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Virtual Recovery:

Bringing the Kingdom to an Online Community

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Andrew Matts

Lynchburg, Virginia

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Thesis Project Approval Sheet

Dr. Jacob Dunlow
Faculty Mentor

Dr. Seth Bible
Faculty Reader

THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT
Andrew Matts
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Mentor: Dr. Jacob Dunlow

Soon after Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension, the fledgling church community divided into two camps: One favoring the inclusion of Gentile converts only if they observed traditional Jewish Law and custom (e.g., circumcision) and the other, led by Paul, asserting that following Jesus did not require such formality and legalism. A lengthy debate concluded by reaching into the Gentile community to provide a captivating kingdom message of hope, love, and compassion. Today, the traditional, physical church community faces a growing challenge: reaching into a growing online community by providing a captivating kingdom message, while recognizing that potential recipients of the message may be averse to physical church attendance. Lifehouse Church, in the northern suburbs of Washington, D.C., has wrestled with how it can best address this gap and has undertaken a strategic development plan. This study addresses a potential Lifehouse Church online ministry by reaching both internally and externally via quantitative and qualitative analysis, with a sample population of about 100 and sample size including 38 quantitative responses and eight substantive interviews. The resulting insights offered some important conclusions, including the need for positive, tailored, and targeted messages that resonate with the unique needs of the virtual audience. These conclusions offer a foundation and suggest ample opportunity for future research into how best to bring Christ's message to the online mission field from a community church forum.

Keywords: Online, virtual, social, community, connection, fellowship

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Abbreviations

DMIN	Doctor of Ministry
IRB	Institutional Review Board
LC	Lifehouse Church
OIT	Online Intervention Team

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The church is decades behind in engaging society with technology and social media. Jesus told His disciples, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of it," which has often been interpreted as telling Christians to steer clear of engaging with non-believers (John 17:16, New International Version). It is just as important to note that Jesus also expected the church to be among their peers by saying, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (John 17:14-15, NIV).

In the decades following the Resurrection, a fledgling church made an enormous impact across the Mediterranean basin by going into places where others fled, sharing compassion with others who were not necessarily their race, culture, or creed.[1] During the reign of Marcus Aurelius (c. AD 165), a tremendous plague coursed through Rome. During this plague and others that followed, most fled the disease while those who could not avoid the afflicted.[2] Christians risked and lost their lives caring for the sick with unheard-of confidence and joy, which marked a decisive point of inflection from which Christianity grew.[3]

From prison, Paul of Tarsus used "technology" to his advantage, using writing instruments to compose letters for the young churches he had helped plant.[4] These letters to

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[1] Sean Everton and Robert Schroeder, "Plagues, Pagans, and Christians: Differential Survival, Social Networks, and the Rise of Christianity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58, no. 4 (2019): 776.

[2] Ibid., 777.

[3] Josh Haldon, et al. "Plagues, Climate Change, and the End of an Empire. A Response to Kyle Harper's 'The Fate of Rome (2)': Plagues and a Crisis of Empire," *History Compass* 16 (2018): 2.

[4] Matt Schubert, "What Would Paul Think of Online Sermons?" *Lutheran Theological Journal* 54, no. 2 (2020): 95.

ancient churches and others, including Timothy, still resonate today, and influence believers across the generations. Against a polytheistic culture, Christians stood firm on the promise of a carpenter's son who paid the ultimate price and often paid a price themselves. This was the obligation laid out to the Christian by Jesus, an obligation no other faith claimed: to minister to the sick and dying.[5] Engagement with the world was an explicit response to a living God, and the early church's sacrifice, combined with the Spirit of that same living God, caused a detonation of faith and salvation for many.

Today, the ἐκκλησία (the name Jesus gave to His body of believers) is still charged with taking the captivating kingdom message of agape love, hope, and mercy to all nations and all peoples. It happens that many of these "peoples" are online, engrossed in social media, or scrolling through Amazon or Target mobile applications ("apps"). Just as followers of Christ ran into cities plagued by disease or became human torches (a practice during the reign of Nero whereby Christians were rounded up, soaked in oil, and burned alive) defending the name of the true God, today Jesus' followers should take the kingdom message to online frontiers.[6] The church is behind in its mission: few have successfully reached into the social media world and found ways to connect with a heavily consumerist culture with a short attention span.[7]

This thesis project is designed to research the gaps in kingdom message application at Lifehouse Church to a new, "virtual" world. Churches understand there are issues reaching the online unchurched or dechurched audience but have hesitated to shift their paradigm or pulpits to

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[5] Everton and Schroeder, "Plagues, Pagans, and Christians," 778.

[6] N. T. Wright. *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 54.

[7] Vincent Evener, "Spirit and Truth: Reckoning with the Crises of Covid-19 for the Church," *United Lutheran Seminary* 59 (2020): 239.

accommodate them.[8] The project addresses the opposition among traditionalist church attitudes, the conflict between physical and online congregations, and how best to reach across these boundaries and create connections. Addressed also are gaps in outreach, in creating a community online that grows in faith and discipleship, and how to address the inherent online concerns, including secularism and attention spans. It is a daunting task, but one many deem entirely necessary given the upheavals across cultures, particularly church culture, as the cyber-environment has grown.[9] From the gap analysis, this project endeavors to create and apply solutions that will gradually change the paradigmatic climate and engage a new frontier of potential followers of Christ.

Ministry Context

Contextually, this project seeks to find gaps in the Lifehouse Church online ministry program in two tangential paths. First, the current congregational culture at Lifehouse will be examined in detail, as certain cultural attitudes and activities help shape the church's willingness to pursue the evolving online audience. Second, the nature of the online community needs to be scrutinized as Lifehouse endeavors to engage with this constituency's unique requirements and relationship styles.

Lifehouse Church has existed as a church community for several generations but under a different name. Lifehouse was originally organized as the "Glad Tidings Tabernacle in 1931 but eventually became "First Assembly of God" of Laurel, Maryland.[10] After meeting for many years in a building located at 1102 Montgomery Road, it was decided to sell the building and

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[8] Tim Hutchings, "Creating Church Online: A Case Study Approach to Religious Experience," *Studies in World Christianity* 13, no. 3 (2007): 245.

[9] Evener, "Spirit and Truth," 237.

[10] Lifehouse Church, Orientation Guide: Church History, 4.

search for a new facility near the Laurel and Beltsville area outside of Washington, D.C. The move was based on two divergent paths: on the one hand, attendance was peaky, reaching a record number of over 400 attendees on Easter 2014, but also partly predicated by a gradual decline in overall and regular attendance.[11] This was perhaps attributable to the general aging of the core congregation, as well as newer churches in the area. These churches flourished in a geographic region that experienced rapid growth during the early years of the twenty-first century. Secondarily, the cost of maintaining a large property grew along with the population as property tax and maintenance cost changes evolved.

Once the decision was made to seek a new facility, the previous building was sold, and the search proceeded in fits and starts for many months.[12] After meeting in school cafeterias and libraries for a time, a lease was finally signed at the church's current location in Beltsville early in 2016. The transient nature of meeting places had caused further erosion in congregation size, but leadership was hopeful that the church could be revitalized with the firmer setting. As a symbol of the change, the church was renamed "Lifehouse" in early 2017.[13] Still affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination, the church body has experienced a dramatic demographic shift towards a younger and more diverse congregation. Several factors contributed to this shift. Importantly, the church leadership was refreshed with a new board and lead pastor, Gavin Brown.[14] The Beltsville facility is in an area that is considerably more racially diverse than the former facility in the city of Laurel. While it might seem congruous that an African American pastor would translate into an African American congregation, Lifehouse now retains a rich and

[11] Ibid., 5.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 6.

[14] Andrew Michaels, "New Pastor Comes Full Circle in return to Lifehouse Church," *Baltimore Sun* (2017).

diverse group of believers. Further, the average age of Lifehouse congregants has become considerably younger as prior congregants chose not to travel to the new location, and young families near the Beltsville location joined.[15] This is a positive trend occurring within the church.

The revitalized church experienced an 80% growth spurt between 2017 and 2019.[16] New life groups were initiated for men, women, and multiple age groups of youth. Services occur every Sunday morning at 10:30, plus Wednesday evening Bible study sessions which are streamed live to Facebook and then posted to YouTube. There are regular conferences for each group, including a regular Marriage Conference, which took place most recently in February 2022, and a Women's Conference, which most recently took place in October 2021.[17] With new leadership and a core group of dedicated volunteers, the church once again began to exhibit the hallmarks of a vibrant and growing congregation.[18]

Lifehouse leadership concentrated its efforts on providing a worship environment that was more attractive to the younger generation that was driving exciting change. More energy was also devoted to reaching into the community to provide awareness and services to those in need. The more diverse congregation gave the church a more welcoming aura for those searching for a new body of believers or those simply curious about the "newcomers on the block." This dynamic and emboldened vision continued its upward trajectory into 2020. Then COVID-19 happened.

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[15] Lifehouse Church, Orientation Guide: Church History, 7.

[16] Lifehouse Church, www.mylifehouse.church, "About Us."

[17] Ibid.

[18] Lifehouse Church, Orientation Guide: Church History, 7.

In March 2020, Prince George's County, along with the State of Maryland, enacted what essentially amounted to a "full stop" to indoor group meetings.[19] Lifehouse and other community churches were hit directly and hard. While giving continued at a generous pace, the ability to grow together in person was seriously challenged for several months. The church made needed adjustments in its efforts, forming alliances with other churches and the city of Laurel to form food and clothing distribution centers.[20] Lifehouse continues to be at the core of this renewed service. Pastor Gavin immediately changed the service format to a suite of virtual media, including Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Many members took the changes in stride. Most continued to give and provide resources to move the church forward, no matter what forward meant.

Despite these efforts, the sudden change in venue and format caused some upheaval in church attendance as measured by the viewing audience. Once the physical campus doors reopened, the difference in attendance was disheartening. Many congregants rejoined the physical space quickly. Others remained online until the vaccine rollout. Still, others decided the online format was more convenient, particularly those with young children that previously spent an entire Sunday morning preparing for church, getting to church, sending kids to various age group settings, attending service, retrieving their kids, and making their way home. It was easier to walk downstairs for coffee and watch church from the comfort of their couch, in pajamas, and then go about their day.

For others, the effect of the pandemic on their faith was more sinister. Some attendees, it was discovered, were attending because they felt an obligation, perhaps to God but often to

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[19] Sandra Salathe, "Prince George's County Closes County Buildings, Offers Meal Deliveries for Seniors during Pandemic," *WTOP News* (2020).

[20] Lifehouse Church, "Food Pantry," www.mylifehouse.church (2022).

continue the process set by parents or relatives that had always attended church on Sundays. It was a matter-of-fact exercise, and once the obligation was removed, the tradition was reexamined. Some did not feel the need to return to campus. Others did not feel the need to pursue faith at all. Still, others reviewed their current house of worship and chose the opportunity of the pandemic "reset" to look elsewhere. These were patterns noted not only at Lifehouse but across the country as the pandemic took its toll on parishioners' faith.[21]

It is important to point out here that just because someone left the physical campus and did not return was not necessarily an indication that their faith had been shattered.[22] For sure, some congregants, at that moment when their emotional and spiritual connection to the physical body at Lifehouse was broken, decided they had not needed God in their lives. To be sure, others were merely showing up because they knew no other way, simply going through the motions since childhood.[23] For others, there was no adversity to God. There had been no falling away, no change in their desire to be children of God. Instead, the void had been replaced by the comfort of Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings spent at home, on the couch, or sleeping in to take in their "church service" at their convenience.

This cross-section of the population still wants God in their lives. They pray they believe in the power of prayer, but they have doubts about traditional worship. These believers sing in their cars and get on their knees at bedtime, but their kids are not excited about youth ministry,

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[21] Julie Lytle, "Virtual Incarnations: An Exploration of Internet Motivated Interaction as Manifestation of the Divine," *Religious Education* 105, no. 4 (2010): 396.

[22] Christian Harwig, John Rowland, and Hijme Stoffels, "Click to Connect: Participation and Meaning in an Online Church," *Ecclesial Practices* 5 (2018): 27.

[23] George Barna and David Kinnaan *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014), 140.

and it is hard to get everyone going on Sundays.[24] A significant portion of the Lifehouse congregation, and any potential added congregation, has simply moved away from the traditional church model, and now they investigate the abyss of social media, and they find little in the way of answers, meaning, or purpose that comes from hearing Christ's eternal message of hope and mercy.

Lifehouse Church represents many churches in this respect. Churches have failed to adapt to changing needs and tastes of believers as lifestyles change and evolve. Many believers still desire the light of Christ. Just as important, many seekers crave more information and deeper discussion of who Jesus is. Social media has created a whole new virtual congregation who would have, at a different time, perhaps walked into the back of the church during service just to see what church was all about.[25] They want to know mods about God. There is something telling them that God is more than a meme, God is more than a post, and the salvation of Christ is more than a building. They are right.

The kingdom message transcends space and moves into lives and through lives, whether those lives are inside a building or not.[26] People search for God's healing, mercy, and love amid the chaos they observe on their screens and in the world around them. Lifehouse Church can reach into this new type of virtual reality. Lifehouse has community connections, has built partnerships with other churches, and has leadership willing to work towards reconciliation and agape love in new horizons. The church's revitalized and youthful congregation is familiar with

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[24] Barna and Kinnaan*, Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them*, 142.

[25] Miriam Bosch, "Open Wall Churches: Catholic Construction of Online Communities," *Prisma Social* 19 (2017): 304.

[26] Thom Rainer, *Who Moved my Pulpit? Leading Change in the Church* (Nashville, TN: The B&H Publishing Group, 2018), 26.

online trends and has some idea of how to reach people via social media. Lifehouse Church is prepared to bring the kingdom message to a medium that is hurting, seeking, and desperately needs Christ. That is where this research project comes in, leading the virtual ministry and ready to meet an online audience where it is. It is an imperative part of LC ministry, recognizing that the mission field has expanded beyond the church walls into a new opportunity.

Problem Presented

The problem is that Lifehouse Church has no coherent strategy for delivering a captivating kingdom message to an online congregational audience. Addressing the problem will require a Christ-oriented strategy of engaging and participating in the online community. A fully developed program will encompass reaching as many in the community as possible through Christ's message of hope and allowing God to draw people towards him through more integrated messages and activities. The program's design must be one the online culture can identify with.

Importantly, the Review of Literature will show opportunities to engage in the online community despite obstacles such as attention span or Western consumerism. Research within the review will attempt to address social media behaviors on popular sites, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. These behaviors will likely need to be parsed by demographics, including age, gender, and (where possible) faith behaviors. Social media platforms have the right algorithms and statistics in place to analyze and affect targeted messaging that is popular and attractive to their audience.[27] The use of algorithms and expensive research is outside this project's scope. Still, the observable lessons might be able to be applied in the approach taken by

[27] Valarie Kupke, "The Church has Left the Building," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 54, no. 2 (August 2020): 94.

Lifehouse for engagement and outreach. Even though the expected sample size is small relative to the overall population, sufficient data should be available from which to develop a strategy.

In general, researchers have found that with the right approach, those willing to hear the kingdom message are just as receptive through online methods as within a brick-and-mortar setting.[28] Explicating a specific plan will require using the body of evidence developed through the Review of Literature and applying it to relevant, online-oriented actions that provide a compelling kingdom message to a growing online audience.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this DMIN action project is for the adult congregation of Lifehouse Church to strategize engaging an online audience in kingdom ministry. This will require intervention into the dichotomy between the traditional brick-and-mortar campus and the developing online audience by equipping Lifehouse Church with an actionable process for adapting to evolving cyber-environmental behaviors. Lifehouse certainly has sufficient passionate members to begin to bridge this gap. The hesitation followers of Christ have exhibited in engaging unbelievers where they have grown in number has reinforced the conflict and suspicion towards online media. Jesus explicitly told the apostles to go forth and take the kingdom message to the ends of the earth; just because the new frontier is not reached in sandals does not make it any less terrestrial in the eyes of God.

Research has shown that a properly designed engagement and participation series of actions within the online community is just as likely received as through a community-oriented physical program or service in a brick-and-mortar facility.[29] Developing an effective kingdom-

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[28] Harwig, Rowland and Stoffels, "Click to Connect," 27.

[29] Anna Cho, "For the Church Community after Covid-19," *Dialog* 60 (2021): 16.

advancing initiative will likely mean using already complied research to analyze the attention span, attitude, and connections required to develop an online community of Christ-followers. During analysis of the work of others and subsequent synthesis into methodologies to close the "gap" of knowledge in engaging the online community, this project seeks to find methodological procedures designed to meet the new audience where it is. Concurrent with simply deploying a series of project actions, the solutions pursued in this project will be designed to target the online community's needs so that the deployment of potential solutions maximizes the opportunities available to gain traction in the virtual world.

Ultimately, the goal would be to provide a message compelling enough for believers to receive God's purpose and continue spreading the message throughout the intersections and connections in the online community. It is likely the series of project actions will include short presentations designed to favor short attention spans prevalent with the technologically savvy. These would be designed in part to direct those who are compelled by the message of the kingdom to be able to find significant resources and support. This support would consist of prayer groups, studies, and encouragement as potential believers wrestle with skepticism and doubt. While the number of "hits" for short online videos may not result in perfect conversion to Christianity, the messages designed to captivate an online audience should be considered similarly to an in-person outreach and new attendees to brick-and-mortar church buildings.

Basic Assumptions

At the outset of this action research project, it is important to note some basic assumptions made that are assumed to be true but are not explicitly proven or supported in the context of this project. For example, it is assumed that the church community has an important impact on people's lives, and it is assumed that meeting a body of believers in a physical or

online environment meets the qualifications of "community." Additionally, it is assumed that the people interviewed or surveyed during this project have provided honest responses. To strengthen the assumption, participants were informed of their anonymity to encourage freedom in their responses. It is also assumed that the cross-section of Lifehouse participants and those outside the Lifehouse community, reasonably represent the larger population that would not be included in the sampling.

When discussing theological questions, such as the assertion in Matt. 18:20 of Jesus that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there also am I," it is assumed that the respondents either agree with His statement or (in the case of those outside of faith) at least that they understand the meaning of the passage. In other cases, certain concepts that apply outside the Christian faith are discussed, and it is assumed that the respondents are also familiar with those terms. These include "social media," "culture," or "consumer." In general, it is assumed that the participants in this project can respond with at least a basic level of knowledge of these concepts and terms.

Because of these basic assumptions, it can be inferred that the results of this action project are reliable and can be used as the basis for actionable decisions in developing a captivating kingdom message program for an online audience. Where circumstances would limit this reliability, these circumstances are discussed in the limitations section, which follows the definitions.

Definitions

This action research project is meant to create a plan for Lifehouse Church to deliver a kingdom message to an online audience in a captivating way. As the project thesis progresses, certain common terms are used, often in relationship to one another. Such a relationship is

exemplified in the terms "Western," "culture," "consumerist," and "secularization." This section defines some of these key terms so that as they appear in the project, their relationships and contexts will be more easily followed.

Change in the context of this project refers to the process of churches becoming "social, not spatial" congregational online communities as participants become part of an online network. The trend has been away from traditional physical brick-and-mortar structures and towards virtual "nodal" structures.[30] As change has occurred between these two models, Kupke observed that the body must retain both creativity and connection in the online space as it was possible in the physical.[31]

Church, or ἐκκλησία as described by Jesus, is a body of people with a shared belief who are called out to congregate and to encourage discipleship in one another, and then go forth into the world to spread the kingdom message of hope, love, and mercy. Interestingly, Jesus did not use this word to describe a building or specific place; rather, He described a gathering and fellowship. This project is designed to consider "church" as a body that meets virtually but still is concerned for and connected to one another, able to evangelize and disciple through online media.[32]

Community is often considered a core group or family of members who affirm each other's beliefs in the hopes of future transformation. Hindley described a group of like-minded participants who "affirm each other despite ourselves."[33] Hudgins noted that true community

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[30] Harwig, Rowland and Stoffels, "Click to Connect," 27.

[31] Kupke, "The Church has Left the Building," 97.

[32] Oren Golan and Nurit Stadler, "Building the Sacred Community Online: The Dual Use of the Internet by Chabad," *Media, Culture and Society* 38, no. 1 (2018): 73.

[33] Jane Hindley, "Breaking the Consumerist Trances: The Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 21, no.4 (December 2010): 120.

encourages one another and seeks positive transformation as part of an ongoing relationship.[34] As it pertains to a body of believers, Smith described a community as "where two or more are gathered" and find Jesus there.[35] This could, as the project endeavors to describe, be either a physical or an online environment.

Conflict is part of a corrupted human nature, but in the context of this project, conflict refers specifically to the interaction between those open to online congregations and those not. Rainer notes, "there are many kinds of stubborn church members," referring to those who do not consider an online audience to be "church."[36] Others have contradictory beliefs, as Golan points out, "both accepting and rejecting" the use of the internet in their church communities.[37] There is also conflict on the nature of the value to be derived from an online experience.

Consumerism online refers to a culture that seeks to gain satisfaction through the gathering of generally superfluous goods (tangible or intangible) and services. This often looks like scrolling through social media to find items of interest and then clicking to view them, but then rapidly discarding them and continuing the pursuit for fulfillment. Consumerism also shows up in a physical context and leads to churches looking like "organizations, competing for consumers in demand of goods and services."[38] This is not necessarily a good outcome, as churches are called upon to be set apart in the community, providing needed ministry and service to those most in need, but with fulfillment being the acceptance of Jesus Christ and a decision to

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[34] Tripp Hudgins, "Preaching Online," *Anglican Theological Review* 101, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 79.

[35] Pam Smith, *Online Mission and Ministry* (London, England: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2015), 55.

[36] Rainer, *Who Moved my Pulpit*, 26.

[37] Golan and Stadler, "Building the Sacred Community Online," 73.

[38] Andre Audette and Christopher Weaver, "Filling Pews and Voting Booths: The Role of Politicization in Congregational Growth," *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2016): 247.

follow him. Our nation "has adopted consumerism as a pastime," Zandustra points out, making it difficult for churches in any environment to adopt "anti-consumerist" behavior.[39] Consumerism is ingrained particularly in Western culture, which generally has pursued secularism and replaced the good things of God with false material idolatry.

Discipleship broadly defined is the process of making or leading someone to become more like Jesus. For this project, the context of discipleship is the ability to transfer the abilities and understanding across media and for those not physically in a church building to receive grace and become true followers of Christ, teaching, and making disciples themselves. Generally, a familial environment is most conducive to learning and leading disciples.[40] Specifically, discipleship is commanded of Christians.

The kingdom message is preached by Jesus and then the apostles to bring the good news ("gospel") to the hopeless and poor in the assurance that their cries are heard by the Heavenly Father. The message is interwoven throughout the fabric of Jesus' ministry and includes His preaching that "the least shall become first" and of the urgency of repentance and believe "on" Jesus as the way to reconcile to the Father. One aspect particularly relevant to the online congregation is "Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34, NIV). Research has shown that an online congregation hears this message the same way as a physical congregation.[41]

Mutually exclusive implies that an experience in one venue cannot be replicated in another. For this project, the context is hearing the kingdom message in a building amongst other

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[39] Lee Zandustra, "The 30 cent Deal of a Lifetime: Using Luther's Small Catechism with Teenagers to engage Consumerist Culture," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 49, no.4 (Winter 2010): 315.

[40] Michael Mitchell, *Leading, Teaching, and Making Disciples* (Bloomington, IN: Crossbooks, 2010), 419.

[41] Cho, "For the Church Community," 16.

believers is a catalyst to hearing and responding to the Holy Spirit, whereas hearing the same message online is not. Lytle observed that the success of the online congregation will "be measured by whether or not seekers and the faith community can hear God's Word, grow in faith and experience God's presence."[42]

A *node* in the context of this project refers to people as part of an online network. While they cannot physically touch, they become a "node" in an online network. Nodes are also defined as "points at which lines or pathways intersect or branch, a central or connecting point."[43]

An *online audience* is a contingent population on social media that is communicated "to." In a ministry context, these might be people who are either unchurched or dechurched and are not actively engaged in religious fellowship. The online audience is often reached with positive advertising messages.[44] This is the target audience for the first phase of the LC online strategy.

An *online congregation* is a different population on social media that has either been attracted to the online audience messaging and seeks a deeper connection or perhaps is an audience that has been engaged in a physical congregation and is interested, for personal reasons for being part of a church experience online. This population is being communicated "with" and "among" as opposed to "to."[45]

Outreach in an online ministry context uses the "nodes" described by Harwig to become the groundwork for disseminating the kingdom message.[46] This network challenges the perception of mutual exclusivity of the physical church as the originator of the message, but

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[42] Lytle, "Virtual Incarnations," 413.

[43] Harwig, Rowland and Stoffels, "Click to Connect," 27.

[44] Jordan Morehouse and Adam Saffer, "Promoting the Faith: Examining Megachurches' Audience-Centric Advertising Strategies on Social Media," *Journal of Advertising* 50, no. 4 (2021): 409.

[45] Ibid., 410.

[46] Harwig, Rowland and Stoffels, "Click to Connect," 30.

rather that the network of online "nodes" can be an effective way to bring the message of Jesus to new audiences.

The *Secularization* of culture includes what Audette calls "a discarding" of traditional values and beliefs in favor of scrolling and clicking in an online environment.[47] Churches might take this process and use it to withdraw into "bubbles" away from society, yet Jesus preaches for His followers to be active in society to bring His kingdom message, wherever that occurs, to the ends of the earth.

Western culture generally refers to the culture of conditions this project is designed to address. Hindley describes it as a culture that "in thrall to consumerism and is molded by corporate power."[48] Zandustra notes Western culture has turned consumerism into a "pastime."[49] It should be noted that this definition is not intended to point out an excess of consumerism in one culture versus another but rather to clarify the conditions under which the action research for this project is taking place. This action project is designed to develop and deliver a captivating kingdom message from Lifehouse church to the predominant culture of which it is part.

Limitations

In this study, there are several limitations to consider. With Lifehouse specifically in mind, limitations will be imposed as some participants are unwilling to provide complete responses or honest feedback to surveys and interviews. Attempts will be made to maximize the integrity of survey and interview responses, such as anonymity, but some participants may not be willing to consider the validity of certain survey responses due to preconceived or presupposed

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[47] Audette and Weaver, "Filling Pews and Voting Booths," 247.

[48] Hindley, "Breaking the Consumerist Trances," 124.

[49] Zandustra, "The 30 cent Deal of a Lifetime," 315.

notions of what a church should be. This skewing of information also occurs when participants in a survey are aware of the importance and weight of their responses and change them accordingly to meet leadership or peer approval.

Additionally, while the diversity of the Lifehouse congregation is ordinarily a positive, for survey purposes, the demographic makeup of the church is not reflective of the country overall, and therefore the congregation's responses may not represent other geographic or socio-economic segments of the population. Therefore, it is important to be aware that even though all reasonable efforts have been taken to ensure accuracy, the results of any action research in this project may not represent a completely realistic cross-section.

Finally, although efforts will be made to address potential flaws in methodology, it is possible that the research being undertaken will not be able to account for all process flaws that could arise. There are also time limitations not only on the survey itself but also in the lives and schedules of potential participants. Despite these concerns, the manner of research and participants' input should provide valuable insight into the thought process of both believers and non-believers in their willingness to receive and consider the kingdom message of Jesus outside the church walls.

Delimitations

This research study does not consider participants outside Lifehouse church who are beyond the researcher's contacts. Nor does this study take into consideration children under the age of 18. Additionally, this study is not designed to execute a broad strategy of taking the kingdom message of Christ to the entirety of social media, nor of determining the details of what such an experience might entail across such a vast space, as it would require more resources and a larger team than Lifehouse. The purpose of the project is to devise an introductory strategy to

engage with an online audience that may be averse to participation in a physical, brick-and-mortar environment and then to assemble an online congregational team to implement the strategy and monitor results. It is expected, however, that the course of research will unveil certain behaviors or characteristics of what could be used to provide an experience to an online congregation, even if that means going outside the experiences currently offered by Lifehouse.

This project deliberately excludes other denominations and religions from information-gathering processes. Prior research will be actively considered, but this project's time and space limitations, unfortunately, preclude the involvement of other church communities. It is likely that the leadership of other churches would provide additional insight. However, concerning Lifehouse church's ability to meet the needs of an online congregation, only the Lifehouse church leadership and experiences are being considered in this project. It should also be noted that technical considerations such as algorithms and placement metrics are not being considered in the gathering of information for this project.

The research results for this topic are not designed to change the physical, in-person experience at Lifehouse church from what physical congregants are used to and appreciate. Rather, this project seeks to address preconceived notions about perceived online message shortcomings so that the gaps between the traditional and the online mission fields can be narrowed or closed. Because this is an action project, the goal is not simply to uncover the problem areas. Much of that work has been evaluated. Rather, the end goal is to assemble and mobilize the necessary team and resources to provide a captivating online experience to forward the kingdom message and grow disciples for Christ. Prior research, plus the information gathered during this project, should provide insight, direction, and action steps for how to serve an online community or congregation better.

Thesis Statement

If Lifehouse Church develops a strategy to deliver a captivating kingdom message online, then LC will be better prepared to engage with that audience. Lifehouse Church can contribute substantially to its online presence and community, helping spread the gospel in a rapidly evolving online environment. Such an engagement might look something like the following:

- Create and distribute short "blast" messages designed to attract attention and create positive reception to the gospel message,
- Develop slightly longer "Take a Break" lessons to reinforce short "blast" messages and affect greater attention to the kingdom,
- Explore deploying "banner-style" public awareness campaigns on popular social media and app sites designed to generate interest in Jesus' message of hope, and
- Eventually, design an effective experience to spread the kingdom message online and build discipleship.

Putting together an effective program for gospel advancement will require analysis and synthesis of a body of research, looking for common threads from which to develop ways to engage and participate in the online community. Undoubtedly, proper execution of a successful online mission strategy will require people and financial resources to fully realize an online congregational movement.

Projects steps might look something like what follows:

- Consult with church leadership to earn buy-in for developing an online congregation strategy,
- Assemble a small team (the "Online Implementation Team" or OIT) from which to develop and implement strategy elements,
- Conducting interviews and surveys with Lifehouse church members and leaders,

- Interviewing both Lifehouse members and some outside the church, perhaps even outside the faith, to seek what strategy elements might work best in an online congregational environment,
- Implementing project strategies by mobilizing an online mission team to enhance an online congregational experience, then monitoring the results to remain adaptable and improve results.

Because the online kingdom messaging strategy contains multiple phases over an extended period, little of the project implementation is expected to be quantifiable during the span of this project. However, if the project engagement is successful, the following actions should be underway.

- Implementing "blast" short messages can be measured in the number of views on each media they are implemented. This should provide trend analysis to monitor activity and measure which messaging opportunities provided the greatest interest.
- Rolling out "banner" messaging, which, while more targeted, should yield "click rate" information and trend analysis.
- The release of "Take a Break" videos may provide quantifiable data on two fronts: the number of views, as well as tying between interest in "blasts" that result in "Take a Break" views.
- The evaluation of project results will drive the development and implementation of online congregational activities during the project's next phase.

If successful, the methodologies developed could be utilized by similar church communities to compound the engagement across social media. It is also hopeful that those compelled by this project's online modeling would share it with their own friends as "nodes" of

online contacts and networks spread. The proposals set forth result from processing the available resources. Processes, including consulting with church leadership, interviewing congregants, and surveying the church body can provide direction for other churches also struggling to meet the challenge presented as in-person participation wanes and virtual participation grows.

Despite the apparent obstacles of conflict between virtual and traditional audiences and consumerist attitudes in a culture increasingly accustomed to online shopping and instant gratification, research shows an opportunity to advance the kingdom message with the right manner of outreach and engagement.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Pursuant to the successful completion of a Doctor of Ministry project focusing on theology and apologetics, the following literature has been compiled and reviewed to build a body of knowledge and understanding that can contribute to closing a gap in the research. This literature review emphasizes recurrent threads in the study of online ministry, which provide relevant information for delivering a compelling kingdom message to an audience either opposed to or unaware of the importance of following Christ. The scholarly and peer-reviewed works discussed herein are both current and contribute significantly to the conversation of ministering to an online audience.

Literature Review

The nature of delivering a compelling kingdom message to an online audience has many moving parts. Some of these have a significant amount of research already completed, and this project builds on that knowledge. Other considerations are less well-known. These have conspired to become barriers to convincing those who are “unchurched” or perhaps never have attended a physical campus to follow Jesus. The conflict between traditional religious delivery methods and contemporary reception is among the better-known issues. Less well-understood concerns include the attention span of those conditioned to receive their entire message in under a minute and how to meet these changing habits. This literature review addresses both aspects of delivering an effective kingdom message to a growing online contingent.

Conflict

Wherever one finds the prospect of change in life, one finds conflict. The upheaval of culture from physical space-based interaction or corded phone calls has metamorphosized into a lifestyle of carrying not only the phone on one's person but the reality of being constantly connected to a world of information and activity. The greater church tradition of meeting once- or twice-weekly in a building that acted as a "bubble" from society has long since been popped. Yet, until recently, there seemed little apparent motivation on the part of the church to address what would undoubtedly become a conflict in adaptation to a new reality.[1] This is evidenced in churches that do not offer online "life group" options or deliberately exclude potential congregants that cannot physically attend a campus.

One primary source of conflict in developing a coherent online ministry plan is addressing the growing secularization of the post-modern Western world. Regretfully, often the church reverts to its "bubble" mentality and retreats from the new reality rather than engaging with it in a compelling way that advances the kingdom message.[2] The substance of the physical church message is often negative, and the virtual world is "not really church."[3] Golan and Stadler suggested the dichotomy is due in part to simultaneous adherence to beliefs that are contradictory when discussing the internet. Some feel an online audience is counter to the concept of "church," while others believe that "communal boundaries" can be adjusted to include those outside the

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[1] Marco Carroggio, "Church Communication in the face of Vulnerability: A Theoretical Framework and Practical Application for Information Management in Cases of the Abuse of Minors," *Church, Communication and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2021): 58.

[2] William Oliver, "From In-person to Online Worship," *Verum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (2022): 2.

[3] Ying-Feng Kuo, "Relationships Among Community Interaction Characteristics, Perceived Benefits, Community Commitment, and Oppositional Brand Loyalty in Online Brand Communities," *International Journal of Information Management* 33, no. 6 (2013): 950.

physical campus.[4] Yet at the same time, society marches relentlessly forward. Audette and Weaver found that, at least in the United States, the process of secularization is continuing, and the result is the "discarding" of traditional values and beliefs.[5]

The online community is a community in the truest sense of the word. Even though there are not as many physical relationships, those in social media groups or engaged in virtual gaming consider themselves "attached." In many, outgrowths occur in which participants are concerned for each other, building each other up, or offering empathy or assistance. Further, the online community can be characterized as a mission field, perhaps along similar lines to Paul's letters to distant churches offering education, encouragement, and valuable insight. Despite the distance "gap" that exists technologically and relationally, Paul was able to personalize His messages to bridge the gap of physical distance to connect with his readers.[6] One might consider the "distance" online to be a similar but manageable challenge. Indeed, the message offered to the virtual audience might be the same message of grace but delivered in a separate, distinct way to appeal to their prevailing characteristics, much like the distinction between the Jewish-Christian ministries and the Gentile ministries during the time of Peter and Paul.[7]

Therefore, to ignore the burgeoning audience that is unlikely to consider God's call by entering an actual church building, these cannot simply be overlooked to concentrate on those that do. These lives, online though they are, of short attention span as they are, are not so far removed as the masses were during the earthly ministry of Jesus. Jesus was "moved with pity"

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[4] Golan and Stadler, "Building the Sacred Community Online," 73.

[5] Audette and Weaver, "Filling Pews and Voting Booths," 246.

[6] Benjamin Forrest and Mark Lamport, "Modeling Spiritual Formation from a Distance: Paul's Formation Transactions with the Roman Christians," *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 1 (2013): 114.

[7] Benjamin Schliesser, "Why Did Paul Skip Alexandria? Paul's Missionary Strategy and the Rise of Christianity in Alexandria," *New Testament Studies* 67 (2021): 261.

for those oppressed and with little hope (Matt 9:36, NIV). Many in the online audience have not considered the message of Jesus, largely owing to the skepticism or cynicism accompanying the culture.[8] Barna and Kinnan noted these groups represent a quarter of all unchurched adults.[9] Yet, these represent an opportunity. Just as online culture has helped accelerate secularization, it has also created new avenues to deliver an effective kingdom message to some who would not otherwise be exposed to it.[10]

Alongside the pressures of secularization are those that value the comfort and familiarity of traditional church culture. The difference, pointed out by Evener, is that the opportunity for mission to come from within the traditional church is being missed.[11] Thom Rainer likewise emphasized the "stubbornness" of church members who either do not understand or do not approve of the advantages of online engagement.[12] "Some Christians lament this move," Lytle notes, calling out the criticism of "disembodied online relationships" as evidence the church should hold fast to traditional plans and activities.[13]

Lament or not, Christ directed His followers to bring the kingdom message to all peoples. Looking at the Lifehouse Church audience, one sees many similarities with other church bodies: lip service is paid to the online audience by providing a live stream on Sundays or perhaps on Wednesdays. It is a window to the message, but it could be perceived similarly to the Pharisees

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[8] Ruth Tsuria, "Get out of Church! The Case of #EmptyThePews: Twitter Hashtag between Resistance and Community," *Information* 11 (2020): 7.

[9] Barna and Kinnaan, *Churchless,* 140; see also Dube, Zorodzai, "The Discursive Cultural Representatives of Gentiles: A Contextual Approach Using Migration Theory," *In die Skriflig* 48, no. 1 (2014): 1.

[10] Thom Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities that will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2020), 31.

[11] Evener, "Spirit and Truth," 230.

[12] Rainer, *Who Moved my Pulpit? Leading Change in the Church*, 26.

[13] Lytle, "Virtual Incarnations," 396.

and religious leaders pushing Mosaic Law.[14] There was nothing "wrong" with the law, just as there is nothing wrong with providing a Sunday morning live stream. It misses the point Jesus was making. Following Jesus is not checking a box or clicking a link but rather deciding to transform lives and die to oneself to be born again in Him. Spreading the gospel's kingdom message should be accomplished in a meaningful way.

Ultimately, the challenge has only grown more pointed with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. While it is a visible concern that declaring oneself a Christian on social networking sites invites argument or challenge, the fact remains that followers of Jesus are called to carry forth the kingdom message even in the face of potential verbal persecution.[15] Evener recognizes this moment as a "reckoning," "a moment that forces confrontation," and not one of destroying one another through destructive antagonism.[16] Rainer expresses his concern about churches returning to their old ways once the COVID-19 pandemic ends. The online mission field needs exposure to the kingdom message.[17] The church needs to bring exposure.

The Problem of Consumerism

Broadly and informally defined, consumerism is a culture of "what can you do for me?" It manifests in our churches as consumption of services, whether that occurs on Sunday mornings, Wednesday nights, or through food giveaways or Vacation Bible Schools, without devoting or giving anything substantive in return. In online cultures, this particularly makes itself visible in consumers' short attention spans for what meets their eye. Beyond a short video or

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[14] Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 20.

[15] Smith, *Online Mission and Ministry*, 57.

[16] Evener, "Spirit and Truth," 234.

[17] Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities that will Determine the Future of Your Congregation*, 29.

posted message, the online consumer scrolls on just as the physical consumer drives by a church. Naturally, this is counter to what Jesus asked for when He told His disciples to "follow him."

Regrettably, Audette and Weaver determined that churches are often seen as organizations "competing for consumers" who demand whatever goods and services the church can supply to them.[18] As Hindley recognized in 2015, the result is that the "portrait that emerges" is one of the consumers driven by organizational power and stuck in its web of instant gratification.[19] Sandustra agrees, noting that society has turned consumption into a "pastime," and along with other pastimes such as scrolling and clicking, the church has also become a box to be checked off, depending on where the "organization" fits on the schedule.[20] One could infer that a virtual experience can be non-committal, non-threatening, and, therefore, non-obligational.[21]

Jesus addressed a situation remarkably similar in condemning Capernaum in the Scriptures. "But to what will I compare this generation," He asked, invoking the wedding dance and the funeral dirge (Matt. 11:16-17, NIV). The problem, then as now, is a corrupted world in which the message is not received unless it is the message the world wants to hear. It is easy to dismiss a new type of culture, one born of instant gratification and raised on short-term rewards. Yet Jesus was also clear that "all whom the Father gives" to Him will come to Him, and these He will never drive away (John 6:37, NIV). Despite the world's corruption, followers are still commanded to deliver the gospel with all strength. Therefore, a new methodology must be employed to effectively reach the new tone-deaf audience, perhaps related to the "incarnational

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[18] Audette and Weaver, "Filling Pews and Voting Booths," 247.

[19] Hindley, "Breaking the Consumerist Trances," 124.

[20] Zandustra, "The 30 cent Deal of a Lifetime," 215.

[21] Heidi Campbell and Michael DeLashmutt, "Studying Technology and Ecclesiology in Online Multi-Site Worship," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 2 (2014): 267.

relationship" that replaces proximity relationships across distance media. To some degree, the degree to which participants are fruitful vessels of divine knowledge determines the quality of connection and spiritual formation.[22] The internet does not slow God's mercy, but the fruit of a gospel message could be accelerated given the proper technique in a new space. Even the limited range of Lifehouse provides an opportunity to let a message of hope resonate into new online mission fields.

Against this seemingly formidable backdrop, signs of hope have emerged. Azevedo notes church members are increasingly willing to adapt behaviors that shift latent consumerism if churches are willing to reach out to them (under "certain conditions").[23] Most importantly, these "conditions" are met when the Western consumer is forced to confront their inherent emptiness that comes from clicks and tweets, but without addressing their God-given purpose. Addressing the potential opportunity, Hudgins, referencing a Barna survey, noted that even those who previously were not exposed to church are open to "new forms of religious experience," although acknowledging these new forms might draw people closer to a relationship with God, but farther from inclusion in a traditional brick-and-mortar campus.[24] The application of this observation is those drawn "farther" from being in a physical church building would likely not have attended regardless. Perhaps the only way to reach this audience is by going where they are and speaking their "language." Rainer calls this group "digital-only, and digitally-transitioning."[25] The

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[22] Forrest and Lamport, "Modeling Spiritual Formation from a Distance," 114.

[23] Antonio Azevedo, "Recognizing Consumerism as an 'Illness of an Empty Soul': A Catholic Morality Perspective," *Political Research Quarterly* 66 no. 2 (June 2015): 255.

[24] Hudgins, "Preaching Online," 79.

[25] Rainer, *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities that will Determine the Future of Your Congregation*, 31

combination of reaching into the online space through distance-relational and incarnation-driven formation may create opportunities for a kingdom message that the physical space alone cannot.

Consumerism, then, is an obstacle, but it is not impenetrable. People appear to have an almost instinctive need to find a direction, and they know it cannot be found on Amazon. Perhaps it is not sufficiently found online, whether that means the message is not in front of the online audience, or it is not compelling. According to Barna, too many find the barrage of crises online indicative of a God who is not involved, does not care, cannot protect, or does not exist.[26] Such a God exists, and God wants to be in a relationship with His people regardless of their online followers or scrolling habits.

Connection: Church Family and Conversation

Cho noted in 2021, "In a community. . . we become one in our entanglement with each other."[27] Part of the "problem" of developing a viable kingdom message for an online audience is attracting those willing to hear the message into a community of believers, in the same way attracting people to a church building is hard without offering an array of conveniences like a café or "babysitting." Previously the question seemed to be whether the online audience would be something new and apart from any physical campus or instead something designed as an outreach of an existing building.[28] The answer comes from recognizing the entanglement that comes with being part of God's church body, as designed by Jesus to be a gathering of His people with purpose.

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[26] George Barna, *America at the Crossroads: Explosive Trends Shaping America's Future and What You Can Do about It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2018), 40.

[27] Cho, "For the Church Community," 19.

[28] Ferdinand Kruger, "Descriptive Empirical Perspectives on Participants' Attitudes on Virtual Worship Services Kindle an Ineluctable Revisiting of Ecclesial Assumptions in a Post-Pandemic World," *HTS Teololgiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021): 7.

Harwig suggested that within an online community, people are part of a structure that is "social" rather than "spatial." While individuals are not physically able to touch one another, they instead become a "node" in an interlocking online network.[29] Defining a living, breathing individual as a "node" perhaps sounds just as disembodied as Lytle discussed in the nature of relationships, but consider the definition: a point at which lines or pathways intersect or branch, a central or connecting point.[30] Perhaps the word itself has disembodied connotations, but the concept of an online congregation plugging into a network as a series of "nodes" in practice is not that much different than a body of believers in a building. These believers connect at church and perhaps on occasion outside the church but are connected primarily through the church family relationship. In implementing an action plan to reach this growing community and influence the development of these types of relationships, careful observations will need to be made so that changes in delivering the kingdom message can be employed even as the plan continues to be executed. Recent studies have shown that many church attendees believe the local church community should do more to connect with the online world.[31]

Due to the pandemic, portions of the population have moved towards online community and away from physical attendance, whether that means work, sporting events, or church.[32] Kupke observed in 2020 that as these transitions take place, what needs to be preserved is the creativity and connection of physical space.[33] Churches will need to learn what works in an online or blended environment to enhance what works in advancing the kingdom. The translation

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[29] Harwig, Rowland and Stoffels, "Click to Connect," 27.

[30] Lytle, 386.

[31] Kruger, "Descriptive Empirical Perspectives," 7.

[32] Wright, God and the Pandemic, 42.

[33] Kupke, "The Church has Left the Building," 94.

may simply acknowledge the collection of "nodes" as just as much church family as the collection of bodies in a physical space. This new vision of a church family becomes the core community from which the work of discipleship flows.[34] It bears familial resemblance with a physical campus yet has its distinctive characteristics and needs a kingdom message must address to be relevant in online culture. Centola suggested that the difference between "weak ties" and strong connections ("long bridges") with a virtual audience is derived from the difference between observing a message and developing a fellowship.[35] The goal, as with a physical congregation, is not to check off the church box, but rather to transform lives by attracting followers of Jesus who want to participate and interact and fellowship with fellow believers who are also online.[36]

Smith noted that Jesus said that wherever two or three are gathered, He joined with them and that "many have observed this holds true online."[37] Hindley suggests the reason for the meaningfulness of gathering online can be traced to online audiences "affirming" shared beliefs "despite ourselves."[38] Despite the lack of physical connection, distance, and danger of being disembodied "nodes," God finds a way to connect through the intersection of online lives, creating a new heart for the church. It becomes, as Cho suggested, a community of solidarity.[39]

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[34] Mark Cherry, "The Consumerist Moral Babel of the Post-Modern Family," *Christian Bioethics* 21, no. 2 (2015): 146; see also William Dreyer, "Being Church in the Era of 'Homo Digitalis'," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40, no. 1 (2019): 2.

[35] David Centola, "The Truth about Behavioral Change," *MIT Sloan Management System* 60, no. 2 (2019): 3.

[36] Campbell and DeLashmutt, "Studying Technology and Ecclesiology," 268.

[37] Smith, *Online Mission and Ministry*, 55.

[38] Hindley, "Breaking the Consumerist Trances," 120.

[39] Cho, "For the Church Community," 16.

The question of whether the word of the Holy Spirit can be realized in an online community is answered in the coalescing of bodies of believers when such communities are encouraged in churches looking "outward" to deliver the message of Jesus.[40] "In sum," Evener said, the church is to proclaim Christ in "ever new contexts."[41] The Word of God is not blocked by an audience of nodes that combine in a network to advance the kingdom.

Outreach and Engagement

The audience of nodes described by Harwig becomes the groundwork for engaging online people with the message of hope delivered by Jesus. The message overcomes the perception of online church as "supplementing" or "replacing" the traditional church, as Harwig noted.[42] It is not whether the physical church survives or not; rather, it is that the church online can be both the originator of the message and outreach of an existing campus. Online audiences are not mutually exclusive to one or the other. Engagement with a relatively new frontier of people in need is certainly motivation for sharing the kingdom message online.

Lytle suggested the success of online church communities will be determined by whether not just church members but also seekers of the Word will be able to recognize God's voice and grow their faith and experience God's presence outside of a traditional physical context.[43] Hutchings observed that various surveys have at least suggested that the claim that virtual worship is not a viable substitute for the physical should be "called into question."[44] The research to be undertaken in this project will have value in advancing the conversation.

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[40] Lytle, "Virtual Incarnations," 396.

[41] Evener, "Spirit and Truth." 237.

[42] Harwig, Rowland and Stoffels, "Click to Connect," 80.

[43] Lytle, "Virtual Incarnations," 411.

[44] Hutchings, "Creating Church Online," 237.

There will be challenges as society transitions into a new reality where physical presence in shopping, libraries, schools, and churches becomes less prevalent. Simply applying the same experience and messaging from traditional venues will not meet the needs of the virtual audience. Berglund suggested a tailored, positive, and intentional message to attract attention and reception by new believers.[45] Rainer postulated, "For sure, there will be naysayers," but that these will become less important and less visible as new groups become more excited for the potential direction of the church.[46]

The main issue, or certainly "a" main issue, is what Barna noted in 2014. He pointed out that it is "increasingly common" for the younger generation to "dismiss" religion and tradition.[47] Possibly as more information is at the literal fingertips of a more technologically savvy age group, the traditions of religion have been deemed less reliable than what is available with a click. It is certain there are more available resources for answering questions of purpose, but Sholihin pointed out studies that draw a linear relationship between religion and life satisfaction which is certainly less attainable than point-and-click shopping.[48]

Likewise, one could more likely point to positive mental health effects from relational religion than from less-engaging online activities.[49] Even less-interactive posts, messaging, and "memes" on social media have been found to provide both informational and perceived social

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[45] Carl Berglund, "Paul's Rhetorical Efforts to Establish Good Will in First Thessalonians," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 44, no. 4 (2022): 539.

[46] Rainer, Who Moved my Pulpit? Leading Change in the Church, 26.

[47] Barna and Kinnaan, *Churchless,* 142.

[48] Muhammad Sholihin, et al., "The Effect of Religiosity on Life Satisfaction: A Meta-Analysis," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (2022): 8.

[49] Bert Garssen, Anja Visser and Grieteke Pool, "Does Spirituality or Religion Positively Affect Mental Health? Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 31, no. 1 (2021): 5.

value.[50] By inference, simply providing a means of engagement can align with a Spirit-led spark to grow new followers of the Savior. Network-based virtual communities were found to find purposeful value, and this was a driver of participation and what Dholakia called "providing information to others," which from a church's vantage point sounds a lot like "discipling."[51] One is positively affected when one has a sense of belonging, and this is not exclusive to a physical location.[52]

Reaching out and engaging with an audience connected to multiple resources is going to take more than a posted sermon and then vanishing into the ether of social media, as Hudgins pointed out.[53] Further, evidence shows that there is a similar willingness to receive messages across social media for different backgrounds, for example, rural vs. urban, as reported by Village in 2020.[54] Harwig observed that many online consumers do not even see their experience online as "anonymous," going back to the "nodes" definition, which seems inanimate and impersonal.[55] Therefore, communication with an online contingent is possible, and communicating the kingdom message is possible. It is more a matter of designing a message that promotes goodwill among the new audience.[56]

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[50] Zhimin Zhou, Jane Wu, Qiyuan Zhang, and Shen Xu, "Transforming Visitors into Members in Online Brand Communities: Evidence from China," *Journal of Business Research* 68, no. 12 (2013): 2.

[51] Utpal Dholakia, Richard Bagozzi and Lisa Pearo, "A Social Influence Model of Consumer Participation in Network- and Small-Group-Based Virtual Communities," *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 21, no. 3 (2014): 18.

[52] Josje ten Kate, Willem de Koster and Jeroen ven der Waal, "The Effect of Religiosity on Life Satisfaction in a Secularized Context: Assessing the Relevance of Believing and Belonging," *Review of Religious Research* 59 (2017): 135.

[53] Hudgins, "Preaching Online," 82.

[54] Andrew Village, "Faith in Lockdowns: Experiences of the Rural Church of England Clergy and Laity during the Covid-19 Pandemic," *International, Ecumenical, and Disciplinary Perspectives* 18, no. 2 (2020): 85.

[55] Harwig, Rowland and Stoffels, "Click to Connect," 22.

[56] Berglund, "Paul's Rhetorical Efforts," 541.

The key is learning how to engage the online community with a kingdom message, and that requires going outside the traditional resources of the church body.[57] The church has a responsibility to outreach into the online world to provide that message. Golan and Stadler noted the beginning of the process includes an examination of the ways "webmasters" develop and promote "universal" outreach messages.[58] Simply blaring a message, even if it is one short and attention-getting enough to reach the online audience, might simply result in what a young agnostic told Hindley in 2020: that the wrong message can turn people from being "agnostic" into full-blown rationalistic atheists when confronted by religious "fervor."[59]

Rather, the answers lie in engaging the online community and actively participating in it, finding a way for the audience to perceive and hear God's Word and be compelled to act affirmatively on His invitation to follow.[60] This is the job of all who follow in the footsteps of Jesus: to live as a missional community, and it is still providing unease to those used to a physical church campus and its familiarity.[61] That requires not only a kingdom message that the online community is willing and able to receive but also care to ensure the message does not blend into the secular world's frenetic noise. Paul's willingness to associate closely with Gentiles drew the angst of traditionalists. Still, he could orate in a way that reached his audience without partaking in their sinful activities.[62]

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[57] David Downs, "Pauls Collection and the Book of Acts Revisited," *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006): 51.

[58] Golan and Stadler, "Building the Sacred Community Online," 77.

[59] Hindley, "Breaking the Consumerist Trances," 120.

[60] Johannes Knoetze, "Transforming Theological Education is not the Accumulation of Knowledge, but the Development of Consciousness," *Verbum et Eccesia* 41, no. 1 (2020): 7; see also Richard Wolff, "A Phenomenological Study of In-Church and Televised Worship," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no.2 (1999): 219.

[61] William Dreyer, "The Priesthood of Believers: The Forgotten Legacy of the Reformation," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (2020): 6.

[62] John Barclay, "Paul among Diaspora Jews: Anomaly or Apostate?" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 18, no. 60 (1996): 91.

Conclusion

The proposed problem statement for this Doctor of Ministry project is that Lifehouse Church does not have a viable plan to deliver a compelling kingdom message to an online audience. To be sure, Lifehouse is not the only church body facing such a predicament. It has been addressed with some level of haste, and by applying the same principles delivered in a traditional, in-person context. These methods do not often result in an online audience feeling compelled to follow Christ.

Several themes stand out as particularly relevant or concerning in reviewing the literature compiled to address this problem effectively. In any circumstance involving a change in basic assumptions, and certainly the advent of an online, consumerist Western audience is one, there will be a conflict between the "old" paradigm and the new. One challenge will be breaking through the "consumerist" attitudes that accompany modern culture and are emphasized by a "point and click" immediate nature of the online environment. Addressing these challenges will require forming a sense of community online, through which "nodes" of people can intersect and connect; God can use what would perhaps be rather anonymous in such intersections to catalyze a new way to spread his message. Finally, building that catalyst will require direct, meaningful, and persistent engagement through which the online community will feel connected and compelled to participate.

In upcoming sections, this project will endeavor to design such a product, one which starts by initiating contact with as many in an online audience as possible, attracting them through the kingdom message while drawing those who are willing to hear towards growth in their faith and to new discipleship. This daunting task is nothing less than what Jesus commands His disciples to engage in through the Great Commission.

Theological Foundations

The thesis directing the action supporting this project cannot be demonstrated directly, as there was no "online" or "nodal" audience during Jesus' physical ministry. Concepts directly related to the project were available and actively considered. These include the concepts of community, of relationship, and what it takes for a body of believers to be in fellowship with one another. House churches gave way to gothic cathedrals and cathedrals back to smaller gatherings, missionaries, and then to large megachurches. In each circumstance, the kingdom message brought by Jesus and expected to be carried on by disciples was actively applied to new environments and locations.

Old Testament: Tabernacling

There are plenty of direct references and types of allusion in both the Old and New Testaments to be applied in the context of "what is community" or "what is fellowship?" Ezra suggests that a community of God coalesces around Yahweh and the temple and is set apart from the remainder of other cultures.[63] This being set apart was to be the catalyst for transformation and for regeneration. Nehemiah considers both the repatriated and the remnant as a community in rebuilding the city wall.[64] It is true that Nehemiah and Jeremiah both condemn the intermarriage of Israelites and foreign peoples, but this is likely in the context of intermarriage with pagan worshippers leading to the falling away of Israel from Yahweh. Regardless, the underlying concept is that the people of God come together to fulfill His mission.

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[63] Nissam Amzallag, "The Authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah in Light of Differences in Their Ideological Background," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 2 (2018): 273.

[64] Nissam Amzallag, "The Authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah in Light of Differences in Their Ideological Background," 277.

Likewise, a binding concept of Old Testament biblical spirituality was the keeping of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was to be kept holy and set aside for the Lord, although the concept of keeping the Sabbath holy was manipulated by religious leaders to mean anything they needed it to mean, and this was called out repeatedly by Jesus: "Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not" (Luke 14:3, NIV)? Keeping the Sabbath was not meant to be a divider between groups going to one temple or another. Rather, it was a time for followers of Yahweh to come together and worship the one true God. Indeed, the Sabbath throughout the Old Testament was dynamic and continued to develop in tradition, lending credence to the conclusion of "gathering," meaning different things as different eras involved.[65]

In the Old Testament, there are numerous references to God being with His people at the temple, living and dwelling with His people (1 Kings 8:13, NIV). God was in the garden with Adam and Eve before the Fall, dwelling among His creation and attending to their needs. God spoke of His being with Israel in several passages. God led His people out of Egypt, guiding them day and night with a pillar of cloud or of fire (Exod. 13, 14, NIV). Yahweh met with Moses at Mt. Sinai to deliver His commandments to His people (Exod. 29:45, NIV). He declared His desire to tabernacle with His people again in Leviticus (Exod. 26:11, NIV). God's plan for a relationship with His people was prophesied in Zechariah, Isaiah, and several other prophets. And yet, this was not the type of relationship granted in the New Covenant. God expected His people Israel to fear him as Holy and glorious.[66] In His response to Moses asking God to identify himself: *Ego sun qui sum*, "I am who I am," God confirms that He is subsistent in himself,

[65] Peter de Villiers and George Marchinkowski, "Sabbath Keeping in the Bible from the Perspective of Biblical Spirituality," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (2021): 7.

[66] Jason Fout, "Difficult Texts: Exodus 20:18-21 – On Fearing God," *Theology* 118, no. 1 (2015): 32.

separate in glory yet present in pure existence. He is one who is with His people but distant, hearing the cries of His people, omnipresent and never changing, yet somehow inaccessible.[67]

The second temple continues this tradition even through the ministry of Jesus. It is, therefore, important to note the foundations from which the importance of a physical church location might be derived, as it was literally considered the place where heaven and earth intersected.[68] Yet, once the new Jerusalem described in Revelation came to fruition as Ezekiel prophesied, the intersection came to be represented instead by a river flowing through the new city (Ezek. 40; Rev. 21:22, NIV). Isaiah provided text which later proved a teachable moment for Jesus, stating, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the peoples" (Isa. 56:7, NIV).[69] It became the lynchpin in one of the more dramatic messages of Jesus accelerating the coming to fruition of the Old Testament prophecies.

At the crucifixion, as Jesus passed away, the curtain in the temple was ripped from top to bottom, representing the moment in which man's relationship with God changed from distant yet present to intimate.[70] In a real sense, the "point" of intersection represented by the temple is replaced by a living river from which everyone can be with God. The temple was temporary, and the second temple was destroyed just as Jesus predicted (Mark 13:1-2, NIV). That living river is described as flowing "forth" from the new city, representative perhaps of the gospel message bursting from the old legalism and old boundaries into a new mission to all peoples.

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[67] L. Roger Owens, "Free, Present and Faithful: A Theological Reading of the Character of God in Exodus," *New Blackfriars* 86, no. 1000 (2004): 618.

[68] Jan Willem van Henten, "Josephus, fifth evangelist, and Jesus on the Temple," *Theological Studies* 71, no. 1 (2015): 7.

[69] Hans Betz, "Jesus and the Purity of the Temple (Mark 11:15-18): A Comparative Religion Approach," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116 no. 3 (1997): 457.

[70] Marius Nel, "Mark's Distinctive Emphasis on the Temple's Torn Curtain," *In die Skriflig* 49, no. 2 (2015): 2.

New Testament: God Omnipresent and Intimate

Clarifying, no one suggested the church would cease to be an important meeting place for believers, and Jesus spoke clearly about the importance of gathering (Matt. 18:20, NIV). Historically speaking, "church gathering" during the development of the New Testament generally took place in peoples' homes and not in a dedicated building.[71] Standalone buildings were an evolution of gathering as the environmental circumstances changed (a reduction in religious and political persecution, for example). One might consider the development of online church messaging and communities another development in the process of "gathering," just as standalone physical buildings were a development, and massive Gothic cathedrals were a development, or "megachurch" massive gatherings are a development. None of these stages was a step away from the importance of fellowship Jesus and Paul advocated, at least not in themselves. Rather they were extensions of the changing world environment, perhaps similarly to the changed environment in which LC currently finds itself.

Physical church gatherings have performed and will continue to perform incredible works both in the fellowship of those gathered as well as in outreach to the communities they serve. Like the temple, the physical church campus is meant to be an integration with its surrounding environment, in the world, but not of it.[72] Churches represent intersections across the world between heaven and earth, as Jesus prescribed during His ministry. From it flows charity, community, ministry, and evangelism. Jesus spoke that the very gates of Hades would not prevail against the church, and for over two millennia, this has continued unabated. The tradition of Jesus's church will not be replaced.

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[71] Birger Pearson, "A Q Community in Galilee?" *New Testament Studies* 50 (2004): 476.

[72] Van Henten, "Josephus," 8.

Jesus put a much different emphasis on what He meant by ἐκκλησία in the context of congregational engagement. At the forefront, His directive to disciples was, "Therefore 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). Granted, this was a different time, and it called for a different kind of outreach than a modern church congregation. And yet, the message was simple: Go forth, engage with people wherever they are, and bring them the gospel. This is supported throughout His ministry and many of His teachings and parables. Matthew presents the message as Gentiles responding favorably to Jesus becoming exemplars for Gentile participation in the Christian community.[73] While the online audience is not "Gentile" from a sense of circumcision and following strict Jewish Law, which Paul was opposed to, conforming to attending a physical church campus is in some ways parallel to the new audience of Jesus' time. For example, much as the "dogs" in Matthew responded favorably to Jesus, so could the online audience respond and act as the foundation for an online kingdom awakening.[74] The analogy could be inferred from the presence of Jesus in both settings, in the way Jesus referred to His disciple and church image.[75] Online audiences can spread a kingdom message just as a physical audience can.

Another example of Jesus and His teaching to take His message to the people is the Parable of the Bushel, represented in several of the gospels. Following the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the crowds assembled that they should be an example of love and humility, but importantly be this example to all the world rather than hiding it away (Mark 4:21-25, NIV). Jesus preached, and lived, a ministry that was inclusive, rather than the traditional religious elitist

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[73] Gene Smillie, "Even the Dogs: Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 1 (2002), 73.

[74] Ibid., 74.

[75] Andries Van Aarde, "Matthew 27:45-53 as the Turning of the Tide in Israel's History," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 55, no. 2 and 3 (1999): 671.

methods of exclusionism.[76] Interestingly, the bushel basket could be interpreted not only to mean "hiding the good news away from everyone" but being silent, but rather it could mean to keep the message of hope "siloed" into the old legalistic religiosity.[77] In Mark's Gospel, this was quickly overturned by Jesus as He alluded to the prophet Joel, "Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow, so great is their wickedness" (Joel 3:13, NIV). His reference to Joel exposed the coming judgment on religious elites and the ruling classes and points out that the new mission field is all people without hope or feeling unloved or left behind.

New Frontiers: The Online ἐκκλησία

The online congregation, therefore, could be reconsidered as a new method of ἐκκλησία to be engaged in the carrying forth of God's plan. By "new method," the consideration is this: the church fathers went "outside the box" to enable the spread of the gospel, just as Jesus commanded them.[78] One can find ample evidence of the struggle the early church went through in terms of who the core audience for the good news of Jesus should be.[79] Paul's letter to the Galatians records one of these confrontations the church fathers were forced to face. As a Jew, Paul understood what it was like to be conforming to a rigid system of legalism.[80] He fought for

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[76] Stephen Ahearne-Kroll, "Audience Inclusion and Exclusion as Rhetorical Technique in the Gospel of Mark," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 4 (2010): 721.

[77] Ibid., 721.; see also Nicholas Taylor, "Caligula, the Church of Antioch and the Gentile Mission," *Religion and Theology* 7, no. 1 (2000): 6.

[78] Eric Wefald, "The Separate Gentile Mission in Mark: A Narrative Explanation of Markan Geography, the Two Feeding Accounts and Exorcisms," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 60 (1995): 4.

[79] Gertraud Harb, "Matthew 17:24-27 and its Value for Historical Jesus Research," *Journal for the Study for the Historical Jesus* 8 (2010): 257.

[80] Gavin D'Costa, "Gentile Catholics, Hebrew Catholics, and Rabbinic Jews: Steps on the Path Toward Resisting Antisemitism and Anti-Judaism in Catholic Practice and Theology," *Antisemitism Studies* 6, no. 2 (2022): 346.

it, likely killed others for it, and was well-known and respected by the religious elites for doing so. His old name, Saul, sparked fear in the fledgling church and its adherents.

Fortunately, despite the persistence of Saul in acting against Jesus, the risen Lord sought him out, removed the sight representing Saul's persecution, changed his name to Paul, and gave him a renewed vision (Gal. 4:8-9, NIV). Through his transformational encounter with the risen Lord, his eyes were opened both figuratively and literally to a new environment where God had clearly spoken that all His children were to be loved and all His children were to be reached in ministry. Importantly, Paul, in the remainder of his life, did not seek to "replace" ministry to the Jewish with a mission for the Gentiles, but rather he fulfilled the Great Commission by adding to and building on the infant church. He understood Jewish Law as not bad but not an "entrance requirement" for the forgiveness of sins and not necessary for salvation.[81] The old guard of religiosity needed transformation into something relational and restorative, beyond the scope of the Pharisaical landscape.[82]

The transformation Paul experienced was not kept in his ministry "silo." Rather, he understood the Great Commission for what Jesus intended: spread the good news to all nations. Paul recognized *semper reformanda*: The church is in constant change and reformation.[83] He recognized the need to use plain language to be persuasive, meeting the needs and understanding of the people where they were, not where the religious powers of the day demanded they be.[84]

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[81] In-Gyu Hong, "Does Paul Misrepresent the Jewish Law? Law and Covenant in Galatians 3:1-14," *Novum Testamentum* 36, no. 2 (1994): 169.

[82] Francis Vilijoen, "Jesus Healing the Leper and the Purity Law in the Gospel of Matthew," *In die Skriflig* 48 no. 2 (2014): 3.

[83] Oliver, "From In-person to Online Worship," 1.

[84] F. Gerald Downing, "A Cynic Preparation for Paul's Gospel for Jew and Greek, Slave and Free, Male and Female," *New Testament Studies* 42 (1996): 454.

Now it was Peter, specifically, and James that had the legalistic and rigid blinders. Peter and the other apostles spearheaded what today would be called a racially and religiously motivated ministry. They were content to fall back on what they knew and understood (Gal. 2:11-14, NIV). As far as they were concerned, the previous religious system was the "box," and there was no seeing past its walls without a blinding revelation that only someone like Paul could provide. The contemporary church faces, as always, issues that derive from human brokenness but could facilitate the participation of a greater mission field and its own by focusing on Christ's messages of grace.[85] It provides an ecclesiology that is both realistic and hopeful and understandable by all audiences.

Paul's Letter to the Galatians: Beyond Defined Boundaries

As his letter to the Galatians relates, Paul "had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised" (Gal. 2:7-8, NIV). He recognized something in his prior self that needed to be radically shifted to accommodate a new ministry environment.[86] He confronted Peter and James about this transformed environment, traced directly back to the words of Jesus. It is important to note that Peter and the other apostles had received the same words, as recorded in the book of Matthew (Matt. 28:16-20, NIV). Paul recognized that the requirement of circumcision or obedience to Jewish Law was simply an act of hypocrisy and an act "against the truth of the Gospel" as he records it in Galatians.[87] Paul understood, therefore, that a new mission field had arrived and that

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[85] Richard Lennan, "Beyond Scandal and Shame? Ecclesiology and the Longing for a Transformed Church," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 3 (2019): 590.

[86] Caroline Hodge, "Apostle to the Gentiles: Constructions of Paul's Identity," *Biblical Interpretation* 13, no. 3 (2005): 271.

[87] Douglas Campbell, "Galatians 5:11: Evidence of an Early Law-Observant Mission by Paul?" *New Testament Studies* 57 (2011): 327.

Jesus Himself had commanded His disciples to proclaim the kingdom message boldly.[88] This evolution in ministry appears situationally like the opportunities of the online mission field today to provide a message of hope with kingdom truth.[89]

Just as importantly, Paul argues for a transformation in ministry to the Gentiles based on logic, as opposed to what was represented by the "law" as it was carried forth by religious elites.[90] In the end, Peter had no choice but to recognize his shortsightedness and bias, recognizing Paul's teaching as "commendable" (2 Pet. 3:15-16, NIV). Jesus called for Peter to be His "rock," and even after preaching to His disciples the importance of laying down their lives and picking up their cross to follow Him, they remained bound to the old standard.[91] This adherence to what was familiar, the reliance on the "comfort zone" of what was already known, and the resistance to becoming what Jesus needed His church to become, represents a case study of what has happened to the church mission as it pertains to the online environment. Paul argued rationally and logically against reliance on religiosity and thereby ignoring the changed environment presented by Jesus through His ministry and the Great Commission.[92] His discussions and arguments delivered the types of messages expected by His audiences of the day.[93]

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[88] Hong, "Does Paul Misrepresent the Jewish Law," 170.

[89] Seth Turner, "The Interim, Earthly Messianic Kingdom in Paul," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25, no. 3 (2003): 324.

[90] Timothy Gombis, "The 'Transgressor' and the 'Curse of the Law': The Logic of Paul's Argument in Galatians 2-3," *New Testament Studies* 53 (2007): 83.

[91] Vincent Smiles, "The Blessing of Israel and 'the Curse of the Law': A Study of Galatians 3:10-14," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 3 (2008): 3; see also D. J. Verseput, "Paul's Gentile Mission and the Jewish Christian Community: A Study of Galatians 1 and 2," *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993): 37.

[92] Gombis, "The Transgressor," 82.

[93] Downing, "A Cynic Preparation," 454.

Today's environment often shares similarities with the early church with its undue reliance on Jewish Law and tradition and its unwillingness to consider that the world around them had changed.[94] Jesus came in and turned over the tables physically and in the relationship between God and man. Clarity is what was needed, not that God had inadequately provided it, but that Peter needed his eyes opened to what had happened around him.[95] The new ministry was marching forward inexorably because of Christ's saving death on the cross. The church today, while perhaps well-intentioned, has largely missed an environment where the unchurched and those not ministered to abide every day.[96] What appears to be an underserved online community represents a new opportunity in the mission field. It is an opportunity not just in the possibility to be explored but rather one in which Jesus commands making disciples. The online environment is not a replacement for the church, only an extension of its outreach and calling.

There are other examples throughout the New Testament that bring some clarity to where believers should be going to preach the kingdom message. Returning to Jesus' own teaching, He was asked upon describing the commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself, "Teacher, who is my neighbor (Luke 10:25, NIV)?" Religiosity suggested a "neighbor" meant "someone of Jewish lineage in need." Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan, in which the lowest on the social strata was elevated to "neighbor" status.[97] It was this inclusivity that shattered the prior paradigm and upset the elites, whose power base was now threatened.[98] Based on this all-inclusive definition of what constitutes a "neighbor," extending this definition beyond the boundaries of

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[94] Smiles, "The Blessing of Israel," 4.

[95] Gombis, "The Transgressor," 85.

[96] Bosch, "Open Wall Churches," 304.

[97] Mark Proctor, "Who is my Neighbor: Recontextualizing Luke's Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-27)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138, no.1 (2019): 203.

[98] Ahearne-Kroll, "Audience Inclusion and Exclusion," 721.

the church walls seems valid. Likewise, as the Great Commission commanded believers to take the gospels to each corner of the earth, the Samaritan neighbor drives a narrative of "everyone, everywhere" (Luke 10:25-37, NIV).

Paul's Ministry to the Romans: Inclusivity

Another way to approach the same inclusive context via Scripture is through Paul's letter to the Romans, "but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith" (Rom. 16:26, NIV). Paul emphasized the narrative that just as God is one, all of humankind could come to obedience regardless of their differences.[99]

Likewise, to the Romans, Paul stated, "If you declare with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 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. 10:9-10, NIV)." Paul's context in the passage was to describe the Jewish perspective of exclusivity as misguided, their faith in the law misdirected.[100]

His point was not that the law was bad, but the exclusionary mindset was now obsolete, replaced by the all-inclusive love of Jesus.[101] He had come to fulfill the law, not replace it, and in a way that showed divine love and grace to all people, not just one group, as religious leaders had carefully cultivated.

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[99] Andries van Aarde, "'By Faith Alone' (undivided loyalty) in Light of Change Agency Theory: Jesus, Paul and the Jesus-group in Colossae," *Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017): 3; see also Eric Stewart, "I'm Okay, You're Not Okay: Constancy of Character and Paul's Understanding of Change in his own and Peter's Behavior," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66, no. 3 (2010): 2.

[100] William Oliver, "Romans 10:5-13 Revisited," *Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 3.

[101] Hong, "Does Paul Misrepresent the Jewish Law," 172.

One more context to consider: The kingdom message of Christ was not just meant to be passed along to all, but also the message that the love of Christ was available to all. Not only have Christians all participated in Christ's death, but they also share in His Resurrection. Available to all is the death Jesus faced, symbolically by baptism, and His resurrection is available to all by faith.[102] The gospel, according to Paul, is "bearing fruit" among Jews and Gentiles alike, and believers are to act accordingly, no matter what the setting.[103] It is an essential part of getting the light of the good news out into the world rather than hiding it under a bushel (Mark 4:21-25, NIV). Therefore, Jesus and His kingdom message changed the perspective, ministry's motivation, and the view of those receiving ministry.

Conclusion

Theologically, the evidence is abundant for taking the kingdom's message to the evolving online audience. Even in the Old Testament, the prophets and kings preached coming together as a community in obedience to God. By the time of Jesus, this had unfortunately become religiosity, an over-dependence on legalistic interpretations of Jewish Law that helped preserve the establishment but did nothing to ensure the salvation of God's people. This environment is where Jesus entered as He preached the good news to the marginalized.

The news Jesus delivered shattered the paradigm being taught by the religious leaders of the day. His message deliberately reached out to include even the marginalized. His love touched the oppressed and lost. The commandment to love your neighbor was designed to include changing dynamics in outreach and the Great Commission to spread its arms across everyone,

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[102] Michael Barram, "Colossians 3:1-17," *Interpretation* 59, no. 2 (2005): 188.

[103] Ibid., 189; see also Santiago Guijarro, "Biblical Cartography and the (Mis)Representation of Paul's Missionary Travels," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75 no. 3 (2019): 2.

regardless of location. Even then, some of the apostles to whom He entrusted His Commission could not process its meaning. Peter and James are named for over-emphasizing circumcision and other parts of Jewish Law. It took the transformational understanding of Paul, developed after Jesus' resurrection appearance, to confront and create the change needed to take the kingdom message to the ends of the earth.

The need for Lifehouse Church to develop an action plan to bring the kingdom message to an online audience is definite and strong. Without it, Lifehouse and many churches like it fail to recognize the opportunities of the cyber-environment and do not effectively minister to it. The gates of hades shall not prevail against the church, and the need for a physical presence remains imperative for serving the community and is an important way to create fellowship for many. Yet the world is not static, and the need to serve the unchurched and unexposed in the online community is a real and pressing need. It is the sort of need that can only be met by a compassionate, dedicated kingdom message designed to reach and minister to an online audience.

Theoretical Foundations

The need to address an online audience with a kingdom message is not new. The online environment is well-established. Many companies, non-profit organizations, schools, and individuals are well-versed in not just the technology involved in utilizing social media but also in how an online culture typically interacts and responds. Therefore, one expects to find a bevy of research and study on online interactions, and one indeed finds much. Churches, however, are less likely to maximize the opportunities of social media, and if Lifehouse Church is typical of most, there is a deficiency in bringing a kingdom message to an online audience or congregation. Fortunately, the gap is both investigable and addressable.

Referring to the thesis, "if" Lifehouse can develop a strategy from which to distribute a kingdom message that proves captivating to an online audience, "then" LC can make effective inroads into this previously underserved audience. At first glance, acting in this area seems simple and appealing. Businesses can attest that tapping into the vast market of consumers that are available and willing to shop online for products and services they are interested in can result in relatively effortless cash flow.[104] LC is not contemplating a medium where no prior interaction between suppliers and consumers has been established. On Cyber Monday 2021 alone, 10.7 billion dollars (about $33 per person in the US) of commerce occurred in the United States alone.[105] Consumers know how to use the internet to find what they want to satisfy material needs and desires.

Addressing Consumerism

As the problem statement alludes to, LC must contend with distributing a message that is not a consumer good. The kingdom message of hope does not satisfy a consumeristic need for immediate gratification.[106] Therefore, simply placing ads on internet sites, gaming apps, or Instagram will not necessarily translate into thousands of new followers of Christ. Messaging must be delivered in a way that captures the attention of someone seeking self-affirmation in online shopping or offers a meaningful alternate message to the unchurched who harvest their hope from observing others. Observing others often leads to dissatisfaction, jealousy, and perhaps worse: loneliness or despondency. Too often, the seemingly perfect lives of those on social media are at once not indicative of the truth but also portraying a false truth others wish

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[104] Hindley, "Breaking the Consumerist Trances," 124.

[105] Lauren Thomas, "Cyber Monday Online Sales Drop 1.4% from Last Year to $10.7 Billion, Falling for the First Time Ever," *CNBC.com* (2021).

[106] Audette and Weaver, "Filling Pews and Voting Booths," 247.

for themselves.[107] It is this undercurrent of "lostness" Lifehouse Church seeks to address with Christ's message of compassion and hope by reaching beyond its physical borders to an audience in need.

Previously undertaken research has endeavored to show why this is so. One reason is, as Cho notes that those involved in ministry full-time may not fully understand or believe the Holy Spirit can work through messaging in an environment without physical touch.[108] Fortunately, efforts have been made to show that physical presence is not necessary for the Word of God to move in the hearts of the exposed congregation. In a survey from 2015, Smith found that "Jesus said that where two or three are gathered in His name, He will be present. Many of us have found this promise holds good online."[109] God's plan cannot be stopped, and His will cannot be thwarted, a statement supported when Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus. The betrayal, far from keeping God from delivering His people, became the action needed to reconcile Him to His creation. Likewise, creating communities online can bring the kingdom's message to people in a new and provocative way.[110]

Other cited demerits for the validity of an online congregation include the departure from traditional church norms of what creates "community." Harwig has done some useful research in this area, noting that communities have become "social, rather than spatial" structures with the proliferation of online chat rooms and forums.[111] The trend has been towards groups of people coming together to form peer and support groups.

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[107] Evener, "Spirit and Truth," 237.

[108] Cho, "For the Church Community," 15.

[109] Smith, *Online Mission and Ministry*, 55.

[110] Hudgins, "Preaching Online," 79.

[111] Harwig, Rowland and Soffels "Click to Connect," 27.

This bodes well for online congregations to grow in stature and shrink in stigma. The stigma manifests as the assumption that when one cannot touch another person physically, the sense of community is diminished. As the virtual world of communication and comradery has developed, the tendency to minimize or exclude its importance to a ministry message has been harder to justify. That same stigma would have hindered online congregations' acceptance as technology has developed, and predominantly younger generations have pursued new ways to hear messages and seek information.[112] Going forward, the increased pervasiveness of online culture may tend towards a more inclusive environment for ministry messaging.

Connections and Creativity

Kupke recognized in her research that connections must be intertwined with creativity because as technology draws people out of church, it enables new bonds to form between their own social networks.[113] Increasingly, they have come to recognize their online connections as "family," and because of that familial nature, a new core community has developed.[114] Where research appears to be lacking, however, is how an online community can be reached with something that requires more than a point-and-click mechanism for entertainment. Alternatively, how a message can be projected so that attention can be grabbed before the "point and click" reflex takes place.[115]

Currently, Lifehouse and many similar churches have approached online engagement the same way, that their physical congregations can be served by offering messaging online, but that

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[112] Ibid., 28.

[113] Kupke, "The Church has Left the Building," 94

[114] Cherry, "The Consumerist Moral Babel," 146.

[115] Rainer, Who Moved my Pulpit? Leading Change in the Church, 27.

the mission field is limited online due to the "point-and-click" reflex. LC streams one service live on Sunday mornings, to Facebook Live and YouTube, with a moderator managing comments and interactions, but only on the Facebook page. During the week, the LC leadership team posts prayer requests or updates to community events or ministry opportunities. On Wednesdays, like so many other churches, LC conducts Bible study either live on Facebook or by simply posting a prerecorded devotional video. It is not that there is no strategy at all. Rather, the argument at LC is whether there is a way to reach out and offer to be the church family for those connections that exist primarily online. Many churches have decided that those connections do not produce disciples.[116] Therefore, the debate many church organizations face is how best to make disciples and how to not lose sight of energizing online discipleship based on what "could" happen if churches were engaged in this area.[117] Cho openly speculates not on "whether" the Holy Spirit could work through an online gathering but rather on what it takes for existing physical congregations to bridge the gap between the building and cyberspace.[118] The same gap is what this project is designed to address.

At once, the LC approach was commonly shared with other church organizations engaged and not.[119] There is engagement because many church members and attendees view and recognize these online interactions during the week. There is insufficient engagement, however, because these efforts, while noble, do not promote a kingdom message beyond what "used" to be physical church walls and now are quasi-physical walls built around membership "likes" and views. Bosch observed in her research that "the ontological character of cyberspace" has

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[116] Ibid., 27.

[117] Kupke, "The Church has Left the Building," 94.

[118] Cho, "For the Church Community," 15.

[119] Golan and Stadler, "Building the Sacred Community Online," 72.

elements of connectivity and openness to it and opportunities to communicate and create contact.[120] Therefore, LC and other physical congregations can and should make it part of their mission field to reach out into this "character of cyberspace" to take the message of Christ to the underserved.[121] As Cho observed, there is a certain solidarity a church family experiences, and these same types of experiences do happen online in gaming and common group interests.[122] There is nothing to stop churches from approaching the online community similarly.

Defining the Gap

The result of this theoretical background work is to propose that Christian mission field opportunities are "out there" in cyberspace, but something is lacking.[123] What lacks is the outreach so often embodied on a physical mission field with food banks, clothing drives, or prayer vigils. Lifehouse has an option for someone already familiar with LC but who does not have the desire or ability to drive to campus on Sunday: A livestream of the normal Sunday service. A casual glance at other churches in the area shows similar accessibility: lots of reaching out to current members and plenty of ways for physical and online fellowship. If someone is plugged into Lifehouse Church, they have access to prior sermons, studies, and a prayer wall. They will see the occasional prayer request or encouraging note from LC leadership.

These outreach methods represent arms wrapped only as far around as church membership and guests, an old issue whereby the church encourages attendees to "bring a friend."[124] It is a limited-opportunity growth method, and it is unresolved by including a "share"

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[120] Bosch, "Open Wall Churches," 304.

[121] Ibid., 305.

[122] Cho, "For the Church Community," 18

[123] Golan and Stadler, "Building the Sacred Community Online," 73.

[124] Hudgins, "Preaching Online," 82.

button on Wednesday night prayer services. One might as well ask an online audience to send emails to their contact list. It is easy to click "send" or "share," and it is likewise simple to ask every person one sees to come to a physical campus. It is difficult to convince a seeker or an unbeliever with a busy schedule to accept the invitation, whether in person or online. There must be a motivation, an attraction, which captivates the invitee.[125]

A casual observer might see a social media consumer flipping through pages with their thumb on a phone, barely pausing for only the most scintillating stories or posts that come along on the screen. There it is. That is the dilemma exactly.[126] Neither Lifehouse nor most other traditional physical churches seem to have captivated an unfamiliar audience with a kingdom message that stops the scroll. Models by Barna or Rainer show there is a need for connection to such an audience, one that is not moved by a lengthy sermon necessarily, at least not at first.[127] The need for further research lies in capturing the opportunities presented by cyber culture. Success means observing, connecting, and transforming lives by reaching them where they are, not where the church is used to seeing them.[128]

Where is the resistance, then? The connection has adequately not occurred for several reasons. First, as Rainer points out, traditional church members and church leadership can be "stubborn."[129] One might look at the similarities between a "stubborn" church and Pharisaical Jewish leadership during the ministry of Jesus. A segment of believers sees the growth and connection with an online congregation as a "threat" to the old order, as though a new wave of

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[125] Barna, America at the Crossroads, 21.

[126] Golan and Stadler, "Building the Sacred Community Online," 73.

[127] Rainer, Who Moved my Pulpit, 24.

[128] Evener, "Spirit and Truth." 237.

[129] Rainer, Who Moved my Pulpit, 26.

believers will somehow redefine the words and ministry of Jesus or change the truth of Scripture.[130] "The entitled church resists change constantly," as Rainer concisely states it.[131] One needs to look no further than the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of the day to see "entitlement" and "power" as strong barriers to the kingdom message.

Conclusion

There is a gap between the body of research presently composed regarding the online congregation and its ability to be in community, its potential for familial relationships, and the opportunity to spread the gospel message as rarely occurred over the past two millennia. The need for this project is displayed by a culture that clicks and scrolls, looking for the next good or service that will satisfy their inner hunger, but comes up empty. The emptiness displays the need for the kingdom message to proliferate and spread by reaching this culture, this potential online congregation, where it is, and by using methods that create productive connections. Research shows the opportunity to reach untold numbers of unbelievers or the unchurched is both present and necessary. Networking online creates connections and community that is dissimilar to a physical presence in the sense that one cannot reach out and touch another; however, the similarities provide plenty of evidence for a communicative and supportive environment where participants empathize and work with each other to overcome obstacles.

Scripture teaches the fundamentals from which to seize the opportunity. The early church grew through the figurative wrestling between the old legalistic system and the new advocacy for reaching out to Gentiles and other pagan groups. Granted these were still physical environments, but one must then also consider the body of letters written by Paul to various fledgling church

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[130] Audette and Weaver, "Filling Pews and Voting Booths," 247.

[131] Rainer, Who Moved my Pulpit, 19.

communities in the known world. This was a new era of “distance” teaching, and parallels can be drawn to the current expansion of what a church boundary is. Lifehouse can be an integral part of closing the gap between online interactions, bringing the kingdom message to a group that needs a fresh Gospel outreach.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Lifehouse Church faces a sobering situation. It is reflected in this project's problem statement, centering around how to accomplish effective ministry to an online audience that has not received ministry from the church. Developing a plan of action requires gathering information, careful analysis, and evaluation, creating an entire team of individuals oriented to the mission, and executing a plan of intervention. Meticulous research and examination are only the beginning of an effective intervention plan. The results of the gathered information will be carefully processed and integrated into a strategy, something Lifehouse has never embarked upon as it relates to an online congregation. Developing an online congregational message requires a different set of requirements than a physical audience. This action research is designed to obtain a cross sectional body of information about the needs and activities of an online audience, specifically what attracts attention, what types of messages and attitudes draw people, and how to provide a kingdom message in a captivating way. Then, the results of this research will be enacted in two primary phases.

The level of precedence in engaging an online audience from a ministry perspective is low; there is a severe gap in the application of strategy to deliver a captivating kingdom message to an entire population who may never have heard it. This gap is what the following action research is designed to address. In some ways, this audience's behaviors are different than expected within the confines of a physical church building. Yet, Paul did something similar in taking the message of Christ to a Gentile population. This was cutting edge in his day, and he

was willing to fight the standing powers of the new church (the Apostles and disciples) to keep the door open to reach the world for Christ. Paul took his ministry to the edges of his known world, planted churches along the way, and followed up with them out of his passion for spreading the transformation he had experienced. Further, Paul defined the views of those mired in Jewish legalism and unwilling to consider the proper expectation of Jesus in the Great Commission as hypocritical. He reasoned, provided compelling evidence, and earned the attention of thousands of new followers of Christ.

This project endeavors to do nothing less than follow the footsteps of Paul in addressing a new audience to Lifehouse. An online congregation would know different boundaries, no walls, and an exponentially greater capacity to show compassion and empathy and share hope with others who may have withdrawn from many public routines. This audience has been shown to spend hours daily on social media where previously, they might have been interacting physically with peers. Sadly, this has created isolation among creatures God designed for interaction. Happily, technology has created opportunities to reach into society in a way previously unknown. This chapter is designed to include a complete description of the intervention design, how it will be implemented, and an effective defense of why this intervention is needed and called for all followers of Christ.

Intervention Design

The problem is that Lifehouse Church has no coherent strategy for delivering a captivating kingdom message to an online congregational audience. Addressing the problem will require an intervention plan that reveals the dynamics that occur through various perceptions, levels of understanding, and interpersonal, intergroup relationships that create a web of

information that needs to be dissected.[1] No single intervention method can uncover the full extent of information required to address the problem entirely. Still, solid research techniques and subsequent reflection can provide Lifehouse Church with direction for addressing and meeting the needs of an online congregation. Therefore, the goal is not to "solve" the entirety of the gap in online ministry. Instead, it is to define better and implement the Lifehouse contribution so that the church fulfills the commandment of Jesus to reach out to all people. Future congregations and research can help close the gap in other communities.

There were two criteria met before beginning the action stages of the intervention plan. These included approval by the faculty member assisting with this project's research and action processes and IRB approval. These approvals occurred during the Spring semester of 2022 as a part of DMIN 841 and are attached to this project for review. See Appendix E for IRB approval. The senior pastor and leadership of Lifehouse Church were also briefed on the research plan and the trajectory of what happens when it is time to implement an intervention. They are standing alongside to assist, as necessary. Then before the research was undertaken in the form of questionnaires and interviews, all the questions for the research were submitted to a peer review and focus group of leaders at Lifehouse Church to ensure the church agreed with the tone and subject matter of the research to be completed.

The preparation work for the intervention plan for addressing the problem included participant interviews and surveys of both Lifehouse Church congregants and leadership, but also of people outside the church and even outside the faith who provided further valuable insight into what precisely in an online atmosphere attracts and retains attention. This meant asking the right questions: "What entices you to read an article," or "What draws your eye to a

[1] Ernest Stringer, *Action Research* 4th Ed., Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE (2014): 99.

specific meme," or "What types of presentations turn you away," as opposed to asking what would draw nonbelievers to faith. From the execution of the intervention, and the monitoring and consideration of its results, Lifehouse Church endeavors to follow the Lord's direction in taking his message to the underserved of the online community.

Constructing the Intervention Plan

Constructing a thorough intervention plan requires several levels of activity, beginning with the preparation in advance to meet the needs of an online audience. These are designed to acquire the information necessary to address the deficit in Lifehouse Church's ability to deliver a kingdom message effectively to an online audience. The current strategy is essentially not to have a strategy. This is reflected in the types of interaction and connection seen today, centered on the live stream of Sunday messages. This is not "bad," but is wholly insufficient to deliver a captivating message that appeals to the previously unexposed or otherwise unchurched. It is an opportunity that God requires followers of Jesus to explore and leverage evolving technology and how people acquire information.

With the approval and support of church leadership, the first stage in preparing the intervention action plan was to identify the key stakeholders and groups involved in the research.[2] These included congregants at Lifehouse and contacts either of the researcher or provided by Lifehouse leadership that are good candidates for providing valuable responses to questions regarding online behavior but fall outside the faith community. The added insights

[2] Paul Leedy and Jeanne Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design* 12th ed., New York, New York: Pearson Education (2019): 237.

might prove invaluable to learning what modes of delivery are attractive to people not currently being reached by online initiatives.[3]

Once these stakeholders were identified, the second phase was engaged to reach out to potential participants, including invitations as part of services, electronic means, and personal contact with people outside the range of the Lifehouse congregation. These were selected while considering participant backgrounds and how they might influence their responses, which will help develop the research questions.[4] While these responses were considered, the researcher developed roles and an agenda from which to proceed during intervention contact. While the researcher could adopt the title "facilitator," this formality was not chosen. However, the researcher promoted a neutral stance and adopted what Stringer calls "an unoccupied space position" to be perceived as objectively as possible.[5]

The research "facilitator" will eventually spearhead the action phase of the intervention. It was explained before participation the nature of the project, specifically that there is no intention to replace anything currently part of the Lifehouse Church physical programming. This is going to begin as an outreach into the online community.

Activities prior to Research

Due to the quantity and nature of information shared, it was essential to approach the key stakeholders to obtain approval to pursue the research. In this case, there were several ways to provide that information. For those in the congregation and leadership of Lifehouse Church, information was provided in advance by announcing it in service, plus graphics were added to

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[3] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 248.

[4] Ibid., 246.

[5] Stringer, *Action Research,* 84.

the information screens shown before and after services, congregation members were greeted after service, multiple supplemental requests were made, and plans were included in weekly emails and newsletters sent to congregants.[6] These took place throughout the late spring and early summer of 2022.

Those who were available and interested in participation could respond by speaking to the appropriate contact or filling out an information request sheet near the exit after service. LC added contact information to its website during the early summer months of 2022. Additionally, there were secondary communications approximately ten days and several weeks after initial contact.[7] These included a reminder during services and sending out email supplemental communications based on the templates developed for the IRB. Additionally, screening for participant interviews took place during this time.

For those stakeholders who are not active members of Lifehouse Church, outreach included text conversations, private messaging, and phone conversations inviting them to participate. These participants would be provided similar information to Lifehouse Church participants, with an explanation of the research project's goal and how they can assist in its completion. There was still a consent form, albeit not affiliated with Lifehouse. The researcher was responsible for securing information, and secondary communications were distributed approximately ten days after initial contact in situations where additional communications were required.

Participation in this action research project was designed to be minimally invasive. Still, before any interviews or questionnaires at the point of initial contact with the participant, a

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[6] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research,* 250.

[7] Ibid.

consent form was made available.[8] This form is further discussed below but discusses subjects including confidentiality and anonymity. Additionally, due to the likelihood that some of the information gathering sessions would take place on church property (likely the most suitable location since most intended participants know it), facilities management was contacted for such purposes as unlocking doors, setting the thermostat, and describing where cleaning materials are so that the church will be returned to its previous state before leaving after participant interviews.[9] Other interviews were conducted via Zoom or in person (but not on campus) and required no facilities intervention. The only resources needed to complete the research were a few visits to Dunkin' for food and the gas required to drive between meeting points.

Participant consent documentation was not required for questionnaires but was available to be documented and retained for future reference. Made available was a specifically prepared form called "Agreement to Participate," modeled after the example shown in *Action Research*.[10] This short form includes the name of the church (Lifehouse Church), contact information for the researcher and the appropriate church leadership in case there are concerns, an identification line, and two signature lines, one for the participant and another for the facilitator/researcher. As part of the form, there is a brief description of the purpose of the information gathering sessions, along with an assurance of secured responses and contact information for those with questions and concerns. Due to the small population and sample size, the process was not as formal as might be required with an extensive number of participants. A draft consent form can be located at the end of the project in Appendix A and is modeled after the IRB requirements.

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[8] Ibid., 248.

[9] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research,* 248.

[10] Stringer, *Action Research,* 90.

Research Instruments

The next process began with participants selected and the "tone at the top" set. Indeed, LC leadership was very supportive of the researcher's efforts. The early summer months were spent in information gathering. This project is a mixed methods study utilizing both qualitative and quantitative techniques, borrowing from case studies and ethnographic methodologies.[11] Qualitative data was also gathered from interviews, while the quantitative portion was conducted using questionnaires distributed at the church and via email. Qualitative designs are implemented to gather more thorough information from a few people. This project consisted of less than ten. Ethnography (questionnaires) will be used to understand the beliefs of a particular church culture (LC). An idea of how the flow of data will occur during the research phase is exhibited in Figure 1.

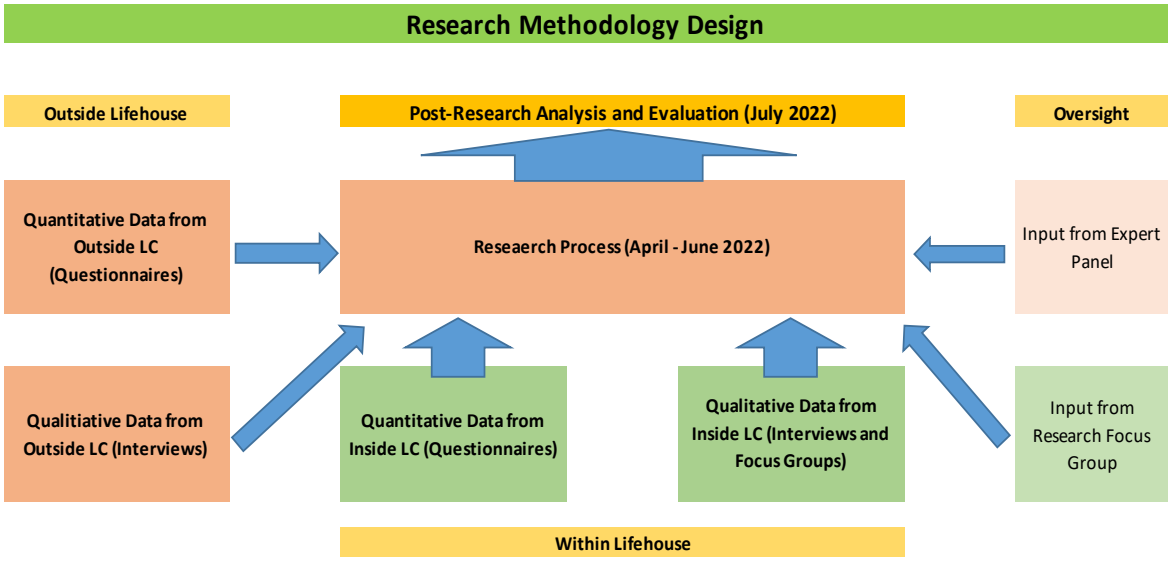

Figure 1: Research Methodology Design

The reason for a "mixed method" design is to make the most of what otherwise might be considered a relatively limited sample of the online population. Choosing a blend of quantitative

[11] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research,* 236.

and qualitative techniques leaned itself to the most significant measure of "completeness," where the project problem can be addressed by collecting and analyzing multiple types of techniques.[12] The relatively narrow sample means the data collected must be complementary; the quantitative and qualitative data fill in gaps in one another and contribute to a more representative perspective of the general population.[13]

Because narrow samples can provide inconclusive or unexpected results, even statistical analysis might not reconcile some oddities in quantitative data. Due to the small sample size and the qualitative nature of interview questions, certain statistics were difficult to calculate and analyze with meaningful results at implementation time.

The addition of qualitative data, for example, an interview, along with those deeper and more carefully considered responses, complement each other, and can provide solutions to questions in the data.[14] To ensure "reasonable credibility," it was important to ensure that each aspect of the project data gathering was similar enough to warrant comparisons and interpretation.[15] Additionally, support from church leadership and recommendations from sample peers is important to provide evidence of validity and impartiality. The initial expert panel and peer focus group helped to ensure this took place, and this process was described below.

Research Process

To some degree, questionnaires and interviews will take on aspects of phenomenological studies in that it will benefit the project's progress to sample the online culture as individuals

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[12] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research,* 260.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 261.

[15] Ibid., 271.

perceive it within the culture.[16] Yet while there will be some aspects of the research directed towards phenomenological perceptions (how does the online culture perceive itself), most results will fall into two ethnographical groups: those who fall inside the church community and those who fall outside the church community altogether.[17] This will help identify which concepts in the online realm contribute to the most effective message delivery.

Following IRB and faculty approval, the initial meeting with Gavin Brown and his administrative assistant Taylor Kothe occurred within the first week of April 2022. At this meeting, the general guidelines and plans were discussed and agreed upon, including how the project would be presented to the congregation, forwarded to outside participants, and the process of data gathering and storage. The formal approval request was then mailed to Mr. Brown, along with the response template indicating his approval.

Quantitative Questionnaires

While consideration was given to constructing an online questionnaire using the popular and free resource "SurveyMonkey," it quickly became apparent that most participants would prefer an emailed survey rather than an online format. The reasons given varied. One participant asked for time to consider the questions carefully, which this participant felt an online survey might adversely influence. Others wished to have the ability to print the survey. One suggested that working with the paper was more "user friendly" than clicking on a screen. Still, another was concerned about a third-party application using the collected data for unrelated reasons to the questionnaire. Interestingly, if not unexpected, the older the participant, the more opposed to online surveys. Younger participants were more receptive to SurveyMonkey. Ultimately because

[16] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 236.

[17] Ibid., 231.

even younger participants were willing to take the survey by email, the decision was made to skip the online component in favor of 1) a PDF version of the questionnaire emailed to each participant, or 2) a paper copy of the questionnaire distributed in person, or in three cases, mailed directly to the participant.

The questionnaire was constructed based on information gathered during the Literature Review. The themes running through the collection of resources include conflict, consumerism, connection, outreach, and engagement. Throughout the course of questioning, these themes run as threads to discern the participants' perceptions and views regarding pertinent issues discovered during the Literature Review. The rendering of questions is in a format that emulates random sampling; that is, questions are not asked in groups of five, for example, rather than a grouping of five questions about Western secularization. Instead, secularization questions are distributed throughout the questionnaire. The questions and layout are included in this document as Appendix C.

One example of how the questionnaire process was constructed concerns the subject of engagement. Engagement repeatedly came up in the Literature Review because traditional "brick and mortar" church building advocates equate "engagement" with "physical presence." Research suggests this to not be the case in the current social environment. As an example, in the gaming environment, participants invite each other to teams and engage in chat rooms that function in many of the same ways recognized as "fellowship." There are sidebar discussions and support groups for those participants who need encouragement. When teams are formed with the same people on a regular basis, common bonds of friendship are formed. It is not fair to say, "there is no fellowship," but rather that it is a different form of fellowship. Teamwork occurs on the

virtual level, with different people and different talents lifting each other up to reach a common goal.

The questionnaire addresses the engagement issue. Interspersed throughout are insightful inquiries, including, “When you are online, where are you spending most of your time?” “Do you use social media to catch up with what your friends are doing?” “Do you envy certain aspects of your peer group’s lives?” This line of questioning was designed for discerning interaction in a virtual environment. At the same time, one cannot encapsulate the virtual “fellowship” world without determining what things have been used to attract people to socialize. Likewise, a physical church campus without outreach and engagement will not be able to attract people to fellowship together with a common sight on Christ. Therefore, a series of questions are interspersed to gauge “attractiveness” in an online environment. The goal of these questions is to 1) determine “whether” participants would be willing to interact online in a way that promotes the kingdom message, and 2) “how” to bring that message to an unfamiliar audience in a captivating way.

The questionnaire is also designed to address other conflict areas, including Western secularization, the church “bubble” mentality, and physical versus virtual “boundaries.” Other subjects revealed in the Literature Review include conflict, consumerism, and outreach. Participants are asked to consider whether social media is predisposed only to consumerism (“If you are a scroller, what attracts your attention”) or whether the media could also be used to distribute a kingdom message (“do you believe online audiences should be exposed to the ministry of Christ”). Regarding outreach, the questionnaire is designed to glean what messaging platforms participants are most inclined to utilize (“If you are not entirely opposed to all religious and political messaging, what attracts you most. . . visual attractiveness. . . positive

vibes?"). Participants are also given examples of types of messaging to ascertain which receives the most positive response.

Ultimately, the questionnaire will drive participants toward one final question based on their responses. By responding to the questionnaire in a reasoned, logical manner interspersed with emotional stimuli, participants are exposed to various aspects of decision making which enable a thoughtful response to the following question: "In general, would you expect an online audience to receive a faith message the same way as a physical audience, or would a different messaging strategy by more effective." One possible response sticks out, "I doubt anyone scrolling on social media is expanding their search for faith." If, on completing the questionnaire, participants are inclined to respond that social media will not be an effective method of outreach with a kingdom message, and if this were the consensus of the population of those participants, then perhaps this would be an indication that the two worlds of physical and virtual are so exclusive of one another that the kingdom message could not be conveyed in a captivating way except in a physical context.

As a preliminary action, an expert panel consisting of two or three members of LC leadership was involved in creating the questionnaire and evaluating its questions. Based on the feedback from the expert group, an additional focus group of two or three participants was given the questionnaire before its release to the greater population involved in the project. The comments from both the expert panel and the focus group were incorporated into the questionnaire's final design to ensure the questionnaire itself was valid and impartial. Church leadership was involved in the process throughout. The introduction of the project to the church congregation occurred on May 15th, along with the first request for participants. The names and email addresses of 22 congregants were collected, and the questionnaire was emailed on May

20th. Of this initial batch of 22, seven were received by May 27th, another five by June 3rd, and a second email was sent on June 4th. By June 15th, 17 of the initial batch of 22 had been received and tallied. A second request was initiated on June 5th, from which an additional seven names and email addresses were collected. By the end of June, 21 questionnaires were received from the Lifehouse congregation.

Likewise, an email list of possible participants was constructed outside of the Lifehouse Church congregation and not based on any specific demographic. This list comprised those recommended by Lifehouse congregants (but not members of the congregation) and of friends and those recommended by friends and acquaintances. Reaching out to these contacts took place concurrent with the congregants of LC. Over the course of May and June 2022, an additional 17 requests were either emailed or mailed, and thirteen were received from this batch by July 15th. The remaining four were collected by July 31. Overall, 29 questionnaires were solicited through the church, with 22 collected; and another 17 outside of the church.

Of these, it was hoped that the initial response rate would be about 20%, yielding perhaps 20 responses total. Instead, the response rate was 38 questionnaires or 77.6%. This was an outstanding response rate, albeit a small overall sample size, implying that the content of the questionnaires struck a chord with the population of those solicited. It also provides some hope that future studies will find a receptive audience.

Qualitative Interviews

During June, solicitations were made for those interested in the qualitative portion of the project data gathering. Because interviews require a greater time allowance and are more oriented toward detail than emailed or mailed questionnaires, the population selected was much smaller, with eight individuals chosen from a solicitation made to 15 total people between LC

and outside the church. These individuals were selected in such a way as to create a representation of points of view as best as possible. Of the eight selected, two were congregants of LC, one was a self-proclaimed atheist, two were of professed faith outside of LC, one was a Jewish doctor, and the final was a church leader at a different church with whom the researcher was an acquaintance.

The interviews were conducted over a several week period in June to August 2022. The Lifehouse congregants were interviewed, one on the church campus and the other via Zoom. Four of the remaining participants were interviewed in person and two virtually (Zoom and a phone call). Interviews were designed to last approximately an hour and covered specific topics to dig deeper into the subject matter. Between the qualitative and quantitative information sets, a significant representation of a typical population was covered. Given more time and resources, however, it would be productive to expand the data collection and apply the additional findings to the project solutions.

Limitations rising from the project time frame and quantitative response rate helped determine the types of interviews and group sessions administered, along with the previous Review of Literature.[18] This preliminary picture showed how information gathered could be brought in, how it will be analyzed and investigated, and how the findings can be applied to grow and manage an online congregational experience. Interview conversations included information gathered through the Literature Review and proceeded, in part, as follows:

- Do you have a significant amount of interaction online? Compare the types of interaction and the results of interacting between virtual and online realms.

[18] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 272.

- In your online interactions, do you look for anything specific that makes you feel encouraged? In other words, do you find any interaction "captivating," and if so, describe that interaction.
- Can you find inspiration online in the same way you do "offline?" If yes, please provide an example. If not, why do you think that is?
- (Upon presenting the various posts and memes from the questionnaire to the interviewee) Of these types of messages, do any encourage you? Would any provoke you to reconsider your faith beliefs?
- Do you believe the physical church and an online church community can coexist or possibly benefit one another? If not, why not?
- (To those professing no faith) Is there any type of messaging that would provoke an internal thought process into why you have the set of beliefs that you currently have? If not, why not?

The interviews took from 45 minutes to over two hours, with the shorter being primarily during busy workday discussions and the longest being over breakfast, where there were ongoing and building conversations with valid and useful input. Because questionnaires were promoted as taking approximately an hour and were considered anonymous, participants were reassured with consent forms (described below), that their privacy was guaranteed and that the results were made secure in either a lock box or encrypted electronic format. As of this writing, all results are either in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office or as an electronic file encrypted on the researcher's laptop. These will be destroyed or deleted upon completion of the project.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

To counteract the possibility of participants dropping out, whether due to time commitments or lack of interest, these research phases began with large pools of participants to draw. Questionnaires were anticipated to be returned at a rate of 15 or 20% percent, necessitating the distribution of questionnaires to the larger corporate body at Lifehouse and then to a second audience outside the congregation. A quorum of responses was more likely to be gathered by broadly opening the pool of potential respondents. The actual response rate was significantly higher.

Regarding interviews, the number invited was twice the expected or desired rate; a typical sample might be between seven and ten participants. New questionnaire submissions and interviewee screenings were allowed throughout the research period in 2022. The interview process would be the last phase of data gathering and the most thorough. It was found that the group was able to reach deeper into the discussion and surfaced considerations that other quantitative and qualitative methods did not.

As it pertains to the sample of the population represented by the administration of the questionnaire, there are limitations in the data being collected. For example, those under 18 are excluded from this questionnaire. This is deliberate, as the kind of online ministry considered in this project does not include an audience of those under 18. Additionally, education levels are not considered in this questionnaire. The primary reason for excluding this demographic is to maintain a manageable level of data; that is, the scope of this project could easily exceed reasonable time and expense parameters needed to find timely conclusions and develop a strategy of action.

Considering the project's scope, certain combinations of data were not considered. Because education levels are not within the scope, this project does not consider education levels

changing with age, or the odds of proclaiming faith depending on education, nor whether those proclaiming faith came to that conclusion at an early age or more recently. The data does not consider one's conversion experience. One might speculate that the more dramatic and recent the experience, the more likely one would favor an ambitious online kingdom message. These topics could be the focus of a later project as an online kingdom message is implemented and more directly targeted.

Another area of limitation involves the narrowly targeted interviews associated with this project. All but two interviews occurred outside the Lifehouse Church community, providing ample data from outside the congregation but limited information from within the community from which the online mission field will originate. The interviews outside the community revealed significant differences between how kingdom messaging might be received inside and outside groups of those professing faith. As before, this area could be explored in future phases of online ministry, learning how to focus the kingdom message on an underserved field.

Data Analysis

The data collection phase of this project was largely concluded by the end of the summer of 2022. Now that all the surveys and interviews as the primary forms of information gathering are concluded, deeper analysis and reflection was able to commence during the fall. One part of interpreting the collection of quantitative data has been through the application of analysis, specifically data analytics. The analysis has been able to determine demographic shifts such as age, gender, or race; response rates have been measured not just in number but in standard deviation from the statistical mean by using unique identifiers. Essentially, data analytics report not only the number of responses but how different groups responded to different questions and the relationship between demographic factors like age or gender. Information analyzed this way

can help direct the limited number of resources available to launch the action phases of the project.

One advantage of data analytics is examining the relationships in quantitative responses that might otherwise be hidden in the questionnaire.[19] As an example, question 12 refers to a public message on social media referencing the COVID-19 vaccine (see Appendix C). Using analytics, one can determine several critical relationships in the data responses. In the sample, respondents did answer differently based on age, faith, education, or a combination of these demographics.[20]

Analytics uncovered whether older respondents might be more receptive to receiving the vaccine as an offset to compromised immunity or whether parents might respond to the use of children in the message by considering greater precautions. The results of the data analysis for this project are discussed more comprehensively in Chapter 4: Results section.

Spreadsheets can manipulate data in various ways, many of which will prove useful to the sample gathered in this project.[21] Of note is how spreadsheets can allow for sorting data by a specific data range (e.g., age) and allowing subsets of data to be mapped within the greater population of responses. This might be useful in separating the responses between those who profess faith and others who do not. These core groups will likely receive messages relating to faith in different ways. Messaging to an online audience will need to be carefully coordinated to reach those who either have not received the kingdom message or have simply fallen away from faith. Analytics will be a useful tool for organizing the data.[22]

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[19] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research,* 305.

[20] Ibid., 306.

[21] Ibid., 312.

[22] Ibid., 308.

An advantage of using analytics to produce subsets of quantitative data is the further depth provided by distribution measurements, including symmetry, standard deviation, and proportion.[23] Predicting the effectiveness of online messaging would be haphazard without the ability to understand the normal distribution of responses between the greater sample and the subsets created. By defining the data mean and other parameters in the data expected to be provided by the qualitative portion of this project, it is possible to generate standard deviations of responses.

Standard deviation will enable precision in determining which message attributes are more effective for the target online audience members. It does this by showing the distribution of responses in the form of a "bell curve." The most significant number of responses show up at the highest points of the bell. This is where the "sweet spot" of online messaging could be targeted to reach the greatest number of people.

If the distribution of responses to multiple choice questions is deemed reliable by the expert panel and peer focus groups, then LC will be able to see on a curve which messages capture attention in a positive way by an online audience.[24] Further, with enough response, it will be possible to discover trends in normal distributions that are either positively or negatively skewed in response rates.

As the project progresses, continued feedback and analysis will provide a stream of data analytics from which LC can modify and emphasize types of messaging to reach the online audience that has been underserved. Data analytics will never entirely conclude as various

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[23] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research,* 308.

[24] Ibid., 314.

project phases take place. Studying questionnaire responses can provide key strategic insights to maximize the potential of the limited resources with which Lifehouse Church works.

During the fall, Lifehouse will be given a completed body of information, will have the "tone from the top" support of leadership, the allocation of financial and team resources, and the corporate prayer and meditation necessary to implement the first stages of an online congregational action plan. It is essential to consider how the results will be measured and evaluated using "triangulation."[25] Triangulation uses multiple data resources and techniques to reach the most comprehensive conclusions possible. In evaluating the research phases of the project, the researcher will include questionnaire responses and interview notes information gathered. The combination of these initiatives will provide significant insight into the direction of the action phases described later in the project, as part of Lifehouse Church's growth into new ministry opportunities.

Given enough time, data analytics can also be applied to the engagement strategies LC chooses to show a correlation between crucial message variables related to specific messaging techniques like short "blast" messages or longer "take a break" videos. These strategic elements are designed to reach groups online who might otherwise not have considered Christ's kingdom message.

Milestone Activity

It is important to note that the action phases of the implementation will be subject to a timeline that includes specific milestones where progress measures will be assessed. These are based on the elapsed time since implementation, quantitative measures such as "number of

[25] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research,* 240.

responders," and qualitative metrics including support or offense for the intervention measures. This evaluation and meditation plan is expected to continue indefinitely as the congregation evolves and technology and participant needs change. While the final timeline has not been determined, the draft timeline for the project period of performance is as follows:

- Summer 2022: Data collection both quantitatively and qualitatively through interviews and questionnaires (completed),
- Fall 2022: Data analytics and evaluation, along with a discussion of results with LC leadership and implementation of the first action phase (completed),
- Spring 2023: Form an Online Implementation Team to oversee the results and evaluate findings prior to implanting further actions (in progress).

Please see Chapter 5 and Appendix D for more comprehensive details about the proposed timeline, including the period following the end of this project. Even though the time horizon of the intervention exceeds the scope of this project, the problem Lifehouse is experiencing will have been addressed then there will be a carefully drawn, prayerfully considered, and enthusiastically applied strategy to deliver a kingdom message and experience to an online audience with a congregational setting.

Conclusion

After data analysis has been completed, Lifehouse Church leadership will be apprised of the quantitative and qualitative results and the results of the statistical analytics. This could either occur with the researcher/facilitator doing the analysis and presenting the findings to the Board of Trustees and senior pastor; or with the researcher/facilitator presenting preliminary findings and inviting deeper cooperative analysis alongside the Board and senior pastor.

Stringer recommends the facilitator reflect on how participants reacted to being interviewed by a "stranger," how much was learned, and meditating in the space in which the interviews were taking place (the church itself).[26] The goal of this stage would be for the Board, pastor, and facilitator to construct an action plan and determine the resources necessary to implement it. These resources may be financial and include assembling a separate team (OIT) dedicated to an online congregational experience.

The intervention design was conducted in a sequence that collected the data from the quantitative questionnaires first, and from qualitative interviews second. The primary reason for this sequence was to provide the data foundation from which to develop the more thorough interview questions, for these were meant to capture information and personal perspective. These perspectives helped to further confirm the quantitative findings but ended up lending themselves to valuable insights. Some of these insights were more heartfelt than any questionnaire could capture and are discussed in the next chapter.

[26] Stringer, *Action Research,* 96.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Reviewing the intervention results uncovers exciting possibilities and considerable challenges. Some of the results were as expected, and others were surprising. This portion of the project is designed to highlight the results of the data collection phase and to complete a detailed analysis of which parts went well, which ones veered off course, and what could have been done differently to address areas of concern that developed as the process continued.

The problem, as described earlier, is how to bring a captivating kingdom message to a largely unrecognized and underserved online mission field. The problem statement considers that there are already various churches either streaming services live or posting a summary after the fact. It also considers that there are plenty of "memes" (i.e., online billboards) designed either to impart an irrationally euphemistic sense of what Jesus offers through His action on the cross or deliver an intentionally painful message designed to scare the audience into repentance. The data collected in this project endeavored to consider these approaches in such a way as to tailor the most effective online messaging solution.

One complaint about online church experiences is the lack of fellowship from gathering outside of a physical location. The questionnaires contained in this project, along with both physical interviews and Zoom interactions, were put together with questions and discussions meant to discern how much of this prevailing view exists in the eyes of participants, along with examining potential biases that might exist between those consistently attending a physical campus with others who did not attend a physical campus at all. While the sample size and limited scope and period of the project did not allow for the assessment of all considerations

possible in discussing an online kingdom message, the results exposed weaknesses in approach and potential opportunities for advancing a message in an online environment.

Overview of Results

A total of 38 participants submitted questionnaires as part of the solicitation process. A significant number of these came from Lifehouse Church congregants (54%); the remaining 46% came from non-congregants who were either known to the researcher, to the congregants and invited to take the questionnaire, or to the leadership of LC and suggested for solicitation. This approach produced a diverse cross-section sample of the greater population, which at least imperfectly addressed a potential weakness of this project: narrowing the results to those with significantly homogenous viewpoints.

There are other demographic aspects to consider, some of which add strength to the research findings, and others suggest areas of limitation or improvement. Racially, the country is racially allocated 60% Caucasian, 19% Hispanic, and 13.6% African American.[1] The questionnaire results came from a sample of 45.7% Caucasian, 25.7% Hispanic, and 28.6% African American. This provides adequate representation across multiple racial groups, allowing one to analyze responses in some key racial demographics.

However, the numbers hide two important pieces of information. First, it overrepresents some groups while underrepresenting others. Second, nearly all the racial diversity came from the congregation of Lifehouse Church, which offers a significant opportunity for the statistics to be skewed. Correcting the disproportions in the sample could involve the distribution of questionnaires to several churches of varying ethnicity and then polling those not espousing faith

[1] United States Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/topics/population. Retrieved December 22, 2022.

in a more diverse manner. Doing so during this project would prove to be time prohibitive. The results produced for the project are sufficient to introduce the concepts in the questionnaire to various groups, even if disproportions exist.

Tangentially, of the respondents claiming to be Christian, only eight are Caucasian, and of those, seven are age 50 and above. The range of age distribution for this range is shown graphically below in Figure 2.

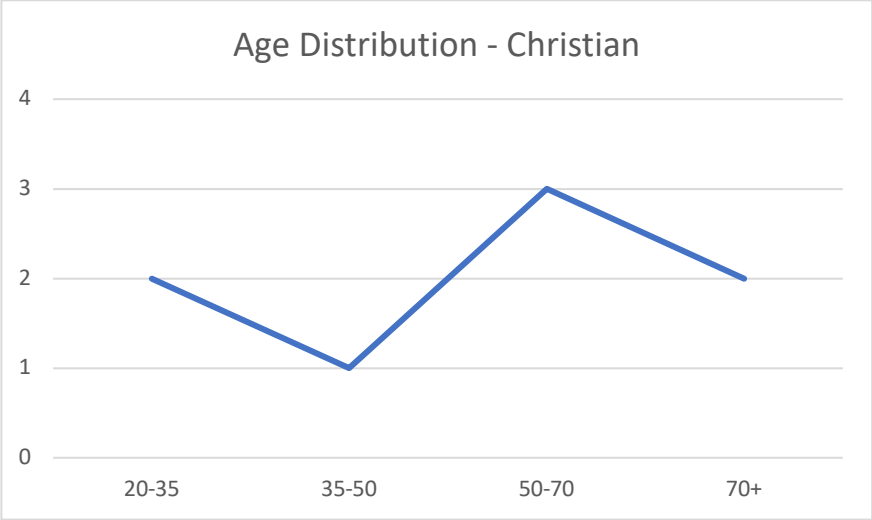


Figure 2: Age Distribution Among Christians (Questionnaires)

This causes two ambiguities. First, it distorts Caucasian Christian responses toward the older population segments. As shown below in Figure 3, far more respondents were under the mean age of 45.6 years than above. This is represented by a standard deviation graph. On the positive side of the mean were eight respondents within one deviation of the mean (calculated as 15.0 years, or 65) and another 3 within two deviations (80 years old). Less than the mean by one deviation were fourteen respondents and another nine within two negative deviations (representing ages 30 and 15, recalling that no one under 18 was permitted to take the questionnaire).

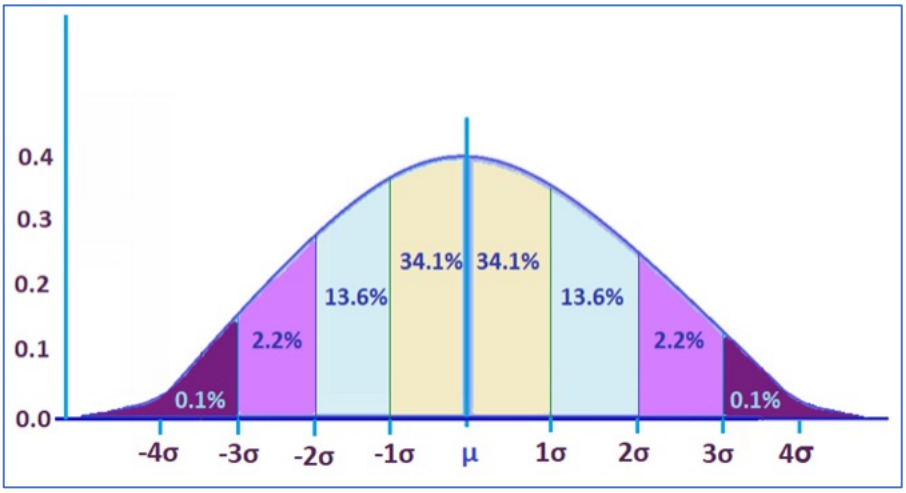


Figure 3: Age Distribution Standard Deviation Representation

Second, it risks distorting the younger responses toward disproportionate racial representation and Christianity, shown below in Figure 4.

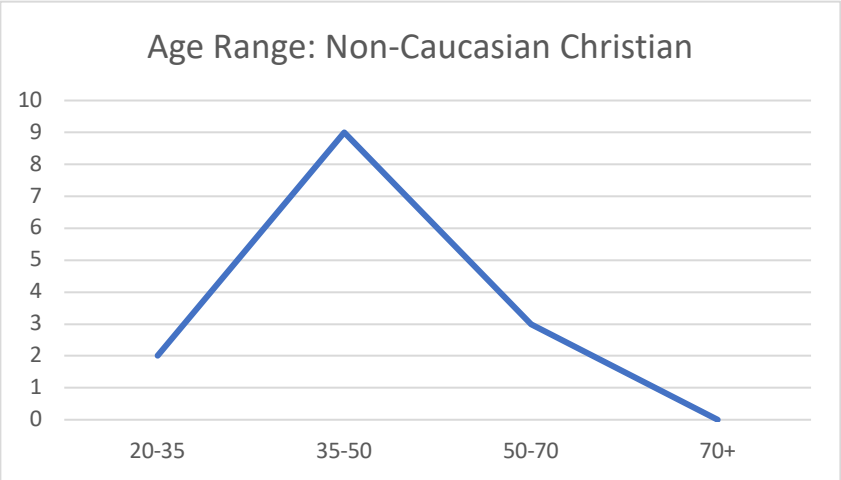


Figure 4: Age Range: Non-Caucasian Christians (Questionnaires)

Of the respondents professing to be agnostic (22.9%) or atheist (14.3%), 11 of 13 responses were Caucasian (84.6%). 82% of professing atheists and agnostics across the entire American population are white, so the sample in this project is relatively representative in this sense.[2] However, those religiously unaffiliated tend to be younger and more educated, whereas

[2] Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion. Retrieved December 11, 2022.

the Caucasians in the sample tend to be older, and education was not a consideration of the questionnaire.[3]

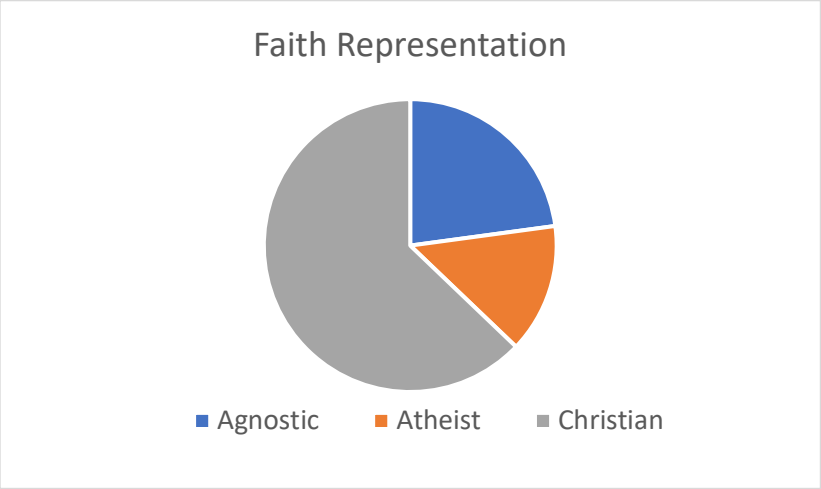
It should be noted that no attempt was made to emphasize or restrict any specific race, nationality, gender, or faith representation. As a result, the racial breakdown nationwide versus the spread of respondents in this project is not entirely symmetrical, as shown above. Further, 70.6% of the United States population professes Christianity, 1.9% Jewish, 3.1% atheist, and 4% agnostic.[4] In the questionnaire data, 63% of respondents said they were Christian; 23% were agnostic, and 14% were atheist, as shown graphically on the pie chart below in Figure 5, located on the next page. While no restriction was made on faith profession, the numbers in the sample compare relatively well to the overall population, shown on the line graph (Figure 6). It should be noted there was one Jewish interviewee covered in a different section. The Jewish comprise 1.9% of the population in this country.

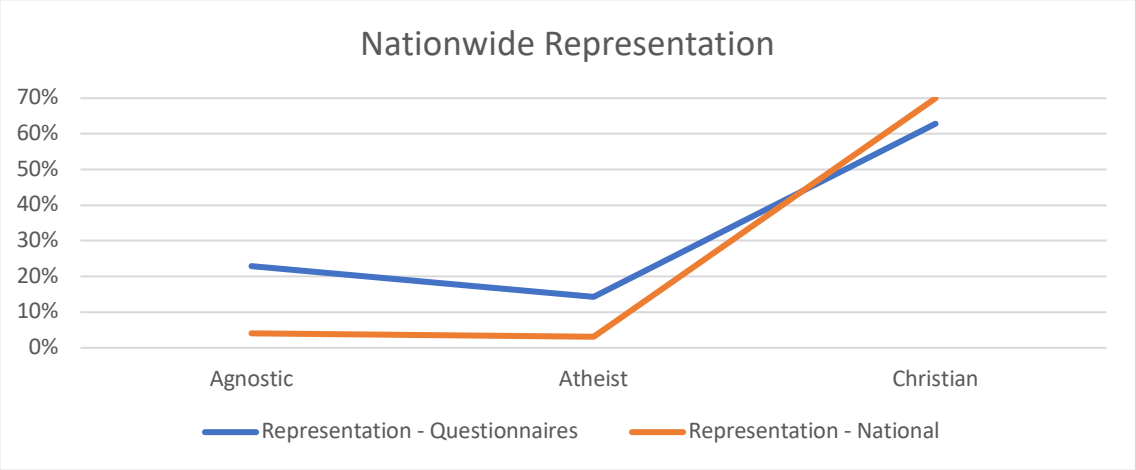
It bears noting there are distinct limitations in sample size as they pertain to demographic information. Because there were relatively few respondents, there is no reliable way to accurately portray a national or global scale regarding age, nationality, or faith. The results enable only a window through which Lifehouse can begin to address its response to the gap between messaging to physical, in-person audiences and that of the online mission field. Regarding age, no attempt was made to gather data for this project to emphasize one age over another. At first glance, it appears as though a representative cross-section of data was accumulated. Of the questionnaires submitted, 40% were between the ages of 30 and 50, and another 25.7% were between 50 and 70. A quarter of the sample was between 20 and 35, and the

[3] Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion. Retrieved December 11, 2022.

[4] Ibid.

remaining 8.6% were over 70. The United States 2020 census data shows that 61% of the population is between 18 and 65, with another 18.6% over 65.[5] Notably, no participation under the age of 18 was permitted for this project, and the youngest participant was 20. Further, no restriction was placed on the upper age range; the eldest was 79. Fortunately, this age range allowed for a relatively wide distribution of life experiences. A graphical representation of the collected data regarding age is included in Figure 7.





Figures 5 and 6: Faith Representation

[5] United States Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/topics/population. Retrieved December 12, 2022.

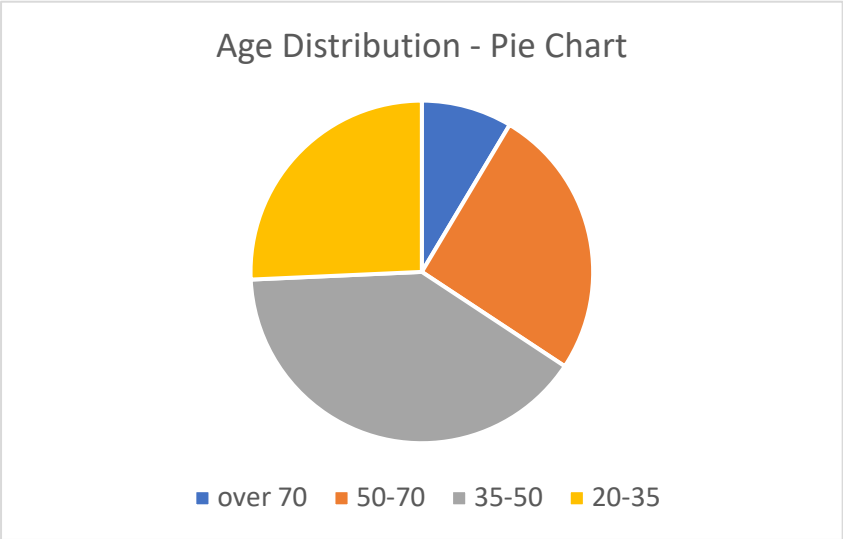


Figure 7: Age Distribution

The danger of disproportionate age group representation is a predisposition towards specific questionnaire responses that may not reflect the online audience this project is intended to reach. Overrepresenting older age groups that may not be as technologically savvy could lead to greater adversity to ministry to an online audience. Unfortunately, aversion to social media is not part of this project's scope, so this limitation must also be included in reviewing the results. Future studies might consider both the aggregate age of physical congregations and how this affects the churches' response to date in addressing the online audience.

Questionnaire Results

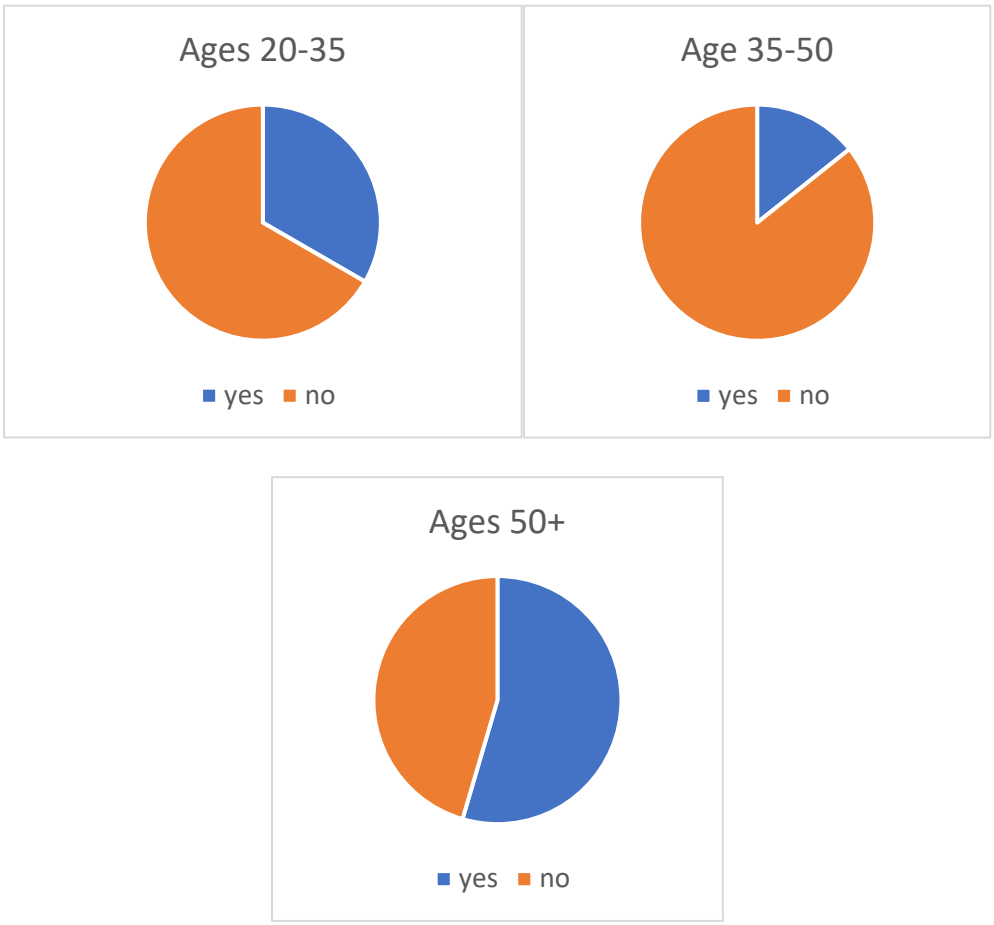
Social Media Usage Habits

The questionnaire distributed for this project sought to draw out from participants which types of messaging they found most captivating, and which were the most motivating. The first series of queries were designed to uncover who spends time online, how much time, and whether there is a limit as to what constitutes "too much time" online. One question, "Would you consider grabbing a phone to be a type of addiction?" was intended to search for the threshold of

what is considered healthy social media use because the intent of providing a captivating kingdom message is not to draw an audience into a deeper, unhealthy addiction in what can be an isolating form of activity. Social media addiction can be harmful, and delivering a kingdom message is not intended to bring harm but hope.

With that as the premise, this question was surprisingly divided. Eighteen respondents suggested that just grabbing a phone "because it's there" is a form of addiction, and seventeen responded it is not. Breaking down the age groups further revealed complexities and curiosities. The oldest respondents were indeed split nearly in half (six "Yes." and five "No."). The youngest group, from 20-35, were heavily against the likelihood of a phone "addiction," six opposed and just three affirmatives. Interestingly, the age group between 35 and 50 fell in the opposite direction, with nine respondents saying "Yes." phone and social media use can be considered addictive, and only five were against it. The differences are displayed in Figures 8-10.

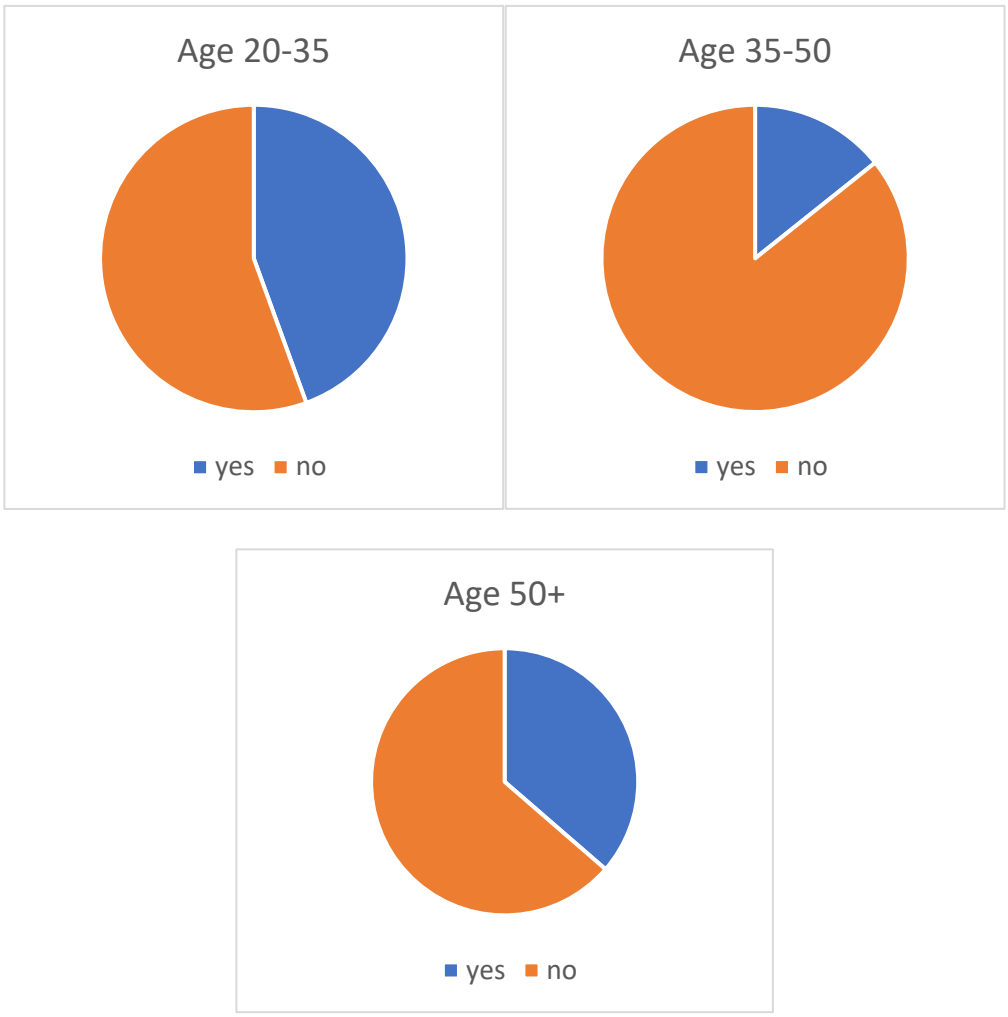
The key takeaway from this data series is among the sample polled in this project. There was no clear direction on "how much is too much" when it comes to social media, and no clear point at which use becomes unhealthy. It reflects a dichotomy that seems to also exist in the greater population, the discussion of society spending too much time away from physical connections to friends and family in favor of virtual connections. One respondent added a comment and said it this way: "reaching for your phone or laptop every time is kind of like eating fast food. You fill your mind, but you leave wanting something more."



Figures 8-10: Age Group Responses to Question #2: Addiction to Virtual Media

Related to the prior question, were the responses to the following query, "Do you consider yourself attached to social media?" Perhaps it was expected that more would answer "No." than "Yes," even though the question was subtitled, "is being online part of your daily routine?" Few like to admit when a disproportionate amount of time is being spent outside reality, or perhaps there was a level of unawareness of routine. Not as surprisingly, the youngest group was more likely to admit daily social media exposure. Four responded "Yes." and five responded "No." In contrast, the middle-aged segment of responders was heavily negative in their responses. Two said, "Yes." versus 12 who said, "No." A visual representation of responses is presented in Figures 11-13. The combination of these two questions suggests a couple of overarching concepts. First, people generally do not like to admit to being attached to the virtual

world. Second, in general, there is an aversion to questioning that suggests the overuse of devices in daily routines.



Figures 11-13: Age Group Responses to Question #3: Routine

"What Attracts Your Attention?"

The second series of questions was designed to extrapolate respondent insights into what sort of messaging attracts their attention. While the previous section of the questionnaire established that no matter the age, race, or faith persuasion, nearly everyone spends time on a device and virtual media. Question five asked respondents how they spend their time online, and the results suggested a couple of trends. First, the results noted no significant differences

between ethnic groups regarding their primary purpose for online usage. Second, age had no substantial effect on the response either. Overall, the responses were like the total group response, represented below in Figure 14.

However, there were considerable differences in areas of emphasis between levels of faith. For example, among respondents professing Christianity, 12 of 21 stated their primary purpose online was "catching up with friends." The most significant number of agnostics also selected this answer, although the emphasis was muted: five of eight versus three preferred to "shop online," and none chose "catching up on news," or "other" (one written in "other" response was "catching up on email," but this was not among the agnostics.).

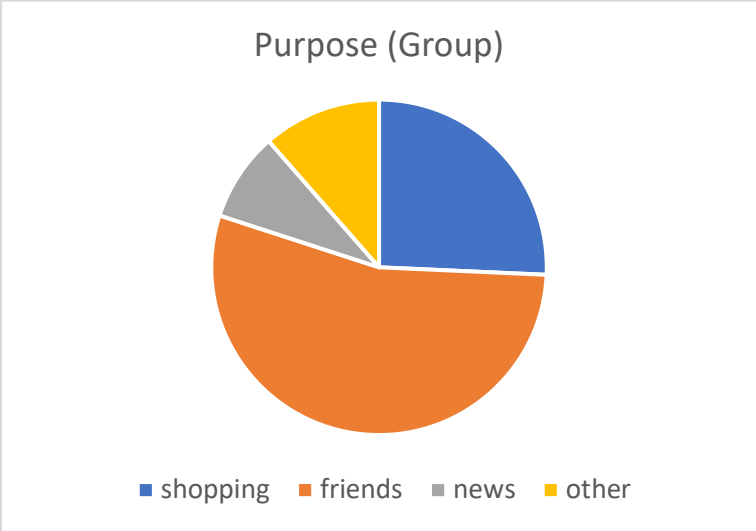
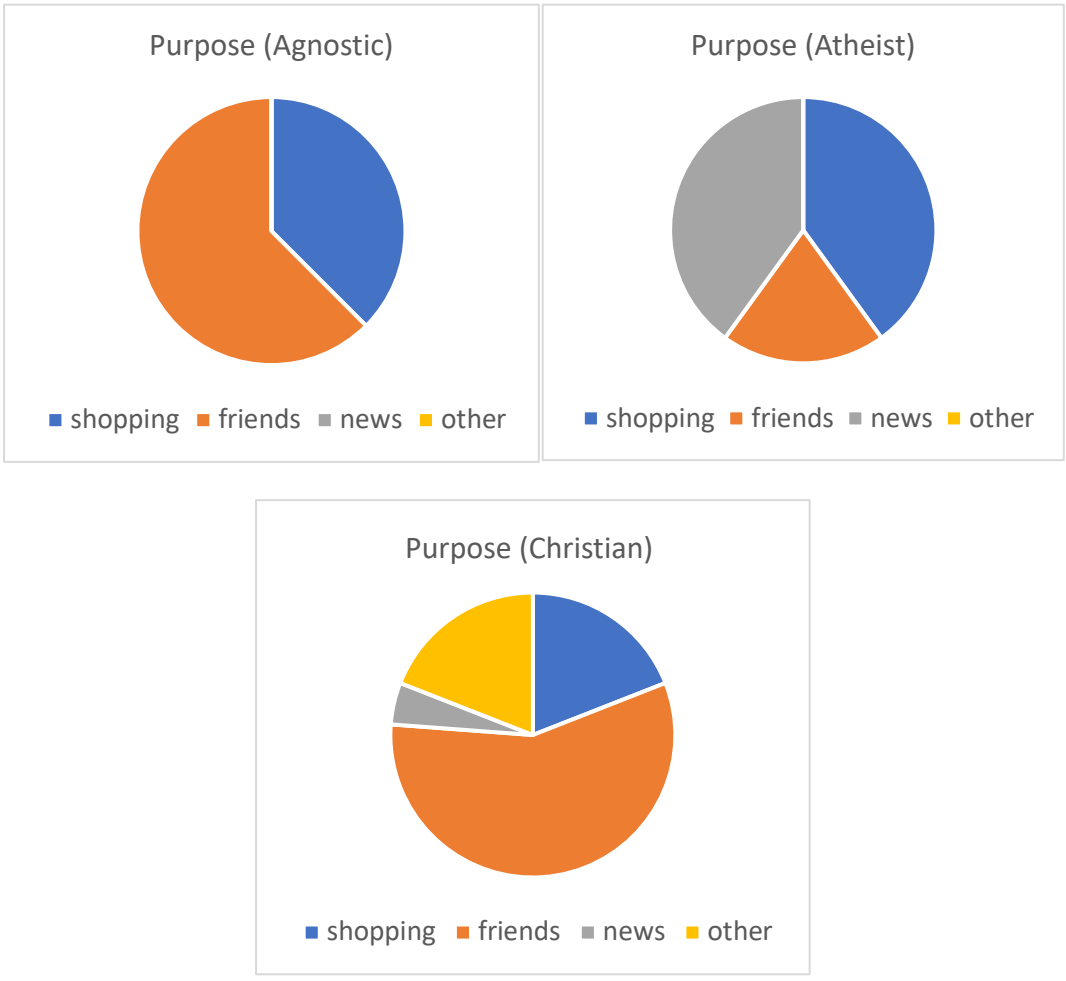


Figure 14: Total Group Responses to Question #5: Purpose Online

There were fewer respondents asserting atheism, five total in the questionnaire distribution. Only one of those suggested catching up with friends as their primary purpose for being online, and perhaps not surprisingly, this was a young participant. The others suggested they were online primarily for shopping (two) or catching up on the news (two). While the sample size is too small to draw definitive conclusions, an interesting future investigation might

be to analyze whether individuals who profess atheism are predisposed toward or away from social interaction, either physically or online, and how age affects those responses. From this limited sample, it appears that professing atheists are more averse to keeping up with friendly relationships, at least online. The results of this analysis are in Figures 15-17.



Figures 15-17: Faith Group Responses to Question #5: Purpose Online

While there were other insights in this portion of the questionnaire, some of the information generated was less useful in terms of defining types of purpose or messaging in virtual media usage. For example, there were relatively uniform responses to the question "do

you find yourself envious about certain aspects of your peer group's lives" (No), and "do you use social media as your primary source for news" (No).

Of the remaining questions in the section, one served as a forebearer for the content yet to come. Question #11 asked, "If you're a scroller, what attracts your attention," where "scroller" is an arbitrary way to denote respondents who either thumb their way through social media or looks for a specific set of material or subject of interest before pausing. The responses were interesting because the greatest number indicated that people did not pay much attention to what they were scrolling for. Other possible answers included "appearance" and "content," which elicited fewer responses. While the implications of these responses did not bode well for questions that more directly asked for emotion-driven answers, the actual data showed otherwise. A visual representation of Question #11 is shown in Figure 18.

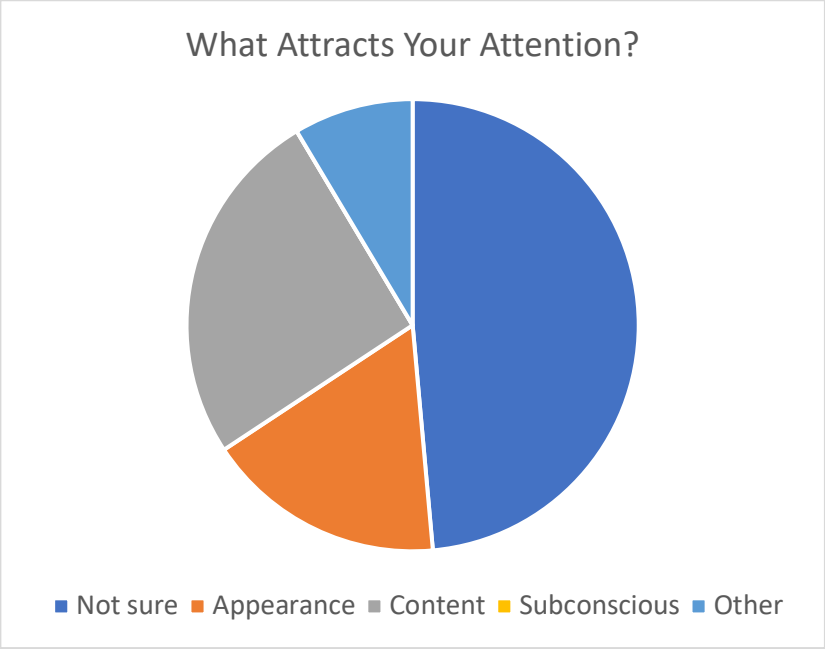


Figure 18: Faith Group Responses to Question #11: What Attracts Your Attention?

Positive Vs. Negative Messaging

The third grouping of questions given to participants was meant to reveal what specific messaging appealed most and was most likely to attract attention. It was not assumed that "positive messaging" would win hands down since "negative messaging" in political campaigns is generally considered more effective.[6] It appears that when one starts with a positive perspective and is fed a negative narrative, the negative narrative is retained.[7] Perhaps, as social science has suggested, the human mind is more wired to perceive the world as "half empty" than "half full." If that were the case, presenting a negative message as it pertains to the kingdom would elicit a greater positive response, the desirable response generating a spirit of repentance and a new direction toward following Jesus.

However, Jesus frequently preached from a perspective of empathy and compassion when addressing an audience considered "sick" (Mark 2:17, NIV). His strongest verbal barbs were reserved for the self-righteous and those who oppressed others. Based on how Jesus described the kingdom message ("good news"), it is easy to see why a positive messaging campaign would be more attractive than a "glass half empty" approach. The design of the questionnaire is to present both methods to the participant to see which elicits a more positive response. The results, generally, were as expected and are discussed below.

First, a question was disregarded due to a potentially leading message. Question #13 presents a screen found on social media regarding getting vaccinated against COVID-19. The first response to the question is, "Yes, I stop scrolling, but only because it aligns with my views."

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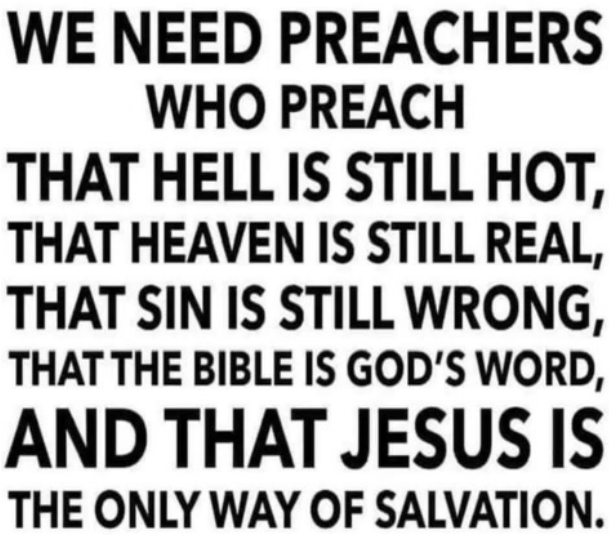
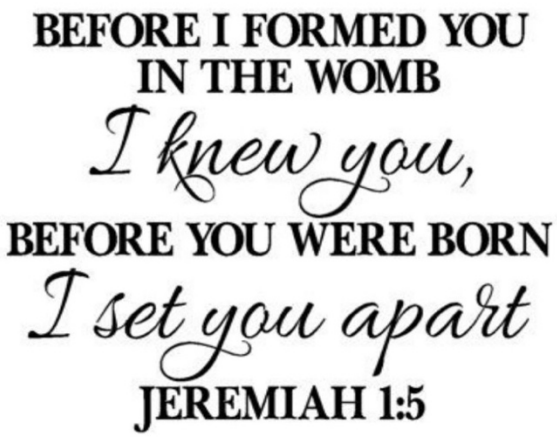
[6] Bruce Pinkerton, Nam-Hyun Um and Erica Austin, "An Exploration of the Effects of Negative Political Advertising on Political Decision Making," *Journal of Advertising* 31, no. 1 (2002): 3.

[7] Richard Lau and Ivy Rovner, "Negative Campaigning," *The Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009), 297.

This response asks for personal information, and even though most of the participants chose to respond, for the sake of the integrity of the questionnaire, the question was withdrawn from consideration.

Questions 15 and 16 asked respondents to consider two significantly different types of Christian messaging[8]. These samples are shown below in Figures 19-20.





Figures 19-20: Negative and Positive Messaging Samples

[8] @TozerAW (Aiden Tozer), "We Need Preachers," *Twitter* (September 13, 2017) https://twitter.com/TozerAW/status/908099189908766720.

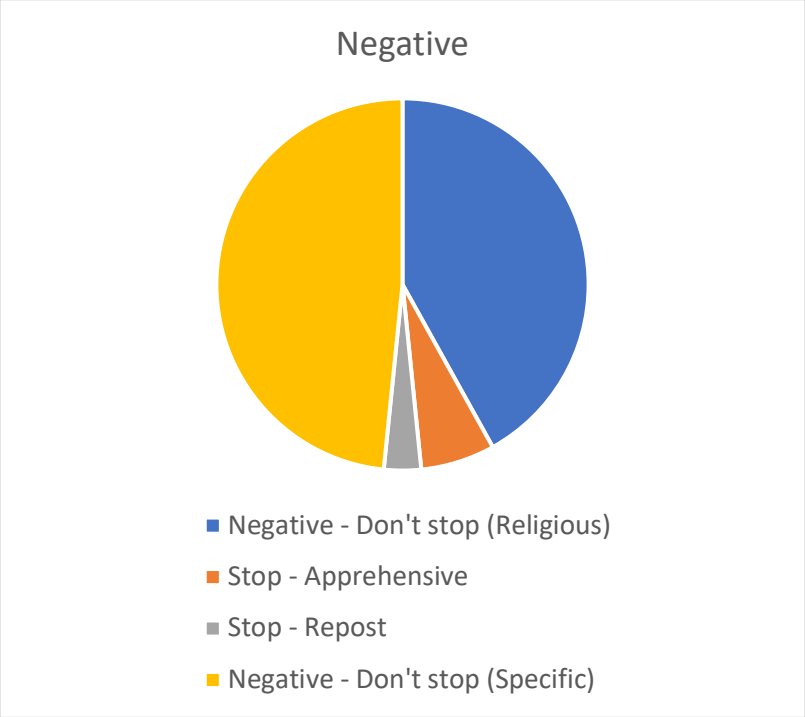
Both questions proposed very Christian themes, but the differences are palpable. The fonts between the two messages are strategically different. Question #15, which is the more negative of the two, has bold, square lettering, which is at once harsh and an exclamation. Question #16 utilizes a softer typeface, with a more inviting script imparting a more encouraging message. Whereas the prior question specifically mentions "Hell," the latter is a gentle Bible verse that implies "love and acceptance." Finally, the negative sample uses a holistic first-person pronoun which appears to presuppose a need for everyone. The positive sample utilizes a singular pronoun to remind the reader of an external, singular personal force.

The results of the questionnaire unequivocally favor the positive message. Out of thirty-five responses, twenty-eight for the negative message were entirely negative. Thirteen of those were negative and would not stop for the message. The other fifteen were willing to concede that some types of religious messaging might appeal, but this was not an appealing message. The remainder either did not respond (four), were willing to stop but felt apprehensive about the message (two) or favored the negative message and were willing to pass it along (one). It should be noted this is not a scholarly commentary on whether Hell is real because Jesus preached on the subject without compromise. It is merely part of designing a captivating message to appeal to an underserved online audience.

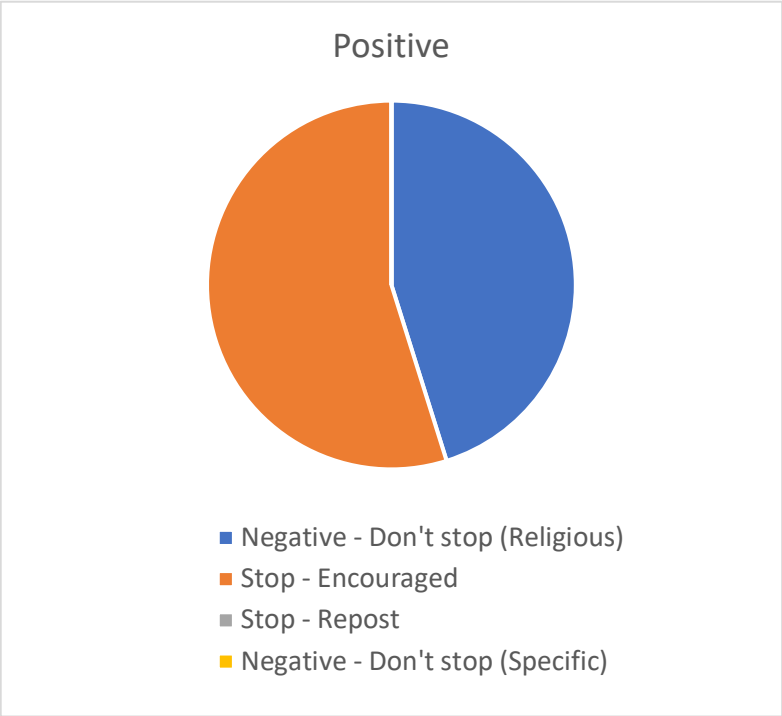
Interestingly, fourteen respondents would also not have stopped to consider the positive message of Question 16. The difference is in the second option, "I stop and look because I feel encouraged." 48.6% of respondents chose this answer (four respondents responded "other"). None of the respondents indicated they were turned off by the positive messaging. Based on this information, the evidence indisputably indicates that negative messaging is much less effective

in winning attention with a captivating message. These two responses are visually represented below in Figures 21-22.

The remaining questions in this series were intended to generate focus on what types of messaging were most appealing and which were ignored. Question #17 asked participants whether they felt that political and religious messaging were "equivalent," meaning if one were opposed to one type of message, they would also be opposed to the other. A slim plurality of respondents agreed that the themes were significantly different, yet both were equally attractive or unattractive in their eyes.



Figures 21: Responses to Negative Messaging Samples

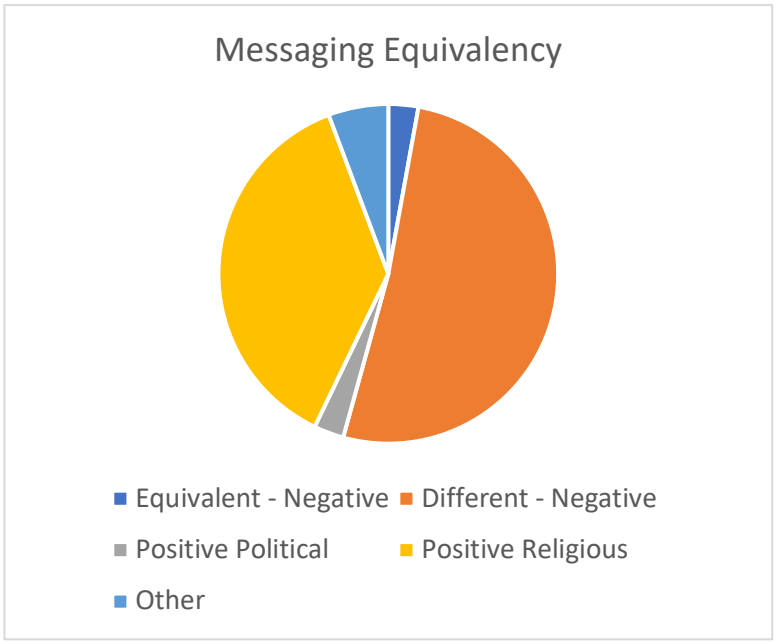


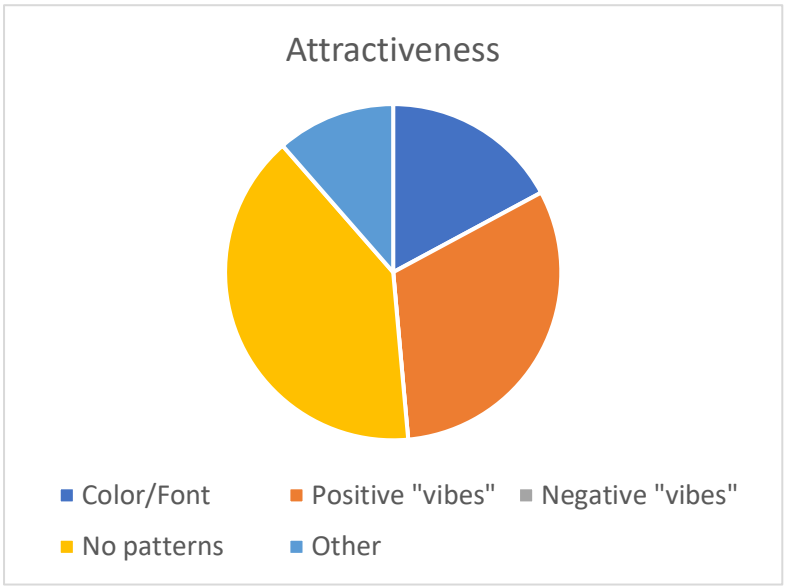
Figures 22: Responses to Positive Messaging Samples

This could illuminate a difficulty in messaging technique, suggesting people who would not respond to political advertising would also not respond to religious theming. Conversely, 37.1% of participants indicated that they would skip over the politics but pause for "certain" religious messaging, to which point "certain" appears to mean positive theming, at least among this group of respondents. Perhaps the subject of future research would show whether messaging could be developed to captivate some of the remaining 51.4% that this question appears to reject it.

Question #18 reveals another challenge. The question asked participants, "If you are not entirely opposed to all religious and political messaging, what attracts you most?" 40% of respondents (14) indicated they do not have any scrolling patterns, and there is no specific messaging that attracts them. Most of the remainder (11) preferred to stop for positive messaging, which follows the pattern established with Questions #15 and #16. Still, this presents

a challenge, as it seems to confirm that many people whom the message is intended to reach are not responsive to any messaging. Incidentally, introducing demographic factors such as age and religiosity had little effect on the emphasis of the results of either question. The results are graphically presented below in Figures 22 and 23.





Figures 22-23: Messaging Equivalency vs. Attractiveness

Responsiveness to Messaging

The final section of questions was designed to narrow down the types of direct messaging that could provide a captivating message to an online audience. Some social media users tend to watch video clips known as "Reels" on Facebook or "TikTok." Part of the proposed messaging response from Lifehouse Church is presenting short messages designed to attract positive attention and generate interest in longer messages which could help disciple and grow Christ followers. Therefore, it was relevant to sample the respondents to see if they would be receptive to a video message and then to poll on desirable subject matter and length. This remaining section addresses those concerns.

The first barrier was revealed in Question #21: "Do you watch videos online?" Most respondents answered negatively (22), with only 13 responding affirmatively. Part of the responsiveness appears attributable to age. Of the youngest responders (ages 20-35), the answers were mixed: four said "Yes." to watching videos, and five said "No." Those aged 35-50 responded with eight "No." and six "Yes." answers. The drop off to the aged 50-70 group was dramatic: seven "No." versus just one affirmative response. The results, by age, are graphically presented below in Figure 25. Perhaps the definition of "video" was weak, implying a longer time commitment than a short clip. In any case, this presents a significant challenge for an online kingdom message.

A significant limitation exists because only three respondents were in the "70+" age bracket. Therefore, these results are skewed. While it is possible to generate a series of implications regarding who spends more time watching videos or the length of attention span generated by video clips online, more research needs to be undertaken to determine exactly the different behaviors exhibited by these age groups.

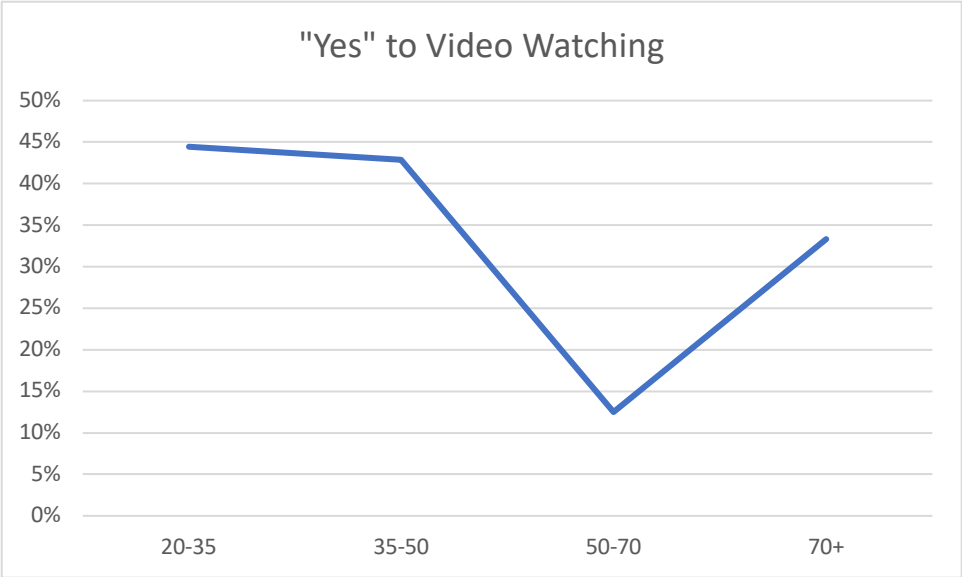


Figure 25: Question #21 Affirmative Responses by Age Group

Despite the limitations, length of attention span was also addressed in the questionnaire, explicitly asking those who watch online videos whether their attention could be focused on a themed message. Half the participants could not respond positively as they were averse to watching. Question #24 was developed specifically with "non-watchers" in mind, specifically asking, "If you are not a regular watcher of videos, could you be enticed to watch if positive subject matter was presented in an attractive way?" 40% of "non-watchers" responded negatively to this question. Many of the others abstained from answering rather than responding affirmatively.

With this consideration in mind, nearly all affirmative respondents from either group (those who currently watch and those who do not but would reconsider) would consider one-minute video clips the maximum for messaging of any type, and demographics were not a significant factor in their decisions. The split was even between "short" (e.g., 15-30 seconds) and "up to a minute," with ten choosing the latter and seven the former response. In no way does this indicate a level of response that can be applied nationwide. Despite the clear lack of sheer

respondents, it remains an interesting inference that many would consider taking time to focus on a themed message if the proper tone and balance were struck.

One final area the questionnaire addressed was whether exposure to the message of Christ would be appropriate for an online audience and whether those outside the faith would agree or disagree. This subject matter is relevant in today's political climate, where the refrain "separate church and state" seems prevalent. Fortunately, for the purpose of this project, even those who were not affiliated with any specific faith were relatively in agreement that freedom of expression allowed for a kingdom messaging strategy from Lifehouse Church to be deployed to an online audience. Perhaps not surprisingly, nearly all followers of Christ were unopposed to online exposure to a kingdom message. Of those not following Christ, the reactions generally refrained from taking a stance.

Question #28, once more at the group of respondents generally, asked about the equivalency between the messaging towards a physical audience and one online. In general, participants felt an online audience would need to have a message targeted towards them, as opposed to simply deploying an extant physical audience message. These results are represented graphically below in Figure 26. Twenty-two responded affirmatively and only four against, although seven (20%) doubted anyone online was looking for a faith message. Five of those seven were agnostic or professing atheists.

The question reveals another potential obstacle for the LC online captivating message: The possibility that the online audience will not be receptive to a faith message, no matter what the faith message is. The sample size limitation of this project prevents applying the results of the questionnaire across an entire population, but it brings up an interesting topic for future research. The possibility exists that the online audience is superficial: no message resonates in a

way that changes lives or attitudes. Then again, it may be worth pursuing how various messages resonate as part of future endeavors and as the results of Lifehouse online initiatives are realized. Further, if an online audience is not able to drive a kingdom message home, and an ever-increasing portion of the population is not finding the message on a physical campus, to where does the burden of the Great Commission fall? These aspects are part of what drove the interview portion of the project, discussed in the next section.

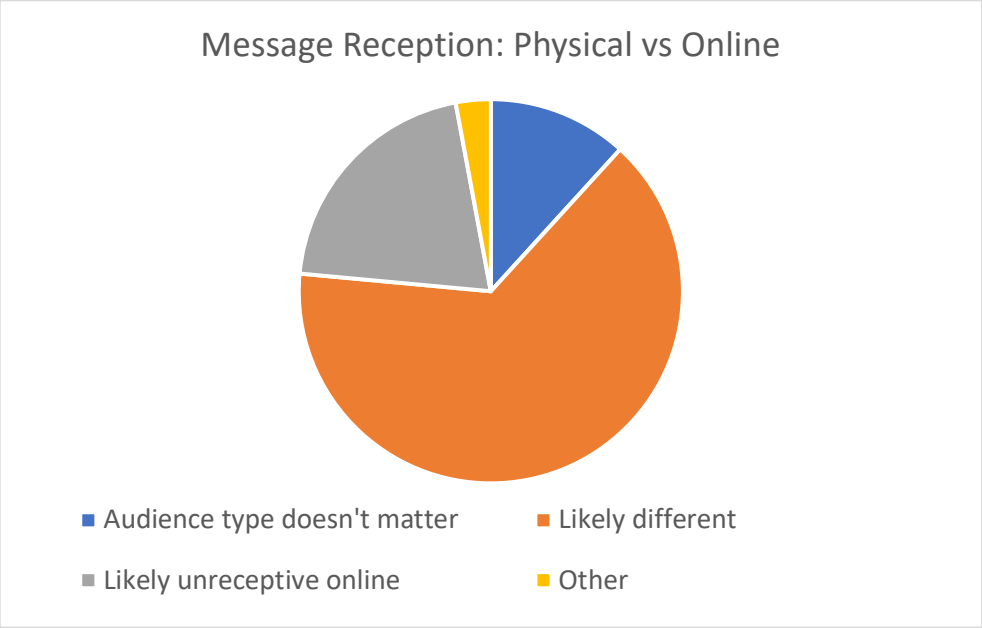


Figure 26: Question #28: Physical vs. Online Messaging Equivalency

Interviews

During the months of July and August, opportunities for one-on-one interview sessions were offered to add flesh to the questionnaire results. At Lifehouse Church, these were offered as part of the announcements in service on July 7 and July 14, 2022. The reception was mixed. Initially, it appeared there would be a dozen possible interviewees, but in the end, only two were willing to spend part of their Saturdays in a closed-room session with the presenter. One of these was a Zoom meeting, the other on the physical campus of Lifehouse. Both sessions ran

considerably longer than an hour and proffered many thoughts and suggestions, some not germane to the main body of this project.

As it happened, several contributors both within the questionnaire field and outside of it offered to participate in the interview portion of the project. Two Zoom meetings were held, one with a husband-and-wife couple attending a different church and the other with a self-proclaimed atheist. There were two additional in-person interviews held during August, one with a local pastor who is not affiliated with Lifehouse and another with a female church attender. Additionally, a Jewish medical practitioner offered his time and provided valuable perspective.

The interview process embodied different goals than the questionnaires. Data collected from the questionnaires were objective (optional comments aside) and did not take rationale into consideration. For example, if a participant were against online kingdom messaging, they could choose “Option B” and perhaps add a couple of sentences at the end of the questionnaire. The interview process was designed to incorporate emotions, qualitative impressions, and to dig more deeply into the rationale behind participant answers.

Each interview was designed to take approximately an hour and therefore was confined to six discussion questions. The first, “Do you have a significant amount of interaction online” was designed to gauge how much the subject’s impressions and opinions might have been shaped by experiences in the virtual realm. Interviewees were also asked whether they derive some level of emotional involvement (i.e., encouragement) in their interactions, which could include either the messaging encountered or interactions and observations of friends and family. The third question, “Can you find inspiration online to the same extent as through physical networking,” was designed to do more than evoke an affirmative or negative response but also to

instigate conversation about how online influences were able to promote positive experiences as a comparison to their physical networking.

As a part of the interview, the same images from the questionnaire were presented to everyone for their reactions and subjective thoughts. The goal of this interview question was to flesh out the objective points of view collected in the questionnaire data and to compare whether there was a difference in opinion between age groups, faiths, and other demographic concerns. The last major consideration discussed in the interview process was meant to delve into whether subjects felt there could be a synergistic interface between the online and physical communities or whether these audiences were best considered by themselves. As part of that discussion, left for consideration was whether a captivating kingdom message could best be presented "as Lifehouse" or rather originating from somewhere with less church influence.

Interviews with Lifehouse Congregation Members

Of the eight interview subjects, only two were regular Lifehouse congregants. There was no premeditated decision to restrict the number. Rather, potential interviewees either had work and family conflicts or more often, had already participated in the questionnaires and chose to leave comments on the forms. Additionally, a married couple was chosen to complete an interview that was excluded because of the subject matter discussed. These potential participants were intent on consuming considerable time with their own "multi-level marketing" business, which made it hard to parse information that did not bear undue influence from that secondary subject matter.

The responses from these subjects were largely expected. Both were African American males, one in his thirties with ministry experience, the other in his forties, who had no formal ministry training but was actively involved in the men's group with Lifehouse. Their answers

were surprisingly disparate. The younger subject with ministry experience was considerably more opposed to finding inspiration or encouragement online. Specifically, he stated, “When I want to be inspired, I go to church.” Likewise, he stated that he considered online fellowship and networking to be a lesser experience than a physical experience. When asked as a follow-up question whether the various social groups and forms of social media offered opportunities for people to support one another and provide encouragement, he simply stated that God is present in a physical building and not “in the same way” online. When asked to clarify, he stated that God manifests through a physical connection and that Paul intended to “go out” to show Christ’s love and share Christ’s message with the Gentiles.

By contrast, the second Lifehouse congregant was a decade older with less ministry experience and education but did not have the same harsh reaction to whether an online message was valid and worth pursuing. Whereas the first gentleman was unconvinced that delivering an online kingdom message, with the research and distribution, follow through, and fine-tuning required was worth the time and resources “that could otherwise be delivered to the community,” the second Lifehouse congregant was much more sympathetic to the plight of those online who were not being reached with an uplifting gospel message. In His words, “Jesus told us to reach out to all peoples, and there were no online peoples then. Were he here today, he would expect ministry to continue online.” Interestingly, he was less willing to commit to whether such messages would be captivating with outward church influence. His response indicated that sometimes churches have a negative connotation, and people might be better influenced through a less direct message source.

Interviews Outside Lifehouse Church

The remaining participants were from outside Lifehouse Church. Two were female, one Caucasian and one Hispanic of approximately the same age, and both professing Christians. Perhaps not surprisingly, due to the similarity of their backgrounds, they shared most of the same opinions in answering the interview questions. Whereas the two Lifehouse gentlemen had definite stances on whether they leveraged online activity to be encouraged (one yes and one no), these two subjects (interviewed separately and on different weekends, one in person and one via Zoom) were less committed. Both admitted they had seen messages online that inspired them. These messages had just "been there." They were purposefully not recruited. Both indicated they did not feel encouraged the same way online as they did in person. Still, one made a point of acknowledging that "not everyone is inspired the same way" and that presenting an encouraging and captivating Christ message "was a good idea" and "encouraging messages do not happen online enough. Everyone is always so toxic."

One participant was a 49-year-old Caucasian atheist male. The interviews were designed to capture diverse feedback, and this gentleman had considerable feedback to share. Most importantly, he was asked whether there was "any" message he could receive, whether online or in person, that would give him pause as it relates to a Christian message, and he responded with an emphatic "No." He was unwilling to consider rational or intellectual arguments in this area, so these were not pursued. Beyond that initial unwillingness, the gentleman was quite comfortable talking about his online experiences and preferences. As with most participants either in the interview portion or providing data through the questionnaires, he was receptive to positive messages, was willing to concede finding encouragement (and discouragement) in the presentation of such messages; and although the type of experience between physical connection and online connection is different, "benefits were there to be had" in both circumstances.

Both Types of Experiences offer Value

Of the last two participants, each was on a different faith spectrum. The first was a 46-year-old Caucasian male who happens to pastor a non-denominational church; the second was a 79-year-old physician (general practitioner) of the Jewish faith. The pastor was much more receptive to the idea of online messaging than the prior participant with ministry experience and education and was encouraged by the interest being shown to what he described as a "mission field in much the same way as Jesus reached out to the Gentiles."

The Jewish doctor had some interesting perspectives. First, while he stated he does not personally go to social media expecting to find encouragement, he was perfectly willing to accept that others might. While he was willing to concede that he felt "warm" when he saw positive messages online, he iterated that he needed the messages to "be real" as well. Specifically, he was against messages that offer "false hope" and pointed out different people hope in different things. Fortunately, the message Lifehouse intends to provide addresses hope on a personal as well as biblical level.

Perhaps even more poignant, the doctor described a scenario in which he found the online experience enriching. During COVID-19, one of his brothers passed. During the traditional mourning period (shiva), the family held Zoom gatherings for friends to offer prayer or share memories. The doctor mentioned he had been to many of these prayer services at a synagogue and was able to catch pieces of conversations but was usually not able to listen in entirely.

In this situation, everyone attending spoke in turn, having the entire floor, while others were muted and shared their memories and prayers. He said, "it is certainly true that certain aspects of the physical experience cannot be duplicated in the online environment. However, I would be remiss not to offer this experience as one way the virtual environment enriched the memory of my brother in a way, I could not have experienced physically. Therefore, while I do

not know whether it is wholesome to derive the entire fellowship experience over a screen, I would suggest there are ways in which an online fellowship is better than no fellowship. Online fellowship can develop in ways physical gathering cannot." His wisdom and experience added considerable depth to the interview responses of this project.

Interview Responses: A Summary

Expressing interview answers graphically is much more difficult since each response is nuanced and individual. Despite this, it summarizes the responses to the interview questions well. Of the eight people interviewed, all eight expressed significant online interaction. Two of eight indicated "maybe" to looking for encouraging online interactions, both female. The other six, all male, were evenly split, and there was no clear delineation across demographics. Likewise, responses were evenly split across all demographics as to whether interviewees could find inspiration online, but all agreed that positive messaging produced the greatest reaction. Furthermore, all respondents suggested that physical churches and online audiences could coexist because, as expressed by the doctor, each offers its own nuanced experiences.

The interview with the doctor was the final session held for this project, but significantly, it shed light on how the online audience is just as real, in need, and as lost as many wandering the streets searching for hope. The pandemic revealed to the doctor a reason to revisit the value added in a virtual world, just as a developing online audience was forced to reconsider their assumptions on what virtual worship could be.[9] So often, they are the same people. One wonders, then, why one should not afford this audience the same ministry efforts redirected in a way to maximize effectiveness over a virtual medium.

[9] Kruger, "Descriptive Empirical Perspectives," 3.

Conclusion

In this chapter, detailed results of action research were presented in a manner that attempted to find solutions to the problem statement: that Lifehouse Church has no coherent strategy for delivering a captivating kingdom message to an online congregational audience. It became readily apparent that while the sample size obtained as part of the project was not likely to provide consistently reliable results across a nationwide population, it did reveal some key insights that will prove helpful to Lifehouse as it endeavors to resolve the gap between traditional physical church and the growing online audience. First, no matter the age or persuasion, the participants in this project consistently responded favorably to a positive message of hope. They were generally open-minded to the opportunity provided by virtual communications and discussions, and they recognized that technology had led inexorably toward media that must be adapted to and accepted.

Against this body of evidence with its significant limitations, several conclusions are reasonably drawn, and several other areas should be addressed in further studies, if Lifehouse Church will present a captivating kingdom message to an online audience effectively. Certainly, enough data was provided to develop a strategy from which a captivating online kingdom message can be distributed through LC. Whether discussing age, faith, and culture in a quantitative study; or speaking in depth to participants via qualitative interviews, some ideas come forth to be applied to the Lifehouse Church response to the problem statement. These are the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

At the outset of this project, a considerable amount of time was consumed verbalizing Lifehouse Church's problem that prompted the intervention. The issue was never about simply expanding the congregation, as there are several dynamic churches near Lifehouse in Laurel, Maryland, in the vibrant outer suburbs of Washington D.C. Nor was the concern a money matter; giving at Lifehouse has increased even during the pandemic, and even as actual congregational attendance has waned.[1] Many congregations face attendance or giving issues periodically, and there is much research, writing, and solutions for these. There is another concern at Lifehouse Church that has been on the minds and hearts of leadership for some time. It is not resolved by throwing more money at it, and one for which there is no extensive body of research and evidence to offer solutions. The problem is that Lifehouse Church has no coherent strategy for delivering a captivating kingdom message to an online congregational audience. It is a gap in ministry that LC is committed to closing.

The action research in this project was designed to suggest answers to important online audience questions: Can online messaging reflect a captivating kingdom message? Can this message be presented in a way that changes minds and hearts? Can God work through Lifehouse Church online to take His message of mercy and hope "to the ends" of the physical and virtual world? Through a careful literature review and action research, the answer to these questions appears to be a resounding "Yes." It is true that the delivery of the message cannot be the same

[1] Lifehouse Church–Attendance Records 2020-2022.

as for a physical audience, and not everyone will hear and appreciate a kingdom message online and then respond positively, nor does everyone in the physical realm. Therefore, considering the literature and the research, the remainder of this project is designed to consider possible strategies for delivering His message to a new mission field for Lifehouse and to suggest a pathway forward for future research in this area.

Research Implications

First, the message of Christ is ageless. The term "age-less" is designed to mean it can appeal to all ages; just as technological advancements are being enjoyed by those of all ages. There is a high likelihood that younger generations are deeply immersed in the social experiences of an online world, including virtual gaming, pastimes, finances, and friend interaction.[2] Even gamers find frequent interactions by gathering in teams and the conversations offered in online chat rooms.[3] Older generations also frequent the online world, if nothing else, to monitor the activities of their friends, children, and grandchildren as life evolves, as shown by the answers to the questionnaire in this project (Question #5). This audience has the benefit of experience and, hopefully, wisdom to peer through as they navigate online messaging. One point of value in this project is the cross-section of age groups sampled, which helped bring some of these different attitudes to light.

A second area of research that had a variety of responses comes down to faith. Timothy Keller points out in his book Making Sense of God that "to move from religion to secularism is not so much a loss of faith as a shift into a new set of beliefs and into a new community of faith,"

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[2] Herwig, Rowland and Stoffels, "Click to Connect," 27.

[3] Ibid., 34.

one that also shares beliefs and draws lines of heresy.[4] Therefore, the sample of this project is across multiple faiths. Several participants were either agnostic or atheist and, importantly, a Jewish interviewee. From these different faiths, some implications came forth: for example, the atheist interviewed said there was no "faith message" to convince a change of heart. That discounts the importance of the Holy Spirit moving in the lives and hearts of all people. The job of the missionary is to deliver the message. A disciple's job is to be the "light of the world" (Matt. 5:14, NIV). As the Jewish interviewee pointed out, there are aspects to how messages come across online that can add flavor to what one experiences in the physical world. The research in this project implies that if the Commission is being carried to the ends of the earth, God will use those efforts to produce spiritual fruit.

The research included as part of the project analysis shows that an online community experiences many similar activities, connections, and collaborations one might find in a physical presence. Participants are individual nodes of activity that connect to other nodes and form strings of connectivity. Connectivity allows friendships, relationships, and fellowships to develop and grow. These relationships often involve individuals or groups working with one another to solve group problems or to provide guidance, advice, and counseling on one another's problems. They can turn to one another to provide services or offer recommendations for other connections that can fill needs, like a puzzle. The connections of puzzle pieces are like the benefits physical fellowship offers in an on-campus church experience. The research as part of this project implies that a virtual mission field exists in the online world, providing similar benefits to the physical environment.

[4] Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God* (New York: Viking Press, 2016), 31.

Yet, at the same time, there are dissimilar qualities. Online communication often does not feature face-to-face contact, so participants will not see the expressions of those with whom they communicate. Some of this is mitigated using video cameras, but not all online communication features this type of visual contact, particularly the type of scrolling activity that occurs on popular social media. Even if cameras are used, they leave much of the visual and physical experience to be desired, including watching body language or capturing accurate verbal cues. The lack of physical contact, such as a handshake or friendly embrace, removes some of the intimate familiarity generated through on-campus church fellowship. The research in this project effectively shows the implication that the physical and online worship experiences cannot be handled similarly.

Logically the question becomes, "Does the online experience "need" to replicate the physical experience exactly to provide a successful vehicle for a captivating kingdom message?" Research in this project suggests not. Whether church-going or not, participants in questionnaire responses and interviews both offered evidence that online messaging can break through the noise that permeates life activities, providing opportunities for hope and compassion that many would never otherwise experience. Not everyone is open to the physical church experience, but a segment of those people could be receptive to a message that reaches people in an increasingly online culture. The online experience, while not identical to a physical environment, does offer enough parallels to qualify as a legitimate mission field, and LC recognizes from the research implications that the church needs to meet its needs.

Research Applications

It was enlightening to see that many of the views towards kingdom messaging and tone were shared across boundaries. These included the need for positive engagement, concise and

focused messages, and that it would take a variety of approaches to reach a variety of people. The research showed that no matter the disparity of the demographics in the sample, many of the results were the same. People are willing to listen. They are more likely to receive a positive message than a negative one. No matter the walk of life, background, or culture, many are willing to hear a well-placed and well-timed message. And that is a good segue into what applications can be derived from the research in this project.

The applications can be separated into groups: what does Lifehouse Church need to do, what does the messaging need to look like, and how the foundation laid by this research can be built for Lifehouse Ministry's future efforts? This is no easy feat: for one thing, online ministry sounds easy to implement but will be rather nuanced and complicated. The target audience will consist almost entirely of currently non-Lifehouse members, which means, by way of illustration, that the church will be diving into a large pond. Therefore, the greatest accomplishment may not be the sheer volume of people reached but rather the ability to understand and communicate with those who are and the willingness to grow and be flexible in how the messaging is applied. The origins of this strategy have already been undertaken with this project, as participants were generally within relatively closer proximity to LC but were interviewed or questioned in a way meant to reveal how LC efforts could be focused. There are many swimmers in the virtual pond with a great diversity of intentions, and Lifehouse will need to pray and discern which messaging applications will be most effective.

The church will likely lean heavily on its greatest resource: its people. Demographically speaking, the LC congregation is comprised of a dynamic cross-section of people from different ethnicities, of different ages, and with different life stories. As it relates to outreach into the online community, this is a significant asset. It enables our people to be the hands and feet of

Jesus as we seek to broaden our efforts into online ministry. LC diversity provides eyes and ears within the online environment to monitor trends, make suggestions, and bring attention to new ministries and efforts, which will assist LC in growing its strategy as needs in the online ministry change.

Another key application derived from this action research consists of how messaging will be implemented; that is, is LC looking for something attractive and attention-seeking or more friendly and intimate? Lifehouse has a choice between blasting a message into the greater social universe or carefully targeting hopeful messages and leveraging the congregation and its contacts to broaden the distribution channel. For example, willing congregants can share the church's messages with their contacts through a service free of charge and easily monitored. There is a saturation point with the number of themes and contents online, and many are openly hostile to the Christ-centered kingdom message. The application for Lifehouse will be avoiding the political pitfalls that so often corrupt otherwise valuable messaging techniques. The goal is to provide something hopeful, captivating, and separate from worldly ambitions (John 17:14-15, NIV).

Lifehouse Church stands at the threshold of a significant intervention into an online world that has been scarcely attended to by the church community. The cyber-environment is a rich mission field. The next section dives into significant detail concerning the path being considered by church leadership. The research phases of the project have given data and information which lend themselves to the way forward.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

Implementing the intervention design will set the course for a change in thinking at Lifehouse Church, and, therefore, must be approached with reverence and diligence, with a heart

for meeting a community in need wherever they are. Reverence should be emphasized, as the church is wading into less-charted waters, and the hand of God needs to be followed along the walk, as Israel in the desert after Egypt. Indeed, the church has been "wandering" in the cyber-world, never really finding its way in delivering God's message to an online audience. Yet God promises to walk alongside and provide deliverance to all His people, no matter the location. For Lifehouse, this will mean creating and executing a plan with a single-minded team, discussed in the next section, called the Online Implementation Team. The size and scope of this team will depend on the results of data collection and analysis, the response rate of the first action phase, the available resources from LC, and leadership support.

Personal preparation will foremost include prayer and meditation, both individually and with church leadership so that God might move in ways that reveal opportunities to take His message to a contingent of people who are online every day and are not being met there by the encouragement of the kingdom. Financial resources aside from the electricity needed for lighting and heating during interviews will not be necessary for data collection but will be reviewed as necessary for the action phases of the project.

Online Implementation Team

Launching the action stages of this project will fall to the implementation team at Lifehouse, named the Online Implementation Team (OIT). The team will be led by the researcher/facilitator and directed by senior leadership to enact the approved parts of the plan derived from the research phases' analytical findings. This action plan will likely look something like the list in Appendix B. The research phase will have helped determine what sorts of virtual engagements are the most captivating and compelling and which help to reach people and speak

to their hearts. As noted below, these steps could include banner ads on predetermined popular apps and multi-tiered posting approaches on social media such as Facebook and Instagram.

Stringer states in Action Research that one goal of an intervention is to "reveal reality."[5] Revelation might seem simple, yet the intertwining and interaction of online cyber-reality offer many complexities to be resolved. The intervention plan is designed to make a change by unraveling some of these complexities, represented by Figure 1. The figure shows a facsimile of where many churches stand in their online journey, with no dedicated program to bring a kingdom message to an unexposed audience. The figure reveals some strengths of the current church organization: strong leadership, growing congregation, and community involvement. Yet there are also several opportunities in evidence. First, there is no dedicated ministry tasked with reaching an online audience. Second, while services and studies are streamed online, no specific material is dedicated to the unique characteristics an online audience is seeking. Finally, there is no way to measure results or feedback for services rendered online. Therefore, even if the church could provide an online experience, there would be no way to gauge its effectiveness.

Action Phases

Speaking with individuals and groups within the Lifehouse Church context has helped to reveal ways and directions within the cyber-environment from which a strategy to deliver a captivating kingdom message can be developed. This messaging, described in more detail below, differs in detail from the "normal" weekly sermon presentation, designed to apply to the physical audience. Rather, the insights revealed through the quantitative and qualitative analyses show where a specific online strategy can be deployed and where efforts from the already extant LC

[5] Stringer, *Action Research,* 103.

services and materials could be utilized. Indeed, there will be two different directions related to one another but different in scope and presentation to meet the relational and technological needs of the online ministry.

From these revealed details and directions, Lifehouse Church can make changes by implementing online outreach strategies which create an appealing message that draws people to Christ in ways the church is currently under-representing. Finding these details amid the quantitative and qualitative data procured in this project will be part of the evaluation that follows the OIT implementation. As results from the messaging deployment are revealed, there will likely be refinements and new techniques employed "in progress" as the strategy continues to roll out. These will partially be dependent on the variability discovered in the study.[6] It is not just LC that has approach problems regarding the online community. Finding little precedent online for approaching the stated problem indicates just how urgent this research is since spiritual formation across distances depends on creating relationships and relatable moments found in the heart of the gospel.[7]

These efforts (as detailed in Appendix B) will help to create an atmosphere online of inclusiveness and empathy, providing an attractive format to move Lifehouse from its current, Figure 27 structure to a more highly developed Phase one implementation.

Lifehouse Church Online Outreach: Phase 1

Intervening and building on the foundation of what exists at LC is a multiple-phase plan that begins as follows. Phase one will be designed to engage with and encourage the online audience, which Lifehouse has not properly addressed through efforts that are not financially

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[6] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research,* 242.

[7] Forrest and Lamport, "Modeling Spiritual Formation," 116.

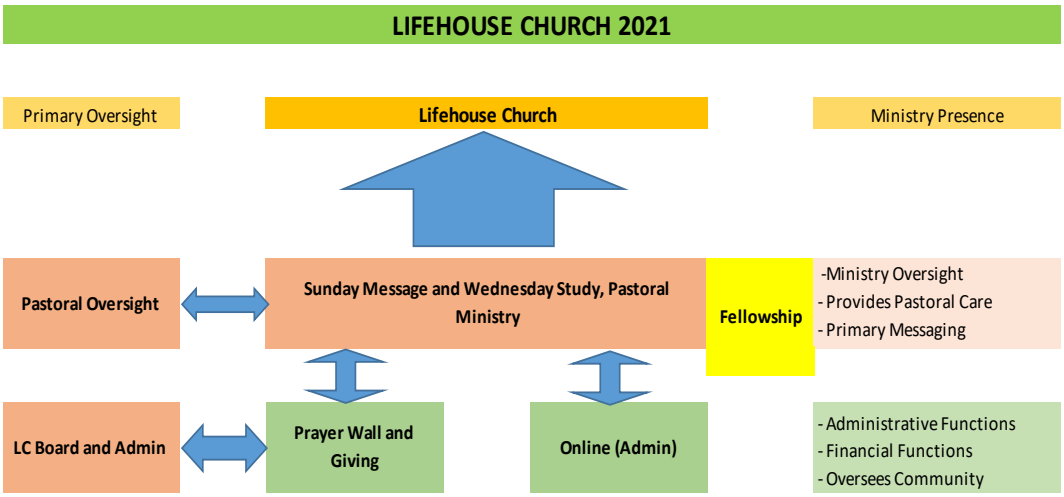

Figure 27: Lifehouse Church Structure as of 2021

intensive but are meant to distribute the kingdom message as broadly as possible. Aside from the actual actions taken during the phase, care will be taken to reassure the existing congregation that their needs will still be met. As discussed earlier, LC has been through its upheavals over the last several years, so introducing a new initiative will require open communication and trust. Fortunately, the church has been through other initiatives that have generated tight fellowship bonds at LC, including community-oriented back-to-school campaigns and food drives.

This first phase of online outreach will remain relatively integrated with the existing LC leadership and church structure. During this phase, also outlined in Appendix B, several outreach opportunities will be implemented based on the findings of the research phase. These include partnering with online platforms to create a new, online-specific podium from which to deliver short messages of encouragement called "blasts" and slightly longer videos designed to create opportunities to "take a break." "Blasts" are meant to be between 30 seconds and one minute and will be designed to promote a positive kingdom message. "Take a Break" messages will be longer primarily for those who see a message that resonates and want more information or a deeper dive. Depending on the reception of these two initiatives, a third message called "Deep

Dive" could be developed separately from what is already promoted for the physical congregation, or the online audience might be simply directed towards the existing messages. Ultimately the goal would be a complete online kingdom messaging experience.

These opportunities will direct an online audience toward a deeper realization of the kingdom message without creating the pressures often associated with "getting people to go to church." The phase and its activities will also create minimal disruption for the existing congregation and will provide ways for members of Lifehouse Church to participate in a new ministry, to create and grow disciples through an online kingdom message.

The fruits of Lifehouse Church's initial online outreach are designed to lead to an updated structure, as depicted graphically in Figure 3, shown on the next page. Phase two, also detailed in Appendix B, will be the implementation of an online-specific church experience. These experiences will coincide with a thorough review and evaluation of the progress phase one has made. The evaluation will reveal where there have been successes and inroads made into online engagement. It will also offer opportunities to do a better job reaching those who may have been missed either in the message placement or in the messaging itself.

From this evaluation, the OIT will be charged with planning an online church experience that combines the best of the current Lifehouse experience with optimized worship and interaction opportunities. As outlined in Figure 28, this will include, at least initially, the addition of a worship program designed for online viewing, which promotes online engagement and reverence for God, with the already existing Lifehouse video segments and sermons. Worth noting is that some ministries already incorporate some version of this into their online strategies by posting sermons and worship on their website or sharing online. LC itself does the same with

its online library and podcasts.[8] The OIT will also consider programs to promote online congregation interaction and fellowship. Again, some churches already use programs designed to do exactly this. The goal of the OIT as Phase two begins execution will be to create a captivating experience that reaches into the online community to form nodes of communication, collaboration, and fellowship.

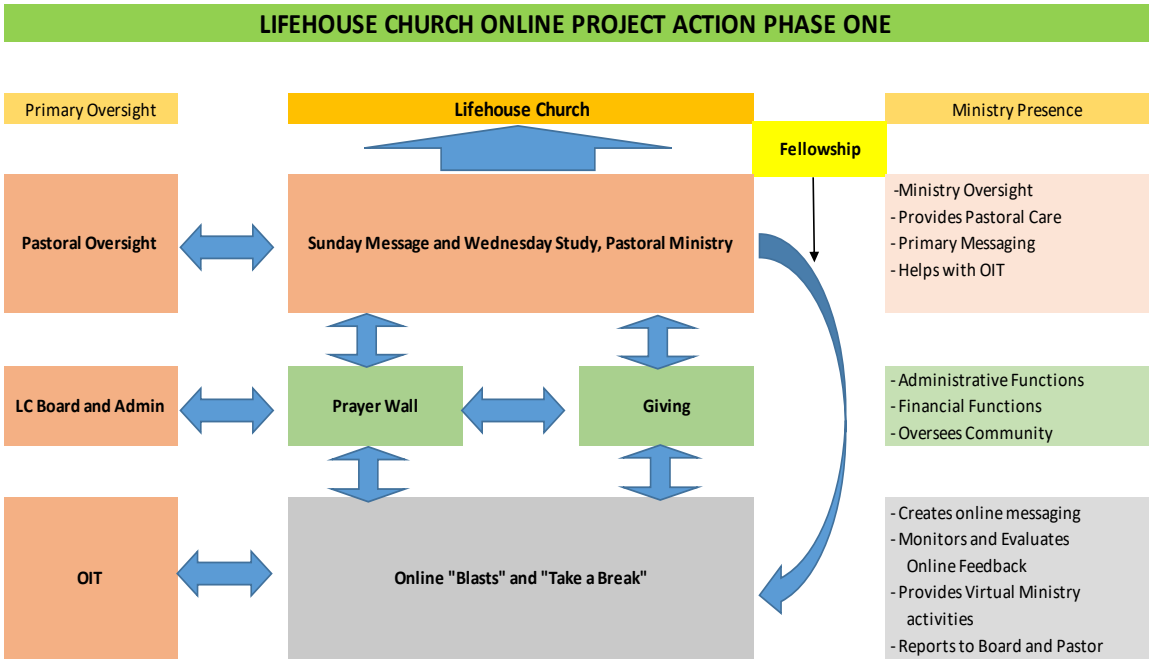

Figure 28: Proposed Phase One Structure

Creating Lifehouse Ministries: Phase 2

The goal of Phase two is not to operate two completely independent operations, one being a physical presence and the other virtual. Despite the apparent differences between the new online congregational experience and the traditional physical brick-and-mortar service, the final product is meant to be one of a united community, each operating in its unique way. One might

[8] Lifehouse Church Sermon Library and Podcasts, https://mylifehouse.church/sermons-library, accessed February 13, 2023.

call the result “Lifehouse Ministries,” signaling the maturity of a program that both optimizes the outreach into an online community yet collaborates to provide mission opportunities both in the local community and outside of it. Lifehouse Ministries would be singular in its devotion to God, yet diverse in its ability to serve wherever God would call the church to respond to a need. Figure 29 represents a potential structure for such an organization. Note the parallel growth but intertwined mission.

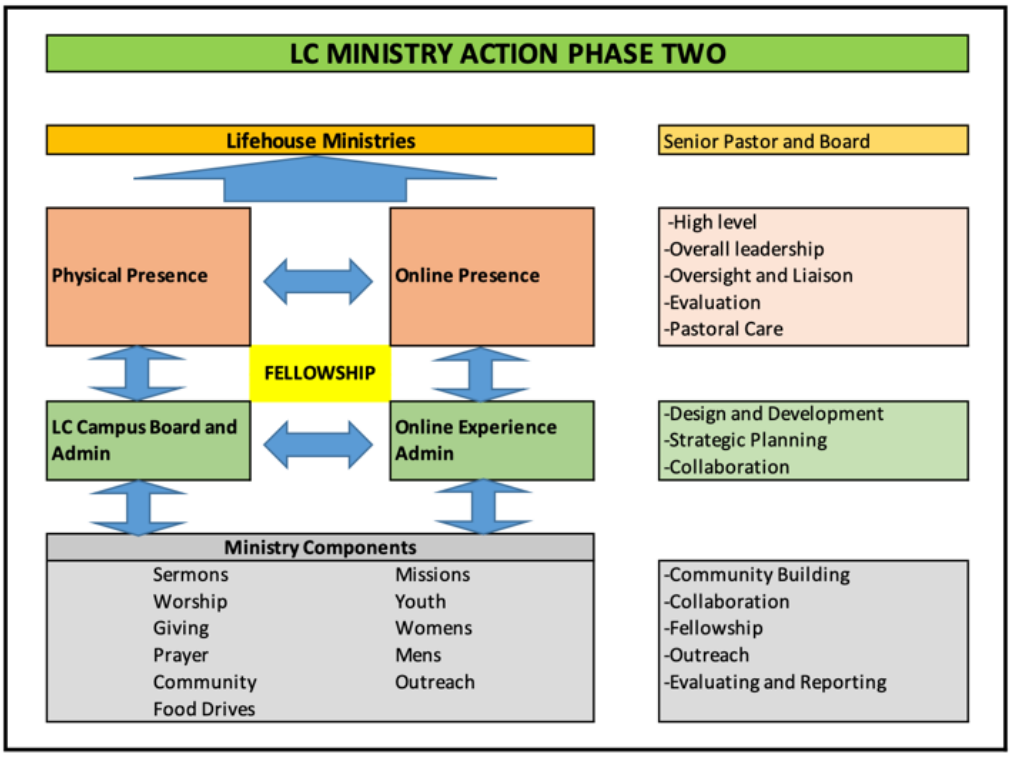

Figure 29: Proposed Lifehouse Ministries Structure after Phase Two

Milestones

It bears mentioning how the evaluation “trial period” will unfold during the program’s action phase. As shown in Appendix D, the evaluation period will not be a “one-and-done” evaluation of the information uncovered by the information-gathering phase of the intervention

plan. Rather, it will consist of a preliminary discussion and decision-making process on which actions to execute in the intervention plan and an ongoing monitoring and evaluation program that continues throughout the process. Major milestones in the trial period will occur in action phase one at 30 and 90 days (about 3 months) and then periodically moving forward. Milestones in action phase two will take place at 60 and 90 days (about 3 months) and then be ongoing. The difference is the length of time it takes to finalize the online experience settings.

It should also be noted that comparisons between this "new approach" and the "old" Lifehouse content-sharing plan will be as disparate as night and day. Almost everything in action phases one and two will be a new paradigm for the church, with only a few touchpoints of similarity between the online and physical congregations by the end of phase two. Even so, comparing the number of Bible study views and message views as milestones pass will be valid. These might provide insight into which modes of communication are successful and where further opportunities persist.

Phase One: Spring 2023

Before the OIT executes the action phases of the intervention plan, the direction and content of messaging and video presentations ("Blasts" and "Take a Break" as expressed in Appendix B) will have been approved by Lifehouse leadership but will remain relatively informal as the implementation begins. For example, actual messaging might start during Spring 2023 alongside the completion of data analytics, and the actual messages may not yet be fully honed via analytic results. Upon approval, action phase one will be implemented in a more formal way, using the results of analysis and statistics to optimize the execution of messaging tactics. Tools used along the milestone timeline (Appendix D) will include data analytics (number of views, number of likes) and qualitative feedback provided by the audience.

Phase Two: Spring 2024

As an action phase, quantitative metrics and qualitative feedback will be considered successful, and opportunities will be evaluated. These would include how online congregants interact with an online experience, how online giving trends through the online program are being used, and the number of hits on in-service links ("click if you are committing your life to Christ," or "click here to plug into Lifehouse"). In no way should LC "just" purchase an online messaging program where a preprogrammed chat exists and preformatted "I give my life to Christ" links appear. These can be useful tools, to be sure. What Lifehouse Church is directing its energy towards is a captivating, online specific, and tailored kingdom message, not taking the extant physical messaging and encapsulating it within a purchased program.

As the OIT leader, research has already begun and will continue to be kept in a reflective journal, a way to keep track of the direction and opportunities involved with the Lifehouse online audience action project. Journaling is a well-recognized and creative method to record thoughts, successes, and failures in "real-time," so lessons learned in data collection, analytics, and action plan implementation are not lost. One of the primary reasons for keeping the journal is "lane change correction," like the safety feature in a car that gently nudges the driver back on course when the vehicle deviates from its direction. Because one job of the team leader is to avoid biases and influences that rise from situational politics and preferences, the journal is important in revealing such pitfalls as the project progresses.

Research Limitations

The biggest disadvantage LC experiences in relation to the desired scope of its online messaging is simply size and resources. Even with the dynamic change and growth of the Lifehouse physical congregation, only a fraction was willing to share their opinions during this

project's research period via quantitative or qualitative means. Despite the clear limitations of narrowing down a population, potentially of hundreds, to a sample size under 50, there is considerable value that was exposed during the project. These things, taken in order, are the importance of a cross-section of ages, faiths, and cultures in the accumulation of relevant data.

A clear and present hazard exhibited as much now as during the ministry of the Apostles is how a legalistic mindset can prevent the ministry of God from reaching the populous in the manner prescribed by Jesus. Lifehouse is not immune to such difficulties. Jesus preached truth to His audience, but with great empathy and understanding to the "sick" He came to save (Mark 2:15, NIV). It goes both ways. One can place too great an emphasis on the "tears" empathy portion of ministry and fill an audience with a false hope just as easily as being heavy-handed on legalism and crushing the spirit of those whom God loves. This is also why the message needs to be clear and focused to lead what Jesus described as His "sheep" (John 10:16, NIV). Fortunately, the data can be applied to provide a targeted, positive message. Unfortunately, the resource limitations of LC will prevent the most efficient and effective messaging, at least initially. Careful monitoring and evaluation will be necessary.

Many participants in the project are indeed professing Christians, although no substantial effort was made to ascertain just how into following Christ versus "admiring" Christ, these professors were. While this could be a significant limitation, determining the depth of faith was not the project's purpose. The decision was made that for a sample this size, capturing the depth of active faith was not as important as the delineation between Christian and not. Another area of hazard for many churches is getting multiple cultural viewpoints, and the action research made inroads into this area. While most Lifehouse Church congregants are African American or Hispanic, a significant portion of respondents came from outside LC and from varying

backgrounds. There were limitations, however. No real attempt was made to gauge education levels or ministry experience (although some of the latter came to light during the interview process). Having limited resources to devote to such a project, Lifehouse Church will need to select the appropriate media and formatting to apply to an online audience carefully.

As a part of implementation and monitoring, careful evaluation should be given to the research of this project and considering the updated work of others to fill in the gaps discovered as information is collected. For example, the sample size was relatively small compared to the overall audience. Therefore, there was insufficient data to separate agnostics and atheists sampled by age and education level, but the combined efforts of other researchers could fill some of that gap. Nor was there time to spend interviewing more subjects to ask what kinds of messaging touches them personally or how what they have seen online leaves them thinking about life's issues. Lesson learned: there is no possible way Lifehouse can conclusively target a focused message, evaluate, and monitor its progress, and adjust its trajectory without more information from people willing to share their perspectives.

Further Research

One of the goals of this action research project has been to ascertain the feasibility and value of developing and deploying a captivating kingdom message to an online audience. Based on the research results, it is reasonable to conclude that such a message is both valid and necessary. The Apostle Paul was clear in his actions that all audiences should hear the good news of Jesus. In Acts 13:47, Paul exhorts his fellow Jews to spread the gospel to the Gentiles, referencing Isaiah 49:6 by saying, "For this is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have appointed you to be a light for the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the ends of the earth'" (Isa. 49:6, NIV). Similar statements are made in Romans 1:5, Galatians 2:14, and Ephesians 3:8

(NIV). Reaching past traditional demographics was central to Paul's ministry, and one he suggested had been revealed to him by Jesus Himself.

Reassess the Boundaries

It is true, of course, that no online ministry existed during the ministry of Paul. Such a medium would have been considered inconceivable until the last of the twentieth century, but to ignore the online audience misses the point of Paul's preaching: that the kingdom message is relevant to all peoples, no matter their location. While there was no way to predict the messaging vehicles and manners of communication, the takeaway is that Paul's message of outreach and distance preaching remains relevant in this discussion. The relevance stems from Paul's willingness to receive, defend and carry forth the Great Commission of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 28:16-20, "To go and make disciples in all nations, and that Jesus is with His people in the world mission fields until the end of the age" (NIV).

The data accumulated during this project does not show simple answers, just as Paul did not initially have simple answers. Paul had to wrestle with himself and with the other apostles, and for Paul, the message of Jesus was that "all people" meant "reassess boundaries."[9] Nor did Paul have an easy implementation of his boundary reassessment. In wrestling with the other apostles, he noted the hypocrisy of ignoring the way Jesus had changed the game, providing inclusion to "even the dogs," the Gentiles who had favorably responded to Him.[10] Eventually, Peter had a vision that cleared his mind of previous prejudices, and the result was a famous meeting with Cornelius, the Roman soldier. In it he addressed his critics, "God has shown me in

[9] Anita Cloete, "Living in a Digital Culture: The Need for Theological Reflection," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (2015): 1.

[10] Smillie, "Even the Dogs," 73.

a vision I should never think of anyone as inferior" (Acts 10:28, NIV). Peter recognized there had been a change in the boundaries.

Additionally, it is relevant to bring forward the Jerusalem council referenced in Acts 15. In it, several detractors (noted to be former Pharisees) are noted as having advocated for burdening the Gentiles with circumcision and Jewish Law to be saved (Acts 15:5-6, NIV). They had not reassessed the boundaries of the gospel; instead, they were locked into their familiar ways.[11] Peter rebuked them, and Paul invoked Amos and pointed out that the Lord was prophesied to come again and that the Gentiles would also find the Lord (Amos 9:11-12, NIV). The theme of these various contexts in the New Testament is that the apostles expressed a need to be flexible enough to share the gospel with all people, regardless of distance, because it was necessary. They did not fully understand the approach nor how to bridge the distance.[12] "Distance," in contemporary discussion, can be either geographical or virtual, relational, and contextual, but never beyond the scope of fruitful outreach.[13]

Create the Path

In much the same way, the growing prevalence and importance of the online mission field necessitate a reconsideration of exactly to whom "the ends of the earth" applies. During the ministry of Peter, Paul, and other Apostles, the description was not much past the borders of Rome. There were vast expanses of people beyond those borders. There are vast expanses of real souls in the virtual online world who fit the description of "those whom God loves." These also

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[11] Rob O'Lynn, "What Comes Next: Continuing the Digital Ecclesiology Conversation in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Religions* 13 (2022): 2.

[12] Marilyn Naidoo, "The Nature and Application of Formational Learning in the Distance Medium," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2019): 2.

[13] Forrest and Lamport, "Modeling Spiritual Formation,"116.

are to be given the gospel. This research uncovered no logical reason a captivating kingdom message should not be offered to a burgeoning new audience. Future research should focus on "what comes next." With the boundaries reassessed, "next" is creating the path.[14]

Bellano concluded in his research that the need is for online ministry to transcend the virtual and become "real" with the type of personal interactions and deep encounters with Christ that have characterized the physical church since its inception.[15] Lifehouse and other churches should initiate programs that draw people towards the gospel. The actions described previously (short "Blasts" messages, "Take a Break" videos, etc.) are only the beginning of creating a captivating online experience that effectively carries the kingdom message. It is challenging for religious groups to address a different mission field with different practices and opportunities.[16] Researchers should build upon the data in this project and others, considering such obstacles as reduced attention span, the need for community, and the gap in social support.[17]

Another challenge for Lifehouse and other congregations will be to avoid neglecting the needs of physical congregations while simultaneously looking at bridging the technology gap in the online mission field.[18] The data examined in this project show a significant population willing to accept "telepresence" as a valid substitute for physical presence, and other research supports personal online interaction and encouragement.[19] This project recognizes the gap between the progress of technology and the response of Lifehouse and other religious

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[14] O'Lynn, "What Comes Next," 3.

[15] Vivencio Bellano, "COVID-19 Pandemic, Telepresence, and Online Masses: Redefining Catholic Sacramental Theology," *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 16, no. 1 (2021): 41.

[16] Ibid., 44.

[17] Cloete, "Living in a Digital Culture," 3.

[18] Vicky Balabanski, "Mission in Matthew against the Horizon of Matthew 24," *New Testament Studies* 54 (2008), 163.

[19] Bellano, "COVID-19 Pandemic, Telepresence, and Online Masses,"42.

institutions. Future researchers should devote time and resources to identify the technology gap and creating a path.

Be Mindful of Change

Balabanski points out that the Great Commission of Matthew 24:16-20 is not meant to be static, and it is not meant simply for the time in which Jesus gave it to the apostles. Instead, it is designed for the circumstances of the time in which followers of Christ find themselves, past or future.[20] Future researchers should understand that the changes found necessary today to bring a captivating kingdom message to the virtual world; those changes will evolve. Research building upon this project will need to grow alongside technology to keep the message relevant to the audience, lest that mission field opportunity be missed. Missing the opportunity robs an ever-increasing populous of a God-centered relationship that is critical to belonging, support, and self-value.[21]

Despite the size limitations of this project, the data revealed quite convincingly that ministry messages of hope and compassion offer the greatest effectiveness, as opposed to negative messaging. Paul suggests in a letter to the Corinthians that initial messaging is often best served as milk, with more mature Christians being fed the meat of Scripture (1 Cor. 3:2-6, NIV). While some of the most profound truths in the gospel are not so pleasant to the untrained ear, they are just as valid, including "narrow is the gate" spoken by Jesus in Matthew, "weeping and gnashing of teeth" found in several of Jesus' teachings including Luke 13, and "woe to you Pharisees," also in Matthew (Matt. 7:14, 23:12, Luke 13:28, NIV). The available teaching of

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[20] Balabanski, "Mission in Matthew," 164.

[21] Maghboeba Mosavel, Ariel Hoadley, Aderonke Akinkugbe, Dina Garcia and Sarah Bass, "Religiosity and COVID-19: Impact on Use of Remote Worship and Changes in Self-Reported Social Support," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19 (2022): 2.

Jesus is vast, and LC and other churches must be mindful of how the virtual mission field is addressed. The proof of mindfulness in this area will be the fruit produced as a result, like Jesus and the fig tree in Mark 11. If the church does not offer a captivating message, there will be a lack of fruit. A fruitless temple is a doomed temple. [22]

Even since the onset of this project, there have been efforts made to break through to this audience, including, recently, the "He Gets Us" movement that seeks to deliver a message of hope and empathy to a technology-rich environment through social media posts, short videos, and brief television commercials.[23] Churches would do well to follow the example of monitoring the virtual landscape and addressing the changing technological landscape as the kingdom message is carried forward.[24] There is plenty of room for the gospel message online, and while this project is designed to tease out what Lifehouse Church specifically can do to build on and develop effective messaging itself, the implication for future research is to be mindful of the dynamic change taking place in the online mission field. The process of reaching people where there are online is not going to be one stage of action and then static rest. The process is ongoing, just as it has been throughout church history.

Remember the Commission

Even though the online mission space is likely the most significant mission opportunity of the upcoming generation, it is important to remember to bring a truthful message to the online space, not just a "happy" one. That will require a sort of "boundary" by which messaging is measured for accuracy based on Scripture. Just before issuing the Great Commission, Jesus'

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[22] Craig Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51 (1989): 239.

[23] https://hegetsus.com/en/about-us. Retrieved December 2, 2022.

[24] Balabanski, "Mission in Matthew," 165.

followers were warned about false prophets and teachers, masquerading as sheep while being wolves leading followers astray (Matt. 7:15, 24:4-5, NIV). In the online space, many messages are portrayed as truth from disreputable sources and swindles that prey on the uninitiated or the naïve. In building on the research in this and other projects, it is imperative to remember Jesus' command to take Jesus' message to all people, including the requirement of gospel accuracy. Christ would not have preached on it repeatedly were it not a serious, ongoing concern.

Paul also repeatedly warned Jesus' followers of false teaching; in fact, it was a theme He frequently brought to His listeners. For example, in Romans, he spoke against those causing dissensions and hindrances to correct teaching (Rom. 16:17, NIV). In his second letter to the Corinthians, he cautioned against teachers acting as "servants of righteousness" while misleading followers (2 Cor. 11:15, NIV). He cited as an example Peter being influenced by Judaizers, which required a public confrontation (Gal. 2:11-15, NIV). Indeed, as messaging flooded the early church, Christians had to beware of the wolf in sheep's clothing and fight, as Paul named it, "the good fight" (2 Tim. 4:7, NIV). Thankfully, his letters of caution and prescription for diligence have survived to guide the contemporary Christian community.

Moving forward, this will be an important job for the action researcher and ministry leader. Leading the flock to Christ requires a "captivating" kingdom message and a scripturally accurate one. Careful monitoring of the online environment, evaluation of the information being spread on the mission field, and growth along with the advancing online movement will be the responsibility of those working in the online mission field. The church must proceed boldly into the online world, but only in ways that lead the flock to hope, mercy, and truth. Nothing less is not "loving one another" as Jesus commanded (John 13:34, NIV).

Conclusion

The sobering situation is not faced by Lifehouse Church alone but also by many churches is the gap in accomplishing effective online ministry to an audience that had previously been underappreciated. It has become increasingly clear that bridging the gap requires an action plan that cannot be addressed by just one church or one ministry. Solutions require gathering information, detailed analysis, and careful evaluation of the work of others. The support of church leadership and the creation of a team of mission-minded individuals are essential. Affecting a comprehensive, effective, and captivating kingdom message to a new frontier encapsulated by the online world requires more than reading books. It is more than talking to people, more than plugging numbers into spreadsheets, more than allocating dollars, and more than simply "wishing" a plan into action. Lifehouse has never embarked upon this journey, and Lifehouse is representative of many churches that have been reluctant to engage with an online audience.

The implementation plan discussed throughout this chapter is the genesis of actions designed to help LC meet a different set of needs than a physical audience. The research undertaken is meant to capture a cross-section of the population in a small sample but large enough to begin to understand what attracts the attention of the online participant and what resonates with a virtual world hungry for the kingdom message of hope. It is hoped that not only will Lifehouse energize and catalyze a new way for God to be displayed but that the example might be reproduced by other churches and congregations and then refined and developed as the online experience evolves and grows.

With in-depth data gathering, careful analysis, and targeted action phases, this intervention is designed to help LC bring Christ's message of hope to a mission field desperately in need. Much as Jesus taught His followers to love another, and as Paul brought the kingdom

message to the community of Gentiles, Lifehouse wishes to expand its mission net to new boundaries. Prayerfully, the reverence and diligence exhibited during this project align with His plan, and LC will deliver in being “fishers of men.”

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Appendix A

CONSENT

Title of the Project: Lifehouse Church Research Participation

Principal Investigator: Andrew Matts, Lifehouse Church

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 16. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to participate in this research.

What is the study about, and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is assessing how Lifehouse Church meets the needs of a growing online audience. Because online activity has become a part of everyday life, we believe God intends for there to be outreach into this community, much as Paul brought the Kingdom message to all cultures in his ministry.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an interview. The interview process takes approximately an hour, is anonymous, and will likely be audio recorded for reference.
2. Possibly take part in a focus group, where there will be interaction with other church members. Information gathered will be anonymous and will likely be audio recorded for reference. These sessions may take slightly longer than an hour.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from participating in this study.

Benefits to society include spreading the message of Jesus, as commanded in the Great Commission.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher[s] will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be anonymous. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. Any written notes will be stored in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

- Interviews/focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer or device for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher serves as a student at Liberty University. The study will be anonymous to limit potential or perceived conflicts, so the researcher will not know who participated. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University Lifehouse Church. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please inform the researcher that you wish to discontinue your participation and do not submit your study materials. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study. Alternatively, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus

group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Andrew Matts. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Jacob Dunlow.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study

after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

Appendix B

INTERVENTION IMPLEMENTATION

Once the Lifehouse action plan has been completed and the results evaluated and shared with church leadership, the implementation plan is as follows:

- Construct an Online Intervention Team (OIT) consisting of Lifehouse Church members and leadership.
- Secure the financial resources needed to execute the messaging buys required to execute parts of the online strategy.
- Work with existing Lifehouse leadership to develop a specific timeline for execution, monitoring, evaluation, and enhancing phase one and phase two implementation actions.

Phase One

- Use findings from the intervention to design appealing “banner” and “view” messaging (these will be designed to catch the eye of the viewer in ways that promote positive responses).
- Contact various online platforms for popular online viewership and participation to discuss placement rates and opportunities.
- Leverage tech-savvy OIT members to create an online messaging-specific platform for Facebook (Meta) and other social media platforms. This will be distinct from the already-existing Lifehouse page but could be linked to it.
- “Construct” an on-premises studio with existing resources to create social media “blast” messaging. “Blasts” will be 30-45 second encouragement messages designed to attract the eye and not to apply “church pressure.”

- Use the same studio to develop “Take a Break” videos which build on the more frequent “Blast” messaging, guiding listeners to contemplate and meditate on specific life applications designed to provide a break from daily routines. These will direct viewers with Lifehouse contact and prayer wall information. “Take a Break” videos will be five minutes or less.
- Share on the online-specific platform the Lifehouse sermon series and Bible study streams. These will be full church services and studies for those inclined to pursue deeper faith and discipleship commitments (first action phase) and full online experiences designed for online-specific congregations (second action phase).
- Work with online platforms to place banner messaging consistent with a kingdom message.
- Utilize the online-specific social media platforms to place and boost media messaging content (“Blasts” and “Take a Break”).
- Alongside Lifehouse Church leadership: review, evaluate, monitor participation, and identify successes in the OIT online strategy. Implement changes based on feedback and weaknesses in the implementation, to create new opportunities for an online-specific congregation.

Phase Two

- Leverage the OIT and phase one messaging to design an online-specific church experience.
- These experiences would use the best of existing Lifehouse services (sermon and video in-service messaging) along with online-specific worship, which optimizes available

technology to promote kingdom messaging and lead people to praise and prayerful community experience.

- Online experiences would be roughly 45 minutes to an hour long, designed to encourage community interaction, and posted on the online-specific platform for future viewing.
- Initially, these experiences would likely utilize existing online-service programs such as those used by (example) Barefoot Church in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. This interaction-intensive streaming service promotes a sense of fellowship in an online setting.

Ongoing

- Leverage the OIT to review, evaluate, monitor, and suggest ways to augment and optimize phases one and two throughout the implementation process.
- Be cognizant of developing technology opportunities and concerns (i.e., privacy risks, etc.) and adjust the strategy accordingly.

Appendix C

Andrew Matts

Online Kingdom Message Project

Questionnaire Sample

Note: There will likely be changes to the questions shown here between this rough draft and the final draft to be submitted later. The questions are designed to gauge participation habits and preferences for online behavior and content. They are not based on scientific or formal research.

Note: Variations of these questions will also be used as the basis for interviews and focus groups. The questionnaire available to interested participants will be designed to take approximately half an hour to complete and will offer an area for comments. Interviews and focus groups will be designed to last approximately an hour and be conducive to more detailed responses, which will be recorded and transcribed.

1. When you are considering grabbing a phone or sitting at the computer, the primary reason is:
    a. I want to get online.
    b. I want to pass the time, and online is the best way to do that.
    c. I feel like I am out of the loop.
    d. I feel bad about it, but I need the data.
    e. Other, please comment _____

2. Would you consider grabbing a phone to be a type of addiction (i.e., do you grab your phone "just because it's there"?
    a. Yes.
    b. No.

3. Do you consider yourself attached to social media (i.e., is being an online presence a part of your normal daily routine)?
    a. Yes.
    b. No.

4. How many hours per day do you spend online?
    a. An hour or less
    b. 1-3 hours
    c. 3-5 hours
    d. I am not sure, but it is a lot.

5. When you are online, where are you spending most of your time?
    a. Amazon (or shopping)
    b. Social media to catch up with friends.
    c. Social media to catch up on the news.
    d. Other, please comment _____

6. Do you use social media to catch up with what your friends are doing?
    a. Yes.
    b. No.

7. If you do, then do you find yourself envious of certain aspects of your peer group's lives?
    a. Yes, it seems perfect.
    b. Sometimes I do because they do not have what they have.
    c. Not usually, I know what gets posted is just a snapshot.
    d. No, we all have plusses and minuses.
    e. Never, I see my life as better than most.

8. Do you use social media to catch up on "the news?" Meaning current events or reviewing what's trending.
    a. Yes.
    b. No.

9. If yes, do you find yourself using social media as your primary source for news stories?
    a. Yes, I do not even watch TV for news anymore.
    b. Yeah, but I also watch TV news.
    c. Not really, it's fun seeing people argue about current events.
    d. I do not even want to know what is in the news, I scroll until I see something interesting.
    e. Other, please comment _____

10. If you frequent social media, how do you primarily decide what to view?
    a. I scroll until I see something interesting, and I stop.
    b. I look at pretty much everything that pops up on my feed.
    c. I take time to look at everything, but if it is an ad, do not even waste my time.
    d. I have what I want to see in mind, and I scroll until I see something like what I want.
    e. Other, please comment _____

11. If you are a "scroller," what attracts your attention?
    a. I am unsure; I never really paid attention to my online habits.
    b. Honestly, when I am rolling through my feed, and I see something with pretty colors, I stop. I may not stay, but I stop.
    c. The appearance of the post does not matter to me; it is the content that attracts me.
    d. My subconscious, or something like that, stops me when something attracts me, and I click on what I see.
    e. Other, please comment _____

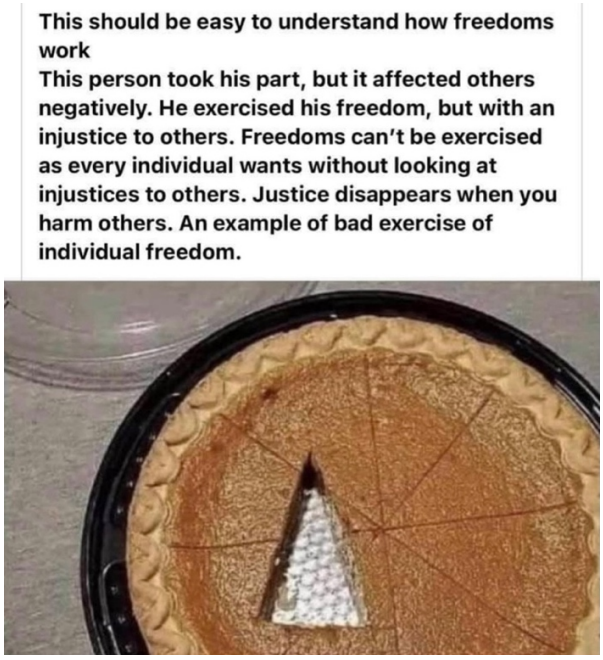
12. Would a meme that looks like this make you stop scrolling?

    a. Yes… I would stop because of the bright colors.
    b. Yes… I would see it, but I would move on because of the message content.
    c. Actually, when I see something like this that attracts my attention, it sometimes actually does provoke me to think.
    d. This does not attract my attention at all, and I am a content-only person.
    e. Other, please comment _____

(The next few questions will also feature different colors or contents and ask similar questions.)

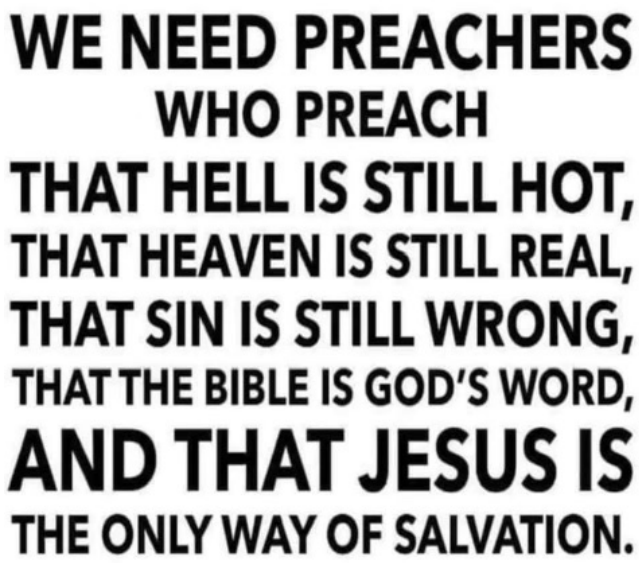
13. Take a look at this political story. Would you stop scrolling to focus on this?
    a. Yes, but only because it aligns with my views.
    b. No way: I see it, and I keep moving. I do not need that stress.
    c. Maybe, it depends on how much time I have.
    d. Other, please comment _____

14. How about this one?



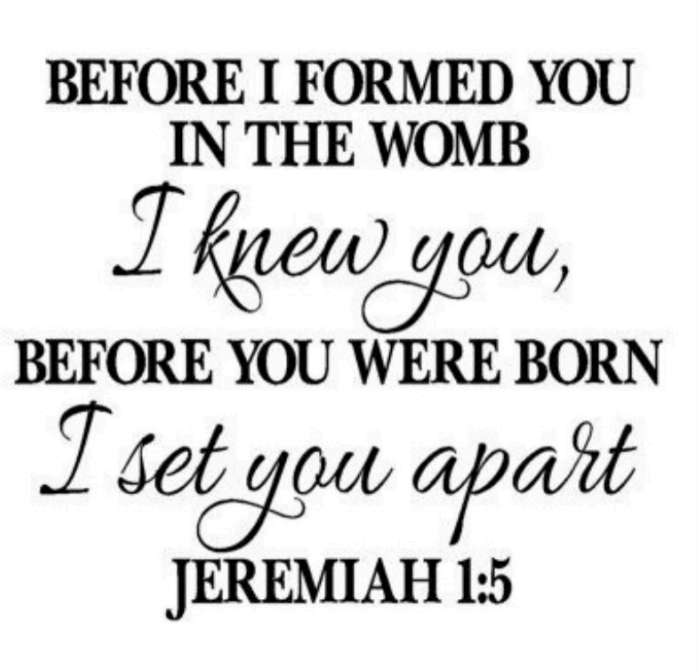
a. Yes, but only because it aligns with my views.
b. No way. I see it, and I keep moving; I do not need that stress.
c. Maybe, it depends on how much time I have.
d. Other, please comment _____

15. How do you feel when you see content with Christian themes?



a. I keep right on scrolling.
b. I stop and look because I feel apprehensive.
c. I cannot wait to repost.
d. I mean…sometimes I look at religious themes, but this one does not appeal to me.
e. Other, please comment _____

16. Do you feel the same way when you see this type of message?



    a. I keep right on scrolling.
    b. I stop and look because I feel encouraged.
    c. I cannot wait to repost.
    d. I mean…sometimes I look at religious themes, but this one does not appeal to me.
    e. Other, please comment _____

17. In the past several options, we saw messaging from political parties and messaging with religious themes. How do you feel about the equivalency of these two themes?
    a. If it is religious, it is political, and I am out.
    b. Different themes are equally attractive or unattractive to me.
    c. I skip over everything religious, but I will stop at certain political messages.
    d. I skip over politics, but I will stop for certain religious messaging.
    e. Other, please comment _____

18. If you are not entirely opposed to all religious and political messaging, what attracts you most (you can look at our examples if that helps)?
    a. Visual attractiveness—colors, fonts, etc.
    b. I stop for what I perceive are positive vibes (love, hope, inclusiveness).
    c. I stop when something grabs me, and usually, it has to startle me (fear, derision).
    d. I actually don't have any patterns; I scroll randomly.
    e. Other, please comment _____

19. Do you prefer (a— positive Christian vibe of love) or (b—negative Christian tone)
    a. A
    b. B
    c. Other, please comment _____

20. Would you more likely receive a message that was closer to A or B?
21. Do you watch videos online?
    a. Yes.
    b. No.

22. Are you more inclined to watch longer or shorter clips?
    a. Short, 15-30 seconds
    b. Kind of short, up to a minute
    c. I like to have my focus shifted, up to 5 minutes.
    d. It does not matter, if I like it, I will watch it however long it is.

23. If you watch a video clip you like, do you look for others like it?
    a. Yes, particularly by the same person.
    b. Yes, something similar in content.
    c. No, one and done.
    d. Other, please comment _____

24. If you are not a regular watcher of videos on social media, could you be enticed to watch if it were positive subject matter presented in an attractive way?
    a. Yes.
    b. I am not sure.
    c. No.

25. If not, why not?

26. If you are a follower of Christ, do you believe online audiences should have exposure to the message of Christ?
    a. Yes.
    b. No.
    c. Other, please comment _____

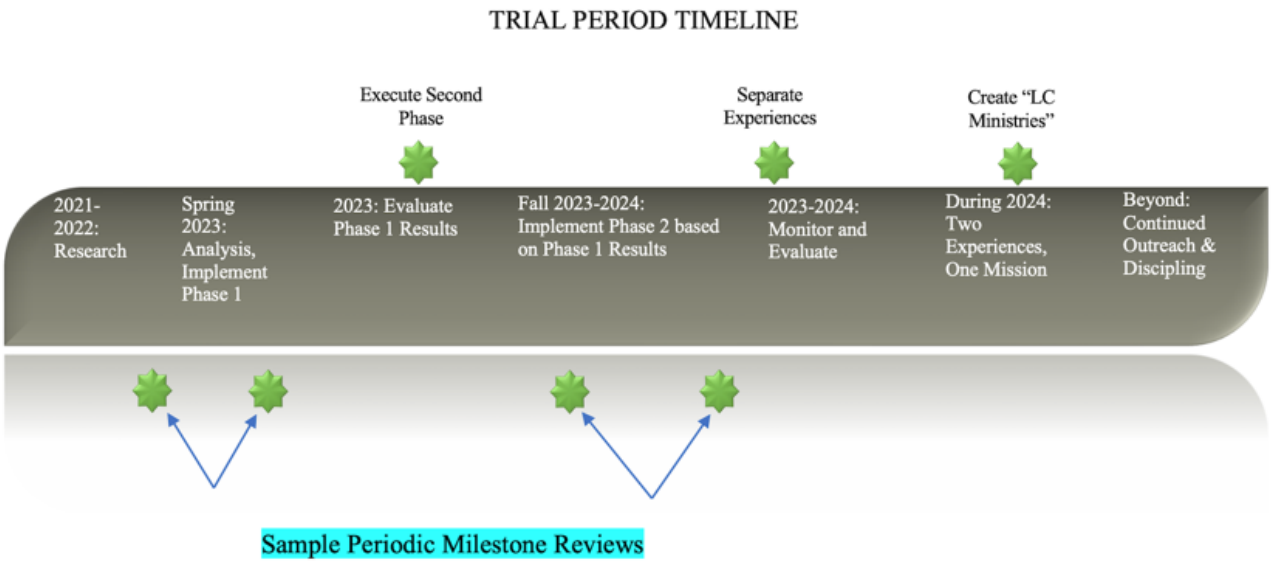
27. If you are not a follower of Christ, but you are intellectually open to asking questions about faith, do you believe online audiences should have exposure to the message of Christ?
    a. Yes.
    b. No.
    c. Other, please comment _____

28. If you are not interested in faith, do you believe online audiences should be exposed to the ministry of Christ?
    a. Yes.
    b. No.
    c. Other, please comment _____

29. In general, would you expect an online audience would receive the message of Christ the same way as a physical audience, or would a different messaging strategy prove more effective?
    a. Honestly, if you are interested in faith, you will be just as likely to find it online or in a physical location, regardless of the type of messaging.

b. People online are likely to be receptive to different types of messaging but might still be interested.
c. I doubt anyone scrolling on social media is interested in stimulating their search for faith.
d. Other, please comment _____

Appendix D


TRIAL PERIOD TIMELINE
Execute Second Phase
Separate Experiences
Create "LC Ministries"
2021-2022: Research
Spring 2023: Analysis, Implement Phase 1
2023: Evaluate Phase 1 Results
Fall 2023-2024: Implement Phase 2 based on Phase 1 Results
2023-2024: Monitor and Evaluate
During 2024: Two Experiences, One Mission
Beyond: Continued Outreach & Discipling
Sample Periodic Milestone Reviews

Appendix E

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 16, 2022

Andrew Matts

Jacob Dunlow

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY21-22-743 Online Audience Kingdom Ministry

Dear Andrew Matts and Jacob Dunlow,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) 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 does not classify as human subjects research. This means you may begin your project with the data-safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: Exempt

Explanation: Your study is not considered human subjects research for the following reason: (1) Your project will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not "designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge," according to 45 CFR 46. 102(l).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates, you are not required to do so. **If you choose to use our documents, please replace the word *research* with the word *project* throughout both documents.**

If you have any questions about this determination or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your application's status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office