

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

AN EXAMINATION OF THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING ON
DISCIPLESHIP IN YALOBUSHA COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI

Dissertation Draft

Doctor of Education

by

Gary Bernard Walton

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2024

AN EXAMINATION OF THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING ON
DISCIPLESHIP IN YALOBUSHA COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI

by Gary Bernard Walton

Dissertation

Doctor of Education

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

April 18, 2024

APPROVED BY:

Allen England, EdD., Ph.D., Dissertation Supervisor

Gary J. Bredfeldt, Ph.D., Second Reader

ABSTRACT

Significant technological advancements in this new digital age and culture have increased digital and online technology. However, churches faced many challenges in integrating, creating, and transitioning new media platforms to develop a cooperative network society to train and equip disciples. Some research showed that many clergies vehemently opposed the use of digital platforms for discipleship, primarily because those leaders believed that digital discipleship platforms were insufficient in power to be transformative as compared to what would occur at a traditional church location (Campbell & Garner, 2016). This phenomenological research study aimed to understand better the perceived impact of social networking activities on discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. This study used a phenomenological approach to gather data from participating Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. This study used an online questionnaire and video conference interviews such as Zoom © or Google Meet © to explore the perceived impact of social networking on discipleship activities in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. The theory that guided this study was Connectivism (Goldie, 2016). “Connectivism is the idea that learning takes place across networked learning communities, and information technologies are central to Connectivism, a theory of learning that emphasizes the importance of networked information resources throughout the processes of learning” Goldie (2016).

Keywords: Digital discipleship, online learning, Connectivism, social networking activities.

Copyright© 2024. Gary Bernard Walton. All rights reserved.

Liberty University has permission to reproduce and disseminate this document in any form by any means for purposes chosen by the University, including, without limitation, preservation or instruction.

Dedication

First and foremost, I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and my God, Christ Jesus.

Secondly, I dedicate this dissertation to my fantastic family. I love you sincerely, with my whole heart. To my wife Patricia, you have been my number one supporter in all my efforts in this journey. I love you so much. To my daughter, Jessika, my daughter, Kaila, and my son, Gary Jr., remember to set no limits on what you can accomplish in life. Always be faithful and never be fearful. The just shall live by faith, not by fear. I love each of you immensely; you are my inheritance and blessings from the Lord. Lastly, to my parents, thank you for your unconditional love and support. Thanks to my dad for your work ethic. It has shaped me into the person I am today. Thanks to my mother for always ensuring I went to church every Sunday as a child and for always putting my trust in God when times were tough.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	3
Copyright.	4
Dedication	5
List of Tables	10
List of Abbreviations	11
CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN	12
Introduction.....	12
Background to the Problem	13
Theological	14
Historical.....	16
Sociological.....	17
Theoretical	19
Statement of the Problem.....	22
Purpose Statement.....	27
Research Questions.....	27
Assumptions and Delimitations	28
Research Assumptions	28
Delimitations of the Research Design.....	29
Definition of Terms.....	30
Significance of the Study	31
Summary of the Design	33
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	35
Overview.....	35

Theological Framework for the Study	36
Shepherd Leadership Model	44
Theoretical Framework for the Study	48
Connectivism	49
Behaviorism	49
Cognitivism.....	50
Constructivism	51
Yount's Discipler Model	52
Related Literature.....	54
Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature	58
Profile of the Current Study	74
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	77
Research Design Synopsis	77
The Problem.....	77
Purpose Statement.....	78
Research Design and Methodology	79
Setting	80
Participants.....	82
Sampling	82
Limitation of Generalizations	82
Role of the Researcher	83
Ethical Considerations	84
Data Collection Methods and Instruments.....	85

Collection Methods.....	85
Instruments and Research Protocols.....	85
<i>Document Analysis</i>	87
Procedures.....	87
Data Analysis.....	87
Analysis Methods.....	88
Trustworthiness.....	89
Chapter Summary.....	92
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS.....	93
Overview.....	93
Compilation Protocol and Measures.....	93
Instruments and Protocols.....	93
Procedures.....	95
Demographic and Sample Data.....	95
Data Analysis and Findings.....	95
Research Questions.....	98
Evaluation of Research Design.....	99
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS.....	116
Overview.....	116
Research Purpose.....	116
Research Questions.....	118
Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications.....	118
Research Limitations.....	122

Further Research124

REFERENCES126

APPENDIX A.....133

List of Tables

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants.....	93
---	----

List of Abbreviations

BGEA: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

COVID-19: Coronavirus disease 2019

IRB: Institutional Review Board

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

The digital revolution is one of the most significant phenomena today. According to Pew (2019), more than 5 billion individuals are believed to possess mobile devices, with most of these connections being smartphones. Various churches faced challenges in creating and integrating digital spaces. A Barna Group study showed that pastors struggled in multiple aspects of ministry, from kids' programs to digital strategies. Barna (2020) revealed that approximately 47 percent of pastors encountered difficulties in effectively ministering to children and youth. Additionally, 44 percent grappled with devising a hybrid church model. Another significant concern revealed in this study was maintaining church growth and momentum, which 46 percent of pastors identified as a challenge, with over one-third, precisely 35 percent, experienced personal burnout (Barna, 2020).

Social distancing to mitigate COVID-19 forced some churches to close their doors altogether (Banks, 2020). One study discovered that by the end of April 2020, only four percent of the Protestant churches in the United States were meeting for in-person worship (Dunlow, 2021). Dunlow (2021) noted that ninety-five percent of churches identified as Protestant would close their doors to weekly in-person service (Dunlow, 2021, p. 459). Additionally, due to mitigations and the lack of literacy on social media platforms, some churches temporarily laid down their cross and decided to practice abstinence from church fellowship (Meadows, 2012). In response to this new digital phenomenon, Christian leaders should seek to understand the impact of social networking and its perceived impact on the spiritual well-being of believers and discipleship (Voght, 2018).

This research study revealed that if done strategically, social networking can create digital spaces for making disciples and expanding and spreading the Gospel in local communities and across the globe (Oliver, 2019). The Office of Communications & Public Engagement, Liberty University, reported in October 2022 that their online programs hit a new record (Liberty University, 2022).

“This fall, Liberty University has welcomed more students than ever in its residential and online programs, exceeding 130,000 students for the first time. Total on-campus enrollment stands at a record 15,800 students. Liberty’s online programs hit a record 115,000 students pursuing degrees from across the nation and around the globe.”

This research study showed that regardless of the approach to Discipleship, Christian leaders can apply a resilient pedagogy that concentrates on identifying activities and interactions that will undergird meaningful learning and discover methods to make them work, irrespective of where the learning occurs (Voght, 2018). Additionally, this study examined the four traditional learning theories and the role they play or may play in the development of a well-balanced pedagogical approach to discipleship through social networking activities.

Understanding the relationship between theology and technology can pose a difficult challenge to the modern church. The digital or technological revolution has become a significant and necessary part of society today. It would be wise for church leaders to examine ways to negotiate with technology and how it impacts the Christian community (Campbell & Garner, 2016).

Background to the Problem

Christian leaders faced various leadership challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite those challenges, the missional responsibilities of the Great Commission continued to be of first importance. In the season of the coronavirus pandemic, churches worldwide experienced unprecedented and unfamiliar changes in how they worshiped, fellowshiped, and spread the

gospel. This study revealed that no simple leadership theory or method can be applied to social networking that addresses the fundamentals of making disciples, as outlined in Matthew 28. However, this study aimed to understand better how churches leveraged social networking activities to develop disciples and spread the Gospel (Zylasta, 2015).

The Church's use of social networking is not meant to be a downgrade to the concept of discipleship (Oliver, 2019). Discipleship remains the church's presiding premise and foundation (Guldalian, 2013). In this study, the term social networking described today's technological revolution. This study found that the Billy Graham Crusade furloughed 10 percent of its staff years ago and redirected those resources to online evangelism. As a result, the BGEA reported that the organization had delivered the gospel to over 9.5 million people worldwide through the ministry's online websites (Zylasta, 2015). Zylasta's research provided relevance to this study for the need for churches to integrate digital platforms into their evangelistic efforts to help spread the gospel while maintaining a physical space for ministry. BGEA's results and incorporation of a social networking platform showed that these platforms can help spread the gospel. BGEA's boldness in reducing staff pointed to the theological relevance of social networking as a method of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Theological

Would Jesus have used social networking to spread the gospel if it was available to Him? (Williams, 2015). The relevance of this question to this study is answered from a cultural perspective. Today's culture is, without question, digital; even the Bible has become digital (Phillips, 2019). Phillips found that Siker (2017) explored the history of computing alongside the Bible as it related to Bible engagement in the United States (Siker, 2017, p.2)

The mission of Christ and His followers is to seek and save what is lost worldwide by preaching the gospel message of salvation, baptizing new believers, and teaching them the commandments of Christ as quoted in Matthew 28:18-20:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Whether or not Jesus would have used or promoted digital technology is exciting but assumed. However, it may not be safe to assume that Jesus would have replaced physical encounters with people with technology. Jesus physically laid his directly on people. An excellent example of Christ physically touching others is when He washed His disciples' feet. The laying of the hands and foot washing required physical contact, and the Bible shows that both were standard practices in the early Church. The following scripture shows an example of Christ laying His hands on those that needed to be healed, as quoted in Luke 4:40-41:

When the sun was setting, all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to Him, and He laid His hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many, crying out and saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of God! And He, rebuking them, did not allow them to speak, for they knew that He was the Christ.

The disciples carried the practice of laying hands into the New Testament Church even after Christ ascended to heaven. Jesus taught His disciples that the laying on of Hands would play a role in ministry as written in Mark 16:17-18:

And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name, they will cast out demons, speak with new tongues, and take up serpents. 18 If they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.

The laying on of hands was also a way to commission those who worked in the ministry. In Acts chapter 6:1-6, the apostles would lay hands on the commission chosen to serve in ministry.

Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

When Jesus physically walked on the earth, using new and old technology had advantages and disadvantages. The advantages and disadvantages of new and old technology Are Seen when Jesus taught on the proper and improper use of wineskins to expose the folly of the Scribes and Pharisees’ self-righteous attitude compared to true righteousness found in Matthew 9:14-17 (NIV):

Then John’s disciples came and asked him, “How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast? Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse.¹⁷ Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined+. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.

Jesus revealed that new wine belonged in new wineskins and old wine belonged in old wineskins. However, both could be stored on the same shelf. This revelation could lend itself to an explanation that the Church today can embrace new technology while maintaining and preserving the traditional essence of discipleship.

Historical

Some researchers believed the earliest evidence of an online church came from the Church of England document *Cybernauts Awake!* (Hutchings, 2017). Hutchings discovered in

that the earliest online church was started in 1985 (Hutchings, 2017). Hutchings noted that the founders of the online church had some sense of freedom in the online church.

“for the first time, people could worship in spirit and truth’, free from the distractions of others who might—in their own words—be ‘fat, short, beautiful, or ugly. People are pared down to pure spirit” (Hutchings, 2017, p.244).

However, the name of the online church was not given, and what the people were doing in the church is unknown (Hutchings, 2017, p.244). Hutchings appeared to be forecasting the need for churches to embrace the digital revolution and encouraged the Christian community to integrate social networking into their ministry platform.

Sociological

Bombaro (2017) noted that the movement to create cyber-social networks appeared in most of a Church’s evangelistic appeal. Bombaro (2017) highlighted that when an inquiry is made concerning a local church today, the question is whether the church uses Facebook. Bombaro (2017) argued that Facebook's innovative ways to shape society's culture of nearly 650 million subscribers have shaped societal expectations about identity and a sense of belonging. This could explain why churches adopted their innovative approaches to discipleship (Bombaro, 2017). Typically, evangelicalism is inclined to provide individuals with what they desire, such as convenience and low commitment, rather than what disciples truly require, which is challenging and engaging discipleship (Bombaro, 2017). Hunt (2019) found that digital technology has the power to shape the way human beings engage with one another in the present society. Digital culture encompasses a comprehensive concept that encapsulates that technology and the internet profoundly influence our interactions, behaviors, thoughts, and communication within a societal context (Thomas, 2011). It emerges from the widespread use of technology and unrestricted

access to information stemming from disruptive technological advancements within our society (Thomas, 2011).

Many researchers argued that social networking has positive and negative impacts on the youth and adults in society. Undoubtedly, Christian leaders were challenged to implement social networking platforms (Hunt, 2019). Unsurprisingly, the founder of one of the most used social media platforms, Facebook, favored its use among children and adults despite its harmful effects. Zuckerberg's contemplation regarding the benefits of social media resonated with the sentiments of many youth and young adults (Hunt, 2019). Despite the prevalent negative aspects they encountered in online environments, this demographic continued to hold their social media interactions in high regard (Hunt, 2019). They viewed these engagements as valuable opportunities for forging connections and acquiring information about topics they were eager to explore further (Hunt, 2019). A research study by Anderson and Jiang (2018) supported Zukerberg's overall positive outlook on the impact of social media on those who used social media regularly. According to Anderson and Jiang (2018), among those who expressed that social media predominantly has a positive impact on the lives of young adults (constituted 31% of the surveyed population), 40% highlighted that the most beneficial aspect of social media for people in their age group is its capacity to enhance connections with friends and family. Additionally, 16% of young adults in this category believed that "enhanced access to news and information" is the primary reason they view social media positively. One respondent said, "My mom had to arrange a ride to the library just to access what I have at my fingertips all the time." (Anderson et al., 2018) The findings in these studies highlighted the importance of churches having a social networking presence to impact previous, present, and future generations with the gospel message.

Theoretical

The theoretical nature of digital platforms will fall under the theory of Connectivism. Connectivism clarified how internet technologies have shaped chances to learn and share information with others on what is known as the World Wide Web. (Dickering, 1991). The connectivism model suggests that learning happens when students connect ideas throughout their established individual learning networks, which are collected from various information resources and technologies (Dunaway, 2011). Dunaway argued that knowledge is activated from an individual's learning network as they become acquainted with links between ideas, thoughts, and viewpoints accessed by Internet technologies such as electronic databases, web search engines, and online information resources. Dunaway concluded that connectivism recognized networked information technology as essential to the learner's overall learning progression (Dunaway, 2011).

Jesus is known for his many teaching styles and techniques. Many scriptures in the Bible recorded people referring to Jesus at least 45 times as “Teacher.” One of the most noteworthy times Jesus' teaching styles is displayed is in His encounter with Nicodemus.

Now, there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him. John 3:1- 2 (The New International Version).

Nicodemus was a teacher of the Law in Israel. Because he was a teacher of Israel, he should have known that Jesus was the Christ. However, Nicodemus needed to be taught by Jesus instead. Because he lacked faith in Christ, Jesus could not introduce spiritual things to him.

Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit[b] gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. How can this be?” Nicodemus

asked. You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still, you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things, and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." John 5:5-16 (The King James Version).

Jesus' choice of teaching style met Nicodemus in his unbelief rather than in his position as an esteemed Rabbi (teacher) of Israel. Jesus refused to weaken the necessity of faith in the Son of God to bypass God's process for people to access the Kingdom of Heaven. The standards of salvation were the same for everyone on earth, regardless of position or title.

The gospel message is centered around the personhood of Jesus Christ. Christ represents the re-establishment of the lost connection between God and mankind, which happened when Adam sinned. Jesus successfully reestablished that lost connection by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. Jesus is the only mediator between God and man. Not only did Christ re-establish that lost connection between God and humanity, but Jesus did not desire to see people lose that connection because of unbelief. Jesus revealed that unbelief limits how one learns a new thing and severs the connection between teacher and student. The teacher of all teachers, Jesus, revealed that learning is more effective whenever good teacher-student relationships exist.

"Just as Moses lifted the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God." John 3:14-21 (The New King James Version)

The Prophet Isaiah prophesies that one day, everyone will be taught of the LORD:

“All your children shall be taught by the Lord, And great shall be the peace of your children.” Isaiah 54:13 (The New King James Version)

When Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, he would have been familiar with what Isaiah prophesied. Jesus even questioned Nicodemus about his teaching position because of Nicodemus's unbelief that He was the Messiah.

Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be? Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. Moreover, as Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. John 3:9-15 (The New King James Version)

One of the issues with Nicodemus's failure to believe in Christ was that Jesus presented new teachings and doctrines different from what Nicodemus was usually accustomed to teaching and following. This study revealed that, like Nicodemus' slowness in heart to receive something new, many leaders and Christians in Yalobusha County, MS, struggled with adapting and using social networking. This perspective created difficulty in implementing social networking into the discipleship platforms of some churches in Yalobusha County, MS. Combined with the apprehension caused by the COVID-19 pandemic of potentially losing contact with members, the demand for digital discipleship platforms increased. However, a study by Barna (2020) and Dreyer (2019) highlighted that many churches were unprepared to transition technologically.

COVID-19 revealed to many secular and religious organizations that they were unprepared to transform technologically. This unpreparedness strained the connections and networks of many accustomed to sharing a physical space on Sunday morning (Barna, 2020).

Additionally, Barna found that one in three practicing Christians has stopped attending Church during COVID-19. Therefore, it would be wise if local churches embraced the transition to digital platforms to maintain a connection with those who have stopped attending church. The church should shift to winning the lost in a fast-growing digital culture. The age of homo digitals calls upon the Church to examine its approach to digital platforms and formulate an ecclesiology that can guide churches to uphold their integrity as we enter the third millennium (Dreyer, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

The number of people connected to the church impacts their learning in a social networking society (Guldalian, 2013). Digital culture has significantly changed how people connect with the Church (Oliver, 2019). The president of Barna Research wrote a book, *You Lost Me*, in 2011, where he addressed three trends that he believed were shaping the culture at that present time (Barna, 2020). The widespread access, greatly amplified by ubiquitous Wi-Fi today, has intensified the sense of alienation from institutions and traditions that provide structure and significance to our lives. Similarly, authority, much like these institutions and traditions, is increasingly met with skepticism (Barna, 2020).

The above Barna (2020) research data showed that the digital revolution posed many challenges for the Churches in America, tangibly reaching the lost in a physical space. The power and use of a device have become a source of entertainment for the young and old (Barna, 2020). The influence of screens on the lives of teenagers and young adults is immeasurable (Barna, 2020). Even with conservative approximations, the average young individual devotes nearly 20 times more hours per year to consuming screen-based media than engaging with spiritual content. Even among young churchgoers, the ratio remains at more than ten times as much exposure to cultural content as spiritual consumption (Barna, 2020).

The leadership challenges in the church brought on by COVID-19 revealed that many churches were initially unprepared to handle discipleship through digital platforms. Roberto (2022) found that churches that relied on traditional methods and tools for discipleship before COVID-19 struggled to stay connected to their church members. However, Churches that chose to use discipleship platforms with online and hybrid approaches in response to in-person gathering restrictions better presented and expanded opportunities to engage in what was referred to as “faith-forming opportunities” (Roberto, 2022, p. 6).

Implementing a successful online discipleship program can be a valuable platform for expanding and spreading the Gospel (Murashko, 2013). However, little work has occurred on the relationship between daily internet usage and disciples' spiritual development throughout the Church in Yalobusha County, Mississippi (Flynn, 2013). This study examined the relationship between digital platforms and the spiritual experience of Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi.

The worldwide usage of social media platforms cannot be overlooked. Churches that leverage social media platforms stand an enhanced chance of engaging lost souls with the Gospel internationally. This study does not suggest that social networking platforms diminish the power of the gospel message. Churches should ensure that they avoid becoming utterly digital in their discipleship methods. This study did not attempt to abolish traditional approaches to discipleship. However, this study explored the strategies of using social networking activities for discipleship and how leaders can use digital knowledge to influence those trained in discipleship.

Sigmon (2023) concluded in an article titled “*The Courage to Preach in the Digital Age*” that society is experiencing a rapid techno-cultural change in the digital age (p.11). This rapid change in how the church engages the present society must be embraced positively by churches

to communicate to a society that lives in a digital world. Sigmon's research concluded that churches should be encouraged to examine their current digital platforms to reach those in a digital space rather than a traditional in-person church setting.

“We live in a global network with ever-present and evolving tools that have lured hundreds of millions of people into a daily reality known as X-reality, with relationships, connections, and conversation informing and forming us through a constant flow blurring the lines between “virtual” and “conventional” reality in the palm of our hands or the band on our wrist. The novelty of this moment offers homiletics new ways to preach—a new how and who for preaching—for those willing to embrace the new possibilities within technoculture for reimagining the event, spaces, and media in which we preach” (Sigmon, 2022, p.11).

Barna (2017) found that almost four in 10 (38%) Americans are active churchgoers, slightly more (43%) are unchurched, and around one-third (34%) are de-churched. (Barna, 2017). Barna (2020) found that some church leaders seemed to maintain attendance levels, and some were coming to terms with the digital transition in their churches due to COVID-19. Barna (2020) discovered that under one in five church leaders (17%) reported that their church's virtual attendance is the same as typical in-person Sunday attendance. While 29 percent say virtual attendance is down (11% much less, 18% slightly less), another 44 percent said it has been higher (29% much higher, 24% slightly higher). A small proportion of pastors (3%) said they do not stream or offer services to an online congregation. However, 7 percent were unsure how virtual attendance is compared to in-person attendance. (Barna, 2020). A Pew research study conducted in 2016 found that around 60 percent of adults under 30 accessed the Internet to find a new church (Robertson, 2019). However, only 12 percent of adults over 65 years old accessed the internet to find a new church. (Robertson, 2019). The Barna (2020) study is interesting because it found that those under 30 were more interested in using the Internet to find places to worship than the elderly. This can lend relevance to the fact that churches today must have an internet presence to target those 30 and under with the gospel.

Nationwide, in-person attendance has declined (Robertson, 2019). However, many who support online churches argued that church attendance in physical space does not encourage community. However, some churches tried connecting with members online (Robertson, 2019). This nationwide decline in in-person attendance appeared to be a cause for alarm among many researchers; however, one researcher claimed that religious belief is alive. The commonly cited argument is that the decrease in traditional church attendance cannot be solely attributed to secularization and a decline in theistic belief. Instead, the researcher argued that despite diminishing religious practices, religious beliefs remained robust. Consequently, the researcher contended that Britain had entered an era characterized by "believing without belonging" (Davie, 1994).

This research study found that a successful discipleship program must involve consistent and frequent engagement. One problem identified with using digital platforms is that in-person worship and fellowship became challenging to maintain in the digital space. Dunlow's (2021) research study showed five areas in which digital discipleship programs must cultivate to impact or enhance engagement and the disciple's overall growth and development through social networking. Those areas are presence, a strong formative curriculum, community cultivation, and communication (p,492). This research study showed that Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, had become accustomed to traditional in-person service, fellowship, and worship service. However, the purpose of discipleship is for disciples to go beyond the traditional once or twice-a-week in-person service and engage the surrounding community with the gospel. This research showed that many churches in Yalobusha County Mississippi, unprepared to go beyond their regularly scheduled Sunday services when tradition in person service and fellowship were not feasible due to Covid restrictions. Smith (2009) suggested that worship services on Sundays

must be intentional and formative (Smith, 2009, p.208). This research study showed that churches in Yalobusha County, Mississippi that approached social networking with intentionality led to more engagement with the local community.

Fellowship played an essential role in developing disciples. During the COVID-19 pandemic, large indoor restrictions were enforced, and it was recommended that further spread of the coronavirus be limited. Zaluchu (2022) noted in an article titled, *Church Digitalization and the New Koinonia in the Era of Internet of Things*, that the early church apostles developed a way of fellowshipping through the breaking of bread to assist with building strong relationships between believers (p.25). This research implied that churches in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, like the early church, found a way to maintain fellowship and developed creative ways to maintain fellowship among believers through social networking when traditional fellowship was no longer reasonable.

A strong discipleship program, whether traditional or through digital platforms, can be vital through hardships such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Dunlow (2021) found that 95 percent of identifying protestant churches closed their doors to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic. Churches were forced to create ways to be present in the community. Sklar and Goldman (2023) found in their research that faith leaders were concerned about not being able to conduct in-person services and finding ways to provide pastoral care to their communities.

“We’ve really had to kind of come up with new ways of doing outreach, just because the tried and true ones we’ve been doing for 1000s of years were not available to us” (Faith Leader 7). In light of this stress, faith leaders mentioned the importance of volunteers in their work, with one saying “Number one, you have to have a team” (Faith Leader 1) (Sklar et al., 2023, p.2869).

Digital technology has become a permanent fixture in society. This researcher study found that the digital revolution changed the way many people connect in modern society. Many

in society transitioned from face-to-face to screen-to-screen in their everyday lives (Ronda et al., 2024). These researchers discovered specific threats that the internet era brings to society. One of those threats is known as interactive silence. The researchers found that interactive silence produces arbitrary freedom for those who engage with others through digital platforms (Ronda et al., 2024).

“Screen to screen interaction is radically different from the face to face interaction. People are unable to truly know and understand each other because of the big potency of deceptions and manipulations behind the screen. Another danger that is often overlooked is loneliness. Since the introduction of the internet, the number of people that suffer from loneliness has increased drastically within the digital generation (Gultom & Simanjuntak, 2022:17–18). That loneliness is often inevitable and symptomless” (Ronda et al., 2024, p.6).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to understand better the perceived impact of social networking activities on discipleship in Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal denominations in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. The theory that guided this study is Connectivism (Goldie, 2016). Connectivism is the concept that learning occurs within interconnected learning communities, with information technologies playing a pivotal role. This learning theory underscores the significance of networked information resources in the learning process (Goldie, 2016).

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the perspectives of pastors about the use of social networking in ministry?

RQ2: How do pastors integrate social networking into their current discipleship platforms?

RQ3: How well do Christians receive the use of digital platforms for discipleship?

RQ4: How often do Christians use digital platforms for discipleship?

Assumptions and Delimitations

Research Assumptions

This study established an ample and better understanding of the impact of social networking on discipleship. One assumption in this research study is that sampling Christians from Yalobusha County, Mississippi, provided the researcher with a picture of the context of the engagement of social networking activities and its impact on discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. Additionally, this study examined how Christians connected in a digital space. Connectivism is the notion that learning occurs within networked learning communities, with information technologies occupying a central role in this concept (Goldie, 2016). Another assumption of this study is that many Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, will attend some form of church online before attending in person (Lynn, 2019). The research also assumed that discipleship through social networking would help and not hurt church growth. (Lynn, 2019).

The assumption was that social networking is prevalent and influential in the lives of individuals in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, impacting various aspects, including religious practices like discipleship. Individuals in Yalobusha County are assumed to be aware of social networking platforms and perceive how these platforms may influence their engagement with discipleship and religious activities. It is assumed that people in Yalobusha County may have varied perspectives regarding how social networking affects their discipleship, encompassing both positive and negative views. The assumption was that individuals in Yalobusha County considered a connection between their faith, religious beliefs, and the use of social networking platforms, influencing their spiritual experiences and expressions of discipleship. Social

networking was assumed to potentially influence religious practices, beliefs, and interactions within religious communities in Yalobusha County.

The assumption was that individuals in Yalobusha County have adequate internet access and the necessary technological literacy to engage with social networking platforms. Participants are assumed to provide accurate and reliable information regarding their perceptions and experiences with social networking and its impact on discipleship. It was assumed that individuals in Yalobusha County were willing to participate in the research study and provide insights into their experiences with social networking and discipleship. The assumption was that the study's findings would provide insights and recommendations to inform strategies to enhance discipleship and religious engagement through social networking in Yalobusha County.

Delimitations of the Research Design

The theory or call of discipleship must stand upon the personhood of Christ. Bonhoeffer (2001) argues that Discipleship is a commitment to Christ". Bonhoeffer (2001) also suggested that a person's responsibility to Discipleship should be duty-bound by the disciple's understanding of the living resurrected or living Jesus rather than one's perspective and terms of Discipleship. Bonhoeffer would claim that Christian discipleship or Christianity could not separate from Christ, which would be futile (Bonhoeffer, 2001). Bonhoeffer's assertion acknowledged that Discipleship, irrespective of its platform or method, must continuously be grounded in one's dedication, commitment, and knowledge of the Son of God, not some emergent spiritual constructivist ideal absent of Jesus the Godman.

Adding an adjective like "digital" to discipleship does not diminish its overarching goal and essence (Voght, 2018). This objective remained rooted in fulfilling Jesus's mission to make disciples by proclaiming the Gospel, baptizing believers in the name of the Father, the Son, and

the Holy Spirit, and instructing new and young believers in the teachings of Jesus (Guldalian, 2013). This research study showed that Christian leaders must guard against the dangerous urge to drift away from the pedagogy Jesus gives in Matthew 28:18-20 (The King James Version). However, virtual discipleship can be used to expand and spread the Gospel in a digital space. No substantial research considered it a substitute for using physical spaces and methods to make disciples. The command from Christ is to go, preach, baptize, and teach. Regardless of the digital platforms used by churches in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, the commandment to spread the gospel remained intact and of great importance despite the many challenges faced in utilizing social networking for discipleship through social networking. The literature in this study supported this research on the theological necessity of Christian education and the difficulty of its integration (Estep et al., 2014, pp.26-27).

This body of work assessed how leaders in the Body can build, incorporate, and use digital spaces to uphold and accomplish the Church's mission when traditional methods of making disciples are unrealistic. Such as in the age of social distancing and recommended guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Although incorporating web-based learning to equip disciples can be beneficial in these circumstances, it must mimic a pedagogy that does not take away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ or downplay His mission of saving the lost and making more disciples.

Definition of Terms

1. *Social media*: Social media refers to online platforms, websites, and applications that facilitate the creation, sharing, and exchange of information, content, and ideas in virtual communities and networks (Meadows, 2012).
2. *Social Networking*: Social networking refers to using online platforms, websites, or applications that enable people to create share, and exchange information, ideas, and content within a virtual network (Hunt, 2019).

3. *Digital church*: Digital church" refers to religious or spiritual activities, services, communities, and practices conducted and facilitated through digital platforms, the internet, and other digital technologies (Meadows, 2012).
4. *Discipleship*: Discipleship pertains to following and learning from a religious or spiritual leader, teacher, or belief system (Esselman, 2004). Discipleship often involves mentorship, guidance, and the development of a personal relationship with the teachings or beliefs being followed (Meadows, 2012).
5. *Digital Platforms*: Digital platforms include, but may not be limited to, Zoom, Google Meets, Facebook, etc. (Dunlow, 2021). This refers to delivering biblical training content through video Bible study, including email and social media (Facebook, YouTube, blogs, vlogs, and Twitter).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this qualitative phenomenological study is connected to the worldwide expansion of digital media and social networking activities. Further research should be conducted on the relationship between social networking and discipleship related to Christian commitments. It was found by Pew research that 97 percent of Americans on a smartphone, which is a 60 percent increase of smartphone ownership in America since pew conducted its first study of smartphone ownership by Americans in 2011 (Pew, 2024). Hunt (2019) argued in his study that youth ministry has not consistently connected with young people's digital lives. Consequently, the field of youth and young adult ministry has overlooked valuable chances to equip them for navigating virtual social communities and the challenges they encounter beyond the Church's physical confines (Hunt, 2019). Additionally, youth ministry has missed opportunities to thoroughly nurture young individuals into faithful and spiritually engaged digital disciples (Hunt, 2019). Other studies have revealed that digital culture can lead to a greater merging between in-person and virtual realms (Meadows, 2014). Meadows (2012) argued that the evolution of mobile computing devices and wireless network connectivity has seamlessly integrated our online activities and virtual relationships into the daily fabric of our lives (p. 163).

The primary issue that some churches faced in this generation was finding their marketplaces or markets of opportunity to preach and spread the gospel. It is believed that 3 billion, nearly half of the world's total population, is in the digital marketplace. Suppose Churches wanted to be involved in this vast digital marketplace. In that case, the church must become more active in pursuing and investing in web-based distance education and teaching platforms to administer the gospel to their communities (Esselman, 2004).

The New Testament Church inserted itself into different markets of opportunity. The Apostle Paul spent time in the marketplace during his ministry lifespan. Paul's missionary journey helped spread the gospel to Rome, Asia Minor, Greece, Macedonia, Cyprus, Judea, and Syria. This missionary work of Paul required him to physically travel to those locations on foot, on a ship, or in chains as a prisoner. Imagine if Paul had access to digital platforms at the current time. The book of Acts reveals a better understanding of how Paul engaged the marketplace with the Gospel.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So, he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean. All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. Acts 17:16-21 (The New King James Version)

Paul's behavior in the marketplace could be viewed as going where the fish are. The church cannot avoid three Billion people in the digital marketplace today. The church has the right message to spread the gospel. The concern would be if they are in the right place at the right time with that message.

Summary of the Design

This qualitative phenomenological research design allowed the researcher to understand better the impact of social networking activities on digital discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. Additionally, the researcher gained insight and explored the depth, richness, and complexity of digital platforms (Roberts, 2010). This phenomenological design allowed the researcher to focus on the essence of the participant's experience with the phenomenon of digital discipleship.

The researcher was not concerned about whether social networking works in discipleship but how Christians in Yalobusha County experienced discipleship through social networking. Auday and Coleman (2009) also looked for positive outcomes from social networking technology. The researchers gathered data from a group of 1,342 students who were enrolled in one of four Evangelical Christian Colleges in the United States during the spring of 2009. The researchers found that Christian students were heavily using Facebook.

Along with the research questions in this study, the researcher adapted a questionnaire and the open-ended interview questions from Auday and Coleman's (2009) Electronic Activities Questionnaire using SurveyMonkey. The researcher acknowledged that there have been many advancements and ascensions in Social Networking since the creation of Auday and Coleman's (2009) Electronic Activities Questionnaire. However, the researcher received the necessary permission to modify the questions on the questionnaire from Auday and Coleman (2009) for the present time and this research study on October 16, 2020 (Appendix A). The online questionnaire took around 11-15 minutes to complete. The online interviews lasted 15-20 minutes and were recorded with the participant's consent.

This questionnaire was designed to explore the different kinds of electronic products commonly available to the participants and how they used them for discipleship. This information helped the researcher better understand the extent to which Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi engaged in discipleship using social networking activities such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, video games, YouTube, cell phones, etc. This questionnaire was selected and adapted for this study because of its concept of measuring one's engagement with digital devices and the positive and or negative impact on a person's relationship with God and others (Auday & Coleman, 2009). The researcher interviewed each participant through online recorded video chat or conferencing platforms like Google Meet © or Zoom ©.

This qualitative phenomenological study was limited because of its small sample size of 25 participants from Christian churches of different denominations, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, and non-denominational, in Yalobusha, Mississippi. (Roberts, 2010). Twenty-five participants from Yalobusha County, Mississippi, were chosen for this study. However, five of those participants were removed from the study for not completing the recorded online interview. Participants had to be between the ages of 18-65. For this study, the term Christian was defined as someone who follows Jesus Christ. Participants were members of various Christian church denominations, Such as Baptist, Non-Denominational, Methodist, or Pentecostal. The sources of information used to attain this sample might not be comprehensive. This study used an open-ended online questionnaire and recorded interviews utilizing Zoom © or Google Meet ©. Therefore, the generalizability of Christians in Mississippi may be affected (Roberts, 2010

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The concept or call of discipleship must not rest on the commitment of the culture, individuals, or digital and physical spaces. The concept or call of discipleship must rest on the person of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer (2001) said, “discipleship is a commitment to Christ” (p. 53). Bonhoeffer would suggest that Christian discipleship should be compelled by the believer’s knowledge of the living Christ and not by their discipleship. Bonhoeffer (2001) stated that “Christianity without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship, and a Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without discipleship” (p. 59). This claim by Bonhoeffer reveals that the call to discipleship must always be based on one’s commitment to Christ and not some emerging spiritual formation models absent of Christ.

Attaching the term digital to the word discipleship does not minimize the call and mission of Christ to preach the Gospel to and make disciples. Digital discipleship has only been around for a short time. However, digital discipleship should not be understood as a substitute for traditional disciples-making methods. The command from Christ is to go, preach, baptize, and teach. This theoretical framework will examine how Christian leaders can create, integrate, and utilize digital spaces to fulfill and maintain the church's mission when traditional discipleship models are not feasible.

Discipleship involves going, preaching the gospel, baptizing, and teaching new believers. As new believers learn about Christ, they should also be trained to go out and make other disciples, as found in Matthew 28:18-20 and Ephesians 4:11-17. Because discipleship involves

preaching and teaching, web-based instruction should possess a pedagogy that does not diminish the gospel of Jesus Christ or the mission of making disciples.

Theological Framework for the Study

Discipleship can be described as a calling rather than just something anyone can sign up for. Bonhoeffer believed that any approach of discipleship that does not include Christ is to choose one's path, no matter what path that would be to the individual. Bonhoeffer claims that even if the chosen path is ideal or martyr's, it will be without promise (Bonhoeffer, 2001). Bonhoeffer's entire body of work is relevant to this study in several ways. However, most importantly, it connects discipleship to the calling of Christ. Bonhoeffer (2001) wrote this book while the Nazi regime was in power. To be associated with Christ during that time was a death sentence. In this book, Bonhoeffer challenges his congregation and the readers today that their commitment to Christ must not be superficial.

Bonhoeffer (2001) stated, "Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace" (p.51). Bonhoeffer is in no way attempting to shame the church; he is simply attempting to challenge their view of grace as one of grace without a price. In short, Bonhoeffer (2001) tells the reader that grace and discipleship come with a price. Bonhoeffer's (2001) work is relevant to this study because of his emphasis on the calling of discipleship and how that commitment to the call becomes a strategic advantage in making quality disciples that would essentially make other disciples.

In many ways, discipleship in the 21st Century has drifted away from Christ's original command in the Great Commission. Ogden (2011) claimed that discipleship or making disciples has a strategic advantage. Jesus' method of making disciples was strategic in many ways, but the most significant were internalization and multiplication (Ogden, 2011). Through internalization,

Jesus ensured the enduring essence of his mission by concentrating on a select few. In addition, using multiplication, Jesus' emphasis on a few individuals should not be mistaken for a lack of desire to reach the masses (Odgen, 2011).

Ogden's (2011) assessment of the strategic advantage of Jesus' approach to making disciples is relevant to this study because it informs the researcher that terms of discipleship or making disciples are not of human origin. Jesus' approach to discipleship or making disciples is repeated by his disciples and those like the apostle Paul. Ogden (2011) shows that Paul did not change or improve the model for making disciples anything different than the model Jesus had left. Like the other disciples, Paul held to the commands of Jesus in the Great Commission to make disciples according to the commands he gave in the Great Commission. Ogden (2019) highlights that there was no controversy among the apostles in the early when it came to the meaning of discipleship and the method that would be used to make disciples that would make disciples. The relevancy of Ogden's (2019) work to this study is seen in his description of Paul's approach to making disciples:

Following Jesus' method, Paul invested in individuals to make disciples. He, too, had his sights on the multitudes, but he knew that solid transmission of faith would not occur as readily through speaking to an audience. Paul encouraged Timothy to use a personal style to link the gospel to future generations when he exhorted him, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2). Paul envisioned an intergenerational chain of disciples linked together through personal investment. This verse contains generations in the disciplining network, creating the following path: Paul Timothy's reliable people teach others (p.53).

The cost of discipleship for Paul would be persecution, abandonment, and imprisonment. Paul would show Christians in the early Church and the Church today that being committed to the calling of discipleship would be necessary to focus on the primary focus on the Church's mission to make quality disciples and make full proof of his ministry. Moreover, discipleship

was never meant to be a competition between the disciples. However, discipleship was to be driven by the calling of Christ to discipleship. Paul writes:

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death repeatedly. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times, I was beaten with rods, I was pelted with stones; three times, I was shipwrecked; I spent a night and a day in the open sea, and I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? (2 Cor. 11:21-29 New International Version).

The life and ministry of Paul in the scripture text above are relevant to this study in that it further defines or describes discipleship as something much more than bake sales and fundraisers. Paul did not lay down the gospel for a safe space or to please the wishes of others and to escape the rigors of persecution. Paul clearly understood that his present sufferings could not be compared to the glory that would be revealed in him and all those who choose to live godly.

However, many Christian Leaders have difficulty implementing the leadership and philosophy to mature disciples appropriately. Frequently, leaders make serious blunders and flops regarding integrating suitable and sound biblical doctrine and a biblical worldview into their online or digital platforms. This error can result in the problematic culture of the disciple, such as bad character, poor spiritual development, and pseudo-church beliefs and behaviors among believers. The Barna Group study relates to the need for sound doctrine, regardless of the platform used for discipleship. Barna (2015) revealed that only one percent of pastors believe churches today have a successful discipleship program to disciple new converts and young

believers. The Barna study concluded that 60 percent of churches believed they were not doing well. The Barna study showed that few Church leaders or members believed they did well in discipleship (Barna, 2015). This study by Barna is essential for further research on the need to develop discipleship programs to make equipped disciples.

If the church wants to engage the culture, it must be online (Stetzer, 2014).

“Pew Research found that 72 percent of online adults use social media. Every age group continues to experience growth, particularly those over 65 who have tripled their usage in the last four years—from 13 percent in 2009 to 43 percent this year. Despite the overwhelming trends in social media usage, LifeWay Research discovered that less than half of all churches are engaged on Facebook. A full 40 percent are not using any social networking tools.” (Stetzer, 2014).

COVID-19 revealed to many secular and religious organizations that they were unprepared to transform technologically. This unpreparedness strained the connections and networks of many accustomed to sharing a physical space on Sunday morning (Barna, 2020). Additionally, Barna found that one in three practicing Christians has stopped attending Church during COVID-19. Therefore, it would be wise if local churches embraced the transition to digital platforms to maintain a connection with those who have stopped attending church. The church should be a paradigm shift in winning the lost in a fast-growing digital culture. “The era of homo digitalis challenges us to reimagine the church and develop an ecclesiology which would assist churches to be churches with integrity at the start of the third millennium.” (Dreyer, 2019).

Dreyer proposes a radical paradigm shift for organizations to transition to digital platforms. Dreyer’s position is relevant to this study because it can be argued that Jesus radically transformed everything about what people knew concerning God. The change Jesus brought to the earth was revolutionary and necessary for humanity to be saved by God’s wrath. Jesus’ radical transformation did not abolish the law of God in Matthew 5:17. The Church should

accept that humanity has entered a networked reality and begin to accept the new normal, and they must do it quickly. (Dreyer, 2019). Additionally, the Church has always been about change (Baum, 2009). This is seen in the early Church in Acts 17:6, as through the Gospel, the disciples were accused of turning the world upside down. The apostle Paul encourages believers to be transformed by renewing their minds.

The possible silver lining in the present pandemic is that the church needs a radical transformation. (Dreyer, 2019). This claim does not mean the Church must abandon its message of Christ to appease the masses. It only means it must reach the lost most effectively and efficiently. In Luke 19:10, Jesus declared He had come to save the lost. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus commands his disciples to preach the gospel to every creature. Jesus set no boundaries regarding how far the Church could travel to spread the Gospel and reach the lost. Unfortunately, suppose the church fails to reach the lost and strengthen what remains. In that case, the devil will seduce them through false teachers and prophets. Paul reminds us of what happens when the Church forgets its shared purpose to win the lost and is outwitted by the devil:

However, if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:3-6, NKJV)

Joubert (2018) stated the following concerning networked reality:

Reality is no longer only a physical space. Geographical and political divisions do not have the final say. Non-geographical cyber reality now sets the pace (and the tone!) because digital technologies have succeeded in putting the entire world in touch with each other 24/7. (Joubert 2018:4)

Online or digital churches should not substitute physical fellowship spaces or lead Christians to forsake their assembling together as a community in a physical space (Dibley,

2018). Dibley would note that “research has found that of the 73% of Americans who call themselves Christian, only 31% go to church at least once a month” (Dibley, 2018). Believers must find creative ways to navigate the new normal. Rosner (2020) stated, “In this strange world of physical distancing in our day, we do well to remember that we do not have to be relationally distant. There are still ways to cultivate a community that does not involve getting up close and personal physically” (Rosner, 2020, p.42).

The church not only has a mission to reach the lost, but it also has a mission to strengthen what remains and make an appeal to the backslider. This claim is further supported in the Letters to the Seven Churches. The Church in Sardis was a type of Church that had the appearance of life, but they were dead to God. God’s letter was explicitly addressed to the angel or pastor of the church. This could imply that the leadership was in sin and needed to turn and repent. Sardis also had a few people who had not fallen into sin (Revelation 3:1-6, NKJV). Somehow, a tiny remnant of believers in Sardis could preserve the gospel’s integrity. This devotion was commendable to God. Many oppose the use of digital platforms for ministry. Duff notes that:

The primary objection most people must have to online Christian practices is that they are highly individualistic and impersonal. While there is some truth to this concern, the Internet can enhance genuine human interaction, partly because of the unique aspects of online communication (Duff, 2013, p.22).

Digital Discipleship is just one tool that can be used to advance and expand the gospel. However, it should not substitute a physical connection between believers (Hunt, 2020). Many churches have adapted or are adapting to this new social networking platform for discipleship, and many have not. Some are confused about how to integrate this use of technology. Hunt notes that “the primary reason why there is confusion as to how social media should be approached in the field of youth ministry lies within the Church’s confusion of what digital discipleship is” (Hunt,2020, p. 91).

To better understand discipleship's expected learning outcomes, this study examines the biblical methods or model of discipleship through the life of Jesus and the command to His disciples in the Great Commission. God's intent in the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20 is the pedagogy Jesus leaves for his original disciples to teach and develop new believers, established explicitly in Matthew 16:13-20. Christ makes making disciples and His blueprint to build His Church a command, not optional.

The above scripture passages show that Jesus commanded his disciples to be transformative leaders in discipleship. This model ensures that new disciples would grow up properly spiritually and be fully capable of developing others. Any other means to train the believer would be outside God's intent and biblically and theologically flawed. When leaders venture away from the biblical model of a disciple, many seek to grow in numbers rather than increase the few spiritually. However, there is a need to reach the masses. However, before reaching the masses, this method focused on developing small groups, such as the twelve disciples.

The idea, term, or call of Christian discipleship need not rely on post-postmodern subjectivity of current cultural beliefs, individuals, or geography (Slick, 2007). The theory or call of discipleship must stand upon the personhood of Christ (Bonhoeffer, 2001). Bonhoeffer also argues that "discipleship is essentially a commitment to Christ." Bonhoeffer (2001, p.42) would additionally suggest that a person's responsibility to discipleship should be duty-bound by the disciple's understanding of the living resurrected or living Jesus rather than one's perspective and terms of discipleship. Bonhoeffer (2001) would claim that Christian discipleship or Christianity separate from Christ would be futile.

Bonhoeffer's assertion acknowledges that discipleship, regardless of its platform or method, must continuously be grounded in one's dedication, commitment, and knowledge of the Son of God, not some emergent spiritual constructivist ideal absent of Jesus, the God. The Apostle Paul taught that this gospel is fundamental to spiritual growth and maintaining every believer's faith. Faith without faith in the living Christ is empty and useless. Any discipleship platform that eliminates a living Christ is a dead platform. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 quotes that:

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.

Attaching any adjective to Discipleship, such as "digital," in no way takes away from the overall objective and purpose of discipleship, which is to carry out the mission of Jesus, which is to make disciples through the preaching of the Gospel, baptizing believers in the name of the Father, of the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and to teach new and young believers what Jesus taught. Christian leaders must guard against the dangerous urge to drift away from the pedagogy Jesus gives in Matthew 28:18-20. However, digital discipleship can be used to expand and spread the Gospel in a digital space. No substantial research considers it a substitute for using physical spaces and methods to make disciples. The command from Christ is to go, preach, baptize, and teach. This body of work will assess how leaders in the Body can build, incorporate, and use digital spaces to uphold and accomplish the Church's mission when traditional methods of making disciples are unrealistic. Such as in the age of social distancing and recommended guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Although incorporating web-based learning to equip disciples can be beneficial in these circumstances, it must mimic a pedagogy that does not

take away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ or downplay His mission of saving the lost and making more disciples.

Shepherd Leadership Model

Every disciple of Christ had or has a disciple or a leader. Throughout the Bible, God often uses the shepherd's life and leadership when referring to His expectations of those chosen to lead His people. God refers to Moses as a Shepherd of his flock. "Then his people recalled the days of old, the days of Moses and his people where is he who brought them through the sea, with the shepherd of his flock? Where is he who set his Holy Spirit among them" (Isaiah 63:11, NIV). According to Thomas (2014),

There are numerous leadership models in the Bible, such as the school of prophets, servant leadership, teacher-learner relationship, disciple-making, coaching, and mentoring, amongst others. The natural thought was coming to mind in considering leaders as shepherds are Psalm 23. This Psalm is one of the best known and one of the most appreciated pieces of Old Testament literature ever penned. It is David's reflection on God's task as the shepherd-leader for his people (p. 12).

Shepherd leadership can be traced back to the beginning. "Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Genesis 1:26. The New International Version). This Scripture shows that God's original purpose for the shepherd was to care for His livestock. Although Adam was given dominion over creation and the ability to name them, He did not make or own them. He understood that he was just an under-shepherd. Everyone who desires to lead God's flock must understand that they are just tending God's flock and do not own God's sheep. This scripture is also essential, and passages like it can be utilized to establish the biblical and theological importance of the good shepherd.

When tracing a biblical theme or establishing a foundation for that theme, the why or purpose is often left out or overlooked. The primary importance or significance of the shepherd is evident, tending to God's livestock. From this biblical foundation of the shepherd and its theological significance, the researcher better understands why God refers to His leaders as shepherds. "There is a trend away from authoritarian, top-down leadership and an increase in the use of key terms to describe alternate leadership models such as instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership (Carter, 2016, p.15). Although many scriptures identify God's expectations, duties, and responsibilities for His leaders, the shepherd's life is the one He uses to teach every leader how to lead His people. One thing that stands out the most about a shepherd is not their sacrifices but rather their attitude and understanding concerning their purpose and why they do what they do.

Examining most Christian leaders today makes one scratch their head in amazement at how badly shepherds lead and treat God's people. What went wrong? Especially if they did not start out leading the way they are now. Many Christians today are experiencing both good and bad shepherds throughout their Christian journey. However, after studying the shepherd motif, bad shepherds may have raised them.

Moreover, they may just be doing what they were taught to do. It is essential to establish a theological and biblical foundation in Christian leadership. Jesus said it best when he rebuked the Pharisees for their irresponsible spiritual leadership in Matthew 23:15, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are" (Matthew, 23:15 King James Version). The Pharisees were producing evil trees and calling them good. Jesus tells us that we must be mindful of how we raise people in ministry and be sure to

teach them how to be leaders after His heart. The only way to train others to be good leaders is that the current leaders must know and understand who they are and who they work for in the kingdom. Alternatively, they will become conceited and self-serving. The example of the shepherd is God's standard example of leadership.

Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd. If Christians are to be followers of Jesus and leaders in His kingdom, they must lead others just as He is leading them. Everything Jesus did on earth was for those He came to save, not for himself. Jesus came to serve and not to be served. In the Gospel of John, John records Jesus saying, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd, and the sheep are not his own. When he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf pounces on them and scatters the flock (John 10:10-12).

As the Compassionate Shepherd, Jesus is letting us know two things. One is his concern for the lost. Two, he is disappointed in why they became lost in the first place. This area of ministry is where the rubber meets the road in Christian leadership. The shepherd is supposed to protect the sheep from danger. Many people today wander around in dry places, starving, depressed, and dying, all because they do not have proper leadership. There is hope that can be found in the Compassionate Servant.

The central theme we must draw from the motifs in the Gospels is that the Lord is our Shepherd. He has been our shepherd from the beginning; he is our Shepherd today and will be our shepherd tomorrow and forever. Knowing Christ as the Good Shepherd gives believers peace. Just because the Good Shepherd provides for the flock's every need, makes them lay down in green pastures, locates quiet streams, corrects and comforts them, blesses them while in the presence of their enemies, is a light in a dark place, and is the believer's rear guard. Jesus laid

down His life for His sheep. This illustration must be adopted by anyone wanting to be a leader of God's people. In the four gospels, we find the following Shepherd Motif about Jesus: Mark describes Jesus as the Shepherd King, Matthew describes Jesus as the Compassionate Davidic Shepherd, Luke describes Jesus as the Seeking and Saving Shepherd, and John describes Jesus as the Self-Sacrificing Shepherd.

In describing the Shepherd Motifs of Jesus, Laniak starts with the gospel of Mark. Mark is typically understood to be the first Gospel (Laniak, 2006). Mark begins his Gospel by describing Jesus as the Son of God. Then, he backs up His description of Jesus as the Son of God with several Old Testament Scriptures (Laniak, 2006). In so doing, Mark establishes a biblical foundation through the Holy Scriptures that Jesus is the Son of God (Laniak, 2006). Let us know that while this motif may link Jesus with the prophets Moses and Elijah, both of whom spent 40 days in the wilderness (Exod. 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8; Mark 9:4 King James Version), there are more apparent connections between Jesus and Israel, God had called Israel, his son, out of Egypt and into the desert (Laniak, 2006).

The next motif is the Compassionate Davidic Shepherd. For out of you [Bethlehem] will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people, Israel (Matthew 2:6 King James Version). This motif highlights the contrast between the messianic child and the self-serving Jewish rulers, especially Herod (Laniak, 2006). Matthew tells us in his motif that Jesus came to do what others were not. That was to have compassion for God's people, Israel. Jesus also did what corrupt leaders were not doing. Although Israel had leadership, Jesus was not satisfied with the condition of those whom those corrupt leaders led. Jesus must have had many haters. In this motif, Jesus is portrayed as the Seeking and Saving servant. The motif in Luke gives us a glimpse of God's desire that no man perishes but comes to the knowledge of His Son. Luke portrays Jesus as a

compassionate, evangelistic minister, the Son of God who returned to seek and save what had been lost. Luke 19:10, thank God that he came and is coming back.

Lastly, Jesus is the Self-Sacrificing Lamb. In other words, Jesus had to lay down his own life and not only lay it down but take it back up again. The good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11 King James Version). Jesus is the model shepherd for all Christian leaders to follow. We must lay down our life for our friends. Some researchers believe most Americans still believe in God, life after death, heaven, and hell. Examining what influenced Christian education in the Early Church is rewarding and convicting. A close examination of the early Church's teaching and training methods reveals that they held on to the commands given by Jesus in the Great Commission and followed His teaching model. The early church had great power in their society because their power source came from their obedience to Christ's commands. This mandate of obedience never went away for the churches of our generation today.

Shepherd leadership is relevant to this study because leadership will make or shape the disciple. If the leader is good, the disciple will be good. If the leader is wrong, the disciple will be wrong. This premise of the leader being good or bad will have an impact on how the disciple turns out is supported by what Jesus taught His disciple and others in the following scriptures:

“Woe to you, law teachers and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are” (Matthew 23:15 New International Version).

Theoretical Framework for the Study

This research explored four learning theories to understand better the different methods used to teach people and how those methods impact how people learn. This is to avoid wasted efforts and resources allocated to digital platforms with inefficient pedagogy to equip disciples

for ministry properly. Additionally, this research examined Yount's (2014) disciple model as it relates to the concept of discipleship and is relevant to this study. Four commonly known learning theories describe or explain how people learn:

Connectivism

Connectivism is a learning theory explaining how internet technologies have created new learning opportunities for people to learn and share information across the World Wide Web. The learning theory of Connectivism is significant to this study because it defines the impact the digital age can have or has had on how individuals learn, behave, and construct their opinions and views in the 21st Century (Dickering, 1991). Connectivism theory sheds light on how people learn today through digital technology and digital platforms. Each learning theory is still applicable today. Dickering (1991) would note that many researchers favored using one or more learning theories to determine the best approach to teaching others. Many "researchers believe that human learning is so complex that a single model may not be adequate and that a better approach would be developing a comprehensive model containing elements of each of the three major perspectives" (Dierking, 1991).

Behaviorism

Behaviorism is the operant conditioning concept developed by B.F. Skinner (Dierking, 1991). Behaviorism or behaviorist theory came on the scene in the early 20th Century. (Dierking, 1991). The theory suggests that the external environment controls learning and could be stimulated. The primary contributors to this theory were J. B. Watson, B. F. Skinner, and Robert Gagne (Dierking, 1991).

Thorndike (1932) and Skinner (1938) rejected the very ideas of mind and person in favor of the nervous system and organism. Yount (2014) states that disciples can use behavioral

learning principles to set patterns and reward success for behaviors that honor God. We can motivate first attempts at proper action where self-motivation does not exist. (Yount et al., 2014). Thorndike's Law of Effect states that the consequences of an act increase the probability of that act. After visiting his daughter's classroom, Skinner (1938) became interested in the educational applications of operant conditioning. Skinner observed that the classroom activities were disorganized and a waste of time for the students. Skinner (1938) believed children could develop more efficiently if their behaviors were shaped like his experimental pigeons or rats. During the 1950s, Skinner (1938) developed what is known as the "teaching machines" to direct children through their learning step-by-step with reinforcement.

Cognitivism

Cognitivism is a learning theory focusing on learning processes rather than observed behavior (Ghazi et al., 2014). The cognitivism learning theory would replace the behaviorism learning theory. The first person to study cognitive development was a psychologist named Jean Piaget. Most of Piaget's cognitive theory focused primarily on children and their development (Ghazi et al., 2014). Piaget's intended goal of the theory was to describe how babies become adolescents and individuals who can effectively use the process of objectivity and theory.

Piaget's cognitive theory contained three significant components: Schemas-Piaget's definition of a schema is a cohesive action sequence possessing component actions that are tightly interconnected and governed by a core meaning (Ghazi et al., 2014). Piaget believed that intellectual development is the practice of adaptation. Alternatively, as the individual adjusts to the world around them, this adjustment takes place through assimilation. Stages of development Piaget's Theory suggests that children go through four stages of development: Sensorimotor

stage (0-2 years), Pre-operations stage (2-7 years), Concrete operational stage (7-11 years), Formal operations stage (12-16 years) (Ghazi et al., 2014).

Constructivism

Constructivism is a learning theory of learning based on the idea that knowledge constructed by the knower is based on mental activity (Clark, 2018). Plato, a Greek philosopher, posed two fundamental questions to society: it would educate its children, which still speaks loudly today. Plato's first question was, "What will society teach its children?" The second question was, "Who will be doing the teaching?" Plato's philosophy on childhood education is relevant to this Body of work, showing that education is sometimes misunderstood. Suppose the teacher uses one teaching method in a negative or biased way. In that case, the child will grow up to adulthood with that inaccurate understanding and value system. Although the child may not act out what they learned in school, it may take years to change the beliefs of what they learned in their formative years.

Clark (2018) defined constructivism as the "study of a learner's construction of knowledge" (p. 180). Constructivists believe that people learn better when they construct their meanings to new content made available to them. Clark (2018) noted that constructivists construct new information, connecting them to their real-life experiences, attitudes, and beliefs as a reference. Constructivism connects new information with existing information based on schemas, similar to cognitivism. It includes the individual learners' real-life experience in the construction process (Clark, 2018). Clark further describes constructivism as a learner-centered model. He identifies two prominent constructivist theorists: Bruner, who introduced the discovery learning model, and Vygotsky, who introduced the social development theory (Clark, 2018).

Yount's Discipler Model

This study showed that churches in Yalobusha County could enhance their discipleship through digital platforms. Pastors in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, revealed concerns about digital discipleship in this study. This research did not attempt to suggest that there is a discipleship model that will work in every church setting. This research study examined Yount's Model, which he described as a temple. The Left Foundation Stone: The Bible, The Right Foundation Stone: The Needs of People, The Left Pillar: Helping People Think, The Right Pillar: Helping People Value, The Center Pillar: Helping People Relate, The Capstone: Helping People Grow, The Circle: Holy Spirit as Discipler (Yount et al., 2014, p.16).

The above research suggested that it's not necessarily the platform that's used for discipleship but rather the foundation upon which that platform rests. Additionally, there must be a respect word of God for those programs to be effective. Yount (2014) also stated that the Word of God is:

“1. Divinely Inspired Scripture emphasizes that the Lord, not man, speaks through Scripture. 2. Sacred Scripture warns its readers and teachers not to alter it by adding to or taking away from it. 3. Powerful in Its Influence. Scripture is more than words and symbols. God's Word is an extension of God's power: "The Gospel... is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom 1:16 The King James Version). 4. Written for a Purpose-Scripture has a purpose, and that purpose is life in Christ. 5. Reveals Eternal Truth. Scripture moves us upward from our daily experiences to eternal principles. (Yount et al., 2014, p.39).

Rightly dividing the Word of the truth of God's Word in a wicked and perverse society can be challenging but necessary. Young suggests that most Christians agree on the eternal nature of Scripture amid various interpretations of the Word of God. Even with high regard for Scripture, it is still possible to misinterpret God's intent.

With this model, the Word of God must be laid before the remaining elements. The suitable foundation stone is the needs of the people. Throughout the ministry of Jesus, we saw

him frequently address the needs of the people. Isaiah prophesies in Isaiah 53 that Jesus suffered and died so mankind could be saved from their sins. "Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted, but he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes, we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4-5, The King James Version).

The left pillar deals with helping people think. The objective focus of the Thinking Pillar emphasizes the translation of Bible passages into principles, standards, and ideals, which inform the decisions they make in everyday situations. How do we teach so that thinking skills are improved? (Yount, 2008). Three things must be present in spiritual growth: knowledge, understanding, and spiritual wisdom. Most people are controlled by what they know and understand. This is described best as epignosis, which is a knowledge that emphasizes experiential learning derived from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (Yount, 2008). Because people are controlled by what they know and understand, the goal of every Christian should be epignostic. The right pillar addresses the believer's emotional control. Jesus did not wear his emotions on his sleeves but was not void of emotion. Jesus often showed compassion for the lost. Jesus also wept for Lazarus John 11:35, and when He drew near Jerusalem in Luke 19:41-44, Jesus wept because they did not see what was coming upon them for their rebellion against God.

The center pillar is helping people relate. Meeting people where they are in ministry is often seen in the ministry of Christ. It is fundamental to spiritual learning and growth. When Jesus called Peter, He did so where Peter worked. Peter was a fisherman, and Jesus told people to follow Him and become students. He would develop them into fishers of men. Jesus was willing

to meet people where they were. Relatability was instrumental in forming the early Church and what it learned.

Conflicts and disagreements will always arise in the Church. Conflicts were like in the early Church, but the Church kept growing. The fellowship of the believers is a significant strength in the growth of the Church. All who believed they were together had everything in common, sold their possessions and goods, and divided them as anyone needed. So, continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. Moreover, the Lord added to the Church daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-44 The New King James Version) The Capstone: Helping people to grow. The Great Commission gives us a clear understanding of God's intent to grow the believer. Paul further expounds on the Church's primary function: to develop believers transitioning from babes in Christ to fully grown believers in Christ.

Related Literature

This section includes the purpose of the literature review, which reviews the literature on digital discipleship. The section highlights the themes and suggests best practices developed from the literature review. The overall purpose of this literature review is to describe related research on social networking and the perceived impact that networking has on discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. This literature review is focused on the following question: How have pastors integrated social networking into their discipleship models? How do pastors plan to use digital technology to connect with churchgoers to minister to the surrounding communities?

Initial research seemed to indicate that plans for digital integration into the mission of discipleship were infrequent or non-existent in the church at large. Therefore, this research

comprises current literature on using social media platforms and technology to develop disciples. Subsequently, while this literature review does not explicitly locate any need for consistent models for integrating digital discipleship into every 21st Century, this research will help advance the need to develop such programs in the church. A recent Barna research study showed that nearly half of the pastors struggled to find a hybrid digital and physical space model that worked in their ministry (Barna, 2020). However, despite these challenges, several churches have managed to be vital in the new digital normal (Barna, 2020).

Pastors and churches differ in how they incorporate digital technology and social networking into their discipleship models because of variations in congregational demographics, technological literacy, and theological stances (Hunt, 2019). While some pastors might think social networking is a great way to build community and engage with younger people, others might worry about distraction, privacy, and authenticity. Similarly, churches catering to younger generations might be more likely to use digital technology in their discipleship programs, while churches catering to older generations might favor more conventional approaches to outreach (Griffiths, 2021). Considerable consideration is needed when using social networking and digital technologies in discipleship programs (Díaz, 2021).

Using social media networks or specialized church websites, pastors build online communities where members may communicate, connect, and offer support to one another. Online Bible study groups, prayer networks, and discussion forums are typical examples of these platforms (Sircar & Rowley, 2020). Online community platforms improve discipleship by giving people an easy and convenient way to grow their faith and scriptural knowledge (Dunlow, 2021). Through online platforms, pastors can communicate meaningfully with their congregation members, offer resources, preach, and encourage community and spiritual development. In

addition, churchgoers can assist each other beyond in-person events by participating in online communities, which enables them to celebrate milestones and provide mutual encouragement to one another in times of need, all without being limited by distance (Thompson, 2020).

To make their sermons available to churchgoers who cannot attend in person, many pastors employ digital technology to webcast or record them, strengthening the great commission by enabling people to interact with the teachings and maintain a connection to the church (Campbell et al., 2020). Similarly, digital technology not only makes pastors more accessible but also gives them the chance to reach people outside of their church. Along the same lines, sermons can be recorded or live-streamed to allow listeners worldwide to take in the content and better understand their faith (Garner, 2019). Additionally, sermon broadcasting promotes diversity and allows people to be spiritually nourished and connected even if they cannot physically attend church services (Sigmon, 2023).

Pastors might arrange virtual Bible studies or post daily devotionals via social media or online platforms. The online teachings allow church members to engage with scripture and participate in spiritual growth activities from any location at their leisure (Josue et al., 2020). One of the most effective methods of digital evangelism to reach more people for Christ is creating and sharing material that resonates with the target audience, improving discipleship, and building community (Armstrong, 2022). On the same note, pastors can adapt to diverse learning styles and give a platform for meaningful discourse among believers by using multimedia formats such as videos, podcasts, and interactive internet forums. The adaptation not only increases their faith but also motivates them to ask others to join them on the digital adventure of spiritual growth and study (Fuente-Cobo et al., 2023).

Pastors use social media to build prayer networks and give church members a place to contribute prayer requests. Pastors can reach a larger audience and engage with church members beyond the geographical bounds of their congregation by utilizing social media platforms (O'Leary et al., 2022). Online prayer networks not only build a sense of community among Christians but also provide instant and ongoing support via the power of prayer. The pastors can compile these requests and host virtual prayer sessions where participants can unite for specific needs or concerns (Smith et al., 2021). The virtual prayer groups can also serve as a forum for members to exchange testimonials of answered prayers, thus strengthening others' faith and instilling a sense of encouragement and hope in the community. Pastors can also use social media to offer inspirational messages or daily devotions, fostering their congregation's spiritual development outside scheduled church services and contributing immensely to the great commission (Levin, 2020; Bryson et al., 2022).

Pastors can use social media in novel ways to foster worship and involvement among their congregants. For example, pastors can use interactive polls and quizzes to engage their followers in decision-making processes or to stimulate discussions on pertinent topics (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2022). Pastors can also offer inspiring quotations, Bible verses, or personal anecdotes that resonate with their audience, establishing a sense of connection and spiritual growth (Adegboyega et al., 2021). In addition, pastors can use social media platforms to reach out to potential new members by sharing compelling testimonials from current members or highlighting the tremendous influence the church has had on the community (Roso et al., 2020). On the same note, the pastors can also work with organizations to host virtual or in-person outreach events, such as community service projects or informational sessions, to attract people looking for spiritual guidance or a sense of belonging (Sklar & Goldman, 2023).

Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature

The pedagogy of using social networking in discipleship can be best understood in the command Jesus gives His disciples in the Great Commission. The disciples understood that what they were teaching was taught by the Master Teacher, Jesus himself. The disciples were well-trained in God's things and Jesus's commands. They were to apply what they learned to train others to advance the Kingdom of God by the command given by Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20 (New King James Version). How well a disciple is equipped will depend on the method used to train those individuals. How well trained and prepared the disciples would be seen in Acts 2:1-42 (The New King James Version), during the events on Pentecost that would lead to the birthing and formation of the early Church. The number of disciples suddenly grew from 120 to over 3,000 people in one day.

This exponential growth of the Church was managed most uniquely. People did not accept Christ, which was the story's end. Instead, to deal with the growth and maintain the highest priority towards discipleship, the disciples, now apostles, ensured that spiritual development was not compromised. The apostles were committed to teaching what Jesus taught them, and the new believers were eager to learn what they were teaching. Acts 2:42-47 (The New King James Version) shows how the disciples were innovative in implementing the pedagogical methods of discipleship.

Moreover, with many other words, he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then, those who gladly received his word were baptized; that day, about three thousand souls were added. Moreover, they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had everything in joint sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all, as anyone needed. So, continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord

added to the church daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47 The New King James Version)

The events that occurred on Pentecost introduced the disciples to a new marketplace for winning souls to Christ. That marketplace was the entire world. To spread the gospel successfully, the disciples had to rely on new converts using their homes to help strengthen them. The disciples' first wave in this marketplace came to them. In the second way, the apostle had to go out and preach and teach the word in every city.

Many churches have trouble locating their marketplaces or markets of opportunity to preach the gospel. With nearly 3 billion, half of the world's population is in the digital marketplace; the church must become more active in its pursuit and investment into web-based distance education and teaching platforms to administer the gospel to their communities. (Esselman, 2004). Esselman's study set out to answer the question asked by many in the theological community whether electronic learning was suitable for meeting specific goals in graduate-level theological formation for ministry. Esselman (2015) would answer yes to this question by drawing on one theological faculty (Esselman, 2004). Esselman's work further deepens the need for this study and research on ways to transition to distance learning programs to help develop disciples. The need for churches to leap into online learning programs must be carefully considered. Online learning discipleship models will come with their challenges and benefits. Roels' work and its relevance to this study are captured in the author's claim that Christian education must be relational and benefit the learner. Roels (2004) noted that,

Christian educational philosophy has both standard and diverse elements across the spectrum of those involved in higher education. There is a shared commitment to teach the integration of Christian faith, learning, and living until Christ's return. At different moments in history and in different institutions, the three legs of the faith, learning, and living triangle have varied in length (p.12).

COVID-19 has created a renewed interest in using online platforms for the works of many. Unfortunately, the impact that COVID-19 had on the Church was either ignored or misunderstood. Many churches have struggled to keep their members trained and equipped. Some ministries have weathered the storm and continued ministering and teaching through online programming. Flynn (2013) noticed what many church leaders may have missed, ignored, and now regret. Flynn (2013) noted that,

“The digital revolution in communications continues to have a profound effect on education and how it is delivered in both the church and the academy. Online mediated education, which was in its infancy less than two decades ago, now continues to expand to the point where it is becoming a predominant form of education. This expansion has created the need for specialists who understand the dynamics of effective education in a virtual environment. This special edition of the Christian Education Journal examines different facets of effective Christian education in our digital world (p.13).

The importance of an educated Church must not be misunderstood. For the Church to survive and be strong, vibrant, and vital, it must emphasize its methods of educating the believers. The pedagogy for discipleship is outlined very clearly in the Great Commission. Each element of the Great Commission involved some form of teaching, training, or demonstration to ensure that the new and young believers were fully prepared for the ministry (Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 4:11-17 New King James Version).

In an article, Oliver (2019) describes what he believes to be a sound pedagogical approach to train people in what is known as networked religion. Oliver (2019) argued in this Article the following principle that is relevant to this study as it relates to the need for pedagogy in discipleship,

As the “fracturing” continues, the pressure grows on religious leaders to both navigate the prevailing social landscapes and, along the way, to help people reconnect to meaning making practices and relationships in order to challenge and support personal and social transformation (Oliver, 2019, p.17).

The millennial generation has become a large part of the Church's target market for the gospel (Guldalian, 2013). There are 80 million Millennials in the United States. Most of them live outside the church. What is worse is that they are living without Jesus. This generation stays mainly connected through social media (Guldalian, 2013). Impacting the millennial generation will require more than relying on traditional church attendance in a physical space. Approaching this generation with the gospel will require well-thought-out and strategic planning. Most, if not all, of the millennial generation is in the digital marketplace. This literature review reveals that many Churches will struggle to leverage digital technology to preach the gospel. Further research should focus on how to engage the millennial generation through digital platforms to educate the millennials in the teachings of Christ.

Education must avoid being one-dimensional in its design. Christian leaders and educators should be flexible and open to drawing from successful online programs within outside organizations to help improve their programs. Online platforms have been on the landscape for some time now. Many Christian leaders and educators question the credibility and reliability of their ability to advance the gospel and extend the platform to reach the lost globally. Maddix et al. (2014) found that four million adults nationwide study online to pursue university degrees. Christian leaders should cast their nets in the direction God commanded them to if they want to catch any fish. To catch fish in the new digital marketplace, leaders must be willing to transition toward digital technology (John 21:6, The New King James Version).

Any successful transition to digital platforms will require good leadership. Discipleship and leadership go hand in hand. Further research on leadership could strengthen the need for good and bad leaders and their impact on discipleship. Leaders are those who influence others to accomplish a specific mission or task. Regardless of the organization, the effectiveness of the

leader will be measured by the leader's process of influence or how well he can create followership.

This research examined the essential elements of leadership to influence others through discipleship through social networking. There is no simple answer to leadership, nor is there a shortage of leadership books or journals written about leadership. The intent of this research study was not to create a one-size-fits-all model for every organization. Instead, this paper attempted to add to the existing knowledge body to help leaders improve and further develop their leadership influence. The COVID-19 situation has presented many leadership challenges across the country. This study showed that Christian leaders in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, determined how to rise to the challenge of this crisis, but many are left scratching their heads.

There are several pros and cons to discipleship through social networking. With the emergence of online digital platforms, access to the virtual world is more readily available to every age group. Meadows (2012) uses the perspective of convergence to argue the necessity of balancing reality and virtual reality (Meadows, 2012). This study's relevance to this study can be found in its exploration of ups and downs in the digital culture. This new digital culture has challenged the traditional forms of worship, and the idea of virtual worship can stir up problems for churchgoers.

Many churchgoers and leaders struggle to negotiate this new virtual worship experience with the current global coronavirus crisis. Change is not always received, and the transition is difficult when change is resisted. Jesus was a disruption to the present culture and threatened business as usual. Many in the religious community held tight to their religious practices and how they worshiped God; many, such as the Pharisees, were unwilling to follow Jesus. Although

the Pharisees and Scribes were religious, they perished because of their unbelief (Matthew 21-23, The King James Version).

In the incident with the woman at the well, Jesus explains that if she wanted to experience true worship with God, she could not limit that experience to a physical location. Jesus describes to the Samaritan woman what it means to be a worshipper of God and how and where we should worship Him:

“Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is where one ought to worship. Jesus said to her, Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:20-21 The New King James Version).

Jesus undoubtedly puts to rest the argument of the appropriate place of worship. Jesus did not necessarily tell the woman that she could not worship on the mountain; He just let her know how to worship no matter where she was located. The encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well shows that worship must not be limited to one designated space. However, with the rise of internet access and exposure to the virtual world, much skepticism exists about whether faith can be found and maintained online. Authors Dawson and Cowan (2004) argue that “people are doing online pretty much what they do offline, but they are doing it differently” (Dawson, Cowan, 2004). This claim by the authors can be twofold. From one perspective, people can practice good order and discipline online or be undisciplined online. The authors admit that the impact of online worship is still largely unknown. This study used this work to understand better how online culture impacts the believer's growth. This body of work briefly examines how online platforms can make a difference.

The Bible is clear on the importance of corporate fellowship and worship. The question on the minds of many leaders is how to respond to the gospel's mission in times of crisis.

The answer may lie within the leadership's faith, commitment, and confidence. Going against the herd is not always popular, yet it may be necessary. The impact of connectivity in a physical space on the growth, maturity, and preservation of faith is strongly emphasized in scripture.

There is no confusion about the power of fellowship.

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. Moreover, let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb. 10:22-25 New King James Version).

This scripture may lend some understanding to this study on the opposition to online worship and the creation of digital spaces for Christians to fellowship. Although many people have access to smartphones and devices, it does not necessarily mean they are literate in that technology and can navigate the virtual world. Although some pastors had access to online services during the COVID-19 pandemic, a handful of them decided with their congregations not to make that transition to online services. The pastor of Liberty Baptist Church in Missouri decided to do the following:

On Easter Sunday—and Pastor Nathan Rose said his congregation's leaders have decided not to attempt online worship as a replacement for their traditional services. "We do not think that live streaming a worship service is inherently wrong or sinful," he said in an email to Religion News Service. "However, we do not want to unintentionally communicate that an online service is the same as—or even like—worshiping with the gathered body in person. In other words, we do not believe that a live stream is a real, actual substitute for a church gathering (Banks, 2020).

The significance of this work to this study is that it shows the importance of fellowship and connectivity of the church, whether in a virtual or physical space. This study also shows that

not all leaders agree that online worship is the correct response in a crisis. This study is relevant because it uses a current crisis to highlight the differences in opinion and responses to online worship. The church must embrace the reality of virtual worship. The population on the earth is not getting any smaller, and the necessity to reach the lost has become more significant than ever. Shirley (2017) quotes in his research from an observation made by Crosby (2012) concerning the people in the world today and their connection to the Internet:

More people are alive now than ever in history, and they are more connected than ever before. We believe that this could become the most Bible-engaged generation in history. I want to fully leverage technology to advance the gospel (Crosby, 2012, p. 38).

Shirley's work provides a clear picture of the present digital age and the need for the Church to make efforts to tell the gospel to the world through digital platforms. Shirley (2017) provides the researcher with many platforms for the Church to leap into digital media. Shirley identifies the following platforms to help churches leverage digital and online platforms.

Right Now, Media, self-proclaimed as the "Netflix for the church," delivers training content through video Bible study, streaming conferences, leadership training, and family ministry resources to support the equipping needs of over 10,000 churches (<http://www.rightnowmedia.org>). Web resources like Right Now Media and Ministry Grid allow churches of any size to access world-class training from renowned leaders and field experts at a fraction of the investment of time and money it would take to attend national conferences or denominational training events (Shirley, 2017).

Although social media platforms come with many benefits, they are temporary platforms. Voght (2018) suggested that when social networks are designed and implemented correctly, they can strengthen relationships among believers. Voght (2018) stated that,

When done well, social networking can enhance the church's fellowship by providing congregants a window into each other's lives. It can mobilize congregants to serve their neighbors and enhance the church's mission by embedding the community of church relationships in the broader community (p. 15).

Social networking platforms should never serve as a means to replace physical relationships between human beings. In the age of social distancing, the in-person fellowship has

been strained. Social media networks may connect people but detract from gatherings in many ways. This does not mean Churches should avoid using social networking platforms. Vogt (2018) suggested that the Church should embrace these platforms and gave five primary reasons. There are five primary reasons congregations should embrace these tools to aid church fellowship.

First, fellowship is not an end but a means to many other goals: community, mission, evangelization, and spiritual growth. Second, social networking transcends geography. Third, social media transcend time. Fourth, online relationships spark offline communities. Fifth and most importantly, social media opens the doors of Christian fellowship and invites millions of outsiders to join the community (Vogt, 2018). Although social media can be good at providing alternative solutions to enhance fellowship, it can also be a platform for sinful behavior. Vogt (2019) states that social media platforms can also inflate gossip, encourage narcissism, and reduce people to text (Vogt, 2018).

This study revealed that Christian leaders in Yalobusha County Ministries found that during COVID-19, they embraced new ways to connect and teach Christ through social networking. This study showed that everyone benefited from digital platforms. So, the challenge for pastors in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, was to devise the right way to ensure people learn from digital platforms or, at minimum, benefit from them in some way. One possible way to achieve this is through the Connectivism learning theory. Connectivism is the idea that learning occurs across networked learning communities, and information technologies are central to Connectivism, a theory of learning that emphasizes the importance of networked information resources throughout learning. Goldie (2016) Connectivism acknowledges the role of information technology in accessing data from various sources and developing skills for

evaluating connections between different information sources in a dynamic information network (Goldie, 2016). Goldie (2016) suggested that learning begins in Connectivism when the learner) Knowledge gets stimulated when those learners connect in a networked community (Goldie, 2016). Whether or not the Connectivism learning theory can serve as a suitable learning theory to equip the disciple and monitor the new disciple's well-being and development will require further research.

Goldie (2016) later highlighted how well the learner (s) participated would also be reliant upon the facilitator's social presence. Goldie would note that other researchers discovered that "participation and autonomy promoted by the "social presence" of facilitators and other participants, which fostered a sense of belonging and community that built confidence and stimulated active participation" (Goldie, 2016). This insight sheds light on the impact and importance of how the leader's or facilitator's presence can be the student's learning process. Goldie (2016) suggested that facilitators' or teachers' participation could be intensive initially but taper off as the students begin to engage. (Goldie, 2016).

The learning theories examined in this study are relevant to developing a curriculum that appears sufficient to teach and develop disciples through a virtual platform. These theories provide critical research on teaching methods and how well students will respond to the online learning platform. The more traditional platform should remain but be incorporated into the new online platform. Applying the proper pedagogy to Connectivism and transformative learning theories to virtual Discipleship can help with the well-being and spiritual development of the disciple.

Discipleship through social networking possesses a dual role. First, discipleship is to be a lifelong follower of Jesus Christ. Secondly, Discipleship is to be a lifelong student or learner of

Jesus Christ. The terms disciple and Christian can have two different meanings. A disciple can mean a person who identifies as a follower and student of Christ. Christian can mean someone who identifies and follows any branch of Christianity, which does not necessarily make them a disciple of Jesus. Therefore, any adjective, term, or concept that precedes disciple or discipleship cannot take away the nature of a disciple. Nevertheless, it serves to explain the disciple's specific approach. Jesus sums up the life of a disciple in various ways, and each description reveals His expectations of what His disciples should and should not be. One of the best examples of Jesus' expectations of a disciple of His is found in Luke 14:26-27;33 (The New King James Version) the following:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his Father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life, he cannot be My disciple. So likewise, whoever of yourself does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. (Luke 14:26-27;33, The New King James Version).

Jesus' observation emphasizes the followership commitment and aptness it takes to be a disciple of Christ. The above passage of scripture also demonstrates that the Disciples of Christ cannot determine the terms of Discipleship of their own accord. They will have to do it God's way. Making disciples utilizing social networking platforms is a relatively new concept. However, it can be essential to communicating, equipping, teaching, and making disciples. However, there is much to be understood surrounding the pedagogy of such platforms. It can be understood that the primary focus of these platforms should be to make disciples that can make other disciples, emphasizing how the disciples learn, apply, and replicate what they learned in others. The goal of discipleship must always remain transformative. Additionally, the disciples' knowledge of Christ should be strong enough to endure persecution, even if it costs them their lives. To navigate the digital culture efficiently, leaders and students must accept the reality of the digital age. However, this work did not suggest believers practice abstinence from

assembling themselves. There is no suitable substitute for face-to-face connections between people, and the virtual world may allow humans to stay current on what is happening around the world but may fall short of the connectivity that comes from fellowship and human interaction.

Jesus' discipleship model involves the leader's presence and voice consistently or daily. It may be argued that Jesus, the master teacher, utilized three learning theories to teach and train His disciples in just three short years. When he finished with his disciples, they spoke like Him, taught, behaved, and carried themselves like him. When many religious leaders heard the disciples speak and saw how they behaved, they knew they had been with Jesus. This affirmation from the religious describes that the disciples were publicly practicing what they had learned from Christ. At this moment, the disciples were identified as followers of Christ. "Now, when they saw Peter and John's boldness and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, They marveled. Moreover, they realized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13, The New King James Version). An argument is that the disciples' behavior resulted from what they learned from Jesus.

The model of discipleship Jesus used was not a model that had a concentrated focus on the masses. Instead, Jesus invested His time into profoundly impacting the small group of disciples He initially selected (Wilson, 2012). Some researchers believed Jesus's method could be replicated and effectively merged with technology (Wilson, 2012). Jesus' discipleship model is transformative. He took everyday people unlearned in the religious pedagogy and transformed them into men who would usher in the early Church. Although the transformative learning theory is not discussed among the four popular theories, it is relevant to the study of digital discipleship.

Jack Mezirow (2009) established the transformative learning theory in the 1900s. Mezirow (2009) defined transformative learning theory as "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2009). Transformative learning theory is teaching to change. To use this theory properly, the teacher must understand the six core elements of the transformative learning theory: individual experience, critical reflection, dialogue, holistic orientation, awareness of context, and authentic practice (Mezirow, 2009). The six core elements are not to be viewed as stand-alone elements. These core elements are interdependent. (Mezirow, 2009).

Individual experience serves as the primary means of conveying transformative learning. Individual experience sets the stage for dialogue, opening the door for critical examination of what upholds the learners' value judgment or normative expectation (Mezirow, 2009). The second core element of transformative learning is promoting critical reflection among learners. Critical reflection is a characteristic of the challenges of deeply held beliefs and assumptions based on the individual learner's prior experience. This element often brings specific thoughts and feelings that can transform perspective. Mezirow noted that perspective transformation possessed three forms of reflection: content, process, and content. (Mezirow, 2009). The third element is dialogue. Mezirow believed that dialogue is where individual experience and critical reflection are played out and implemented. The fourth element is holistic orientation, which suggests learners embrace the affective and relational ways of knowing. The fifth element of transformative learning is an awareness of context. Context awareness is gaining a better appreciation and understanding of the learner's sociocultural factors. These factors are as follows: "surroundings of the immediate learning event, the personal and professional situation

of the learner at the time (their prior experience), and the background context that is shaping society" (Meziro, 2009). The sixth and final element is authentic relationships with students. When the teacher has a good relationship with their students, this relationship sets the stage for learning on a practical level. Authentic relationships allow individuals to communicate openly to reach a mutual understanding (Mezirow, 2009).

One benefit of utilizing digital or online platforms to teach, preach, and spread the Gospel is that the viewer or listener can listen to the message as much as they choose. Virtual or digital platforms include email and social media (Facebook, YouTube, blogs, vlogs, and Twitter. Each platform can provide effective and efficient ways for ministries to stay connected with believers when traditional meetings in physical spaces are not feasible. Using digital platforms, ministries can provide hope, strength, and encouragement daily or multiple times throughout the day instead of being restricted to one central location, date, or time. Online viewership can stretch across the nation or abroad. However, viewership is not necessarily an indicator of engagement. However, Facebook provides data on each viewer who logs into a live broadcast.

This data gives ministries a metric to understand their whole audience accurately. However, Facebook attendance cannot measure the spiritual health of the viewer. Facebook and other media platforms should be used as additional tools to expand the gospel message. The reality is that a traditional brick-and-mortar church with a virtual platform increases its skill to reach more people with Christ's message. Many would probably like to attend Church but are usually hindered for various reasons. Therefore, the argument could be that virtual Discipleship is fundamental to the spiritual growth and development of the believer, as the conventional approaches to Discipleship are conducted in physical locations. This is not to say that conventional Discipleship methods are abandoned altogether, and churches close their doors and

refrain from cooperating worship. This statement only suggests that churches leverage every tool to reach the lost for Christ. Esselman (2009) addresses the necessity of spiritual formation platforms. Esselman believed there was an ever-increasing need for the Church to research what part technology plays in theological pedagogy (Esselman, 2004).

The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) seems to have mastered art using online evangelism, simply a command given to every Christian (Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Timothy 4:5 The New King James Version). In 2012, BGEA decided to lay off a small portion of its staff and redirect its resources to online evangelism. BGEA's results are staggering but confirmed to be authentic and verifiable. (Zylstra, 2015). The change is paying off; in 2014, the BGEA shared the Gospel with almost 9.5 million people worldwide. Of those, only about 180,000 were in a live audience at a crusade, while 7.5 million were reached through BGEA websites. Of the 1.6 million people who told the BGEA they prayed "to accept Jesus Christ as [their] Savior" in 2014, less than 15,000 did so in person, while more than 1.5 million did so with the click of a mouse" (Zylstra, 2015)

However, churches must guard against going outside the commandments of Jesus' blueprint to reach the lost. Christ is building His church through the testimony of those called by His name. Whether in a traditional or digital setting, this mission is the same when spreading the gospel or making disciples. That mission is to reach the lost in every community, city, nation, and world. It is not uncommon for the laborer to disagree with or desire to change the scope or blueprint of what's being built when something is being constructed. However, in Matthew's gospel account, it is revealed that Jesus designed the Church and is also the master builder of it. Matthew 16:18 (The New King James Version). The goal of the Church is to be co-laborers with Christ.

There are some advantages and disadvantages to online communication. Communication is simply information passed between two or more people. Communication breaks down when the process of communication gets ignored. Whether or not the means of communication is online or in-person, it requires four elements: sender, receiver feedback, and active listening. The process would look similar: sender to receiver, receiver actively listens. Then, the receiver switches places with the sender and gives feedback. The receiver actively listens to the feedback and sends feedback to the receiver. What makes any form of communication effective is active listening. When no active listening is present, broken communication follows. As a result, many people would somewhat circumvent communicating with certain people face-to-face. This form of communication can cause a person to separate themselves from other people altogether. It is easier to say something mean, derogatory, negative, or harmful online than to say it in public (Duff, 2016).

Some researchers are concerned that online communications are unsuitable for developing a genuine community. Therefore, this requires further research. Duff does not go into detail about this topic. Whether or not an entirely online Church can maintain the integrity of Scripture and a genuine faith community is unknown. (Duff, 2016).

Americans exist in a world ruled by technology. Over 70 percent of Americans use social media to interact with friends and make new internet connections. Pew research found that over seventy percent of Americans in 2019 spent time on social media (Pew, 2019). This research study discovered that social media could be a good ground to sow the seeds of the Gospel. Pew would indicate that the most popular social media platforms are YouTube and Facebook. Vogt (2019) argues that the Church should not be frightened by social media and

gives the following five reasons why churches should use social media to encourage fellowship among believers. (Vogt,2019) stated that:

First, fellowship is not an end but a means to many other goals: community, mission, evangelization, and spiritual growth. Second, social networking transcends geography. Third, social media transcend time. Fourth, online relationships spark offline communities. Fifth and most importantly, social media opens the doors of Christian fellowship and invites millions of outsiders to join the community (p.17).

Profile of the Current Study

The researcher highlighted digital discipleship's theological and theoretical relevance in this qualitative phenomenological study. The researcher highlighted reasons a qualitative phenomenological approach was chosen instead of a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approach. The preference for the qualitative phenomenological research design allowed the researcher to use the qualitative approach to ask participants about their experiences with digital discipleship platforms (Roberts, 2010).

If done strategically, social networking can create digital spaces for making disciples and expanding and spreading the Gospel in local communities and possibly across the globe. Regardless of the approach to Discipleship, Christian leaders can apply a resilient pedagogy that concentrates on identifying activities and interactions that will undergird meaningful learning and discover methods to make them work, irrespective of where the learning occurs. Additionally, this study examined the four traditional learning theories and the role they play or may play in the development of a well-balanced pedagogical approach to discipleship through social networking activities.

Understanding the relationship between theology and technology can pose a difficult challenge to the modern church. The digital or technological revolution has become a significant and necessary part of society today. It would be wise for church leaders to examine ways to negotiate with technology and how it impacts the Christian community (Campbell, Garner,

2016). Christ is clear in His command to His disciples that they were to spread the gospel unto all the earth to every people group.

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen. (The New King James Version)

This passage of scripture is the missional purpose of the church. However, when the Church was born and started to grow, the disciples faced finding a way to develop and maintain a faith-based community. This would not have been easy because Christians were not very popular then. The disciples were about to come out of hiding and preach openly that Christ had been resurrected and alive. The risk of persecution would have played a vital role in how the disciples would disciple new believers. To manage the church’s exponential growth on the day of Pentecost, discipleship occurred in the homes of those who were being added to the church daily. Because of this, the Gospel would spread throughout Jerusalem.

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. Moreover, they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.
Acts 2:41-47 (The New King James Version)

The traditions of laying on the hands and water baptism cannot be performed digitally but can be seen by others when broadcasted digitally. The worldwide usage of social networking platforms cannot be overlooked. A better understanding of the context of how Christians in Yalobusha County are engaging with social networking platforms and each other can help

identify if social network activities help or hurt the engagement of the lost with the message of the Gospel through the means of digital discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlined the research methods followed in this study. It also provided information about the participants and the sampling technique used to collect data for this study. This chapter describes the instrument used to collect data for this study and the procedures followed in data collection. The researcher discussed the method used to analyze data collected in this research study.

Research Design Synopsis

This qualitative phenomenological research study was not limited to statistical formulas but lends itself to explanation (Hatch, 2002). The subjective nature of this qualitative research challenged the researcher to separate wholly from the data. The researcher is a Christian pastor who was careful to avoid individual bias towards the research group, which can result in a distortion of reality and make it difficult to establish the reliability and validity of the research.

This qualitative research involved a natural setting where the researcher collected data from participants who helped the researcher answer the problem and research questions. Multiple data sources were collected through interviews and online surveys. A thorough data analysis was conducted to detect themes, patterns, and categories from the research. The researcher's primary responsibility in this qualitative research was to identify the setting and participants of the study. The researcher became aware of any personal background, elements of culture, or experiences that shaped interpretations of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the process, the researcher was flexible and prepared for the research process to shift upon entering the field.

The Problem

The worldwide usage of social networking platforms cannot be overlooked. A better understanding of the context of how Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, were engaging

with social networking platforms and each other can help identify if social network activities help or hurt the engagement of the lost with the message of the Gospel through the means of digital discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. This study did not suggest that social media platforms diminish the power of the gospel message. Neither did this study attempt to abolish traditional approaches to discipleship. However, this study sought to examine the impact of Christians' social networking activities on digital discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study sought to understand better the perceived impact of social networking activities on discipleship in Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal denominations in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. The theory that guided this study is Connectivism (Goldie, 2016). Connectivism is the concept that learning occurs within interconnected learning communities, with information technologies playing a pivotal role. This learning theory underscores the significance of networked information resources in the learning process (Goldie, 2016).

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the perspectives of pastors about the use of social networking in ministry?

RQ2: How do pastors integrate social networking into their current discipleship platforms?

RQ3: How well do Christians receive the use of digital platforms for discipleship?

RQ4: How often do Christians use digital platforms for discipleship?

Research Design and Methodology

This qualitative study used a phenomenological design. This design allowed the researcher to address questions about the everyday human experiences among the study participants in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. This approach allowed the researcher to assess how the participants' expertise added meaning to social networking and how it impacted digital discipleship. The phenomenological design allowed the researcher to focus on the essence of each participant's experience with the digital phenomenon. The researcher was not concerned about whether discipleship programs were working but about how Christians in Yalobusha County experienced discipleship through social networking activities.

Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, were sent a recruitment email asking them to participate in a study regarding their use of social media in discipleship. A hyperlink for participants to take the same 14-question anonymous questionnaire was provided in the recruitment email. The researcher also conducted an online video interview with each participant primarily through Google Meet ©; however, Zoom © was offered to the participants who preferred the Zoom platform. No participants chose the Zoom platform for the interviews. All interviews were conducted through Google Meet ©. Each participant was asked the same ten open-ended interview questions on their usage of social networking in discipleship. The researcher sought at least 80 percent of the sample population to sign up and complete the questionnaire and the online interviews. The participants selected were Christian, aged 18-65, and participated in the research study voluntarily. Gender information was collected and averaged at the end of the study. The recruitment of participants yielded 25 individuals to be included in this study. However, five individuals were removed from this study because they

only completed the social networking questionnaire but declined to participate in the recorded interview. Upon coding the interviews for the 20 participants who completed the recorded interview and social networking questionnaire, saturation was reached, and the recruitment of participants was terminated.

To encourage participants to join the study, each participant had a chance to submit their name to win a \$50.00 gift card after completing the research study. To protect the participant's identity, the researcher sent out a separate email detailing the process of providing their name and address to enter a drawing to win a \$50.00 gift visa card for their participation in the survey. The participants receive a confirmation code once they complete the survey and will be required to enter it once they enter their name for the drawing to win the \$50.00 Visa gift card. The informed consent will explain this process, and the participant will be allowed to consent or not consent to the study.

Setting

This research study was conducted through an online digital setting to assess the impact of social networking on digital discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. This study examined how the perceived day-to-day activities using social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc., affected discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. The assumption in this study was that the use, overuse, or addiction to social media networking platforms is impacting discipleship.

The researcher contacted Churches and pastors throughout Yalobusha County, Mississippi, who used digital technology as a part of their ministry in the last 12-24 months. The researcher invited Christians aged 18-65 who had attended online church in the previous 12-24 months. The researcher sent an email link to the online questionnaire to all participants who

provided an email address. A flyer was sent or given to churches in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, to post in the church to inform those who would like to participate in the research study. An email link was on the flyer with instructions on how to sign up for the questionnaire. Once the participants sent an email to participate in the study, the researcher emailed the participants to take the questionnaire.

The recruitment of participants yielded 25 individuals to be included in this study. Five individuals were removed from this study because they only completed the social networking questionnaire but declined to participate in the recorded interview. Upon coding the interviews for the 20 participants who completed the recorded interview and social networking questionnaire, saturation was reached, and the recruitment of participants was terminated. According to the 2010 Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) “county membership report, the population of Yalobusha County, Mississippi, was 12,678 (ARDA, 2010). The adherent total of the religious groups, 13,383, included 105.6% of the total population in 2010. ARDA defined adherents in the following manner.

Congregational adherents include all full members, their children, and others regularly attending services. The 2010 reports contain incomplete counts of congregations and adherents belonging to the eight largest historically African-American denominations. These denominations are not included in the 2000 reports and are largely missing from the 1990 and 1980 reports (ARDA, 2010).

In its 2010 report, ARDA identified 17 denominations and 61 churches in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. Additionally, the 2010 report showed that some of the data from the most prominent African-American churches are missing, incomplete, or not identified as black or African-American in the report. The following denominations represent a small group of the eight largest African American Churches missing data from the report: The Church of God in Christ (COGIC), United Methodist Church (UMC), The Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC) and National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA). (ARDA, 2010).

Participants

The desired number of participants in this study was 25. A recruitment email was sent to Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, to encourage them to participate in the study. Each participant volunteered and was not randomly selected for this study. The Christians in this study were those who have attended online church service(s) in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, in the last 12-24 months. Participants recruited for this study were male and female between 18-65. Ten were female (50%), and ten were male (50%).

Sampling

This researcher used a purposeful sampling approach to collect data from the participants. The purposeful sampling technique allowed the researcher to collect data that showed how participants were impacted by social networking. The data collected by the purposeful sampling technique provided data that helped the researcher answer the research questions for this study.

Limitation of Generalizations

This qualitative phenomenological study was limited because of its small sample size of 25 participants from Christian churches of different denominations, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, and non-denominational, in Yalobusha, Mississippi. (Roberts, 2010). Twenty-five Participants from Yalobusha County, Mississippi, were chosen for this study. Participants must be between the ages of 18-65. For this study, the term Christian was defined as someone who follows Jesus Christ. Participants were members of various Christian church denominations, such as Baptist, Non-Denominational, Methodist, or Pentecostal. The sources of information used to attain this sample might not be comprehensive. This study used an open-ended online questionnaire and recorded interviews utilizing Zoom © or Google Meet ©. Therefore, the generalizability of Christians in Mississippi may be affected (Roberts, 2010).

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher must do the following to avoid researcher bias: Identify the setting and participants of the study, become aware of any personal background, elements of culture, or experiences that might shape interpretations of data, gather multiple forms of data such as questionnaires, non-participant observations, and artifacts. The researcher was flexible and prepared for the research process to shift upon entering the field, interpreting the data, and determining existing themes, patterns, or categories. The researcher checked for the accuracy of the findings.

Instrumentation is as critical in qualitative as in quantitative research. It takes strain and practice to write open-ended questions, the hallmark of a qualitative interview, and then to keep from transforming them into closed-ended questions, especially with a resistant subject when conducting the interview (Sofaer, 2002, p. 329).

The qualitative research exercised the following principles for interview implementation.

First, while the interviewer recorded the online interviews, the interviewer occasionally verified that it was recording. Secondly, the interviewer asked one question at a time. The interviewer remained neutral while participants were responding. Third, the interviewer provided a transition between significant topics, and lastly, the researcher maintained control of the interview. The researcher was aware of the kind of information obtained. During the time researchers spent with participants, no ethical issues arose. There were some personal relationships with participants. However, the researcher avoided settings that presented ethical dilemmas to the researcher. The researcher is male. Therefore, the researcher did not interview or observe female subjects behind closed doors. The researcher was aware of reciprocity. Participants in the study devoted their time and effort to the study. The researcher was mindful of the give and take between themselves and the participants.

Ethical Considerations

A proposal was submitted to the IRB to use human subjects to protect the participants' stress, discomfort, embarrassment, invasion of privacy, or potential threat to reputation (Roberts, 2010). There are minimal risks to the participants psychologically, physically, or socially. Before any research instruments were used, each participant was fully informed about the procedures and risks involved in the research project (Roberts, 2010). Participants were given the freedom and autonomy to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time without recriminations, and their participation was voluntary. Each participant received a statement that covered the essential elements of informed consent before the research study. This study was a low-risk study, and no participant was at risk. The researcher assured the confidentiality of the study participants. At no given time did the researcher use individual names in the study. Only the researcher had access to personal data collected on participants.

The information the researcher submitted to the IRB application followed the guidelines set by the IRB for Liberty University. The researcher used the IRB checklist for Liberty University and submitted the IRB application through Cayuse IRB. Incomplete IRB submissions were immediately returned. The researcher provided the supporting documents to the IRB. The researcher ensured that the study instruments were attached to the IRB application in Cayuse. Cayuse IRB required the researcher to attach various supporting documents to the application. The researcher used the document templates on the Liberty University IRB web page. The following templates were used to gather the following: Consent, recruitment, permission, and debriefing.

Before data collection began, each participant was fully informed about the procedures and risks involved in the research project (Roberts, 2010). Participants were given the freedom

and autonomy to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time without recriminations, and their participation was voluntary. Each participant received a statement that covered the essential elements of informed consent before the research study.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Collection Methods

To collect the qualitative data in this study, the researcher used a collection method that allowed participants to share their daily spiritual experiences with digital discipleship platforms. This research used a purposeful sampling approach. The purposeful sampling technique used the following to collect data to be analyzed. The data was collected through a sample questionnaire chosen because the total time to take the questionnaire is between 11 and 15 minutes.

Furthermore, the open-ended design of the sample questionnaire allowed the participants to explain their responses to some questions with a brief written answer. The sample questionnaire allowed the researcher to place a primary emphasis on saturation to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of social networking activities on digital discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Instruments and Research Protocols

In 2009, an Electronic Activities questionnaire was developed by Auday and Coleman (2009). This study was conducted out of concern for time college students devote to electronic social network activities (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, text messaging, etc.)” (Auday & Coleman, 2009). The authors were concerned with discovering self-reported negative consequences of excessive use of social networking activities (Auday & Coleman, 2009). The researchers also looked for positive outcomes from social networking technology (Auday & Coleman, 2009). The researchers would collect data from “1,342 students who attended one of

four Evangelical Christian Colleges within the U.S. during the spring of 2009” (Auday & Coleman, 2009). The researchers would find that Christian students were heavily using Facebook. According to Auday and Coleman (2009),

One in every three says he spends 1-2 hours on the site; 12 percent report using it 2-4 hours daily, and 2.8 percent report usage at 4-7 hours daily. That is in addition to other forms of social media and electronic usage such as video games, blogs, e-mail, and Internet browsing (p.17).

Survey Questionnaire

Along with the research questions in this study, the researcher adapted a questionnaire and the open-ended interview questions from Auday and Coleman’s (2009) Electronic Activities Questionnaire using SurveyMonkey. The online questionnaire took around 11-15 minutes to complete. This questionnaire was designed to explore the different kinds of electronic products commonly available to the participants and how they used them for discipleship. This information helped the researcher better understand the extent to which Christians engage in discipleship using social networking activities such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, video games, YouTube, cell phones, etc. This questionnaire was selected and adapted for this study because of its concept of measuring one’s engagement with digital devices and the positive and or negative impact on a person’s relationship with God and others (Auday & Coleman, 2009). Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, were sent a recruitment email asking them to participate in a study regarding their use of social media in discipleship. A hyperlink for participants to take the same 14-question anonymous questionnaire was provided in the recruitment email.

Recorded Online Interviews

The online interviews lasted 15-20 minutes and were recorded with the participant’s consent. The researcher interviewed each participant through online video chat or conferencing

platforms like Google Meet © or Zoom ©. The researcher also conducted an online video interview with each participant primarily through Google Meet ©; however, Zoom © was offered to the participants who preferred the Zoom platform. No participants chose the Zoom platform for the interviews. All interviews were conducted through Google Meet ©. Each participant was asked the same ten open-ended interview questions on using social networking in discipleship.

Document Analysis

A four-step coding process was used to analyze the raw data collected from the participants of this study. This coding process provided the researcher with a method to convert the data collected from the recorded interviews and social networking questionnaires into themes for analysis (Roberts, 2010). The data analysis process generated seven themes essential to the research questions, which are: (a) enhancement of discipleship, (b) spreading the gospel, (c) discipleship through social networking, (d) connectivity with members, (e) adaptation to social media, (f) in-person worship concerns utilizing social networking, (g) personal usage of social networking platforms.

Procedures

To protect the participants' stress, discomfort, embarrassment, invasion of privacy, or potential threat to reputation, the IRB submitted and approved a proposal to use human subjects (Roberts, 2010). This study has minimal risks to participants psychologically, physically, or socially.

Data Analysis

To establish rigor (trustworthiness) in this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher displayed the collected data and identified the coding process to convert the raw data

into themes for review (Roberts, 2010). This process included a four-step method for analyzing data collected from the questionnaire and the recorded interviews. Step one entailed all individual transcripts to be read and significant phrases to be extracted. In step two, the researcher started grouping and coding responses. Step three reviewed possible connections between themes and established final Coding. Lastly, Step four entailed the conclusion of data analysis, findings, last Review of transcripts, and validity of results. The researcher will apply the following standards: rigor, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Analysis Methods

Step one entailed reading all individual transcripts, and significant phrases were extracted. After data collection was completed, the researcher transcribed the data. The researcher reviewed all the data twice before developing the initial list of themes or patterns. Various themes arose from the initial reading, and each was assigned an initial coding (Roberts, 2010).

In step two, the researcher started grouping and coding responses. The responses of the participants were organized and grouped by each research question. The researcher then read the participants' responses to each research question, noted the relevant information, and established a list. Each research question contained the participant's response and was tallied by occurrence.

In step three of the research process, the aim was to delve deeper into the data and establish connections between the various themes identified during the previous phases, particularly those listed in the coding list from step two. The researcher conducted a comprehensive review of the transcripts' themes to accomplish this. These themes were collected and carefully examined about one another. The goal was to identify patterns, relationships, or overlaps between the themes. During this process, it became evident that some themes were

interconnected or could be grouped under broader categories. These connections and relationships were systematically documented. By identifying these connections, the researcher gained a more nuanced understanding of the data and how different aspects were interrelated. Ultimately, this step culminated in the finalization of the coding list. The coding list, now refined and enriched with the insights gained from thematic connections, was a powerful tool for organizing, analyzing, and interpreting the data coherently and comprehensively. It laid the foundation for the subsequent stages of data analysis and reporting of research findings.

Step four entailed the conclusion of the data analysis, findings, final review of transcripts, and validity of findings. In this final step in the coding process, the researcher checked the original transcripts to assess whether the themes were supported by satisfactory evidence in the Participants' actual dialogue. The researcher then reviewed all transcripts and determined and validated the findings, main themes, and patterns consistent with the data. Furthermore, the researcher used triangulation to validate the findings.

Trustworthiness

The researcher used triangulation to develop multiple methods to collect data for this research study. To better understand the impact of social networking, the researcher utilized the research questions and developed a 14-question questionnaire through Survey Monkey. This survey was then emailed to each participant who volunteered for the study. Additionally, the researcher utilized the research questions to develop ten open-ended questions for the online recorded interview. Triangulation allowed the researcher to collect data from multiple sources to better understand the phenomenon of social networking on discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. (Patton, 2002).

The researcher remained neutral with the findings of the inquiry. Every person is entitled to his or her viewpoint, viewed through cultural, experiential, environmental, and other contextual influences. However, researchers and their audiences, such as nurses in practice settings who hope to build a practice on the best evidence, need confidence and trust in the research findings presented. There are four components of trustworthiness available to researchers to establish trust in qualitative research. The four elements of trustworthiness relevant to qualitative research are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

“A qualitative study is considered credible when it presents an accurate description or interpretation of human experience that people who also share the same experience would immediately recognize” (Krefting, 1991, p.218). Credibility allows the reader to make out the experiences contained within the study by interpreting participants’ experiences. Credibility is achieved by checking for the representativeness of the data as a whole. The researcher established credibility in this study by examining each transcript and observing similarities in the transcript and research.

Dependability

Dependability encompasses the stability and trustworthiness of research outcomes, as well as the extent to which research methods are meticulously documented, enabling external parties to understand, assess, and scrutinize the research procedures (Sandelowski, 1986). In this study, the researcher documented the research design and implementation, the methodology and methods, and the details of data collection. The researcher achieved an audit trail by describing the specific purpose of the study, discussing how and why the participants were chosen for the study, explaining how the data were collected and how long the data collection lasted, describing

how the data were reduced or transformed for analysis, discussing the interpretation and presentation of the research findings and communicating the specific techniques used to determine the credibility of the data (Polit et al., 2006).

Confirmability

Confirmability is comparable to objectivity and transpires whenever the researcher establishes credibility, transferability, and dependability (Speziale et al., 2011). To ensure confirmability, the researcher was reflective and stayed mindful and open to the study and the results that developed—remaining reflective allowed the researcher to keep a self-critical attitude of how his or her preconceptions can affect the research (Sandelowski, 1986). The researcher selected poignant quotes from the collected data that best represent the findings. The researcher will not present Substantial portions of the interviews. Confirmability in this study was “concerned with providing evidence that the researcher’s interpretations of participants’ constructions are rooted in the participants’ constructions and data analysis and the resulting findings. Conclusions can be verified as reflective of and grounded in the participants’ perceptions” (Jensen, 2008, p.115).

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described transferability as “the ability to transfer research findings or methods from one group to another, or how one determines the extent to which the findings of a particular inquiry have applicability in other contexts or with other subjects/participants” (p. 2). To establish transferability, the researcher described the population of this study, including the descriptions of denominations, demographics, and geographic boundaries of the study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a better understanding of the qualitative phenomenological research design and how it increased the researcher's knowledge of the impact of social networking platforms on discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. This writer plans to use the findings from this study to help develop disciples through digital spaces in the Church where the researcher serves as the pastor. However, this researcher understands that there are limitations to this qualitative phenomenological study because of the small population size (Roberts, 2010). Further research should be conducted on the impact of social networking on commitments to Christ through social networking platforms.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter provides the results of the data analysis. This qualitative phenomenological research study sought to better understand the perceived impact of social networking activities on discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. This chapter covers each research question, seven themes developed from the data collected, protocol and measures taken, sample size, online surveys, and recorded interviews. Additionally, this chapter includes participant responses that helped better understand the impact of social networking on discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

To collect the qualitative data in this study, the researcher used a collection method that allowed participants to share their daily spiritual experiences with digital discipleship platforms. This research used a purposeful sampling approach. A purposeful sampling technique was used to collect and analyze the data. To collect the data, a sample questionnaire was chosen because the total time to take the questionnaire was between 11 and 15 minutes; the sample questionnaire allowed the researcher to place a primary emphasis on saturation to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of social networking activities on digital discipleship in Yalobusha County Mississippi (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Instruments and Protocols

In 2009, an Electronic Activities questionnaire, appendix A, was developed by Auday and Coleman (2009). This study was conducted out of concern for time college students devote to electronic social network activities (e.g., Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, text messaging, etc.)” (Auday & Coleman, 2009). The authors were concerned with discovering self-reported negative

consequences of excessive use of social networking activities (Auday & Coleman, 2009). The researchers also looked for positive outcomes from social networking technology (Auday & Coleman, 2009). The researchers would collect data from “1,342 students who attended one of four Evangelical Christian Colleges within the U.S. during the spring of 2009” (Auday & Coleman, 2009, p.14). Auday and Coleman (2009) found that:

One in every three says he spends 1-2 hours on the site; 12 percent report using it 2-4 hours daily, and 2.8 percent report usage at 4-7 hours daily. That is in addition to other forms of social media and electronic usage such as video games, blogs, e-mail, and Internet browsing (p. 17).

Along with the research questions in this study, the researcher adapted a questionnaire and the open-ended interview questions from Auday and Coleman’s (2009) Electronic Activities Questionnaire using SurveyMonkey. However, the researcher received the necessary permission, appendix A, to modify the questions on the questionnaire for the present time and this research study on October 16, 2020. The online questionnaire took around 11-15 minutes to complete. The online interviews lasted 15-20 minutes and were recorded with the participants’ consent.

This questionnaire was designed to explore the different kinds of electronic products commonly available to the participants and how they used them for discipleship. This information helped the researcher better understand the extent to Christians, ages 18-65, in Yalobusha County Mississippi engaged in discipleship using social networking activities such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, video games, YouTube, cell phones, etc. This questionnaire was selected and adapted for this study because of its concept of accessing one’s engagement with digital devices and the positive and or negative impact on a person’s relationship with God and others (Auday & Coleman, 2009). The researcher interviewed each participant through online video chat or conferencing platforms like Google Meet © or Zoom ©.

Procedures

Before data collection began, each participant was fully informed about the procedures and risks involved in the research project (Roberts, 2010). Participants were given the freedom and autonomy to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time without recriminations, and their participation was voluntary. Each participant received a statement covering the essential elements of informed consent on the questionnaire's first page before the research study. To protect the participants' stress, discomfort, embarrassment, invasion of privacy, or potential threat to reputation, a proposal was submitted to and approved by the IRB to use human subjects (Roberts, 2010). This study had minimal risks to participants psychologically, physically, or socially.

Demographic and Sample Data

Participants volunteered and were not randomly selected for this study. The desired number of participants was 25. However, five participants did not participate in the recorded interview. This left 20 (80 percent) of the 25 participants who completed both the online survey questionnaire and the recorded interview. Saturation was achieved at 80 percent of the desired participants. Ten participants were female (50%), and ten were male (50%).

Data Analysis and Findings

Data for this study was collected from keywords in the recorded virtual interviews and the social networking activities questionnaire. This allowed the researcher to explore the theoretical concept of connectivism, which assisted the researcher in establishing a genuine connection between concept and data.

The data analysis method produced seven themes essential to the research questions in this study, specifically, (a) enhancement of discipleship, (b) spreading the gospel, (c) discipleship

through social networking, (d) connectivity with members, adaptation to social media, (f) in-person worship concerns utilizing social networking, (g) personal usage of social networking platforms. The themes that materialized were then analyzed to understand the challenges pastors and members experience with using social networking platforms in discipleship and their personal lives.

The findings from research question one, the pastors' perspectives regarding using social networking in ministry, showed that the participants generally perceived that pastors favored using social networking platforms for ministry. Although some pastors were initially apprehensive about using social networking in ministry, the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on public gatherings forced the hands of the more traditional pastors to embrace the use of social networking platforms for ministry.

Most participants (95%) expressed that the pastors perceived that social networking platforms could enhance discipleship and were open to utilizing digital platforms to accomplish and sustain the church's mission when traditional discipleship methods are impractical. All participants stated that COVID-19 presented a unique problem for pastors in how to get the gospel to their members. However, this research found that the pastors, in general, who held a positive perspective on using social networking in ministry successfully merged social networking into their traditional ministry platforms.

The findings from research question two, how do pastors integrate social networking into their current discipleship platforms, showed that most pastors in Yalobusha County had integrated social networking into their current discipleship platforms. Some employed social networking platforms effectively, and some could have been more effective. The study found

that some were effective in integrating social media, and most pastors used Facebook Live to conduct Bible studies, Sunday Services, Conferences, and pastoral Care.

The study found that some pastors had no media teams and struggled to use social networking in ministry. However, many older pastors relied heavily on the younger members and those who frequently used social networking to ministry to stand up social networking platforms. This allowed pastors to participate in social networking and stay connected to the Members who wanted to attend physical services but could not because of COVID-19 fears or because they were otherwise unable to attend services.

The study revealed that the more traditional pastors who could implement social networking platforms for ministry discovered that they could reach a broader audience than before using social networking. Many pastors had minimal or no digital social networking platforms to spread the gospel beyond their in-person service and word of mouth before COVID-19. The study found that the willingness of the pastors in Yalobusha County allowed them to tap into the social networking society. Social networking. The methods or ways people connect to the local church can significantly impact their learning. The present phenomenon of digital culture has radically changed the way people connect to the church. Pastors had to change their perception to embrace the digital revolution or risk losing connection to their members during the pandemic.

Additionally, the study revealed that most pastors and churches in Yalobusha County redirected a small percentage of their traditional resources to online evangelism. They successfully transitioned to integrating digital platforms into their evangelistic efforts. They continued to spread the gospel and keep physical space for ministry for those who wanted to attend in-person services (Zylasta, 2015).

The findings from research question three, how well Christians receive digital platforms for discipleship, found that Christians needed to adapt to social networking to listen to online messages and discipleship when in-person worship was not feasible. The study found that COVID-19 presented many challenges for churches in Yalobusha County. Yalobusha County is a rural county; therefore, internet access and media teams were limited for some churches.

The study found that most participants generally believed Christians were adapting well to social networking platforms for discipleship; social networking somehow made those who could attend in-person services somewhat lethargic. The study revealed that members preferred watching church online instead of attending church. Like the disciples, in many ways, pastors and church leaders must either change their perception of social networking or risk losing connectivity to new and existing members. It was found that all 20 participants understood the need for social networking in ministry, especially during the current pandemic; all the participants shared the same desire to return to in-person worship. Many participants referred to the bible as it relates to the importance of assembling as believers in a physical space.

The findings from research question four, how often Christians use digital platforms for discipleship, showed that many participants used social networking platforms once or several times per day. During the interviews, some participants described their usage of digital platforms as mainly being used to share live messages from their church, repost inspiring Christian posts on their page with others, and post scriptures. However, some participants stated that they use digital platforms daily for ministry.

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the perspectives of pastors about the use of social networking in ministry?

RQ2: How do pastors integrate social networking into their current discipleship platforms?

RQ3: How well do Christians receive the use of digital platforms for discipleship?

RQ4: How often do Christians use digital platforms for discipleship?

Evaluation of Research Design

The Institutional Review Board for Liberty University approved the application of data review for this study—recruitment for participants from. The recruitment of participants yielded 25 individuals to be included in this study; 5 were removed from this study due to only completing the social networking questionnaire but declining to participate in the recorded interview. Upon coding the interviews for the 20 participants who completed the recorded interview and social networking questionnaire, saturation was reached, and recruitment of participants was terminated. Table 1 captures the demographics of the participants of this study.

The researcher used a four-step coding process to analyze the raw data collected from the participants of this study. This coding process provided the researcher with a method to convert the data collected from the recorded interviews and social networking questionnaires into themes for analysis (Roberts, 2010). The data analysis process generated seven themes essential to the research questions, which are: (a) enhancement of discipleship, (b) spreading the gospel, (c) discipleship through social networking, (d) connectivity with members, (e) adaptation to social media, (f) in-person worship concerns utilizing social networking, (g) personal usage of social networking platforms.

To establish rigor (trustworthiness) in this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher displayed the collected data and identified the coding process to convert the raw data into themes for review (Roberts, 2010). This process included a four-step process for analyzing data collected from the questionnaire and the recorded interviews.

Step One: Preliminary Reading of Transcripts

After completing 20 recorded interviews and transcribing responses from the social networking questionnaires, the researcher undertook a rigorous data examination process. This entailed reviewing the collected data twice to ensure a comprehensive understanding. During this initial review, various recurring themes and patterns within the data began to emerge organically. Identifying these themes was a critical step in the research journey. As the researcher delved into the transcripts and questionnaire responses, it became evident that the participants consistently raised specific topics, ideas, or issues. These emerging themes provided valuable insights into the subjects under investigation. This initial thematic exploration paved the way for the subsequent steps of grouping and coding the responses. By categorizing the data into distinct themes, the researcher could systematically analyze and extract meaningful information from the collected data, ultimately contributing to a more structured and insightful interpretation of the research findings.

Step Two: Grouping and Coding of Responses

After collecting and coding the participants' responses, the next step in the research process involved organizing and categorizing these responses based on the specific research questions. The researcher carefully sorted and grouped the participants' answers, ensuring that all relevant responses were grouped under the research question. The researcher reviewed each participant's response to every research question to refine the analysis further. This in-depth examination allowed the researcher to identify recurring patterns, themes, or commonalities in the participants' answers. From this scrutiny, a master list of response categories was meticulously crafted. This critical phase, step three, was pivotal in the research process. It laid

the groundwork for a structured and systematic data analysis, enabling the researcher to draw meaningful insights and conclusions from the participant's responses to each research question.

Step Three: Final Review of Transcripts and Final Coding

Following the establishment of the master list in step two, the researcher proceeded to code each participant's transcripts. This coding process involved meticulously noting down any instance where a second or third reference to a specific topic or theme was made within the responses provided by each participant. This thorough examination ensured that all recurrent elements were identified and appropriately documented. Upon completing this coding phase, the list was thoroughly reviewed and refined to ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness. This finalization of the coding list marked a crucial step in the research process, as it provided a solid foundation for subsequent data analysis and interpretation.

Step Four: Completion of Data Analysis and Report of Findings

The researcher analyzed each participant's response to the research and an analysis of each interview question and social networking question. This action led to themes for the research questions. The researcher then examined all transcripts for a final time to establish that the findings and the key themes and patterns were consistent with the data collected. The research then conducted a literature comparison to ascertain which one, if any, of the findings did or did not support the literature in this study (Bullion, 1996).

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant	Age Range	Gender
Code		
1 Jane	45-54	Female

2 Sara	25-34	Female
3 Mary	45-54	Female
4 Alice	35-44	Female
5 Kevin	45-54	Male
6 Brianna	45-54	Female
7 Mark	65+	Male
8 Janice	25-34	Female
9 Kathy	35-44	Female
10 Eric	45-54	Male
11 Billy	35-44	Male
12 David	45-54	Male
13 Samuel	45-54	Male
14 Richard	35-44	Male
15 Earnest	45-54	Male
16 Larry	45-54	Male
17 Matthew	35-44	Male
18 Dianne	45-54	Female
19 Martha	45-54	Female
20 Julie	25-34	Female

This research found that most participants believed pastors' perception of social networking in ministry in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, was generally receptive and positive. Additionally, the Social Networking Questionnaire would support the pastors' perspective discovered in the participant's responses in the recorded interview. When participants were

asked, “What is your pastor’s take on the use of social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in ministry, ninety-five percent of the participant's responses were that their pastor either strongly approved or approved the use of the social networking sites in ministry. The responses from the recorded interviews and the social networking questionnaire found that most of the pastors in Yalobusha County generally support using social networking platforms to spread the gospel when traditional discipleship methods were not feasible.

As the literature confirms, the concept or call of discipleship must not rest on the commitment of the culture, individuals, or digital and physical spaces. The concept or call of discipleship must rest on the person of Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer says, “Discipleship is a commitment to Christ” (Bonhoeffer, 2001). Bonhoeffer would suggest that Christian discipleship should be compelled by the believer’s knowledge of the living Christ and not by their discipleship. Bonhoeffer states the following,

“Christianity without the living Jesus Christ remains necessarily a Christianity without discipleship, and a Christianity without discipleship is always a Christianity without discipleship” (Bonhoeffer, 2001, p.42).

Bonhoeffer's claim revealed that the call to discipleship must always be based on one’s commitment to Christ and not some emerging spiritual formation models absent of Christ. Discipleship means that a person has chosen to be a student of Christ or one that learns from Christ. Bonhoeffer’s claim reinforces this study that discipleship models or platforms must include Christ and his teachings. Discipleship also involves connectivity. Bonhoeffer's claim supports this study’s findings of the importance of learning. The guiding theory of this research study is Connectivism. “Connectivism is the idea that learning takes place across networked learning communities, and information technologies are central to Connectivism, a theory of

learning that emphasizes the importance of networked information resources throughout the processes of learning” Goldie (2016).

Research Question 1: What are the perspectives of pastors about the use of social networking in ministry?

Theme 1: Enhancement of Discipleship

Research question one, the first theme that became visible and was established from the recorded interview and the social networking questionnaire transcripts was the *Enhancement of Discipleship*. During the interview, the participants were asked *what the pastor thinks about using Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube for discipleship*. Many participants frequently alluded that the pastor’s perspective on using social networking in ministry is an excellent tool to enhance discipleship. For example, participant Jane stated the following about the pastor’s perspective on the use of social networking:

Pastor thinks Facebook could enhance discipleship in the kingdom of God. The pastor does believe that in-person worship is the best. In-person worship is more effective; however, for the time that we are living in the various schedules of people, sickness, and just even now in this pandemic where we are not able to gather in large numbers are not able to gather in numbers, it could be used as a tool for specific purposes. However, the primary source of worship should be in-person worship.

Participant Earnest also had mixed reviews regarding the pastor’s perspective on the use of social networking in ministry:

You have your positive and your negative. On the positive side, you have members who are not able to be there, but they can watch the service online. Then, on the negative side, many will use that to keep from having to come to church. You can probably look at the percentage of membership and see that it has dropped tremendously because now, everybody values going live. They do not have to leave home; they are just going live online. So, it has got a negative and a positive side. On the positive side, many older members are getting used to technology and have been using it to come to service when they could not get there that day. On the negative side, you have got young members you think would be coming to church; they are using social media as an excuse not to attend church.

Richard stated that the only other platform that was used, other than Facebook, is Twitter. He had one of the younger members help. Most of our older members have a Facebook account, but they do not have a Twitter account. Many of our younger people have Twitter accounts, so he checks in with them to ensure they put the weekly and mid-week messages on Twitter to share with the public. So, he is totally in agreement with Facebook and Twitter for ministry.

Participant Richard stated that:

The above example is a memory because the pastor is an elderly pastor, and his acceptance of Facebook shows that the pastor was open to change. Social media has become an excellent platform to reach younger people. This also showed me he was interested in reaching out to our younger people. You may not get young people to come to church without social media. It was going to be hard for them to walk through the doors. Hopefully, you can get them to come to the church by contacting them on social media.

Theme 2: Spreading the Gospel

The following visible theme of research question one was *Spreading the Gospel*;

participant Mark said the following:

The pastor is approximately 65-66 years of age today and is in the older group. He welcomed it because it is easy to see the necessity of how it could be used today. Especially with the technology and everybody tied to their cell phones and even how they use their bibles, tablets, and even music on their devices such as iPads, cell phones, and even in church. So, within that, he welcomed it, saw the need, and pushed towards it very aggressively, I would say. We already have a website, and we automatically stream our services, but we can also save those services on the internet through YouTube, our website, or other forms of technology. The other thing with Twitter, especially Facebook, is that your special events, like baptism or other activities, can be streamed live. Many people love seeing their pictures and faces participating in those events on Facebook or Twitter. YouTube could also be used a lot for ministry. I used it a lot, especially with bible study. We once did essential discipleship and Ogden's devotional and the study. Ogden also posted these devotionals on YouTube, and his perception of what he was trying to teach went along with each chapter as we went through the bible study. There was also a test, and you had the author on the side who would give you his opinions. There are ways to do studies remotely, even in different languages. My wife was taking a Hebrew class that was free online to study the ancient language of Hebrew. New technology opened many opportunities to disciple others."

Research question 2: How do pastors integrate social networking into their discipleship platforms?

Theme 1: Discipleship Through Social Networking

Research question two, *“How pastors integrate social networking into their current discipleship platforms,* the first theme that became visible and was established from the recorded interview transcripts and the social networking questionnaire. The research found that most pastors in Yalobusha County were generally receptive to integrating social networking platforms into their discipleship platforms. However, participants revealed that there was a learning curve in integrating social networking platforms into their ministry platforms. The research did establish that pastors and churches in Yalobusha County were able to integrate social networking platforms into their discipleship platforms successfully:

Participants were asked in the interview, *“Can you provide an example of how pastors have integrated Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube into discipleship,”* they said the following.

Participant Jane would give the following example of how the pastor has integrated social networking into discipleship:

From Sunday morning worship to Bible Study to conferences. Again, people have used social media for a while, but again, in the state of the pandemic, it has become massive. So, to still reach the people that belonged to their church and the fantastic new people, from using it to host conferences to having regular Sunday morning service, On Bible study, you can use Facebook and Twitter to bring in other people, not just one person talking; all of you can be on the screen, chiming in and giving advice, and things like that. One of the most significant examples of the time we are living in now would be in this pandemic stage, to keep people connected to the Word and still be able to check on people. Not just that, if the pastor wanted to do wellness checks on his members. Just like doctors make virtual appointments, the scripture says that you can call for the church's elders; the elder may not be able to go, but he can call virtually and do just like the doctor. He can pray for you. over the phone and the internet. Moreover, it is still not just over the phone but allows that person to see your face. Those virtual house calls are best for them regarding house calls.

Participant Richard stated:

I have seen pastors in Yalobusha County use Facebook. I have seen more and more pastors use Facebook and Twitter to go live during services; again, they were trying to get the message out. So, they were going live during their weekly programs, mid-week programs to their programs that they have by just going live and letting people know and

giving people information about their church and information about the word of God or trying their best to get the information about the word of God out through social media. I have seen them use it by spreading the word about community services and community projects the church is doing. So, it all comes back to spreading the word; they are using it to spread the word through social media activities.

Theme 2: Connectivity with Members

Another theme that stood out regarding research question two is *Connectivity with Members*. The theory guiding this study is Connectivism (Goldie, 2016). “Connectivism is the idea that learning takes place across networked learning communities, and information technologies are central to Connectivism, a theory of learning that emphasizes the importance of networked information resources throughout learning processes” (Goldie, 2016. p. 4). All participants appear to suggest that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, using social networking platforms helped pastors maintain connectivity to their members.

When the participants were asked, *why is this example important to you?* Participant Mary would state the following when asked why it was important for pastors to integrate social networking into discipleship:

I think it reaches some people; I will not say all. I think that people who are afraid or uncomfortable with coming to church just yet can be reached through the word, through Facebook. They also can be reached through, you know, the singing as well, whatever it is that they are watching at the time. They probably will gain some insight into what is happening at the church.

Participant Eric expanded on how social networking enhances the connectivity with members within the ministry:

I need to use it because we need to give people every means of hearing the word of God. There is television, so if there is television and people sit at home and watch TV, they are going to sit at home and watch a ministry on TV. To maintain the number of members, you must put your church on that platform so they can stay and watch you. Because if you cut that off, they do not get that opportunity to enjoy your service when they cannot come. They will be drawn to someone else. You can lose members that way. So, the church must provide every means they can in every way, shape, form, and fashion to maintain that membership and ensure that people hear the message that you believe in. We all have different interpretations of the Bible. There are just some out there that are

preaching things that are not true. So, you want to maintain your membership and your people and ensure they receive the word you feel is correct. During the Pandemic, without those means of social media to maintain that connection with your church members and your pastor, it influenced many people. Without that, you could lose many people to other churches, or you can have them fall back into the way of the world.

A few participants noticed that their pastors had more difficulty adapting to integrating social networking in their ministries due to a lack of proper technology or prior knowledge.

Participant Alice's previous response to how pastors integrate social networking into their ministry platforms expands on this thought:

I think many pastors, especially old school pastors, who do not know how to go Facebook live, were finding their way into the Facebook zone per se. Not really Twitter, Instagram, YouTube. Even though those are great platforms to have, I think if they had a team to take them to that point, then they would go over into it, but a lot of the old-school pastors do not have access to those kinds of things, and they are just now learning about the app. I know my pastor does not have a media team. This was so funny because my pastor was preaching, and he was holding the phone while he was preaching. I stepped in because I was not a part of his generation, but the next, I told the pastor, " Your word is too rich for you to be preaching, holding the phone in your hand; you have got to do something different. I did not attack him with my thoughts. I was the change, and I bought him a tripod, and you sit it there, and you do not have to move it or do anything. Just have somebody on your side that you would also listen to because some pastors are stuck in their ways; they do not want the help. They want to do it on their own, and however it turns out is how it turns out. I do not feel like that is how ministries should be but to each their own.

Some participants also stated that social networking helped connect members during the COVID-19 pandemic. As COVID restrictions surrounding public gatherings loosened, many participants believed that many members were no longer coming inside the physical building.

Participant David states:

During Covid, I thought it needed to be done. Unfortunately, because of COVID, you have many people who will never come back to physical church in the sanctuary and are still relying on the social media part. With the likes and comments, I guess that is how they kept up with it. Those who manage social media for the church would say before the preaching that some people who could not return because of COVID-19 feared coming back. Most of those people are sometimes older and can still do social media.

Although there has been some initial hesitation towards implementing social networking within their ministries, many participants felt that their pastors generally approved of using it. According to the Social Network Activities questionnaire, ninety respondents felt that their pastor approved using social networking within their ministry.

Research question 3: How well do Christians receive the use of digital platforms for discipleship?

Theme 1: Adaptation towards social media

Research question three examined, *how well do Christians receive the use of digital platforms for discipleship?* Adaptation to social media was the first theme that became visible and established from the recorded interview and the social networking questionnaire transcripts. Whenever the participants were asked in the interview *how well they were adapting to the use of social networking in ministry*, over ninety percent of the participants believed that Christians were adapting well to the use of social media. However, a small percentage of the participants found that it was not easy to transition using social networking platforms for ministry.

Participant Sara stated the following:

Christians have adapted well and accepted social networking and social media in ministry. In some cases, this has become the preferred method, especially for those who have had difficulty physically attending services.

Participant Brianna indicated that social media adaptation makes social networking platforms the preferred choice. Social networking platforms also opened the door for Christians to pick and choose whom they wanted to hear on that Sunday rather than the church in which they were members:

I think that Christians, some, I will not say a lot of Christians, but some have taken it to a point where it is the only way. They view the physical building as a place where you know it is no longer a full effect for them, and they use social media platforms, such as Facebook, as their only means to contact other people. However, they view different pastors on the site, yet they still do not have that specific pastor or their leadership that would correct them in that time of need. So, they gravitate towards the one that can speak

towards their flesh instead of their spirit man. So, the spirit man is dying and starving because they do not have that connection with the leader. They hear and see somebody on Facebook; there is no connection there; it is just a connection to the flesh but not the spirit man. The spirit man is slowly drying out, and the fleshly man is growing stronger. Therefore, they do not have that connection to walk in complete healing. There is no accountability there; they can say one thing and say yes, I love God, but still, their flesh is saying one thing, but their spirit man is saying, I need help. They can say I am healthy and strong, but spiritually they are not. There is no eye-to-eye contact when they watch. The service is online, and there is no way to have that correction and that accountability. You can always dress it up, but when that storm comes, how will they stand?

Although the general responses towards the adaptability and usage of social networking in ministry have been generally receptive, there has been some opposition. Participant Earnest shares their thoughts on the adaptation of it in ministry:

They have adapted it three times because many now use it as a platform or an excuse not to be in church. And then when they do come, I have personally heard myself, some members have said, "I have gotten so used to seeing it on live, I did not even get out of my bed. I can watch it while I am lying down or sit in the living room while watching it. It is suitable for the Pandemic, which is fine, but it is different when you are there.

Participant Martha stated:

I think that they have adapted very well. In my personal experience, it was not very easy with social media. At my church, at first, they were not for social media. They had a thing with the iPad being out because you are not always being politically correct or you are not always using proper English, but now we see it as a way to reach young people. Just be yourself whether the cameras are on or not. It is more acceptable now.

This research study revealed that most participants believe Christians in Yalobusha County adapted well to using social networking in ministry. The above participant's responses supported this research that social networking should play a significant role in ministry but not be a replacement for ministry. Many participants raised concerns that social networking became the preferred method of attending church over in-person worship in the physical space. Many participants stressed the need for an emphasis on in-person worship because of the benefits of the assembly and the encouragement not to forsake assembling as one body, as it says in Hebrews.

“Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Hebrews 10:23-25).

This study showed that many churches effectively leveraged social networking to maintain fellowship when in-person worship was restricted. This finding would support the literature in this study. Voght stated, “When done well, social networking can enhance the church's fellowship by providing congregants a window into each other's lives. It can mobilize congregants to serve their neighbors and enhance the church's mission by embedding the community of church relationships in the broader community” (Voght, 2018, p.60).

The participants' responses revealed that although social networking platforms can enhance and assist with discipleship, they should never serve as a means to replace physical relationships between human beings. In the age of social distancing, in-person fellowship has been strained. Social media networks may connect people, but they, in many ways, detract from gatherings. This does not mean Churches should avoid using social networking platforms.

Research question 4: How often do Christians use digital platforms for discipleship?

Theme 1: In-Person Worship Concerns Utilizing Social Networking

About research question four, *how often do Christians use digital platforms for discipleship?* The first theme that became visible and established from the recorded interview and the social networking questionnaire transcripts was In-Person Worship Concerns Utilizing Social Networking. Whenever participants were asked what issues they think are related to the use of social networking in ministry, participant Jane responded with the following: Participant Martha stated,

I see that sometimes, when you are on social media in the ministry, you sway off where you should be. I have noticed that sometimes, when you have your Facebook up in the church, something could catch your attention, and you could lose where you are supposed to be. You cannot concentrate on what you are doing because you are more on social media than listening to or paying attention to what you are doing for the service.

Participant Brianna indicated in their response that discipleship through social networking could create a false balance between digital ministry and in-person worship, where believers prefer online ministry rather than in-person service.

When there is no balance between online and in-person service, it could cause a person to wander away from God, seeking other things to fulfill their need. You lose a spiritual part of yourself where you were once strong in certain areas, and you could become weak when you have opened yourself up to something you cannot shake when you allow yourself to wander away from that connection of in-person fellowship. The word has become watered down and muffled. It is not as strong as it used to be.

Participant Samuel stated,

Even though you are reaching them, you still want that personal connection. That is one of the issues dealing with it: you do not have that personal connection. Yes, they are looking in via Facebook Live or Zoom, whichever one you may be using, but that personal connection of seeing them face to face and communicating with them face to face.

Participant Richard stated,

We must get our pastors to work together in ministry, especially with social media. Our pastors need to get a network of pastors, and they work together in ministry because everyone should have the same goal. When the message is different and the goal is different. If I am spreading the word, but your goal is to promote yourself, we could not work together in ministry, even on social media. So, I think social media needs to be integrated where we are promoting the word of God. If I am promoting the word of God, I will be happy for that other person promoting the word of God also. That is why I say we must work together in ministry on social media; that way, we make the word of God a Top Priority. That way, everybody is on the same page, and social media will work. Moreover, we can reach out to the lost. The goal must be the same. I told people all the time that the words are the same. The King James Version has not changed in years. The problem is how we give it to the people; the end goal must be the same.

Theme 2: Frequency of Personal Use

Research question four presented another theme: how participants utilized social networking in their personal lives, ministry, and discipleship. This can be measured in many

ways. A few ways this could be measured are their preferred social networking method, how often they use it, etc. According to the Social Network Activities questionnaire, sixty percent of the twenty participants favored utilizing Facebook daily for discipleship. Another social Networking platform participants favor is YouTube, with forty-five percent of participants utilizing it daily. The questionnaire revealed that participants preferred to utilize something other than Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat for personal use or within the ministry.

When asked, “*How often do you engage in using social networking sites for discipleship,*” in the Social Network Activities questionnaire, sixty percent of the participants said they used social networking sites almost daily. Forty percent of the participants said they sparingly used social networking sites for discipleship. This showcased how many are shifting towards utilizing social networking sites and platforms to increase their outreach or participation within ministry and discipleship. Participant Jane showcased how they utilize social networking for discipleship:

To broadcast our services every Sunday, we do not broadcast every day. However, we do put up scripture or clips from messages. Again, going back to people being distracted, you may not have been able to sit through the whole message, but we will put up a clip during the week. Because people now are so busy. It is hard for them to sit up and do twenty-minute messages; giving you a two-minute or three-minute clip will help you. Maybe I would say go back to the page and follow our page for the entire message. So, I would say very often because we broadcast every Sunday, but we put up clips on social media during the week. We are also sending out encouraging messages and things like that.

Participant Eric elaborated on how they utilize social networking within their ministry and personal life:

Not only do I use it in my ministry as far as Wednesday night bible study, but I am also in charge of that, so I use it to air it, especially during the winter months when we do not have a church, that is our form of communications, and that is that way we do our Wednesday bible study is virtual through social media. Even when we return to the church during the spring, winter, and fall months, we will still have social media and live members who come to the church. If I use it to do the ministry, I also listen. We have

morning Mana, M-W-F mornings. I would get up and listen to that person giving their morning mana text, so it is weekly, daily.

Some participants who did not utilize social networking sites specifically for discipleship have mentioned different methods of reaching others through discipleship. Participant Mary stated:

I use the phone sometimes, maybe a Facetime call or something like that, to see someone when I minister to them. That would be the only thing that I would use. I have made some message calls through Messenger on Facebook; that way, I can still see them, but for others to see. I do it that way; I think it is easier for others because, many times, people are not comfortable with Zoom or the new apps that can allow you to see each other. A lot of them may not have it on their phone. So, I think it is more accessible to Facetime; even with Messenger, I can do it that way because some may not have an iPhone. As well as messenger call, you can still see the person”.

A consensus among the participants stated that they enjoyed using social networking sites to encourage others. Participant Janice provided insight on how they encourage social networking sites:

I would see a friend who may make a particular post, and I know that is not typically their character. I will reach out to them, encourage them, and give them a sermon. To push them along the way. Like I said before, the small moments are what matters.

Participant Dianne stated, “I sometimes post encouraging words by posting scriptures. Moreover, posting what is revealed to me in those scriptures.”

The above participants responses revealed their engagement with social networking in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. The participants responses supported the literature in this study that the utilization of digital technology empowered the participants to engage others with the gospel Hunt (2019). The present culture is a digital culture, and this study revealed that over 60 percent of the participants found creative ways to engage Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi by reposting live messages or scriptures on social media platforms, such as, Facebook. The participants’ usage of digital technology supported the literature in this study

because it allowed the believer to interact, behave, think, and communicate with others within a societal context (Thomas, 2011).

The strength of this research design was the purposeful sampling technique used to gather the data to for this study. This sampling technique utilized a 14-question online questionnaire and an 10 open ended questions that were asked to each participant in the study. Each participant were asked the same questions on both the survey questionnaire and the recorded interview. The purposeful technique allowed the researcher to gather each participant's individual lived experience and examine the impact of social networking on discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi.

The weakness found in this study was its small sample size of 25 desire participants. Five of those participants were eliminated from the study for declining to participate in both the online survey and the recorded interview. Saturation was achieved at 80 percent, and the data analysis process generated seven themes essential to the research questions. A larger sample size could have provide the researcher with more data to further examine the impact of social networking in Yalobusha County, Mississippi.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This section summarizes the primary points of this research study. The research questions and outcomes will be reiterated and then contextualized. This chapter concentrated on the importance of research data that was gathered and the research data results. This section summarizes the advantages of this research study as it relates to how Christians benefited from social networking in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. This section will explain the findings in this research related to the literature used in study. Lastly, this concluding chapter of this study discusses the limitations and applications of this research study and gives recommendations for further research on the impact of social networking on discipleship.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological research study is to understand better the perceived impact of social networking activities on discipleship in Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal denominations in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. The theory that guided this study is Connectivism (Goldie, 2016). Connectivism is the concept that learning occurs within interconnected learning communities, with information technologies playing a pivotal role. This learning theory underscores the significance of networked information resources in the learning process (Goldie, 2016).

Christian leaders are faced with various leadership challenges. Despite those challenges, the missional responsibilities of the Great Commission continue to be of first importance. In the season of the coronavirus pandemic, churches worldwide are experiencing unprecedented and unfamiliar changes in how they worship, fellowship, and spread the gospel and fellowship together. This study revealed that no simple leadership theory or method is applied to the use of social networking to address areas fundamental to making disciples, such as outlined in Matthew

Chapter 28. However, this study aims to understand better how Churches can and are leveraging social networking activities to develop disciples and spread the Gospel (Zylasta, 2015).

The findings from this research study discovered seven themes visible in the study. Participants in this study revealed that their pastor thought that using social networking in ministry would be an opportunity to enhance discipleship. The participants also revealed that the pastors believed that social networking was a tool that could be used to help spread the gospel. This research study revealed that pastors in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, were effectively disciplining others through social networking through Bible Study, wellness checks with members who could not attend in-person services, Live broadcasts of Sunday worship services, and virtual conferences.

This research study showed that connectivity with members was maintained through social networking platforms when in-person worship was not feasible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also showed that adapting to social networking was straightforward for most Christians in Yalobusha County. Many of the participants in this study revealed that some Christians preferred online ministry rather than in-person service.

Churches' use of social networking is not meant to be a downgrade to the concept of discipleship. Discipleship remains the presiding premise and foundation. The term social networking describes the technological revolution happening around the world today. As in the case of the BGEA furloughing 10 percent of its staff and redirecting those resources to online evangelism, this study found ways to use social networking to deliver the gospel to people who live in Yalobusha County (Zylasta, 2015). This study showed the need for churches to make the transition to integrate digital platforms into their evangelistic efforts to help spread the gospel while simultaneously maintaining a physical space for ministry. BGEA's results and

incorporation of a social networking platform show that these platforms can help spread the gospel. BGEA's boldness in reducing staff can also point to the theological relevance of social networking as a method of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the perspectives of pastors about the use of social networking in ministry?

RQ2: How do pastors integrate social networking into their current discipleship platforms?

RQ3: How well do Christians receive the use of digital platforms for discipleship?

RQ4: How often do Christians use digital platforms for discipleship?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

This study demonstrated that churches in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, must consider the worldwide usage of social networking platforms. This study provided a better understanding of how Christians in Yalobusha County engaged with social networking platforms, the pros and cons of social networking on discipleship, and the engagement of the lost with the message of the Gospel in Yalobusha County, Mississippi.

This study addressed the problem that Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, were impacted positively and negatively by discipleship through social networking platforms. The literature review in Chapter 2 showed that some pastors struggled with embracing the idea of social networking for ministry. A Barna research study showed that nearly half of the pastors struggled to find a hybrid digital and physical space model that worked in their ministry (Barna, 2020). This study demonstrated that despite the challenges faced by churches in Yalobusha County, each participant revealed that their church found a way to integrate social networking into their discipleship efforts (Barna, 2020).

Recently, pastors shared the most significant challenges they face as they lead their church through the pandemic. Nearly half say they are struggling with ministry to kids and youth (47%), maintaining growth and momentum (46%), and figuring out a hybrid church (44%). Other areas of concern include personal burnout (35%), discouragement as a leader (34%), getting their church fully reopened, and digital discipleship (33% each). A quarter also says that digital evangelism (26%) and responding to needs (24%) pose a challenge. (Barna, 2020)

The research problem of this study also addressed how pastors integrated social networking into their discipleship platforms. The participant interviews focused on how pastors integrated social networking into their disciple platforms and examples of how social networking methods were applied. Barna showed that many Christian leaders experienced difficulty appropriately implementing the leadership and philosophy to mature disciples through social networking. Barn (2015) revealed that only one percent of pastors believe churches today have a successful discipleship program to disciple new converts and young believers. The Barna study concluded that 60 percent of churches believed they were not doing well. The Barna study showed that few Church leaders or members believed they did well in discipleship (Barna, 2015). This study by Barna is essential for further research on the need to develop discipleship programs to equip disciples. If the church wants to engage the culture, it must be online (Stetzer, 2014).

This study and many others cited in this study revealed that social media can help enhance discipleship, the spreading of the gospel, and the education of new and existing believers, as outlined by Jesus in the Great Commission. This study demonstrated that although participants surveyed preferred in-person worship over digital platforms for ministry, each participant acknowledged that using social networking in ministry for discipleship was an effective and necessary tool when in-person worship was not feasible (Dunlow, 2021). For

example, participant Jane noted that the pastor accepted digital platforms from discipleship but viewed in-person worship as the most effective form of discipleship:

“Pastor thinks Facebook could enhance discipleship in the kingdom of God. The pastor does believe that in-person worship is the best. In-person worship is more effective; however, for the time that we are living in the various schedules of people, sickness, and just even now in this pandemic where we are not able to gather in large numbers are not able to gather in numbers, it could be used as a tool for specific purposes. However, the primary source of worship should be in-person worship.”

The findings in this study supported the literature in this study that if done strategically, social networking can create digital spaces for making disciples and expanding and spreading the Gospel in local communities and across the globe (Oliver, 2019). Regardless of the approach to Discipleship, Christian leaders can apply a resilient pedagogy that concentrates on identifying activities and interactions that will undergird meaningful learning and discover methods to make them work, irrespective of where the learning occurs (Voght, 2018). The impact that social networking can have on discipleship was demonstrated in this study and can be seen clearly from what was reported by the Office of Communications & Public Engagement, Liberty University, in October 2022.

“This fall, Liberty University has welcomed more students than ever in its residential and online programs, exceeding 130,000 students for the first time. Total on-campus enrollment stands at a record 15,800 students. Liberty’s online programs hit a record 115,000 students pursuing degrees from across the nation and around the globe.”

The 115,000 online students enrolled at Liberty University Online provided evidence that distance learning and using digital platforms to educate, train, and equip disciples are practical tools to make disciples that make disciples and demonstrated that learning occurs across networked learning communities and information technologies. Liberty was able to reach ten times as many people around the globe. (Liberty University, 2022).

The intentionality and strategic purpose of Liberty University leveraging technologies to develop disciples through digital platforms supports the literature of this study. Voght (2018) suggested that whenever social networking programs are done well, those programs can enhance fellowship and encourage believers to serve other believers. Vought would further state that well done social networking programs can also create strong bonds in the church community and eventual impact the community at-large (Voght, 2018, p.60). Liberty University's challenge to each student enrolled online or on-campus is revealed in question 5 of the Student Checklist:

“Liberty University develops Christ-centered men and women with the values, knowledge, and skills essential to impact the world; therefore, this course and the content you are now studying are designed to help educate men and women who will:

- Make important contributions to their workplaces and communities.
- Follow their chosen vocations as callings to glorify God.
- Fulfill the Great Commission
- All of the above

This study demonstrated that digital discipleship involving preaching, teaching, and web-based instruction should possess a pedagogy that does not diminish the gospel of Jesus Christ or the mission of making disciples, nor replace traditional discipleship methods. This study demonstrated that digital discipleship does not replace traditional discipleship methods but only enhanced discipleship through digital platforms when in-person service is not feasible or practical. This study demonstrated that Christians in Yalobusha County largely accepted the usage of digital platforms as a small part of ministry but desired in-person service as the preferred method to train disciples.

Research Limitations

This qualitative phenomenological study was limited because of its small population size (Roberts, 2010). Twenty-five participants from Yalobusha County, Mississippi, were chosen for this study. The recruitment of participants yielded twenty-five individuals to be included in this study; five were removed from this study due to only completing the social networking questionnaire but declining to participate in the recorded interview. Participants ranged between the ages of 18-65. Each participant identified as Christian according to the Holy Scripture found in the Bible, such as, but not limited to, acts 11:26 and 1 Peter 4:16. For this study, the term Christian was defined as someone who is a follower of Jesus Christ. Participants were members of various Christian denominations, such as Baptist, Non-Denominational, Methodist, or Pentecostal. The sources of information used to attain this sample need to be more comprehensive. This study used an open-ended online questionnaire and recorded interviews utilizing Zoom © or Google Meet ©. Therefore, the generalizability of Christians in Mississippi may be affected (Roberts, 2010).

This study established an ample and better understanding of the impact of social networking on discipleship in Yalobusha County. This study sample provided the researcher with a picture of the context of the engagement of social networking activities and its impact on discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. Additionally, this study examined how Christians connected in a digital space. Goldie (2019) argues that Connectivism is the idea that learning takes place across networked learning communities, and information technologies are central to Connectivism” (Goldie, 2016). Another assumption of this study is that many Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, will attend some form of church online before

attending in person (Lynn, 2019). The research also assumes that discipleship through social networking will help and not hurt church growth. (Lynn, 2019).

This research established the pros and cons of using social networking in ministry. The research revealed that the impact of social networking was generally positive if there was proper integration and implementation. This research established that many of the churches in Yalobusha County, in some ways, successfully integrated social networking into their discipleship platforms. This research revealed that there was no one-size-fits-all for social networking. What works in one Church may not work in another.

This study's findings supported the idea that there is no easy way to rise to the challenge of social networking. This study's findings supported the literature in that as leaders faced the challenges of this crisis, many were left bewildered when it came to using social networking in discipleship.

This research revealed that most participants believed that social networking positively impacted discipleship in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, in their everyday lives. The participants' perspective in this study supports the literature. Meadows would argue that "the development of mobile computing devices and wireless network connectivity has woven our online activities and virtual relationships into the routine flow of everyday life" (Meadows, 2012).

The theory that guided this study was Connectivism (Goldie, 2016). "Connectivism is the idea that learning takes place across networked learning communities, and information technologies are central to Connectivism, a theory of learning that emphasizes the importance of networked information resources throughout the processes of learning" Goldie (2016). This study revealed that many churches in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, struggled to find their way

into the new social networking marketplace to make new disciples social networking. In many ways, social media has become a new and unfamiliar marketplace for the Church, especially for the more traditional churches and those in rural communities.

Further Research

The significance of this qualitative phenomenological study is connected to the worldwide expansion of digital media and social networking activities. Further research should be conducted on the impact of social networking on the commitments to Christ and the Spiritual well-being of Christians in Yalobusha County. In a recent Pew research study on social media usage by young adults in America ages 18–24, 80 percent use Facebook, 78 percent use Snapchat, and 71 percent are Instagrammers (Hunt, 2019).

This research study established that social networking platforms that were integrated correctly helped the discipleship efforts of most churches in Yalobusha County in a positive way when traditional methods of discipleship were not feasible. This study also showed that 100 percent of participants surveyed did not desire to replace in-person services solely with digital online services. Although this study showed many benefits to churches implementing digital platforms, further research is needed to determine the commitments and well-being of newly converted Christians in Yalobusha County, Mississippi.

Digital platforms' effect on society must be understood correctly by today's Church. The internet can be understood as the information highway. Seventy percent of the world's population owns an electronic device with Wi-Fi access. Pew Research Center study determined that "it is estimated that more than 5 billion people have mobile devices, and over half of these connections are smartphones" (Silver, 2019). If leveraged correctly, social networking can positively make and educate disciples for Christ. Social networking is here to stay.

REFERENCES

- Adegboyega, A., Boddie, S., Dorvie, H., Bolaji, B., Adedoyin, C., & Moore, S. E. (2021). Social distance impact on church gatherings: Socio-behavioral implications. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 31(1-4), 221-234.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2020.1793869>
- Anderson, M., & JIANG, J. (2018). *Teens, Social Media and Technology 2018*. Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>
- Armstrong, D. (2022). Stewarding Online Space in Making Disciples of Gen-Z. *Vanguard Journal of Theology & Ministry*, 1(1), 6-15.
<https://vjtm.vanguardcollege.com/index.php/vjtm/article/view/20>
- Auday, B. C., & Coleman, S. W. (2009). "Pulling off The Mask: The Impact of Social Networking Activities on Evangelical Christian College Students."
<https://www.gordon.edu/>
- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., Sorenson, C.K. & Walker, D. A. (2019). *Introduction to research in education (10th ed.)* Cengage Learning.
- Banks, A. M. (2020). Shunning online services, some churches preach "abstinence" from gathered worship. *Christian Century*, 137(10), 19.
- Baum, N. M., Jacobson, P. D., & Goold, S. D. (2009). "Listen to the people": public deliberation about social distancing measures in a pandemic. *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 9(11), 4-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265160903197531>
- Barna (2017, May 26). Most churches have stopped gathering, few plan to meet on easter.
<https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-trends-around-country/>
- Barna (2020, April 7). Current trends in virtual attendance & weekly giving amid COVID-19
<https://www.barna.com/research/current-attendance-giving-trends/>
- Bombaro, J. J. (2017). Face-to-face Discipleship in a Facebook world. *Modern Reformation*, 26(1), 36-47.
- Bonhoeffer, D., Kelly, G. B., & Godsey, J. D. (2001). *Discipleship* (Ser. et al. works ; v. 4). Fortress Press.
- Bryson, J. R., Andres, L., & Davies, A. (2020). COVID-19, virtual church services and a new temporary geography of home. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, 111(3), 360-372. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12436>
- Campbell, D. T., & Riecken, H. W. (1968). Quasi-experimental design. *International*

- encyclopedia of the social sciences*, 5, 259-263.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/h0027982>
- Campbell, H. A., & Garner, S. (2016). *Networked theology (engaging culture): Negotiating faith in digital culture*. Baker Academic.
- Campbell, H. A., Sheldon, Z., Gibson, J., & Guzman, G. (2020). Technological and mediated identity in American multisite churches. *Ecclesial Practices*, 7(1), 11-31.
https://brill.com/view/journals/ep/7/1/article-p11_11.xml
- Campbell-Reed, E. (2020). Four guidelines for improvising pastoral leadership.
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/four-guidelines-improvising-pastoral-leadership-through-pandemic>
- Carter, A. (2016). Empowering middle leaders: Trends in school leadership research on the principal's impact on school effectiveness. *Australian Educational Leader*, 38(1), 37-41.
- Clark, K. R. (2018). Learning Theories: Constructivism. *Radiologic Technology*, 90(2), 180–182.
- Crosby R. C. (2012, June). The social network gospel. *Christianity Today*, 56(6), 36–40.
- Davie, G. (1996). *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without belonging*. Blackwell Publ..
- Dawson, L. L., & Cowan, D. E. (Eds.). (2004). *Religion online: Finding faith on the Internet*. Psychology Press.
- Díaz, I. (2021). Considering the efficacy of digital technology as a means of evangelization in Christian religious education. *Religious Education*, 116(1), 3-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2021.1872001>
- Dibley, P. (2018). Do not forsake the assembly: The importance of Christian community. *Review & Expositor*, 115(3), 407-411. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637318790757>
- Dierking, L. (1991). Learning theory and learning styles: An overview. *Journal of Museum Education*, 16(1), 4-6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.1991.11510159>
- Djupe, P. A., & Neiheisel, J. R. (2022). The religious communication approach and political behavior. *Political Psychology*, 43, 165-194. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12848>
- Dunaway, K. M. (2011). Connectivism: Learning theory and pedagogical practice for networked information landscapes. *Reference Services Review*, 39(4), 675-685.
- Dunlow, J. (2021). Digital discipleship: A study of how churches in New York used technology for adult discipleship during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Christian Education Journal*, 18(3), 458-472. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07398913211046364>

- Duff, N. J. (2013). Praising God Online. *Theology Today*, 70(1), 22-29.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573612472898>
- Dreyer, W. A. (2019). Being church in the era of 'homo digitalis'. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 40(1), 1-6. <https://journals.co.za/doi/abs/10.4102/ve.v40i1.1999>
- Estep, J., Anthony, M., & Allison, Gregg. (2008). *A Theology for Christian Education*. B & H Pub. Group.
- Garner, S. (2019). Imaging Christ in digital worlds: Continuity and discontinuity in discipleship. *Communication Research Trends*, 38(4), 21-30.
<https://www.proquest.com/openview/5c0f70d3bf53c6c298a701cd7319b2cb/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=1576344>
- Generate a religion demographics report for your zip code. Association of Religion Data Archives. (2010). <https://www.thearda.com/>
- Ghazi, S. R., Khan, U. A., Shahzada, G., & Ullah, K. (2014). Formal Operational Stage of Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory: An Implication in Learning Mathematics. *Journal of Educational Research* (1027-9776), 17(2), 71–
- Griffiths, M. (2021). The missing generations: The Church in Wales and young people. *Missiology*, 49(1), 79-92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829620937395>
- Guldalian, S. (2013). The Millennials: Reflections on reaching a lost generation for Christ. *Missio Apostolica*, 21(1), 41-47. https://www.lsfm.global/uploads/files/MA-5-13_Final_Online.pdf page=43-84.
- Goldie, J. G. S. (2016). Connectivism: A knowledge learning theory for the digital age? *Medical Teacher*, 38(10), 1064–1069.
- Esselman, T. (2004). The pedagogy of the online wisdom community: Forming church ministers in a digital age. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 7(3), 159–170.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9647.2004.00206.x>
- Flynn, J. T. (James T. (2013). Digital discipleship: Christian education in a digital world. *Christian Education Journal*, 10(1), 88–89.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131301000106>
- Fuente-Cobo, C., Gutiérrez-de-Cabiedes, L., & Visiers Elizaincin, A. (2023). Using YouTube as a digital pulpit. The most influential Catholic youtubers in Spanish speaking countries: Who they are and how they communicate. *Church, Communication and Culture*, 8(1), 59-83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2023.2174889>
- Hatch, J.A. (2002). Doing qualitative research in educational settings.

- Hunt, J. G. (2019). The digital way: Re-imagining digital discipleship in the age of social media. *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 18(2), 91-112.
https://brill.com/view/journals/jyt/18/2/article-p91_91.xml
- Hutchings, T. (2017). *Creating church online. Ritual, community and new media*. Routledge
- Hutchings, T. (2011). Contemporary religious community and the online church. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(8), 1118-1135.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.591410>
- Jensen, D. (2008). *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. Sage publications.
- Josue Huaycani Cotrado, Y. (2020). Principles of discipleship and church growth from acts 2:46-47. *International Review of Mission*, 109(2), 328–339. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12337>
- Joubert, S. (2018). ‘flowing’ under the radar in a multifaceted liquid reality: The ekerk narrative. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 74(3).
<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.4966>
- Krefting, L. (1991). Rigor in qualitative research: The assessment of trustworthiness. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 45(3), 214–222.
- Laniak, T. S. (2015). *Shepherds after my own heart: pastoral traditions and leadership in the Bible*. InterVarsity Press.
- Levin, J. (2020). The faith community and the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak: Part of the problem or part of the solution?. *Journal of religion and health*, 59, 2215-2228.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01048-x>
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage
- Lynn, S. (2019). *Online churches don't hurt local church growth: study*.
<https://www.christianpost.com/news/state-of-the-online-church-study-reveals-positive-impact-of-digital-church.html>
- Meadows, P. R. (2012). Mission and discipleship in a digital culture. *Mission Studies*, 29(2), 163-182. https://brill.com/view/journals/mist/29/2/article-p163_2.xml
- Mezirow, J. (2009). Transformative learning theory. In J. Mezirow, and E. W. Taylor (Eds), *Transformative Learning in Practise: Insights from Community*
- Miles, Mathew B., & Huberman, Michael A. (1994). Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook: *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 14(4), 336-338.
<https://vivauniversity.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/milesandhuberman1994.pdf>
- Murashko, A. (2013). *Top 5 churches that use social media best*
<https://www.christianpost.com/news/top-5-churches-that-use-social-media-best.html>

- Office of Communications & Public Engagement. (2022), Liberty University enrolls largest student body in history; online education programs hit new records
<https://www.liberty.edu/news/2022/10/28/liberty-university-enrolls-largest-student-body>
- Ogden, Greg. (2011) *Discipleship Essentials : A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ*
- O'Leary, T. K., Parmar, D., Olafsson, S., Paasche-Orlow, M., Bickmore, T., & Parker, A. G. (2022, April). Community dynamics in technospiritual interventions: lessons learned from a church-based mHealth pilot. In *Proceedings of the 2022 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1-23).
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3491102.3517700>
- Oliver, K. M. (2019). Networked religion meets digital geographies: Pedagogical principles for exploring new spaces and roles in the seminary classroom. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 22(1), 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12465>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*, (3rd ed.)
- Pew Research Center. (2024, January 31). *Mobile fact sheet*. Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>
- Phillips, P. M. (2019). *The Bible, social media and digital culture*. Routledge.
- Polit DF, Beck CT, Hungler BP. *Essentials of nursing research: Methods, appraisal, and utilization*. 6. New York, NY: Lippincott; 2006.
- Roberts, C. (2010). *The dissertation journey : a practical and comprehensive guide to planning, writing, and defending your dissertation* (Second edition.). Corwin, a SAGE Company.
- Roberto, J. (2022). *Digital Ministry and Leadership in Today's Church*. Liturgical Press.
- Robertson, N. (2019). *Too busy for church? There's an app for that*.
<https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2019/0729/Too-busy-for-church-There-s-an-app-for-that>
- Robertson, N. (2019). Too busy for church? Churches offer some online remedies.
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/news/too-busy-church-churches-offer-some-online-remedies>
- Roels, S. J. (2004). Global discipleship and online learning: What does blackboard have to do with Jerusalem? *Christian Scholar's Review*, 33(4), 451-470.
- Ronda, D., Gumelar, F., & Wijaya, H. (2024). The church in a digital society: An effort to transform church ministry in indonesia. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 105(105(1))<https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.10526>

- Rosner, B. S. (2020). Coping with Coronavirus disappointments: Five lessons from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice*, 27(3), 42-45.
<https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/INFORMIT.144778205302666>
- Roso, J., Holleman, A., & Chaves, M. (2020). Changing worship practices in American congregations. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 59(4), 675-684.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12682>
- Sandelowski, M. (1986). The problem of rigor in qualitative research. *Advances in nursing science*, 8(3), 27-37.
- Sircar, A., & Rowley, J. (2020). How are UK churches using social media to engage with their congregations?. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 20(1), e2029. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2029>
- Siker, J. S. (2017). *Liquid scripture : the Bible in a digital world*. Fortress Press.
- Sklar, R. P., & Goldman, R. E. (2023). “the first person they call is their pastor”: The role of New York City faith leaders in supporting their Congregation’s health and well-being during COVID-19. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 62(4), 2861–2880.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-023-01789-5>
- Speziale, H. S., Streubert, H. J., & Carpenter, D. R. (2011). *Qualitative research in nursing: Advancing the humanistic imperative*. Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Sprinkle, P. M. (2016). *Go: Returning discipleship to the front lines of faith*. Tyndale House Publishers.
- Shirley, C. (2017). Overcoming Digital Distance: The Challenge of Developing Relational Disciple in the internet age. *Christian Education Journal*, 14(2), 376-390.
- Silver, L. (2019). *Smartphone ownership is growing rapidly around the world, but not always equally*.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/02/05/smartphone-ownership-is-growing-rapidly-around-the-world-but-not-always-equally>
- Slick, M., & Marty. (2007, December 23). *Postmodernism and the Emerging Church Movement*. Apologetics Index. <https://www.apologeticsindex.org/290-emerging>
- Sofaer, S. (2002). Qualitative research methods. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 14(4), 329-336. <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/14.4.329-church>
- Smith, C. E., Kaur, A., Gach, K. Z., Terveen, L., Kreitzer, M. J., & O'Conner-Von, S. (2021). What is Spiritual Support and How Might It Impact the Design of Online

- Smith, J. K. A. (2009). *Desiring the kingdom : worship, worldview, and cultural formation*. Baker Academic.
- Stetzer, E. (2014). *Is an online church really a church?*
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/april/is-online-church-really-church.html>
- The Association of Religion Data Archives (2010). *Data Archive.* " *Surveys The Association of Religion Data Archives.* <https://www.thearda.com/>
- Thomas, Adam. (2011). *Digital disciple: Real Christianity in a virtual world*. Abingdon Press
- Thompson, D. A. (2020). Christ is really present, even in Holy Communion via online worship. *Liturgy*, 35(4), 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063x.2020.1832847>
- Vogt, B. (2011). It deepens fellowship. *Christianity Today*, 55(12), 54-55.
- Watson, D.; Clark, L. A. (1984). Negative affectivity: The disposition to experience negative aversive emotional states. *Psychological Bulletin*. 96 (3): 465–490.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0033-2909.96.3.465>
- Williams, M. (2015). Community, discipleship, and social media. *Christian Education Journal*, 12(2), 375-383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131501200209>
- Wilson, D., Brupbacher, L., Simpson, C., Merren, R., & Woolrich, R. (2012). Making disciples: The effects of technology integration coaching. *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal*, 8(1), 7-9.
<https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1101&context=icctej>
- Yount, William, and Mike Barnett. *Called to Reach : Equipping Cross-Cultural Disciplers*, B&H Publishing Group, 2007. *ProQuest Ebook Central*,
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=475513>.
- Zylstra, S. E. (2015). Do digital decisions disciple? Online evangelists report the equivalent success of on Billy Graham crusade per day.
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/march/do-digital-decisions-disciple.html>
- Zaluchu, S. E. (2023). Church Digitalization and the New Koinonia in the Era of the “Internet of Things.” *International Bulletin of Mission Research.*, 47(1), 32–40.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393221082641>

APPENDIX A

4/24/23, 9:14 PM

Mail - Walton, Gary - Outlook

Fw: [External] Fwd: Permissions to use survey

Walton, Gary [REDACTED]

Fri 10/16/2020 8:50 AM

To: England, William A (School of Divinity Instruction) [REDACTED]

Dr. England,

Here's the permission to adapt the survey instrument. I should not be able to remove the terms that are unrelated to my research.

From: Gary Walton [REDACTED]
Sent: Friday, October 16, 2020 8:46 AM**To:** Walton, Gary [REDACTED]**Subject:** [External] Fwd: Permissions to use survey

[EXTERNAL EMAIL: Do not click any links or open attachments unless you know the sender and trust the content]

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Bryan Auday [REDACTED]**Date:** Fri, Oct 16, 2020, 8:36 AM**Subject:** Re: Permissions to use survey**To:** Gary Walton [REDACTED]

Hi Gary,

Yes, I presumed that you would need to modify some of the questions. As you probably noticed the social media landscape was a bit different in 2009. You have our permission to modify it as you see fit.

Bryan

Bryan C. Auday, PhD
 Professor, Department of Psychology
 Director, Neuroscience Program
 Gordon College
 255 Grapevine Road
 Wenham, Massachusetts 01984

From: Gary Walton [REDACTED]
Sent: Thursday, October 15, 2020 4:37 PM**To:** Bryan Auday [REDACTED]**Subject:** Re: Permissions to use survey

<https://outlook.office.com/mail/id%4AQAQwNjVIMmU3LTdkM2QNGiwOS11YTI0LTU4YzA0MmVIMWFlOGAQAkdj6mHngTNEIBIUXe%2B6ie%3D...> 1/3

1.

This questionnaire is designed to explore the different kinds of electronic products commonly available on computers and cell phones. This information will help us better understand the extent that college students engage in activities such as using MySpace, Facebook, video games, YouTube, cell phones etc.

Please be assured that every attempt will be made to keep your answers strictly confidential. Since results are collected using electronic software, data security is as safe as the Survey Monkey program allows for. The information that you provide will be presented only in summary form, in combination with the responses from other participants. Your specific answers can never be linked with your name since this is an anonymous survey. We don't want you to identify yourself. We are simply asking that you report truthfully to the questions listed below. This questionnaire should not take longer than 10 minutes to complete.

By voluntarily completing this anonymous survey you are agreeing to participate in this research project. If at anytime you feel uncomfortable completing any of the questions, please feel free to skip over a question or to discontinue the survey at any time.

For participating in this study, you become eligible to have your name entered into a drawing to win an iPod Nano. Since this is an anonymous survey, you need to send Prof. Sybil Coleman an email stating that you took part in this study. She can be contacted at: sybil.coleman@gordon.edu

You will be reminded at the end of this survey how to enter the drawing for the iPod nano.

This study is being conducted by Sybil Coleman (Professor of Social Work; sybil.coleman@gordon.edu) and Bryan Auday (Professor of Psychology; bryan.auday@gordon.edu) at Gordon College, Wenham, Massachusetts.

4.

3. What is your #1 reason for using MySpace, Facebook, blogs, and/or Twitter?

- I don't use them
- socializing (keeping in contact)
- curiosity (being nosy, wanting to check on a friend)
- to fill time (boredom, procrastination)
- other

If you responded "other" please specify

5.

4. What is your #1 reason for playing electronic games?

- I don't use them
- Fun/entertainment
- competition
- to fill time (boredom, procrastination)
- socializing (being noseey, wanting to check up on a friend)
- other

If you responded "other" please specify

6.

5. What is your #1 reason for watching YouTube and/or Flickr?

- I don't use them
- fun/entertainment
- gathering information (learning)
- curiosity
- to fill time
- other

If you responded "other" please specify

7.

For the remaining questions, the term "electronic activities" refers to activities that you engage in using a computer or cell phone.

8.

6. I believe that I am neglecting important areas in my life due to spending too much time with the following activities. Identify all that apply.

- MySpace
- Facebook
- blogs
- Twitter
- text messaging
- instant messaging
- talking on the phone (cell or land line)
- watching videos
- watching YouTube and/or Flickr
- playing electronic games (Halo, WarCraft, Avatar etc.)
- viewing pornography

9.

7. There are times when I feel I cannot stop myself from engaging in: (Select all that apply)

- MySpace
- Facebook
- blogs
- Twitter
- text messaging
- instant messaging
- phone use
- watching videos
- watching YouTube and/or Flickr
- playing electronic games (Halo, WarCraft, Avatar etc.)
- viewing pornography

10.

8. My personal relationships have suffered or ended because of engaging in any of the following electronic activities.

	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
MySpace	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Facebook	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
blogs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Twitter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
text messaging	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
instant messaging	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
phone use	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
watching videos	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
watching YouTube and/or Flickr	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
playing electronic games	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
viewing pornography	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

11.

9. I find social networking with others so stimulating and rewarding that I find it hard to stop?

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree

10. My engagement in MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, video games, etc. . . has helped me refrain from possible harmful or destructive activities (under-age drinking, self-injury behavior, etc.)

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree

1.

This questionnaire is designed to explore the different kinds of electronic products commonly available on computers and cell phones. This information will help us better understand the extent that college students engage in activities such as using MySpace, Facebook, video games, YouTube, cell phones etc.

Please be assured that every attempt will be made to keep your answers strictly confidential. Since results are collected using electronic software, data security is as safe as the Survey Monkey program allows for. The information that you provide will be presented only in summary form, in combination with the responses from other participants. Your specific answers can never be linked with your name since this is an anonymous survey. We don't want you to identify yourself. We are simply asking that you report truthfully to the questions listed below. This questionnaire should not take longer than 10 minutes to complete.

By voluntarily completing this anonymous survey you are agreeing to participate in this research project. If at anytime you feel uncomfortable completing any of the questions, please feel free to skip over a question or to discontinue the survey at any time.

For participating in this study, you become eligible to have your name entered into a drawing to win an iPod Nano. Since this is an anonymous survey, you need to send Prof. Sybil Coleman an email stating that you took part in this study. She can be contacted at: sybil.coleman@gordon.edu

You will be reminded at the end of this survey how to enter the drawing for the iPod nano.

This study is being conducted by Sybil Coleman (Professor of Social Work; sybil.coleman@gordon.edu) and Bryan Auday (Professor of Psychology; bryan.auday@gordon.edu) at Gordon College, Wenham, Massachusetts.

14.

18. Sometimes I feel guilty or anxious about the amount of time I am spending using electronic devices.

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree

19. The time I spend using electronic devices decreases the amount of time I can spend socializing with people face-to-face.

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree

15.

20. Defining an addiction as "any behavior you cannot stop, regardless of the consequences" would you say that you are addicted to any electronic activities?

- Yes
 No
 Unsure

If you answered "Yes", which activity are you identifying?

21. Does your college provide services or workshops that are available to students who might believe they have a problem with electronic devices or activities?

- Yes
 No
 Don't know

22. How does your engagement in electronic activities enhance your life. Please explain.

16.

23. Has your engagement with electronic devices caused you any problems. Please explain.

17.

24. What measures, if any, have you tried to help you cut back on the amount of time spent using electronic devices?

18.

25. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male

26. What year are you in college?

- freshman
- sophomore
- junior
- senior
- graduate student

27. What is your age?

- Under 18 yrs.
- 18-21 yrs.
- 22-27 yrs.
- 28-35 yrs.
- over 35 yrs.

19.

28. Excluding chapel services, which alternative best describes your church attendance.

- I rarely or never attend church
- I attend church about 1-2 times each month
- I attend church 3-4 times each month
- I attend church 4 or more times each month

29. What college or university do you attend?

- Bethel College
- Biola University
- Baylor University
- Calvin College
- Eastern University
- Eastern Nazarene College
- George Fox University
- Gordon College
- Houghton College
- Messiah College
- Westmont College
- Wheaton College

20.

Thank you for participating in this study.

For participating in this study, you become eligible to have your name entered into a drawing to win an iPod nano. Since we want this to be an anonymous survey you need to send Prof. Sybil Coleman an email:

sybil.coleman@gordon.edu

Include the following in the email:

1. Type "Electronic Activities" in the subject line
2. Type your name in the email.

Thank you.

If after taking this survey you feel that you might have a serious problem concerning the use of electronic activities, please consult the counseling center on your campus.