

The use of online technologies in the small church

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Background: The lack of consideration of the developmental opportunities that online technologies offer small churches in the 21st century forms the foundation of this research article. This article reports on a master's study which seeks to investigate whether small churches are aware of the opportunities generated by the use of online technologies.

Objectives: This study was done to identify the current online technology usage and seeks to create awareness as to how these technologies are impacting congregation members in the small church environment.

Method: A quantitative study was conducted in the form of a survey of four small churches in the Johannesburg metropolitan area to identify the current usage and the potential impact online technologies could have upon the small churches.

Results: The study indicated that online technologies have a large role to play in the development of small churches and have the ability to increase the involvement of members in church programmes.

Conclusion: It is clear that online technologies offer substantial benefits. Small churches should incorporate the opportunities associated with online technologies in their strategic plans.

Introduction

Pastor Warren at a church ministry conference:

Every time there is an advance in technology, The Kingdom advances. ... Technology has a huge impact on our mission ... not the 'what' of our mission, but the 'how'. ... Technology is the frontline of evangelism. (Nicholau 2010)

Can small churches sit on the fence when it comes to employing the services of Web technology? The challenge that small churches face is to decide which direction will be taken when looking at Web technology. Marcotte (2010) and Larson (2000) confirm religious environments are not utilising the Web and Internet to their full potential. Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2009) affirm Wilson's (2000) stance that small organisations should seek to use technological advancements to assist the churches to move into the 21st century.

The dramatic increase in Internet access in recent years, due to the lower prices of processing power, is availing the Web to just about anyone (Niemand & Rensleigh 2003). Information Communication Technologies (ICT) bring people with common interests and ideas together via the Web without having them having to ever meet face to face (Niemand & Rensleigh 2003). Stephenson (2006) discusses the Web's influence on the church and further emphasises how the church should unleash its Internet ministry and seek to Web empower itself.

The inadequacy in understanding the developments and challenges online technologies place upon small churches in the 21st century defines the background to this research article, as it investigates the Internet and the Web and how it can influence the small church environment. Small churches have similar information needs to their larger counterparts; however, they find themselves in a disadvantaged information position in terms of their finances and expertise.

From the research done by Thumma and Travis (2007) it is evident that larger churches are utilising online technologies to a large extent; however, this is not the case for the smaller churches.

This article seeks to investigate this issue and give direction to small churches who find themselves vacillating on the pendulum of indecision when reviewing the use of online technologies in the

church. Valdez (2012) identifies how these technologies impact the youth and modern society. Some of the findings from this study were presented at conferences (Arthur & Rensleigh 2012, 2013). The underlying purpose for this research was to identify the current and potential usage of the Internet and the Web within the small church environment. In addition, the study identified respondents' views on their current usage of the Web regarding content they access and would like to have access to and how a church Web presence would potentially influence the respondents' view of their future involvement in the church.

Defining the small church

Fish (2006) defines a small church as constituting a membership between 1 and 500 members; a medium church encompasses a membership of between 501 and 1000 members and a large church can be demarcated by a membership larger than 1000 members (see Figure 1).

The definition was created using the following three variables to classify the church size:

- The physical size of the church, taking into consideration the church building and structure. The capacity of the building, in most cases, defines how many people can attend a church service in one sitting. Thus, in some churches, because there are too many people attending the church, the need arises to organise a second or third service.
- Secondly, the number of full-time members plays a large role in the classification of the church size. It is safe to conclude that the larger the number of members in the church, the bigger the size of the church. The opposite is true as well: the smaller the number of members on the church register the smaller the church.
- The third variable is the financial income of the church, which in most churches is one of the most defining factors in the size of the church. The inconsistency that is found when linking the membership to the financial income of the church is that the size of the church membership does not necessarily indicate the financial income of the church.

The different church sizes have different needs, financially, strategically and in terms of information. Therefore, one needs to identify the various technologies that can assist in meeting these needs. Stamoulis (2010) indicates that an online presence is not always effective; however, there are ways in which creating a more effective site can aid an organisation in becoming more operative.

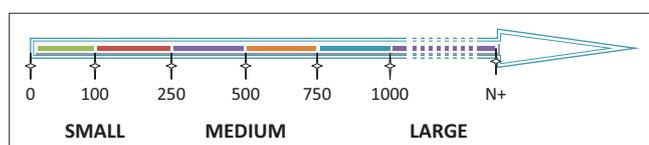


FIGURE 1: A generic congregation size scale.

Source: Adapted from Fish, T., 2006, *Church size*, viewed 30 October 2013, from <http://www.timothyfish.net/Articles/Article.asp?ID=17>

Defining online technologies

The Internet forms the foundation upon which systems such as the World Wide Web run (Haynal 2013). The World Wide Web consortium (W3C 2013) defines the World Wide Web or the Web as 'the universe of network-accessible information, an embodiment of human knowledge'. The Web creates an online environment where the church community can have access to valuable information such as the pastor's notes, calendar activities and weekly devotions, all of which encourage the members to be more involved within the church. Online technologies encourage the sharing of human knowledge and teaching of the biblical word.

These technologies give access to a variety of information resources. On the Web it is evident that there are many applications that people would find themselves making use of. These include email, blogs, forums, podcasts, polls, wikis and online social networks.

There are many online social networking websites that can be utilised. The responsibility of monitoring the church online community belongs to the moderators to help maintain an acceptable form of communication. It is essential that rules and regulations are formulated to assist in governing the communication inside the online community. One such example is 'the respect of others' which must be adhered to by all users. An effective method to restrict visitors from posting unsolicited content is to ensure that they first register on the church website by using a verifiable email address.

Emails, instant messaging (IM) and short messaging systems (SMS) are all part of the various forms of communication in the online environment. Whilst investigating different forms of communication and online technologies, it is imperative to take note of the use of mobile devices. Cellular devices allow people to have access to a mobile online environment.

Research approach and methodology

The research approach undertaken for this study is categorised under Pasteur's quadrant of Stokes's (1997) research classification quadrants. An in-depth literature review was used to introduce the theoretical foundation of the research problem. A quantitative research approach was used in the form of questionnaire survey, all taking place amongst the congregant members in small churches within the Johannesburg metropolitan area. Quantitative research was selected as it is able to address the research question more appropriately and it was able to address the resource constraints.

The literature study provided the background knowledge from which the questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was used to assess the views, approaches and practices and usage of online technologies within the small church environment. Convenience sampling was used for this, surveying 150 respondents from four small churches

within the southern suburbs of Johannesburg. Members from all age groups participated in the study.

Empirical findings

The questionnaire consisted of four sections: church biographical information, online activities, religious information requirements and church online community needs. Some of the responses are discussed below.

Section A: Church biographical information

Section A concentrates on the biographical information within the sample group. The distribution in the age category within the churches allowed for an inclusive view based on age groups. The largest grouping (27%) was that of the respondents under the age of 20, whilst the smallest portion (12%) of respondents can be classified as the young adults in the age bracket between 21 and 30 years of age (see Figure 2). It is important to understand the age distribution within the church and then seek to identify the online need that can be met.

The results of Question 2, which dealt with gender, revealed that 39% of the respondents were male and 61% female. Figure 3 shows a cross-tabulation between the questionnaire variables of age and gender. The survey indicated that there are more women than men in all the age categories with the exception of those above the age of 60. A clear curve shape is visible, identifying a good spread in the age distribution for both the women and the men who took part in the research.

When seeking to develop an online environment it is important to identify the target audience as well as who within the target audience will be making most use of the online technologies.

Section B: Online activities

This section of the questionnaire focused on aspects such as the respondents' choice of Web access.

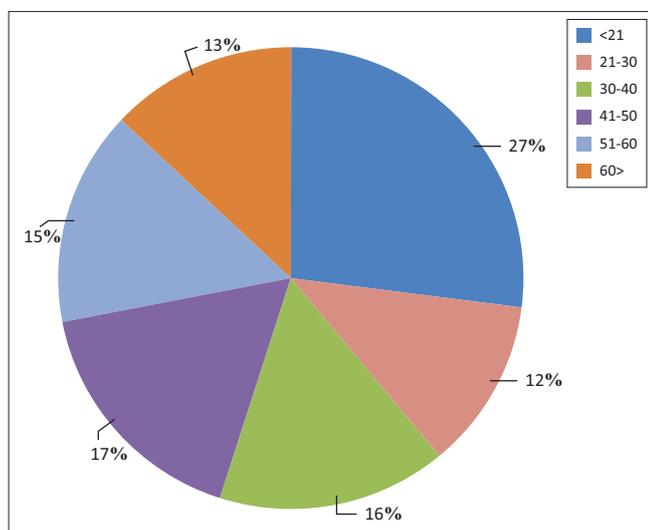


FIGURE 2: Age distribution of respondents.

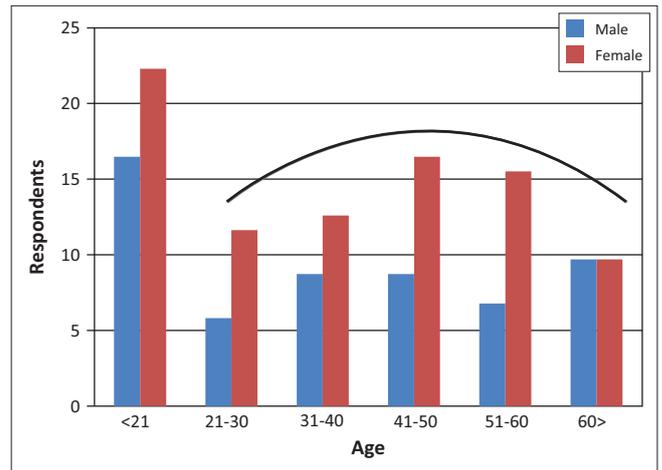


FIGURE 3: Cross-tabulation between age and gender.

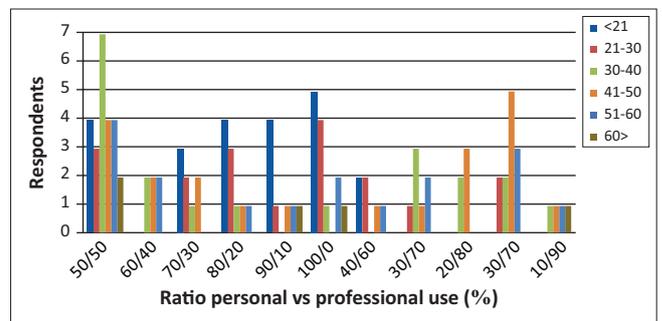


FIGURE 4: Web usage in terms of personal versus professional activities.

Figure 4 shows the respondents' use of the Internet and Web for their personal (e.g. interacting with friends) versus professional (business networking and transactions) interactions. It is clear that the younger respondents use the Web more for personal than professional use. The 31–50 year group on the other hand shows the direct opposite, with a propensity towards less personal and more professional use.

It is interesting to note that the highest peak is that of 50% personal versus 50% professional use in the age category of 31–40. This can be due to the fact that a large group of the working class falls into this age bracket; thus, they will be using the Web for business purposes as well for personal use. This can also be linked to those in the age bracket 41–50; however, this age group peaks at a point where the usage is primarily for professional (90%) rather than personal (10%) activities. As can be expected, the under 20 age group uses the Web more for personal rather than business use as the largest number of respondents use the Web (100%) for personal reasons. This is also noticeable in the age bracket 21–30 where the Web is used largely (100%) for personal rather than professional activities. An interesting point to note is that of those over the age of 60. Contrary to popular belief, this group of individuals is using technology and the Web for personal and professional use.

From Figure 5, a cross-tabulation between gender and the view of the Web, it is clear that the largest number of female

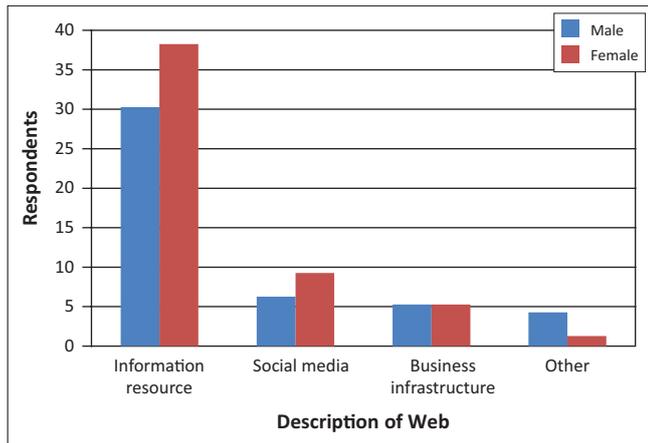


FIGURE 5: Cross-tabulation between gender and view of the Web.

respondents indicated that they view the Web primarily as an information resource. There are an equal number of men and women who view the Web as a business infrastructure. It is important to note that a large portion of the respondents view the Web as an information resource. Churches seeking to utilise the online environment should enquire as to what information is seen to be valuable to the members, taking notice as to whom the information will impact the most.

Figure 6 is a cross-tabulation that identifies the different age groups' view of the Web as an information resource, social media portal or business infrastructure tool. This is interesting when seeking to identify ways to develop the Web technologies in the future. From the figure, the highest perception of the Web is as an information resource.

The age bracket 41–50 is the group with the most respondents who view the Web as an information resource. The only other high number of respondents is in the age group under the age of 21, who view the Web as a social media tool. From the results depicted, this age bracket would be ideal to develop an online social media group to keep them up to date with current and future happenings within the church.

Few respondents in the age categories of 21 to the oldest age group of 60 understand the Web as a social media tool. In terms of those who view the Web as a business infrastructure it makes sense that there is a rise from the younger age groups to the middle age groups and then a drop as respondents enter the age of retirement. The highest numbers of respondents who see the Web as a business infrastructure fall into the age bracket between 31 and 40. This makes sense due to people that age bracket being involved in the business environment at work. Due to many church members seeing the Web as an information resource first, it is ideal to first develop an online presence that will provide valuable information to its members before developing online social networks.

In Figure 7 is the cross-tabulation between age and the respondents' ability to adapt to new technology. As expected

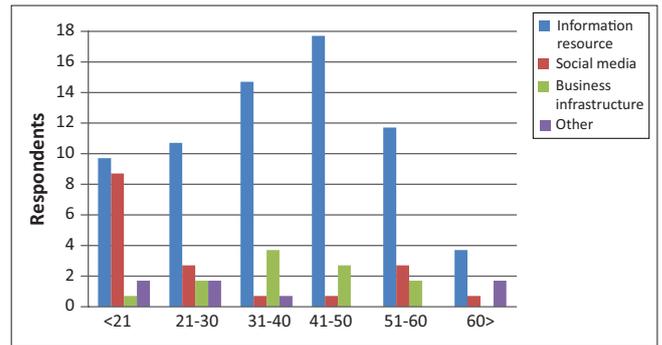


FIGURE 6: Cross-tabulation between age and view of the Web.

the group under the age of 21 find it easy to adapt to, and develop skills when using, new technologies. The opposite is true for those over the age of 60, as they are hesitant to use new technology and seldom move away from their existing technology. In the age category 51–60 the highest number of respondents indicated that they convert gradually to new technology. In the age bracket 21–30 the highest number of respondents indicated they easily acquire the skills to use new equipment. The ability of the younger age groups to adapt to newer technologies is evident. This enforces the idea that as the church grows older, the current younger generations will be much more settled in an online friendly environment.

The cross-tabulation in Figure 8 depicts the respondents' gender compared to the age of their cellular devices. Eight men and 21 women do not own a cellular phone. The largest group, comprising 26 men and 26 women, have cellular phones that are no older than one year. When seeking to gather information in a push or pull manner, it can be best done via cellular devices (Fasolo *et al.* 2006). It is worth noting that most respondents have access to mobile technologies that allow them to access the Web.

In Figure 9 is a depiction of the cross-tabulation between age and respondents' willingness to access the church website from their cellular devices. In the age category under 21, 88%

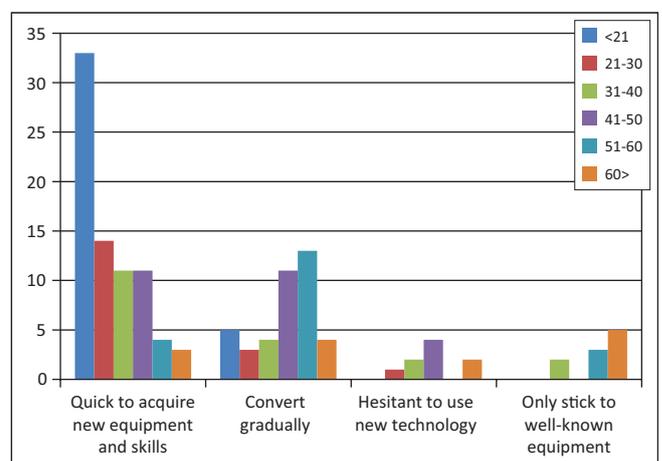


FIGURE 7: Age of respondents and ability to adapt to new technology.

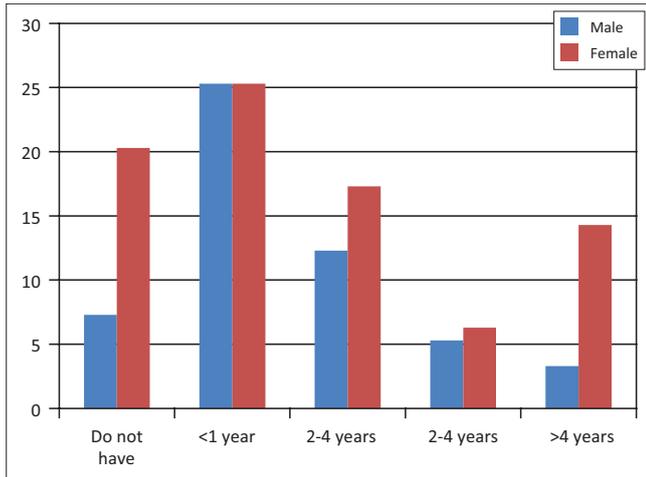


FIGURE 8: Gender of respondents and age of cellular devices.

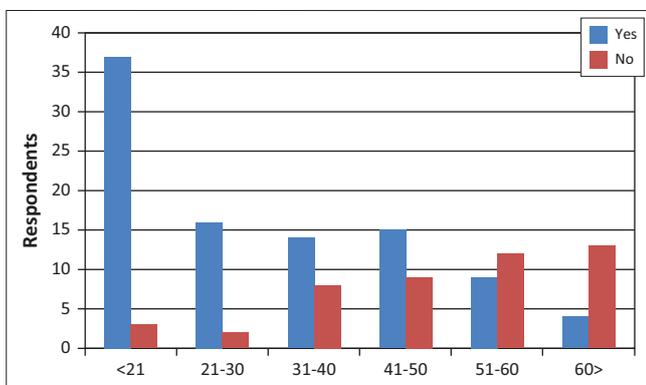


FIGURE 9: Age of respondents and willingness to access the church website via cellular devices.

of respondents indicated they indeed would use their cellular phones to access the church website and only 12% indicated they would not. In the age group 21–30, 86% respondents revealed they would use their cellular phones to access the church website whilst 14% indicated they would not. Only in the age categories over 50 did respondents indicate the opposite. Statistics reveal that 68% of respondents would prefer not to use their cellular phones to access the church website. These churches should seek to invest in developing a website that is designed to be operational on a cellular device. In all age categories, there were respondents who indicated they would use their cellular phones to access the church website.

To the question 'Do you think making use of online social networking can enhance your involvement in the church activities?', 62% of the respondents indicated 'Yes'. The respondents indicated their willingness to make use of their church's online presence, should it have one: 82% to download information, 74% to upload information onto the church website and 38% to utilise the social networking. In addition, 41% of the respondents would make use of other online tools such as Mxit and Blackberry messenger (BBM) applications to share information within the church (see Figure 10).

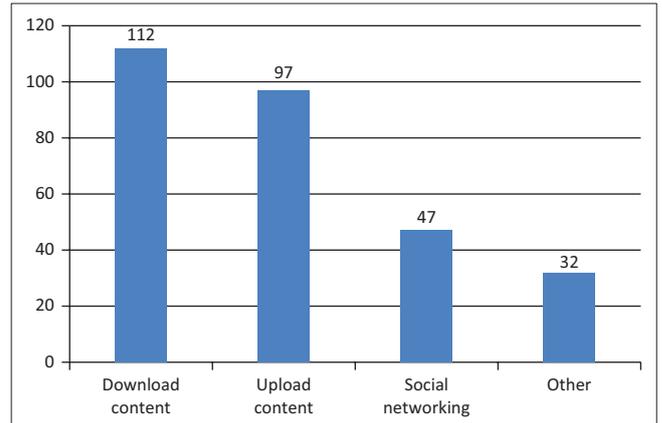


FIGURE 10: Utilisation of the church online presence.

It is worth taking note that the majority of the respondents indicated that the presence of such online technologies would enhance their involvement in the church, as it will help to keep them updated as to what is happening within the church. The correct use of online technologies in the small environment will have a positive impact on member participation.

Conclusion

Based on the research conducted for this study it is evident that these small churches currently do not effectively utilise online technologies. Their current usage of online technologies is minimal or none at all. The findings reveal that as the churches' timeline moves forward, they cannot afford not to use online technologies. The younger generations find technology to be a necessity and do not find it in any way difficult to use. Online technologies are an accepted part of the younger generational culture and so small churches need to identify the potential these technologies have currently and also will have in the future. The church leadership need to have foresight and look as to how they will best use online technology in the church.

It is evident that by using online technologies, an environment for people to stay up to date and informed of the happenings of the church will be created. In addition, it will improve the involvement of the congregation members in the church functions. When small churches look to increase involvement of church members, it is important that they find the best practices that work for the church and use the appropriate online technologies.

Online mobile technologies make people accessible any time of day, allowing the church to share and gather information at ease. These online mobile technologies are ideal when the church seeks to stay in touch with their congregation members.

In the future, churches need to identify the trends in terms of information needs and social media needs of the congregation members and to find ways to share appropriate information at convenient times with their members.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

J.A. (University of Johannesburg) and C.R. (University of Johannesburg) contributed equally to the writing of this article.

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