SURVEY OF BEST PRACTICES
FOR
THE DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES
THESIS PROJECT APPROVAL SHEET

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ABSTRACT

SURVEY OF BEST PRACTICES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

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Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010
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The purpose of this study is to determine the procedures to develop an Internet-based online church and seminary. Ultimately, the research will define the tools, technologies, and best practices of building religious online communities to better serve the unchurched, church members and seminary students. Research will address the shared resources common to both the online church and seminary for evangelism, teaching and training. The findings of the study will also result in the creation of an implementation guide for the future development of other religious online communities.

Abstract length: 88 words.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

All honor and glory belong to the Lord for all he has accomplished through this dissertation project at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary. My dissertation would not have been possible without all the encouraging support and prayers of my family and friends. Special mention is made to my wife whose encouragement and perseverance carried me through the long preparation hours. I would especially like to mention Dr. Ronald E. Hawkins for mentoring me through the long process to complete this dissertation. Without his wisdom and guidance, I would not have been able to make it through all the many challenges this paper presented. I am especially grateful for his example and challenge to walk in the image of Christ that has transformed my life during his course on Growth and Development of the Contemporary Minister.

I would like to thank Dr. Charlie Davidson for supporting and praying me through the difficult final hours of completing this dissertation. His encouragement and constant communications during the final stages of the dissertation were especially helpful. I would also like to mention Karen West for editing my dissertation.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

After observing church congregations diminish in size over the past decade, it became apparent that something was happening on the local church scene that was symptomatic of the larger church throughout the country. Numerous research reports have also indicated that the American church is in crisis.\(^1\) According to both the Gallup polls\(^2\) and the Barna Research group, surveys have indicated that church attendance in the United States declined between the years of 2002 to 2005.\(^3\) In the research studies, only 40 to 47 percent of American adults reported recently attending a Sunday church service.\(^4\) These statistics are alarming for pastors who monitor the spiritual life of the church in America.

The majority of churches in the 21st Century are failing as a result of cultural and economic changes in the pop culture that have affected a large cross-section of the nation.\(^5\) The reasons for this failure are varied and debated. Some studies have indicated

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2. George Gallup, Jr., “National Catholic Reporter” (January 9, 2004), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_10_40/ai_112450677); Internet; accessed 10 September 2008.
4. Ibid., 26.
that people expressed feelings of isolation and lack of intimacy as the probable cause for this decline.\(^6\) Other reports charged our post-modern culture and loss of community as the major causes affecting the church.\(^7\) Still other studies have determined that the church has been unsuccessful in capturing the minds and hearts of their communities due to ministers who embrace old-fashioned, traditional methods. They fail to take advantage of technological opportunities and deliver linear sermons that lack creative media enhancements and critical thinking.\(^8\) Some authors have noted that additional factors contribute to the failure of the church including loss of income, decline in ministers’ energy, lack of vision, and ministers’ inability to deal with the changing world.\(^9\)

In addition to church decline, colleges and seminaries have also experienced dynamic changes as a result of cultural and economic downturns. Over the last 10 years, online learning has shown continuous growth in colleges and seminaries that offer both undergraduate and graduate degrees throughout the country. In fact, enrollments for all age groups have increased steadily.\(^10\) Recent studies have shown that a number of those who populate the online courses are also enrolled in classroom courses.\(^11\) In contrast,

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\(^7\) Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, 163-164; 185-190.

\(^8\) Aubrey Malphurs and Michael Malphurs, *Church Next: Using the Internet to Maximize Your Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2003), 17-21.

\(^9\) Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, 21.


\(^11\) Ibid., 3-5.
Catholic seminaries have declined 24% in enrollment during the last 20 years.\textsuperscript{12} Other seminaries and colleges that have yet to invest in online courses are finding some of the same difficulties to their growth as churches and consider “online learning critical to their long-term strategy.”\textsuperscript{13} The declining economy is also a factor that has impacted enrollment growth and narrowed the religious training options for potential students.\textsuperscript{14} The addition of online courses to seminary curriculums, however, is anticipated to increase enrollments and provide new opportunities for current and new students.\textsuperscript{15}

Over the last century, the single most significant change in our culture has been the technological advances in the way we communicate with and relate to each other.\textsuperscript{16} Among the findings of modern science, none gives greater promise of changing our world than the discovery of electronic communication and its phenomenal effect of bringing the world closer together. Schools, for example, can order resources on the Internet from England faster than they once ordered materials from the next county. Churches can communicate with fellow churches around the world in less time than it would take to travel across town. Technology has succeeded in bringing us closer together and making us aware of the greater body of knowledge by connecting us to worldwide database libraries and universities as never before.


\textsuperscript{15} Mariah Bear and Thomas Nixon, Bear’s Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Learning, 16th ed. (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2006), 17.

\textsuperscript{16} Mary Chayko, Connecting (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 8-10.
Today, these technological advances have created the Internet, the major media of our culture, where communications and commerce are played out on an enormous scale. The church is making progress towards using this phenomenal innovation to help spread the Gospel. Although the fundamental Gospel message remains the same, the media have changed as the culture moves toward an international forum in which web pages and podcasts act as the platform for the Gospel message to reach far beyond the general audience of a traditional church setting.

Although the local church and seminary have experienced significant detrimental impacts for a variety of reasons, they continue to be important and relevant religious institutions in our society today. Technology, if employed wisely, could be used as a needed course correction to change this downward trend in both the church and the seminary. As a solution, this study recommends using the Internet as a tool for evangelism and renewal to help these religious institutions regain their relevance and expand their numbers, as well as their sphere of influence in their respective communities.

Purpose of the Study

At this time, scant academic research has substantially supported Internet-based communities, except for a growing number of cyber communities that successfully minister to thousands of people throughout the country. This study will investigate the technological innovations for the purpose of developing Christian community that will offer greater depth of closeness and have the potential to create lasting relationships. This online strategy has already proven to be effective for renewing and building up the
community of believers who share in the deeper meaning of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{17}

Although many people are members of an online church, and a revolution of sorts is taking place with online education,\textsuperscript{18} an evaluation needs to be undertaken concerning the methods of each of these types of communities as they relate to communicating traditional religious beliefs and practices. A limited number of studies have shown that an online church can exist and have full social interactions on the Internet.\textsuperscript{19} Online learning has also been studied from the sociological aspects of human relations.\textsuperscript{20} The next step is to examine how these institutions (church and seminary) can integrate this technology to reach their respective communities for their potential benefit.

Therefore, once the surveys are completed, this thesis project will define the instruction plans and technologies for building religious online communities to serve church members and seminary students. The result will be an implementation guide for the future development of religious online communities. Research will address the shared resources common to both the online church and seminary for evangelism, teaching, and training. This project will also provide a sample implementation plan for a church and seminary that have successfully achieved online communities in their respective theaters of operation (church and academics). Actually, the sample implementation plan is for the church and seminary who wishes to establish an online community.

\textsuperscript{17} Mark M. Stephenson, \textit{Web-Empower Your Church}, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 153-175.

\textsuperscript{18} Palloff and Pratt, \textit{The Virtual Student}, 3.

\textsuperscript{19} Campbell, \textit{Exploring Religious Community Online}, xvii – xix.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 18-23.
Problem Background

In America, churches are failing due to the antiquated practices and spiritual decay that have impeded growth over the last 40 to 45 years. A perfect example of this malaise can be found in the European churches, where many of their institutions have become shrines of the past. Currently, the UK reports that less than 8% of their population attends church on a weekly basis.21 In the United States, Barna’s research reported that weekly church attendance has declined to a low of 40% of the Christian population, and “an estimated 73 million adults are presently unchurched. The estimate grows to 100 million when youth are added to the population numbers.”22 The most recent survey reveals a continued decline that approaches 30 percent.23 Aside from the mega-churches, many of the smaller churches, which comprise most of the churches in America, are following in Europe’s footsteps because of passivity and lack of interest, as well as moral and cultural changes. Consequently, the spiritual life of the church is threatened by the “vicious moral and spiritual war raging in the hearts and minds of Americans.”24

This decline in church attendance across America has produced some startling statistics. Before 1946, 51% of Christians in the U.S. reported that they attended church

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21 Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, Emerging Churches (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2005), 19.
23 Ibid., 2.
on a weekly basis; however, by 1994, only 29% reported weekly church attendance.\textsuperscript{25} A Gallup poll also reported the Christian church service attendance in the U.S. as fluctuating in a range between 35% and 41% from 1955 to 2001.\textsuperscript{26} Wren Arn, a researcher on church growth, further expounded on this decline with his findings that by the end of the 20th Century, four out of five churches had reached either a plateau or experienced a decline in church attendance.\textsuperscript{27} One of the many arguments for this decline is that people think differently than their forefathers.\textsuperscript{28} The older, pre-Vietnam generation produced hard workers, who were people of faith and did not look for hand-outs or entitlements. Unfortunately, today’s generation is no longer tied to the church, and furthermore, they tend to have a skeptical view of it.

In addition to the moral decay of our current society, the church has become “superficial” in its ability to minister in peoples’ lives.\textsuperscript{29} George Barna reported, “There are roughly nine out of ten churches that are not effective in ministry. That translates to a quarter of a million churches in America that are not highly effective in ministry.”\textsuperscript{30} Influential ministers, no matter how gifted with spiritual depth they are, cannot foster significant changes in peoples’ lives. Without more effective ministry, the church cannot

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Malpurs and Malphurs, \textit{Church Next}, 24.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Wen Arn, \textit{The Pastor’s Manual for Effective Ministers} (Monrovia, California: Church Growth, 1988), 41.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Gary Harrison, “Pinnacle Ministries,” \texttt{http://www.pinmin.org/about-pinnacle}, Internet; accessed 3 March 2010.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} D. Martin Loyd-Jones, \textit{Studies in the Sermon on the Mount} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{30} George Barna, \textit{The Habits of Highly Effective Churches} (Ventura: Regal Books, 1999), 18.
\end{itemize}
meet the community’s longing for genuine fellowship, and furthermore, it will be unable to meet the mandate for evangelism. Therefore, the church has to address these issues by asking itself: What is the best way to reach the projected 20 to 100 million people via Internet-based online churches?\(^{31}\) Olson suggested one way to accomplish this outreach: “In the post-Christian world, pastors, churches, and Christians need to operate more as the early church did. In the post-Christian world, the needs of outsiders become most important. Ministry is more like missionary work, with a renewed emphasis on the message and mission of Jesus. The role of pastors is to lead the church in its mission and equip members to understand and live out the message and mission of Jesus outside of the church.”\(^{32}\) Evangelism and renewal add something of value to the problem of ineffective ministry and are needed more in the midst of a decaying society, especially during a time when the church is experiencing a spiritual slump.

**Cultural Changes that Impact the Church**

As a consequence of our culture today, many people in the mainline churches have experienced a sense of loss due to a lack of intimacy, as well as feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnectedness.\(^{33}\) Some churches have even denied the basics tenets of the Christian faith and turned to relativism, socialism, and secular humanism, which give roots to the feelings of loss and disconnectedness. Consequently, the church is suffering and unable to meet the needs of the people who have transferred their allegiance

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\(^{31}\) Barna, “Unchurched Population Nears 100 million in the U.S.,” Internet; *accessed 3 March 2009.*

\(^{32}\) Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, 163.

\(^{33}\) Malphurs and Malphurs, *Church Next*, 29-40.
to the world and sought other means to fill the void. Howard Butt reached the following conclusions concerning individuals in America:

“Our current condition in the church, as a whole, to a deadly extent, we are superficial, mediocre, sickly, and appallingly ineffective. Broken relationships characterize the church, just as they do the world. We have left our first love for God, each other, and our healthy selves. We have become “a nation of strangers,” so relationally shallow that we are blind to our broader calling to be the church to each other in the secular world every day.”

Critical changes are required for the 21st-century church to remain relevant in this culture. It is imperative that churches evolve their ministry presentation to appeal to both young and old church members. Quentin Schultze offered an interesting point to consider: “Many cultural changes have precipitated the rush in some churches to high-tech worship. Perhaps foremost is the assumption that the most effective worship today must be visually augmented with presentational technologies ... some even suggest that for young people, electronic images are the new language.” The future of worship in the post-modern culture is moving towards the visual dimension that captures the imaginations of both young and old.

In addition, a harsh, anti-Christian attitude has developed across the nation as a result of differing moral values. The last political election has shown a major transition in the voting population’s moral compass as it shifted from the influence of religious leaders to political leaders, regardless of the moral implications. Mainline churches have been especially negligent and have experienced a moral decline in church leadership by their acceptance of homosexuality and abortion, as well as ignoring internal evils like

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corruption and child molestation by clergy members. This moral failure has led to their congregants’ redirection from Biblical truth to tolerance of sex outside marriage and a total breakdown of our once Christian society. Unfortunately, we find no moral outrage coming from the media, church hierarchy, or fellow Christians, who all the while behave in a benign acceptance of what God calls an abomination (Romans 1: 21-32).\textsuperscript{36}

Furthermore, the national community has experienced a major transference from religious truths to a corrupt form of cultural relevance defined by the liberal media, which has already made a negative impact on our society. This new culture appears to offer unrealistic hope for people who look for change across religious, political, and social norms. It is viewed as a different order to replace Christianity with a new social orthodoxy. This new order offers a promise of hope for financial, environmental, and social change that the church historically has failed to address. Technological advances are driving this transference to a new cultural relevance apart from Christianity.\textsuperscript{37}

Therefore, with all of these cultural issues afflicting the church, the battle lines have been formed. The Scriptures are clear with regard to the struggle for the minds and souls of men (Ephesians 6:12). According to Schaeffer, “If we are to win…it will take a life committed to Christ, founded on truth, lived in righteousness, and grounded in the gospel…Finally, it will take a life of prayer: Pray in the spirit on all occasions.”\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the \textit{New International Version} Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corporation, 2002).


\textsuperscript{38} Frances A. Schaeffer, \textit{The Great Evangelical Disaster} (Crossways Books, Wheaton, IL, 1984), 25.
Cultural Changes that Impact Families and Communities

A major change in our culture that greatly impacts our community connections is marked by our national television viewing habits. The average American family typically watches 40 hours of TV a week.\textsuperscript{39} When teenagers augment their TV time with computer games and entertainment activities, very little time is left for meaningful relationships. Parents are deeply concerned with the constant inability to communicate with their children. A noticeable disconnect has caused a vacuum and sense of loss in our families and communities. We have lost our sense of belonging, which has resulted in one of the great family tragedies of our time.

Under these conditions, the prognosis for the younger “Y” generation is even bleaker for the 12- to 17-year-olds expected to graduate over the next five to ten years. Teenagers are expected to follow a different path from their parents’ religion simply because they have been raised in the cyber world of games and entertainment and are bored with the linear sermons of their parents’ church. These teenagers are not expected to cross the threshold of a traditional church.

Many new technologies have become available and are built on the web and social networking capabilities that may draw youth and teens back into the church. These same youths are looking for a meaningful spiritual life and are receptive to social networking technologies such as My Space, Twitter, and Facebook on churches’ websites. “The potential market is huge. A Pew Forum survey of 35,000 U.S. adults found 78.4 percent of Americans call themselves Christians but only 26.8 percent attend evangelical churches. Today, you can view streaming video reception of real-time

sermons, receive podcasts of Bible teachings, sign up for RSS (Really Simple Syndication) news feeds, subscribe to and receive audio files that make your favorite programs available when it is most convenient for you to listen." All of these innovations can have a major positive influence on our population across the nation.

Cultural Changes that Impact the Educational System

Many institutions of higher learning have been affected by the same cultural changes as churches, which prevents many potential students from investing their time and money on education. Colleges have experienced declines in enrollments due to the higher cost of living and higher tuition costs, which forces many schools to offer courses online in an attempt to increase their student body. This shift in course offerings has been largely successful. Distance learning has quickly become the primary method of learning for a larger number of students and has resulted in an increase in enrollments throughout the country. For example, Rio Salabo College reported a fourfold increase in enrollments in online courses for Associate Degrees from 1996 to 2005, and the University of Maryland reported a 16 percent increase in awarded B.S. degrees from 1998 to 2004. In 1988, according to the Michael T. Moe CFA Education Report, "1.3 million students were enrolled in online courses. In 2008, just 20 years later, more than 4 million students were currently enrolled in distance education courses, with an additional 23% projected increase in the next 12 years by the year 2020."
Online enrollments are expected to increase over the next 20 years. In these difficult economic times, adding online capabilities to seminaries cannot come too soon. More colleges and universities have added online courses to increase their student body and bolster their influence in the national community. Some seminaries are also following this trend. For example, Fuller Theological Seminary is the most recent seminary to add online courses.

As academic institutions add online learning capabilities to their scholastic offerings, many more institutions are becoming sold on the benefits of adding web-based activities to their schools’ offerings. The Internet is expected to revolutionize the industry by adding more innovative ideas each year that will make this kind of learning easier and more acceptable to a larger population.

History of the Internet

The Internet (Net) has evolved over the last 30 years into the system with the largest combination of computers connected together by high-speed data lines that provides a massive worldwide web (www) of communications. The genesis of the Net was the experimental government “network called ARPAnet (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network).” Lincoln Labs in Massachusetts designed it originally in answer to the Government’s need for enhanced communication. ARPAnet offered a system of hardware and software primarily used for text messaging without color, sound, graphics, or the ability to link one location to another. Over the next 20 years, it slowly

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44 Oram, Peterson’s Guide to Online Learning, 4-11.

45 Valerie Tomaselli and Hilary Poole, History of the Internet: A Chronology, 1843 to Present (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1999), 34-35.
evolved into a complex set of systems that brought messaging opportunities to
revolutionize the way both governments and individuals communicated.

The Net has grown over the years and offers many new services and resources
over global networks such as huge library databases, electronic mail, file transfers and
sharing, online chat, and video games. The two main segments of the Net are composed
of the Internet and the web, which are two different entities. The Internet is made up of
the hardware, whereas the web is the software primarily used on the Net to combine text,
video, and sound. Browsers are additional software to help people navigate around these
global networks.\textsuperscript{46} David Mercer wrote:

“The Internet is arguably one of the most profound achievements in human history…
Internet has simply dropped the barriers of time and geographical distance to turn the
entire world into a local community center.”\textsuperscript{47}

Today, individual users, churches, and colleges have abundantly more
opportunities to become involved with this exciting medium. Technology trends on the
immediate horizon will expand web browsers to the virtual world, which will allow two-
dimensional data reporting. Many more innovative and technologically advanced systems
are coming that will further revolutionize our communications. These innovations include
the coming wireless revolution, which opens up the spectrum of multiple wireless signal
frequencies, open source cloud computing tools, collaborative technologies, virtual
machine management and integration, and terabit fiber optics.\textsuperscript{48} Perhaps the most
exciting aspect of Internet growth is the ability to capture large volumes of information


\textsuperscript{48} “Special Reports: The Future of Business Technology,” \textit{Technology Review},
http://technologyreview.com/specialreports/specialrepoet.aspx?id=27; Internet; accessed 16 December
2008.
and access it on a home computer. The Internet is so large and complex; however, that tracking down information resources can be a laborious job.

Technological Impacts on Communities

Innovative technology tools are one way churches and seminaries can build up the body of Christ and gain the ability to reach out in new and effective ways. For example, religious institutions can incorporate advanced technology tools such as browsers, HTML editors, graphics editors, and audio/video editors/players that can reach a different segment of the population and ultimately greatly expand the Kingdom.

The expansion of the telecommunications industry is extremely valuable to the church, in that the time expenditure normally required to offer these ministries is no longer inconvenient and costly. Audio podcasts and video streaming would enable these ministries to be more accessible, less expensive, and available 24 hours a day.

The Internet is well known as a rich and viable resource of religious material including millions of databases for a diverse population. In the Pew Report on the Internet and American Life, researchers cited a phenomenal increase in Internet usage between 2000 and 2001: Two million additional people had accessed religious content or spiritual material online.\(^49\)

Therefore, the advent and rapid growth of Internet-based communications in today’s world have led to an unprecedented opportunity to overcome the barriers of the current institutional malaise in church growth and evangelism. This technology’s impact on teaching, learning, and worshipping can be phenomenal. Specifically scheduled

courses that require facilities and instructors to administer them will no longer be the primary method of training. Once these courses have been developed, they can be repeatedly replayed. This change presents tremendous opportunities to improve Christian careers and significantly influence the future of Christian ministry. It represents “the most exciting opportunity for evangelism and discipleship that has come to us in generations.”

The telecommunications industry expects to see an increase of millions of new systems. The next generation of broadband mobile networks (4G) will explode on the scene and create instant e-mail communications, mobile TV, up-to-the-minute stock market quotes, web pages, and push-to-talk telephone connections. “Many of these telecommunication devices are already on the market and expect to see tremendous expansion with millions of additional subscribers over the next five to ten years.” The effect of this communications explosion will expand the borders of the local church and seminary by offering immediate links for evangelism, counseling, teaching, and Biblical training that will greatly expand the ability to build up the Body of Christ. The telecom explosion has created a need for technically savvy pastors who are prepared for the coming harvest.

The Internet has offered people an opportunity to develop more intimacy and experience an honest and open communication online that is often difficult to obtain in the offline church. People have found real community by searching the Internet and


learned to build community in a deeper and more fulfilling way. A new means of communicating has helped focus their lives and develop ways to fill the loneliness and isolation. Furthermore, the Internet has connected people who need to feel that they are part of something more meaningful. Some people have even become frequent Internet subscribers and creatively link to form online communities; they engage with one another at varying degrees of personal interaction daily. People seek to gather in groups via the Internet, which challenges the traditional ideas of community.

Ultimately, these online activities and interests will also help fulfill those who seek greater community involvement. The emerging communities are followers of Jesus and the Kingdom and have made the Internet reach a cultural movement in this century. They hold to the uniqueness of Christ, share in spiritual practice, and exchange the good news at all levels of society.

Community is not simply achieved by employing technology, just as carrying a Bible does not achieve evangelism. The heart of the believer totally committed to proclaiming the Gospel must be added to the technological equation to reach a true Biblical community. Online religious communities take shape by combining the above technology with people of faith who are willing to give themselves completely into His service to accomplish this goal.

Furthermore, many churches throughout the country not only have worship services online, but also include weekly television broadcasts, such as the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, VA.\(^2\) Online religious communities also offer flexibility in providing options to connect and communicate with others at any time. Online

\(^2\) "Thomas Road Baptist Church, "http://home.trbc.org," Internet; accessed 15 February 2009."
communities provide a place for individuals to congregate either at scheduled times or for impromptu Christian group meetings. Another example, Harvest Christian Fellowship (HCF), has over 1,100 weekly online attendees with over 45 people a week accepting Christ as a direct result of the online influence the church has in the community. A third example is Los Gatos Baptist Church in California, which receives over 1,000 hits a day on its website. As more members are added to the church list, these online gatherings become more valued by the members for both intimate and casual meetings. Within this context, individuals may see their online community as their main source of socialization and religious pursuits.

Preliminary research and studies have determined some of the important components that comprise online community. Shara Karasic recommended the following guidelines to build a successful online community:

1. Deliver substantive content.
2. Offer connectivity support tools.
3. Develop an online family atmosphere.
4. Establish a reputable name that identifies the group.
5. Establish a free flow of information.

In addition, researcher George Barna’s report has indicated that “numerous changes in people’s faith experience will emerge in the next few years. By the end of the decade, we will have in excess of ten percent of our population who rely upon the

54 Ibid., Internet; accessed 4 April 2009.
Internet for their entire spiritual experience. Some of them will be individuals who have not had a connection with a faith community.”

Barna also stated:

“Virtually every dimension of the faith community will be influenced by online faith developments. Within churches, we will see e-mail broadcasting, theological chats, online meetings, broadcast to congregants who are immobile, live webcasting of mission trips via webcams, and 24/7 ministry training from the best trainers and educators in the world.”

The Pew Research group has supported these findings and reported that religious online communities make a significant contribution to the church. After surveying over 1,300 congregations, the group reported a wealth of information concerning Internet use and how these congregations will continue their growth. Specifically, the study results determined:

“that the Internet is being used by congregations to strengthen the faith and spiritual growth of their members, evangelize and perform missions in their communities and around the world, and perform a wide variety of pious and practical activities for their congregations.”

Therefore, the Net has been, and will continue to be, a great tool for introducing the church and seminary to the local and extended community. The Net now also includes enhanced features such as teachings and secure chat rooms for church members and students to help them connect with others on a regular basis. As the future of “web casting” becomes more of a reality in the lives of the community, large numbers of people will find the communication they are looking for to help them build interpersonal relationships, as well as meet ministry and educational goals.

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57 Ibid., 3.

Importance of the Study

Volumes of works have covered Internet-based technology; however, insufficient research has been dedicated to the online religious community and the effects of evangelism and renewal. By using this media, the church will provide an outreach to congregation members, the lost, and the unchurched. Although many books, journals, and periodicals have been written about church decline and evangelism, little progress has been made toward using innovative contemporary forms of evangelism and renewal. These works typically approach the issue from church demographics, attendance statistics, or from a denominational, cultural, or spiritual perspective.\(^{59}\)

This study will have a tremendous impact on the development and social outreach capabilities of online religious communities, and subsequently, the relevance of religious institutions in our society today. This dissertation will determine the technologies and methods that have successfully demonstrated their effectiveness for online religious communities to thrive. It will also document the findings in an instruction guide for other churches and seminaries to use for their future implementation. It is essential for religious leaders throughout the country to know and learn from this study so they can conserve valuable resources such as time and money and allocate them towards methods proven to establish and expand their own congregation’s online religious community. Although many churches have begun to establish online communities, to date, no study has addressed the common technology components and methods necessary to reach the lost, or to increase online church membership attendance through online evangelism.\(^{60}\)

\(^{59}\) Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, 23-113.

\(^{60}\) Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, 61-69.
Statement of Methodology

The dynamics of the computer and audiovisual markets have changed dramatically over the past decade. This change provides a unique opportunity to communicate via the Internet with online church members and seminary communities. We are in a market that has rapidly matured, and the church is uniquely positioned to capitalize successfully on advanced technology (e.g., browsers, enhanced graphics, Learning Management Systems, audio podcasts, and video streaming) to reach unchurched groups.

In order to examine this e-Ministry more closely, two original surveys will address some of these relational issues for building an online community. This research study will survey some existing online religious communities to determine how they utilized the Internet as the media to embody Christian community. The focus of the inquiry will be to determine how they developed online communities and how they link them with the affiliated offline church. This information will be extremely beneficial to other churches and seminaries in their search to develop online communities that embrace Christian values and supportive relationships among their members. It will also provide an essential way to bridge the relationships between the online and offline congregants successfully. Andrew Careaga claimed: “The church must move beyond developing a presence in cyberspace…Christians must populate cyber communities—chat rooms, web-based communities, online forums, and other models of virtual gathering places—to be the salt and light that the dark reaches of the Net so desperately need.”61 The possibilities are unlimited; users have created such things as powerful prayer groups, worship

61 Andrew Careaga, eMinistry: Connecting with the Net Generation (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001), 135.
services, and intercessory prayer ministries offered around the clock that usher in a
tremendous harvest as they engage the Matthew 28 mandate for reaching the lost. This
new ministry will not replace the existing ministry, but it is perhaps the greatest
technological tool to advance the teaching ministry and influence our postmodern society.

To determine the best practices related to developing an online religious
community, this research study will administer two different online surveys. The first
survey will be forwarded to church leaders or pastors of online churches, and the second
survey will be emailed to seminary administrators of those institutions offering online
courses. The congregations and seminaries will be located throughout the United States
and will have demonstrated a measure of success in developing an online religious
community within their respective domains. The church and seminary participants for the
survey will be located through an online search for churches and seminaries that have
already established an online presence and community. To ensure a replicable study, a
representative group of online churches will be randomly selected to participate in this
project. Due to the relatively low number of accredited seminaries, most of the
seminaries in the United States will be emailed the survey. The surveys will be sent to
church leaders and seminary administrators via email, accompanied by an introductory
letter and a link to the survey. If church and seminary leaders do not respond within an
appropriate amount of time, an email reminder will be sent as a prompt, followed by a
personal phone call. These measures will help ensure the highest return rate and
reliability on the surveys.

Prior to full implementation, a pilot study will be conducted with the proposed
surveys sent to a small sample of online churches and seminaries. The pilot study will
reveal any questions that are problematic for participants, so the questions can be adjusted prior to full implementation. The revisions to the survey questions, based on the response from the pilot study, will help ensure that church and seminary leaders better understand the survey questions and allow them to provide more meaningful responses.

The surveys used in this research study will examine the common aspects of teaching, training, evangelism, and renewal in the church and seminary. Specifically, the surveys will address the common tools and technologies to promote an effective online religious community including:

- Learn what teaching and training opportunities are offered.
- Determine the level of connectedness between online members.
- Learn what strategies are most effective for reaching the unchurched.
- Explore what opportunities are offered for online evangelism.
- Understand how each organization promotes church renewal.

Ultimately, the research will define the tools, technologies, and best practices of building religious online communities to better serve church members and seminary students. The result will be an implementation plan for the future development of religious online communities. This paper will examine the function of online communities from a practical viewpoint and present best practices of their respective online capabilities for successful expansion of these institutions, especially for building up His kingdom. This study will primarily address the online community implementation of the church and seminary. It will also describe the practical tools and technologies associated with reaching emerging church communities, including both the adult and the
cyber culture “Y” generation. In addition, the study will address the staffing requirements necessary to maintain entire web-based operations.

Chapter 2 will cover a literature review contributing to the work that defines the online religious community and online technologies for implementing both online systems. Chapter 3 will discuss the methodology implemented to conduct the online surveys. Chapter 4 will review the results of the online surveys. Finally, Chapter 5 will include a summary and discussion of the results of the surveys; in addition, it will offer recommendations regarding the next steps for online community implementation.

Definitions

To ensure that the readers and the author are on common ground in relation to the concepts being discussed, the following definitions of special terminology are presented in alphabetical order.

Blog is a “personal website updated frequently with links, commentary, and anything else someone chooses to post there. New items go on top and older items flow down the page. Bloggers are encouraged to throw their ideas into their blogs as they occur. The blog form is unique to the Web and is often used for developing community in the online world.”62

Church is “a tentative theological definition of the church as the whole body of those who, through Christ’s death, have been savingly reconciled to God and have the received new life. It includes all such persons, whether in heaven or on earth. While it is

universal in nature, it finds expression in local groupings of believers, which display the same qualities as does the body of Christ as a whole."63

**Church Membership** follows the early church model, in which followers of Christ were added to their numbers daily to make up the local body. They were believers committed to one another and to Christ and identified with a local church.

**Church Renewal** is a sovereign move of “the Holy Spirit that will purge the church of her sin and fill her with Pentecostal fire so that the work of evangelism will be owned afresh as both a joy and responsibility.”64

**Community** is one of the foundation principles in the Christian faith. Community is a group of believers with common beliefs and interests, who interact with one another for the common good. The purpose of community is to have meaningful fellowship patterned after the New Testament model of intimacy, sharing spiritual blessings for the building up of the Body of Christ.

**Evangelism**, as a function of the church, is a command to go forth, be witnesses, and carry the message of the gospel to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28 19). The task of evangelism is “viewed by Paul as a cooperative effort and likened to that of farming, where as co-laborers, one plants and another waters as the Lord assigns.”65

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Faith is an “opening of our hearts to the grace of God, allowing him to release us from the past and bring us into his future. It also involves obedience—turning our backs on self and abandoning all security.”

Generation Y follows the X generation and is identified as those who are between the ages of 12 and 27, born in the last century.

Lost typically refers to those people who are not born-again believers (John 3:3). They do not have Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord of their life. Theologically, Lost refers to a spiritual condition of death and separation from God.

Online Class, or online course, is designed in such a way that makes learning resources and instructional activities available to the students instead of providing instruction in a traditional classroom setting. “Classes or discussions are held at a specific time. Students are required to attend by logging in at scheduled times, just as they would have to come to a classroom.”

Online communities are groups of people who commit to communicating online with each other via the World Wide Web for the purpose of developing deeper relationships. Heidi Campbell described online community as: “Online communities combine traditional traits of community in a new setting. They occur as individuals assembled through Internet technology to form networks of independent relationships based on common vision, care, and communication. At the time as community online

66 Erickson, Christian Theology, 897-898.


68 Oram, Peterson’s Guide to Online Learning, 6.
emerged, the Internet became seen as a social sphere as much as an information-gathering tool.”

Podcast is a “sound—or audio—file. These are recordings of just about anything—music, talk, or any kind of sound- that has been saved in a format that a computer or other digital media device (like an MP3 player) can recognize and play. These audio files are stored on a computer called a server somewhere on the Internet and made available for people to listen to online or download so they can listen later at their convenience.”

Renewal is a term generally connected directly with the renewal of the whole church and its growth in Christ’s kingdom. From the Christian view, renewal is centered on God and is driven by a desire to love God above all things. Renewal finds expression in community by loving the larger body of Christ and renewing the minds and hearts of the believers.

RSS feed is “an acronym for at least three different phrases, but the most common one is Really Simple Syndication. Syndication has to do with syndicating your information flow—in other words, you can subscribe to the information feeds you want. And when you subscribe, you automatically get the news you want.”

“Web 2.0 is ultimately about harnessing network effects and the collective intelligence of users to build applications that literally get better the more people use

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69 Campbell, Exploring Religious Community Online, xvi.


72 Steven Holzner, Secrets of RSS (Berkley: Peachpit Press, 2006), 2.
them.”73 It refers to revolutionary changes in the ways we use the web. The World Wide Web offers collaborative technologies that facilitate web designers in creative ways for information sharing in new and innovative ways.74


74 Ibid., xiv-xv.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This study will examine and survey the feasibility of developing an Internet-based online church and seminary. In addition to examining the function of online communities from a practical viewpoint, this thesis will also include a sample implementation plan for both churches and seminaries to expand these institutions’ social communications, which will lead to the building up of His kingdom. Furthermore, this study will identify the practical tools associated with reaching the 12- to 27-year-old demographic, otherwise known as the “Y” generation. Major emphasis will concentrate on those resources common to both the church and seminary that will actively engage their respective communities in online evangelism and renewal through teaching and training. The term “community” will typically be used to represent both church and seminary institutions.

The theological resources cited in this study will address Christian community, evangelism, and church renewal through employment of the best practices of developing an online church and an online seminary. The implementation guide, as mentioned above, will consist of the tools and technology that have demonstrated their effectiveness in other successful online religious communities. The Web 2.0 software and management phases of the implementation guide will address special software programs, content management, and the logistics required for an effective online ministry. A successful
online community is one that accurately integrates the message of the Gospel as it communicates a community presence.

This chapter will provide a detailed analytic summary of reference documents to support the relevance of this research project. It will also review the theoretical basis for the project, which includes biblical references to the communication of the Gospel and the roles of both the Church and Christian community. Finally, this chapter will describe the Church’s current strategy to evangelize new members, as well as online strategies that have demonstrated success in other institutions.

Theoretical Basis for the Study

In order to understand the idea of religious community on the Internet, it is necessary to define what “religious community” means in this postmodern age of technology from a Biblical standpoint. “Community is a manifestation of God in the World; a picture on earth of a divine relationship…Christian church represents a meeting place of two communities, the divine community and the human community.”75 “These communities are defined by metaphors and images found in the Biblical text.”76 Each generation must seek the faith to define its role as a religious community in the culture in which it finds itself. In today’s society, some of the most diverse collections of church communities function from seeker-sensitive, cell-driven, and house churches to newly emerging communities, or what is described in this study as web-empowered communities that employ technology to share the Gospel.

75 Campbell, Exploring Religious Community Online, 30-33.

76 Ibid., 30.
Community takes on many forms sociologically and physically, but the religious community views the church as a special group ordained by God. It is focused on the relational and spiritual lives of its members with theological ideals. From the basic definition above, we can infer two important aspects of community: “First, it is relational, and second, it is the fundamental expression of the kingdom of God on earth.”

Biblical Times

In Jesus’ day, the normal means of communication were the public forums, town squares, meeting houses, synagogues, and any other places where people gathered. The people’s hunger for truth in the midst of a cruel Roman world prepared the platform for the life-changing communication that would dramatically affect the hearts and minds of those who lived in His culture. Jesus taught, lectured, and traveled all over Israel to promote the Kingdom of God. Interestingly, it was the mode of communication that drove the message home to those hungry, waiting hearts who anticipated a cataclysmic change in their way of life. With great insight and wisdom, which none before had equaled, Jesus preached the Gospel to the masses of the Galilean countryside. He constantly revealed His Father’s will to set up His Kingdom in the world, and that reign had to begin in their hearts. Jesus began to communicate the greatest secret of His Kingdom: that it was to be found in the hearts of the people, and as a reward for accepting Him, the measure of it was righteousness, peace, and joy (Romans 14:17). Throughout His life, Jesus used the communication media of His day to proclaim His message effectively to the people.

Ibid., 35-40.
When God works in our life, He often does it through community. Specifically, through other people, He changes us and impacts others in profound ways. In the Old Testament, God sent prophets to confront individuals, discipline them, and encourage them often in difficult times. For example, He used Nathan to confront David (2 Samuel 12:1-15) and Elijah to contend with Ahab (1 Kings 17:1-19:18). God worked through these special men to discipline His people and guide them back to the one true God.

Today we, too, have a community of believers to help us in times of need. We have church leadership and college faculty for support, to help discipline and train us in life and ministry. We have teachers and pastors, in their respective communities, who use spiritual gifts to impart wisdom and knowledge. Their impact cannot be measured quantitatively, but it has greatly influenced our behavior by offering practical insights for our everyday life, helping to build up the body of Christ.

Communication of the Gospel Message

The principal role model for these emerging online communities is Jesus and His band of disciples. Together, they forged a group of believers who shared the Gospel message with everyone with whom they came into contact. This small nomadic community traveled from village to village to share the message of God’s Kingdom. They changed the platform from synagogue to mountainside to whatever gathering place people congregated. The message was always the same, but the platform would vary according to people’s location. Whether people gathered around a mountainside, where Jesus would teach the Sermon on the Mount, or beside the Sea of Kinnereth, where He fed thousands with five loaves of bread and two fish, He would skillfully make use of the presentation media of His day to communicate God’s message. According to Dan Spader
and Gary Meyes, the stages for spiritual growth in Jesus’ ministry provide guidelines for building an environment of growth and mobilization for evangelism today. The Master’s strategy included building a Biblical foundation, equipping a team through church leadership, and winning and multiplying followers through evangelism and ministry training. The postmodern minister can implement this same growth strategy through the development of an online religious community.

In the New Testament church, radical change was common and viewed as a necessary means of community growth. Paul told us: He “became all things to all men, so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessing” (1Cor. 9:22-23). Paul was basically saying that in order to preach the Gospel, he would become anything (Jew or Gentile, slave or free man) acceptable to his audience in order to communicate his message. Paul was not opposed to preaching in a temple, synagogue, home, or the local marketplace; he spoke wherever the people were located. For example, Luke wrote in Acts 2:42, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer…in the temple courts…in their homes.” Kreider and McClung gave an example of an extreme departure from the normalcy of conventional temple worship and cited when God brought about the first church in Europe.

“It started in the home of a woman—a businesswoman named Lydia. Paul heard about a community of believers of God-fearing women that were meeting to pray by the river outside of Philippi. Though women meeting to pray together outside of a religious building are not very remarkable to our Western way of thinking, in the first

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...century this was an extreme departure from the temple-centered practices of the Jews and the Greeks.\textsuperscript{80}

Moreover, Christianity has a demonstrated history of radically changing its norms or modes of communication to reach the lost or unchurched through the media or marketplaces over time. The message was propagated in every arena where the people gathered for current events. The pattern and themes of the message became common in the New Testament times (Acts 2: 46). The theme was simple: God’s plan of salvation for sinful humanity was Jesus Christ, the person and His works. In this message, radical change birthed a new community that brought about a radical change in the way people lived, worshipped, and communicated. Today, the message is the same; however, the method has experienced a major change by utilizing the Internet to convey the Gospel. In this way, online churches engage in a high level of participation on the web that includes every aspect of community life. The extent of online participation for individuals is not limited to predetermined congregational responses.\textsuperscript{81} It often consists of spontaneous activities that bring the characteristics of “openness and vulnerability” into their communion.\textsuperscript{82} One community, for example, posted individual views on a website that openly expressed the issues affecting their local church.\textsuperscript{83}


\textsuperscript{81} Gibbs and Bolger, \textit{Emerging Churches}, 172.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 168.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 169.
The Role of the Church

Historically, the main role of the church has been characterized by “the six pillars: worship, evangelism, Christian education, community among the believers, stewardship, and serving the needy.”\(^{84}\) Worship is offered with humbleness of heart that brings glory to God and is not just an act of entertainment. Evangelism reveals the Word of God to the world; however, it is yet to be fully received and accepted. Therefore, the challenge is to create innovative ways that bring the Word to stir the hearts and minds of the hearers to respond to His invitation. Christian education’s mission is to develop champions for God and make servant leaders with Godly character, who make disciples and advance the kingdom to all the nations. Community among believers is a Christ-centered group committed to encourage, disciple, and love one another. Christian stewardship involves being faithful to God in personal, financial, ethical, work, and ministry affairs. Serving the needy engages Christians to care for the poor, widows, and orphans.

The message of Christ must find creative expression to become vital to a dying world. Erickson emphasized the connection between the church and the pillar of evangelism: “If the church is to be faithful to its Lord and bring joy to His heart, it must be engaged in bringing the Gospel to all people.”\(^{85}\) Unfortunately, according to Barna’s research, the church has not been effective in its role of ministry.\(^{86}\) To become effective, the church must recognize the need for change and edify the believers through meaningful fellowship, instruction, and teaching. Therefore, the church needs to develop

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\(^{84}\) Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1051-1053.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 1054.

\(^{86}\) Barna, *The Habits of Highly Effective Churches*, 18.
new strategies to reach congregations, community members, and the lost in order to minister to their needs.

**Role of Christian Community**

Biblically speaking, Christian life is formed by two important components: the individual and the collective Body of Christ, which in turn form the basis of the Christian community. It was expressed through the voluntary sharing of all things in common including instruction, fellowship, prayer, and the “breaking of the bread.” Community participation for these new Christians was not optional and yielded eternal benefits (Ephesians 2: 8-22). Today, online church activities that involve Christian community include the very same functions; however, the use of Internet technology has enabled the Christian community to reach out to the larger online community. For example, online church activities also include podcasts of church services, online Bible study, and online prayer.

The New Testament community is one of the many models the Christian Church has for growing in Christ. It begins and ends with God’s greatest commandment, summed up in “loving God and loving others” (Matt 22: 37-40). The Christian life depends on these two principles and how they are applied to our everyday lives. Community life draws its strength and meaning from this principle and is the supporting structure required for the spiritual growth process. Paul exhorts us to carry one another’s burdens to enable people to go through the many trials in life and a host of difficult times (Gal. 6.2). Each one of us is responsible to Christ to help bring the message of hope and restoration to our brothers. The law of love demands responsibility for others, and the love of neighbor encompasses all our social responsibilities (Rom. 13:10). In this present
age, the Internet opens a vital channel of communication to reach the people with the Gospel and help them share Christ’s love. The impact of technology on the teaching and learning ministry of the church has increased exponentially and will continue to affect church growth.  

The Church has many beneficial and practical ways to offer service to God and show our love for Him. For example, members can help each other with home repairs, childcare, and transportation to Sunday services (Gal. 5:13). Online communities extend these services to one another by their frequent participation and everyday communication. Accessibility is an important consideration for all people, especially for those who may have physical impairments that limit their ability to travel to and participate in church services. The Internet gives people with disabilities the opportunity to develop more meaningful relationships from their homes. The Internet is also a mission field where church members can openly debate and exchange ideas on spiritual matters.

Another important aspect of community is the way that it contributes to our relationships and commitments to others. Community goes beyond submission to authority. We are called to submit to one another by putting another’s needs above our own. True love calls us to stand in another’s shoes and defer to others as long as there is no impropriety in doing so. Paul demonstrated how believers were to bring Jews and Gentiles together into a new relationship in Christ (Ephesians 5:21). He stressed the importance of unity in the Body, and how believers were to live out their lives together in

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88 Stephenson, Web-Empower Your Church, 154-159.
practical ways by displaying a conciliatory attitude toward one another. Online prayer
groups post prayers for forgiveness and conciliatory prayer help to encourage other
online members. Unity prayers also help resolve matters that are of a sensitive public
nature, such as church finances or hiring new youth leaders. Empowered teachings can
also provide greater insight into current issues and might offer a broader understanding of
the weightier matters the church must consider. This type of teaching provides an
impartation that not only instructs, but also enlightens and draws people into a deeper,
more committed Christian life. 89

Therefore, it is imperative for church leaders to embrace this tremendous
opportunity to use technology as a contemporary means of communication. Doing so will
enhance the church’s sphere of influence in today’s society by spreading the Gospel
message, restoring the church’s relevance, and reaching its congregations and the world
for the Kingdom of God.

Church Strategy

In the past, the Church strategy for evangelism focused on the methods of
preaching the Gospel, which pastors use as their primary tool to communicate with their
congregations. Several authors, however, have placed a strong emphasis on the need for
the church to concentrate more on the functions of the church mandates, rather than on
the methods, to communicate the church’s directives. 90 These authors have recognized
the church’s decline and the need for change. Obviously, the most important mandates

89 Elmer Towns, Understanding the Deeper Life (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revel, Company,
1988), 70-76.

90 Kevin Ford, Transforming Church (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, U.K., Kingsway
Communications, 2008), 30-44; 60-64.
are the Word of God and its meaning, rather than the format in which the Word is conveyed. We must be practical and flexible with regard to the cultural shifts in our society and change our methods of communication to reach the lost. Therefore, in order for the church to be successful, we must be willing to change the form in which the Word is transmitted solely from traditional church sermons to include online church communities, as well. Babin and Zukowski stated: “For the Church, evangelization means bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity, and through its influence, transforming humanity from within and making it new.”91 Electronic transmission of the Gospel is becoming, and will continue to become, the method of choice for many—especially for the next generation.

Although we must never violate the Word of God, it is apparent that the Gospel form does not have any Scriptural formula to be religiously correct. The Gospel message is too rich and powerful to be confined to a single paradigm. Frances Shaffer emphasized that flexibility is imperative for church survival: “Not being able, as times change, to change under the Holy Spirit is ugly. The same applies to church policy and practice. In a rapidly changing age, an age of upheaval like ours, to make non-absolutes absolutes guarantees both isolation and death of the institutional organized church.”92 We live in a crucial moment in history that is ripe for communicating the Good News and bringing new revenues of dynamic faith, religion, and spirituality.


An important new vehicle has arrived on the cultural scene for evangelism that offers a revolutionary paradigm for reaching the next generation, the “Y” generation. This innovative tool requires specific actions on the part of the church for implementation. First, the church must recognize the need to have an open mind in order to reach this modern generation with the good news. Second, the church needs to develop a “theology of change” to reach a generation that will no longer accept the old methods. Third, the church must adjust its way of thinking about how to reach the millions who are tuned out and turned off by the usual forms of religion. One author reflected on the strengths of the church, as well as the need for a strategic change:

“Core values, mission, and vision won’t change much. However, strategies must change to take into consideration matters of generational culture. Today’s church must examine both the bridger and buster culture and ask, “What are some of ways that God can use His church to make inroads into these generations with Christ’s gospel?”93 (In other words, for the 40 and under crowd some important questions need to be asked as to how the postmodern church can reach the generations tuned into technology and the Internet.)

Online Community Roles and Relationships

Online communities are groups of people who communicate with each other via the World Wide Web and offer support at a deeper, more intimate level of communication in community relationships. Some are highly sophisticated and technologically integrated; they use Web 2.0 tools that employ Wikipedia, bulletin boards, Blackboard, and Moodle (supplemental classroom resources), chat rooms, lists, demographics servers, and a combination of software programs along with multiple

93 Malpurs and Malphurs, Church Next, 57.
ministry web pages. Other online communities operate simply around e-mail communications or some combination of these communities. Some online groups support one another in geographically located communities; others are purely virtual web-centric. Sociologists have debated what exactly constitutes an online community and how they relate on the Web. Heidi Campbell observed:

“Online communities combine traditional traits of community in a new setting. They occur as individuals assemble through Internet technology to form networks of independent relationships based on common vision, care, and communication. At the same time as community online emerged, the Internet became seen as a social sphere as much as an information-gathering tool.”

 Religious online communities have been shown to foster more honest and intimate communication and expression than other types of communities. A faith community is composed of like-minded persons who join to think and speak about God with authenticity in individual life situations as they engage in life-transforming tasks. Committed people are willing to trust their companions by openly and honestly investing their lives in one another as they let down their barriers of communication and reveal their personal struggles and real-life trials. A community of believers is willing to submit themselves to His truth and love, empower their lives, and nourish one another’s souls. These types of faith-based relationships include discipleship, coaching, teaching, mentoring, sponsoring, and peer-to peer counseling “that empower another by sharing God-given resources.”

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94 Campbell, Exploring Religious Community Online, xvi.
95 Ibid., 61-73.
The main function of religious online communities involves a number of considerations that define the core values of Christian community. The main idea is to function as a church, a living body of Christ whose mission outreach extends throughout the local community and beyond. Online communities want to identify and express their involvement within the context of the offline church, whereby they hold to the sacerdotal functions of the church. The way that online members utilize the community and interact with others beyond cyberspace reflects on the overall positive spiritual life of these online churches.

Research involving these communities has revealed that email is one major source of building relationships. One important aspect of the email community is its desire and actual commitment to honest and open communication. It is this aspect of community that brings out the good to enable changed lives, and ultimately, a transformed church. Traditional church constituents often express their desire for honest communication. They often complain of the church’s impartiality and the loneliness it creates among its members. Therefore, the online church offers something very valuable to many who seek a deeper Christian walk with others, and who are interested in forming genuine relationships.

In order to adapt this technology into our online community life, we must not offer just impersonal messages, but also obtain a real understanding of the needs of the people with whom we desire to communicate. Helping people become receptive to the

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99 Ibid., 69.

100 Ibid., 114-115.
media to the degree they are willing to participate in the communication process will be important to the overall success of the church. For example, one member of the online church may need assistance with a particular service task that another online church member is able to provide for free. Some of these services might include, but are not limited to financial data, tax information, home school assistance, scheduling rides for shut-ins, and online counseling for widows and the elderly. In this way, the online community encourages the two members not only to connect, but also to form a mutually beneficial and rewarding relationship.

The potential of online community cannot be overstated, nor its prominent role in building faith-based groups, which is the primary reason for its evangelistic success. Faith is a strong belief in God and is described here as not only belonging to the individual, but also as an expression of our ever-growing desire to share this faith with others. In this context, religious community is more than a group of people that revolves around social information and interactions; faith is a major ingredient that must be added to the social formation of the group. Faith is the catalyst that has to be included in the relationship with the Divine as well as the human. Therefore, just as the Biblical communities were faith based, it follows that the same spiritual dimension is included for online communities. Online communities can also be viewed in terms of their religious networks with one another and with God. Using the name “online community” indicates that group members have made a significant investment of their time and energy. In these arenas, people spend their time in ways beyond the traditional church

101 Ibid., 36-39.
activities, such as faith-based chat rooms and “Blog” worship, in efforts to explore creative ways to reach out to more people.

“Community as a network of relationships is an idea that sits well within the idea of the Internet as the “network of networks”….This network image of community can also be applied to religious communities. It brings the Divine to the human communities by highlighting their shared connection as a network of spiritual relationships and practices. Employing dynamic understandings of the Trinity, communion, and koinonia from Christian theology demonstrates how these unseen spiritual connections between the church and God can be interpreted as a network.”  

Online community can thus be a meaningful expression of the Body of Christ.

**Online and Offline Community**

Life is embedded in each of the interconnected communities of online-offline community life, or cyber churches and physical churches. The distinction between the online and offline communities is blurred due to the members’ perceptions that they are interconnected and linked to the point where they cannot be separated. They connect through prayer groups and chat rooms that link members on a daily basis. In some ways, the online church is more dynamic than its counterpart, which has less contact during the week; it generally meets only once a week for religious services.

Ideally, the values of the online/offline communities benefit each other and add to the overall quality of the Christian church. An online community of faith can be an active force for evangelism for the offline church and offer many advantages for those who seek to be involved in a living and vibrant community life. Using the Internet, the church will

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102 Ibid., 51.
evangelize and disciple the surrounding communities to bring the Gospel message to many people who are homebound, cyber church seekers, and/or unchurched. This outreach ministry hopes to present basic Christianity in ways that make it clear and relevant to a dying world. Certainly, one of the most beneficial items about online community is the personal connection it makes between members; it complements the communion of the saints in ways traditional institutions have failed. A component of this dissertation will focus on strategic recommendations for the implementation of an online church ministry, which is expected to increase and empower these communities in the 21st Century.

Internet-based Learning

The positive impact of technology on teaching, learning, and worshipping is phenomenal and significantly contributes to expanding the evangelistic church. The force of “the new technologies on the life of the church may represent the most exciting opportunity for evangelism and discipleship that has come to us in generations.”

Technology can improve the teaching quality in colleges and universities, as well as save these institutions time and money. Although more initial preparation is necessary to develop an online course than a traditional course, once an online course is developed, it can be repeated with minimal effort many times over. Online learning offers competitive ways to gain information, acquire and practice skills, and receive learning assistance and tutoring. It also removes the traditional teacher’s role as the main source of knowledge and challenges the student to go beyond the classroom to search for answers. Collaborative planning for courses, especially through collaborative teams of students,

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can be a more efficient way for teachers to develop courses and make greater use of information technology.

Creative ways to implement an online course have been proven to be more effective for the students and the professor. Typical innovations include one-on-one, one-to-many, “student-to-student rather than student-to-instructor” interactions. Interactive assignments are best for students to move into a learning environment with instructor-led activities, and to turn to one another as a source of knowledge. Whether one-on-one or one-to-many engaged learning types are employed, the outcome sought is a greater learner motivation; it is hoped that successful activities will promote confidence and create a shared community presence. Some of the characteristic tools required for online education include program announcements, course syllabi, assignments, study guides, discussion boards, chat rooms, and instant messaging. The goal of the educational institution is to create courses designed to challenge learners and expand their learning experience as they engage in online discussions within faith-based communities. Although some students will also require help to learn how to navigate the online environment, it is important for instructors to develop students’ social interaction skills in the community. The primary goal for the student is to develop a community “presence” with a sense of belonging. The additional time it takes to develop these skills will ultimately lead to a successful online learning program.

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In addition, an important aspect of the online seminary is the connection between the Internet and classroom that requires teachers and students to become technologically literate. Suggestions will be addressed to help plan and analyze the technological needs of the online college. First, it is essential that schools research and plan how technological components will meet their students’ academic needs, and make their expensive purchases accordingly. Some colleges may purchase the technology because it is economical in price, and then try to fit it into their programs. This method has proven costly in the long run, as it creates more problems technically and academically.

Second, the structure of courses must be determined as the first priority to assess the way students and teachers will interact over the Internet. For example, students are generally required to have a webcam and speaker for direct communications with the professor. Courses can be formed according to several different methods in order to maximize the educational benefits. One method draws on the real-time pedagogical teacher’s interactions with students. This one-on-one interface with the teacher adds to the sense of community presence. In this example, the professor introduces the course by utilizing a video file while students follow along with an audio file synchronized to PowerPoint slides that outline the subject matter. Another alternative provides asynchronous teacher student interactions that employ audio podcasts with accompanying PowerPoint slides. This method allows students to listen to lectures as they follow along with the slides. Students may replay a section as many times as necessary to obtain the information or concepts being presented. Other teaching alternatives include: visual and

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106 Conrad and Donaldson, *Engaging the Online Learner*, 8-10.
verbal teaching with whiteboard, graphics, map diagrams, audio collaboration, and simulations.\textsuperscript{107}

Proponents of online learning claim positive effects for student learning and community interactions. Online learners cut across diverse groups of geographic locations, time zones, and levels of computer proficiency. Online learning provides an open door for many who could not otherwise afford a higher education. Research has shown that “online learning is in many ways, better than face-to-face”\textsuperscript{108} learning in a traditional classroom. Transforming cyber learning has the ability to reach millions of students over the next decade and to make a tremendous impact on our postmodern world.

Risks and Concerns of the Internet

Although the potential benefits the Internet offers are great and many, risks are still involved that must be mentioned. For example, children might be exposed pornography without proper parental supervision, and chat rooms might be used for slander or gossip. The Internet also offers the accessibility and potential for developing video game addictions, as well as possible exposure to pedophiles. In addition, computer viruses and worms, as well as the opportunity for hackers to steal personal information present potentially damaging security issues.

Although the above concerns are valid regarding use of the Internet, the positive aspects of wise Internet use far outweigh the risks. The Internet, for example, enables parents to enhance their children’s education through online programs such as

\textsuperscript{107} Palloff and Pratt, \textit{The Virtual Student}, 37-38.

\textsuperscript{108} Fern A, Oram Ed. \textit{Petersons guide to Online Learning}, 72
Encyclopedia Britannica’s website, Biblical tutors, and many other available Christian resources. The Internet will continue to have an influence in our world at home, school, and church. The Internet may be used as a community “presence” in numerous ways that are limited only by the imagination of those who commit themselves to the ministry.

Many of the concerns and issues of the online student and teacher are related to “social presence.” Both teachers and students must fully engage in the collaborative process. “The instructor can be effective in each stage of the process, thereby increasing social presence and reducing the likelihood of uneven participation.”109 A common concern that potential online students may have is that they will feel segregated from their peers and professors when they take online courses. Palloff and Pratt have found that the isolation online students may apprehend has largely been eliminated due to the formation of an online community.110 Because online courses are a part of a larger degree program that provides a sense of belonging to an institution, the students’ connectedness to the institution fills the gaps for community by providing a connection to the larger group.111 In this way, students develop a sense of community “presence” that enriches their overall academic experience.

Characteristics of an Effective Online Learning Program

An effective online learning program has several important characteristics. First and foremost, it is essential for students to be actively engaged in the learning process of

109 Palloff and Pratt, Collaborating Online, 10

110 Ibid., 17.

111 Ibid., 17-19.
their education. Students should ensure that their instructors are aware of how they learn best and understand their learning needs. In the initial development process, it is imperative that students meet with their advisors to discuss their educational objectives, cognitive learning practices (visual or audio), and career goals. Students should also investigate what institutional support mechanisms are available to them such as computer requirements, student aid and practical guidelines, small group projects, blogs, and participation in virtual teams.

Students who engage in online classes must become learner-focused to gain the most knowledge from an online course. For students to become truly learner-focused requires specific supports be in place for both student and teacher in the online teaching environment. Some of the specific technological areas with which students may need assistance include learning to use message boards, participating in chat rooms, and reviewing online Bible lessons. As for academic institutions, the staff may also require technological development to assist prospective students. The college administration may appoint potential consultants to help create and develop the overall curriculum, design technological plans, or act as the webmasters.

The role of the teacher is also an important part of the overall learning process and must be included in the whole learning environment for a successfully designed online course. Greg Kearsley pointed out that “the most important role of the instructor in online classes is to ensure a high degree of interactivity and participation, which means designing and conducting learning activities that result in engagement with the subject.

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112 Conrad and Donaldson, *Engaging the Online Learner*, 7-8.

113 Ibid., 107-110.
Interactions between student and professor require students to fully engage in the learning process, learn to work collaboratively and post responses that demonstrate reflection and thought. The professor develops the course and orchestrates his interactions with the students to create a “teaching presence.” Palloff and Pratt noted that a “teaching presence is further divided into two major functions: first, the selection, organization, and design of content, activities, and assessment; and second, the facilitation of the course.”

The instructor is an important component in developing and ensuring a successful online program. The instructor must plan creatively and engage the students in learning activities that to ensure that they learn how to interact successfully in an online learning environment.

Literature Summary

One of the greatest challenges the church currently faces is how to be relevant in a postmodern culture. In these times, the church must be able to change into a living organism that teaches the reality of truth, not relativism. The church must become a living body of believers actively engaged evangelistically to reach out to the lost with creative ideas and ways of worship so the church can achieve great things in God. The church must evolve to become one that values authentic body life and deals with the heart issues of the present day. The church will use this new technology to engage the culture in which they are living in order to maintain relevance.


115 Palloff and Pratt, *Building Online Learning Communities*, 108.
This study will focus on the ability to harness the power of the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies in order to empower churches and seminaries for service in the 21st Century. The missionary power of the Internet will tap into energizing the church and seminary in ways that can promote the Gospel message like no other time in history.

The web-empowered church and seminary hold great promise for the success of the universal church, as the online community is quickly becoming a major influence in today’s society. Christian churches and universities now offer insights of Biblical principles into everyday needs and will reach into homes previously untouched by the Gospel. Both individual and corporate renewal can be realized with a sustained spiritual vigor when these Biblical principles are developed and released through the community life of the church and seminary.

A gap exists, however, between the opportunities available to the church through the use of the new technologies and the actual readiness of the church to use them. This gap can pose an obstacle for many who see the Internet as impersonal text messages and miss the evangelical opportunities. This study seeks to identify and report empirically on the opportunities and methods of churches and seminaries who have successfully demonstrated thriving online religious communities. The aim of this research is to help persuade those who are skeptical of the evangelistic and renewal opportunities the Internet offers.

Recent research has indicated that nine out of ten teenagers are plugged into the Internet and will become the next generation of church participants.¹¹⁶ This “Y” generation may never cross the threshold of a church, but it would be very open to a

¹¹⁶ Malpurs and Malphurs, Church Next, 114.
cyber church with all the present technologies to collaborate, communicate, and integrate on a wider scale. The possibility to create and maintain such an online church presents a tremendous opportunity for the church to evangelize and bring glory to God.

Churches that are motivated by the possible evangelistic opportunities and view the Internet as a strategic platform to reach the world for Christ will have the potential to experience an explosive outreach and subsequent harvest of new believers. The web-empowered church can also have a powerful impact on winning the lost and participating in one of the fastest church growth methods in Christianity today. Both church and seminary can realize spiritual renewal as they apply the practical steps of integrating the Internet as a major tool for change, whereby God’s name can be proclaimed anew.

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117 Ibid., 114-115.
118 Ibid., 134-135.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

More research groups have reported that an increasing number of the nation’s population seeks online materials to complement their religious activities and educational resources to support their spiritual lives. The most relevant research today is the Barna Research group’s report on the effectiveness of the church, which is considered the foundation for similar studies. Two other groundbreaking works, both based on a national database, have been provided by David Olson concerning the State of the Church in America and Babson’s Online Nation Survey, which detailed 5 years of growth in online learning. In addition, Heidi Campbell offered a comprehensive study on the sociological and religious efforts that affect online communities. These reports revealed encouraging results towards advancing the spiritual life of the church by changing the habits of its people and explained new forms of outreach that show promise for modeling online religious communities to promote evangelism and renewal.

119 Internet Resources are Aids for the Deeply Devout (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 23 December, 2001), http://www.pewInternet.org, Internet; accessed 2 December 2008.

120 George Barna, The Habits of Highly Effective Churches.

121 David T. Olson, The American Church in Crisis.

122 Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning, (Needham, MA: Slone Consortium, October 2007).

123 Campbell, Exploring Religious Community Online, xii-xx.
The design of the overall study relies heavily on Web technology. The Web is proposed to be the main tool to transform the church and seminary to renew communication and bring back a spiritual depth to relationships. The Web will also be the main survey mechanism to obtain the necessary survey results and complete the study. This technology offers religious communities a unique mechanism to expand their borders to build online relationships and draw people closer together.

This research study will survey successful online churches and seminaries to determine the best practices of establishing an effective online religious community. Surveys were initially distributed to specific churches and seminaries via email invitation, with an attached link to access the survey through a professional online survey company. Telephone interviews were later introduced in the survey as a more realistic method of obtaining results. Results were analyzed and used as a basis to create a generic sample implementation plan for churches and seminaries to expand or build new online components for their institutions.

**Research Design**

Several research methods were available to determine the best practices to develop a thriving online community. The researcher considered using research methods that included facilitation of focus groups, face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, direct observation, and survey methods via either postal mail or emailing them over the Internet. After careful consideration, the researcher chose to implement the survey method using the Internet as the most efficient and economical way to obtain the relevant information from this population. During the course of the survey implementation, telephone interviews were necessary to complete the surveys.
Advantages and Disadvantages of the Survey Method

Emailing surveys to specific institutions has several advantages. First, the survey can be answered when it is convenient for the respondent. This method gives respondents the time to think about each question and access the information to complete the questions in the survey.\textsuperscript{124} Second, the speed at which surveys can be sent, completed, and returned to the researcher is faster.\textsuperscript{125} Third, the cost to the researcher is minimal—only the fees accessed by the professional online survey company. In addition, web page surveys can use logic and randomize questions that other types of surveys are not able to use. These features ensure more accurate data.\textsuperscript{126} Furthermore, respondents tend to give more detailed responses to open-ended questions on web page surveys than they do on other types of surveys.\textsuperscript{127} Research has also demonstrated that respondents may answer questions more honestly by email survey because anonymity is guaranteed.\textsuperscript{128}

A few disadvantages have been noted regarding the use of surveys, in general, and forwarding surveys via email, specifically. First, the returns from surveys are statistically low, and generally range from only 5–10\%;\textsuperscript{129} however, if potential research participants


\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{128} Parten, \textit{Surveys, Polls and Samples}, 94.

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 95.
are contacted personally, the response rate may be as high as 20\%. Therefore, by continued efforts, the return rate may be increased considerably over the initial first response. In this study, if respondents did not complete the survey after the first contact, they were prompted again to complete the survey via email one week after they received the initial invitation. If a second week passed with no response, the researcher contacted the institution by phone to answer any questions that the administrator/webmaster had about the survey and verbally invited the individual to complete the online survey.

A second disadvantage of the survey method is that because respondents completed the survey without the guidance of the researcher, they may have misinterpreted questions or omitted items. To counter this obstacle, a pilot survey was first administered to a small sample group of seminaries and churches to ensure the clarity of questions and diminish any ambiguities in the questions and possible responses.

A third disadvantage of the survey method is that questions on the survey must be simple and self-explanatory because the researcher would not be physically present to assist respondents as they complete the survey. To diminish this issue, the researcher included his email address and phone number to ensure his availability and assistance if any potential respondents required further clarity on any of the questions, as recommended by the Ethics Resource Center (ERC).

A fourth disadvantage of the survey method is that surveys must be kept brief if high returns are to be realized. This is an especially critical issue because response rates

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131 Parten, *Surveys, Polls and Samples*, 95.
132 Ibid.
are already notoriously low for the survey method. In this research project, a pilot study was conducted with a small group of churches and seminaries to determine the length and specific number of questions on the surveys. During the pilot study, only a small number of respondents were recorded to assist in determining the appropriate number of questions for the survey. In addition, the researcher discussed this issue with church and seminary administrators/webmasters and asked for their feedback if a personal phone call was warranted (e.g., if two weeks had passed since the initial email invitation to complete the survey).

Certain drawbacks were also noted to specifically forwarding surveys electronically via the Internet. The challenges included the need to obtain or possess a list of applicable and appropriate email addresses, as well as the participants’ ease and ability to stop completing a survey in the middle. To address these issues, the researcher created a master list of potential respondents by conducting Internet research to locate online churches and seminaries throughout the United States. In summary, the researcher addressed these challenges of using the online survey method by researching, locating, and creating his own email contact list of potential respondents and implementing a contact strategy that included follow-up e-mails and personal contacts via telephone calls to survey participants.

Objectives and Variables for this Research Study

One of the most important aspects of survey development is to define objectives that will serve as a foundation for the research study. The primary objectives for this research project were to determine the most effective methods to enhance and expand
ministries from existing online religious communities, as well as to determine how best to establish a successful online religious community.

The variables in the online church survey (from onlinedirectory.com) include the number of online members, technology methods, effectiveness of evangelism and renewal, and size of the churches. The variables the online seminary survey (from online ATS.com) used to analyze the survey resulted in the number of online students, tools and technology employed, evangelism and renewal, and size of the student body enrolled in online courses.

Validity and Reliability

A valid measure is “one which measures what it is intended to measure.”\(^{134}\) To improve the validity of the survey questions, the researcher:

1. Phrased the questions in meaningful ways to improve understanding.\(^ {135}\)

2. Ensured that each question addressed only one item. “Double-barreled” questions were not included in the survey.\(^ {136}\)

3. Asked multiple questions in different question forms for each subcategory topic. Multiple questions counter “idiosyncrasies” and improve the validity of the surveys.\(^ {137}\)

Reliability “is the extent to which people in comparable situations will answer questions in similar ways.”\(^ {138}\) Similar questions will be compared in each category and


\(^{135}\) Parten, *Surveys, Polls and Samples*, 200.


\(^{137}\) Ibid, 96.
compared in relation to each other for reliability. This method provides a means of correlating the data with the hope of capturing the full meaning/answer for the study.\textsuperscript{139} Finally, the results will be analyzed by each variable, which will offer a more complete examination of the survey.

Selection of Subjects

An important step in the process of conducting a useful survey is to sample the population randomly. The cost of performing a census-type study of the population would be extremely expensive, so sampling techniques were used to make inferences about the population as a whole.\textsuperscript{140} This method involves using a small portion of the whole population for representation. “Key to good sampling is finding a way to give all (or nearly all) population members the same (or a known) chance of being sampled, and to use probability methods for choosing the sample.”\textsuperscript{141} A representative sample of online churches will be selected and emailed a description of the project with a link to the survey. Due to the relatively few “eligible” seminaries in the United States most, if not all of these seminaries will be emailed an invitation to participate in either the pilot or final research survey.

Active online churches and seminaries were drawn from a cross section of religious denominations throughout the country to learn from their experiences and the

\begin{itemize}
\item[Floyd J. Fowler, Jr.,] Survey Research Methods (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1984), 84. \\
\item[Ibid., 259-275.] \\
\item[A. Razaveih Jacobs and C. Sorenson, Intro to Research in Education (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006).] \\
\item[Fowler, Jr., Survey Research Methods, 12.]
\end{itemize}
The uniqueness of their respective implementations. The focus of the surveys centered on successful religious communities; therefore, the potential church and seminary participants for the survey were located by an online search for churches and seminaries that had already established an online presence and community. The populations the churches and seminaries represented were from various denominations such as Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Wesleyan, Church of God, Seventh Day Adventist, etc. All of the churches and seminaries included in the research study offer some level of ministry for evangelism and a focus on the spiritual development for their congregants. The surveys do not specify the religious affiliation of the church or seminary; therefore, religious denomination is not a variable in this research study.

Specifically, the method employed for the online search consisted of Googling “online church” and “online seminary” and documenting the specific institutions that appeared. The researcher created two master spreadsheets, one for online churches and one for online seminaries. The master spreadsheets contained the name of the church/school; the web address; the religious leader, president or dean as the contact person; and that individual’s email address. The researcher also utilized the website for The Association of Theological Schools—the Commission on Accrediting as a reference tool for locating seminaries that offered online courses. Specifically, the researcher located the website, “ATS Institutions Offering Distance Education Courses,”142 and viewed approximately 110 schools to determine the actual number that were applicable to participate in the survey. In addition, the researcher sought “online churches” and specific states (e.g., “California”) around the country to ensure representation from each section of

142 “ATS Institutions Offering Distance Education Courses,” http://www.ats.edu, Internet; accessed, 30 September 2009.
the United States. Furthermore, any online churches and seminaries that the researcher located while conducting the literature review for this paper were added to the master spreadsheet of potential online churches and online seminaries. Once the master spreadsheet was compiled, the researcher checked each site to determine its eligibility for inclusion as part of the research study. The online church had to meet the following conditions to be eligible to participate in the survey:

1. Must have had a minimum membership of at least 50;
2. Must have already been functioning as an online religious community;
3. The online church had to have a measure of success (e.g., additional members as a result of adding the online component) in building a religious community.

To be eligible to participate in the survey, the online seminary had to meet the following conditions:

1. Must have been functioning as an online seminary for a minimum of 2 years;
2. Must have a minimum enrollment of at least 25 students.
3. Must offer instructor assistance to specifically address technology concerns of students;
4. Must provide at least two online courses as options for students.

To start, the researcher located an initial number >200 but settled on 150 online churches and 110 online seminaries as potential research participants. After reviewing the individual church and seminary websites, the researcher determined that 125 online
churches and 110 online seminaries were eligible to contact to complete the survey. These final online church and seminary candidates were added to the master spreadsheet list.

To ensure a replicable study, a representative group of eligible online churches was randomly selected to participate in this project. Seminaries were chosen from a short list of Accredited Theological Schools, as mentioned previously, because the population pool was small. The surveys were sent to church leaders, seminary administrators, and/or online webmasters via email, accompanied by an introductory letter and a link to the survey at SurveyMonkey.

SurveyMonkey Implementation

To contact potential research participants, emails were initially sent to specific pastors and administrators of online churches and seminaries. The emails contained a letter of introduction that invited participants to access the survey through the website SurveyMonkey. The researcher selected SurveyMonkey as the professional survey service because it offered many valuable service support options. First and foremost, SurveyMonkey offered the researcher the opportunity to develop a professional-looking survey that used their templates for a minimal cost. Survey question types included multiple choice, rating scale, drop-down boxes, and open-ended questions, among other options. SurveyMonkey also automatically sends out a reminder email to non-respondents and creates real-time graphs for each question on the survey, which is a great support for analyzing the data. Another important feature of SurveyMonkey is that it assures anonymity to respondents. Because representatives of the church and seminary were emailed a greeting and invitation to complete the survey through a Web link, their data were compiled with multiple other churches and seminaries, as opposed to asking
them complete the survey and email it back to the researcher, which would then directly identify the church or seminary by the respondent’s email address.

**Instrumentation**

The researcher developed two original surveys that were available online via a web link through an email sent to specific church ministers and seminary administrators. The researcher followed the guidelines to develop strong and effective survey questions:

1. The language used in the questions was simple and easy to understand.
   The questions used well-known technical terms (e.g., webmaster, RSS feeds, etc.).
2. Questions were concise and to the point.
3. Each question asked for only one piece of information at a time. No “double-barreled” questions appeared on either survey.
4. Respondents were only asked questions pertinent to the research topic if the resulting responses contained relevant information.
5. Questions contained clear and relevant wording for clarity of meaning.¹⁴³

**Survey Content**

The surveys examined several variables within the online churches and seminaries. The surveys included the common aspects of teaching, training, evangelism, and renewal in the church and seminary. In addition, the survey responses will indicate the most effective tools and technologies to: (a) provide evangelism; (b) determine the

most common online ministries; (c) determine the most common programs that are offered online; (d) assess the connection between the on- and offline institutions; (e) determine the most common methods and technologies to provide teaching and training; and (f) learn of the most effective methods to promote church renewal. Most importantly, the surveys determined how the churches and seminaries employ technology to engage in a religious online community, and how they keep their members connected.

The online church survey specifically addressed certain issues that were fundamental only to the online church. The surveys asked about the types of online capabilities the church institutions offer including e-mail, Internet resources for teens and families, Bible study tools, Sunday sermons, and numerous church ministries that help promote deeper fellowship and communion of the members. Other survey questions dealt with the number of new members the online capability brought into the offline church, and whether or not online fellowship has brought about a deeper relationship for its members. The survey also addressed how the online church helped to promote evangelism and church renewal strategies.

The online seminary survey specifically addressed some issues that were fundamental only to the online seminary. These issues included questions regarding communication between students and their professors, as well as academic programs offered by the seminary. The seminary survey also addressed technology-related concerns such as the most effective online software that promotes student satisfaction and success, the best technology to increase the quality of the religious community, strategies to develop an online curriculum, and the technology that promotes an effective online capability. In addition to the research questions mentioned above, this study also
determined the number of seminary students learning online and the number who have benefited from the sense of “community presence” in their learning experience. The results of the seminary survey were also expected to enhance the church’s understanding and appreciation of online learning techniques to further their ability to offer effective teaching online.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to reveal any problems in the design of the research surveys or procedures so that these issues could be addressed before time and resources were spent on a larger scale. It had been determined that a pilot study of approximately “5-10” respondents will generally be large enough to locate any “major flaws” in the survey questions. This pilot study was conducted with 50 online churches and 35 online seminaries. The pilot study included a variety of religious denominations and affiliations of churches and seminaries throughout the United States. The purpose of the pilot study was to confirm and clarify the questions on the official survey. Specifically, the pilot study ensured that all survey questions:

- Were easy to understand and answer;
- Consistently meant to imply the same meaning for every participant;
- Offered respondents appropriate alternatives to adequately capture their meaning;

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144 Parten, *Surveys, Polls and Samples*, 57.

• Drew differences in responses to ensure that every question was not answered in the same exact way from every research participant;
• Were an appropriate length; and
• Were applicable and answerable.\textsuperscript{146}

The pilot study was conducted from September 17, 2009 to September 30, 2009 and yielded poor results. Out of the initial 50 church and 35 seminary surveys distributed, only 3 responded for a $<10\%$ response rate. In the first two weeks of the pilot survey, only 3 churches and 4 seminaries responded. SurveyMonkey emailed a reminder greeting after 7 days to the non-respondents. After the reminder email, two additional churches and four additional seminaries responded to the survey. After 14 days from the initial invitation email, the researcher began to call non-respondents via telephone to prompt individuals to complete the survey, or he completed the survey with them over the telephone.

Based on these results of the pilot study, the researcher eliminated 10 questions from each survey and narrowed the focus of the surveys to specifically address 15 questions. The researcher also determined that senior pastors and seminary administrators often juggled so many obligations that they were frequently unable to prioritize completion of the survey in a timely manner. Therefore, the researcher began to email the surveys to the webmasters of the church and seminary websites. Under this method, the researcher received three additional responses. Based on the response rate, the researcher decided that the most efficient way to continue to obtain accurate and timely responses

\textsuperscript{146} Parten, \textit{Surveys, Polls and Samples}, 57.
was to contact the churches and seminaries and complete the survey with the respondents over the telephone.

Appendix A contains a copy of the email greeting and the introduction letter. Appendix B includes a copy of the survey questions submitted to the church and the seminary in the pilot group, as well as the final surveys used for the research project.

**Types of Questions Used on the Surveys**

Regarding the structure of the survey questions, several guidelines were followed in their general design and application. First, many of the questions provided a “don’t know” or “not applicable” response, except for those questions where the researcher knew and expected a clear answer (e.g., “What is the name of your church?”). This technique was implemented to increase the likelihood of honest and accurate results and help participants complete the entire survey with a minimum of frustration.147 Secondly, whenever a survey question contained a list of options, the responses “none” and “other” were also included as potential responses if they were logically possible answers. Third, a five-point scale with written labels to each point on the scale (rather than just the endpoints) was purposefully used on both the rating and agreement scales. Research has demonstrated that this type of question design yields “higher quality data.”148

The surveys contained multiple choice and open-ended questions to increase the possibility of obtaining thorough answers to the questions. Each type of question has

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148 Ibid., Internet; accessed 20 October 2008.
several benefits, and a brief explanation of the strengths of each type of question is included here. Because each type of question has different advantages, both types of questions were incorporated into the surveys.

Open questions offer a few opportunities, as follows:

1. They reveal unanticipated answers to help round out the survey.
2. They help to understand respondents’ real and accurate views.
3. Responses to questions are the respondents’ own words.
4. Open-ended questions are appropriate to narrow down the list of possible answers to make the survey more feasible.\(^{149}\)

Closed questions offer a better way of obtaining data in this regard:\(^{150}\)

1. Respondents more reliably answer the questions when they have alternatives listed.
2. They offer more reliable answers when precise alternatives are provided.\(^{151}\)
3. They offer respondents opportunities to provide differing views to be analytically interesting.

Assumptions and Limitations

This study will focus solely on churches and seminaries that have demonstrated thriving, effective online religious communities in order to learn about the common tools and technologies that have collectively made them successful. Website design is the

\(^{149}\) Fowler, Jr., *Survey Research Methods*, 87.

\(^{150}\) Ibid., 87.

subject of many books and will not be discussed in any detail, other than to focus on the unique aspects of church and seminary websites.

This study has a few limitations that need to be mentioned. First, churches and seminaries will be identified for participation in the survey by locating their active church or seminary website and community online. Specific criteria facilitated the selection of appropriate churches and seminaries for the survey. Therefore, only churches and seminaries that have highly visible websites were included in the study. Because the study focuses on established thriving online communities, this condition is not anticipated to be a great disadvantage. It should also be noted that the survey questions will be limited to online churches and seminaries that have successful online ministries, and no attempt will be made to examine failed institutions.

Second, the sample size for this research project is relatively small. The surveys were emailed to 125 churches and 110 seminaries. Although the sample size for the survey is small, the information gleaned from the survey will still be applicable and relevant for most churches and seminaries interested in pursuing an online religious community.

Third, the research will not discriminate between the various religious denominations. Therefore, specific findings will not be generalized to a particular religious group.

Fourth, sociological and psychological aspects of an Internet or cyber-based church are left for other studies to address, as well as the concerns implied by a “virtual” church. Understanding the “emerging church culture” that has spawned the evolution of computer age communication will also be left for other studies; however, limited
discussion on this “emerging church culture” topic will be included for the purpose of understanding the direction of this study.

Procedures

The researcher began the study procedures by reviewing the initial requirements that were necessary as derived from the project scope. These requirements included the technology components that were necessary to set up a new website (e.g., CMS software, ISP, Host Services, etc.). After this review, the researcher contacted a religious leader from both a local church (Northgate Community Church) and a local seminary (Evangel Theological Seminary) to discuss the concept of online religious groups and to learn of their interest in developing one and becoming part of this research study. Additional meetings were held with the leaders of each institution to learn what components of an online community they would consider implementing over the next year. From these discussions, the researcher drafted a preliminary list of requirements and possible operational procedures (reference Appendix C for the details for requirements and the operational procedures). The list of initial requirements also included relevant material from the literature review regarding online community features that are prominent in existing online communities. In addition, a review of relevant online church and seminary web pages was investigated to expand upon the list of initial requirements.

Once the requirements and a literature review successfully identified the scope of the dissertation, the survey questions were developed. The researcher reviewed several websites and research books to construct valid and reliable survey tools. The methods are fully described in the Instrumentation section in Chapter 2.
The researcher contacted the University to acquire the Institutional Review Board’s (IRB) approval to conduct the research study. The IRB requires a statement of the content that explains the subject matter, along with documented assurance and maintenance of the confidentiality of the research data. The request form was approved within two weeks of submittal to the IRB chair. After the IRB gave its approval, the surveys were administered to the pilot churches and seminaries.

Because the population to be surveyed focused on online churches and seminaries that had established successful online communities, the researcher had to determine an effective method of locating potential survey participants. To determine the population for the surveys, the researcher Googled “online church” and “online seminary” and documented the specific institutions that were found. The researcher also utilized the website for The Association of Theological Schools—the Commission on Accrediting—as a resource base for locating religious institutions that offered distance education courses. Specifically, the researcher located the website, , sub-link “ATS Institutions Offering Distance Education Courses” and viewed approximately 100 schools to determine the actual number that were eligible to participate in the survey. Furthermore, any online churches and seminaries that the researcher located while conducting the literature review for this paper were also considered as potential survey participants. The researcher created two master spreadsheets, one for online churches and one for online seminaries. The master spreadsheets contained the name of the church or school, the web address, the religious leader, president, or dean as the contact person, and that individual’s email address.
After the master list of eligible potential respondents was confirmed, the pilot study was conducted. The researcher sent an email with an invitation to complete the surveys to 50 churches and 35 seminaries. A link to SurveyMonkey was included in the email for immediate response. The SurveyMonkey website collated and performed the initial analysis with graphs and bar charts included in the results. After conducting the pilot study, the researcher learned that the phone call method was most beneficial to survey participants, as he was able to clarify respondents’ comments to better understand the context of the responses. The telephone interviews were also a more efficient and effective method to obtain completed surveys from the religious institutions. The researcher later manually entered the responses into Survey Monkey’s database. These changes in procedure from the pilot study to the actual research study helped ensure the highest return rate and reliability of the surveys.

Prior to full survey implementation, the pilot study was conducted and yielded poor results, as mentioned above. Surveys were initially emailed to the head religious leader; however, based on the low response rate, it was determined that the senior religious leader was not the best person to complete the survey. When the researcher spoke with various respondents on the phone, many conveyed that they had good intentions of completing the survey, but it was just not a high priority for them. Based on the lack of responses, the researcher began to email the survey to the administrator or Webmaster of the sites instead and/or also began completing the surveys with them on the phone. For the full-scale research study, the researcher continued with the telephone interviews because that method produced faster and better results.
Once the SurveyMonkey results were compiled, the analysis of findings and comparisons was determined. The analysis did not provide enough conclusive results, so the researcher returned to gather additional samples and continued investigating additional religious communities. The researcher repeated the previous steps until a full understanding of the methods and technology requirements (methods and technology) was obtained. The entire process is depicted in Figure 1.

![Research requirements process](image)

Figure 1. Research requirements process.

The results met the researcher’s expectations for the project concept. The results of the surveys were used to create a sample implementation plan for religious institutions to develop effective online communities. Reference the implementation plan in Appendix C.
Implementation Plan

This research paper includes one generic sample implementation plan that can be applied for either a church or seminary to expand its current web page to an online community (see Appendix C). The sample implementation plan describes the development process for both of these online communities because they both share very similar implementations. It includes instructions for setting up new web pages and associating links to discussion boards, Moodle, Facebook, Twitter, chat rooms, etc. The implementation plan also recommends appropriate software for each institution. The plan documents all of the technical media communications necessary in both of the ecclesiastical and academic domains.

The goal, as outlined in the implementation plan, is to expand the websites of both communities and add online capabilities that offer cost-effective ways to provide ongoing growth and effectiveness. Several ways are available to accomplish this task and are specifically detailed in the Implementation Plan. In brief, options include professional web design houses, content management consultant companies, “plug and play” content management services, and high-level software packages and/or web publishing software available in the public domain that allow for someone to design their own web page.

Data Processing and Analysis

The responses from subjects were collected by the SurveyMonkey website, and later via telephone contacts. The results of the surveys were compiled and analyzed using the initial demographic questions asked at the beginning of each survey. The SurveyMonkey website collected and graphed the data for each survey question. The website also graphed the data based on the independent variables of the research study:
how many in the church/seminary participate in the online community and the numbers added to the size of the institutions as a result. These graphs and charts will be included in Chapter 4 as visual supports to analyze the results and determine the findings of the surveys.

The findings of the surveys were used to create a sample implementation plan for religious institutions to follow to develop a new or expanded online community. Structured survey questions were used to obtain the basic requirements in developing an online community. The idea was to understand the methods and technology employed by each group that brought about a successful online capability and incorporate those findings into the implementation plan.

Furthermore, the survey responses were grouped and catalogued for commonality of method and technology. Once the responses were documented, the researcher conducted an analysis using a structured approach. This approach allowed for the responses to be prioritized in the order of importance, to ensure that the implementation plan provided the greatest degree of functionality within the specified resources claimed by the respondents. Requirements were then derived by ranking the responses according to their measure of influence on the online capability.

Once the significance of each requirement had been classified, they were placed into a table. This table represented the implementation project’s order of importance, description of the requirement, its significance, and contributing factors. Once the technical parameters had been determined, the recommended solutions were designed into the implementation plan.
The researcher mapped the results of the surveys against earlier studies by Barna and Pew’s research groups to measure the validity of the data (see Chapter 5). The survey was developed in conjunction with SurveyMonkey’s guidelines, as stated in their online handbook. Appendices A and B contain a copy of the email greeting, the introductory letter, and the survey questions submitted to the church and the seminary.

Summary of Methodology

The approach to the methodology in this dissertation project has followed the classical six steps of research methods. The research methods steps consist of initial planning, research design, process, implementation, data analysis, and resulting findings. The first four steps were documented in this chapter; the resulting data analysis and findings will be detailed in Chapters Four and Five. The research subjects were located from Internet searches of “online church” and “online seminary,” as well as from the websites (churchsitedirectory.com and ats.edu). The respondents for the study included officials from online churches and seminaries that have successfully developed an online capability.

The researcher solicited 125 online churches and 110 seminaries to complete the study, with 17% of the churches and 24% of the seminaries responding, respectively. The addition of telephone interviews was necessary to complete the study and collect the evaluations for each of the institutions. Data were collected and stored by SurveyMonkey as participants completed the online survey, or the data were input manually by the researcher after telephone interviews. This approach allowed for the collection of the needed information in an efficient and

anonymous manner. The final results and analysis were analyzed and diagnosed in
Chapter 4 with Chapter 5, which provides the overall summary for the entire dissertation.
CHAPTER 4  
SURVEY RESULTS

The purpose of this thesis project is to define the tools, technologies, and best practices for building religious online communities in order to better serve the church and seminary communities. This information will be incorporated into an implementation plan for the future development of religious online communities. This project will also determine the most effective tools to promote evangelism and renewal within online churches and seminaries. To accomplish this goal, the researcher administered two different surveys: one to online churches and one to online seminaries to gain a working knowledge of their online communities. The following paragraphs will detail the raw data of each survey question through tables, graphs, and an analysis of the overall results for each survey.

Review of Survey Implementation Methodology

In review, the researcher sent an initial email survey to 125 online churches and 110 online seminaries across the United States and invited them to complete an online survey through SurveyMonkey. In response, the researcher received completed surveys from only four online churches and two online seminaries. After one week, SurveyMonkey emailed a reminder to all of the religious institutions who had not yet completed the online survey. An additional two churches and ten seminaries completed the online survey after they received the reminder email. After two weeks had elapsed
since the initial invitational email was sent, the researcher began contacting the churches and seminaries to complete the survey by phone. The most effective method by far in regard to obtaining results was the follow-up telephone interview. The immediacy of the telephone encounters helped potential respondents accept the invitation to participate in the survey and generously offer their information. An additional 15 churches and 14 online seminaries completed their surveys by telephone with the researcher. In all, 21 churches and 26 seminaries completed the survey (see Table 1), for a response rate of 17% and 24%, respectively (see Table 2).

Table 1. Religious institution response rate by survey method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># complete survey after 1st email</th>
<th># complete survey after 2nd email</th>
<th># complete survey by phone</th>
<th>Total number completing survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online churches</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online seminaries</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Religious institution response rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total # invited to take survey</th>
<th>Total # to complete survey by any method</th>
<th>% response rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online churches</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online seminaries</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The surveys were conducted based on a total of 125 possible churches and 110 seminaries. Three respondents who expressed concern for their anonymity were invited to email Liberty’s faculty to verify the institutional authorization and remove any doubts about the confidentiality concerns or security of their information and identities. Most of the respondents, however, were satisfied to complete the surveys after the IRB numbers that legitimized the survey were revealed. The survey was completed over a period of 81 days from inception, September 1, 2009 through November 20, 2009, for a total sample of 21 online churches and 26 online seminaries. The total number of samples for both surveys was 235 churches and seminaries, with respondents providing less than a 20 percent return rate.

Both the church and seminary surveys focused on four main themes: tools, technologies, evangelism, and renewal. The online church survey contained 22 questions, and the online seminary survey contained 27 questions. The survey questions were designed to determine what methods these institutions used to create and maintain a successful online community. The data are organized logically and follow the questions on each survey.

Analysis

The researcher recognizes that to conduct a statistically correct sample requires a more random selection of subjects and a larger sample of respondents for scientific accuracy and completeness. Therefore, it is deemed more accurate to identify these surveys as “exploratory data gathering” so it is not wrongfully misconstrued or accepted as scientifically based.153 “Careful use of biased sampling can be used if it is justified as

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such.”154 Even though the selected examples may not cover all the population, the collected information can be legitimately claimed as recognizable patterns that lay the foundation for concluding the best practices and methods of religious online communities.

Online Church Survey Analysis

Research Question 1: How Many Members Belong to Your Online Church?

Respondents were offered the following choices (n=21): (a) 1-100; (b) 101 – 199; (c) more than 200; (d) don’t know.

The intent of this question was to determine the number of online participants and relate it to a similar offline membership question to find out how many congregants in the church were actually utilizing the online capability. Although the majority seemed to favor retaining the online capability and in some cases believed they could not do without it for communicating with their members, most found it difficult to put an exact number to the online participation. Some church measures included partial tallies from Facebook, an online networking tool that connects the congregation with friends in the church. Other churches measured the number of times people accessed their website over a 30-day period. These two examples were just cumulative responses and tools used to make a conservative guess as to the actual number of people connected via the online social network in the church. Real numbers were difficult to obtain from this question because of the time constraints in acquiring the information. Therefore, educated estimates of the numbers were requested from each of the respondents in order to gather the data.

154 Ibid., 12.
Furthermore, the size of the church and seminary was intended to be the independent variable for the analysis of the rest of the questions in the survey. Unfortunately, most of the institutions ranked in the “small” category, and not enough medium- or large-sized institutions responded to the survey to make the analysis provocative. Therefore, the results of the surveys will be reported solely as raw data.

As the responses indicate, 43% of the religious institutions were in the first category of (a) less than 100 online members. Larger churches (33%) that completed the survey claimed greater online populations of more than 200 participants. Three churches (14%) indicated (b) 101-199 online members, and two churches (10%) indicated they did not know because of their inability to measure the online participation (Reference Figure 2).

Figure 2. Responses to the question how many members belong to your online church?
A common experience in the church was for the leadership to target their respective ministries with e-mail broadcasts and Facebook to communicate with their groups. For example, youth ministry, as well as men and women’s groups, would stay in contact with their peers via online communication. The basic practice consisted of sending notifications by email or through Facebook. Roughly 5% of the church respondents indicated that almost their entire church was involved with the online communication, which made it a valuable source to link the church leadership with its members and connect them to one another.

Research Question 2: How Many New Community Participants Have Been Added to the Local Church as a Result of Online Ministries?

The choices offered included: (n=21) (a) none; (b) 1-10; (c) 11-20; (d) 21-50; (e) 51-100 (f) >100; (g) don’t know.

This question sought to understand whether the church had benefited evangelistically and added new members as a result of its online capability. During the follow-up telephone interviews, the researcher determined that it was necessary to put a specific time frame on this question to help narrow down the responses. The research question was revised as follows: How many new community participants have been added to the local church as a result of online ministries in the last year? Most churches indicated that small numbers (11-20) of new members had been added each year but could not specifically attribute the growth to the online capability alone. Other factors contributed to the addition of new parishioners, such as telephone communications by religious leaders, accessibility of the web page, location information, and members who proselytized as a normal course in their daily walk with the Lord.
Some church leaders believed that their home web page advertisements may have had the most influence, and others claimed that the online communications (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, or e-mails) to the local community helped evangelize new members. It was difficult for almost all of the respondents to determine the exact number of new members per year, but most of the respondents who discussed this question agreed that the church had positively benefited by the presence of the online capability. Only one respondent disagreed with this statement and noted that his church just used the website to provide the church’s location, contact information, and staff identifications.

The respondents indicated that 33% were in the range of 1-10, 5% within the 11-20 range; 10% indicated additional 21-50 new members; 14% estimated between 51-100 new members; 24% did not know; and the others (14%) estimated the number to be greater than 50 new members per year. Again, the larger churches (n = 5) claimed that up to 50 new members were added to their church yearly. The survey question did not address the number of members who left the church for various reasons (discussed in Chapter 1). Therefore, these new members were not continuously accumulating, but amortized over a period of time.

Research Question 3: How Many Support People Do You Require to Staff or Manage Your Online Ministry?

The respondents were offered the following choices: (n=21) (a) 1-2 people; (b) 3-4; (c) 5-6; (d) more than 6 people.

This question is important for those religious institutions that have not yet started an online ministry and want to understand the magnitude of this requirement for adding this capability to their church. A follow-up question determined whether the support staff consisted of technically capable volunteers or paid personnel (professional Webmasters),
and whether those staff members who worked the online services were seen as ministers or just technical consultants. In 58% of the cases, at least one staff person was a part of the leadership team, and 1-3 additional technical staff members contributed to specific parts of the production (e.g., pictures, audio podcasts, and program managers) of the online system. In a related question, 70% indicated that church volunteers composed their technical staff, and the rest (30%) claimed that paid technical staff or a professional IT service company supplied the technical needs.

As the respondents indicated, 58% of the churches used only one to two people, 26% required three to four people, and 11% had five or more staff that contributed to the overall support of the online community (see Table 3). It is important to note that although the remaining churches (5%) relied on professional hosting services to provide the majority of the technical services for the online community, they still required at least one individual from the leadership team or an IT person who acted as the church content manager for the online system. These managers are key contributors to the overall success of the online community. Their creative collaboration between the leadership team and community forms the foundation for a successful online offering.

Table 3. Number of people who manage the online church community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of people who manage the online community</th>
<th># churches(n = 21)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 -2 people</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – 4 people</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5+ people</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Two churches did not respond to this particular question.
Research Question 4: Indicate All of the Methods That Your Church Uses to Communicate with the Members

Respondents were offered the following choices (n = 21): (a) Podcast; (b) Blogs; (c) Live streaming video; (d) Facebook; (e) Discussion Boards; (f) E-mail Broadcast; (g) e-newsletter; (h) Personalized Photos/Profile Pages; (i) Online Announcements of Church Events.

The Internet houses thousands of successful Christian web pages and online communities, and it is important to know which tools have contributed positively to our faith and culture. Therefore, the intent of this question was to investigate the technical aspects of the sample churches and determine what Internet tools were most often utilized to communicate with their online membership. This question also gives insight into how people tie into their churches to find relevance, as well as meaningful and spiritual connections.

The majority of the respondents used e-mail broadcasts (71%), e-newsletters (71%), and Podcasts (62%) as the primary means of communication with their online members. Many church administrators (57%) claimed they made use of Web 2.0 applications, and several (48%) indicated that blogs were the next most important media for communications. Streaming video (28%) and video conferencing (29%) were seen to be beneficial for communicating the pastor’s messages about the church’s vision and missions. Discussion boards and personalized profile pages of members were included in 10% of the respondents’ online communities. A smaller percentage (14%) included live video church services and special holiday plays (7%) in their list of media tools to reach their members (see Table 4 for the Most Frequently Used Technology Methods).
Table 4. Most frequently used technology methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology methods</th>
<th>% of churches that use the method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email broadcast</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-Newsletter</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcast</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web 2.0 technologies</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video conferencing</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streaming video</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission updates</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live video church services</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalized profile pages</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion board</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special holiday plays</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 5: What Are the Best Evangelistic Practices You Have Found That Have Led to Building Your Successful Online Religious Community?

This open-ended question was designed to elicit free and honest responses geared towards understanding the evangelistic practices of churches. This question was an integral part of the survey, as it sought to determine the methods of how online ministries increase their numbers in the church. The data gained from this survey question will be added to the best practices guide for online ministry.

The responses to this question often required clarification from the researcher. This step was due to some respondents who interpreted the question as addressing a specific evangelical ministry (e.g., evangelistic preaching or a noted evangelist who gave a special seminar in the area) and required further explanation to determine the true nature of the question and subsequent response. Because options were not provided for
this question, religious leaders were able to list multiple examples in their ministries. Mission outreaches, inner city group projects, home groups, youth community meetings (e.g., harvest celebrations in lieu of Halloween parties that are open to the community), and women’s tea times were examples of potential evangelism outreaches in which many churches participated on a regular basis. Overall, special social events like the ones mentioned above, including passion plays and Christmas pageants, were seen as the most effective outreaches to the local community.

Church leaders noted several interesting issues when they responded to this question. In some cases (n=7), the denominational preference of the church or church members appeared to influence their evangelistic outreach. For example, if a church was a confessional professing church, the church leaders tended to keep a traditional liturgy as their mode of communication, which limited their ability to expand the size of their congregations. In addition, the size of the church impacted the type of response that church leaders communicated to the researcher. As anticipated, larger churches hosted many more ministries, which contributed to the number of web pages offered and added numerous ways to reach more people for Christ (e.g., youth ministry, men and women’s ministry and missions, etc.). Smaller churches were more likely to indicate that their web pages were more of a yellow pages advertisement. Other church leaders considered the age of their membership and noted that older members tended to prefer physical gatherings, whereas younger members desired more online communication, online ministries, and communication with the greater community outreach.

The larger churches that had 200 or more members (n=5) had far greater ministries and more leaders who implemented various online programs. Examples
include online men and women’s meetings, which shared their own outreach communications with each other and the community. Almost all of the churches offered Vacation Bible School. Several churches cited that church members communicated with their friends in the community to alert them of this ministry and ultimately contributed to the overall evangelistic practices of the church. As indicated above, respondents reported that most of the online evangelism was integrated into the overall ministries of the church. In most cases (n = 12), the ministries as a whole were viewed as the main outreach of the church.

This question was open-ended, and responses varied over quite a range, with almost as many answers as there were respondents. Samples of some of the open answers are listed below as direct excerpts from this question:

1. “Primary goal is to create easy-to-use methods to communicate to people and how they relate to outbound information sources like Blogs. Very little comes back into the church—mostly outbound broadcasts with emails or telecom pages.”
2. “Senior pastor blogs and conferences are mostly used to get the word out to people.”
3. “We practice regular survey questions sent out to members to help understand the needs of the membership and communicate to those in need. There are Web visual effects to attract seekers that add to the spiritual content of the Web page and help to inspire visitors looking for a home church.”
4. “Mostly, the links to other Christian sites are employed to capture people’s attention. Group projects and seasonal special events like Easter pageants advertised on the Web contributed to evangelism outreaches.”

5. “Christian links and Bible studies are the primary means within the church and are offered on the Web to people.”

6. “Podcasts for plan of Salvation and free literature by noted authors like Dr. Andy Stanley. We also have links to Christian media on How to Meet God.”

7. “We have seen some people visit the church due to their interactions with the online church, but that is about it. Existing members are not involved much.”

8. “Online sermons are seen as the primary vehicle to get the message out.”

9. “The offer of ministry to help people in need via the web seems to attract people.”

For several cases, additional inquiries revealed that online prayer and podcasts of worship services were also indicators of evangelistic outreach. Although these last issues were not specifically addressed as evangelistic tools, they were considered as possibly contributing factors to the evangelistic ministry of the church. The presence of their web page as an open invitation to seekers looking for a spiritual home was frequently mentioned.

A follow-up question for this section examined the effectiveness of the online church as an evangelistic tool. The respondents rated the effectiveness on a scale of 1-5, in which 5 is the most effective tool for evangelism or expanding the number of parishioners in the congregation. The following pie chart provides a visual representation of the results of the question: 60% (n=12) valued the online church as an effective tool.
for evangelism, whereas another 25% (n=5) indicated that it was at least as effective as other tools.

![Figure 3. Effectiveness of the online church as an evangelistic tool.](image)

Research Question 6: How Does Your Church Website Promote Church Renewal (That Is, Anything That Affects or Improves the Church’s Spiritual Vitality)?

The intent of this open-ended question is to understand the contribution that online community has made to the spiritual life of the church. Answers showed that the spiritual life of the church was affected in a number of ways. Some of the responses included: in the life of worship, Bible study, service, and friendly gatherings advertised on the Web, which included pictures, videos, and/or individual testimonies. Both Facebook and Twitter were cited by half of the respondents as having a positive influence in building this spiritual atmosphere in the church.
A number of the respondents (>40%) indicated preparing their site to be attractive to non-Christians and the general public. These respondents included web pages of secular interest, which then lead across to the Gospel message, a.k.a. “bridge strategy.” A smaller, but still significant percentage (33%) believed that testimonies and Christian advertising helped promote renewal. Furthermore, another 25% of church leaders indicated that “real world” or self-help-oriented messages were used to attract new members. Only 8% of the church leaders declared the use of salvation messages as effective tools. Surprisingly, 8% of the ministers were not even sure of what method, if any, was effective in their overall ministry.

Online Seminary Survey Analysis

Research Question 1: What Is the Total Number of Students Enrolled in the Online Courses at Your Institution?

Respondents were offered the following choices (n= 26): (a) 1-100; (b) 101 – 199; (c) more than 200; (d) don’t know.

The purpose of this question was to learn the size of the online student body. This question, in conjunction with other related questions in a series, also inquired whether online enrollments created a positive contribution for these institutions.

The related questions included: What kind of online learning does your institution provide? What ministries do you invite online participants to share as part of your campus collegial events? What programs or events do you offer online participants? Finally, how have the online courses contributed to the spiritual life of the seminary by involving students in the ministries the institution offers? All of these questions were
addressed both in the online survey and by the researcher during each of the telephone interviews.

Most of the respondents (~98%) indicated that their seminaries were involved in online courses, which included directed study, intensive on-site courses, or online courses with intensive on-site courses. The latter defined the larger institutions’ position for onsite intensives, in addition to online courses as a requirement to fulfill the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) accreditation standards. For institutions to qualify for accreditation, the online course requirements had to be less than 30 percent of the overall curriculum for their seminary degree. The smaller institutions comprised about 40% of respondents with less than 100 online members, and 28% indicated more than 200 online students. The most interesting aspect of this part of the survey was that almost all the respondents indicated that their online offerings contributed to the life and vitality of their seminaries. Only one respondent offered an opinion that contradicted this position by noting the desire for more on-site presence to build a more meaningful student body (see Table 5).

Table 5. Number of students enrolled in online seminaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of students</th>
<th># seminaries with student enrollment (n = 26)</th>
<th>% of seminaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 – 100</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101- 199</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200 +</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 2: What Tools and Technology Does Your Website Offer to Promote an Effective Online Religious Community?

Respondents (n=26) were offered the following choices: (a) Podcasts; (b) Blogs; (c) Live streaming video; (d) Facebook; (e) Discussion Boards; (f) e-mail Broadcast; (g) e-newsletter; (h) Personalized Photos/Profile Pages; (i) Online announcements of events.

The intent of this question was to understand the innovative framework of technology and tools that helped students become successful online learners. Although these technologies were just the tools for online learners to participate in the religious courses, they provided the framework for creating a “community presence” at each phase of an online curriculum. They helped convert classroom activities into an online environment, allowed students to access learning, and promoted student engagement that helped to create an online virtual classroom. These technological advances contributed to the academic and spiritual ministry activities to improve and make religious education available. These Web 2.0 technologies also help expand the market for a potentially larger student body (e.g., Liberty University has more than 3,000 students in the seminary’s distance learning program).

Not surprising was the greater percentage (80%) of the larger institutions (n=5) that used some form of a learning management system (LMS) to offer a large variety of these tools for both professors and students in one package. For example, Blackboard, Moodle, Scholar 360, SAKAI, and Desire to Learn were all mentioned as fulfilling the academic requirements for a LMS that offered a wide range of learning tools. Moodle and SAKAI are open source LMS that offer basic services for free, with additional cost for increased capability.
Most of the seminaries (80%) claimed they offered special meetings at their facilities for their online communities to meet and develop fellowship. About the same percentage of respondents used some form of discussion board to enable collaboration and enhance the “community presence” in the online environment. Facebook, blogs, and Twitter made major contributions to the communication and connectedness of the student body, according to 48% of the respondents.

Additional methods were also mentioned as impacting the level of community presence. These methods included chat rooms (50%), web conferencing (48%), and ministries and events (e.g., 52% indicated that Bible studies and online prayer were offered on-campus). Podcasts and video presentations were found to be a favorite among 60% of the respondents. The best media to communicate course offerings, announcements, and upcoming events was email broadcast (78%).

Research Question 3: What Online Evangelism Does Your Seminary Provide?

Respondents (n=26) were offered the following choices: (a) Refer people to a local church, (b) Online Prayer, (c) Testimonies, (d) Provide spiritual material, links, or relevant Christian resources, (e) Online Counseling, (f) Volunteer Opportunities in Evangelism, (g) Mission Outreach, (h) Inner City Projects.

This question tried to examine the spiritual content of the online seminary as an instrument for evangelism. Although most, if not all of the student body in each of these institutions had previously committed their lives to Christ (“raison d’être” for seminary), the evangelistic component to this question extended beyond the immediate question and spilled over into both the spiritual life of the student body and spiritual event
announcements broadcast out to the larger community (e.g., Christmas and Easter pageants conducted by the seminary/college).

About 44% of the respondents indicated spiritual materials, links to other Christian resources, and internal resources (e.g., Bible studies, online prayer, and special internship meetings) for internal spiritual encouragement. External communications that included web page advertisements and radio broadcasts were the vehicle for communicating their evangelistic outreach messages. Only a few respondents, approximately 15%, reported no evangelistic outreach to the community; however, the researcher believes this question was skewed negatively because the e-mail responses did not have the opportunity for further clarification from the researcher. The same explanation as in the church surveys was necessary to clarify and restate this question for continuity. The responses to this question often required clarification from the researcher because some respondents interpreted the issue to address a specific evangelical ministry (e.g., evangelistic preaching or a noted evangelist who gave a special seminar in the area); further explanation was needed to determine the true nature of the question and subsequent response. For some seminaries, the evangelistic impact was unknown because it was neither measured nor thought to have a direct impact on their Christian message beyond the borders of their seminary.

Facebook and blogs were major contributors to communication among the student body, with 70% of the respondents indicating that their online seminaries utilized one or both of these tools. The external component was impossible to measure because many students were already in a ministry that shares the Gospel message with their communities. Other tools that might contribute to extend the message were personal
testimonies in chat rooms (50%) and web conferencing (67%), along with ministries and events (e.g., 50% of the online seminaries offered Bible studies and online prayer on campus). Special events were another means of contributing to the evangelistic outreach; again, they were difficult to measure as directly related to the seminary’s evangelistic outreach. Podcasts and video presentations (70%) were also found to be an important ingredient in this regard for 60 to 70% of the respondents. Methods included e-mail broadcasts (78%) that were favored as a media “to-get-out-the-message” of course content, course announcements, and special event information.

Table 6. Favored technology methods for evangelism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology type</th>
<th>Favored method of evangelism in %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat rooms</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferencing</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible studies and online prayer</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcast and video</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail broadcast</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Below are some excerpts from responses to this survey question:

1. “Many factors are significant for interactions with student spiritual life, beginning with the on-campus intensives and continuing with teacher-to-student mentoring and discipleship.”

2. “Seminary-wide cumulative and formative programs that examine the goals, formative components in the spiritual life of the students, and monitoring how
the students are coming along and meeting their goals of spiritual formation are already accepted.”

3. “Counseling and mentoring via the phone and e-mail communications.”

4. “Seminary offers an on-campus intern program, which includes 300 hours of mandatory community service.”

5. “Mostly via the intensive courses and faculty interactions with students.”

6. “Mentoring and faculty communications.”

7. “Spiritual formation minister addressed the needs of the student body with basically no evangelism via distance learning.”

8. “Spiritual advisors are the primary contact and ministers for this area; all the students have made a prior commitment to Christ.”

9. “Through course content, but basically not through distance learning.”

10. “All of the members share informally among the community.”

Research Question 4: How Does Your Seminary/College Website Promote Renewal?

Respondents (n = 26) were provided the following choices: (a) Internet advertisements on Christian websites, (b) Testimonies, (c) Modeling spiritual courses, (d) through word, graphics, sound, animation, and video, (e) Online prayer, (f) Orientation intensives with emphasis on spiritual content.

This question had to be rephrased in order to explain the spiritual life component of renewal in the context of the seminary. The revised question was: How does the Seminary/College website promote the spiritual life of the student body, and what ministries are employed to increase the spiritual level of student life? This question was also related to enhancing the “community presence” of the seminary by offering an
important spiritual component to the student body life. This component should be at the top of the list of seminaries’ goals and vision for depositing a valuable spiritual treasure into their students’ lives. Some of the faculty’s comments concerning the spiritual life of the seminary follow:

1. “Most significant is the collaboration between the students and faculty that has promoted higher levels of communication between groups and face-to-face contacts with faculty, including phone and email contacts.”

2. “Special intensives help to develop online community and make those initial contacts that help build the spiritual life of the student body.”

3. “Regular contacts with the student body, informal word of mouth communications. Most are involved in some form of mentoring and teacher-student interactions.”

4. “Mostly through classes structured by the faculty.”

5. “Ministry Alliance is an evangelistic program in which the students have an opportunity to participate for spiritual advancement.”

6. “Witness testimonies and sharing what they believe as Disciples of Christ, critical theological reflections in class and spiritual reflections, Chapel and Bible groups.”

7. “Chapel, Faculty advisors, and Dean of Students all play a part in the spiritual life of the student body.”

8. “Spiritual life of the Seminary is primarily through courses and onsite church services.”
9. “Dean of Students and faculty advisors—modeling courses and chapel. There are 25 different ways to address this area in the seminary life of the students. Missions, group projects, and inner city outreaches are just a few ways the students participate in building the spiritual life of the seminary.”

10. “The school is not designed to evangelize; it teaches students about evangelism along with other content/processing through the curriculum.”

Survey Method Effectiveness

This research project utilized two online surveys, which were sent by email to specific religious leaders of online churches and seminaries. If the study participants did not respond within one week, SurveyMonkey automatically sent out a second email as a second request to complete the survey. Despite this follow-up, many church and seminary leaders still did not respond to the invitation to complete the online survey. At this point, the researcher contacted the remaining churches and seminaries via the telephone. As stated in the previous chapter, the return rate for a research survey was anticipated to be 20-30%. In this particular study, the overall return rate for the online church survey was 17%, and the overall return rate for the online seminary survey was 24%.

Several challenges contributed to the low survey return rate during this research study. First, it was very difficult to gather a full discourse of adequate feedback from the participants, which seemed to be largely due to the time constraints of the respondents. For example, an experience with one Director of Information Technology required several phone calls before she was able to complete the survey due to the demands on her time and office. It was just not possible to carry on a continuous conversation because of all the interruptions in that person’s office. In addition, the original survey contained 34
questions. As the survey progressed, it became apparent that it was too long for respondents to complete it thoughtfully. As a result, number of questions on the online church survey was reduced from 30 to 22, and the online seminary survey was reduced from 34 questions to 27.

Second, telephone interviews did not provide sufficient time for participants to research or locate the specific information that was required of them. Therefore, ballpark figures were often requested from each of the subjects in order to gather the necessary data.

Third, several of the surveys that were completed online through SurveyMonkey required further clarification. As a result, the researcher conducted follow-up phone calls to clarify at least one response from five churches and six seminaries. This process was time consuming and indicated that a larger pilot should have been conducted to recognize the need to rephrase ambiguous questions. Specifically, the questions related to evangelism and church renewal were unclear to multiple respondents and required additional explanation and follow-up.

Related follow-up questions helped to flesh out those questions that could be misconstrued, such as the evangelism and renewal items. A couple of seminaries reported that a seminary task force monitors their spiritual ministries and student involvement with both teachers and other students on a regular basis. The task force would evaluate the progress of the students and/or obtain reports from their communities on the success of the individual in the respective ministry areas. Another response included development of the core theological aspects of the training that deepen the Christian education of the students.
In retrospect, the researcher believes that a personal face-to-face interview may have yielded a more informative research study. The benefits of this method would be that participants would be advised in advance of the length of the interview and be prepared to participate. The disadvantages would be that all of the churches and seminaries that participated in the survey would need to be somewhat local, as the researcher could not afford to incur the expense of traveling to churches and seminaries throughout the country to conduct the personal interviews. In addition, church and seminary leaders may not be willing to spend their busy time with a doctoral student to complete the surveys during a longer interview period. A second hindsight would be to narrow the scope of the research so the surveys could have been more concise and focused on only one or two specific issues (e.g., evangelism and renewal).

Overall, respondents were definitely generous with the limited time that they had to offer the researcher. Unfortunately, the survey questions frequently required additional discussion between the researcher and the participant to fully flesh out responses or completely discuss the issue. Furthermore, related questions in each category of the surveys were limited, as the telephone contact did not allow for lengthy discussions.

In the final analysis, these two survey methods offered the most time-efficient means for gathering the information and reporting findings. The benefits included a larger geographic area (e.g., the entire United States); a diverse population sample to draw from; minimal out-of-pocket expense to the researcher; and the ability to work from home.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In review, Chapter 1 introduced the purpose of the study and listed the primary objective as defining the most effective methods to implement an online religious community. A literature review in Chapter 2 examined the attributes of the post-modern culture that challenge the church in the 21st Century. This chapter also reviewed some of the theological resources that focus on Christian community, evangelism, and church renewal. The methodology in Chapter 3 introduced the research design, selection of subjects, and the types of survey questions that addressed existing online religious communities for their best practices and methods. The primary focus of these survey questions was to learn how these communities operated and linked their online- and-offline communities together. Chapter 4 reviewed the findings of the surveys and analyzed the results of each survey question.

Chapter 5 will summarize and interpret the findings of the surveys to determine the best practices for the development of online religious communities, as well as the tools and methods churches and seminaries most often employ for a successful online capability. This chapter will also make recommendations regarding the design of an implementation plan that combines the attributes of both institutions for an online religious community. Furthermore, the chapter includes specific recommendations for churches that want to add an online community, and specific recommendations for
seminaries interested in expanding their academic offerings to add online courses to their offerings. Conclusions about the research design and methodology of this research project will also be included.

Summary of Overall Findings

Analysis of the surveys revealed that a number of churches and seminaries utilize similar approaches to their online experience. Although they may differ in the particular technological media, they all employ some innovative form for their members to communicate (e.g. Blogs, Podcasts, streaming video, Facebook, e-mail, or Twitter). These media are reported to have greatly enlivened the spiritual lives of these communities. In other words, the formation of groups engaged in intimate Christian communication is a formula for successful relationships and online community.

In the following analysis, the survey uncovered several interesting findings that include overwhelming evidence that people were positively affected by the online relationships, and that the spiritual life of the institutions was at least improved, if not greatly impacted, by the community “presence” that resulted. For example, 82% of the online church respondents felt overall that communicating online enabled religious leaders to know their people in the congregation better; and 57% claimed the benefits of meaningful personal connections and regular contact sharing as a function of online communication. The natural outcomes of this community presence were the contributions made to evangelism and renewal within the community life. Second, the study found indications that the online environment significantly contributes to building relationships and increasing interactions of spiritual activity in the traditional religious context. The research reported 76% positive feedback from respondents indicated improved
relationships within the church as a result of online communication. Heidi Campbell also confirmed the first two outcomes in her research on “Exploring Religious Community Online.” Third, the tools and technology that churches and seminaries implement have been assets that empower extended communication within the institutions, as well as a means of outreach beyond their local communities. This outcome also supports previous study results by Mark Stephenson in his work, “Web-Empower Your Church.” He asserted this point: “We have seen online community facilitate close relationships…It was fascinating to see how close people could be who had not met face-to-face. The group was like a family and had a great time together.”

Survey Findings

Most of the communities have taken full advantage of the online ministries that offer their members media communications to enliven their spiritual lives and deepen their relationships. These media have proven the capability to advance the kingdom and have a positive influence to capture the hearts and minds of the “Y” generation for Christ. The researcher’s original intention was to analyze the online churches and seminaries’ responses by using the size of the institution (small, medium, and large) as the independent variable. Unfortunately, the large majority of churches and seminaries that responded to the survey invitation were in the small category (less than 100 church members and less than 100 currently enrolled online students), so a reliable analysis was

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155 Campbell, Exploring Religious Community Online, 187.
156 Stephenson, Web-Empower Your Church, 150.
not possible. Therefore, this section will provide a general discussion on the overall results of the surveys.

**Trends**

The survey results yielded five overall trends regarding the institutions that had successfully implemented an online community and participated in this research project: (1) The institutions sought effective technology to support their vision for an online community; (2) The institutions consistently offered online media to allow their members the opportunity for more meaningful communication media for their members; (3) Most of the respondents engaged in some method(s) of online evangelism and spiritual inspiration; (4) The communication media (Web 2.0 technologies) employed advanced the online church and seminary’s opportunities for a more successful community experience; and (5) Most churches and seminaries indicated they implemented a specific renewal strategy, although some viewed this mission to be incorporated into their Bible courses or motivational seminars. A few of the seminaries were not aware of the opportunity that the online capability presented. Their focus was primarily on the growth of the student body at the seminary.

**Managing the Online Ministry**

The survey results indicate that most of the respondents (60%) required only one to two people to manage their online church ministry. Another quarter of the respondents (25%) indicated that three to four people were responsible for the online management of their church. Furthermore, most of the respondents (71%) acknowledged that the support people were volunteers from their congregation. Another 43% noted that at least one paid staff person acting as a content manager was responsible for maintaining the online
ministry, in addition to performing other church responsibilities. Interestingly enough, only a small percentage (14%) indicated that they used a commercial application service provider or IT content management company, and not one respondent indicated that they used an open source CMS. This information is valuable for churches that are interested in starting an online component to their current ministries. Based on the survey results, it is common for online ministries to be maintained by a small group of people, and common to draw from the knowledge and expertise of the current congregation. The researcher believes that the financial constraints most churches face at this time are responsible for this finding. Online seminaries were not only engaged in open source software like Moodle, but they employed many of its features (blogs, virtual lounges, etc).

Web Page Content

During the course of the survey investigations, it was noted that discussions with the participants revealed a measure of importance being placed on web content. Church and seminary web content share a substantial amount of common information. They share the same basic structure of their respective home pages. Most church and seminaries’ web pages include the usual graphics of the institutions, in addition to pictures of people that featured the fellowship ministries the churches offer. Some churches include photos of special church functions such as holiday celebrations, children’s ministry, women’s fellowship, and men’s discipleship meetings, as well as special events like Vacation Bible School, missionary trips, and support for charitable agencies. Mark Stephenson emphasized the importance of depicting members’ fellowship
and community: “The church is the people; it’s nearly impossible to have too many pictures of people on a church website.”157

The seminary web pages typically address the needs of the institution to capture the hearts and minds of prospective students and administer online courses effectively. As observed during this research investigation, their web pages often highlight video and audio podcasts of the president’s vision, or chapel for the seminary. Respondents reported that their online assignments were often geared toward developing interactive and spiritually fulfilling courses. Many viewed the web pages for both institutions as just the front door to the overall ministries for the church and seminary. Major functions were often linked via separate windows that described each of the above ministries.

Technology

In this study, technology was found to advance the areas of communication to such a degree that people have changed their ways of doing business, worship, and education. These technologies (Blogs, Facebook, emails, etc.) have been proven to be effective ways of communicating and were critical to how these institutions built relationships. The Internet and all its software tools have changed these communities into highways to manage their online day-to-day and week-to-week activities. These media have empowered the ministries, teaching, sermons, prayer, and service by combining Internet technologies to deliver content more effectively to people and their community. Once the church grasps the potential of these media, every ministry within the church will want to take advantage of their benefits to secure the Gospel message for this century.

157 Ibid., 135.
This study has also confirmed the tremendous impact these tools have had to date on spreading the Gospel, and the future influence on the spiritual life of congregations and student users. Based on the surveys, the most commonly used technology components were content management software, learning management systems, Internet 2.0 services, Blogs, Facebook, and emails. These were essentially the components that the researcher believed would be most used, and this hypothesis was correct.

The survey results indicated that most of the church respondents (50%) budgeted less than $1,000 per year to maintain their online community. Another 31% responded that their church budgeted between $1,000 and $5,000 per year. This information is important to understand for the financial impact on churches interested in pursuing an online ministry. Although it may be intimidating to allocate funds for online components, doing so need not be an expensive endeavor. It is reassuring for churches to know that this task can be accomplished on a small budget, and that the online components can start small and be increased incrementally.

This research study also found that churches used five main technologies to promote an effective online religious community. The most common tools for religious leaders included: email broadcasts (73%), e-newsletter (68%), podcasts (59%), web 2.0 applications (54%), and blogs (50%). Facebook has also become a popular networking tool for some congregations of the younger generation. Each of these technologies actively engages people in online community and deepens relationships throughout the country.

These findings are helpful for religious leaders to know and implement proven effective strategies to reach their congregations. It is cost effective and relatively easy for
religious leaders to send out an email broadcast or e-newsletter to help the congregation stay informed and connected. Surprisingly, only a small percentage indicated that they used chat rooms, discussion boards, or personalized profile pages of church members (13% of the respondents indicated each of these tools). These tools would also be relatively easy and cost-effective strategies to build community; however, they do not appear to be commonly utilized. These latter tools are not as popular because they require a little more time and effort to set up. The tools are not in great demand unless they are implemented within a scholastic environment.

Several technologies came to the forefront of seminaries that utilized the Internet for online courses and development of a community “presence.” These were Blogs, Facebook, streaming video, e-broadcasts, and e-newsletters. One interesting technology that incorporates all of these tools is the Learning Management System (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard, SAKAI, and Scholar 360). These LMS offer software platforms that provide grading, assignments, class scheduling, and social forums such as blogs, discussion boards, and virtual lounges. Most of the larger seminaries and some of the smaller ones have successfully employed Learning Management Systems (LMS) to capture and engage the student body in community and spiritual development. Of these LMS, Moodle was the most utilized according to the survey results. Moodle has some unique features such as Moodle Lounge (e.g., students can socialize and develop community) and blended courses that augment face-to-face communications. These tools and technologies are important because they empower the seminaries to bring a new level of evangelism and renewal that spiritually enrich the seminary.
Relationship Development in the Online Community

The online church survey results demonstrated that the online community supports the development of deeper, more meaningful relationships. Half of the religious leaders (50%) strongly agreed that communicating online helped them to know their congregations better, and another 32% agreed with this sentiment. Only 9% (two respondents) disagreed with the statement. Another interesting result was that more than half of the respondents (57%) felt that personal connections and individual relationships had developed among members through online contact, with some regular communication sharing and support for one another. Furthermore, three quarters of the respondents (76%) felt that the relationships within the church were improved as a result of online communication. In these post-modern times, communicating through email allows people to connect easily and lend support to one another during the weekdays outside of traditional church service hours. This communication tool helps people stay connected both with religious leaders and other church members, and it enhances the sense of belonging and community among believers. The responses to these three questions supported the researcher’s hypothesis that online communication would deepen church relationships.

Evangelism and Renewal

The best practices and methods employed as resources for building these institutions into communities of faith are not as important as the natural outcomes of evangelism and renewal. The Christian church must engage in this culture in order to reach those who will never be reached by traditional religious practice. Internet ministries that promote theological reformation through Christian education, spiritual mentoring,
and discipleship can offer something of substance to those who seek deeper, more meaningful relationships.

This study has revealed the primary instruments to bring about this new wave of evangelism and renewal. According to the survey results, four main strategies were used by the online church to evangelize the Lost/Unchurched: (1) preparing their website to be attractive to non-Christians and the general public (68%), (2) linking people to a local church (58%), (3) providing testimonies on their website (47%), and (4) using a “real-world-based” or “self-help-oriented” message on the website. These results demonstrate that successful online churches are open to changing their methods to reach people outside of their current congregation, with the aim of adding to their numbers. As anticipated, few of the successful online churches (26%) used sermons to reach the Lost/Unchurched. This finding fits with the author’s background research and hypothesis that people in today’s world are just not interested in linear sermons, as in our parents’ generation. People today are more apt to read and respond to a church website if they feel a connection with the message they are reading about, which may instill a sense of belonging in these times of isolation.

This research study also determined that the online church was an effective evangelistic tool for church leaders. Over half of the respondents (59%) indicated that they felt the online church was a useful or even a very effective tool to reach the Lost/Unchurched. Another quarter of the respondents (27%) felt that the online church was comparable to other evangelistic tools to reach non-congregants. With the state of the church such as it is, the online ministry supplies a much needed tool to reach out and meet the needs of the community.
According to the survey results, three strategies were commonly used to promote church renewal on the website. The most popular ways to improve the church’s spiritual vitality include: writing web pages on a subject of secular interest and then linking it to the Gospel, a.k.a. “bridge strategy” (50%); providing testimonies on the church website (45%); and preparing the website to be attractive to non-Christians or the general public (40%). The survey results indicate that the practice of promoting evangelism and renewal on the Internet has resulted in building many new religious communities throughout the country.

The ministries of Evangelism and Renewal offer spiritual collaboration and servant community interactions that foster the Gospel and can reinvigorate the body towards a healthy spiritual climate. The implementation of an online community is a vibrant tool whereby its members can practice worship, prayer, evangelism, and missions. Evangelism and renewal can be exercised on a grander scale via the online church and seminary by virtue of their ability to reach many more people in the local and extended community.

Online Programs and Ministries

This research study determined the five programs that were most often offered to online participants. The most common services included: vibrant sermon transcripts (68%), e-newsletters (63%), online prayer (59%), online news and updates regarding religious events (55%), and podcasts of worship services (50%). This finding may help churches interested in starting an online church to know the programs most commonly included by other successful online churches. These programs offer effective ways to connect and provide news to congregants and the general public alike.
The research study also determined that two ministries were overwhelmingly offered to online participants. By far, the most common ministries were online Bible studies (82%) and youth ministry (73%). Although other ministries were mentioned in the surveys, many churches did not use them. One reason may be that most of the churches that completed the surveys were small in their number of members and could not afford to provide additional online ministries. The researcher theorizes that Bible study is commonly offered as an online ministry because it meets the need for a large cross-section of the church and is the organization’s main educational resource. The reason that youth ministry is so commonly offered among churches may be because youth (e.g., the “Y” Generation) are the group more likely to engage in online ministry than any other age group because of their past exposure to technology.

**Spiritual Activities**

According to the surveys, vibrant sermons, devotionals and prayer rooms are the most sought after spiritual activity on the Web. Other popular areas of online community ministry include service to support others, evangelism, and benevolent care. The Internet affords people who want to get connected great opportunities to serve and express their belief in a real and tangible way. These functions cover many needs in the church and community.

Perhaps the most important spiritual activity of the online religious community is found in evangelism and renewal. These two practices are outward expressions of the online community. These communities can experience a revival as a natural outcome of the online capability presented by virtue of this increased communication afforded to the local church and seminary.
Recommendations for the Church

The Gospel message is powerful and attractive in any form or method presented to a dying world, just as it was 2,000 years ago (Hebrews 4:12). We live in a postmodern culture that is tuned into the World Wide Web for everything from entertainment and daily news to religious services. Andrew Careaga claimed: “What is certain, however, is that the Christian faith will not be left untouched by the Internet. In fact, this technology is already shaping Christianity in ways that few people in the traditional church would have imagined.”

This dissertation yielded several interesting findings related to the use of online communities and the Internet for communicating the Gospel. Based on the survey results from the study, the following best practice recommendations are suggested for building an effective online community:

Recommended Tools

Based on the survey results, the most effective ministries referenced on church websites are prayer, devotionals, Bible studies, sermons, and discussion groups. These ministries are often interwoven into men and women’s groups, youth, and discipleship groups but can be separate or additional ministries in the church. In combination, these ministries create a progressive web page that people are interested in viewing as part of an online community. These technologies are communicated through Blogs, chat rooms, Facebook, e-mails, and video streaming. These ministries have proven to be the most relied-upon media for communicating the Gospel, as well as a powerful and effective way to communicate the Gospel over the Internet.

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158 Careaga, eMinistry, 21.
**Recommended Online Community Management**

Two cost-effective means of creating an online community exist. The first is to develop a technical team within the church, composed of individuals who have the capability to design, develop, and integrate the social content for a church website. The second method is to hire a Christian Content Management team, previously mentioned in Chapter 4 (e.g., ChurchPlantMedia, Web-empowered Church, Ekklesia, and Faith Connections). For as low as one dollar a day, these turnkey hosting companies can design, develop, and integrate an entire website that includes social content pages using open source content management software like TYPO 3. Churches and seminaries can minimize costs by utilizing these Christian organizations that offer complete packages for Web hosting and content management for online religious communities.

Although professional turnkey management companies can provide all of the technological engineering for a church or seminary, a content manager will still be necessary for an effective online community. The content manager oversees the production design of the web page content and provides administration to the online community. It is acceptable for the content manager to already be a part of the leadership team, as long as the individual possesses the creative talents to manage the content for the web home page and links to online community resources. For an online community to function effectively, it is essential for at least one individual to oversee the entire church content operations. The online seminary has one very important additional function to manage that will complete their online capability: the production of the video and audio content for online classes. This function will be described further in the next section.
Recommendations for the Seminary

In order to support online learners in the best way, online instructional techniques need to focus on three major characteristics. These include, but are not limited to: communication, collaboration, and community.\textsuperscript{159} Regarding communication, the students must have the ability to dialogue with others, form correct responses, and create personalized communications. Several directors of distance learning programs viewed this dialogue as an essential aspect of building community.

Building an online community is the essence of online learning and is considered the groundbreaking event in higher learning. The establishment is accomplished by implementing collaborative tools that are offered in LMS, such as Moodle. These collaboration tools enable students to experience with their peers and teachers the real value of distributed learning that connects, engages, and inspires. Collaboration supports and encourages a community “presence” about learning together and sharing in a mutually beneficial experience that may possibly be greater than the classroom.\textsuperscript{160} Palloff and Pratt have added further clarification:

“The model of collaboration…shows that the social constructivist context of an online course should be the guiding factor in the course design. The goal is to reduce isolation and maximize learning potential by creating social presence…Collaboration, then, should be a theme that runs throughout the course.”\textsuperscript{161}

Therefore, collaborative learning is the essence of online classes, which empower critical and independent thinking.\textsuperscript{162} Web 2.0 technologies offer seminaries the ability to

\textsuperscript{159} Palloff and Pratt, \textit{Collaborating Online}, 31-40.

\textsuperscript{160} Palloff and Pratt, \textit{Building Online Learning Communities}, 231-237.

\textsuperscript{161} Palloff and Pratt, \textit{Collaborating Online}, 36.

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 6-8.
facilitate online collaboration and sharing between users. Some educators believe that the social interactions in education are an important issue that defines online learning communities. LMS offers online lounges and chat rooms in which students can explore this important aspect of learning. Strong relationships can develop among the student body as they interact socially and strive to exchange information between their peer groups, ministers, and professors. The roles of each group are important to the overall success of an online learning community.

Several important issues also need attention when engineering the online seminary community. First, the above technology for building an online capability for the online church applies to the seminary as well. In addition, an in-house technical team or outsourced professional management resource will be necessary because the demands of content management are continuously upgraded on a weekly basis. Teaching resources, course production, and learning management capabilities will also be integral components to build an effective online community presence into the overall curriculum of the seminary.

Furthermore, it is recommended that the seminary host a website and an online training platform (LMS) that equip users with curriculum, video, audio, and online presentations. Based on survey results, it is also recommended that training be covered by tutorials or teacher-led introductory courses to familiarize students with the basic tools to handle online courses. One commonly used teaching method is to develop course modules that will consist primarily of PowerPoint presentations with an accompanying introductory video at the beginning of each course. Courses generally consist of up to 20

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modules, with an average of 45-minute duration for each module. Another teaching method is to employ a Learning Management System like Moodle, SAKAI, or Desire to Learn, which can supply all the necessary tools for producing courses online. All of these Learning Management System options are open source, community-based tools for learning that educators can use to create virtual classrooms via web learning sites. Both Moodle and SAKAI LMS companies offer hosting, technical support, installation, and integration for customizing the courseware, training, and consulting services to help build the entire virtual classroom website at low cost.

Other options are available on the market that combines interactive virtual classrooms with collaborative meeting platforms as tools that the church and seminary can pursue in developing new online communities. Two such learning management systems are r’s Centra Suite and Cisco’s Web Ex, both of which provide seamless interactions to maximize learning activities for a minimal fee of $49/month. These platforms “combine highly interactive virtual classrooms, e-meetings, and Web seminar platforms to enable eLearning and collaborative web conferencing across the globe.”

In addition, Microsoft offers a free “I_Spring_Free.com” add-on that allows for narration and recording into Flash video and audio files synchronized to the PowerPoint slides. All of these technologies provide easy production of online courses and ultimately help to build an online community presence.

The following is a list of recommended tasks that each institution should complete to initiate the development of online courses:

1. Establish operations with a reputable Internet Service Provider (ISP).

2. Contract with the ISP for continued hosting service and Configuration Management Service (CMS).

3. Provide training packages for common CMS applications and selection for use in the seminary and at the sustaining website.

4. Provide office administration functions for online access control, user rights, password retrieval, and update systems.

5. Ensure that the hosting site will provide monitoring tools to user access, page hits, and content downloads, as well as supply metric results for evaluation.

6. Obtain a measure of the video and audio storage space the ISP hosting site offers.

7. Confirm that the host site will provide alert and subscription services, as well as back-up/recovery of site content.

8. Provide directory structure for curriculum-related content presentation to students.

9. Ensure that a security system is in place. Most reputable ISPs offer a security system to protect their customer base. A security system provides protection to proprietary web page content.

10. Ensure that the CMS site will provide individual user registration for online access to controlled information.

11. Designate/hire a faculty interface with curriculum publishing responsibilities.

The implementation plans provided in Appendix C of this document provide additional details.
The Internet is quickly becoming the media to empower the church for evangelism and renewal. Unleashing that power will require courage and vision on the part of church leaders as they move beyond the traditional functions of the church into this new arena for propagating the faith. Web 2.0 technologies and configuration management strategies have an enormous potential to greatly assist in this important transformation. These technologies can be integrated into the ministries of the church and seminary in many ways. Therefore, it is recommended that careful research and planning take place before investing in costly hardware and software upgrades. It is also recommended that the above-mentioned support structure be created because it will ultimately sustain the online ministry.

In online and offline community life, these surveys have provided enough evidence to indicate that the spiritual life of the church is embedded in each of these communities throughout the country. The difference between the two communities can be blurred due to the seamless perception by the members that they are interconnected and linked to the point where they cannot be separated. Their connections consist of devotional prayer groups, blended discussion rooms, and online lounges that link members on a daily basis. Sermon transcripts, worship sermons, and e-newsletters are also major contributors to communication with the community. In some ways, the online church is more dynamic than its counterpart, which has less contact and generally meets only once a week for religious services. Online communities, by their very nature, are actively engaged in communicating with one another, contributing to deeper faith, and forging deeper commitments in service to God and one another.
The power of online courses also benefits seminaries that are realizing community as a result of online interactive tools. The value of online and offline community presence is also a reality that ideally benefits seminaries and adds to the overall quality of education. LMS lounges, chat rooms, discussion boards, and intensive courses offer students many opportunities to engage in community. Certainly, the most beneficial item about this online learning community is the personal connection it makes between students, which also complements the classroom experience of the traditional institutions. Four strategies are offered in the Online Community Implementation Plan in Appendix C to assist seminaries in starting up their online learning community outreach programs.

**Conclusions about Study Design and Methodology**

This study was designed to discover which strategies churches and seminaries have successfully employed to support their online communities. During the course of this study, the researcher experienced significant challenges in contacting and corresponding with these institutions. Numerous attempts were made to solicit information from the churches and seminaries, which was a very time-consuming procedure. The surveys were revised from the feedback received from the participants; however, additional follow-up phone calls were still necessary to complete the surveys. In other words, just shortening the surveys and the length of the questions was not sufficient to capture the attention of perspective participants; subsequent telephone interviews were required. On a positive note, these telecoms resulted in far better responses to the surveys and offered additional detailed background information that assisted the survey completion. For example, one participant offered to include the researcher in a Moodle class for hands-on experience with that specific learning
management system. Another respondent offered advice and concerns for their implementation approach to online learning and suggested employing an in-house technical manager to oversee the content of the web page regardless of the size of the implementation.

In retrospect, after the researcher learned from experience what these surveys entailed, he believes that a more personal, face-to-face contact with the respondents would yield more informative research data. The benefits of this method would provide the opportunity for more in-depth interviews. The disadvantages would be the extra time, travel, and cost that would be required to conduct the personal interviews. In addition, church and seminary leaders may not be willing to spend their busy time with a doctoral student from another University to complete the surveys during a longer interview period.

Comparison to National Studies

A number of national studies conducted by Heidi Campbell, the Barna Group, Pew Internet & American Life, Gallup, and the Slone Consortium have all researched online communities and online education from many different aspects. Citations have been documented in the body of this study that identifies each of these specific references. Many other studies on the subject have also covered numerous categories and disciplines. In each of the national studies mentioned above, comparisons can be made that have direct corollary to the survey, such as the phenomenal growth of online church communities over the last 10 years, online education growth over the last 10 years, and the expected online learning growth over the next 12 years (~23%).

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Admittedly, these statistics do not exactly compare apples to apples. The national studies have a much broader context, whereas this study has more specifically focused on a much smaller subset of online religious communities. The survey findings from this study do, however, show a similarity to the national figures when comparing specific religious areas such as the online community’s significant impact on the spiritual life of its members. This survey found that 76.2% of the respondents believe online community has a major impact on the life of these institutions as compared to the national figure of 83% of the survey respondents.\footnote{Elena Larsen, “Wired Churches, Wired Temples.”} Several other figures are shown in the following table that compare closely to national figures.

Table 7. Response Ratings for Effective Online Communication Tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Tool</th>
<th>Survey Responses %</th>
<th>National Response %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online capability</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sermons</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>73.0%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* National Response rates were all derived from the study, “Wired Churches, Wired Temples.”
Overall, the responses from the surveys followed the national response rate fairly closely, which offers some validity to the survey numbers. Additionally, a majority of respondents appeared to favor e-mail and worship as the most useful community functions for online communication.

The most significant correlation between the national surveys and this one was the need for religious institutions to accept the online capability as an evangelistic tool. In the national survey, 36% of religious leader respondents felt that it was imperative for the church to embrace online technology, as compared to 28% of the respondents in this study.

Other online activities that participants contemplated for future use were Facebook, intercessory prayer groups, and scriptural studies. In this study, approximately 50% favored Facebook, and 52% favored prayer and Bible studies. On the national side of the statistics, Facebook was very popular, 22% favored prayer request, and 18% wanted to add scripture studies.\textsuperscript{167} In addition, another interesting feature was the desire to reach the youth (27%)\textsuperscript{168} as compared to approximately 40% in this study. Therefore, the future holds promise. The next section takes a look at the recommendations leaders should consider for their ministries.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the results of these surveys and the literature review, several areas deserve to be the focus of research in religious online community development in the future. A significant priority should be given to studying how to structure and change


\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 4.
church policies to enable the addition of new technologies as evangelistic tools more easily. These future studies should also focus on how such policy changes will address the needs of church and seminary members, as well as the needs of the local community.

As new technologies become available, the church has to keep pace with innovative media in order to keep up with members’ interest and reach their community with effective ministries current in the social culture. Second, churches that are stuck in methods of the last century require assistance developing new policies to address current operations in this postmodern culture. As policies interfere or become a hindrance to the vision and operations of the spiritual growth of the body, then they require thoughtful reevaluation.

Another area that needs to be studied is the method to develop and empower church leaders to change with the times, yet still maintain the fundamental tenets of the church. Staff members must remain flexible to changing times and develop the fivefold gift ministries of the church (strategist, pastor, administrator, evangelist, and motivational leader). Employing new leadership with different gifts may include restructuring the ministries, as it is important to match the progressively changing culture.

The evangelistic approach of an online religious community assumes the use of cyber media to revolutionize the traditional methods of worship and church, to enrich community life. This enriched life takes shape when the congregation takes the effort and time to build relationships with the help of online communications. We are all a product of the culture we live in and we understand the digital media and the destructive moral ramifications it has for family life and the soul of our nation. Therefore, it is important to

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help the church develop a positive focus in this post-modern culture. The aim is to engage
the congregation actively in the online church by expanding the role of the people beyond
just onlookers and transforming them into active participants.
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APPENDIX A

INVITATION AND INFORMED CONSENT FOR ONLINE CHURCHES

Daniel C. Doody
Graduate Program
Doctor of Ministry
Liberty University
1971 University Blvd
Lynchburg, Virginia 24502

September 1, 2009

Dear Pastor and/or Administrator:

I send you greetings in the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ and hope this letter finds you well and your congregation blessed. My name is Daniel Doody, and I am a DMIN student at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA. I respectfully request your assistance in completing a research dissertation at Liberty University related to employing the Internet as an evangelistic tool in building up the body of Christ. The purpose of this study is to determine the procedures to develop an Internet-based online church and seminary. Ultimately, the research will define the tools, technologies, and best practices of building religious online communities to better serve church members and seminary students. The findings of the study will also result in the creation of an implementation guide for the future development of other religious online communities.
This study was approved by the IRB of Liberty University on September 10, 2009, IRB No.733.091009.

I would greatly appreciate your assistance in helping me complete my dissertation by filling out the following survey. It should not take more than 15 minutes of your time. Please be advised that all personal data will be held in strictest confidence. Any identifying items will be kept in a safe place and presented in only aggregate form without revealing anything specifically related to you or your church. No single response (identifying data) will be revealed to the public. The survey will be presented and the data analyzed by SurveyMonkey, with any personal data kept under lock and key.

You are further advised that your response is entirely voluntary and involves no risk to the security of you or your church. You may refuse participation with our blessing. If you choose to participate, your participation will be held in strictest confidence, and only the researcher listed above will have access to the information. Confidentiality will be maintained to the present level of technological Web security but cannot guarantee any third party interception of data during transmission.

For questions or results of findings, please contact Daniel C. Doody at dcdooody@msn.com. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research, you may contact the Director of Liberty University Office for Research Protection at 434-592-4054.

In order to get started, you simply click on the following link:

Thank you for your support and participation. I really appreciate your taking the time out of your busy schedule to respond to this survey.

In Christ’s Name,

Daniel Doody
APPENDIX B

ONLINE CHURCH AND SEMINARY SURVEY

Online Church

1. What is the name and location of your Church?

_____________________________________________________________________

2. How long has your church operated an online (Internet) church ministry?
   - Less than one year
   - One to three years
   - Four or more years
   - Unknown/Not sure

3. How many total members belong to your physical (offline) church?
   - Less than 100 people
   - 101 – 199 people
   - More than 200 people
   - Don’t Know
   Comments:

_____________________________________________________________________

4. How many of the offline church members are participants in the online church?
   - Less than 100 people
   - 101 – 199 people
   - More than 200 people
   - Don’t Know
   Comments:

_____________________________________________________________________

5. How many total members belong to your online church?
   - Less than 100 people
   - 101 – 199 people
   - More than 200 people
   - Don’t Know
   Comments:
6. How many new community participants have been added to the local church as a result of online ministries?

- [ ] None
- [ ] 1 to 10
- [ ] 11 to 20
- [ ] 21 to 50
- [ ] 51 to 100
- [ ] >100
- [ ] Don’t Know

Additional Comments:
____________________________

7. Do you offer special meetings at your church facility for online community church members to meet and develop community with offline church members?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

If Yes, please describe the events:
____________________________

8. How many support people do you require to staff or manage your online ministry?

- [ ] 1-2 people
- [ ] 3-4 people
- [ ] 5-6 people
- [ ] more than 6

Comments:
____________________________

9. Who are the support people maintaining your online ministry?

- [ ] Volunteer(s) from church congregation
- [ ] Paid staff person/team in addition to other church responsibilities (e.g., bookkeeper)
- [ ] Commercial Application Service Provider (ASP)/IT Content Management Company manages service
- [ ] Open Source CMS
- [ ] Other: ________________________________________________________

10. How much does the church budget to support and maintain its online community per year?

- [ ] Less than $1,000
- [ ] Between $1,000 and $3,000
- [ ] Between $3,000 – $5,000
- [ ] Greater than $5,000
- [ ] Not sure/data unavailable

Comments:
____________________________

11. How do you advertise and market your online church?

- [ ] Religious website
- [ ] Local newspaper
- [ ] Local TV commercials
- [ ] Facebook
- [ ] Yahoo or other list serve group
- [ ] Blog
- [ ] My Space
- [ ] Twitter
- [ ] No special efforts are made to market the online church
- [ ] Unknown/Not sure

____________________________
12. Please indicate all of the methods that your church uses to communicate with church members (please mark all that apply):

- [ ] Podcasts (audio or video)
- [ ] RSS Feeds
- [ ] Live Web church Service
- [ ] Web 2.0 Apps
- [ ] Mission Updates
- [ ] Wikis
- [ ] Blogs
- [ ] Live Streaming Video
- [ ] Conversation Forums/Chat Rooms
- [ ] Discussion Boards
- [ ] Web Conferencing
- [ ] Email Broadcasts
- [ ] Personalized profile pages of members
- [ ] E newsletter
- [ ] Online announcements of births, marriages, and other news
- [ ] None of the Above
- [ ] Other: ______________________________________

Comments: ______________________________________

13. On a scale of 1 – 5, please indicate if communicating online helps you to know the parishioners in your congregation better.

- [ ] (1) Strongly Agree
- [ ] (2) Agree
- [ ] (3) No Opinion
- [ ] (4) Disagree
- [ ] (5) Strongly Disagree
- [ ] Unknown

Comments: ______________________________________

14. Have the relationships improved within the church as a result of online communication?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Don’t know/Not sure

Comments: ______________________________________

15. What online evangelism (Matt. 28:19) does your church provide?

- [ ] Offer Christ’s Salvation message/information
- [ ] Through word, graphics, sound, animation, and video
- [ ] Online Prayer
- [ ] Testimony

Comments: ______________________________________
16. What strategy does your church use to evangelize the Lost/Unchurched? (Check all that apply)
- Internet advertising on Christian websites
- Testimonies on website
- Prepare site to be attractive to non-Christians and general public
- Writing web pages on a subject of secular interest, and then leading across to the Gospel; a.k.a bridge strategy.
- Message is “real-world based” or “self-help” oriented, rather than liturgy based
- Message is light and informal; use humor and personal anecdotes
- Focus on style of music/instrumentation/drama and/or entertainment
- Politically correct sermons and postings
- Link people to a local church
- Not Sure
- Other/Comments:

17. On a scale of 1 – 5, where “5” means great effectiveness and “1” means none at all, how would you rate the effectiveness of the online Church as an evangelistic tool?
- ___ Poor/not effective at all (1)
- ___ Below average tool (2)
- ___ Average/Comparable or as effective as other tools (3)
- ___ Useful, effective tool (4)
- ___ Very effective (5)
- Not Sure
- Comments:

18. What are the best evangelistic practices you have found that have led to building your successful online religious community? Please describe any method/s that has added to the church membership.

19. What tools and technologies does your website find most useful to promote an effective online religious community? (Check all that apply)
- Podcasts (audio or video)
- RSS Feeds
- Live Web church Service
- Web 2.0 Apps
20. What programs/events do you offer online participants? Please check all that apply.
☑ E-newsletter
☑ Invitational notices for Services/Events
☑ Podcasts of Worship Services
☑ Online bookstore
☑ Sermon Transcripts/Archived sermons
☑ Mentoring/Discipling
☑ Online news and updates re: religious events
☑ Photo sharing of events
☑ Online Prayer
☑ Speakers via satellite feed
☑ Christian concerts
☑ Online photo album of congregational events
☑ Home schooling—teaching through an Internet feed to the church school
☑ None of the Above
Other:
Additional Comments:

21. What ministries do you offer online participants? Please check all that apply.
☑ Youth Ministry
☑ Women’s Group
☑ Prison Ministry
☑ Men’s Group
☑ Ministry for shut-ins/nursing home residents
☑ Outreach to Lost/Unchurched
☑ Ministry to the sick
☑ Mission Opportunities
☑ Bible Studies
Personal Testimonies
Volunteer opportunities
Music ministry
Ministry for soldiers
Marital Counseling
Small home/cell group within the church or seminary
None of the Above
Other

22. How does your church website promote church renewal? (anything that affects or improves the church’s spiritual vitality). Please check all that apply:
- Internet advertising on Christian websites
- Testimonies on website
- Prepare site to be attractive to non-Christians and general public
- Writing web pages on a subject of secular interest, and then leading across to the Gospel; a.k.a. bridge strategy.
- Message is “real-world based” or “self-help” oriented, rather than liturgy based
- Message is light and informal; use humor and personal anecdotes
- Focus on style of music/instrumentation/drama and/or entertainment
- Politically correct sermons and postings
- Link people to a local church
Not Sure
None
Other/Comments:

Please add any additional comments you would like to make concerning the online Church community.

_________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your participation in this survey.

Online Seminary

1a. What is the name and location of your Seminary?

_________________________________________________________________

2. How long has your seminary operated online (Internet) courses?
- Less than one year
- One to three years
- Four or more years
- Unknown/Not sure

3. What kind of online learning does your institution provide? (Check the one box that best describes your online offerings)
- Directed Study (study materials are sent via mail to students)
- Intensive on-site courses with e-mail assignments
- Some online courses with intensive on-site courses
- Internet online courses only
Some combination of above—Please explain your seminary/college scholastic online offerings:

4. What is the total number of students registered in your Seminary?
   - Less than 100 people
   - 101 – 199 people
   - More than 200 people
   - Don’t Know
   Comments:

5. What is the total number of students enrolled in your online courses at your institution?
   - Less than 100 people
   - 101 – 199 people
   - More than 200 people
   - Don’t Know
   Comments:

6. How many support people do you require to staff/manage your online seminary?
   - 1–2 people
   - 3–4 people
   - 5–6 people
   - more than 6
   Comments:

7. Who are the support people that maintain your online seminary?
   - Commercial Application Service Provider (ASP)/IT Content Management Company manages service
   - Hired dedicated IT Team
   - Team of volunteers
   - Open Source CMS
   - Other: _________________________
   Comments: _______________________

8. What technology funds were allocated to budget your online courses?
   - Less than $10,000
   - Between $10,000 and $20,000
   - Between $20,000 – $50,000
   - Greater than $50,000
   - Not sure/data unavailable
   Comments:
9. How much does the seminary budget to support and maintain its online community per year?

☐ Less than $10,000
☐ Between $10,000 and $20,000
☐ Between $20,000 – $50,000
☐ Greater than $50,000
☐ Not sure/data unavailable
Comments:
_________________________________________________________________

10. What is the recurring cost for software licenses, e.g., CMS, Backboard, etc.? Please include the description of the software and breakdown cost for each software license.
☐ Not sure/data unavailable
Comments:
_________________________________________________________________

11. What strategies or recommendations do you have in regard to cost savings and cost effectiveness in beginning and maintaining an online seminary course?
Comments:
_________________________________________________________________

12. What tools and technologies does your website offer to promote an effective online religious community? (Check all that apply)
☐ Podcasts (audio or video) ☐ RSS Feeds
☐ Live Web church Service
☐ Web 2.0 Apps
☐ Blogs ☐ Live Streaming Video
☐ Conversation Forums/Chat Rooms
☐ Discussion Boards
☐ Web Conferencing ☐ Email Broadcasts
☐ Personalized profile pages of students
☐ E newsletter
☐ Online bookstore
☐ Links to religious resources
☐ Downloads of religious music
☐ Facebook
☐ Videos of choir practice/holiday plays
☐ Online announcements of births, deaths, marriages, and other seminary member news
☐ Electronic funds transfers as a means of receiving donations
☐ None of the Above
☐ Other:

13. What are the technical and technology requirements for online students? Please describe these requirements.
Comments
_________________________________________________________________
14. Does your Library offer services for online students? Please explain what services are provided.
Comments

15. How is your curriculum developed? Please check all that apply.
☐ Clear content that is easy to read
☐ Student-to-Student interaction
☐ Teacher-to-Student interaction
☐ Assignments that actively engage students to be learners
☐ Student curriculum developed around resources (library, technical support, tutoring
☐ Through assignments for all course materials
☐ Clear objectives and goals that are geared toward learner
☐ None of the Above
☐ Other:
Comments:

16. How are teachers trained to teach online courses?
☐ Training suggested but not required
☐ Technical and online training required
☐ Training not required
☐ Clear training for content presentation, interactivity, communication, and assessment
☐ Other:
Comments:

17. What programs/events do you offer online participants? Please check all that apply.
☐ E newsletter
☐ Invitational notices for Services/Events
☐ Podcasts of Worship Services
☐ Sermon Transcripts/Archived sermons
☐ Photo sharing of events
☐ Speakers via satellite feed
☐ Online Prayer
☐ Mentoring/Discipling
☐ Online bookstore
☐ Online news and updates re: religious events
☐ Christian concerts
☐ Online photo album of seminary events
☐ None of the Above
☐ Other:
Additional Comments:

18. What ministries do you invite online participants to share as part of your campus collegial events? Please check all that apply.
Youth Ministry
Women’s Group
Men’s Group
Prison Ministry
Ministry for shut-ins/nursing home residents
Outreach to Lost/Unchurched
Ministry to the sick
Mission Opportunities
Bible Studies
Personal Testimonies
Volunteer opportunities
Music ministry
Ministry for soldiers
Marital Counseling
Small home/cell group within the seminary
None of the Above
Other: ___

19. What teaching and training opportunities do you provide to your seminary student membership via the Internet? Please check all that apply.

☐ Bible Study  ☑ Leadership Ministry
☐ Evangelism training/classes
☐ Christian Ethics
☐ History of Christianity/Church
☐ Women Figures in the Church
☐ Premarital counseling between married couples in the church and engaged couples
☐ Courses to improve teaching skills (e.g., for Sunday School teachers)
☐ Mentoring—connecting a mature Christian member with a new member
☐ Courses on specific religious denomination beliefs, practices, and customs
☐ None of the Above  ☐ Other:

20. How would you rate the online relationships among online seminary members on a scale of 1 – 10?

0 = No relationship
2 = New Acquaintance
4 = Casual Familiarity
6 = Personal connection and individual relationships developing
8 = Regular contact sharing personal information and details, supportive of other online members
10 = Meaningful and spiritually fulfilling—able to confide in and support one another as dear friends
☐ Not sure/Unknown
Comments:

21. How would you describe the social connections within your online Seminary/College?
Please check all that apply.

- Distant/Aloof
- Formal
- Friendly
- Warm
- Close-knit, cohesive friendships
- Family-loving
- Unknown/Not sure

Comments: ____________________________________________

22. How would you describe the social connections within your physical seminary/college? Please check all that apply.

- Alienated/Alone
- Distant/Aloof
- Formal
- Friendly
- Warm
- Close-knit, cohesive friendships
- Family-loving
- Unknown/Not sure

Comments: ____________________________________________

23. Do you offer special meetings at your seminary/college facility or institution for online community seminary members to meet and develop community?

- Yes
- No

If Yes, please describe the events:

_______________________________________________________

24. What online evangelism does your seminary provide?

- Refer people to a local church
- Online Prayer
- Testimony
- Provide spiritual material/links/relevant resources
- Offer online counseling
- Recruitment/volunteer opportunities in evangelism
- Offer recommitment to Christ opportunities/information
- Not Sure
- None

Comments: ____________________________

25. How does your Seminary/College website promote church renewal?

- Internet advertising on Christian websites
- Testimonies on website
- Offer Christ’s Salvation message/information
- Through word, graphics, sound, animation, and video
- Online Prayer
- Testimony
Google ADWORDS that provide links to your website
Provide Christian content/links/relevant resources
Offer Public Online services
Online counseling
Q&A Format to address specific questions of visitors
Recruitment/volunteer opportunities in evangelism
Not Sure
Link people to a local church
Not Sure
Other/Comments:

26. How does your seminary develop and maintain an effective teacher-student relationship?
Comments:

27. What recommendations do you have for other seminaries interested in designing online courses, in regard to promotion of student collaboration with one another to complete group presentations?
Comments:

Please add any additional comments you would like to make concerning the online seminary community.

Thank you for your participation in this survey.
APPENDIX C

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN: ONLINE COMMUNITY EXTENSION

Executive Summary

The dynamics of the Internet and computer markets have changed dramatically over the past decade and provide a unique opportunity to enhance the church and seminary’s online Internet capability. This Internet-driven extension of these religious institutions offers tremendous possibilities for evangelism and renewal that are intended to expand the borders of the church and seminary. We live in a rapidly changing culture that is uniquely positioned to capitalize successfully on advanced technology.

The online community upgrade described in this plan can be developed over time and implemented gradually depending on the needs of the church or seminary. This plan will address specific areas of implementation to assist the leadership in reaching their goals. The main focus of this plan will be to offer a high-level (big picture) plan to help guide the creation of a new online ministry and “harness the power of the Internet for Jesus.”\(^{170}\) The enclosed sample implementation plan is provided as a way of accomplishing this task with a minimum of difficulty and time and offers logical steps to a successful online church community.

The purpose of this implementation plan is to offer perspective churches and seminaries an overall guide to help them build an online capability for their respective

\(^{170}\) McIntosh, *Staff Your Church for Growth*, 13.
Online Implementation Process

A detailed implementation plan requires some serious thought before committing the financial resources to build this social media into the church or seminary. A number of important processes must be considered before a new web page can be created, or an old one can be redesigned. The goal, as outlined in this plan, is to expand both the seminary and church’s Web pages to an online religious community capability and offer cost-effective ways that will provide ongoing growth and efficiency. This Implementation Plan will review the steps to accomplish this task from three different perspectives. The following paragraphs highlight the individual steps with supporting information and helpful hints:

The first step is to gather and train (as needed) a technical team. This team can be a group of volunteers, hired Information Technologist (IT), or a professional technical management service provider. The team can consist of just one manager or a group of technical people who will provide the graphics, text, and message content for the online communities. This plan provides a step-by-step process of web design options to enable their leadership team to understand the scope and magnitude of building an online capability. It also includes guidance on how to employ either in-house resources or contract professional services that contribute to the overall success of an online community. Finally, a sample implementation plan is provided with key actions, roles and responsibilities, resource management, and project schedule and milestones. This Implementation Plan also includes a Content Management System (CMS) evaluation sheet to help leaders plan for the new implementations and better understand where and how to get started.
community. This team can also be a group professional content management service house (e.g., Church Plant Media, Web-Empowered Church (WEC), or Ekklesia). Instead of a team, another possibility is to obtain free open source learning management system software from the Internet domain (e.g., Moodle or SAKAI learning management systems).

If a professional CMS provider is employed, then all the supervision and guidance aspects of the Web service require only one staff manager/administrator from the church or seminary leadership team who can supply the content messages, mission, and special event notifications. This CMS service allows the church leadership to hire a “plug and play” content management service, or for the institution to design their own web pages from high-level software templates that require filling in the appropriate data. This method does not require an intimate technical knowledge. For those religious institutions that already have a web page, a third option is to utilize the institution’s own web page and add only those specific desired online community features (e.g., blogs, chat rooms, graphics, podcasts, etc.). Building on and expanding from the initial web page minimizes the impact of a total redesign, which also lowers the overall cost of the project.

The second step, and probably the most important, is to develop the web content management system for the online community. Christian CMS providers (e.g., ChurchPlantMedia, Web-empowered Church (WEC), Ekklesia, or Faith Connections) offer excellent comprehensive content services for churches and seminaries. These complete web packages include the host web service, provision of a domain name, e-mail accounts for members, discussion boards, blogs, complete CMS services, and other features. Secular CMS providers also offer all of the above and more, with name
recognition like Microsoft, EarthLink, and GoDaddy. In addition to the CMS providers, another option to consider is open source CMS software (e.g., Joomla). One advantage of open source software is that it is free; however, it requires independent consultants or developers to install and integrate it with the church or seminary’s website. Although Microsoft and EarthLink have more name recognition, they are also usually more expensive to contract for their professional web services. In contrast, GoDaddy and SiteGround offer free services that include hosting, domain name, CMS, and e-mail management. They offer several additional services (Blogs and Script Applications, installation services) for a small monthly fee (starting at $5/month).

Step three is to find a web hosting service, if the CMS does not already provide one. The web hosting service will provide the domain name, email, and house your data. In order to have a website, an institution must have a host provider that has web servers specifically designed for website hosting. An important advisory in regard to hosting companies is not to buy into their “free” hosting service without a thorough investigation of the offer, as limited services often have hidden costs for any extra services that may be added on later.

Numerous Internet service providers, hosting companies, professional consulting services, software houses, and libraries offer tremendous amounts of technical information to support any possible configuration that the prospective online church or seminary could imagine. Those mentioned above are just a few examples of dynamic web publishing houses that are affordable with user-friendly options. Software developers also use code editors, such as Dreamweaver CS3, FrontPage, Eclipse, and TYPO3, which can help build a church or seminary community website quickly and cost effectively.
Software developers and graphics designers are needed in order to design and code sites. Adobe Photoshop is generally used to design the site, graphics, layout, look-and-feel, etc.; and then code/text editors are used to code HTML, CSS, and other programming for the site. This software would be necessary as part of the IT team’s complement of tools for designing the web site. A sample implementation plan will provide focus and guidance to help the church and seminary build an online community capability with a variety of Internet options.

For churches that already have an existing website and web hosting service with domain name in place, an option would be simply to build onto their existing website. For example, a volunteer technical team could add the specific features (e.g., Prayer, Devotionals, Youth groups, etc.) of the “online church” in which they were interested, as defined within the parameters of the technical team’s requirements. The advantage of this option is that the entire upgrade could be implemented around the existing site without a major interference to the current website.

CMS Planning Consideration

Content Management System (CMS) consists of the configuration layout of the web page including font size, colors, text, graphics, and links to other pages that comprise the entire website. It is important to note that it is not the graphics or colors that will attract seekers to your website, but your inspirational content such as prayer, devotionals, youth, or men and women’s groups that will capture their imaginations. CMS is a major component and critical piece of the overall website design of the online community.
The institution’s focus for online content should be based on its mission, gifts, and resources. The most popular content from this perspective in the surveys is prayer, devotionals, sermons, and Bible studies. These ministries create a spiritual environment that nurtures and deepens communication and enriches online community.

Web Design Options

Once the IT team, web content, and hosting service have been determined, a decision must be made regarding the specific implementation strategy to follow. The following section offers some guidance in the form of three different implementation strategies that allow for a church or seminary to design their own online community. These strategies are listed in the order of their implementation sequence, which follows:

1. Plan and develop resources (e.g., IT team) for the design and maintenance of the website.
2. Develop and manage the web content with own resources or with the technical guidance and assistance from a Christian CMS company.
3. Obtain a professional Internet Service Provider (Hosting /CMS) service company to manage the entire website.
4. Determine if stock photos need to be located and purchased. Stock photos are available for download on sites like dreamstime.com and iStock, or one can purchase CDs from stock photographers. Churches and seminaries use stock photography for photos of children to highlight the youth and children’s programs or youth community outreach, which avoids privacy and consent issues.

171 Stephenson, Web-Empower Your Church, 25.
Numerous books and web pages describe in great detail how to accomplish these tasks. Therefore, this paper will only mention those options that are relevant to completing a full online religious community.

The first option, Plan and develop resources (e.g., IT team) for the design and maintenance of the website, relies heavily upon the technical abilities of the ministry team and its level of expertise at developing web content, web management, and overall web design. The real ministry in the online community will require this team to perform frequent additions and changes to the website. Updating websites is a challenging process that requires a dedicated team to have the vision and time for the ministry. It is important for the team to be recognized as a ministry of the church or seminary. Those chosen for this ministry should have a proven record of experience and the ability to post directly to the website. Supporting the team spiritually and emotionally is an important aspect for the overall success of the online community ministry. Following is a list of some of the tasks the online ministry team must consider for operations:

- Website content planning
- Design of new website pages
- Video/Photographic products
- Graphics design
- Designing Podcast intros and animation
- Coding XHTML and Java Scripts (SaaS software solutions)
- Developing Maintenance and management of website

This option of the implementation will concentrate on the initial Web page and configuration design as mentioned above. The actual web development effort covers only
40% of the entire project. The other 60% of the project includes strategic planning, application design, configuration, setting up content management services, and web page maintenance for on-going operations; these tasks would be completed by a host company. A basic hosting plan provided by EarthLink, for example, would include: “Domain name, page setup, 5GB of web storage, 20 GB of monthly data transfers, and 100 e-mail boxes.” The project cost can be reduced significantly if the church can provide a volunteer technical team that would perform most of the CMS maintenance duties.

The second option is to decide on the content of the website. This step is very critical to the success of the online community because the content for the web page/community will determine whether or not the web design is successful. As mentioned above, the CMS not only provides the color, font, and configuration of the web design but can also offer professional guidance for the overall content message and mission of the online community.

This second option also includes the actual design and configuration of the content for the website, including video and graphics design, and will address the web page online community windows. The Content Management System (CMS) can be developed in one of three ways. One way is for the web page content to be designed by the religious community’s technical team, or by a vendor who performs the web design and management service. A second option is for a Christian CMS to manage and support the entire web content for the community.

The third option is to find a hosting service company that will provide the domain name, e-mail services, and data storage. Once the content management system is

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determined, the hosting service provider can be offered as part of the CMS offering. This option includes a hosting service that provides all the CMS services, web page hosting, and actual design of the web page. An advantage of this “all-in-one” service provider is that it is usually very cost effective. Some churches/seminaries have found this method to save time and alleviate the problem of having to locate and hire the technical personnel required to maintain the websites. The church/seminaries would still be required to manage the hosting service and provide the necessary content of design, pictures, podcasts, or video information, including updates to the hosting service. The estimated recurring cost for the web hosting/CMS provider to complete monthly maintenance depends on the degree of management required (e.g., Basic, Professional, or Premium). For example, hosting sites’ charges differ considerably depending upon your choice of operation level, mentioned above. Typically, the hosting service cost runs from approximately $5 to $49/month, depending on the level of service needed. These fees are dependent on the level of service required and can cost considerably more. For example, Earthlink offers its service at a cost of $5 per month for a basic startup site, $30 per month for a professional (increased data storage, monthly data transfers, and larger number of mail boxes), or $49 per month for a premium site with CMS capability.

Another consideration to reduce the cost of the overall project is for the volunteer church/seminary team to develop as much of the content for the website as possible. For example, the volunteer IT team could create the podcasts and video clips of the church/seminary’s vision, mission, and ministry sermons and present them to the website designers. The seminary must also provide course production services as a requirement to produce each of the courses offered in its online curriculum. This course production is a
major part of the content seminaries need to consider for full operation of their online offerings. The course production is heavily dependent on the type of online service offered at the seminary (e.g., Directed study, online with intensives, online only). Therefore, the various production design scenarios are at the discretion of the seminary because they go beyond the scope of this plan.

Another possible option is for those who have the technical expertise to engineer their own websites. Technical innovations are created almost every day that allow for more cost-effective web designs. For example, many companies in the technical industry are moving toward using Software-as-a-Service (SaaS). In SaaS, a company or organization creates a single instance of software and then leases the use of the software to their customers. The SaaS technical company retains full ownership of the software and code, with the added advantage of having only a single code base to maintain and update. This approach allows software companies the ability to add new customers online with minimal effort. Using SaaS provides churches and seminaries the option of creating a members-only area, which enables members to have their own blogs, participate in forums, message boards, and threaded discussions, and download sermon audio/video. SaaS could also expand to include additional requirements as needed and avoid additional software tools such as Joomla and Drupal. These latter tools are for software developers to employ in designing the entire web page. SaaS is a viable alternative because it provides churches a low-cost alternative for products and services for their sites that are able to be up and running quickly. It integrates into existing sites more easily than full software installs on church sites. The disadvantage of SaaS is that it allows less flexibility to meet customers' specific changes from the standard offerings.
The beauty of these implementation options is the versatility and flexibility they offer the church and seminary. These options can be added incrementally over time as the church or seminary accrues the resources to add them. These options also offer the added benefit of minimizing the cost and achieving the goals of the leadership in developing an effective online community implementation.

Sample Implementation Plan

The implementation plan should be well thought out and contain at least the following important areas: objectives, list of important tasks, and charts of the progress of the project with the purpose of reaching goals and milestones.

Purpose

This plan’s purpose is to help chart the strategy for a church or seminary to develop an online community with the following requirements:

a. To build an online web community that drives the overall web design and CMS implementation plan.

b. Details the church or seminary’s key steps that satisfy the implementation requirements and determine the project milestones, resources, and roles of responsibility for implementing an online church or seminary community.

The Objective

The objective should be clear and understandable by all because it will be used as a foundation for building the rest of the project.
Tasks

This part of the project details the necessary steps that must be accomplished to complete the project and realize the goals. A task manager who documents the roles clearly for the purpose of holding people accountable should also be included for each step in the overall process.173

Schedule

An appropriate time frame for completing the project should be matched with each task. An example of a schedule is provided below to help guide the task planning. This is a helpful tool for matching each task with a specific timeline.174

Progress

The progress of the implementation project should be tracked against each objective. The management representative monitors the progress of each step to ensure success for the overall implementation.175 The following sample implementation plan lays out the important areas for consideration and is offered as a guide for the prospective online community.

Scope of Implementation

Online features to enhance the existing church/seminary home pages are included in this implementation. The web design, content management configuration, and communication will comprise the main areas of implementation, technical support, and

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173 Ibid., Internet source; accessed, November 10, 2009.
174 Ibid.
175 Ibid.
administration. It is recommended that the leadership be briefed on all phases of the project.

**Survey Results**

A survey analysis and summary was conducted in Chapters Four and Five that reveals the best implementation methods and current installations products that have successfully contributed to an online capability. The results of the analysis are found in Chapter 4, and the summary is recorded in Chapter 5 of the main dissertation. They can also be used as a guide for the CMS management team in developing the online church and seminary.

Chapter 4 presented the best practices and implementation strategy that will complete the requirements for the implementation plan. A survey summary and recommendations are provided in Table 8. The implementation plan should include all tasks and procedures for implementation. A typical schedule is provided in Table 9.

**Roles and Responsibilities**

**Leadership**

The leadership should oversee all of the online Web design and upgrades and assign a Technical Team to administer all the tasks of the online project. The leadership should also be actively involved in the design of the web content.
Table 8. Key actions to be completed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Key actions to be completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment and strategy</td>
<td>Develop a content management plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Church technical team must be formed to identify its online specific requirements and establish objectives based on survey results and CMS questionnaire below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation and operation</td>
<td>Churches need to designate a specific management team of representatives for design and configuration with well-defined roles project actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Churches must integrate their online vision into working programs and procedures and offer a training guide for online participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking and corrective action</td>
<td>Setting up performance criteria, corrective and preventive action, and auditing can be achieved by Hosting Service Houses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Churches must identify procedures for maintenance and disposition of online ministries, podcasts, blogs, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management review</td>
<td>Pastoral management reviews must provide ongoing performance and continued improvements to the online church community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Management Representative (MR)

The MR’s responsibility is to monitor the project implementation and training to assist the community membership. The MR initiates, promotes, and markets the online community project. He will lead the technical team and help to keep members/leadership informed on a daily and/or weekly basis about upcoming events and ongoing ministry.

The Technical Team (TT)

The TT is a staff or team that uses the Content Management Software, or a vendor who performs the web design and management services. These technical experts will organize and coordinate online web content, production, and dissemination of the online
ministry and community. They will also be responsible for all of the web integration and performance monitoring and conduct the performance analysis.

The TT will also provide the administration of all ongoing web support efforts, including coordination with the leadership, to discuss online technical support results from monthly monitoring reviews and analysis. They will also offer guidance and direction for the future upgrades.

TT and Community Leaders

Together they are responsible setting the online community’s vision and goals. The technical manager is responsible for all the operations and maintenance of the online ministry.

Outside Contractor Support

The technical team can be completely outsourced and cover the entire technical operations for the online capability. This team will monitor any contract support required for full operations of the web community and facilitate overall implementation. This technical support will be required throughout the life of the online community ministry.

Web Functional Roles/Responsibilities

Domain Name (DNS) Registrar

Registration of the Domain name is required for operation (e.g., GoDaddy.com).

Hosting Company

The hosting company “houses” the site on its server (either dedicated server or shared hosting) and points the domain name to where the site resides. The hosting
company is typically selected based on the technical needs of the site. Whether or not a site and/or software require unique access or special technology will drive the decision for selecting a specific host. Typically, the hosting company will host email services as well (e.g., SiteGround, HostMySite, and Crystal Tech).

**Content Management Service (CMS)**

The software/web application that is responsible for building and maintaining the site, the tools and features for managing content pages, building online stores, online polls, forums, blogs, etc.

**The Web/Graphic Designer**

The web designer uses a graphics package to design the template(s) used by the CMS. Examples of potential packages include Adobe Photoshop, Gimp, and Adobe/Macromedia Fireworks.

**The Web Developer**

The Web Developer uses a text editor and/or web development tool to code the templates used by the CMS, taking the .psd file(s) from Photoshop (or applicable graphics package) and breaking them into HTML or some other web-friendly format. Examples of packages include Dreamweaver, Frontpage, Homesite, Eclipse, and Notepad. Depending on the CMS selected, many templates are available for purchase or free download, which diminishes the role of the web designer and developer.
Resourcing Implementation

Initial Implementation Funding

If churches or seminaries already have an operational web page, development funds will still be needed for the additional online capabilities to build their online community. This community should be identified and programmed through the requirements phase of the implementation process. Program budget guidance has been provided for appropriate online capabilities. Funding amounts will depend greatly on the implementation approach and design methods chosen by the church or seminary technical team. Startup funding and initial sustainment of all the online implementation will cover the salary and contractor support from contract start to finish.

Internal Labor Requirements

Full-time staffing may not be required or included in the initial operations. This requirement assumes the use of a CMS service provider to perform the task of the management representative. The initial online staffing and maintenance installation will be required throughout the life of the online community. In addition, the technical team members’ time dedicated to maintenance is largely spent during the first year (the development year), but it depends on the magnitude of the online capability of the leadership. This part of the ministry can be outsourced as needed to a professional CMS house. When in a sustainability mode, it is estimated that only a few hours a week will be required for updates.
Implementation Schedule and Milestones

Table 9 describes the implementation milestones review required for the project.

Table 9. Sample targets and implementation milestones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample target</th>
<th>Sample implementation milestones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NLT 5 days</td>
<td>Initiate Project – Identify and select Technical Team and Management Representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLT 15 days</td>
<td>Develop the Content Management Plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLT 20 days</td>
<td>Complete an Implementation analysis with appropriate documentation, signed by the Church Elders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLT 30 days</td>
<td>Schedule of Project Dates covering the entire implementation of the online community, signed by the Church Elders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLT 10 days</td>
<td>Brief church members on installation details and operational scenarios they are likely to experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLT 30 days</td>
<td>Complete installation and test the website.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every 10 days</td>
<td>Complete church management reviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLT 30 days</td>
<td>Final Test and complete implementation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A more detailed project schedule of tasks, timeframes and resources is required for specific church implementations and should be maintained by the respective TT for each implementation.
Benefits of Proposed Plan

When comparing the current church or seminary office capabilities to those of the present technology, along with new requirements of the online community, the following list of benefits are offered for the leadership to consider:

- State-of-the-art technological improvements will enhance the business model and operational efficiency of the institution. Technology upgrades will increase monthly cost savings, require a relatively short time to complete, include service reliability, and lower implementation costs.

- Increased communications capabilities can be realized as part of the upgrades to networking and Internet connections.

- Digital visual arts have entered the worship environment for the long haul. They will take on different forms over time and can be realized in an online environment.

- Ministry leaders will have access to the Internet for teaching resources and enriching the lives of the online community.

Technology is often used today to spread the Gospel.

Content Management Service (CMS) Evaluation Sheet

Implementation evaluation questions are listed here to help the prospective church or seminary focus on the important areas for creating an online ministry.

The most significant task is the web content design required for a successful online community. The portrayal of the church or seminary and the effectiveness of the website design are keys to success on the Web. The management representative of each
institution should address the following questions for a better understanding of where to start planning.

1. Have you registered a domain name with an Internet Service Provider (ISP)?
2. If you do not have a domain name, how will you obtain one?
3. Describe the mission/function(s) of your ministry:
4. What is the purpose of your website?
5. Do you want to incorporate services (e.g., Sunday sermons, classroom agendas, introductory videos) on your website?
6. Do you want an online catalog of your products (e.g. books, sermons, teachings, seminars) or services on your website?
7. What are your main products or services that you want to market?
8. Is there a preference for a specific color schemes or is there a set of colors associated with your church or seminary?
9. Do you already possess photos or images to add to the website, or do stock photos need to be purchased?
10. Most websites consist of a standard set of links off the homepage, used as standard navigation throughout the site. What topics, functions, divisions, or areas do you envision on the site (e.g., Ministries, Services, About Us, Contact Us, Support, etc.)?
11. List links to other sites that you like and explain what you like about each one.
12. List any relevant church/spiritual links and what you like about each one.
13. Briefly describe your church demographic information (i.e., average age, gender, city/suburbs, etc.).
The above questions will help the manager or developer focus on the steps and strategies necessary to complete the online community. It will also allow for a more accurate estimate of the level of effort necessary to create the best possible website to serve the church or seminary’s needs.
VITA

Daniel C. Doody

PERSONAL
Born: February 15, 1943
Married: Lorraine M. Budwit, September 1, 1964 (Deceased 1988).
        Sean Michael, born March 14, 1969.
        Katrina Marie, born May 29, 1972.

EDUCATIONAL
Bachelor of Science, Engineering, Lowell Technological Institute, 1971.

MINISTERIAL
Ordained: 1985, New Covenant Church, Waldorf, Maryland.

PROFESSIONAL
Discipleship Ministry: Northgate Community Church, 2009-Present
Director of Celebrate Recovery: Harvest Christian Fellowship, 2001-2008
Pastoral Prison Ministry: John Hickey Correctional Institute, 1998-2008
Teacher: Chapelgate Christian Academy, 2007-2008
Teacher: Ets Chaiyim High School, 2005-2007
Principal: New Covenant Christian Academy, 1981-1985