

Liberty University School of Divinity

**The Utilization of the Internet in the Advancement of Discipleship  
in the Traditional Black Church**

A Thesis Project Submitted to  
The Faculty of Liberty University School of Divinity  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry

by

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## ABSTRACT

Discipleship and technology are interrelated. Discipleship is the process of maturing in Christ through our actions, life, and words, as well as how we present ourselves to the world. This must become integral to the vitality and mission of the traditional Black Church. Technology is a resource that can assist the traditional Black Church to fulfill the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20. This thesis premise is supported by applied research (survey findings from pastoral leaders within the General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia), academic research (scholarly material from experts in the fields of theology, sociology, statistics, and church growth), and the Bible.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

As churches progress through the twenty-first century, the power of the Internet as a tool must be embraced to remain socially relevant, and sensitive to their communities while having the power to enhance knowledge. The Internet has allowed churches and its members to stay connected and in real-time while processing the power to dominate every sector of peoples' lives. Churches must seek to use every progressive means at their disposal in assisting a member with the discipleship process. The book of Acts established a biblical model for discipleship, based upon the directive that in which they were instructed to "Go, Preach, Baptize and Train." If one is to become a disciple of Jesus each part of the Great Commission is essential. Jesus said, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth, therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20, NLT).

The development of discipleship with the assistance of the Internet as a tool has accelerated the ability for Christians to stay connected with the mission that was given to the universal church without having to be site present. Discipleship not only involves a personal faith with God but sharing that faith with other people in being his disciple and building up more disciples. The word "disciple" literally means a learner or student and describes one who follows a specific teacher. Disciples are not only pupils; they imitate their teachers. As believers, a disciple should strive to imitate Christ. Disciples must understand the willingness of embracing the Great Commission in their lives as God's will. The Bible speaks of bearing fruit and increasing in knowledge while walking worthy of the Lord (see Colossians 1:5-10).

Knowing how powerful mere words are, imagine how powerful is the Word of God!

David Horton, states in *The Portable Seminary* that “In the New Testament it becomes clear that the Word is not merely a message proclaimed but is Christ himself.”<sup>1</sup> The Word in flesh, Jesus Christ, is the root of our being; the juggernaut of Word-power. He is the creative force of all that is and all that will be. Note the power effused in the following Johannine passage:

In the beginning, was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth (John 1:1-3).

The Spirit-inspired author of Hebrews 4:12 explains, “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” The Word of God is the most powerful word of all, and it is the Great Commission of Christians to spread God's Word to all the earth. Swiss reformer and theologian Karl Barth writes,

The Word of God is Gospel, that is, the good word because it declares God's good work. In this Word, God's work itself becomes speech. Through his Word, God discloses his work in his covenant with man, in the history of its establishment, maintenance, accomplishment, and fulfillment.<sup>2</sup>

The Word is the root of the Christian message, the driving force of evangelism, and the lifeline of church livelihood. Every effective method must be used to spread the Bible to the world. This includes the use of modern technology in the form of the Internet. Today, technology has taken the world to limits previously unimaginable. Advancements on the Internet and mobile forms have emphasized the inner workings of human ideas and opinions on a global

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<sup>1</sup> David Horton. *The Portable Seminar*, (Bloomington: Bethany House, 2006), 216.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), 19.

level. Never has a student in India and a coal miner in Alabama been able to fully converse in a matter of seconds. Never has the influence of a common individual been able to reach people in high places. Personal moments can be captured on a phone and posted on the Internet where it can go viral in a matter of days reaching millions upon millions of people.

Despite the Internet's reputation for addiction, fraud, negative influence, and lack of real human interaction, it has been a positive vehicle for education, community connectivity, promotion, and worldwide awareness. According to Aleks Krotoski, the Internet has changed the landscape of communication, of how people view the world and has highlighted the importance of "the concept of religious ritual is so deeply embedded in our social fabric that it is natural for it to have made the leap to virtuality."<sup>3</sup> There is no greater opportunity to spread the Gospel of Christ than through the utilization of the Internet. For the church to maintain progressive inroads to society it must relevant it must embrace the Internet as a tool, to this is a virtual must. The importance of the Internet in everyday life – from banking to shopping to socializing – means that religious organizations must migrate their churches to virtual real estate to stay relevant and to be present with the people.

Merging technology and ministry is only logical. Krotoski states, "Leaders have websites, blogs, and Twitter feeds, there are email prayer lines and online confessionals, social networks for yogis and apps that call the faithful to prayer."<sup>4</sup> The Internet has made churches more accessible and serves as another avenue for worshipping and connecting believers.

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<sup>3</sup>Aleks Krotoski, "What effect has the internet had on religion?" *The Guardian*. April 15, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/apr/17/untangling-web-aleks-krotoski-religion> (accessed November 1, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

The Internet has become an electronic platform that enables dialogue between churches and its parishioners in advancing and developing inner and outer growth as a tool. It facilitates the sharing and creation of unique information through web networks and virtual communities.

Jan Kietzmann exclaims,

When engaging with these services, users can create highly interactive platforms through which individuals, communities, and organizations can share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content or pre-made content posted online. They introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between businesses, organizations, communities, and individuals.<sup>5</sup>

Christians can access information via a computer, smartphone, or tablet which makes the sharing of information possible at any time. The experts at Digidence Social Media and Marketing proclaim, "Social media uses web-based and mobile technologies to transmute traditional forms of communications like news and marketing into a 787 interactive dialogue with the world!"<sup>6</sup> It can consist of text exchanges, videos, blogs, community forums, and/or audio podcasts. Social media is a free-for-all vehicle of public and private expression. It is a way to receive and share information quickly. It also embraces personal opinions and allows for opposing and connecting ideas to meet.

The Internet has single-handedly connected the world, one person, at a time. It is a platform where ideas of all kinds can be expressed by anyone simultaneously. The world is listening and talking more than ever before. Of the nearly 7.5 billion people inhabiting the earth<sup>7</sup>, according to statistics, 1.96 billion people are on social media and it is estimated that it

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<sup>5</sup> Jan H. Kietzmann, and Kristopher Hermkens. "Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media," *Business Horizons*, 2011: 241–251.

<sup>6</sup> *Digidence Social Media Marketing* (2017) accessed 2017, <http://digidencesocial.com/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Population Total* (2017), accessed 2017. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>.

will be 2.5 billion in 2018. In 2017, eighty-one percent (an estimated 185 million) of Americans had a social media profile.<sup>8</sup> There has never been a time in human history where people were able to communicate with each other on such a massive level. From connecting with family and friends on Facebook to tweeting about politics on Twitter to searching for a job on LinkedIn to using a funny filter on Snapchat to posting dynamic photos on Instagram to making a movie for YouTube to posting recipes on Pinterest, global messaging is shaping the ideas, beliefs, and actions of people all over the world. In "What is the real impact of social media?" Maryanne Gaitho states,

A study by the New York Times Consumer Insight Group revealed the motivations that participants cited for sharing information on social media include: a desire to reveal valuable and entertaining content to others; to define themselves; to grow and nourish relationships and to get the word out about brands and causes they like or support.<sup>9</sup>

People are searching for knowledge and understanding as well as communities in which to belong. In addition, they are looking for a tribe to adhere to and a safe space to share their innermost thoughts.

The downside of all this virtual sharing is a lonely void, created by a lack of real human interaction, that seems to grow bigger each day. The challenge for the traditional Black church is to avoid the lack of personal interaction while using the medium to proclaim the good news of the kingdom throughout the world” (Mt. 24:14). The Internet is the perfect vehicle in which to testify to all the nations. Jesus said of his disciples in Matthew 5:13-14, “You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world.” The power of the Internet can assist churches and

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<sup>8</sup> J. Clement. “Percentage of U.S. population with a social media profile from 2008 to 2017,” accessed November 2017.) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273476/percentage-of-us-population-with-a-social-network-profile/>.

<sup>9</sup> Maryanne Gaitho. "What is the real impact of social media?" *Simplilearn*. October 24, 2017. <https://www.simplilearn.com/real-impact-social-media-article> (accessed November 28, 2017).

members in giving the world direction and be a great light in these dark times. P. K. McCary says in *Rappin' with Jesus*, "If you let the light of the Almighty shine through, everything you are will be clear as a bell."<sup>10</sup>

Through the power of the Internet, the Gospel has been shared literally with all nations. To date, there is not a faster more efficient way to spread the word of God, than through the Internet. In the New York Times article, "Facebook Page for Jesus, With Highly Active Fans," Jennifer Preston noted that Rev. Kenneth Lillard, author of *Social Media and Ministry: Sharing the Gospel in the Digital Age*, concurs with this idea. According to Preston, Lillard stated that "Facebook and other social media tools, including Google Plus, YouTube and Twitter, represented the best chance for religious leaders to expand their congregations since the printing press helped Martin Luther usher in the Protestant Reformation."<sup>11</sup> Social media can be a valuable tool to help Christians to "go into the world not as conquerors but as agents of reconciliation, not with hostility for sinful non-Christians, but with compassion with which Jesus looked on those who were trapped in the inhumanity of their alienation from God, other people, and themselves."<sup>12</sup> It is our duty to reach people wherever they are and in every way possible. Early disciples did not have the use of modern technology like we have. Internet, radio, and television should be used as an advantage for Christ. Like the disciples, the church must not cease claiming the gospel everywhere. Mark 16:20 states, "And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the

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<sup>10</sup> McCary, P. K. *Rappin' with Jesus* (New York: African American Family Press, 1994), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Preston, "Facebook Page for Jesus, with Highly Active Fans," *New York Times*, September 4, 2011, accessed November 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/05/technology/jesus-daily-on-facebook-nurtures-highly-active-fans.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 367.

signs that accompanied it.” Proclaiming the gospel is the foremost mission of the Church, as Scripture indicates, “And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah” (Acts 5:42).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Traditional Black churches that make up the General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia are not utilizing the Internet at times as a viable technological tool in accelerating a cohesive strategic plan of discipleship for its members in order to advance the call of discipleship. The Internet is still considered a fad to some congregations while their growing competitors have latched on to virtual communication.

Many traditional Black churches choose to not use the Internet due to misconceptions, such as the Internet being too secular, watering down the potency of Christianity, conforming to the world, and trying to replace corporate worship. Although some of these issues can occur, social media is completely reliant upon the way it is used and how the information is shared. Sharing of vital information can jump-start church growth, bring new members to Christ, and build new virtual and tangible Christian communities.

Christian church attendance has been on a steady decline over the last five decades. Reporter Sarah Pulliam Bailey of the Washington Post states “Christianity is on the decline in America, not just among younger generations or in certain regions of the country but across race, gender, education, and geographic barriers. The percentage of adults who describe themselves as Christians dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years to about 71 percent, according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center.”<sup>13</sup> The decline can be due to a

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<sup>13</sup> Aleks Krotoski, "What effect has the internet had on religion?" *The Guardian*. April 15, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/apr/17/untangling-web-aleks-krotoski-religion> (accessed November 1, 2017).

variety of factors. Some of these factors include the conversion to other religions like Islam (which is projected to make up one-third of the world's population by 2050)<sup>14</sup>, an increase in the belief of spirituality versus traditional religion, secularism becoming more popular, global embracing of different cultures and ideas, lack of relevancy to modern life, misinformation, lack of religious education, and feeling ill at ease in the church community or organized religion in general. Social media can help remedy some of these problems by spreading the gospel, educating the masses, communicating events, news, inspiration, and general information, and providing a community of believers for continued edification of God and one another and fellowship. Social media can help the church to create a Christian nation of wise and understanding people knowing the ways of God as in Deuteronomy 4:6, "Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'"

The Internet can be used to develop disciples for Christ while bringing people into true worship. Segler and Bradley explain the reasons to worship are "to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, and to devote the will to the purpose of God."<sup>15</sup> The use of the Internet can further the worship of God throughout the world with positive faith-filled messages, educational materials, music, videos, photos, and Bible verses. There is no limit to what can be done with a creative mind and a Christ-filled spirit.

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel Burke, "The World's Fastest Growing Religion," CNN.com, April 2015, accessed July 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/02/living/pew-study-religion/>.

<sup>15</sup> Franklin M. Segler and Randal Bradley, *Christian Worship* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1967), 10.



## Statement of Limitations

Many voices are clamoring for attention through the Internet and social media. The Internet has become a worldwide platform where the intellectual and the lunatic alike can voice their opinions, start a movement, gain a following, and influence the minds and spirits of many. Words of encouragement sit beside vicious insults. Purity and depravity walk hand in hand. The reality of the Internet is that it reflects all the sinners and saints in the world. Personal information becomes way too impersonal and introverts become more introverted while basing their worth on Facebook likes or Instagram follows. Sex, drugs, and fake news battle with inspiration, edification, and education. The world stands at a crossroads of conflicting information bombarding from every direction. No one knows what to believe, what to think, what to feel. There are too many options. More and more the church finds it difficult to get people to focus on God and positive things. The church fights against the noise and tries desperately to remind Christ's disciples, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" Philippians 4:8.

Churches fight to rise above the noise of the Internet while fearing that their doctrine could be tainted, dismissed, vilified, or rendered ineffective. Competition for attention limits what the masses will get to see; therefore, churches must not be redundant in their information but seek to be creative in reaching the people.

How can the church remain relevant today while being socially insensitive to the relational needs of others? Richard Niebuhr states in *Christ and Culture*, "The forgiveness that Christ practices and teaches is said to be irreconcilable with the demands of justice or free man's sense of moral responsibility? The injunction of the Sermon on the Mount concerning anger and

resistance to evil, oaths, and marriage, anxiety, and property, are found incompatible with the duties of life in society.<sup>16</sup> How can the church be heard when there are so many different voices vying for attention; when there are so many doctrines, beliefs, and religious trends? How can the church turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh when stone hearts are being celebrated and flesh hearts regarded as weak disciples have been instructed to demonstrate their faith? Are we aiding in the problem when we know that? In "Social Media's Impact On Society," Ruthann Shellabarger argues, "the overuse of social media is a global problem impacting all generations, and research has shown that substantial Internet usage can have a highly negative impact on our mental and emotional health."<sup>17</sup> A plan must be devised regardless of what others think of the Internet, the embracing of it as a tool will always outweigh the cons.

There are problems associated with Internet preaching of which pastoral leaders need to be cognizant. Sharing the gospel through the Internet has caused some believers to forsake corporate worship. Hebrews 10:24-25 states, "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." The Internet can cause a type of "bedside church syndrome." With church services and programs being able to be streamed via the Internet through various video platforms, online streaming can easily replace personal conversation and be a substitute for personal interaction.

Campaigns via the Internet that are implemented and executed poorly can produce lackluster results. Without strategic efforts, constant engagement, intriguing creative content,

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<sup>16</sup> Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ, and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper Brothers, 1951), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Ruthanne Shellabarger. "Social Media's Impact on Society" *Odyssey*. August 2016, accessed November 2017, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/social-medias-impact-society>.

and frequent updates, social media can fall short of expectations be rendered invaluable to a church. There is very little purpose to having a social media page if it is inactive or uninteresting. Without the use of images, relevant content, video, and engaging dialogue, social media will not prove very social. Churches must interact with their people. There must be healthy interaction between pastoral leaders and their audiences for social media to make a tangible difference.

### **Theoretical Basis for Project**

Spreading the gospel is the main tenant of the Christian faith. Jesus himself is the gospel and his mission was to spread the good news of liberation through him to God. Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-2 in the gospel of Luke,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus told his disciples, before He ascended to God, to preach the good news to all the world.

“And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15).

The Gospel holds the power of salvation. Horton writes,

Much of the most frequent use of *sôtéria* (salvation) and its derivatives are for deliverance, preservation from all spiritual dangers, the bestowed of all religious blessings. Its alternative is destruction (Philippians 1:28), death (2 Corinthians 7:10), divine wrath (1 Thessalonians 5:9); it is available to all (Titus 2:11), shared (Jude 3), eternal (Hebrews 5:9).<sup>18</sup>

It is the only way for people to reconnect with God and to live an abundantly blessed life.

Salvation is through Jesus Christ alone. Christ saves from sin, ignorance, depression, alienation,

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<sup>18</sup> David Horton. *The Portable Seminar* (Bloomington: Bethany House, 2006), 216.

death, pressures of life, mental, physical, or spiritual bondage, self-destruction, unforgiveness, arrogance, disbelief, and whatever else that can separate from God.

The Internet has become an important vehicle in helping to fulfill the Great Commission. We have been instructed to move beyond moving to be followers of Jesus Christ, allowing our relationship with Christ to be manifested in the earth, as Paul wrote Timothy,

Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.<sup>19</sup>

The Internet has provided the tools to help spread Christ's message, encourage, and teach others, and spread sound biblical doctrine in a fast, efficient way of providing a viable discipleship plan to both believers and the unchurched.

### **Statement of Methodology**

Churches need to build technology departments or appoint a dedicated media person with the main goal of creating transformative and restorative campaigns with a focus on discipleship plans. If implemented effectively, the technology ministry could create a massive amount of awareness to a ministry. Research shows that social media is leading in human communication, and if the Church wants to get its message out, it must participate in the conversation. If one were to search the world wide web for "church social media," he or she would experience over 200 million articles on using social platforms for Christian ministry."<sup>20</sup> The Internet is an

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<sup>19</sup> 2 Timothy 4:2-5, NRSV.

<sup>20</sup> Jason Bradley. "5 Reasons Your Church Social Media Needs to be a Priority." *Ministry Tech*, June 2016, accessed October 2017 <https://ministrytech.com/social-media/5-reasons-your-church-needs-to-prioritize-social-media/>.

important tool because it may be where your church is introduced to potential members. An effective Internet campaign can bring the knowledge of a certain church to many people who may not have otherwise discovered it. Almost half of the church planters say that social media is their most successful form of outreach.<sup>21</sup> It is estimated that the Church of England reaches over a million people each month via the Internet. Olivia Rudgard, states in *The Telegraph*, “Around 1.1 million attend services at least once a month, while the church estimates 1.2 million people are reached every month via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn.”<sup>22</sup> The Church of England is a prime example of how a church’s outreach can go beyond what could be housed within the four walls of the building.

An innovative online discipleship strategy plan would send people directly to a church’s website so that they can discover more about their ministry, programs, community events, and resources. Once on a website, if interest has peaked, the conversion is a real possibility. It is important to meet people where they are located. When people do not come to church, social media allows the church to come to people. The church can connect to the transitioning world community online and foster new and rewarding relationships. This can be done by building virtual communities where people can feel like they are in a sacred place, a place of understanding, prayer, peace, and spiritual security. Pastoral leaders need to remember, that “[Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42).

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Olivia Rudgard. “Church of England reaches more on social media than in services,” *Telegraph*. October 2017, accessed November 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/18/church-england-reaches-social-media-services/>.

## Review of Literature

### Selected Books

1. Barth, Karl. *Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963.

*Evangelical Theology* emphasizes the importance of evangelism to Christianity using Barth's theological view on the commitment and duty to spread the gospel to all nations. This is an important premise to support the use of social media as a tool for churches.

2. Day, A. Colin. *Roget's Thesaurus of the Bible*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992.

*Roget's Thesaurus of the Bible* is a valuable resource tool to help search for relevant scriptures. It is divided by topics, related topics: similar and opposite, and also allows research by passages. This book allows for quick comparisons that allow easier research.

3. Duling, Dennis C. *The New Testament: History, Literature, and Social Context*. Belmont, CA: Thomas Wadsworth, 2003.

This book proved relevant to my research by outlining the history of transmitting the gospel. It emphasizes the importance of the gospel message and how it is imperative for it to reach the ends of the earth. I used this as a germane push of the church towards social media.

4. Guthrie, Shirley. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

*Christian Doctrine* introduces the tenants of Christian faith through biblical references and various theologies. It is relevant because it explains the importance of

the Christian community and its growth through theologies relating to one another and life in the Christian community. Communication is vital to a relationship.

5. Horton, David. *The Portable Seminary*. Bloomington: Bethany House, 2006.

*The Portable Seminary* proved to be a useful resource for understanding the Christian church, tenants of faith, theology, The Bible, church history, missions, and expectations of the Church. It helps to expound upon the need for understanding and communicating the gospel to members and nonmembers of the body of Christ.

#### Selected Articles

1. Budak, Ceren, Divyakant Agrawal, and Amr El Abbadi. "Limiting the Spread of Misinformation in Social Networks." In *Proceedings of the 20th International Conference on World Wide Web*, 665-74. New York: AMW, 2011.

This article highlights the dangers of misinformation in social media and gives solutions to limit the imminent spread of misinformation. It studies competing campaigns in a social network and addresses where a negative campaign begins, limiting campaigns to counteract misinformation. Churches must be aware of the dangers of social platforms and how to control information to get the correct messaging to the masses.

2. Feng, Ling, Yanqing Hu, Baowen Li, H. Eugene Stanley, Shlomo Havlin, and Lidia A. Braunstein. "Competing for Attention in Social Media under Information Overload Conditions." *PLoS One* 10, no. 7 (July 10, 2015): 1-13.

This article provided succinct information on the overload of information on social media and how that information reaches people who are drowned in a sea of noise because of rapidly expanding information feeds. Competition for attention limits what the masses will get to see. It is relevant because it is important that churches are not redundant in their information while continuing to creative in reaching the people.

## Selected Weblinks

1. Bradley, Jayson. "5 Reasons Your Church Social Media Needs to Be a Priority." Ministry Tech. June 8, 2016. Accessed October 8, 2017. <https://ministrytech.com/social-media/5-reasons-your-church-needs-to-prioritize-social-media/>.

Bradley's article is relevant because it explains why social media is vital for churches to operate in today's technological era. It gives specific reasons why social media could benefit church growth and it also explains how meeting people where they are (in their homes) is a powerful tool for spiritual transformation.

2. Burke, Daniel. "The World's Fastest-Growing Religion Is..." CNN.com. April 3, 2015. Accessed July 29, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/02/living/pew-study-religion/>.

Burke's article reveals that Christianity is no longer the world's fastest-growing religion. Islam is the fastest-growing major religion in the world; therefore, something must be done to change the tide. Social media may be one way to gain new Christ-followers.

3. Church of England. "Church of England Reaches More than a Million on Social Media every Month." October 18, 2017. Accessed October 26, 2017. <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2017/09/2017/10/church-of-england-reaches-more-than-a-million-on-social-media-every-month.aspx>.

This article is valid because it demonstrates how the use of social media can reach an enormous amount of people easily. A million people were reached by the Church of England through the social media efforts of the church. It is a wonderful victory in spreading their message to the world.

4. Curoso, Jay. "How to Use Social Media Effectively in the Church." Church Leaders. May 23, 2016. Accessed September 12, 2017. <https://churchleaders.com/worship/worship-articles/154143-how-to-use-social-media-effectively-in-the-church.html>.

Curoso explained explains how churches can make social media work in communication, church growth, and messaging. It shows the dos and don'ts of social



media in order to get the desired effect. It also outlines why social media is not working for churches.

5. Forrester, Mark. "The Church and Social Media." *Influence Magazine*. August 24, 2017. Accessed October 26, 2017. <https://influencemagazine.com/practice/the-church-and-social-media>.

This article and podcast explain how social media has revolutionized the way people communicate. If the church wants to remain relevant, it must also learn to communicate the way millions of people do via social media. Forrester expounds on how churches can utilize social media as leverage to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

6. Fuchs, Christian. "Social Media and the Public Sphere." *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism, and Critique: Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 12, no. 1 (2014). Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://triplec.at/index.php/triplec/article/view/552/668>.

Fuchs writes about social media, its use in the public sphere, and how it has become a major vehicle of communication. The author discusses the role of the public sphere for acutely understanding social media.

7. Goble, Gordon. "The History of Social Networking." *Digital Trends*. May 14, 2016. Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://www.digitaltrends.com/features/the-history-of-social-networking/>.

Goble outlines the history of social media and its enormous growth. This is relevant because it shows the technological changes in communication and how people and organizations alike must adapt to survive in the common era.

8. Howe, Jonathan. "7 Keys to an Effective Church Social Media Strategy." *Lifeway*. January 3, 2017. Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://www.lifeway.com/pastors/2017/01/03/keys-effective-church-social-media-strategy/>.

This article tells churches how to effectively use social media to get the results desired. It outlines seven strategies for social media success. It also explains how fast

growth and lack of knowledge of social media lead to reluctance in church participation or poorly done social media campaigns. This is relevant to my research by showing how the correct way to use social media can be beneficial to gaining followers of Christ.

### Selected Scriptures

1. “The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn” (Isa 61:1-2, NRSV).

Using spiritual journals and Daily Bread booklets to tell his/her stories of how they were once low in spirit and how God brought them through hard times can be effective. Social media can be used as a tool of encouragement. Also, social media can be used in this scripture by reminding followers that although it may seem like they are climbing up a mountain right now, God is still in the blessing business.

2. “And he answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them’” (Luke 7:22, NRSV).

Creating a Twitter account to tweet about what one knows to be true will help in this scripture. Tweeting allows followers to read about current, up-to-date events in someone's life. Thus, tweeting about what one has witnessed is a way to get out the good news.

3. “The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force” (Luke 16:16, NRSV). “For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does” (1 Pet 4:6, NRSV).

4. “And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it” (Mark 16:20, NRSV).

Conducting interviews with radio stations can be an effective way to spread the good news gospel everywhere. Listening to radio programs does not involve sitting down and reading. One can do multiple tasks while listening, whereas reading requires focus. Reading is not bad; however, radios can reach larger audiences. People may not be willing to pick up a certain book.

5. “And every day in the temple and at home, they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah” (Acts 5:42, NRSV).

Facebook or Twitter updates will teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. With these social media outlets, one does not have to be in front of a computer, whether it be a laptop or desktop. People are quick to pull out their cellular devices to make a post or scroll. Although they are very helpful, computers require passwords and may take some time to load. Since cellular devices are handy, they are the best way to teach every day in the temple and at home.

6. “Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word” (Acts 8:4, NRSV).

Twitter is a good source of social media to use for this case. With Twitter, one can update his activities minute by minute. This is helpful to keep a record of movement to allow one to know where they have been and other places they have yet to go.

7. “And there they continued proclaiming the good news” (Acts 14:7, NRSV).

Upon waking up in the morning, one can update his social media status with words of inspiration and Scripture. He can also post about the good news that has currently taken place in his life. For example, waking up in the morning, or an ailment he no longer is experiencing. For those who try to keep up with the times, they can download Bible apps to read daily scriptures.

8. “Proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31, NRSV).

Video messages to followers will help to proclaim and teach about God. Followers can then share video messages with their followers, which will lead to mass coverage. The video messages show the person's face, and viewers will be able to witness the boldness and steadfastness of the person who made the video.

9. “The Lord gives the command, great is the company of those who bore the tidings ...” (Ps 68:11, NRSV).

Creating a blog will accomplish the deed in this scripture. Blogs are like public diary entries. They can highlight the exciting and informative events in one’s life. Indirectly, readers will be able to witness how God moved in someone’s life.

10. [P]rovided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel” (Col 1:23, NRSV).

Updating one’s social media status daily and frequently about the gospel of Jesus Christ can accomplish this scripture. One may not be able to spend much of the day on social media; however, updates will keep followers informed. Updating daily and frequently means that there is no shift in dedication to spreading the gospel of Jesus.

11. “Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully” (2 Tim 4:2-5, NRSV).

Social media platforms provide Christian leadership to proclaim the gospel of Christ! Video platforms allow the messenger to be seen and heard, which helps followers to relate because they will see an actual person. Reading or hearing voices on the radio may lose followers’ interest.

12. “And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come” (Matt 24:14, NRSV).

Live streaming is a type of social media to deliver the good news of Jesus Christ worldwide. It encompasses a variety of topics worldwide. People can view recording media in real-time simultaneously.

13. “And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations” (Mark 13:10, NRSV).

With platforms, such as Instagram, the Christian message can be showcased to all nations. People can share photos and videos depicting their testimonies. Viewers can see what is posted instantly.

14. “And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation’” (Mark 16:15, NRSV).

Tumblr is a microblogging social site. Users can post multimedia and other content in a short blog form. Bloggers can follow other bloggers as well as share with others who may not know about the other blogger. If used correctly, social media can be powerful for global evangelism.

15. “And he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem’” (Luke 24:46-47, NRSV).

16. “He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42, NRSV).

Morning text messages and blogs are two ways to preach and testify to people.

Grabbing someone's attention in the morning may set the atmosphere for his day.

Hearing and reading God's word can encourage someone to keep the faith or have hope that God is still good.

17. “Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8, NRSV).

Blogging develops relationships. It allows one to connect with site visitors which enables the spreading of the news. Blogging can serve as one's platform to show his passion for something, in this case, passion for the boundless riches of Christ.

18. "Thus, I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named so that I do not build on someone else's foundation" (Rom 15:20, NRSV).

Through social media, one can invite others to a church service where Christ is proclaimed Lord over their lives. One can also use his/her personal Facebook page or blog to testify about God's love through their eyes. Christian testimonies are precious and effective if the correct words are used and are not tainted by social media.

### **Conclusion**

Traditional Black churches within the General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia must embrace the Internet as a resource for doing ministry more effectively in the twenty-first century. Spreading the Gospel to an unreached, unchurched generation of people through social media is critical to reaching the lost and hurting while ensuring that the message remains unchanged. The church was given the greatest directive in Matthew 28:19-20 when Jesus passionately told them to make disciples by baptizing and teaching. The Internet enables the facilitation of this commission allowing greater education, community awareness, and networking for churches. Also, this digital platform allows for churches to not only meet the needs of their parishioners through the online streaming of worship services but to also reach the unchurched, those who would otherwise not walk into a church building. Despite the stigma of the Internet as a form of secularism, greed, shallowness, and immorality, there is a positive aspect to this cyber-technology that can significantly increase the number of people hearing the message of Christ, thus fulfilling the Great Commission.

## **Chapter Two – The Internet: A Significant Resource**

The Internet has become one of the most prolific forms of technology used to access and share information, surrounding the Great Commission as a moderately new ecumenical concept tool in assisting the believer in becoming a better reflection of the image of Christ. The research encompasses various technical experts such as Ling Feng et. al., marketing gurus such as Shama Hyder, theologians such as Karl Barth, biblical resources such as commentaries and word studies, and academic literature. The range of research is broad and includes academic as well as professional resources that present a more accurate assessment of the Internet's usefulness in our modern times today, especially in the Christian community. Material is gathered from scholarly books, articles, and journals, respected news sources, a diverse group of respected business and technological websites and blogs, and an in-depth survey regarding social media and the Church as a tool in advancing discipleship in the life of the believer.

This research has been divided into five main sections: biblical, theological, technological, marketing, and a survey of a selected group. In this chapter, each section works together to create a persuasive argument for the inclusion of the Internet in traditional Black churches within the General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia (GMBCG), that provides outreach intending to build a positive ongoing relationship between members of church and society which will hopefully foster ongoing communication to build a worldwide Christian community. Together, each section will form a concrete basis for incorporating all relevant technological platforms needed to spread the gospel while advancing discipleship in traditional Black churches within the GMBCG.

The first two sections are biblical and theological. These sections provide sound reasons for the Internet's need in traditional Black churches within the GMBCG. The next two sections are technological and marketing. These sections explain how the use of technology through computers, tablets, smartphones, and social media can be effective in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ in the lives of believers. Examples of successful discipleship programs in churches will aid in revealing its effectiveness in evangelism, Christian education, and community building while advancing discipleship in the life of the believer. The last section will focus on surveying a group of online participants across the state of Georgia from the General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia. These are Internet users who differ in opinion concerning the benefits of the Internet in the traditional Baptist churches within the GMBCG. The process will consist of defining the objective, creating an approach, data collection, and gathering results. A strategy was developed for each approach. The research reveals the demographic of the population, their faith group, church attendance, Internet media habits, Internet influence, and opinions on the relevance of the Internet in advancing biblical discipleship, among other important factors.

### **Biblical Research**

Beginning the research process must always begin with the source among sources, the Bible. The Bible is the main resource of Christian doctrine. It is through the Bible that Jesus the Christ instructs his Church to gain disciples by telling the masses of God's kingdom and how to become a permanent part of the kingdom. The command to evangelize is given in numerous areas of the Holy Bible and it is unarguably clear that evangelism is a part of our Christian duty. Christians are commissioned to enlighten the world to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, God's



messiah, in which spiritual salvation is obtained. The Bible says to spread the gospel in the following scriptures:

- Matthew 24:14: “And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.”
- Matthew 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”
- Mark 13:10: “And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.”
- Mark 16:15: And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”
- Luke 9:1-2: Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.
- Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
- Psalm 96:3: Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.
- Colossians 1:23: provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.
- Revelation 14:6: “Then I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people.”

The above verses clearly state that Jesus wants the good news of God’s kingdom to be broadcasted to every human; to every creature under heaven; to every nation, tribe, and language; to the ends of the earth. Thus, the command to evangelize is abundantly clear. Matthew 24:14 tells us that the end of the world cannot come until every person on earth has the chance to learn about Christ and the hope of every Christian should be the coming of Christ to usher in a new age of paradise on the earth and Heaven. It is only through Jesus the Christ that

God is revealed to humankind. Hugh Kurr, in *Readings in Christian Thought*, cites the second-century Greek bishop Irenaeus:

He is the God of the living, whom the Law proclaims, the prophets preach, and Christ reveals; whom the Apostles announce, and in whom the Church believes. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, through His Word who is His son. Through him, He is revealed and manifested to all whom He is made known. For they only know Him to whom the Son reveals Him. But the son has always existed with the Father, from the beginning, ever revealing Himself to angels, archangels, powers, and virtues.<sup>23</sup>

Only through the knowledge and acceptance of Jesus the Christ can salvation be obtained; and the only way this knowledge can be gained, David Ford and Rachel Muers, explain, is through the spreading of the gospel.

And it is in the nature of the work of salvation – which involves the bearing of the totality of the world's sin in order to initiate and maintain the New Covenant between God and humanity – that it cannot be undertaken unless a "person" is offered in and with the task. The person of Christ alone can accomplish this because his human life is so wholly lent to the divine movement of love and self-donation.<sup>24</sup>

The Apostle Paul assures us in Romans 10:9-10, "...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved." The writer of Hebrews writes, "Therefore [Jesus Christ] is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb. 7:25, NIV). Through salvation in Jesus Christ, the promise of dwelling in the presence of God for eternity is the destination for all believers, as Paul explains, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:10, RSV). Therefore, Christians should strive to meet God and

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<sup>23</sup> Hugh Kurr, *Readings in Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), 34.

<sup>24</sup> David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, *The Modern Theologians* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 113.

gain an understanding of His true purpose for our lives, and to joyfully reap the full benefits of new life and salvation through Jesus the Christ. Christ is the mediator between God and humanity, being the only communication provider with our Creator. The universal Church must always seek to sanctify themselves through the teachings of the Holy Scriptures because "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12, NIV).

The Apostle Paul implies that is through belief in Jesus, the doors of communication are opened to humanity, "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved" (Rom. 10:10, NIV). An open vein of communication occurs between earth and heaven. Howard Thurman writes of communication and understanding God,

It is quite conceivable that if I may enter into fellowship and communication [I am] exposed to the vision of His purposes. The degree to which I respond to that vision I participate formally and consciously in those purposes. Thus, my commitment becomes one in which I put at the disposal of the larger and more creative purposes of the Creator my little life, my little thoughts, my little activities, my little devotions. In living my life, I establish more and more levels of understanding of the Creator as I achieve in face what I see in vision.<sup>25</sup>

Thurman's eloquent statements are representative of the relationship Christians strive to have with God through His son Jesus the Christ and the responsibility to share with others so that the Great Commission will be fulfilled, "For this is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth'" (Acts 13:47, NIV).

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<sup>25</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1954), 45.

## Theological Research

Theological research begins with analyzing the theologies of prominent Christian thinkers throughout the ages, thinkers who expounded upon their biblical research to help bring a greater understanding of Christian dogma. Analyzation will focus on the nature of Christ and salvation through Jesus Christ. Theological research will also focus on the role of Christians in spreading Christ's message to the world.

Understanding salvation rests in understanding the nature of the Savior. Research begins by searching out nonbiblical thought on the nature of Christ. The nature of Christ is universally shared and agreed upon by Christians, in the Nicene Creed which was written in A.D. 325 and revised in A.D. 381.<sup>26</sup> The creed asserts that Jesus the Christ is born of God and is of the same matter in which God exists. It asserts, "God from God, light from light,"<sup>27</sup> and reemphasized "true God from true God."<sup>28</sup> The Nicene Creed asserts that Jesus is fully God that came from heaven to live as man, thus making him both divine and human.

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<sup>26</sup> The Nicene Creed is as follows: "I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him, all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen." See "What We Believe," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed on February 5, 2018, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

The Chalcedonian Creed of A.D. 451 declares the true God/human nature of Jesus Christ also. It highlights the oneness of God and Jesus Christ so that there is no separateness in the Godhead. The creed reads:

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, in confusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures+ being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.<sup>29</sup>

This creed clarifies that Jesus has two distinct natures. Both natures are of equal importance because if Jesus is only perceived as divine, many would not believe that he could be flesh and if he is perceived to be fully human, there is no way that He could do the atoning work for the sins of humanity. He would only be a man. Only God can save. The Chalcedonian Creed claims that the son of God is human and divine; therefore, He truly can save humanity from our sins. It solidifies Jesus' qualification to save because He is from God and is of God. Rudolf Bultmann, Lutheran theologian, and professor writes, "Jesus Christ is certainly presented as the son of God, a preexistent divine being, and therefore to that extent a mythical figure, but

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<sup>29</sup> Matt Slick, "Chalcedonian Creed (A.D. 451)," *Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry*, accessed February 5, 2018, <https://carm.org/christianity/creeds-and-confessions/chalcedonian-creed-451-ad>.

he is also a figure [of historical fact] ... His life is more than a mythical event; it is a human life which ended in the tragedy of crucifixion.”<sup>30</sup>

The renowned Lutheran theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, argued the nature of Jesus’ divinity is not revealed until the resurrection. Ford and Muers agree, and unequivocally claim, “The resurrection, which Pannenberg attempts to establish as a historical event whose probability is stronger than any alternative explanation, is not only the crucial point for the validation of the claims of Jesus’ divinity; it is also the foundation for understanding the true humanity of Jesus as the fulfillment of human destiny.”<sup>31</sup> Swiss Reformed theologian, Karl Barth, agrees with Pannenberg and writes,

The reconciliation of man with God takes place as God himself actively intervenes, himself taking in hand his cause with and against and for man, the cause of the covenant, and in such a way (this is what distinguishes the event of reconciliation from the general sway of providence and universal rule of God) that he himself becomes man. God becomes man. That is what is, i.e., what has taken place, in Jesus Christ. He is very God acting for us men, God himself became man.<sup>32</sup>

However, Donald Bloesch, an American evangelical theologian, has a somewhat different view of Christ’s nature. He says that Christ is God’s Word incarnate, not particularly God incarnate. He believes, “neither the Bible (as a book) nor Jesus Christ (as a human being) is strictly identical with ‘God’s Word.’”<sup>33</sup> He goes further to explain that “there is a sense in which it is correct to say that the man Christ Jesus is God’s Word in person. Again, and in a similar but

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<sup>30</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, “Faith in the Cross,” in *Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 221.

<sup>31</sup> Ford and Muers, *The Modern Theologians*, 131.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Barth, “Lord as Servant, Servant as Lord,” in *Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 226.

<sup>33</sup> Roger E. Olson, “Donald G. Bloesch,” in *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians*, ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 70.

to a lesser degree, the Bible is God’s Word written ... Bloesch affirms that the proclamation of the church can be God’s Word in the present – as God chooses.”<sup>34</sup>

These theologians reiterate the humanity and divinity of Jesus, thus, making salvation through God alone through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God, who is the only source of salvation, became man to save the world. The psalmist writes, “Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him” (Psalms 62:1, NIV). Jesus’ very nature as a God/man provides the backdrop for the future evangelical work of the modern-day Church.

Theologians understood that with knowing the beauty and power of the life of Christ, the message must be spread to the ends of the earth as Christ commanded. Aldof von Harnack, a Lutheran theologian, breaks the gospel message into three parts. “Firstly, the kingdom of God and its coming. Secondly, God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul. Thirdly, the higher righteousness and commandment of love.”<sup>35</sup> These three parts are the foundation of the Great Commission. Thomas Aquinas writes in *The Soul of the Church*,

The church is catholic, that is universal ... Our Lord commanded us, ‘Go ye into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature’ (Mark 16:15) ... The Church is universal with regard to all conditions of human beings; nobody is rejected, whether they be masters or slaves, men or women: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female’ (Gal 3:28).<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, Christians must go into the world, knowing that God’s love is for all people. Christianity is a servant religion that looks to serve as well as heal, uplift, enlighten, and transform. Theologian Shirley Guthrie describes how Christians must execute the Great Commission. She writes,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>35</sup> Hugh Kerr, *Readings in Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 247.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Aquinas, “The Soul of the Church,” in *Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 241.

We go into the world not as conquerors but as agents of reconciliation, not with hostility for sinful non-Christians, but with compassion, Jesus looked on those who were trapped in the inhumanity of their alienation from God, other people, and themselves. Without participating in their personal or social sinfulness, without in any way condoning it, not hesitating to speak against it, Jesus was their friend and gave his life for just such people. That must be our model also if we are to become a reflection of Him.<sup>37</sup>

### **Technological Research**

The Internet has become one of the leading forms of modern technology in conveying information. Most Americans are unable to go an hour without interacting with the Internet by way of a Facebook message, liking an Instagram picture, retweeting a Tweet, watching a YouTube video, or simply accessing information. The Internet has established a highway that has allowed the interaction of major forms of person to person, business to business, customer to the business, and organization to people communication.

Web-based and mobile technologies have been created that allow mass and major communication of information. They also promote dialogue throughout the world via social networks. Social media is made up of web and mobile sites. The major social networking sites are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Google+, Pinterest, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn, but there are also a large number of social media sites that are growing in popularity. Podcasts, blogs, and informational sources such as white pages or Wikipedia can also be considered as social media platforms.

French marketing and business scholars, Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, describe social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0,"<sup>38</sup> allowing the creation and exchange of user-generated

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<sup>37</sup> Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 367.

<sup>38</sup> Kaplan A.M., "Social Media, Definition and History," in Alhaji R., Rokne J. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Social Network Analysis and Mining* (New York, Springer, 2014).



content. They believe social media represents an “evolution back to the roots,” implying that the world wide web was built on the base that is now called the Internet.<sup>39</sup> It began as a group of newsgroups where people could read or post messages which soon developed into discussion platforms that allowed individuals to exchange content with each other. In the beginning, the Internet could only be used by technologically advanced individuals. In the 1990s, corporations saw a marketing opportunity and took over the viral sphere, and anyone with Internet access and a computer could browse the Internet. After the dot.com era failed, the social media era seemed to have brought web technology back to the roots of communication platforms.

The most popular to the least popular social media networking sites for American adults are YouTube with 73%, Facebook with 68%, Instagram with 35%, Pinterest with 29%, Snap Chat with 27%, LinkedIn with 25%, Twitter with 24%, and WhatsApp with 22%.<sup>40</sup> Each networking site has its criteria, audience, and networking style. Some platforms are strictly professional like LinkedIn and some are fun and free-spirited like Snap Chat. The Church could find beneficial means of spreading its discipleship agenda through a variety of these sites. Churches could reach people by using Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and blogs. While other platforms could be useful, churches have been provided with tools that have the propensity to impact the lives of believers as never before.

Internet social media platforms have become some of the most powerful platforms in the world, leading with Facebook. Facebook, according to the social media network’s About page, was founded in 2004 by nineteen-year-old Mark Zuckerberg, and Facebook’s mission is to give

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> “Social Media Fact Sheet,” *Pew Research Center*, last modified January 10, 2018, accessed January 10, 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/social-media/>.

people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them.”<sup>41</sup> The site has over a billion active members making it the most popular social networking site in the world and the second most popular social networking platform in the United States. Sixty-eight percent of all Americans use Facebook.<sup>42</sup> It has personal and business pages where personal or professional content can be shared with friends. Facebook can be beneficial for faith groups by providing an organization page where the faith group can post events, engage in conversation, post informational and inspirational messages and content such as relevant articles, scriptures, or helpful tips, postpaid advertisements, post videos, live streams, post images, and automatically connect blogs with Really Simple Syndication (RSS) pages. Facebook can be used on desktop and laptop computers, mobile phones, and tablets.

YouTube is a free video-sharing website, created in 2005, that allows users to watch and upload videos. YouTube is the biggest and most liked video-sharing social media platform. As of 2018, YouTube is the most visited social media platform in America with 73% of America watching its videos, and over billions of active users worldwide.<sup>43</sup> YouTube could be a valuable tool to faith groups by allowing them to post inspirational, educational, and entertaining videos that will lead to the churches’ websites. It can be used to feature followers, parishioners, and the community at large. YouTube is a great way to promote events and address relevant issues.

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<sup>41</sup> “Facebook.com,” February 4, 2004, accessed February 5, 2018, [https://www.facebook.com/pg/facebook/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/facebook/about/?ref=page_internal).

<sup>42</sup> “Social Media Fact Sheet,” <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/social-media/>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

YouTube can be used on desktop and laptop computers, mobile phones, and tablets to spread the gospel.

Launched in 2010, Instagram is the most popular image-sharing social media platform. Instagram is a mobile social media platform where video and pictures are posted. Members can like and comment on posts, share images and videos, and post videos and images to their story which lasts only twenty-four hours. Thirty-five percent of all Americans use Instagram with the highest number of users between the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine.<sup>44</sup> Eight hundred million people worldwide use Instagram to share their images and videos.<sup>45</sup> Instagram can be beneficial to faith groups by cultivating a following through interesting images and inspirational videos, networking by sharing relevant content, and following followers to build up the Christian community.

With about three million active followers,<sup>46</sup> Twitter is a popular social networking site for sharing news, articles, and opinions. According to *Entrepreneur*, "around 500 million tweets are dispatched into the Twitter-verse every 24 hours from all over the globe."<sup>47</sup> Twitter, founded in 2006, has a tweet character limit of 280 characters which forces content writers to get to the point of their message rather quickly. Twitter can be useful a tool for a faith community to be positioned as a thought leader. It can help drive traffic to websites, and to influence and connect with influencers. The faith community can benefit from using Twitter by tweeting powerful messages, images, and engaging with the world community at large. Twitter can be used on

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> "Social Media Fact Sheet," <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/social-media/>.

<sup>47</sup> Kim Lachance Shandrow, "10 Interesting Facts About Twitter on its 10th Birthday," *Entrepreneur*, March 21, 2016, accessed February 5, 2018, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/272803>.

desktop and laptop computers, mobile phones, and tablets to help spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A blog is a casual or conversational style webpage that is updated often by a person or a group of people. It is a collection of short, sincerely unique posts that can be used to share thoughts, promote business, influence readers, educate, inspire, or push personal agendas. Blogs can be created on personal or business websites or can be hosted on sites like WordPress or Blogger. Blogs can be powerful tools to faith groups because they allow groups to express their views, teachings, missions, and visions in detail. A blog can be used as a primary website, be attached to a website, or be directed to a website.

### **Market Research**

Social media is one of the least expensive marketing tools at the Church's disposal.

Prices begin at "free" and can go as high as one is willing to pay. Shama Hyder explains,

Online/digital marketing leverages the web to get your message across so that you can move people to take action. Social media marketing is the act of leveraging specifically social media platforms to promote a product or a service to increase sales. Without a strong business strategy, efforts are often wasted.<sup>48</sup>

Hyder teaches that a successful digital marketing campaign has three main components which are to attract, convert, and transform.<sup>49</sup> The key to great marketing is to figure out a way to communicate with a targeted audience by providing them with useful information without directly pitching products or agendas.

Research reveals that there must be social media listening and social media engagement. Social media listening requires that market research takes place. It requires the use of focus

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<sup>48</sup> Shama Hyder, *The Zen of Social Media Marketing* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2016), 23.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

groups and/or surveys to discover what the audience is searching for. Social media engagement is the next step after listening.

Listening is good, but you should not stop there. You can make changes to or determine future marketing moves based on your understanding of what customers/followers are saying and doing on social media. Learn how to engage on Twitter, comment on your company blog, or respond to a LinkedIn post comment. Customers love transparent organizations and social media engagement is a step in the right direction for your brand."<sup>50</sup>

Engagement is the key to building long-lasting relationships. Relationships are the foundation of every Christian community. By positive engagement, the Church can build a healthy and strong online community for the cause of Christ.

Great marketing rests upon great social media content. Without good content, messages will be lost in the infinite abyss of the Internet. Diligence Social Media Marketing, LLC contends, "Make sure that posted content is helpful, relevant, captivating, entertaining, sharable, accountable, responsible, versatile, crowdsourced, efficient, integrated, targeted, specific, credible, and visual."<sup>51</sup> It is not enough for a church to post "Jesus loves you." Creativity must be used to grab the attention of potential believers to make them wonder why Jesus loves them. Creative content is paramount.

Research reveals that good marketing tools consist of engaging graphics and videos, descriptions of images, and adding links to them and pinning important posts to the top of the social media page. Do not over-promote or post an excessive amount. Share others' content. Respond to comments, answer questions, engage with followers. Be consistent and have lots of personality. View like organizations to observe their strategies. Follow trends and feel free to

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<sup>50</sup> Ari Meier and Violette L. Meier, *Social Media Marketing* (Decatur, GA: Digidence Social Media Marketing, LLC, 2016), 30.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

award followers, and most of all, know the difference between platforms so that posts will be appropriate.

To see if the content is effective, social media analytics offers data that measures what works and what does not.

Analytics is one of the most important aspects of social media marketing because social media platforms produce a lot of data, within these big boring numbers are trends and stories about the who's, what's, and when's. You'll learn how these numbers ultimately affect your business' bottom line.<sup>52</sup>

Analytics help to understand the preference of the audience. They track your progress and improve your ROI (return on investment). Some popular analytic tools are Google Analytics and Facebook Insights. These tools and many others can help churches as they try to figure out the best messaging to use to bring people to God in Christ.

### **Survey Research**

The research was conducted via an online survey through Survey Monkey. The survey asked questions with a mission to gain opinions on the importance of the Internet in advancing discipleship in the traditional Black churches of the General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia. The forty-question survey gathered information based on demographics, religious beliefs or lack thereof, the importance of the use of technology in the church, the positive and negative influences of social media, and relevance.

Demographics recorded age, sex, religious beliefs, church attendance habits, ethnic group, and area of country residing in to show the similarities and differences of a variety of people. Diverse perspectives produced intriguing results that further the idea that the Internet is a must in today's climate in order to better advance discipleship.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 1.

The survey recorded the opinions of anonymous participants revealing positive or negative feelings and their importance in a technologically advanced world. The research revealed opinions on the pros and cons of the Internet in the Church and whether it is converting the world or conforming to the world.

Survey research also revealed influences and opinions of relevance and benefits for building brand or church brand awareness of discipleship programs. Overall, it revealed a positive response to the Internet and its ability in advancing discipleship through the gospel as a tool for church members. As the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23,

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law, I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law, I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

The Church is to be all things to all people to bring them to Christ. The main purpose of using social media in the church is to effectively "...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19, NIV).

### **Subjects and Procedures**

The purpose of this study was to establish based upon each generational makeup of the General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia, whether the Internet was being used as a tool to accelerate coherent discipleship methods and programs of those traditional church participants. The research focused on individuals who are affiliated with the traditional Black church in the state of Georgia. It is hypothesized that through the utilization of technology (Internet), those traditional Black churches within the GMBCG can have a greater impact on the

lives of its parishioners through the utilization of the Internet as a tool while advancing individual, and corporate discipleship.

#### Data collection

Many of the subjects that were surveyed were located throughout the state of Georgia, being associated with the General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia (GMBCG) where they serve as members. Additional subjects from other traditional churches throughout the community were also invited to participate. Email addresses were gathered from prior church relationships and affiliations, as well as the GMBCG directory. Moreover, subjects were limited to individuals in the Black community for the thesis sought to address the importance of the Internet as a tool for discipleship growth. The population was chosen as it is apparent that many of the churches that make up the GMBCG are using an outdated methodology in their approach to advance discipleship considering the age demographic, rural location, and even size of congregations. Additionally, it was found that many of the traditional Black churches are also not embracing the Internet as one of the greatest technological tools to advance the process of discipleship growth.

Data were collected primarily from the online survey platform Survey Monkey. Survey Monkey came highly recommended as a way to distribute the survey as it is affordable, provides visual surveys, and the interface seems to be much easier to understand for those that are not entirely comfortable with using the Internet. While using Survey Monkey, the researcher did not experience any limitations nor were any obstacles encountered with using this platform for data collection.



## Sampling method

Convenience sampling was used to obtain data from which to sample the population. The convenience method was chosen mainly because the subjects were individuals who were easily available to give their inputs. Convenience sampling also gave this author multiple benefits including accessibility, cost efficiency, objectivity, and quicker results. Subjects were emailed and asked to complete an online questionnaire about the Internet's relationship with discipleship. Responses were recorded anonymously. Additionally, as no contact information was requested, following up with any of the subjects after they completed their questionnaire was not necessary.

## Measures

### Questionnaire

One hundred participants were emailed a 40-question questionnaire. All the questions were created based upon the age group and their ability to confirm the author's hypothesis. The instrument sought to measure and evaluate five overarching questions: the value of the Internet as a tool, pros and cons view of the Internet, believes that as a tool the Internet adds value to the spreading of the gospel, the responsibility of the individual church, and the biblical model of the respondents' house of worship. Additional information was collected such as descriptive data concerning traditional Black church affiliation, knowledge of the Internet, and the subject's demographics.

### Subject demographics

The subjects were asked their age, length of affiliation with a traditional Black church, familiarity with utilizing the Internet, how often the subject conducts Internet searches, if the subject's church has an Internet presence, how satisfied the subject is with his knowledge of the

Internet, how often does the subject attend church, the age demographic makeup of the church the subject attends, and how familiar is the subject with the biblical concept of discipleship.

#### Value of the Internet as a tool

Four questions measured the value of the Internet as a tool of the Internet at their church:

(1) How relevant is an Internet presence and usage to your church? (2) Do you believe that the Internet is a valuable tool in sharing the gospel while enhancing spiritual growth? (3) If churches are to remain relevant and progressive while meeting the spiritual needs of the people, is the Internet as a viable tool unavoidable? And (4) Does your church have an Internet presence that easily identifiable and accessible?

#### Pros and Cons of the Internet

Seven questions measured the pros and cons of the Internet. (1) Can the Internet have a negative impact on a ministry? (2) Do you think that churches that create an Internet presence are conforming to the worldly system? (3) Can churches sustain a negative impact by utilizing social media? (4) Do you believe having an Internet presence is affordable for your church or ministry? (5) Can the negative influence of the Internet be detrimental to ministry? (6) How effective do you think the Internet can be in ministering to individuals and families? (7) Can the Internet be a comfortable place for people to ask their faith leaders questions that they may be afraid to ask face to face?

#### The Value of the Internet in Spreading the Gospel

Seven questions measured if the respondent believes that as a tool the Internet adds value to the spreading of the gospel. (1) Do you believe the Internet can enhance discipleship? (2) Can posting and re-sharing discipleship content assist in your personal and the church's growth? (3) Do you believe that social media can be beneficial as a discipleship tool? (4) Have you ever

received spiritual inspiration via the Internet? (5) Can the Internet be an effective tool in expressing spiritual values involving discipleship? (6) Can the Internet bring the gospel to those who do not have knowledge of the gospel? (7) Do you believe stressing an emphasis on discipleship enhances a greater correlation with higher faith engagement?

#### The responsibility of the individual church

Nine questions measured what the respondents believed to be the responsibility of their churches to create and activate discipleship programs (1) What is your church's demographic makeup? (2) True or False: The church cannot afford to stand on the sidelines. The church has to reach people through every available venue. (3) Do you believe your church is doing well when it comes to discipleship? (4) Are practicing Christians more likely to be involved in a variety of spiritual growth activities than non-practicing Christians? (5) Does your church use various models of discipleship? (6) Does your church need to develop a more clearly articulated plan or approach to the Internet being a helpful tool for discipleship? (7) How aggressively does your church emphasize the "Great Commission"? (8) Does your church have a discipleship program in place? (9) Is your church's discipleship model accessible by the Internet?

#### Biblical model church of discipleship

Five questions measured the respondent's belief surrounding a biblical model at their Church. (1) Do you believe that today's traditional Black churches are utilizing an outdated or less effective model for discipleship? (2) Do you believe a biblical model for discipleship, if implemented correctly, creates individual and corporate inner growth? (3) Do you believe that the lack of accurate biblical teaching in the traditional Black church has led to the dimension of the implementation of the biblical discipleship model? (4) True or False: There is no value for Internet usage in traditional Black churches that translates into enhanced discipleship. (5) Do you

believe that, if implemented correctly, an effective discipleship model can revolutionize an individual, a church, and surrounding communities?

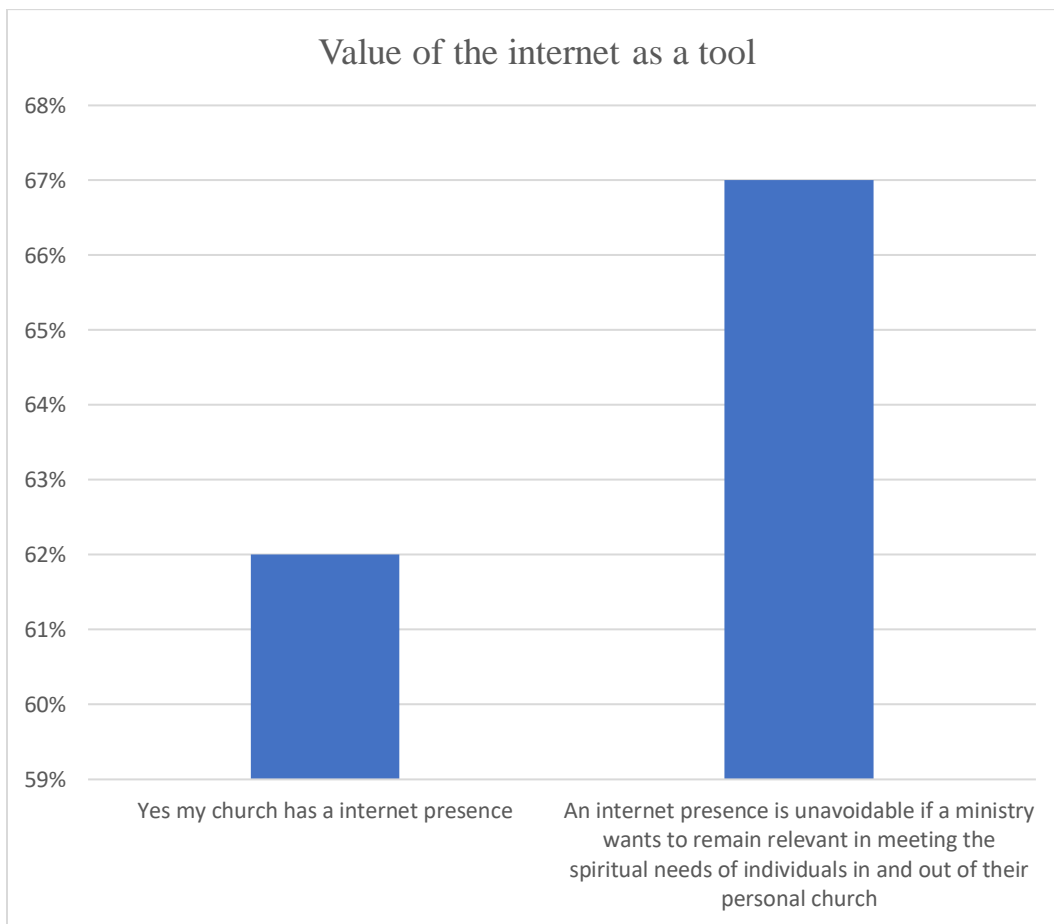
## **Quantitative Results**

### **Demographic Characteristics**

In collecting the quantitative data, surveys were emailed to 260 subjects. A total of 100 responses were returned. Sixteen percent of the subjects were between the ages of 18-24, 21% were between 25-34, 25% were between 35-44, 15% were between 45-54, and 22% were 55 or older while only one respondent was under 18. According to the results, 60% of the respondents have been affiliated with a traditional Black church for 20 years or more, while 18% have been affiliated for 11-20 years. Fourteen percent have been affiliated between 6-10 years, while 8% of the respondents have been affiliated for 1-5 years. This helped establish a baseline to determine if utilizing the Internet in a traditional Black church would be beneficial to those who have been affiliated with one for many years. Regarding if their church has an Internet presence, 62% responded yes. Additionally, 22% of the subjects stated that they are extremely familiar with the biblical concept of discipleship, 39% are very familiar, 27% are somewhat familiar, 7% are minimally familiar, and 5% are not at all familiar.

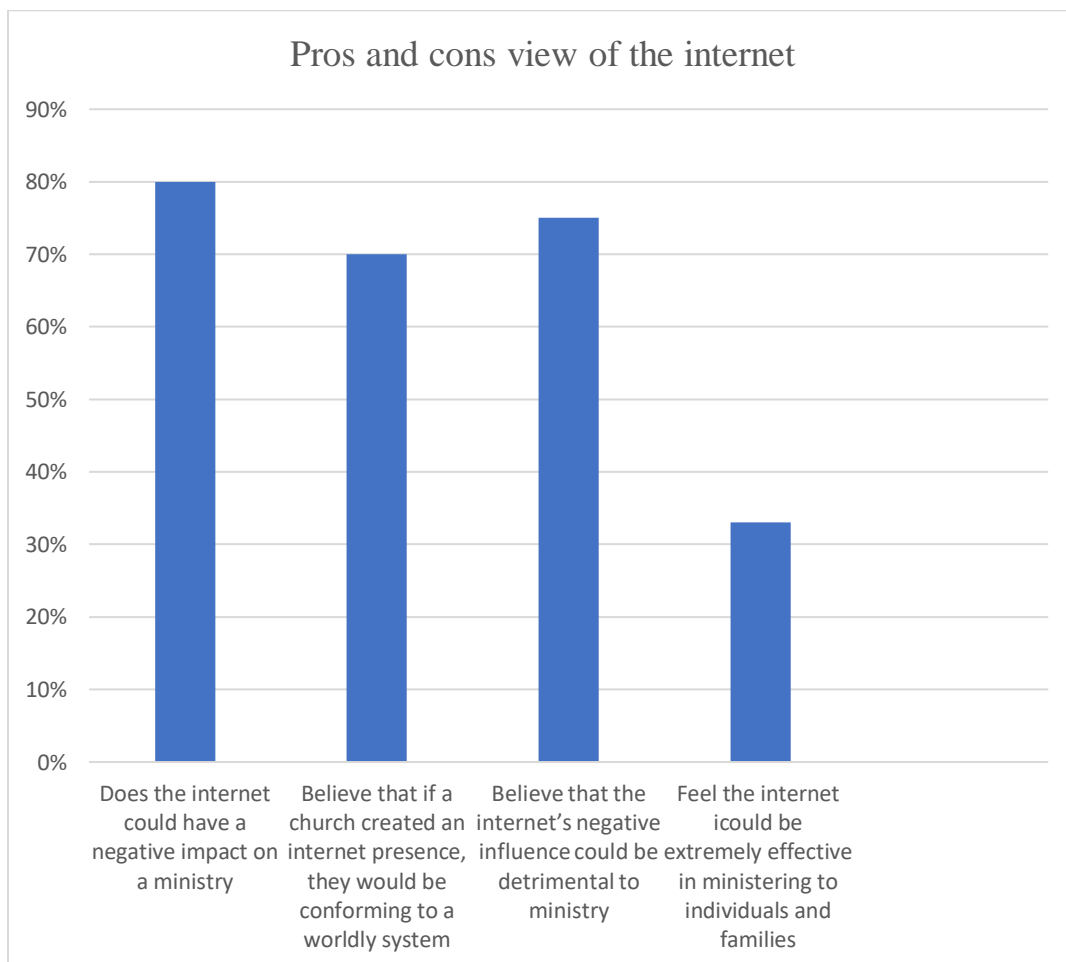
**Table 1: Value of the Internet as a Tool**

The number of those surveyed whose churches had an Internet presence that considers the value of the Internet was 62% of those subjects they stated their churches have an Internet presence, along with 67% of the subjects believing that an Internet presence is unavoidable if a ministry wants to remain relevant and progressive while advancing into the twenty-first century to meet the spiritual needs of individuals that make up the population of their churches.



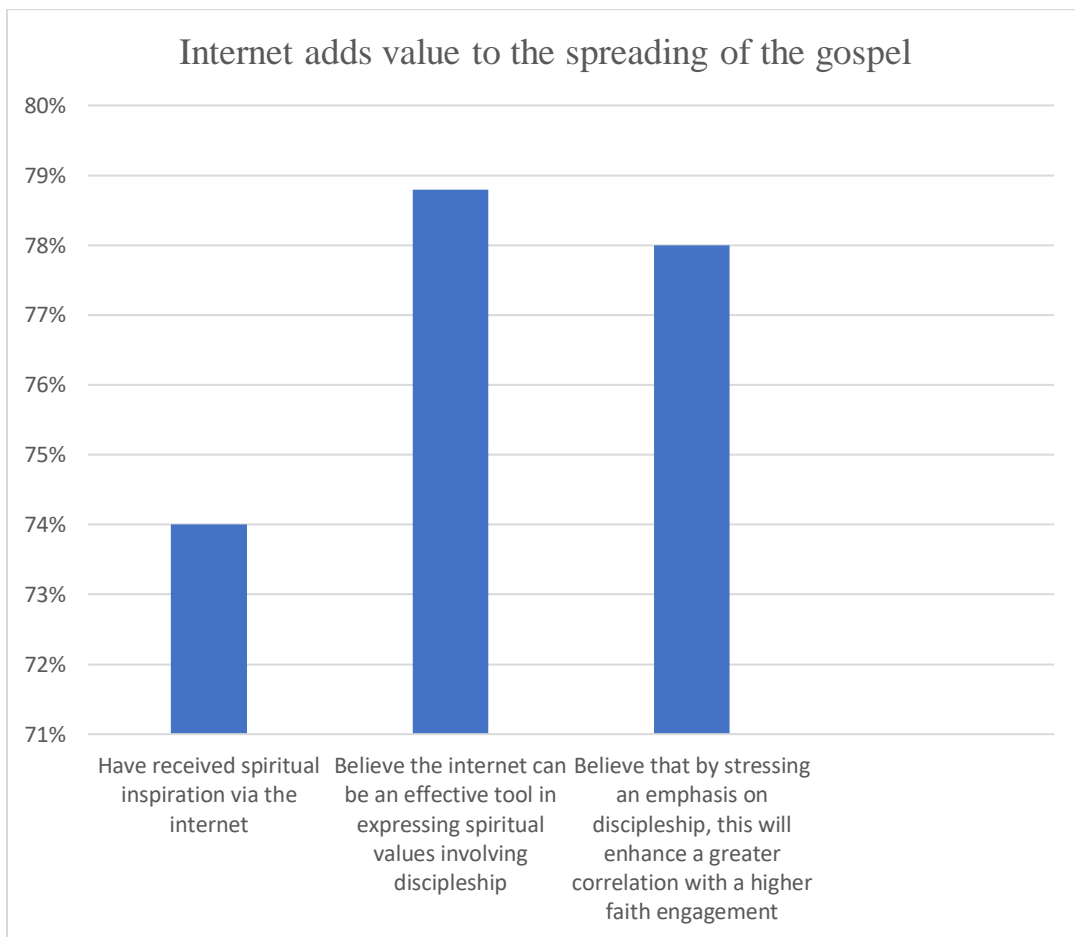
**Table 2: Views of the Pros and cons of the Internet**

Regarding if the Internet could have a negative impact on a ministry, 80% of the subjects answered a resounding “yes.” Seventy percent also believed that if a church created an Internet presence, they would be conforming to a worldly system, while 75% of the subjects believed that the Internet’s negative influence could be detrimental to ministry. The responses were mixed when asked how effective they felt the Internet could be in ministering to individuals and families with only 33% believing that it was extremely effective and 45% believed it is very effective (see Table 2).



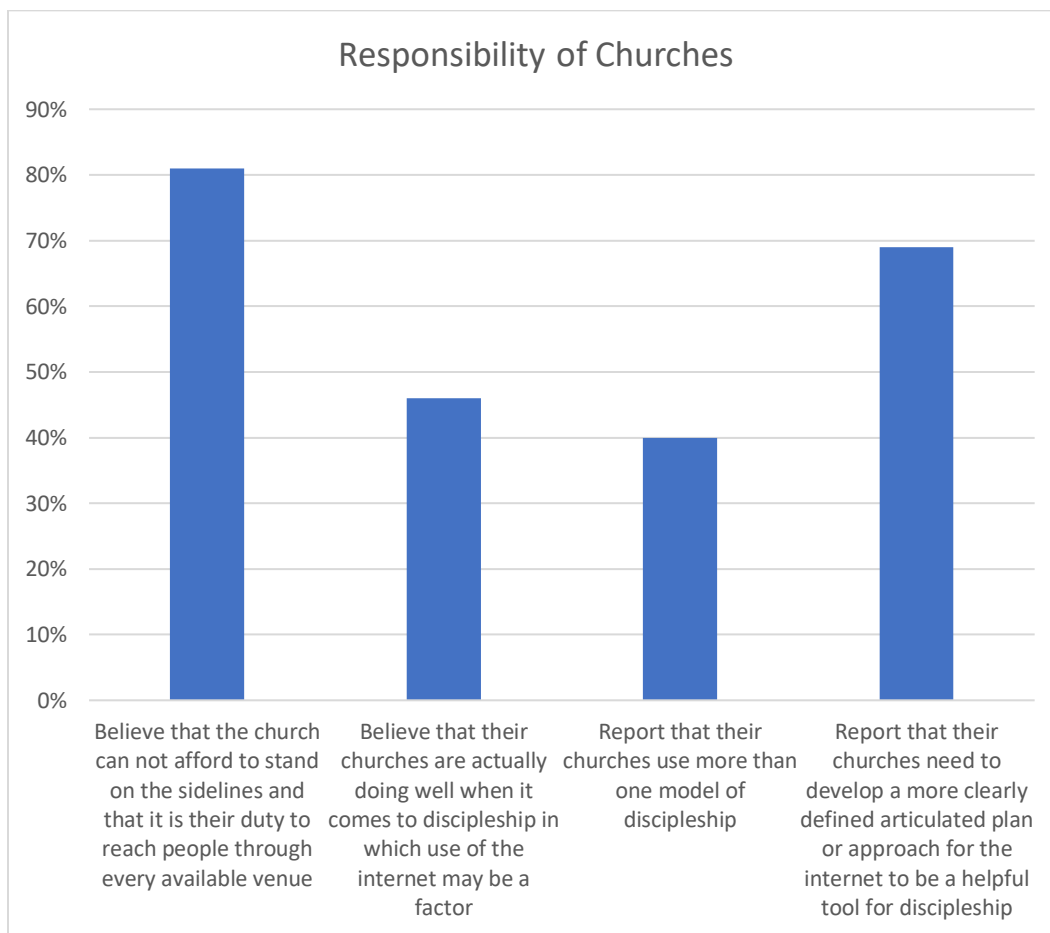
### Table 3: Internet adds Value to the Spreading of the Gospel

Seventy-four percent of the subjects reported that they have received spiritual inspiration via the Internet. Of those who believed the Internet can be an effective tool in expressing spiritual values involving discipleship, 78.79% replied, “yes,” while 78% believed that by stressing an emphasis on discipleship, this will enhance a greater correlation with a higher faith engagement (See Table 3).



#### Table 4: Responsibility of Churches to the Internet

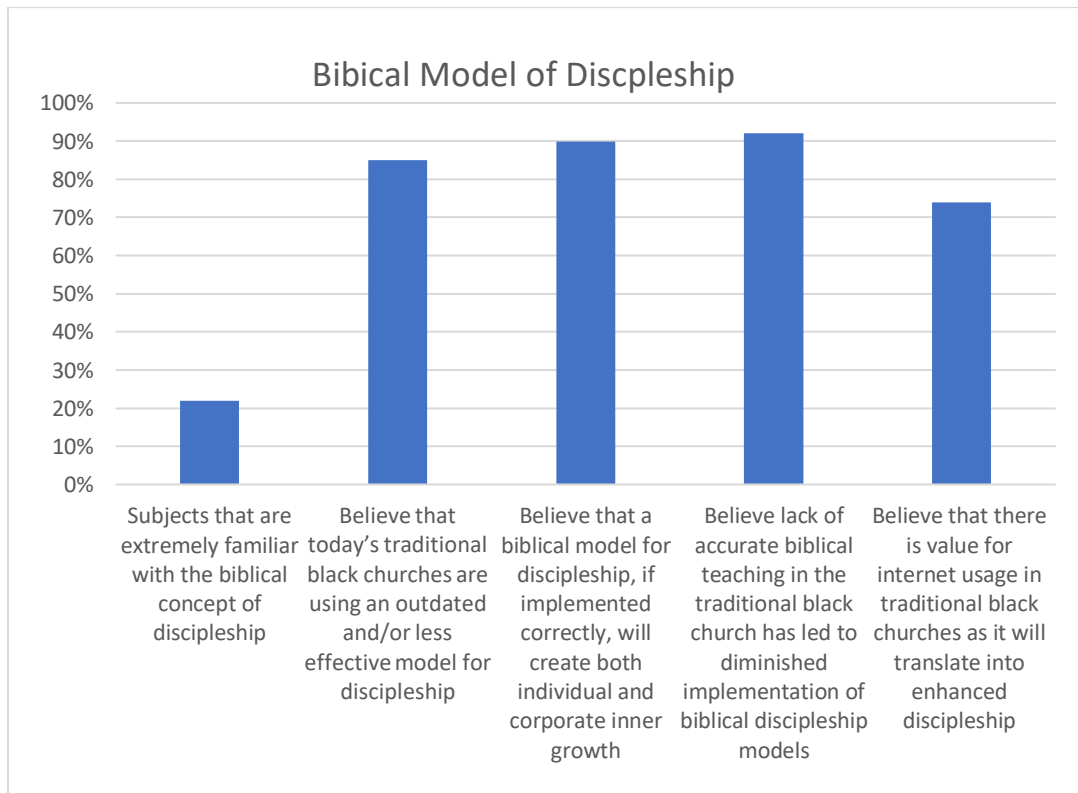
Table 4 shows that 81% of the subjects believe that the church cannot afford to stand on the sidelines and that it is their duty to reach people through every available venue. Only 46% of the subjects believe that their churches are doing well when it comes to discipleship in which their use of the Internet may be a factor. Only 40% of the subjects reported that their churches use more than one model of discipleship, with 69% of the subjects reporting that their churches needed to develop a more clearly defined, articulated plan or approach for the Internet to be a helpful tool for discipleship.





**Table 5: Data that Contributes to the Need for a Biblical Model of Discipleship**

When asked how familiar the subjects were with the biblical concept of discipleship, the responses were diverse. Twenty-two percent of the subjects reported that they are extremely familiar, with 39% report that they are very familiar, and 27% reporting that they are only somewhat familiar. Eighty-five percent of the subjects believe that today’s traditional Black churches are using an outdated and/or less effective model for discipleship. Additionally, 89.90% of the subjects believe that a biblical model for discipleship, if implemented correctly, will create both individual and corporate inner growth, with 92% of the subjects stating that they believe the lack of accurate biblical teaching in the traditional Black church has led to the diminished implementation of biblical discipleship models. Also, 74% of the subjects believe that there is value for Internet usage in traditional Black churches (see Table 5).



## **Conclusion**

The applied research (survey findings) revealed that the traditional Black Church has neglected the use of the Internet as a viable medium to fulfill the Great Commission, but experts in the field of technology, marketing, academia, theology, and church leadership studies, agree that the churches that dismiss the Internet as a tool to spread the Gospel of Christ, are not as successful as those who utilize the technology. Moreover, Christians are mandated through Scripture to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Given the worldwide Internet as a viable means to share information in real-time to all corners of the globe, one could eschatologically argue that every person on earth has the opportunity to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. Matthew 24:14), and therefore, the second coming of Christ is near. Traditional Black church leaders no longer have the luxury of dismissing the Internet as a meaningless medium irrelevant to fulfilling the Great Commission of Christ. The time has come for church leaders to embrace this technology and fulfill their calling as God's pastoral leaders.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **The Necessity of the Internet**

The traditional Black church must ask, “Is the integration of the Internet as a means to reach others in our community a viable asset of discipleship?” As a tool, the Internet has proven to be a great source to help enhance the mission, calling, and purpose of the traditional Black churches’ approach to ministry and discipleship for its members. Author Matt Perman writes, “Technology provides the opportunity to do this on a greater scale than ever before ... massive prosperity of the West since World War II created unprecedented amounts of free time. However, up until recently, most of the time was wasted on TV.”<sup>53</sup>

The current innovation in technology has advanced the efficiency of communication. As a result, it increased the effectiveness of church members' abilities to interact and engage in worship services, Sunday School classes, Bible Study, and church meetings. Jesus instructs His disciples in Matthew 29:19, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost." The church has been given the same commission to make disciples. Technology is used in every aspect of life. While progressive churches are utilizing Internet resources, traditional Black churches are failing to embrace the technology movement which can assist in fulfilling the church’s mission of discipleship and God’s call to ministry. Traditional churches are fearful of change – fearful of the unknown. They believe that by moving away from an interactive, intimate church atmosphere, to a technology environment will affect how people view God.

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<sup>53</sup> Matt Perman, *What’s Best Next* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 315. Author Matt Perman cites Clay Shirky’s, *Cognitive Surplus* when arguing that technology will exponentially expand a church’s audience.

Today, people are living in the digital age, and traditional churches must embrace technology if they are to keep pace with a progressive society. In 2004, the Pew Research Center, in conjunction with the America Life Project, generated an anonymous nonpartisan online survey as a fact finder titled "Faith Online" in the utilization of the Internet for religious and spiritual purposes. The survey found that sixty-four percent of Americans have used the Internet for religious and/ or spiritual reasons.

- 38% of the nation's 128 million (48,640,000) Internet users have sent and received an email with spiritual content.
- 35% (44,800,000) have sent or received online greeting cards related to religious holidays.
- 32% (40,960,000) have gone online to read news accounts of religious events and affairs.
- 21% (26,880,000) have sought information about how to celebrate religious holidays.
- 17% (21,760,000) have looked for information about where they could attend religious services.
- 14% (17,920,000) have used email to plan church meetings.
- 11% (14,080,000) have downloaded or listened to religious music online.
- 7% (896,000) have made or responded to online prayer requests.
- 7% (896,000) have made donations to religious organizations or charities.

In sum, sixty-four percent (81,920,000) of Internet users said they had done at least one of these things online and many had done more than one. This figure represents a substantially higher number of online faithful than the Pew Internet and American Life Project has measured in the past.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Hoover, Stewart, Clark, and Raine, "Faith Online." *Pew Internet & American Life*, April 7, 2004. Pew Internet. Org/reports/2004/faith-online.aspx (access June 2020).

Traditional Black churches must come to the urgent realization that embracing the Internet has become essential if they are to remain attractive to members. A great number of churches have taken a non-aggressive approach to embracing new approaches that are necessary for assisting its members in their discipleship process. Author Tony Morgan states,

When you think about improving discipleship growth, technology is probably not the first thing that comes to mind. In recent years we've seen churches improve discipleship growth through the effective use of technology in their ministries. By exploring the shifts, we need to make in our thinking and practices, we better arm ourselves for the future of our ministries.<sup>55</sup>

If discipleship programs are to move forward in traditional Black churches, while attracting new participation amongst those uninvolved church members, the embracing of technology is imperative to accelerate their church's discipleship growth. The command that was given to the church body by Jesus Christ must be embraced, understood, and infused into the lives of the believer, "go and spread the gospel," so that the gospel would take root in believers allowing the presence of Christ to present an illumination of His manifest power in their daily lives.

Traditional Black churches must understand that regardless of their location or demographic the approach towards the Internet is viewed as a tool must change, allowing for them to adopt in their view of newer and progressive innovative approaches in sharing the gospel. Noted Internet expert, Tony Morgan, writes:

Chat rooms, e-mail are the two most popular applications in Christian circles ... Just as Peter and the 11 apostles were charged with spreading the Gospel through word of mouth, 20 centuries later the new breed of disciples are communicating the word of God via a different type of vehicle: none other than the Internet. But it is not just the sons and daughters of Christianity - the descendants of those early evangelists - that are leading the charge. Many religious sects - from Muslim to Jewish to Buddhist, among others - are realizing the power of the Net and using it to reach the masses. And there's no shortage of folks hungry for an online church community, or who are dabbling in the area that's becoming known as cyber faith. In Christian circles, for example, membership of the

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<sup>55</sup> Tony Morgan, "4 Ways Technology Influences and Improves Disciple Making," [Tonymorganlive.Com. https://tonymorganlive.com/2016/10/12/technology-improves-disciple-making.](https://tonymorganlive.com/2016/10/12/technology-improves-disciple-making)

online portal, dubbed Crosswalk.com, exceeded one million at the end of last year - representing an 80 percent increase of membership over the end of the third quarter, the company recently announced. Meanwhile, 12 percent of the U.S. population is using the Internet for religious purposes, says market research firm Baran Research Group Ltd. based in Glendale, Calif. In addition, other numbers reveal that one out of six teens believes that within the next five years they expect to use the Internet as a substitute for current church-based religious experience. Consequently, because of the growing enthusiasm by religious groups and individuals to blend the church with the latest technology, there's an opportunity for resellers, Web designers, ISPs, and computer consultants, among others, to offer you.<sup>56</sup>

The power of the Internet has created an age of digitalization for the church, if embraced and implemented, it would play a vital role in advancing the discipleship process for churches. Authors Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey state, "The challenge for developing and maintaining a tight disciple-making focus is knowing what to emphasize and what to de-emphasize. You need a clear vision, core values, concise views, vehicles, and concrete verifiers."<sup>57</sup>

Traditional Black churches must become less program-oriented and develop a more comprehensive environment that is not resistant to change. The perspective of the Great Commission must be reassessed because "The goal is to reach the world with the gospel and to make disciples. In order to accomplish that mission, we must maintain a tight focus on winning people to Christ, helping them grow to their full potential, and then sending them out to join the mission of Christ."<sup>58</sup> There are multiple methods the traditional Black church has mastered its pursuit of assisting in the development of discipleship, but the opportunity for improvement has always existed. With the advancement of technology and the progressiveness of our society, it is important to maintain a relevant-need-base-position in engaging its members.

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<sup>56</sup> Tony Morgan "4 Ways Technology Influences and Improves Disciple-Making." Tonymorganlive.com. <https://tonymorganlive.com/2016/10/12/technology-improves-disciple-making>.

<sup>57</sup> Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2013), 228.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 228.

There is a decline in church attendance with successive generations. For example, only 33 percent of Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1980) attend church weekly. Prior to the year, 2000, if one wanted to learn from Scripture from Bible classes, it was essential that members had to attend in person. Technology has created an array of opportunities for members to experience Bible-based theological teaching with limitless options through digital communication via the Internet. It is obvious that a great number of churches are still having reservations about the importance of the Internet in engaging members for spiritual growth. In a joint survey with the Barna Group, Rob Hoskins discovered that even though the technology is pervasive, most parents and churches are not leveraging it for Bible engagement. Hoskins argued that parents and pastoral leaders need to engage children through technology.<sup>59</sup>

If the Great Commission is going to be carried out and manifested in the lives of people of each generation, the Internet must be embraced as a strategic tool for communicating the gospel and presenting spiritual growth programs. While there are many people resistant to change in some traditional Black churches, it is imperative for leaders to consider utilizing these tools as Neil Cole and Phil Helfer state,

He commissioned us to make disciples of all the nations and then left us to our own devices to accomplish the task? Absolutely not! As Paul says again, ‘It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me’ (Gal. 2:20). If we are to be a part of the discipleship process, in being true followers of Jesus, then we must help them, first and always, connect with Him.<sup>60</sup>

The primary questions that must be addressed include: What Internet tools are available for today’s church that are not being used? Are these tools efficient in providing interactive and engaging content for parishioners? Do these tools provide cross-cultural information that

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<sup>59</sup> Robin Hoskins. “Let’s Talk Technology: Barna Resources that Explore Findings from the Digital Age,” <https://www.barna.com/lets-talk-technology/>.

<sup>60</sup> Neil Cole and Phil Helfer, *Church transfusion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 183.

ministers to all people? In an article published in *Church Executive Technology and Discipleship*, authors Lauren Hunter and Ben Stoup list certain steps in which technology can build discipleship.

Technology helps you build a system. Engaging with any organization is a process. In some respects, everyone knows this except the church leader. We just assume that people will proactively come, find their place, plugin, grow (and grow and grow with no setbacks or special attention needed), and then leave when "Jesus calls them home. "Instead of approaching disciple-making haphazardly, review the membership process in four stages: (i) expansion through outreach and evangelism (ii) assimilation as a member starts attending events (iii) cultivation when an individual commits to God and your church, and (iv) evaluation after a break up has occurred. By building an offline system to evaluate your membership and disciple-making process, you can tailor your church management system to fit the specific needs of your church and monitor individual and church-wide growth. 2) Technology helps you define and measure engagement. The great lie of church ministry says that if you get more people in the door (and keep more people than you lose) then you will, by default, make more disciples — wrong! This is where many churches miss the boat when it comes to technology. It's not just about tracking attendance, mailing information, and contribution records. It's about managing your relationship with the member. Technology allows leaders to find ways to measure what's working and what isn't. If eighty percent of the people who have attended a new membership class are not giving, serving, and connected to a small group within six months of completing the new membership program, that should concern you. It's time to evaluate the content and structure of the program because you didn't accomplish your goal.<sup>61</sup>

The twenty-first-century advancement in technology has been extremely beneficial for the Christian community. It has aided in churches fulfilling how the directive that Christ left for the church with the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20.

During biblical times, the only manner Jesus' instructions could be followed was in the lives of believers through face-to-face engagements. Though the personal proclamation of the Gospel of Christ must continue, the Internet has exponentially broadened the church's face-to-face world. Sharing the gospel has been amplified and proliferated opening numerous channels

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<sup>61</sup> Lauren Hunter and Ben Stoup" Seven ways technology helps churches make disciples," *Church Executive Technology and Discipleship*, August 21, 2010, accessed June 19, 2020, <https://churchexecutive.com/archives/technology-and-discipleship>.



of communication for the church. Some have resisted the advancement of technology being utilized in the church for various reasons, but the wise King Solomon wrote, “Intelligent people are always ready to learn. Their ears are open for knowledge” (Prov. 18:15, NLT).

One of the greatest tools that has benefited and impacted our society over the last one hundred years has been the digitalization era. Author Robert H. Welch contends,

Nothing has impacted our society in the past quarter-century like the digital computer. In the 1980's I attended a seminar in which the presenter stated that unless the church becomes computer-adaptive and proficient by the year 2000, the church will fall so far behind the technology continuum it will never regain relevancy in the community. Today children become computer literate in elementary school. Most states in the nation that evaluate the academic proficiency of high school graduates require them to demonstrate computer literacy. There was a time when a church could claim that the computer was too expensive, or was designed for the larger church, or that to hire someone to operate the computer would be too costly. This is no longer a valid statement. Personal and office computer systems are less expensive than the twentieth- century typewriter and have the far more significant and useful capability."<sup>62</sup>

A great number of traditional Black churches have been reluctant in their approach to utilizing the Internet in creating discipleship programs; however, they must re-evaluate their thinking as to how to reach a technology-focused community. Sustainable digital tools have been created which are benefiting churches in advancing their discipleship programs. While the Internet is extremely prevalent in society, many traditional pastors continue to address concerns about technology's effect on the way they have previously conducted church. They presume technology will negatively impact the church. As society has changed with technology, the reluctant churches will be forced to embrace the advancements of technology if they desire to stay viable and relevant in sustaining growth.

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<sup>62</sup> Robert H. Welch, *Church Administration: Creating Efficiency for Effective Ministry* (Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers 2005), 250.

According to Gene Mims, “Discipleship is the point in a church’s ministry where the Kingdom of God is won or lost.”<sup>63</sup> Regardless of how older members within traditional Black churches view technology, the positive result of how the Internet has impacted ministry cannot be ignored. In essence, traditional Black churches must commit to becoming engaged in utilizing the Internet. Author Myron Williams explains,

From this quick overview of churches and publishers, it is evident that the use of social media for discipleship is occurring. However, a congregation may not want to purchase materials for discipleship in an online format. There are several options of social media that could be used for discipleship and are locally created. Blogs that are authentic, consistent, and encourage interaction is one option. These writings can explore biblical themes, Bible study, Christian living, and daily issues on the Christian journey. There are many websites (i.e., WordPress, Patheos, Blogger, Blog.com) that will host blogs for those wishing to use this method. A community page on Facebook is another option that allows people to use the status bar to pose questions and comments, share links they find useful, and publicize upcoming face-to-face events. The photos page can show the events from the group face-to-face activities. Using the discussion page allows for study and discussion of Bible studies, theological topics, or practical living guidelines.<sup>64</sup>

Experts have researched, surveyed, and presented objective analysis surrounding the necessity of churches embracing the advances of technology and the digital new age. Traditional Black churches have found themselves while rejecting the inevitable, exposing their disconnection from the progressive church culture. During the first century, Christians spreading the gospel benefited immensely from the infrastructure of the Roman Empire. The Romans had created a logistical pathway involving roads and ships that allowed for the discipleship process to travel from one city to another. As ships and the Roman roads were the fastest pathways for sharing the gospel in the past, utilization of the Internet has become one of the greatest tools for

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<sup>63</sup> Gene Mims, *The Kingdom Focused Church: A Compelling Image of an Achievable Future* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1944), 102.

<sup>64</sup> Myron Williams, "Community, discipleship, and social media," *Christian Education Journal*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2015, p. 375+. *Gale General OneFile*, [https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/apps/doc/A429498259/ITOF?u=vic\\_liberty&sid=ITOF&xid=30561b6a](https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/apps/doc/A429498259/ITOF?u=vic_liberty&sid=ITOF&xid=30561b6a). Accessed 22 June 2020.

the church in completing that same task in the twenty-first century. Brent McCracken, senior editor for *The Gospel Coalition* (TGC), an Internet-based ministry, provided this salient advice,

Whenever world-changing episodes in history unfold, new technologies are often in the background. Jesus arrived in history “when the fullness of time had come” (Gal. 4:4), and it was exactly the right time for his good news to catch fire. The new “technology” of Roman roadways made possible the rapid spread of Christianity in the Mediterranean. So did the communication technologies of the scroll and, starting in the second century, the codex. Centuries later it was a communication technology—the printing press—that helped ignite the Protestant Reformation. Five centuries later, a new technology represents what could be a new Reformation. For communicating the gospel, the Internet is technology as game-changing as the printing press. It’s a medium with its fair share of challenges, to be sure, but also powerful new opportunities. God in his sovereignty has placed us in this specific era, with this unprecedented tool, for a reason. What we do now could ripple through history and affect generations. Will we seize or squander the opportunity Christians have often been quick to adopt new technologies. When Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 15th century, Bibles were some of the first books printed—thus helping to ignite the Reformation. When movies were invented in the early 20th century, Christians were quick to see the power and potential of the form (for good and for ill). Some of the earliest silent films were biblical epics or explored Christian themes. Soon after radio-broadcast technology debuted in the 1920s, Christians like Paul Radar, Bob Jones Sr., Charles Fuller, and Aimee Semple McPherson were using this powerful form to reach audiences in the millions. When television broadcasting followed, evangelicals were quick to seize its potential. Billy Graham became a household name in part by using television. And of course, a neologism soon entered the lexicon: “televangelism,” with TV preachers like Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson gaining massive audiences.<sup>65</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Traditional Black churches must stop dismissing the need-based importance of the Internet for their congregations. In this technologically driven world, church leaders must evaluate how their churches are using Internet-based tools to facilitate church programs and the potential to benefit their membership and ministry. The churches must evaluate how they are presently approaching the discipleship process. A new tactic must be developed during this digital age that enhances the role of discipleship in the lives of every Christian member while

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<sup>65</sup> Brent McCracken, “The Digital Reformation,” *The Gospel Coalition* (November 19, 2019), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/digital-revolution-reformation>.

maintaining the integrity of the gospel. Internet-based strategies, based on the current culture and technology experts' recommendations, that foster and encourage the use of digital tools to achieve the discipleship process and plan must be developed. The spiritual growth of individuals will never occur through human efforts alone apart from a Spirit-empowered relationship with God. Jesus told Peter, "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18, KJV).

Jesus declared to the Apostle Peter that upon the confession of his faith of who He was, that he would build, his church. The traditional Black church will miss the directive of the Great Commission unless it adds the Internet to its tools of evangelism. While this can be done within the local church at a local level, the Internet is a great way to engage younger demographics who are not necessarily eager to attend a traditional church service.

The traditional Black church has always served as a catalyst for change in the Black community; however, it is evident that in order for them to remain effective as disciples of Christ, there must be progressive changes initiated in the area of discipleship. Church activities and programs alone have provided minimum spiritual growth for the members of traditional Black churches. The Church is called to be disciples of Jesus, to bring Him glory, and to continue to enrich the community with the glory of God, the traditional Black church must explore other options, like the Internet, to aid in teaching its members. Authors Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey express the same sentiment, when they write,

To make disciples, you must maintain a tight focus on the Great Commission. You must develop and implement effective discipleship systems and the environment. Dave has written extensively about what that looks like, and I have described how disciple-making should occur in the context of relationships and small groups. The church of Jesus should move away from complex corporate models of an organization toward a biblical model of discipleship. Dave Browning observes, "Many how-to books for church leaders suggest things for the leaders to do (in addition to what they are already doing) to improve the effectiveness of their church. Unfortunately, many pastors are already experiencing

diminishing returns (or burnout) from attempting too much. The biblical model of discipleship should occur in the context of the relationship. Disciple-making does not happen by the senior pastor or the leadership team in a dead run for their lives while the saints are on the sidelines watching the drama unfold. From Eph 4:11-16, we understand the pastor's main job is to "equip" the saints to do the work of service (NKJV). We make disciples by helping others growing in Christlikeness and helping them to do what God has gifted them to do (v.16). This is the long and short of the whole matter. I believe this happens most naturally in a small group where every person can exercise his or her gift and build up the body in Love<sup>66</sup>

If traditional Black churches are to remain impactful in the lives of their members while seeking to attract younger members, the embracing and activation of digital tools via the Internet must be seriously considered. There are several challenges that traditional Black churches face in attracting former members and millennials to the church. First, there is the belief by some traditional Black churches that by shifting the approach and methodology of presenting the Gospel, they are abandoning certain historical or traditional foundations, yet, there is no evidence to support their reasoning.

The Pew Research Center conducted a survey to present supporting evidence that shows America has experienced a generational decline in religious activities as the U.S. public in general, is becoming less religious. The statistics are alarming and should be read carefully by all pastoral leaders in the Black Church.

Is the American public becoming less religious? Yes, at least by some key measures of what it means to be a religious person. An extensive new survey of more than 35,000 U.S. adults finds that the percentages who say they believe in God, pray daily, and regularly go to church or other religious services all have declined modestly in recent years. But the Pew Research Center study also finds a great deal of stability in the U.S. religious landscape. The recent decrease in religious beliefs and behaviors is largely attributable to the "nones" – the growing minority of Americans, particularly in the Millennial generation, who say they do not belong to any organized faith. Among the roughly three-quarters of U.S. adults who *do* claim a religion, there has been no discernible drop in most measures of religious commitment. Indeed, by some conventional measures, religiously affiliated Americans are, on average, even more, devout than they were a few years ago. The 2014 Religious Landscape Study is a follow-

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<sup>66</sup> Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is ...How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2013), 224.

up to an equally extensive survey on religion in America, conducted in 2007. An [initial report](#) on the findings from the 2014 study, released in May 2015, described the changing size and demographic characteristics of the nation's major religious groups. This report focuses on Americans' religious beliefs and practices and assesses how they have changed in recent years ... The share of U.S. adults who say they believe in God, while still remarkably high by comparison with other advanced industrial countries, has declined modestly, from approximately 92% to 89%, since Pew Research Center conducted its first Landscape Study in 2007.<sup>1</sup> The share of Americans who say they are "absolutely certain" God exists has dropped more sharply, from 71% in 2007 to 63% in 2014. And the percentages who say they pray every day, attend religious services regularly, and consider religion to be very important in their lives also have ticked down by small but statistically significant margins ... The falloff in traditional religious beliefs and practices coincides with changes in the religious composition of the U.S. public. A growing share of Americans is religiously unaffiliated, including some who self-identify as atheists or agnostics as well as many who describe their religion as "nothing in particular." Altogether, the religiously unaffiliated (also called the "nones") now account for 23% of the adult population, up from 16% in 2007.<sup>67</sup>

The church has been instructed to go and make disciples. If pastors desire to sustain church growth, they must re-examine their discipleship programs and approaches. There must be a willingness to venture into the digital community. There is an urgent need for traditional Black churches to become technologically engaged. The evaluation, acceptance, and commitment to utilizing technological advancements within the traditional Black church will enable the church to positively impact its members in multiple ways, as Kluver and Cheong assert,

In contrast to the expectations that technological modernization leads to secularization or that the Internet presents dramatic challenges to religious communities, other researchers have more recently argued that religious communities can and do "spiritualize" the Internet, by conferring a sort of religious legitimacy or *imprimatur* on the technology. Informed by research under the social shaping of technology perspective, in particular the processes of domestication of Internet use by users, [it is argued] that religious users often conceptualize and introduce the Internet as suitable for spiritual purposes.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," *The Pew Research Center* (November 2, 2015) <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.

<sup>68</sup> Randolph Kluver and Pauline Hope Cheong, "Technological Modernization, the Internet, and Religion in Singapore," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Volume 12, Issue 3, 1 April 2007, Pages 1122–1142, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00366.x>.

Christian scholars, sociologists, and statisticians support the premise that the traditional Black Church, in particular, and the Christian Church, in general, need to modify their methodology and engage the Internet to build a robust ministry. Traditional Black churches must utilize the available Internet resources, to not only meet the needs of their former members but also to attract and engage non-believers. This will also ensure it remains relevant in the Black community while progressing with the needs of a changing world.

The Internet impacts every part of our cultural experience. Scholars, church leaders, and cyber-experts agree that to remain relevant in today's technological world, pastoral leadership must be willing to utilize the Internet. Evangelizing lost humanity and discipling every Christian are mandated by Christ in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. The problem of reaching a lost humanity has been challenging since the first gospel sermon was preached on Pentecost, nearly 2,000 years ago (Acts 2:14-36), but with the coupling of the biblical message to the Internet, the Christian church can fulfill its commission to "go, baptize, and teach."

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Biblical Solution: Matthew 28:19-20**

The Black church has always been the center of hope for the hopeless while providing a community of moral and ethical leadership; however, in order to stay connected with its parishioners, with a greater awareness of relevance and responsibility, it must seek to become more progressive in utilizing the Internet for the advancement of their discipleship programs, through digitalization. This dissertation developed a detailed plan to assist the traditional Black church, with understanding the benefits as well as the need for this valuable resource. This solution has proven beneficial for many churches, especially during the 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic. This information was gathered through surveying church leaders, and members of traditional Black churches, researching scholarly studies, books, dissertations, and peer-reviewed journal articles that explored the significance of using the Internet and technology to advance the discipleship process and programs.

While many traditional Black church leaders debated over the authenticity and usefulness of the Internet within their churches, the world was captivated with a global pandemic that forced churches to do ministry differently. Although there were a lot of churches hosting weekly live streaming services, the Coronavirus crisis brought challenges and changes to those ministries as well. Yet, it was the traditional Black churches who had rejected and debated the authenticity of the Internet and technology that were affected the most.

Technology and the Internet have always been defined in various ways based on their utilization, purpose, and usage. Webster's online Dictionary defines the Internet as, "An electronic communications network that connects computer networks and organizational



computer facilities around the world – used with the except when being used attributively.”<sup>69</sup> As to the subjective term, “technology,” the accepted definitions include,

The practical application of knowledge especially in an area; a capability given by the practical application of knowledge; a manner of accomplishing a task especially using technical processes, methods, or knowledge; new technologies for information storage, the specialized aspects of a field of endeavor; and an electronic communications network that connects computer networks and organizational computer facilities around the world.<sup>70</sup>

The traditional Black church has oftentimes been hesitant or pessimistic in embracing and implementing twenty-first-century tools that have the potential to assist the church in advancing the Kingdom of God in the lives of many people. It is imperative that pastoral leaderships begin to view the Internet and technology from a more optimistic view based on the effectiveness of how they have been used in sharing information and impacting people around the world.

The use of the Internet by churches has always been a choice; however, the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020, has proven it a necessity. As a result of this global pandemic, many traditional church pastors and leaders were placed in the position of having to learn how to utilize the Internet and technology quickly in order to stay connected to its members and the Christian community. The normalcy of what had been viewed as a ministry for many Christians, and how they connected to their church family came to an immediate halt. The realization of the necessity of digitalization as the only way to engage with church leaders and members, teaching the word of God as well as conducting meetings was overwhelming for churches that had previously negated to entertain this option.

The Internet has become a viable and relevant tool for assisting churches with their discipleship programs. This tool can no longer be viewed as optional, but rather mandatory for

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<sup>69</sup> Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/technology>.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

helping with the advancement of members in becoming a greater reflection of the Savior.

Traditional Black churches must begin to assume a more progressive approach if they are to sustain a more active and effective role in the lives of members regardless of the number of members or the size of the church.

The primary solution to what has become extremely problematic (a decrease in membership within the traditional Black church) is to implement a biblical model discipleship program, based on Matthew 28:16-20 – God’s strategic plan to evangelize the world.

Implementing this divine plan will move the church from being program-centered to purpose-driven focusing on the call of Christ. Discipleship development plans must be biblical grounded and centered on the Gospel of Christ. Jesus Christ instructed His disciples to go and make disciples of all men and women. Christian discipleship consists of believers that are seeking to become a duplication of Jesus Christ, emulating through their life, His teachings, and beliefs.

The Great Commission instructs Christians as ambassadors for Christ, how they should maneuver in this world.

Traditional Black churches must embrace methods and Internet techniques that will increase spiritual growth and greater participation among its members with the ability to generate long term growth. In his article, "Christian Scholarship and The Philosophical Analysis of Cyberspace Technologies," Douglas Groothuis states,

The specific opportunities that computers and the Internet offer are too numerous to mention. Nevertheless, the major benefits these technologies offer can be summarized in the categories of information and communication. First, the Internet offers easy and quick access to enormous amounts of information ... Those doing research on the Internet can tap into important documents, photos, online encyclopedias, and other educational and reference materials. The Internet also provides up-to-the-minute news, weather reports, and scores from last night's game. Second, the Internet has opened up new means of instant communication with the advent of email and chat rooms. From nearly any location, including home, people can communicate with others almost anywhere in the world with little cost. By

typing in an email address and hitting the send button, messages can be sent without the hassle of handwriting a letter, licking stamps, and finding a mailbox. Emails already outnumber physical mail now aptly called "snail mail."<sup>71</sup>

Leaders and lay members must understand that though the Gospel message will never change, the method of delivery has changed throughout Christian history and must be relevant to the contemporary world. According to Jeremiah, "Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today" (Jeremiah 36:2, RSV). This seems to be the first recorded event of resistance by God's people toward a more progressive form of communicating God's word to His people. The prophet was instructed by God to present His prophetic, spoken words in written form to Jehoiakim king of Judah. This new precedent was set for how God began to disperse His spoken prophecies to His people, in a written form.

Jeffery Mahan, in his article "Christianity in the Digital age, From Mastering new Tools to Understanding Emerging Culture," sought to address the non-avoidable issues surrounding churches embracing the digital age to convey God's universal plan,

Today Christians are living in digital culture. It won't be adequate to either resist it as incapable of supporting authentic Christian life or to embrace it without considering the changes it brings in Christian identity and community. Consider three factors of digital culture. First, it assumes that communications are two-way. Whether one blogs, tweets, or posts sermons, digital culture assumes that the post is the beginning of a conversation in which it is possible for others to respond and assumes that the original poster is listening. Second, this and other factors flatten authority. Faith leaders create contexts for meaningful conversation, they can help the community draw on its heritage, but pronouncement is ineffective in this culture. As I have argued elsewhere, more significant than digital technology is what I call the digital metaphor. Digital texts, images, and soundscapes are created from pixels. The pixels can be rearranged; they are subject to ongoing editing and repurposing. Through this metaphor, people think of themselves, their religious identity, their theologies, and the church itself as under constant formation and reformation. It won't matter if church hierarchies adopt

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<sup>71</sup> Douglas Groothuis, "Christian Scholarship and The Philosophical Analysis of Cyberspace Technologies," <https://globalchristiancenter.com/church-resources/589-applying-technology/24541-how-people-of-faith-are-using-computers-and-the-internet>.

the tools of digital communication if they fail to understand the digital culture in which they seek to practice faithfully and effectively.<sup>72</sup>

A discipleship plan incorporating the Internet and technology to create and connect traditional Black church members to a more enhanced digital discipleship community should be implemented. Romans 10:14-15 states,

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.”

This plan offers the solution needed to revive the traditional Black church through digitalization.

Christians have been instructed to proclaim the Gospel. The Apostle Paul informs the Roman Christians that non-Christians cannot believe in a God of whom they have not heard. Paul informs believers that Christ has equipped each believer with the calling to proclaim the Gospel, allowing Christians to know that it is a glorious act to share the Gospel of peace through words or deeds. As believers, declaring a Gospel that creates spiritual growth, internally and externally. Internal growth demonstrates the believer becoming more like Christ in thoughts, and Christian character while exhibiting external growth demonstrates the believer exemplifies Christ in his actions.

The advances in technology have allowed churches to expand the presentation of the Gospel and the discipleship process. During biblical times, the Gospel was personally preached from one city to another. With the advancement of technology, the Internet has created numerous channels of communication by which the Gospel can be shared. These channels

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<sup>72</sup> Jeffrey H. Mahan, “Christianity in the Digital Age: From Mastering New Tools to Understanding Emerging Culture,” *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs*, May 16, 2017, accessed July 26, 2020.

include marketing posts to announce church events, conferences, and weekly or monthly activities. They are also a means of online services and meetings.

The changes in the world have forced traditional Black churches to embrace the emerging technology which continuously progresses. With the pandemic onset in March 2020, all churches found themselves in an unimaginable predicament, when everything came to an immediate halt; therefore, all in-person church attendance and activities were forced to cease immediately. For churches who were not already utilizing digitalization methods, this was a problem without an immediate solution. Many traditional Black congregations had been experiencing a decline in church membership and participation for decades; however, the Coronavirus pandemic made these challenges worse. There is a consensus among many older members of traditional Black churches who believe that technology could have the potential to contradict their biblical and doctrinal beliefs. The embracing and utilizing of technology would not cause one to compromise their biblical or doctrinal beliefs but would aid in the equipping of the directive given to each Christian to go and make disciples while advancing and spreading Jesus' gospel. The importance and necessity for the implementation of technology within traditional Black churches cannot be fully understood, without examining the reason for prioritizing the Great Commission in the church and lives of people.

When Jesus commanded His eleven men to make disciples by teaching them to observe everything, He had commanded them, He was making a rather large and important assumption. In demanding them to make disciples, He was assuming they were already living as disciples. In commanding them to obey everything He had demanded; He was assuming they were already obeying everything He had commanded. Therefore, before you can make a disciple, you need to be a disciple.<sup>73</sup>

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus gave His disciples a directive, that has become the primary mission for the church over the past two thousand years. Succinctly stated, the mission is to “go,

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<sup>73</sup> Dave Earley & Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2013), 49.

teach all nations, baptize, and make disciples.” The three specific participles in this directive, “go,” “teach,” and “baptize” are essential to completing the church’s mission, and were given by Christ as the foundational structure and framework for the spiritual advancement and growth of the early church and its members. This directive has been more challenging for some traditional Black churches. Resistance has slowed the process of them moving beyond traditional thinking and repetitive preaching. After the preaching of Peter’s first Gospel message, Acts records,

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47, RSV).

The early church of Acts developed a model of discipleship and fellowship that helped with the foundational state of the early members’ faith and charity. In Acts 2: 42-47, the body of believers experienced growth as a result of obeying four principles of being a disciple of Jesus. First, they grew in knowledge, while being instructed and taught the Apostles’ doctrine of Christ. Second, they joined in frequent outward acts of kindness and fellowship with the Holy Ghost pouring out an abundance of love while seeking to operate with a Christlike mindset. Third, they commemorated the Lord’s birth, death, and resurrection, daily, in breaking of bread during the evening meal that created an intimate state of fellowship; and fourth, they prayed. They engaged regularly, both publicly and privately, to interceding through prayer on behalf of the church and the people for the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit.

The first two principles centered around the newfound relationship of the disciples which was the result of a small group discipleship process between the believers and others exhibiting

new Christian character. Principles three and four developed an intimate relationship between disciple and God. This developed out of sincere love for God.

Greg Ogden, Executive Pastor of Discipleship at Christ Church, in Camarillo, California, says he realized that “The first cause of the low estate of discipleship is that pastors have been diverted from their primary calling to “equip the saints for the work of ministry.”<sup>74</sup> It is evident that traditional Black churches are historically program driven. This approach over the past few decades has become less relational focused, thereby producing less spiritually equipped and mature members, causing a decreased retention rate. Often leaders have exhausted a lot of energy and effort attempting to instruct members and desiring for them to become better followers of their instructions. Jesus had a broader approach when seeking to empower people. Discipleship is not an option, but a mandate. Paul informs the faithful followers of the church in Ephesus,

Now, these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

If unhealthy local churches are to be built up while perusing a healthier church, it must be orchestrated one member at a time, we all have a role in assisting with the spiritual development of new and older converts beginning with the leaders until each member becomes spiritually more mature. The church body must seek to become healthier with the understanding that all churches whether traditional or nontraditional, black, or white operates with some degree or level of sickness.

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<sup>74</sup> Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 523. Kindle Edition.

The motivation for discipleship must be understood and embraced. As believers exhibit a deeper reflection of Christ, the greater God glorified. He is glorious and the most important aspect of a Christian's life. God's desire is for Christians to grow and mature as His disciples. Paul explained to the Ephesians that it should be our desire not to remain as infants or little children, always being tossed to and from with every new doctrine or teaching that is brought forth but maturing in our daily walk with Christ, becoming a greater reflection of Him (cf. Ephesians 4:10).

The ultimate purpose of any Christian's life is or should be, to live a life that glorifies God. Through the discipleship process, a believer's life becomes an open display of their love for God and His being glorified by it. Jesus explains to the disciples, in John 15:7-8, "But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father." As disciples, Christians have been called by Christ to bring forth much fruit; therefore, maturing in relationship with Christ advances the personal discipleship process which is the result of fruit-producing disciples. The Apostle John writes, "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>He who does not love does not know God; for God is love (1 John 4:7-8, RSV). John tells the believer that it was not humanity loving God, but God-loving humanity. God first loved humanity, and it is because of this love that each believer should seek to mature in their Christian walk. Jesus declares, in John 14:15, "If you love Me then you would be willing to keep My commandments." As disciples, mature in Christ, the disciple must strive to embrace and keep the instructions of Jesus Christ.

A classic encounter between Jesus Christ and a Jewish lawyer reveals the essentiality of loving God and loving one's neighbor.



But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:34-40, RSV).

In answering the lawyer, Jesus selectively appealed to the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Leviticus 18:19 and summarized them into what He referred to as the “greatest commandment” – loving God and loving one’s neighbor. The first half dealt with our relationship with God, while the second half centered around our relationship with humanity. Disciples for Christ must be willing to love God with their heart, mind, and soul, for this is a choice that each believer must embrace. It is because of allowing oneself to love God in that manner that one can love his neighbor.

Disciples learning and the wiliness to love others is what Christ desires from each believer. This is a necessity if they are serious about fulfilling the church’s mission to evangelize the world. Being His disciple is centered around His love. If God is love, then the disciples of Christ themselves must become what He is. Paul stresses in his letters to the Romans, that to evolve into the likeness of Christ, believers must be willing to deny themselves.

I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:1-2, RSV).

Paul informs the believers that if they seek to become like Christ in their Christian journey, as His disciples, they must be willing to present themselves as a living sacrifice to a Holy God.

This is a spiritual mandate, and a foundational commitment Christians can make to express their

submission to God during the discipleship journey. The more principles of God a believer embraces, the more fellowship he or she enjoys with Christ (cf. I John 1:7).

The process for developing and implementing a plan of discipleship that accelerates the growth of God's people in the traditional Black church will require a change from church leaders and members in restructuring activities and programs that have focused on traditional practices that are program centered. Besides, they must engage in teaching God's word in a way that promotes spiritual growth and less emotionally driven preaching, thus making the discipleship process more effective.

In an April 18, 2019 article, “U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades,” written by the senior editor of Gallup,<sup>75</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones examines the shift in membership over the last two decades. He writes,

Although the United States is one of the more religious countries, particularly among Western nations, it is far less religious than it used to be. Barely three-quarters of Americans now identify with a religion and only about half claim membership in a church, synagogue, or mosque. The rate of U.S. church membership has declined sharply in the past two decades after being relatively stable in the six decades before that. A sharp increase in the proportion of the population with no religious affiliation, a decline in church membership among those who do have a religious preference, and low levels of church membership among millennials are all contributing to the accelerating trend. The challenge is clear for churches, which depend on loyal and active members to keep them open and thriving. How do they find ways to convince some of the unaffiliated religious adults in society to commit to a particular house of worship of their chosen faith? Roughly one in four U.S. adults are religious but not members of a church, synagogue, or mosque. Due to the expiry of members, these same churches must become attractive to the rapidly changing contemporary culture, traditional Black churches do not have to sell out in order to reach to the contemporary culture, but if your method does not change who will be there to hear the message.<sup>76</sup>

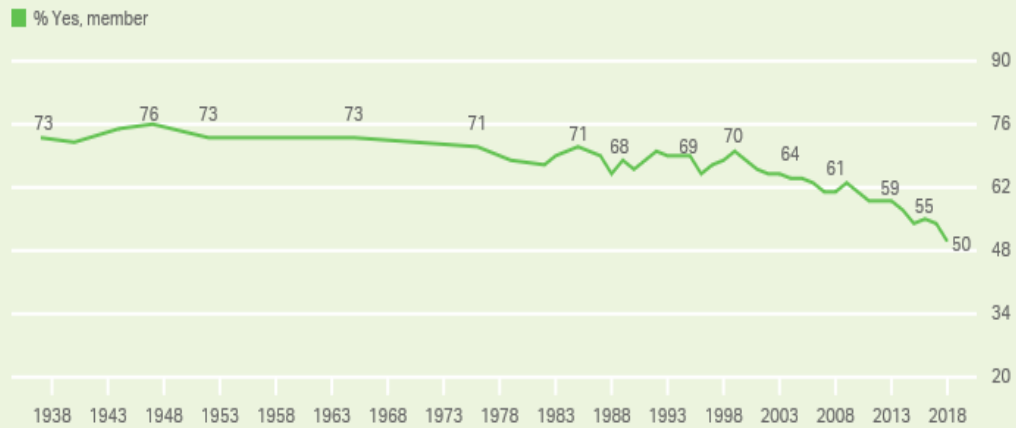
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<sup>75</sup> Gallup is a global analytics and advice firm that helps leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems secular and non-secular.

<sup>76</sup> Jeffery M. Jones. “U.S Church Membership Down the Past Two Decades,” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>, April 18, 2019, accessed August 9, 2020.

## Church Membership Among U.S. Adults Has Declined, Especially in the Past 20 Years

Do you happen to be a member of a church, synagogue or mosque?



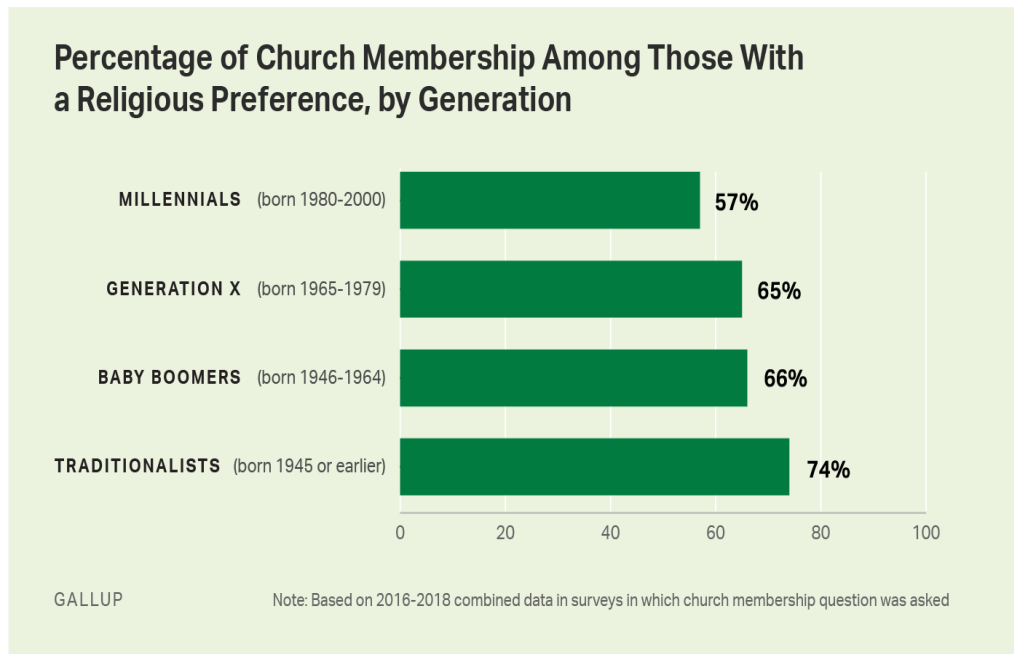
Based on annual aggregated data, usually based on two surveys

GALLUP

If traditional churches are to reverse the decline in church attendance, then they must understand the connection of membership versus relationship with God. This must be addressed. The expectation of attendance and membership must also be looked at carefully.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.



Results are based on aggregated data from Gallup telephone interviews with random samples of U.S. adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. Annual trend results on church membership are mostly based on samples of at least 2,000 U.S. adults and have margins of sampling error of  $\pm 3$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Results for the 1998-2000 aggregated data are based on interviews with 7,184 national adults and have a margin of sampling error of  $\pm 1$  percentage-points at the 95% confidence level. Results for the 2016-2018 aggregated data are based on interviews with 7,688 national adults and have a margin of sampling error of  $\pm 1$  percentage-points at the 95% confidence level.<sup>78</sup>

The message of the Cross has never changed, yet we must be willing to shift our methodology by which the message is presented from one generation to another, from one

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

culture to another. In Acts 17, Paul was deeply troubled by the idolatry that was on display.

Paul, like traditional Black churches, was exposed to a different culture; however, he was not confrontational in his approach but found a common element to proclaim the Christian message.

Note how the Apostle Paul prepared his audience to hear the Gospel of Christ.

So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything since he gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him, we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this, he has given assurance to all men by raising Him from the dead." Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." So Paul went out from among them. But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them (Acts 17:22-34, RSV).

Comparing the current culture to the time of the Apostle Paul, there are many striking similarities. For example, the people of both times were immoral and self-seeking; moreover, they were rebellious towards God. Another cultural similarity is humanity's desire to engage a higher power. While sharing the gospel with the Athenians, Paul was faced with a variety of challenges.

Traditional Black churches must become more flexible in their view of the changing culture if remaining relevant is important to the life of their ministry. They must also recognize the necessary tools to assist with discipleship. The creating of the Internet and the technology was not a coincidence, but because of the will of God. Proverbs 8:12 states, "I wisdom dwell

with prudence, and find out knowledge of witty inventions.” Whether the secular scientific community wants to admit it, all of creation came from the wisdom of God, so before the foundation of the earth, God knew what methodologies would have to evolve with each generation for His will to be accomplished throughout the earth. He knew the development of the Internet would be needed to teach the word of God and transform the world.

As a “global computer network providing a variety of information and communication facilities, consisting of interconnected networks using standardized communication protocols,”<sup>79</sup> the Internet is analogous to the printing press which was created in 1440 by German inventor, Johannes Gutenberg, as a tool that revolutionized how the gospel would be communicated and viewed. It is important to note,

Instead of paper being the medium for books, radio waves being the medium for sound broadcasting, and cables being the medium for cable television, a person can now read a book, listen to the radio, and access many cable television shows on the Internet. In short, digital media read, write, and store data (text, images, sound, and video) using numerical code, which revolutionized media more quickly than ever before.<sup>80</sup>

This plan of discipleship can be implemented and executed in most traditional Black churches. The evidence of this effect has been experienced throughout the world during the global Coronavirus pandemic. Churches utilizing the Internet as a tool for communication can remain connected with their members while continuing to inform and educate them in an array of ways. These methods include:

1. Email daily scriptural verse and/or inspirational biblical quotes each day. This method provides words of encouragement of the recipient.
2. Facebook, post daily quotes, scriptural verse, and/or share a brief, one to three-minute, message on Facebook Live– Live Streaming is a means of connecting communities.

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<sup>79</sup> <https://www.lexico.com/definition/internet>.

<sup>80</sup> A. Sporkin, “Bookstats 2012 Highlights,” *Association of American Publishers*, July 18, 2012, accessed September 20, 2012, <http://www.publishers.org/press/74>, citing Biagi 2007.

3. IG- Instagram, posts a scriptural verse or inspirational quote allowing churches to connect and interact with individuals that are following them.
4. Zoom meeting- allows for live worship, Bible Studies, and youth activities, like a Bible game night.
5. Blogs provide an opportunity for pastors and church leaders to encourage members and the community through a series of articles and posts on specific topics.
6. YouTube- allows pastors to provide videos of church services, conferences, and Bible study lessons.
7. Podcasts allow topics to be taught in series, that have been pre-recorded.

Each of these resources is readily available based on having access to the Internet. There are many ways the traditional Black church can utilize the Internet to disciple its members. The most important tool in the small group discipleship plan is the Bible. Leaders in traditional Black churches have an array of choices to use to teach God's word. The Apostle Paul asserts, "You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others" (2 Timothy 2:2). Paul informs Timothy that church leaders have a responsibility to teach "truth" to the faithful believers.

The development of disciples has always been the mission and directive that was given to the church (Matthew 28:19). Discipleship must be the focus of every traditional Black church and their ministry programs should be created intentionally. Regardless of a church's doctrine or religious ideology, it should be centered on developing disciples that are driven by love for God and committed to being a mature disciple for Christ.

The primary goal of the church's discipleship is to develop disciples to become mature in their walk of faith,<sup>81</sup> while displaying externally the inner characteristics of Christ. The

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<sup>81</sup> Dave Earley & Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2013), 13.

Scriptures teach that the Word of God's ultimate goal is the display of God's glory. The glory of God is revealed in His people through the "fruit" they bear, as Jesus taught,

You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits. (Matthew 7:16-20, RSV).

This became the greatest test of a disciple's character based on their ongoing relationship with Christ. The discipleship process equips believers in their daily walk to become a more mature reflection of Christ.

Regardless of the size, demographic, or location of one's church, a discipleship plan should be created to equip members to learn and grow in faith. In the New Testament, Jesus' discipleship plan was based on three groups: (1) His inner circle, Peter, James, and John; (2) His outer circle, consisting of the other disciples; and (3) the general public. With each group, he taught from a different perspective based upon many factors; not the least of which, was the size of the group. King Solomon states in Ecclesiastes 4:12, "Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken." This is a proverbial expression of strength found in unity. It indicates that a more unified network creates greater strength for everyone.

Every great discipleship plan must be created with the end goal in mind, that is, created with the vision, core values, mission, and purpose of the church and how it will maximize the growth and development of the members. There are many discipleship programs that are available to churches based on their specific needs and goals. Prior to developing a discipleship plan, pastors and church leaders should pray for direction as to which program best meets the needs of their church. Jesus instructs believers, that Christians should always pray before



embarking upon Kingdom mandates; for example, Jesus stated in Luke 6:12-13, “Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself; and from them, He chose twelve whom He also named apostles.”

The writer of Proverbs 16: 3 exclaimed, “Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.” The writer is suggesting to the reader that if Christians commit their works unto the Lord, He will bless the work they have sought to do on God’s behalf. God desires to direct the steps of believers, as they have been called to commit their works and activities unto the Lord. Unfortunately, many times, believers get ahead of God and attempt to carry out what they mistakenly believe to be the works of the Kingdom. It is in those situations that many churches lose direction and began to make mistakes. Church pastors and leaders must commit their planning process to the direction of the Holy Spirit, thereby experiencing godly success.

In most traditional Black churches, the organizational structure normally is not complex. Senior pastors have historically assumed most of the leadership role of those churches, however, deacons and sometimes long attending, influential families have retained a role of power. If the discipleship process and plan is to be implemented with divine success, the role of leadership must be dispersed more appropriately. The wiliness to identify and train key leaders to assist with the discipleship plan is key to elevating the development of the plan to the next level, as Paul explained,

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by[a] one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so, the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not

an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body (I Corinthians 12:12-20).

Paul writes to the church at Corinth to address certain issues that had created divisions within the church. He did not want these divisive issues to distract them from three important objectives – God’s plan, using their spiritual gifts, and waiting for Jesus’s Second coming. Through the usage of physical anatomy of the body, Paul sought to show that though the body consists of many members, it is still one body, thus the church of Christ is made up of many members yet one body. Leaders must realize that God has gifted the church with individuals that are endowed with various talents and gifts that are beneficial to the building and implementation of the discipleship process without disrupting the unity of the church.

### **Discipleship Model**

During the ministry of Jesus Christ, He established one model of discipleship based on three distinct groups – the inner circle, the outer circle, and the crowd.

#### **The Inner Circle**

The inner circle consisted of Simon Peter, James, and John. These three were frequently set apart by Christ to receive intimate teaching (e.g. Mark 14:33; Matthew 17:1-2; 26:37). For example, note the text from Matthew 17:1-2: “And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.”

The utilization of small groups has always been a part of God’s plan to assist His leaders in carrying out His purpose. Moses was instructed by his father-in-law, Jethro, because of the

population of the Hebrews in the exodus, to organize them into smaller groups. In this way, God used Moses to lead His people out of bondage and address their fears.

Moreover choose able men from all the people, such as fear God, men who are trustworthy and who hate a bribe; and place such men over the people as rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and tens. And let them judge the people at all times; every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves; so it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace." So Moses gave heed to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and tens (Exodus 18:21-25).

Moses' father-in-law suggested to Moses (after seeing how demanding and taxing it had become for Moses dealing with the conflicts and issues confronting the Israelites) that it would be more advantageous for the people to be divided into smaller groups. Once corroborated by God, Moses followed the suggestion. Every leader should seek out the counsel of God before implementing their small group discipleship plan. Throughout the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, the utilization of small groups has been an integral part of God's plan, for His leaders. Not only does the Gospel reveal Jesus using the inner circle, outer circle, and crowd, but on one occasion He combined the inner and outer circle by engaging 72 disciples to evangelize (cf. Luke 10:1).

After this, the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he was about to come. And he said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves (Luke 10:1-3, RSV).

After Jesus called the twelve, He called seventy-two disciples instructing them to share the good news. The reasoning behind Jesus choosing His inner circle or the specific qualifications they exemplified is not known. Jesus expended significantly more time and energy with his inner circle, thereby creating a more intimate relationship with them.

Throughout the Gospels, it can be noted on different occasions Jesus would allow for them to be a part of events to which the other disciples were not privy.

### The Outer Circle

His second group consisted of His core disciples the outer circle commonly referred to in Christianity as “The Twelve.”

In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles; Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor (Luke 6:12-16, RSV).

The Scriptures often present Jesus teaching the disciples in secluded places, more conducive to intimacy.

Jesus left the temple and was going away when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. <sup>2</sup> But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.” As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?” (Matthew 24:1-3, RSV).

In this passage, the disciples spent time alone with Jesus, making inquiries about His second coming. Jesus spent personal time talking with His disciples answering their questions, to the extent of their understanding. The disciples are about to go forth with the ministry without Jesus' physical presence. In many traditional Black churches, there is a system of instructions about ministry that no one dares challenge, and the response is always the same, "This is what should be done, so we do it." In these churches, many traditional practices (that are not biblically based) are unquestioned out of generational tradition. While these practices are not ungodly, they have no spiritual base. Often, in the Black church tradition, if a member asks the question, “Why?” he is met with the response, “This is the way we’ve always done it.” For example, the partaking of

the Holy Communion. The Scriptures instruct believers to receive the elements “in remembrance of me [Jesus]” (I Corinthians 11:25), but one could argue Paul does not indicate the day or the frequency. Many traditional Black churches have made it a dogma that the Communion must be taken on a particular Sunday of the month at a particular time. They don’t allow variances for it to be taken at another time on another day. There were many instances when Jesus gave specific instructions without variance, yet His instructions were clear, and not based on religious customs but spiritual focus.

Traditional Black churches, like all churches, must establish guidelines and bylaws in which the church must operate; however, equipping members to share the gospel with others requires them to learn practical biblical truths they can comprehend. For example, when they understand why Holy Communion is important, they will be more focused on ensuring that they partake of Communion, and less concerned with what day and time it is taken.

### The Crowd

Jesus’ third group consisted of the crowd. This group approach can be found in most traditional Black churches on Sunday mornings. Pastors disciple members from the pulpit in the same way that Jesus taught the masses. This form of discipling is very effective but could be improved if it included a personal pastoral touch. Jesus was passionate about His message to the masses but could not take an intimate approach to discipling the crowd because of their size and unbelief, as in Mark 4:1-2.

Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he taught them many things in parables, and in his teaching, he said to them  
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It was because of their unbelief that Jesus employed the utilization of parables as a means of teaching the people. This form of teaching provides instruction without the intimacy of walking alongside Jesus in ministry.

Small groups have been more advantageous in developing and assisting in the maturity of developing disciples. In the small group setting, disciples can find strength and encouragement as they fulfill the mission of Christ, as Paul wrote in Romans 12:11, “Be enthusiastic to serve the Lord, keeping your passion toward him boiling hot! Radiate with the glow of the Holy Spirit and let him fill you with excitement as you serve him.” Paul informs the Roman Christians that as a result of their faith in Christ, their external behavior should be a reflection of their internal relationship with God. Small group discipleship programs have proven to be more effective as well as a more inviting environment for many Christians. Due to the smaller size of the group, it can be more productive than larger group settings. Traditional Black pastors need to understand there is a need for in-depth dialogue. It can be viewed as more effective because it creates a holistic environment for discipleship and participation.

The traditional Black church has historically invested more time into preaching and teaching the gospel while investing less time and energy into equipping its members. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus' instructions to the church were clear, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age." If discipling a small group model is to be activated based on the Great Commission, traditional Black church pastors will have to personally initiate a plan within their churches to get leaders and members excited and engaged. Leaders have been given the

responsibility of equipping church members to minister to those in need based on the Word of God.

To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love (Ephesians 4:12-16, RSV).

Paul says that church leaders have been given the task of equipping the church for the work of God's kingdom. The equipping of members is the responsibility of church leaders who have been entrusted to facilitate ministry activities and programs that promote spiritual growth, as in I Peter 5:2-3: "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock."

In Peter's first epistle, he is encouraging the leaders who were exiled and dispersed throughout the Roman province to remember that regardless of the difficulties they faced, it was God who had chosen and adopted them into the body of Christ. As church members commit to participating in ministry activities and programs, ministry leaders will have to be proactive in the development of programs that will enhance their spiritual growth. Jesus informs Peter in John 21:15-17,

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

The leaders are reminded to feed and care for the sheep through their duties and service to God's people, for they are the children of God, and caring for them is the duty of a pastor. Jesus inquires of Peter three times whether he loved Him, and, on each occasion, Peter replied "Yes Lord." Peter's declaration of love for Jesus led to the instruction "Feed My Sheep." It is through Peter's love for Jesus that he will be able to care for God's people – providing them with spiritual food and continuous care. Peter declares, as Christians we must desire and be fed pure spiritual food, to mature as disciples for Christ. The church family must continue to grow, "Like newborn babies, long for the spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2, RSV). If disciples are to mature and grow in their walk with Christ, they must crave spiritual food. Merriam- Webster defines crave as "an intense, urgent, or abnormal desire or longing."<sup>82</sup> Spiritual food is the Word of God and Christians should have an "intense, urgent, abnormal desire or longing" for it. It is through this intense spiritual hunger that they will mature as disciples of Christ.

Leaders should be excited about the "Great Commission," expressing the same excitement concerning their members. They should also desire to see their members become excited about their spiritual growth and the assignments that Jesus has given them.

Traditional Black church leaders committed to developing and advancing the discipleship process in their churches, must provide extensive teaching and preaching on the most important directive Jesus gave to the church – "The Christian's commission." This will equip committed members to enhance their spiritual growth and reflect Jesus. Jesus knew that if He were to be reflected in the lives of humanity, His disciples would have to understand the three objectives of

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<sup>82</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/craving>.



“The Great Commission.” He instructed them to go, baptize, and teach all the things that He had taught them. Lastly, He assured them that He would be with them.

Jesus equipped the disciples daily, to ensure their ability to fulfill the Great Commission, after His ascension. Therefore, when the Holy Spirit empowered them, they would become the forerunners of the New Testament Church fulfilling the Great Commission and making disciples of all mankind. The book of Acts presents a model of discipleship that created such a progressive movement, that even under the banner of persecution it was unable to stop or slow down its momentum. The small group model of discipleship in Acts 2:46-47 is instructive: “And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

When the Great Commission is viewed in the context of Jesus’ instructions for the church it is apparent that creating and equipping the discipleship ministry was essential. The Apostles embraced the approach of equipping and maturing the new converts as Jesus had taught the disciples. They utilized the small group model to develop those who desired to become a reflection of Jesus Christ.

For the traditional Black church to combat the decline in membership and attendance, the discipleship model that was exercised by the disciples, after the day of Pentecost must be embraced. To better facilitate discipleship, a plan for the utilization of the Internet should be incorporated. Through incorporating discipleship activities and programs via the Internet, these churches will be able to connect to their members and the local community, as well as to people nationally and globally.

The implementation of the small group discipleship model's effectiveness is not based upon a church's size, location, or budget, but it should be adjusted based on each church's specific needs, limitations, and expectations. A successful discipleship plan must be created with the image of maturing disciples in mind. The small group discipleship plan will not only assist in the disciples' spiritual growth but also provide them with numerous spiritual tools that will demonstrate a positive impact in developing characteristics of maturing disciples as they grow during their Christian journey. The following steps will assist traditional Black church leaders with their discipleship programs.

The Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 supported this thesis' premise in real time; namely, for the traditional Black Church to fulfill the Great Commission, pastoral leadership must employ the Internet as a tool in advancing discipleship. The onslaught of COVID-19 brought many traditional Black churches to a standstill that will have lasting effects on how church members, in general, and church leaders, in particular; define and relate to their communities. Before the pandemic, most traditional Black churches did not consider the Internet as a viable medium to reach their local communities for Christ or to disciple their members. Churches in a short amount of time were forced to become more innovative in their means and methods of engaging with members. Those traditional Black churches that were using the Internet as a tool before the pandemic have been able to experience a greater online relationship from members and non-members compared to those that were not using the Internet. Based on applied research, several pastoral leaders have reconsidered the use of technology.<sup>83</sup>

In the twenty-first century, it is apparent that a great number of traditional Black church membership have been in a state of decline for decades. Many pastoral leaders have lost their

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<sup>83</sup> See Chapter Two, subheading "Technological Research," page 40.

influence with the members of their congregations, especially the younger generation. This decline has been caused by several factors, not the least of which, is the total neglect of the Internet as a multiplier for the churches evangelistic and discipleship programs; therefore, the solution for the traditional Black Church is to develop a discipleship plan enhanced by the Internet.

### **Steps to Develop an Evangelistic and Discipleship Plan**

#### **Step One – Prayer**

Prayer is the most essential spiritual discipline for the Lord's church. Throughout the book of Acts, which records the first 33 years of the history of the New Testament church, the apostles, elders, and pastoral leaders started every ministry with prayer beginning with the first church in Jerusalem where newly converted Jewish-Christians, "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

There are several steps to assist the traditional Black church leaders with developing and implementing a discipleship plan, using the Internet as the primary medium to reach the local community, but none more important than prayer. The first step that the pastoral team must embrace is prayer. This act becomes our resolution while seeking God's guidance and will. According to John 5:14-15, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him." As the discipleship director, the pastor must understand that he must model what he is calling others to follow. The whole of the pastoral team must support and lead the discipleship plan, beginning with prayer; without which, the discipleship plan will fail.

Once the plan is immersed in prayer, it needs to be clearly communicated to the pastoral team. The prophet Habakkuk explains, “Then the LORD answered me and said: ‘Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it’” (Habakkuk 2:2, NKJV). Pastors have a responsibility to enlighten the church from a biblical perspective on the importance and responsibility of being a disciple of Christ based upon the Great Commission given to the church (Matthew 28:19-20). Historically, in most traditional Black churches, the Great Commission has not been taught and preached from the point of equipping the believers of Christ on the responsibility of caring out the evangelistic and discipleship mandate. Pastors must begin to correct this neglect and help transform their mindset from a traditional church preceptive to a discipleship-making church. The creation of a sermon series would be a good start. Involving the call to discipleship for each Christian based upon scriptures, while challenging their members about the biblical mandate and responsibility of becoming His disciple and producing fruits that will attract others to enlist the others, is essential.

Discipling members in a corporate setting has always been facilitated in most traditional Black churches on Sunday morning, but utilizing the Great Commission to equip member seems to of been a missing ingredient element. If the need to disciple immature Christians is not embraced with a degree of urgency, the discipleship plan will fail. To this end, prayer is essential for pastoral leaders.

Prayer has always been the Christians’ spiritual communication with God, by seeking His divine authority to intervene in the affairs of our earthly lives based upon His will. The four Gospels reveal that Jesus was always praying to the Father. Over twenty-five times, throughout the Gospels, it is recorded that He was praying. For example, Luke 18:1 recorded, “And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” If pastors are to

connect with His will, prayer is essential. Jesus exclaimed, “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’” (Matthew 6:9).

After direction has been sought from God, pastoral leaders must begin the creation of the discipleship plan. The discipleship plan must be shrouded with biblical characteristics as the guiding force propelling Christians to those fundamental truths, as the Apostle Paul explained, “Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this, I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me” (Colossians 1:28-29). The objective of the disciple plan must be in alignment with that of God. The traditional Black Church leadership must ensure that their parishioners are transformed into the image of Christ by renewing their minds, that they “may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). Christians must realize that becoming like Christ requires having the mind of Christ.

#### Step Two – Establish a Core Team

The development of the Core Team is essential, as this team should be given the responsibility of working firsthand with the leadership in carrying out the vision for the discipleship plan. The New Testament model of a core team is most clearly seen when Jesus selected His twelve apostles.<sup>84</sup> The Twelve were selected as the outer core team. The inner core team consisted of Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, James, and John (see Mark 9:2-3).

The selecting of the core team members should be based on the qualities of the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-

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<sup>84</sup> “The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him” (Mt. 10:2-4, RSV).

control (cf. Galatians 5:22-23). With unconditional love as the foundation of the Christian's life (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8), each member of the core team must possess a love for "God and neighbor" (cf. Matthew 24: 34-40) unequalled in the respective congregation. By determining the membership of the core team based on mature spiritual behavior, the core team will be pleasing to God, credible to the greater church family, and respected by the local community.

As a group, the team must be committed to the congregation's discipleship strategy, able to teach, accountable, respectable, not quarrelsome of other's gifts (cf. Romans 12:3-8), and representing multiple generational age groups and church ministries. In this way, the core team will become the heart of a strong discipleship ministry. It is the pastoral team's responsibility to train and equip the core team.

Pastors should solicit the assistance of their core team in training every department ministry leader at their church, surrounding the purpose, objective, and application of the discipleship plan. Core team members must collectively work in stride with the pastor in deciding the small group platform forms for their church's discipleship plan. The pastor and core team must share the responsibility of developing a biblical sound curriculum. The mandate of the Great Commission that was given by Christ to the church must become the driving force.

### Step Three – The Small Group Model

The implementation of the small group model has the potential to produce a great harvest within the traditional Black churches if implemented under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The eighteenth-century English cleric and leader of Methodism, John Wesley, started using the small group approach once he realized that the small groups created greater accountability while helping to encourage each other to live out a wholesome Christian life.

The calling of the Twelve Apostles as Jesus' inner core, provided the Jerusalem church with the small group model and may well have contributed to the development of the diaconate (cf. Acts 6:1-6), and the elders (cf. Acts 15:4). Additionally, the house church model served as multiple small groups in the apostolic era (cf. Romans 16:3-16). The early church developed and employed a workable church model for discipleship that has proven itself through the centuries. Similarly, the small group ministry of today must have as its primary focus, godly relationships among the membership. The journey of spiritual growth from the group, while becoming a more authentic reflection of Christ should be exciting and serve to motivate the team to further success. If the ministry is immersed in prayer, a core team is developed, and a viable small group is formed, the traditional Black church can succeed at attracting the unchurched, evangelizing, and maturing disciples. Fortunately, the biblical model of prayer, selected core team members, and the venue of the small group is not dependent on a church's numeric size, location, or budget; and with the advent of the Internet, the community is easily accessible.

#### Step Four – The Internet

In developing a successful discipleship plan, the last component a pastoral leadership team must consider is the use of the Internet. During the health crisis of 2020, the use of the Internet was invaluable to continue the worship, work, and ministry of the local Christian church. Pastors and church leaders were forced to learn what most younger generation Christians already understood – the plethora of Internet uses in connecting people. As a result of Internet-ignorance and the dismissal of the value of the Internet as a tool to evangelize the community and disciple the church, the traditional Black church was woefully inadequate to fulfill the Great Commission in the Coronavirus in 2020; however, an adverse effect of the pandemic was to force the traditional Black Church to reconsider the value of the Internet. The health crisis demonstrated

the enormous ministry value of the Internet if understood and utilized by the church. The Internet has become one of the greatest mediums to share the gospel. A church's discipleship plan can not only be implemented locally but on a national scale with the simple use of websites and capitalize on the many social media platforms.

The development of a communication ministry team is critical to maximizing an Internet presence within chat rooms such as Twitter and Instagram, and live streaming of worship and Bible studies through YouTube, Skype, and Zoom.

The Internet tool affords the churches a viable opportunity to minister in real-time while incorporating online strategies to evangelize whole communities through live streaming of worship, sermons, and Bible studies. Traditional Black Church pastoral leaders must remember that they are in the discipleship making business, teaching people how to live their lives based upon sound, wholesome biblical teaching, and the Internet provides a meaningful pathway for Christians to introduce the community to Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Discipleship and technology are interrelated and can never be discounted regardless of cultural disdain against the Internet. The Internet has become one of the most prolific tools of communication since the printing press in advancing evangelism and discipleship. Historically, in many traditional Black churches, discussions involving the utilization of the Internet and technology for evangelism and discipleship, have been delicate topics. Older congregants have erroneously believed that the incorporation of the Internet and technology tools would impact the sacred faith negatively causing the church to become too secular and disconnecting the church from its biblical mission. This misunderstanding has created conflicts with younger generations on the progressive movement of the church and reaching the lost.



Applied and academic research within this thesis project has supported the premise that the traditional Black churches must reevaluate the incredible opportunity the Internet affords the Christian church and the ease of sharing the good news of Christ with a lost world. As a media platform, the Internet would provide an avenue for churches to reach not only their members but millions of unchurched people. The traditional Black Church has been the cultural backbone of the Black community in America for over two centuries – from slavery to the present day. In that time, the Black Church has performed admirably in many ways and has every right to be proud of its loving support to the marginalized Black community, but in today’s cyber world, there is so much more pastoral leaders can do once they embrace the Internet as a viable platform to provide their communities with the only solution to human problems – Jesus Christ.

The commission that Jesus gave His church has not changed since the first Gospel sermon was preached in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-47). Indeed, the gospel that was “once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) is changeless, but the method of communication morphs daily. Given that truth, pastoral leaders must embrace the Internet for the traditional Black church to remain relevant in the twenty-first century.

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APPENDIX ONE

**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 3, 2018

Marshall Williams  
IRB Exemption 3014.040318: The Utilization of Social Media in the Advancement of Spiritual Formation

Dear Marshall Williams,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:
  - (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)

Sincerely,

A large black rectangular redaction box covers the signature and name of the sender.

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