In many instances, decisions made about content will certainly intersect with both intended and unintended audiences. But the importance of outlining these, or any number of other, categories is that having such categories will help to develop an understanding of the specific groups who should be served by any content published by a church. Considering that, it is quite possible to have many more categories than just the three outlined above; each particular church may find that a need to have vastly different categories of content consumers. The key will be that the practitioners keep the list to a manageable number of such categories, intentionally identified, and should be useful for focusing the work of content creation rather than to create confusion and disarray. It might be tempting to delineate all the possible subcategories that exist within such a diverse group people as a local church or a neighborhood community but fighting that urge that is going to be a part of the work of developing a viable strategy, one that strikes a balance between an all or nothing mindset.

Developing and offering a simple but focused strategy to a group of volunteers—it is understandably most likely that this is the type of individual who would most likely be executing the strategy a smaller church without significant paid staff—will be key to successful integration of the strategy into the life of the church. A clear and focused strategy will provide direction for the reasons around directions about *when* to post and *why* to choose a design or *who* to create for; determining *what* kinds of content to share on a variety of available platforms; and even *how* to create aesthetically pleasing content using the available tools. This direction in the strategy will help to prevent burnout or confusion around the timing of developing and publishing content, introducing concepts such as batching, and even identifying a member of staff to consult with

relevant questions, or who will administer final publishing at the appropriate time, if that proves

to be the preferred or necessary method. Providing clear direction in a strategy should also help

to minimize any potential issues with problematic posts or offensive content by clearly defining

boundaries around what should be shared under the church handle; defining what is and is not

appropriate minimizes the time spent in back-and-forth messages, handling negative responses,

and the potential damage to a reputation—be it that of the church or the practitioner. A good

strategy will provide designated practitioners a kind of freedom to display their creativity and

should equip them with the right information and tools to better understand the specific audience

and community. A good strategy understands that the goal is to ensure that any published content

will be the best communication possible.

Fences Make Good Neighbors—Setting Boundaries in Social Media

It becomes important in this conversation to distinguish the broad use of the terms "The

Internet" and "Technology" from that of "Social Media." While the former terms are the digital

linking of content on the World Wide Web or the means by which that is accessed, the latter

term is one that refers to any of the platforms used to connect people to one another, be they apps

accessed through a device or websites used on a browser.[4] Social media is a part of the internet,

and while those platforms now make up a significant portion of internet usage, it is not the whole

of the internet. It is also worth noting that often the words internet or social media become a

stand-in for the multitude of wrongs that happen within the boundaries of that digital

connectedness. Such a use of terminology turns social media into an affliction and as such it

becomes blamed for the ills and woes of a modern society that is experiencing significant

growing pains as it stretches to encompass many different worldviews. Those worldviews are

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[4] See Figure 2 for an illustration of this understanding of the way social media exists inside of the internet
and technology.

splashed across screens, as is the rough edges of conflicting communication styles. So it becomes

important, when addressing the concerns of church leadership or of a congregation, to

understand and explain that social media is simply exposing to us the problems that already exist

in the world, rather than creating those problems. There are positive and negative ways to

manage this exposure, though it may be necessary to also communicate the positive uses of

social media as a lens through which to see the brokenness of the world.
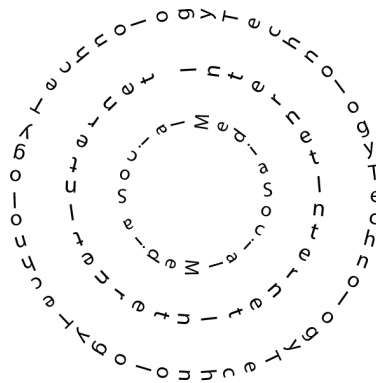
Figure 2 - Social Media resides inside of The Internet and Technology

A prominent example of this tension is the conversation around body image in the West.

Social media is regularly blamed for harming young girls and the formation of a healthy

relationship with their bodies, food, and acceptance of their unique form and shape. It cannot be

denied that there is a connection between body image issues and social media use. But the

question must be examined—is social media causing the problem? Or does it in fact provide a

new avenue of exposure to a long-standing problem? Women have long been objectified and

held to a certain, if constantly moving and sometimes irrational, standard of beauty. Snapchat

filters and Instagram feeds undoubtedly have heightened the pressure to look like the current fad;

and as such a personal need to be careful is very real, whether with the use of the filtering tools

offered by platforms or the content that is consumed by a user. But it does not mean that

abstention from the tools of social media by members is beneficial to the church. In fact, it

should be seen as a call to produce content that differs from these troublesome trends.

Distinguishing the choices of an individual from the needs of the strategic plan will

benefit the execution of that plan by understanding how an individual's needs will hinder or

enable content creation—and their personal growth. Grappling with the limits and boundaries of

a practitioner's personal need is reasonable and should be taken into consideration. For instance,

if a content creator struggles with cordially answering critical engagement, having a partner who

solely engages with comments and direct messages could prove useful to minimizes the personal

conflict with criticism or argumentation. Being careful and kind to an individual who struggles

with body shame, comparison, and the consumption of media that brings about depression means

that looking at whether participation as a social media practitioner is healthy for them or

evaluating what kind of content they should create so as not to do harm.

When developing a strategy, it will be necessary to proactively understand what sort of

content or responses should not be issued using the church's accounts or social media handles.

The individual or community grappling with difficult and painful topics[5] has now become a

potent aspect of social media use and interacting with these communities in the voice of the

church could potentially bring genuine comfort and healing when done well. But it is important

to remember that for many "the church[6]" is a source of their pain—perhaps as the perpetrator of

a grievous wrong or a condoning voice when dealing with significant damage done by other

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[5] For instance, see the #storytime posts on TikTok, often bringing up posts dealing with physical, sexual, verbal abuse; #narctok will show posts dealing with the aftermath of narcissistic personalities in families.

[6] That is, the church in the large, institutionalized sense that groups all organized churches together. A monolithic use of the word that does not distinguish between health or unhealth, positive and destructive leadership, etc.

members—and as such there can be some tension and even outright anger directed at an individual church via social media. Understanding this and developing an appropriate response will save a great deal of time but also help users to understand that it is not always wise to engage with certain topics or conversations because it will only add to the damage. This is an area that will need serious consideration. Churches that have survivor or trauma ministries may be better equipped for engagement in that area while churches with divorce ministries, or who have counselors on staff who understand narcissistic personality disorder, can offer skills in that realm. Taking the time to understand the skills that are available will be vital to understanding areas where the church might wish to engage or wisely choose to defer to others.

Additionally, it will be important to develop an understanding of what matters should be avoided in social media without first carefully crafting the content and allowing church leadership to approve or alter that message. This is not meant to censor or limit the personal freedom of speech of the practitioner, but it is necessary to understand that if a post needs to be made on a sensitive topic, on behalf of the church, the church will need to be prepared to face any potential backlash or answer questions. An individual cannot speak on the behalf of the whole if they act alone. The topics can include posts commenting on social violence, episodes of abuse, broad political convictions or decisions, or any stance that has the potential to alienate; if that alienation happens because of the social media post, then the content should accurately reflect the stance of the church. This is another reason that having a thorough and robust strategy can be useful, offering the leadership a framework by which to judge if a particular post or series of content falls outside of that strategy and if individuals may not be a good fit for the team handling social media due to their own convictions about engagement.

It is also important to note that that even seemingly innocuous content could be deemed as offensive or hurtful to members of the platform. A thorough strategy can help to clarify the community most likely to find content published by a specific church, and how to best address any negative or trolling engagement by proactively considering how to best address pushback, including taking the time to consider whether the critique is valid. While it may not necessarily be helpful or intended to be constructive, such interaction can provide important insights into areas that might need improvement in the form of communication. Do not be afraid to let even the harshest of critique shed light on how a content strategy can be improved because it is improving the overall value of outreach and community engagement.

Is This Thing Working? Measuring the Immeasurable

Understanding the value of having a social media strategy is only the first step in addressing what these tools are going to be able to do for a congregation. At some point it will become necessary to evaluate whether the strategy, with its component pieces and execution, is working to accomplish the desired goals. Metrics are widely available on various platforms and will be useful to assessment but may not give a full picture of the value contained within the work done for the church. How, then, should a content strategy that be assessed when it is understood that not all value is tangible or has a return that will fall into the available metrics? It is understood that when dealing with spiritual ministry, any sort of fruit (or "payoff" to use a different term) can be years in the making and could happen in a completely different church or ministry context. It seems a reasonable question to address how a social media strategy can be measured when the payoff is not always recognizable. Chapter 4 will more fully delve into this topic and present a sustainable and suitably exhaustive metric for a spiritual social media strategy.

At this point though, it also becomes necessary to consider why people even use social media platforms (and why they use more than one) in the first place. This can include a number of motivations in one individual, having different reasons for using each distinct platform, and layered together with what might even seem to be competing desires or needs. But understanding these reasons will assist to inform a more robust metric. It might be sufficient to pursue a social media strategy simply because people are to be found on those platforms; and numbers certainly play into the decisions to be made. But this is only one component of why to choose to develop a social media strategy.

As mentioned previously, people find some sense of community around sharing their stories, often delving into intensely personal issues ranging from questions of identity to deep trauma experienced as children or adults. For many of these creators, the ability to tell their story within this context, devoid of the face-to-face interaction of a counselor's office or in the confines of a trusted friendship, is said to be quite healing and personally affirming. What elements make this very public and very open storytelling feel safe and appropriate? There seems to be a sense of anonymity provided by the distance of the platform—that is, there is not a person sitting in front of the creator and so the creator feels more freedom to speak honestly and without the self-editing that comes in an in-person meeting—joined with a sense of community that come from the comments and similar stories shared in response to their own post. There is something about this kind of freedom that is both the power and the pain of social media engagement.

Developing an appropriate metric for social media in the context of the church will include finding a way to demonstrably measure these sorts of interactions, where people feel comfortable and safe when they share perhaps their deepest wounds and their largest joys with a crowd of strangers across the globe because at the heart of this content and engagement is a

desire to know and be known. This fundamental human longing is being met in unusual ways on

social media platforms and if the church can begin to build an understanding of how to

participate in this, it will be a benefit to its long-term health and growth.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Generally speaking, in the available resources there appear to be two groups of publications on the topic of social media for the use of churches. In the first of these groups, the publications present helpful and practical tips on engagement and an overview of social media use by churches. These sources tend away from being academic and have a more casual or helpful tone but are similar in purpose to the interests of this present paper. However, many of these sources are now over five years old and could be updated, not anticipating the growth in scope of how social media tools are being used today. This is to be expected; new platforms are being developed and launched all the time, but it does mean that the literature is necessarily going to be several steps behind the current trends. This also means that an eye must be kept on new research and writing as it becomes available.

Of the academic resources, the emphasis of study falls less on the use of social media by churches as a strategic tool as much as a focus on the way those tools embed within a culture and then what type of engagement begins to exist within the milieu of particular social media platforms. In many of these resources, social media content is treated as an adjacent element of the research, rather than the core element of study. An example would be the research of Erika Gault looking at how Black Christians and their unique expressions of faith were policed via these social media tools. Meanwhile, John Ellis' 2013 dissertation looks at the effect of a virtual audience on those delivering sermons. These are certainly necessary endeavors of study into understanding the influence of both social media and technology, but not a look at the content and strategies themselves.

This leaves a gap in the available publications, whether that is due to a need for more recent or updated research that can address how the platforms function as tools in and of

themselves to accentuate and improve an existing community, or the need to assess their impact

outside of any other outreach program. That is, how does social media content serve in multiple

functions, whether as a portion of the overall strategy for an occasional program like a capital

campaign or a seasonal activity, or as a means of building and strengthening community? And

how to correctly measure its effectiveness.

Critical Approaches

Some of the research done in the academic resources is scientific, using a statistical

analysis to understand the use and influence of platforms such as Twitter on geo-political events

like the 2010-2011 Arab Spring. Others are looking through the lens of accepted critical theories

such as Feminism, Black Feminism, and Marxism. The more practical guides or investigations

are generally rooted in their own theological backgrounds such as Catholicism or a broadly

Evangelical view. The broadness of approaches can be both a benefit and a hindrance to this

work, in that it encourages a broadness of mind in asking better questions that can reach beyond

a limited perspective. However, that also means that it is difficult to easily engage and synthesize

the materials coming from different theological convictions and applying them to yet another

theological background.

The Value of These Approaches?

Having a variety of critical, scholarly, practical, and professional sources should

encourage an openness to understanding the power of social media tools and platforms beyond

their widely accepted use (e.g., programmatic marketing or personal expression). This also

should encourage creators to look beyond the present demographics of a local congregation and

how those tools can stretch a group beyond the confines of their building or immediate

neighborhood and potentially connect with social groups that they might never have known were

nearby. Choosing to engage with a variety of approaches on social media should allow the

resulting project to be applicable to more than one strand of theological or sociological thinking

and help to address any implicit biases in the author.

The reality is that social media has been and will continue to be a powerful tool for

societal changes that have been a long time in coming, so to turn a blind eye to the way minority

groups and subcultures have used social media to engage and empower is to miss a really

valuable point of engagement with the created content and how that can be echoed and shared by

majority culture users to challenge and equip their own congregations. This also means that for

the purpose of this research, engaging with a broader set of sources may be needed in order to

have a clear and accurate picture of the ways these platforms can be used in a congregational

setting.

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Chapter 3: Methodology

The innovation in the approach of this paper is to view social media strategy with a desire to assess and define the success of the strategy without leaning significantly on the use of conventional, numerical metrics; instead, this is a unique attempt at quantifying success because it relies heavily on conceptual values. Trusting the evidence of positive performance through numbers can only take an assessment so far when dealing with matters of spiritual, emotional, and community-oriented content. Looking at those matters, often deeply personal and evoking internally complicated reactions, can open the door to concepts that seem to defy being quantified. In fact, pursuing numbers has all the potential to distract practitioners from their ultimate purpose in serving their people, chasing an unachievable carrot of popularity. Using the number of likes, shares, engagements as a metric – rather, as an only metric – the practitioner runs the risk of running aground of their true goals. Master marketer Seth Godin understands this, writing on his blog,

> When there's a single metric (likes/followers), we end up looking in the rear-view mirror when we should be driving instead. Maximizing the benefits for the social media platform you're on are different than maximizing the benefits for you and those you are leading. (2019, para. 12-13)

Too many metrics will create additional problems, too. But too few may drive the practitioner to forget the purpose of the strategy.

Measuring the internal is a complicated but not impossible endeavor, particularly when some of the more fundamental demographic and psychographic work has been done in preparation for developing a social media strategy. But it will also take great care, intentional reflection, even setting aside some personal viewpoints to view with clarity the question of

unintended meaning in content. Fundamentally, the difference in approach with this metric is to ask, not, "How does this post matter to me, to my brand, my bottom line?" Rather, it is to ask, "How will this post matter to my community? To my enemies? To complete strangers?" How does the strategy benefit others, rather than the creator or brand themselves? In short, how can social media be used to love someone instead of marketing to them?[7]

Tools Used for This Project

Traditional Psychological and Sociological studies can play a major part of assessing a successful social media strategy, but these methodologies are going to be of value by providing information that is of a more long-term and slow-moving nature. Psychological and Sociological studies are often being widely discussed only after years of research and implicating large swaths of a particular generation or group of people. This sort of thinking is often centered around large groups of individuals, such as when discussing children of divorce, middle-class vs. lower class, trauma experience, etc. These types of categories will benefit assessment and direct content creators on how to think carefully about the overwhelming movements of a given culture or sub-culture. However, the methodologies that will likely prove to be most immediately useful in this scenario centers on a different sort of studies, namely demographics and psychographics. Rather than focusing on social interactions or movements, Psychographics and Demographics build on the collective information that defines a community and collection of people, whether they are a group that is defined by external concepts (demographics) or self-select their grouping through the decision to join a community such as a church.

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[7] This is a riff on a similar statement made in a trailer for an upcoming HBO documentary on the creation of the children's television show, *Sesame Street*. There are many parallels to the current situation with social media as when the program was first developed. The dangers of unmitigated television consumption by children came to be a significant concern in the late 1960s, about a decade after the television had fully integrated into most American homes. With similar saturation rates, now is the time to consider how social media can be leveraged for more than simply selling to people, how can it be used share a grander vision?

Defining demographics—the use of demographical information allows a practitioner to look at communities in a black and white manner by collecting statistical data that will help practitioners to determine the structure and focus of content.

1. **Generational/Age**—Understanding the generational make up of a community will have a significant impact on the platforms chosen by a practitioner. Each platform has a draw for a specific age group. For example, many "Boomers" gravitate toward Facebook, while Millennials and generations below are avoiding the platform as best as they can. But those same age groups will utilize an app like Instagram. Generational preferences are not hard and fast delineations, there will always be outliers, or even significant generational overlap of users. But in general, these demographics help to determine whether a community will benefit from investing time in one platform over another.

2. **Economic (Income and Resources)**—Is this a community that has significant expendable income? Youth group children may have their own smart phones, making social media a powerful tool in that ministry. Or perhaps the community is lower-middle-class, comprised of parents with Blue-Collar values and tight budgets? Youth group children may utilize a parent's phone or share a "go-phone" style device with siblings. Social media platforms will likely have a minimal effect. More so, demographics can point out if a community has a sufficiently diverse group of socio-economic situations; that can make the strategy more complex but will help the practitioner identify potential problems before stumbling into those issues.

3. **Race**—Matters of race and ethnicity have been a painful but important conversation point in the broader culture over the last several years. The racial demographic of a community might reveal how a majority culture has overtaken other sub-cultures, or even how the history of different races and ethnicities are either elevated or slowly eroded based on bias. Is there a sub-culture present that is generally overlooked? Is it long-standing or a new (an immigrant or migrant culture)? Has it grown or diminished in recent years? Loving a community well may mean delving into these questions with sensitivity and carefulness; but knowing the demographic allows a practitioner to better consider their content decisions. For instance, a guest poster might be a better approach on some topics, inviting a member of a minority culture to speak into the majority culture about their experience instead of mediating that through a majority culture member.

4. **Gender**—Like the question of race, the conversation around gender has changed significantly in recent years, raising awareness of questions about inequity, identity, and the tension between a traditional understanding of genetics and gender roles and the modern openness to the fluidity of expression. All of these issues can create intense emotional reaction in consumers, sometimes to the detriment of the actual message. Packaging content for women in pink flowers can seem like a merely aesthetic decision that is seen in many other forms of content, but for many young, professional women it feels like a push to embrace a sort of identity that they have long ago rejected. Understanding the demographic (young, professional, third-wave feminist) shows up in even the smallest choices.

5. **Family (Marriage & Children)**—Is it a community with young families, or

   empty-nesters? A newly married couple or lonely widower? Are practical articles

   and encouraging content for weary parents more of need, or post that not only

   advertises an opportunity to connect with other members and enter into a

   meaningful care relationship? Does a simple click make it easy to start that

   interaction? Understanding these dynamics can help direct decisions around

   content and also direct the need for accessibility—whether that be sign-ups, or an

   expression of interest. Someone who is overwhelmed by responsibilities—or even

   by grief—is a lot less likely to make a phone call but might click a button that

   indicates interest to the practitioner on the other end of the technological medium.

6. **Education (Personal, Children, Parental)**—Similar to the question of income

   and resources, educational demographics can reveal a larger picture of potential

   pitfalls and challenges when engaging with the targeted community. A

   community with a large percentage of higher education degrees (college, masters,

   etc.) can seem like a receptive audience for intellectual content; yet they may also

   be easily distracted by critique rather than to demonstrate receptivity to the

   content. That reaction probably has more to do with the overall culture of a

   specific community, but the demographic of education should at least raise the

   question of how content will be received.

7. **Religious Identity (Denomination, Religion, Non-Practicing)**—A Presbyterian

   church in a predominantly Catholic neighborhood would do well to understand

   the ebbs and flows of the liturgical year and even incorporate some of that

   structure into social media plans to educate their own parishioners; or a Baptist

church that sits in a neighborhood of Orthodox Jews who strictly observe the

Sabbath—sundown Friday to sundown Saturday—extending some awareness to

their members about paying attention to the high volume of pedestrians on Friday

evenings. Social media content may not be the same as navigating a car through

dozens of pedestrians walking home in twilight, but there is an analogy there to

considering how a practitioner's creation of content can harm or care for

consumers

8. **Occupation (Un/Employed, Type of Work)**—Work is a deeply personal aspect

of an individual's identity. Understanding the makeup of work and employment

promotes an awareness of identity issues—is there a large group of teachers, or a

more than a few who are unemployed, shift-worker like nurses or manufacturing,

upper class professionals like doctors and lawyers, or newly emerging

professionals straight from college? The unemployed may not want to be on

social media, while the overworked may not have time to consume much media.

What sort of content can best serve those demographics?

These are not exhaustive demographic categories, by any means. But they are significant and a

good launching point for more questions about the make-up of a community. See Appendix I for

more questions that will help to explore these and other areas of demographic exploration.

Psychographics provide significant insight into developing the work of this metric,

defined by Clotaire Rapaille as a culture code, or "the unconscious meaning we apply to a given

thing." These meanings are learned through our individual and cultural experiences or memories

that lead each person to "processing the same information in different ways." These cultural

experiences become the driving force behind the *why*, forming unseen motivations in decision

making that are often deep and surprising, even from to the individual's own understanding. Culture imbues meaning in ways which must be taken account for when developing content, especially when the practitioner is not from that culture.

Rapaille (2007) defines five codes that help to unearth cultural meaning.

1. Taking on the mentality of a "professional stranger" (2007, pg. 9) and learning to dig deeper past the face value of what is said. This is of particular importance as social media practitioners put biblical concepts into their content. Fewer and fewer people have the depth of biblical knowledge that previous generations may have possessed. Removing that familiarity in creating content will be vital to making content understandable.

2. Emotion is the energy required to learn anything. "The stronger the emotion, the more clearly the experience is learned." It is necessarily to be sure that caution is taken, using emotion carefully so as not to manipulate—to inappropriately drawn someone into relationship—or alienate—to unnecessarily push someone away from relationship—content consumers. Rapaille states that many of our emotional lessons have been learned by the age of seven, but new motions can help to create new mental "highways" and help the individual to relearn (2007, pg. 17).

3. The structure, not the content, is the message. Rapaille introduces the concept of kinship – the way in which we connect the dots between the object and the structure of the story or content. This encourages and supports the argument that a structured and strategic approach to social media will be most successful.

4. There is a window in time for imprinting and the meaning of the imprint varies from

one culture to another. Returning to the centrality of a cultural context, whether that is

a majority culture, minority culture, or sub-culture.

5. To access the meaning of an imprint within a particular culture, you must learn the

code for that imprint.

The work of assessing social media for a church or ministry strategy may require some intense

work at the beginning of the endeavor to best understand the psychographic and demographic

data. It is no small endeavor to look at a community and glean so many facts. But gathering that

information will have great payoffs when turning to look at the development and constant

reassessment of that content.

Chapter 4: Strategic Social Media Metric

Introduction of the Eleven Principles

After exploring the purpose and methodology behind this paper, it became clear that a

series of principles needed to be developed, serving as a metric that is based in a commitment to

a set of particular values that are based out of a Christian theology of the church and the

exploration of demographic and psychographic research. Briefly, these principles are based in an

understanding of the preeminence of Christ and his church; this then serves as a central principle

out of which the other ten principles form a constellation. These remaining principles are of

equal weight and importance when evaluating a strategy—each one may have more or less

importance when looking at a specific piece of content, but all should be applied to the overall

strategy and decision making.
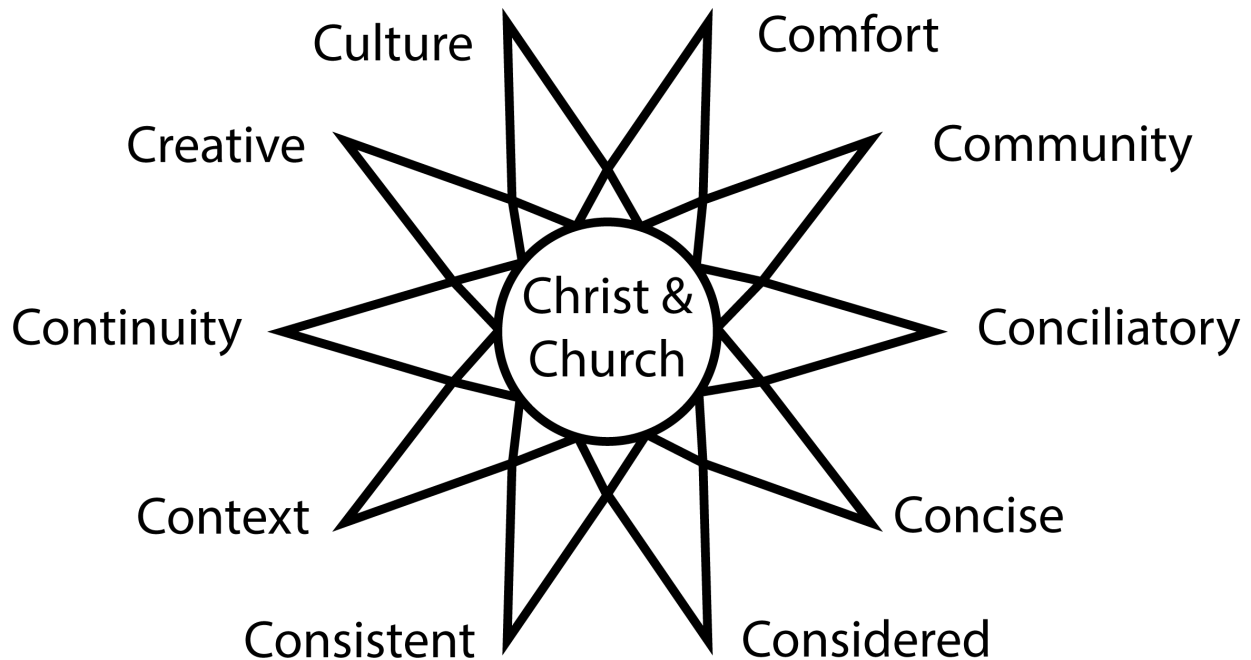
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Figure 3 - Eleven Metrics for Social Media

Church and Christ

Ultimately, the work that is being done is to serve the Body of Christ in the local church. This is not about the strategy, the content, or the tool. It is about the Lord as he makes himself known in the church. Using a tool like social media can become a megaphone of sorts, and so the first question should always be to assess whether the message is Christ and his mercy. A successful strategy will place the foremost importance on this message, even if the nature of the content is expressed in an understated or subtle manner. Consider the words of the Apostle Paul, who looked at gospel interactions with each person as an act of planting seeds of faith, or watering that seed as it lay dormant, so that even the act of reaping the fruit of faith is not in the hands of the practitioner but in God's hands (1 Corinthians 3:6). So, too, can social media be such an interaction.

Equally, consider social medias as an opportunity to see what is happening in the world and where people are investing their emotional and relational capital. When the Apostle Paul enters the Areopagus in Athens, he acknowledges that they had built an alter "to the unknown god" (Acts 17:23) and uses that to develop a conversation with the Athenians about their beliefs and his beliefs. Social media allows those in the church to see what the "unknown gods" of the culture and how to build better relationships with those outside of the church.

Comfort

Many social media users suffer from a level of shame, comparison, and disappointment that their lives do not match what they see in their highly curated feeds (curated both by the user and the content creators they follow). Providing content that pushes against this trend and brings a message of comfort, that acknowledges the strains of real life, can be a balm to weary hearts amid what feels like elusive perfection. Considering the rise of mental illness in teens and young

adults, particularly in young women who have traditionally had a larger share[8] of users in Instagram, it is worth evaluating whether published content actually benefits consumers and promotes mental and physical health. Or does it promote a view on life that is unattainable and dangerous?

What is that danger? A belief that the consumer is isolated and alone; a worsening and deepening of depression and anxiety; the development of envy and dissatisfaction; in short, an inward focus that creates a dislike and dissatisfaction with the self. This can have many forms of outward expression, whether something like an addiction to the social media platforms themselves or something more imminently threatening such as suicidal ideation. These, and other manifestations, are serious and must be addressed when they are discovered. However, it is also true that these issues are sometimes the outworking of anxiety and depression. A recent article from the *Wall Street Journal* explored the development of Tourette's like tics, which some psychologists believe were developed after involvement with a TikTok creator who did have Tourette's Syndrome. But, as Eleanor Cummings writes at The Verge, these symptoms are simply making it impossible to ignore the underlying distress.

Community

Does the structure of the strategy build space for honest community and relationship building? Or does it promote parasocial relationships with staff and other figures? Parasocial relationships are developed in media consumers who begin to feel emotional connection to social media stars[9] and content creators. In the context of a typical church structure, it could be very

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[8] Statista Research, April 2021. More recent research shows some evening out between genders.

[9] This word implies large fandoms, but it can also apply to niche content creators who have a limited following—even if initially—but are still considered to be to the pinnacle of a sub-culture. In fact, the communities that surround those niche creators who then become highly recognized may experience some tension and division as they attempt to reconcile the original fans who feel that they really know the creator compared to people who are newer to the community.

easy for the leadership and staff to inadvertently become the object of such parasocial fixation if

they are routinely featured in the content but do not in turn work to develop strong interpersonal

relationships as well. As a point of concern, practitioners should take care to not focus on the

same group of individuals, especially leadership, in ways that overlook the larger community.

Another element to this question is whether the content expresses a sort of "Inner Ring"

mentality or a community of welcoming friends. If it seems like the same people show up

repeatedly in the content, whether as featured content creators or in the social media posts itself,

viewers may begin to feel that they are on the outside of some invisible fence, unable to get in.

C.S. Lewis famously wrote in his essay, *The Inner Ring*, a description of the rule by which the

"in group" operates—as a slippery, ever-changing law that almost exclusively plays favorites

without any logic or discretion:

> You are never formally and explicitly admitted by anyone. You discover
>
> gradually, in almost indefinable ways, that it exists and that you are outside it, and
>
> then later, perhaps, that you are inside it. There are what corresponds to
>
> passwords, but they too are spontaneous and informal. A particular slang, the use
>
> of particular nicknames, an allusive manner of conversation are the marks. But it
>
> is not constant. It is not easy, even at a given moment, to say who is inside and
>
> who is outside. Some are obviously in and some are obviously out, but there are
>
> always several on the border line. (1949, p. 144)

Sadly, social media can serve a sort of 'gate-keeping' to keep certain people on the outside of the

group rather than to invite them into community and deeper relationship. Though the goal of a

social media strategy is to communicate with others and utilize the tools, it is necessary that it

not become a means of freezing people out who may not have access because of a lack of

equipment (phones, computers, tablets) or even with those who choose to deal with their

conscience in a way that minimizes or even eliminates the use of social media. A practitioner

will do well to take this into account when developing a strategy, considering the inclusion of

such community members as a means of sharing love and inclusion. It does not mean to create

double work for the practitioner, but that the work is open to including as many people as

possible, and if possible, scalable to various platforms or mediums.

Does the content point to opportunities to meet others in the community, to work together

in service, be in personal relationships as much as possible? Does it encourage content

consumers to share information with friends, family, and others who are not on social media?

Related to the concept of parasocial relationships is that of parasocial interactions—these are

person to person engagements that only happen in an online context. This may be a temporary

need in certain situations, such as an online dating relationship; or in the context of this project,

new neighbors may start slow interactions with the church, seeking to learn the culture and

individuals. But for most interactions to remain in this parasocial category is far from ideal.

Wisdom and caution should be taken when individuals choose to meet in person after meeting

online; true health in the strategy and in the church will come with personal community.

Conciliatory

It is important that the development of a social media strategy not present itself as a

Utopian means of spreading peace, love, and kindness. Though bridge-building and community

development are part of the goal of a strategy, it is still necessary to recognize that social media

can also be extremely toxic and divisive to a community if care is not taken in creative decision

making. When attempting to tackle sensitive topics, be they of a global or local scale, remember

that certain discussions just simply cannot be held in meaningful ways through the short, clipped

conversation style of social media. That is not to say that the conversation does not need to

happen, but that the recognition is that certain topics are better suited to in-person conversations

and engagement.

The cycle of dopamine hits that feed a never-ending argument means that a social media

practitioner should be cognizant of when a question or simple disagreement has become a trigger

for something more dangerous. What feels, in the beginning, as though it is a reasonable question

or beginning of a discussion with a community member can become a cycle that devolves into

anger and polarization. It becomes vital to stop the cycle of dopamine by removing the

conversation from the platform. Requesting a face-to-face meeting slows down the aggression

and gives both the practitioner and any other responsible party enough time to engage with the

statements being made by the commenter. This allows for space to discern whether there might

be some other underlying problems; that may not be the case, but if any other issues exist, it may

be discernable through some basic searches and profile view. If the individual is known the

practitioner or community, they may be willing to meet and discuss their behavior, given the

opportunity to voice any other thoughts.

Aggressive and abusive behavior should be stopped immediately, whether through the

deletion of comments or the blocking of the commenter. A conciliatory desire can still be a

priority through face-to-face or direct interactions, but it is necessary that they not be allowed to

do damage through threats and intimidation, even if they are said to be made in jest. And even

more so, threats of injury and harm should be taken seriously and reported to the authorities.

These sorts of threats include some less obvious but no less dangerous behavior, including

goading someone to do self-harm—even suicide—or encouraging others to perpetrate that harm.

This in no way should be allowed to continue.

There is also a growing awareness of the manipulative manner in which social media has been used by those in trusted positions of leadership, whether they be world leaders, government officials, or those individuals in whom social media users willingly place their trust such as teachers, pastors, counselors, etc. Even when content is not meant to be intentionally misleading, it can still be factually in error, an occurrence which may damage the reputation of the account and associated teachers if it happens regularly. For a social media practitioner, part of building bridges with truth will be to evaluate with materials being shared are in fact true and correct.

Concise

Digital real estate may seem to be never-ending. New apps and websites seem to appear daily, promising new ways to connect, create, and consume social media content. This proliferation of sources also divides the attention of the average social media consumer, choosing to invest their time in the platform that most suits their own interests and needs. There is a common idea that technology and social media have created a deficit in the modern attention span, although some studies and reports have repudiated this idea.[10] However, the question of where people choose to spend the currency of their time and attention does still mean that the practitioner has limited time and space to interact with a consumer in any meaningful way. This means that it becomes important to make decisions about where to invest the time and attention of the practitioner.

The concept of being concise also has impact on the time and work done by practitioners. Determining the best platforms for the context of the church and focusing on those platforms,

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[10] In part, an article by Simon Maybin from the BBC points out that questions of attention span have a lot to do with the task being considered. A task that is structured to not feature long-form content, that is short, brief videos and captions, could then be plausibly thought to induce less patience and quick scrolling through the platform. Writing in the Guardian, Dream McClinton reports on a Denmark study that argues that instead of a lessening attention span, the increase in the amount of information is competing for what was already a limited amount of attention.

choosing to ignore platforms that do not serve the strategy until such a time that they fit into the

that work due to demographic changes. Taking into consideration the broad-stroke generational

populations and their social media preferences, as well as any potential sub-groups that might

have specialized interests, can minimize the time spent in creating and resizing content for

multiple platforms. Choosing two to three platforms should be sufficient for a smaller church,

and often those platforms can be set up to feed to other platforms and websites, at least in one

direction (for example, Instagram will feed content to Facebook, but Facebook does not feed to

Instagram).

Choosing to be concise will also be necessary in terms of the content itself. This is a

principle that applies not merely when working on captions, but also when thinking about visual

composition or the length of video content. Is the message better suited to a visual picture, a

trendy meme, a fast-paced video post on TikTok, or a YouTube stream that allows for a calm,

steady exploration of the topic? Concise is not necessarily about limiting the time and space of a

piece of content, but it is certainly taking the time to weigh the right medium for each post.

Considered

It is important that the practitioner takes care not to rush through the creation and

publishing of content. Utilizing and the execution of a content calendar can help to navigate the

sudden need to create content at the spur of the moment. However, it should not be surprising

that creating and publishing content as it was planned may not always be possible. Though the

reality of last-minute needs is one that every organization will encounter, it should be

remembered that the possibility of error and serious misunderstanding increases significantly

when a post is rushed. Taking even an hour to let content "breathe" can give the practitioner or

their partners the time and clarity to see potential errors or problems. And it is certainly worth

noting that allowing the habit of rushing and not taking time to be considered when creating

content can ultimately do a significant amount of damage to the work of building relational

collateral, tarnishing the trustworthiness of both the practitioner and brand.

Consistent

The use of the word "branding" may feel distasteful for a church to use because of the

connotations it has with slick packaging and a perception of manipulative marketing. But

creating a simple set of brand standards—these standards will most likely have to do with visual,

written, doctrinal, and aesthetic standards agreed upon by church leadership—simply means

making decisions about how content should look and sound, maybe even to an extent

determining what sort of information it should contain. This commitment to consistency will

help to promote a cohesive and identifiable set of content—that is, developing a voice and

style—and create might even provide some ease to the practitioner in the creative process

because certain, often minute, decisions will have already been made. Volunteer practitioners

will likely appreciate the help in removing unnecessary decision and streamlining their process.

Context

An understanding of context will most likely be built through looking at the concepts of

Culture and Community together. An example might be that a small town in the South conjures

up a specific cultural picture for most people, probably one of a farming community with beat-up

Chevys, Friday night football games, homogenous, with traditional Christian values. But adding

in the fact that this same community is built around a large state university, the context of this

town may now be understood as one that holds postmodern values, multicultural communities,

and in other ways will be diverse because of the individuals brought into the community through

research and employment provided by the university. But a short trip just a few miles down the

road to a neighboring town, one may find that it will indeed have that traditional context.

Context, for the purposes of this project, is understood as the interworking of Culture and

Community together.

Continuity

Practitioners can also consider the question, does the ethos of the content generally

follow in the historical legacy of the church. For example, the episode *State of Emergency* in the

Rise & Fall of Mars Hill podcast series explores how the Mars Hill church fostered a community

of creativity by employing musicians, artists, and designers to develop new and contextualized

content for worship and outreach. But that also seemed to foster a sense of individualism and

arrogance by not leaning into historic and traditional elements—the podcast calls out the way

Mars Hill staff viewed historic or traditional hymns in particular:

> For much of Mars Hill's history, there was such a distaste of Christian music, they only
>
> played original songs and hymns. It fostered a tremendous amount of creativity, but as
>
> several worship leaders from the church told [Mike Cosper], it also fostered an arrogance
>
> that left them disconnected from other churches (Cosper, 2021).

In the same way, it important to see the content being created as participating in the larger

context of the Global and Historical church. This does not mean that the social media strategy

and content must agree wholly with sister churches and nations; that would be an impossible task

to cover over two millennia of history and a full globe of believers. Differences often reflect

other categories discussed in this metric, such as culture and context that are not shared

universally. The point is for the practitioner to hold in tension the reality that their local church is

likely not developing anything "new" but is building on the shoulders of generations who have

gone before. What is held in common across time and space is the preeminence of Christ, and to

presume an autonomous perspective on any type of worship style or content is to unnecessarily exclude millions of sisters and brothers.

This does not mean that they cannot do the work of developing new or updated elements. But it does ask that some work should be done by the practitioner to consider the larger historical context. Some communities will want to create distance—can they articulate why? Is it out of a concern for potential misunderstanding within the community? Or is it a misunderstanding itself and needs to be lovingly corrected? These are both honest answers and should be engaged with in an honest manner. The question is much more about whether the implied distances or associations created in content is done to be self-protective and self-promoting or if it is done to communicate love and engagement.

Creative

Creative content in a social media strategy will be informational but also aesthetically pleasing. This aesthetic will, as with the content, be dependent upon the context of the community in which the practitioner is working. The demographic and psychographic work done by the practitioner will inform the decisions made about the style used in the writing, images, music, and composition used. Of all the principles presented in this metric, the Creative principle is the one most likely to need to be re-evaluated on a regular basis as culture, community, and context evolve to include new members or experiences the loss of others.

See Appendix II for a "toolbox" of helpful tools that can aid in creating social media content. Many of these tools are "of the moment" and may become obsolete or even deprecated over time.[11] But even if certain tools lose their relevance to the work of building social media content, they are generally replaced by better and more effective tools or are acquired by larger

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[11] As an example, most recently the Adobe Flash browser plug-in has become fully deprecated and is no longer supported. A tool that once drove accessibility on many web pages is now completely defunct.

companies who then make the tools available in their own suite of available tools. If one tool is gone, it is likely that something else is available and is newer and better.

Culture

Practitioners should evaluate how their content considers the culture in which the church and the larger community exists, even taking into account the historical culture that has been inherited through traditions. In failing to analyze the culture the practitioner may not recognize gaps in their communication style, whether or not they understand their neighbors, which can lead them to overlook relevant lived experiences and learned emotional responses. No single strategy or piece of content is ever going to be able to be able to contain all these considerations, and it would be too heavy of an expectation to think that a practitioner can ever fully engage in the realities of culture without stepping on a proverbial landmine. But educating themselves about these cultural considerations will certainly add to the success of the strategy.

Chapter 5: Analysis

This research presents a view of social media from the standpoint of a social media practitioner who is seeking to benefit, equip, and encourage members of their society with little to no expectation of a pay-off in terms of numbers, be that likes, loves, dollars, shares, attendance, even followers. These numbers are not inconsequential to the work, but they are removed from the main analysis of whether a social media strategy is working for a church. A church that is engaging with their community and neighborhood through social media may only see light engagement in terms of numbers—only a dozen on the very best of days—but in a church of 100 members, three to four engagements might be the best that can be done. Not seeing improvement in those numbers can bring about discouragement if the practitioner does not have a framework and metric to understand the larger context of success, one in which they can see the values and commitments of their community as a guide to understanding the success of their work.

Practitioners using this metric now have a tool by which to gauge their decisions—and that can be both before and after the act of deciding, whether they are involved in the content creation portion or are engaging with the content and its consumers once it has been published. The metric, though it requires some significant work to understand the demographic picture of a given community, can be applied at any stage of the strategy and offers direction to apply critical thinking and questioning about how to proceed. Understanding how this metric will work in the field will be a valuable next step in the growth of this research. However, because the metric is delivered in an easily understandable graphic, the practitioner should be aided in their work by not having to manage complex concepts.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

Social Media is still very much in its beginning stages, when compared with other forms of media like television, radio, even the printing press. In that sense, there could still be a great deal that is yet to be known about how it will shape societies. And at the same time, it is important to consider whether it is the content or the medium itself that accelerates the use and appreciation of that medium. Can they even be separated? Gutenberg's printing press, notable for moveable type, had been actively at work for some seventy-five years before the Protestant Reformation took root in Europe. It's reasonable to argue that the later (the content) could not have happened – or at least, would have been limited to a regionalized movement, as had been the case in previous reform movements – without the former (the medium). The structure now existed to create an accessible and wide-spread communication and the time was ripe for revolution.

There may yet be such an unknown cultural shift that has its beginnings in the structure of social media. There certainly have been smaller movements that have degrees of success – something like the #metoo movement that has done some significant good though was still somewhat limited in its scope. Such a movement shows the potential of how social media can be used effectively to shed light on powerful issues and direct people to consider their own choices and lives. But the power of these movements is not with individuals, in their own homes, reading their screens. It is the community those movements can foster through conversation.

One of the greatest limitations—particularly to its longevity and relevance—that this work will encounter is simply that technology, platforms, and trends are constantly evolving. In surveying previous works on the topic of social media and the church, it quickly became evident that many of the resources were dated because the technology and trends of 2015 had shifted

remarkably in the five to six years between. Platforms like TikTok have shown up on the scene

in the last couple of years and begun to alter the way other platforms think about content. The

2016 US Election may yet prove to be a watershed moment in the course of American history—

or simply a bump in the road of democracy as people communicated poorly through social

media. And out of necessity, the COVID-19 pandemic has radically altered the way people use

social media and technology—and in ways that have yet to be seen it may have contributed to a

change in the enthusiasm to spend time glued to screens as more and more human interactions

have had to happen through virtual meetings and video calls.

On the other hand, the strength of this project lies in the fact that this metric does not rely

on numbers and the means of evaluation are based in familiar and unchanging concepts that

should be applicable to almost any platform because the focus is on intention, community, and

demographic data rather than trends and specific platforms. So very often, the emphasis in the

discussion around social media strategies is on the actual doing—creating effective content,

measuring engagement, and the necessary tools. Those are still vital conversations, but the reality

is that those elements will be ever-changing and need to be rooted in something deeper and more

substantial. A return to the understanding that social media is in fact about connection and

communication.

An area of research that could prove beneficial for future work is to look at how a

practitioner is influenced by their work and how their mental and/or emotional health can be

damaged by managing a second-party social media account; or even better, how their mental and

emotional health can be supported while managing a second-party account. A great deal of

research has been put into the influence of social media on an individual's psyche, but when

there is some distance (i.e., managing an account that is not a personal account and does not

reflect on the individual themselves) is there a similar influence? Understanding these

similarities and differences could help to direct pastoral care and organizational structure that can

protect their volunteers.

To be a practitioner of social media means that content creators are able to direct and

sway the public conversation. It is a form of leadership because it is a work of informing people;

in fact, it is a partnership in the work of spiritual formation through the use of image, word, and

emotion. The message of this project is to not look down on social media as an ancillary tool or

merely a waste of time. Instead, consider it, when used wisely and well, as a means of loving

others, encouraging them, and shaping their lives in positive and meaningful ways.

Chapter 7: Illustration References

Figure 1 – Artwork by cartoonist Paul Cox, published on Facebook, June 24, 2021.
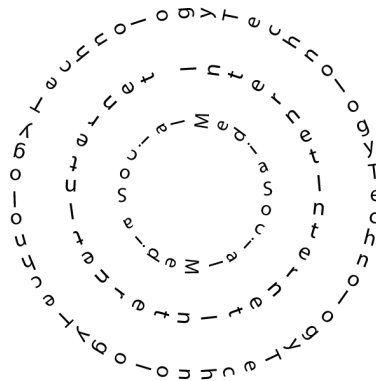
Figure 2 – Artwork by Heather R. Sparkman, 2021.
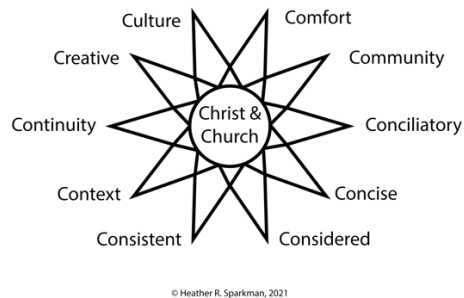
Figure 3 – Artwork by Heather R. Sparkman, 2021.

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Appendix I – Demographic Survey

1. Do you already have any social media handles? Are they similar or the same?

2. What is Your Website domain:

   Is your website mobile optimized?

3. Facebook Page:

4. Instagram Handle:

5. Pinterest Handle:

6. SnapChat Handle:

7. TikTok Handle:

8. Twitter Handle:

9. YouTube Channel:

10. Other Social Media Profiles to Explore:

11. Do you want to have one account per platform or several for your church and ministries?

12. If several, what different entities do you want to feature on those accounts?

13. How do you want to unify your accounts? Similar logos? Similar handles?

14. List any people who have expressed interest in helping with your social media or website

    presence.

15. List those who you might approach to consider participating in this effort.

16. Will you consider creating a style guide for your social media team?

17. What are some of the top hashtags in your community?

18. What are some of the top Social Media handles in your community?

19. What are some similar pages or profiles to what you hope to build?

20. What sort of content do they feature that you like?

21. Research existing hashtags could connect others to your church?

22. What new hashtags would you consider using for your church?

23. Are you going to feed any or all your social media platforms to your website?

24. Consider how will you divide the work of posting? Responding to comments? Managing

    messages?

25. Consider people who would be willing to monitor trends and topics of conversation on

    social media. Will that be staff or volunteers?

26. Do you have any artists, graphic artists, web designers or writers in your congregation to

    help with design?

27. Do you have dedicated brand standards, such as specific colors and designs, for your

    church?

28. Do you have a church logo? Is it available in a digital format?

29. Do you have any iconic or recognizable imagery in your church/ministry, such as a

    steeple, tree, unique architecture, windows, that you want to utilize?

30. What languages are spoken in your community?

31. What languages are spoken in your church?

32. What nationalities are represented in your community?

33. What resources will you need to monitor the comments, shares, and engagement?

34. List people or ministries in your church to highlight or feature on your social media

    content.

35. List people or entities in your community to highlight or feature on your social media

    content.

36. What sort of comments are you willing to let stay on your SM? What will need to be

    removed or addressed?

37. What sort of schedule or expectation will you have for answering messages/comments?

38. Will you stream or post services, sermons or messages to your website?

39. Do you want that content featured on SM on a regular basis?

40. Do you want to turn on geo-tagging? What address and title do you want to use?

41. What contact information do you want to publish on your profiles?

42. How will you handle threats of violence or slander?

43. Does your local police department have a cyber-crime unit? What is their contact

    information?

44. Do you want to publish a user policy to guide church member behavior?

45. What rules do you want to develop concerning following, liking, sharing, and

    commenting on other profiles from the church profiles?

46. Do you want to create a policy on who can be shown in photos?

47. Do you want to turn on Check-In feature where available?

48. Create a list of topics that your audiences might be interested?

49. How will you organize your older content?

50. How will you make your content and profiles accessible to newcomers?

51. What social media platforms do members of your congregation use?

52. What social media platforms do you want your church profiles to avoid?

53. What is the generational make-up of your church?

54. What is the generational make-up of your community?

55. How will you include non-digital users in the same content or information?

56. When was your church founded?

57. When was your local community founded?

58. What is the median income of your church?

59. What is the median income of your community?

60. What is the ratio of men to women in your church?

61. What is the generational make-up in your church?

62. What is the generational make-up in your neighborhood?

63. What is the racial make-up of your church?

64. What is the racial make-up of your neighborhood?

65. Do you have any local universities, schools, or organizations that are high visibility in

    your community?

66. What is your membership?

67. What is your weekly attendance?

68. What is the size of your community?

69. Do you have a mission or purpose statement?

70. Do you have any repeated liturgical or common phrases?

71. Does your denomination or association have any social media policies to follow?

Appendix II – A Social Media Toolbox

eCommerce

Building a social media presence will potentially require the ability to take payment via a digital third-party. Below are several reputable payment processing services that can be used to collect payment for small registration fees, t-shirts, food, etc. Consider doing more research to determine whether use for regular donations or larger payments are worth incurring the associated fees.

	ApplePay—Already loaded on all iPhones, ApplePay and AppleCash is a peer-to-peer and eCommerce payment app. Can be connected to the Apple Credit Card issued by GoldmanSachs, but also can pay directly from another credit card or debit card. No fee on most transactions.
	CashApp—Part of the Square family, this is a peer-to-peer payment app. The app features the ability to have funds deposited on a Square-issued debit card. No fee for regular deposits, but a small fee is charged for Instant Deposit.
	Google Pay—Similar to ApplePay but for phones that use a Google operating system. A small fee may be charged for debit transfers.
	PayPal—Perhaps the most flexible of payment options, PayPal can be used make payments, receive payments, and track inventory. This third-party system is used by most online merchants. A small fee may be charged based on the type of

	transaction. Of particular note is that donations may have a specific fee attached for the recipient.
Square	**Square**—Most useful if you want to take payments from credit cards, this app will connect a reader directly to a phone or tablet. A fee of 2.6% + .10 cents per transaction is charged.
stripe	**Stripe**—Stripe operates similarly to PayPayl but is the default payment processing for stores using SquareSpace to publish. A transaction fee of 2.9% + .30 cents is charged.
venmo	**Venmo**—Similar to CashApp and ApplePay, this is another popular peer-to-peer payment app. No fees are charged on most transactions.

File Sharing and Collaboration

Working on files with a team can be problematic, especially when working with volunteers who may be coming to the project in off-hours rather than during similar business hours. Below are several easy, widely accessible tools for file sharing and project collaboration.

Dropbox	**Dropbox**—A file sharing and cloud storage platform. Subscription required.
Google Drive	**Google Drive**—Perhaps the most accessible cloud storage system, it includes standard office programs including Docs, Sheets, Forms, Slides, Photo Editing, Podcasts, and Meeting tools. A Google email is required for use, but basic storage is

	included. Larger storage needs will require a monthly subscription fee.
OneDrive	**OneDrive**—A Microsoft product that integrates to Office365 for file storage and is included in the monthly subscription fee.
slack	**Slack**—A helpful collaboration tool that allows for creating specific project channels within a "Workspace" – so no need to inundate team members with unnecessary information, but easily shared when necessary. Larger workspaces will require a monthly subscription fee, but under a certain number of members should be free.
Teams	**Teams**—A Microsoft product, Teams provides some of the ultimate integrated collaboration tools, including chat, file sharing, calendars, and online meetings. Most Office365 tools are integrated into the Teams platform and included as a part of the monthly subscription.

Graphic Design Tools
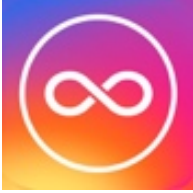
Graphic Design tools will be the backbone of any successful social media strategy. Finding the tools that work for a specific strategy can make the work significantly easier – or harder. Many tools offer a free trial to play around and determine if it offers the right services.

Canva	**Canva**—A web-based graphics tool with cloud storage. Perhaps the best and most accessible of available design tools, with templates and editing available for most all social media

	platforms and print materials. Subscription required for full access.
	Creative Cloud—The managing app for Adobe Creative tools, with cloud storage for assets and files. Subscription required.
	Procreate—This iPad app allows for creating graphics and images. This app is helpful for those interested in creating or editing original designs. Available for a minimal purchase in the App Store.
	Skillshare—A helpful website for tutorials on a wide variety of topics including graphic design, web publishing, search optimization, business tools, writing, etc. Subscription required for full access.
	SparkPost—An excellent tool for creating on-the-go posts and graphics for most social media platforms. SparkPost offers pre-made templates and posts that can be 'remixed' or the ability to create from scratch. Included in a Creative Cloud subscription.
	Studio (Pantone)—For a strategy that is going to incorporate significant print materials, this app may help to ensure that the print and digital color schemes are consistent.

Photo Editing Tools

While part of the graphic design world, these photo editing tools offer a wide array of specific

effects with minimal work involved. Learning to use the specific tool may take a little time or a

couple of tutorials but can provide a lot of power to posts. Most phones and tablets also offer

some photo editing tools, so explore those options before purchasing additional apps. The best

apps are the ones that make sense and are easy to use.

	Boomerang—A part of the Instagram suite, this tool specifically allows for creating a "boomerang" effect in short video clips.
	Facetune—A retouching tool that, at minimum, makes corrections to a video or photograph. Facetune has been at the center of a number of online photo controversies and discussion about distorted body image, so wisdom is needed in how this used in a social media strategy.
	Layout—Another Instagram tool that offers layout options for creating picture collages.
	Lightroom—Part of the Adobe Creative Suite, Lightroom offers specific photo editing tools, but not a full range of the Photoshop application.

	Photoshop Express—Another Adobe product that offers Specific Photoshop tools on a smart phone, but not the full range of the application tools.
	Pixabay—This website offers millions of stock photographs, many available for free through Creative Commons license. Some photographs are only available through subscription.
	Unsplash—Another website that offers millions of stock photographs, many available for free through Creative Commons license. Some photographs are only available through subscription.

Social Media Platforms

The heart and soul of a social media strategy will be to determine which platforms fit within the context of the intended audience. A platform like Twitch may do very little for a cerebral and artistic audience, while Snapchat may be ideal for a Teen Youth Group. Consider how to match the target audience and the core users already on those platforms. Matching the messaging to a platform is also important. It may seem overwhelming to choose which to pursue but take a few minutes to consider what the message is, how it can best be shared, and who it is going to help determine the appropriate platforms.

	Clubhouse—Still working out its identity, Clubhouse is an audio-specific platform in which people can share audio messages in forums.

	Discord—Created as a forum for gamers, Discord offers a channel-specific discussion board, working similarly to Slack as a forum.
	Facebook—The most ubiquitous of social media platforms; most adult users have a Facebook profile, but the average age of the user is trending older rather than younger. Facebook Live (video streaming) has been widely utilized during the pandemic.
	Instagram—While started as a photo-sharing app, the platform now includes videos (Reels) and shopping.
	LinkedIn—Aimed at professionals, it is unlikely that this will be an especially useful tool for outreach, but networking can bring some useful wisdom and attract staff or volunteers.
	Meetup—A platform intended to help people meet and develop friendship who enjoy similar activities. Not a likely platform for a strategy unless it includes a high degree of outreach.
	Messenger—A part of the Facebook platform, this will be useful if a Facebook page is created, as it will deliver inquiries and posts and make responding significantly easier. Messenger is far less used for outreach and broadcast messages as much as for individual inquiries.

	Nextdoor—This platform collects posts and information from specific neighborhoods. This can give helpful insight into a target audience and may be a great place to share events or information.
	Pinterest—A pictorial "cork-board" of sorts, helpful for discovering tutorials and visually organizing information, but most likely would not be a useful focus for outreach. May be useful for sharing "inspiration" information between team members.
	Reddit—A wide-reaching discussion forum, probably not ideal for outreach but may be useful to research and understand a given topic or audience.
	Snapchat—A video sharing app, the appeal is that posts and messages disappear after a certain amount of time.
	TikTok—Short videos (a three-minute maximum was recently introduced) are the staple of this platform.
	Tumblr—Intended to be a pictorial blog, this platform may simply be lost in the noise of social media and a website may be a better investment of time.

	Twitch—Designed to allow users to share and watch video game play.
	Twitter—Largely a word-based platform with a famously short character limit. If publishing quick, bite-sized information is important, a definite must.
	Vimeo—Video sharing platform, similar to YouTube but is less regulated in terms of copyrighted materials.
	WhatsApp—Part of the Facebook company, a texting app that is a also now a part of many Business pages.
	YouTube—A video sharing and streaming platform. Helpful for sharing live events or short videos.

Web Editing and Publishing

	Acrobat—Create PDFs for download and sharing.
	Buffer—Schedule and publish posts without having to push "post"— this app allows for automatic publishing at

	designated time.
	Grammarly—Grammatical typos happen to the best social media managers. If the text of a post is not being copyedited by another party this may be a vital tool to prevent errors.
	Repost App—Allows for sharing posts from another account with proper attribution and tagging. This and similar apps have reports of issues with loading working correctly.
	SoundCloud—Audio publishing for music and podcasts.
	SparkPost—An excellent tool for creating on-the-go posts and graphics for most social media platforms. SparkPost offers pre-made templates and posts that can be 'remixed' or the ability to create from scratch. Included in a Creative Cloud subscription.
	Squarespace—A Plug and Play webhosting and publishing suite, one of the more popular web publishing tools.
	WordPress—Another popular web publishing system, it is widely considered to be the "best" in web publishing but not necessarily the easiest tool to use.

Other Tools

Social Media is a large business; finding a few tools to help with legalities, data information, and statistics can make a big difference in determining whether something is working or if it "worth" doing in the first place.

	Creative Commons—Useful to understand what is appropriate for using media and assets under Fair Use or Creative Commons license.
	Libib—While not technically social media, this could prove to be a useful tool when wanting to make a private library searchable to a group of people—for example, it may drive traffic for a church library by easily publishing a catalog of books on a website.
	Social Blade—Tracks social media statistics across several major platforms.
	Sprout Social—Insight and thoughtful articles on social media strategies and use.
	US Census Bureau—Helpful for understanding demographics and context of a given community.