S. Joubert & W.J. Schoeman

AN EXPLORATION OF THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY BY CONGREGATIONS

ABSTRACT

The internet, cell phones and, more broadly speaking, the social media, have changed the world over the past twenty years, resulting in what is called "the network society". What is the response of South African congregations to the use and role of technology in congregational life? The aim is to provide an empirical and theoretical description of the situation in this regard. An empirical survey was conducted among congregations in the eastern suburbs in Pretoria and the northern suburbs of Cape Town and it was found that congregations communicate mostly information through the social media. Congregations that function within a fluid network society should earnestly consider devising a proper and effective digital and electronic communication strategy for the congregational ministry. Congregations that wish to remain relevant within the aetas digitalis must undergo a shift from being mere providers of the correct information, to becoming mentors, co-travellers and wise guides who assist one another, as well as others, to make sense of this information in order to apply it, to the glory of God and for the benefit of others.

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital world, social media and technological development are undoubtedly influencing the context of church congregations. To cite just one quotation in this regard, by way of introduction: "The theoretical concept of networked religion, besides speaking to the form of spirituality that emerges out of online networked negotiations with traditional religion, shows how current religious narratives, practices, and structures are able to become increasingly flexible, transitional, and transnational as they

Prof. S. Joubert, Research fellow, University of the Free State, South Africa, e-mail: stephan@ekerk.org
Prof. W.J. Schoeman, Dept. Practical Theology, University of the Free State, South Africa, e-mail: schoemanw@ufs.ac.za

are lived out both online and in an information- and technology-driven society. It helps explain the ways in which networked society creates new borderlands of interactions between the online and offline worlds, between the digital and embodied" (Campbell 2011:85). Campbell uses the concept of "networked religion" to describe the shifts that cannot be avoided by believers and congregations. The internet, cellphones and, more broadly speaking, the social media, have changed the world over the past twenty years, resulting in what Castells calls "the network society" (Castells & Cardoso, 2005:6-16), while Friedman refers to this altered global landscape as a "flat world"(Friedman, 2006:48-49). Congregations cannot escape these dramatic changes; they comprise an inevitable part of the reality and context in which they are living (see Thumma 2012:1). What is the response of South African congregations to the use and role of technology in congregational life?

The aim of this article is to provide an empirical and theoretical description of the situation in this regard. The empirical survey will be described in the first section, while in the second, the interaction between the congregation and the digital age will be discussed.

2. TECHNOLOGY AND CONGREGATIONS: AN EMPIRICAL SURVEY

An empirical survey was undertaken in 2013 in order to examine the use of technology in certain congregations. The discussion will start off on a descriptive note, focusing on some of the shifts that have occurred in the technological or digital communication of congregations within the South African context.

The research gap was identified, and a preliminary research question formulated, as follows: The virtual world has not only radically altered the manner of communication, but has also led to incisive changes in the whole concept of what it means to be human. It has led to the formation of a new virtual identity. Sweet (2012: e-source) distinguishes between Gutenbergers and Googlers: "Googlers are a digitalised, globalised group who spend much of their time becoming acquainted with each other in a virtual world, while Gutenbergers prefer a movable-type technology, opting to read a book rather than use an iPad." Digital communication is more than a medium, and is becoming part of a new and changing identity. Christian congregations cannot escape from this state of affairs – hence the following *research question*: What role does digital communication play in congregations, and what is the impact thereof?

The following two research areas can be identified on the basis of the research question:

• Which forms of digital communication and means are used by the managers and leaders of congregations? What are their opinions regarding the necessity, desirability and effectiveness of digital communication? How does digital communication function within the congregation?

• What are the digital needs and practices of faith communities who attend church services? What role does digital communication play in the religious identity of those who attend such services?

2.1 The research design

This research is merely aimed at exploring the role and nature of the use of technology, rather than providing a comprehensive study of congregations in South Africa and their use of technology. It was therefore decided (for logistical and financial reasons) to limit the enquiry to two suburbs: the eastern suburbs in Pretoria and the northern suburbs of Cape Town. With the aid of directories and the Internet, a study population (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:178) of congregations in the two suburbs was compiled on the basis of the following criteria:

• A congregational membership of more than 200 members;

• The congregation should be able to communicate in Afrikaans or English;

• The emphasis was placed on congregations from Mainline, Pentecostal or Charismatic denominations.

A simple random sample (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:189-190) of 20% was selected from the congregations of each of the two suburbs. In the northern suburbs of Cape Town, 146 congregations were identified, 33 were randomly selected, and 10 congregations (30.3%) completed the questionnaire. In the eastern suburbs of Pretoria, 91 congregations were identified, 24 were randomly selected and 9 congregations (37.5%) completed the questionnaire. By using the "equal probability of selection method" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:173) and minimizing the exclusion criteria the responses could be seen as fairly representing the views of congregations in the two mentioned urban suburbs. This limitation should be kept in mind in the discussion of the findings.

A questionnaire was developed, focusing on questions regarding the use of technology in the congregation. Structured and semi-structured questions were used. The questionnaire was completed in an online format,

and also by means of telephonic interviews, mostly by the administrative personnel of the relevant church office. (The questionnaire and full report are available from the researchers.)

2.2 A description of the congregations

A brief description of the nineteen congregations that comprised part of the survey is necessary at this point. One question dealt with the growth of the congregation: a congregation can either grow, or it may find itself within an environment where maintenance comprises the main focus (see Table 1). An equal number (36.8%) of the congregations are growing, or are focused on maintenance or survival. Three congregations (15.8%) regard themselves as shrinking and/or declining. At the other end of the spectrum, only two congregations (10.5%) are undergoing dynamic growth. This might indicate the congregations in these two suburbs are functioning within a more restricted growth environment and that it is difficult for the congregations to experience dynamic growth.

Table 1: How would you define the congregation's current growth?		
	N	%
Shrinking and/or declining	3	15.8
Focused on maintenance/survival	7	36.8
Growing	7	36.8
Displaying dynamic growth	2	10.5
Total	19	100.0

Another question pertained to whether the congregations tended more towards a missionary orientation[1], in other words, whether they regarded missions-projects as one of the activities or functions of the congregation, on the one hand, or whether they viewed the congregation, in itself as a missionary congregation who sees her existence as part of God's mission to this world (see Table 2). In the latter case, the congregation is part of God's mission to the world, and views its entire existence and purpose in the light of a missional perspective. Most congregations (13; 76.3%) placed themselves more distinctly within a missions-project framework while only four congregations reported that they functioned, to a partial

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1   Mission could be seen as a task or function of the church, or a missionary church could be understood as missionary by its nature and mission would then be seen in a more holistic way (Van Gelder, 2000:31-32).

extent, within a missionary framework. This may limit their role within the wider community or restrict their engagement with society.

Table 2: How does the congregation function in terms of community outreach? (%)				
	I totally disagree	I partly agree	I totally agree	Total
Our congregation have missions-projects that form part of the normal congregation activities	0	4	13	17
	0.0	23.5	76.5	100.0
We are a missionary congregation who sees her existence as part of God's mission to this world	0	4	1	5
	0.0	80.0	20.0	100.0

It may be unrealistic to draw too many conclusions on the basis of just two questions regarding the congregations within the two specific suburban areas; but it seems that growth is restricted and that the congregations to a great extent, from a missionary framework, are not involved in the community. It could be that there is not an openness towards the digital world and social media and its possibilities for congregations to explore and use in a changing world, this question will be addressed in the next section.

2.3 Digital communication in the congregations

It was anticipated that the general congregational administration of most congregations would probably be computerized; and this was indeed the case. The majority of congregations (94.7%) make use of an electronic database. This means that systems and registers are electronically stored and managed:

• The membership database and register are computerised;

• The accounting systems of most congregations (88.9%) are computerised;

• Members can make offerings and financial contributions electronically – 89.5% of the congregations make provision for this option.

The extent of computerisation of the congregational administration probably amounts to the minimum that can currently be expected of congregations.

Congregations use the administrative system as a basis for communicating with members. In the case of 73.7% of the congregations, use is made of digital communication. What groups are targeted by congregations in their use of digital communication (see Table 3)? Families comprise the most important target group for most congregations (63.2%). In some cases (26.3%), students "mostly" comprise part of the target group. What is striking is the fact that primary- and high-school children are not regarded as a specific target group by the congregations. Primary- and high-school children are probably viewed as part of the families that are targeted by digital communication. The crucial question in this regard would be: Is this an effective way of communicating with different generations – or would it not be better to view teenagers and young persons as a specific target group?

Table 3: Which group is targeted most prominently in your digital communication? (%)					
	Most important target group	Mostly comprising part of the target group	Sometimes comprising part of the target group	Seldom comprising part of the target group	Not targeted at all
Primary school	0	0	0	0	2
High school	0	0	2	1	0
Students	1	5	2	1	0
Families	12	3	1	0	0
Senior citizens	0	2	0	0	0

Emails comprise the most important digital communication platform for congregations. With one exception, all of the congregations (94.7%) use email as a vehicle of communication. The email addresses of members are available on an electronic database; and emails are sent out on a weekly (72.2%), or in some cases a monthly (17.7%) basis. Usually, congregational activities account for the main contents of the emails, followed by prayer requests. The email newsletters are sent out in both Afrikaans and English. The newsletters are usually sent only to members (66.7%), although in some cases (16.7%) they are also forwarded to other persons in South Africa (16.7%), as well as to persons abroad (16.7%). It can thus be inferred that email communication focusing on congregational activities, in the format

of a weekly newsletter to members of the congregation, comprises the most important form of digital communication to members.

Table 4: What is the single digital communication platform that you could not do without? (%)				
	Our most important platform	We often use this platform	We seldom use this platform	We do not use this platform at all
Email	15	1	0	0
Sms	2	2	0	0
Web-page	1	0	2	0
Social netwerks	0	0	0	2

Most congregations (89.5%) have a *website*, which is maintained by volunteers (76.5%). The website is usually (58.8%) updated on a weekly basis. Information on congregational activities is mostly placed on the website. An interesting factor is that more spiritual messages than prayer requests are placed on the website, in contrast to the emails. In most cases, the information is in text format, but photographs and, to a lesser extent, also audio and/or video snippets are sometimes placed on the website. The website is mostly accessible to computers (78.9%) and, in a smaller number of cases, to cellphones/tablets (21.1%).

How does the use of email and websites by these congregations compare with that of other congregations in other contexts? A national survey[2] was conducted in 2010 amongst 11 077 congregations in the United States of America (see Thumma 2012:1-2). The use of email more than doubled between 2000 and 2010, increasing from 35% to 90% of congregations. The use of websites rose from 33% to 69% during the same timeframe. A quarter of the congregations only use email and do not have a website at all. On the other hand, two-thirds of the congregations that participated in the USA survey have both email and a website. The usage of both email and websites, according to the two surveys, is more or less the same.

Do congregations in our study make use of *social networks* for the purpose of communication? Many congregations are featured on Facebook (78.9%), while a smaller number (21.1%) also make use of

2   The US survey and the South African one discussed in this article used different methodologies and there are certainly limitations in the comparison between the two. The US survey is only used to illustrate certain trends or to explain and explore the South African one more.

Twitter. Congregational activities remain the most important subject of the information placed on the social networks. Text and, to a lesser extent, photographs are used as the media format on these networks. One would expect that the leadership of a congregation would be likely to have a presence on social networks. In 58.8% of cases, some of the leaders featured on social networks to some degree, while in 17.6% of the congregations, all of the leaders used social networks; and in 23.5% of cases, none of the leaders availed themselves of such networks.

What use is made of social networks by American congregations? Over 40% of the American congregations use Facebook. Few of the congregational websites are interactive; and they are not updated regularly.

On the other hand, Facebook pages have a dynamic interactive quality; they are easily updated and offer timely, relevant information to a faith community's 'friends' (Thumma 2012:3).

The Facebook pages of congregations do not contain relevant contact details for outsiders. This leads to the conclusion that Facebook is used mainly by insiders in order to connect to each other, and to share information and photographs with one another.

Cellphones comprise an important platform for digital communication. Most congregations (89.5%) make use of sms communication on a weekly basis (52.9%), while others do so on a monthly basis (35.3%). The cellphone numbers of members are available on an electronic database (88.9%) which is usually sent out by means of a sms system (72.0%). This communication is concerned mainly with congregational activities and – albeit to a lesser extent than in the case of emails, the website and social networks – also with spiritual messages and prayer requests.

The following aspects regarding digital communication in *public worship* were investigated:

- Digital dialogue: None of the congregations created the opportunity for digital dialogue of any nature whatsoever during worship services.

- Recordings of sermons: Sermons are recorded in audio- (78.9%) and in video-format (36.8%). The recordings can be ordered in the form of CDs (57.7%), or downloaded from the website (42.3%).

- Data projector: Most congregations (78.9%) make use of a data projector during the worship services.

2.4 The management of the congregation's digital ministry

The question that now arises pertains to the method of management and decision-making regarding the congregation's digital or electronic ministry. Most congregations (52.6%) do not have a digital communication task group, or a decision-making forum or commission. Policy-related and managerial decisions are usually made by the leader of the congregation, or by volunteers. It may be concluded that the policy regarding the congregations' digital or electronic ministry, along with the management of this ministry, is not conducted in a structured manner.

How effectively is this management carried out? The evaluation of the electronic ministry may provide an indication of the degree of effectiveness:

• The website is evaluated by 31.6% of the congregations, usually on a monthly basis (66.7%);

• The congregation's cellphone communication is evaluated in 17.6% of cases, usually on a quarterly basis (50.0%);

• The email newsletter is evaluated by 25.0% of the congregations on a monthly basis (50.0%);

• A few congregations evaluate their electronic ministry on a very limited scale.

Less than two-thirds of the congregations (62.5%) draw up an annual budget for their digital or electronic ministry to the congregation. In order of importance, most of the budget is allocated to websites, followed by email newsletters and cellphone messages, while the smallest amount is allocated to printed communication.

Many congregations make use of a graphic designer (68.4%), but in most cases (83.3%), the services of a volunteer are used. As a result, the deployment of a graphic designer has no financial implications for the congregation, since the designer renders the service on a voluntary basis.

2.5 General observations regarding the congregations' digital communication

Congregations were given the opportunity to make a few general remarks regarding their digital communication. A few open questions were put to the congregations; and some of the responses are indicated below, on the basis of certain identified themes:

- The congregation's digital communication strategy: It would appear as if congregations do not always have a clearly formulated strategy. The strategy is developed according to the need, or on an *ad hoc* basis – for instance: "Take it as it develops." One example of a more clearly formulated strategy was as follows: "Do the digital communication as excellently as possible to reach as many people as possible." However, there was no example of a clear and comprehensive congregational strategy pertaining to digital communication.

- The effectiveness of digital communication in the congregation: Some of the congregations indicated that they felt that their digital communication system was working well. One congregation felt that it was not very effective.

- The digital communication needs of the congregation: Congregations referred to the need to communicate in a completely paper-free manner, as well as the need to communicate with older members via digital media. A need for the training of volunteers was also mentioned.

- Gaps in the digital communication of the congregation: There are existing gaps in terms of the development of communication on Twitter, Facebook and the website. Older persons tend to feel excluded.

- General remarks regarding the digital communication of congregations: There is a need to expand the congregations' digital communication. Congregations tended to express satisfaction with the growth and development of their digital communication.

2.6 A few conclusions on the basis of the survey

Firstly, it is necessary to point out *a few limitations* of the investigation. The survey was conducted amongst congregations in two suburban areas, namely the northern suburbs of Cape Town and the eastern suburbs of Pretoria. The respective response rates of 30.3% and 37.5% are probably sufficient to warrant the drawing of a few tentative conclusions regarding the use of electronic communication by congregations within the suburbs. These are suburban congregations that probably fall within a middle-class socio-economic grouping. Thus, generalised inferences cannot be made regarding the church and denominations in a broader context. This comprises a preliminary investigation which merely indicates certain tendencies or, at best, maps out certain general trends in this regard.

The congregations in the two suburbs place an emphasis on a maintenance framework and there are a lack of a missionary vision that may restrict their interaction with the wider community and an openness

towards a dynamic environment. The congregations' administration and functioning are computerised, and use is made of electronic and digital communication. Email newsletters to members and the conveying of factual information on congregational activities remain the focal points. The core target group in this regard is that of families. The question remains as to whether it is possible to communicate with the different generations in terms of such a simplistic approach.

Various studies indicate the importance and preference accorded to Facebook as a social network (Thumma, 2012:9). It would appear as if this platform is not being optimally utilised as the media of preference. If older persons comprise the largest growing component of the population that is gaining access to digital communication, attention should be focused on this matter. The most prominent drawback in the congregations probably pertains to the lack of a properly formulated digital communication strategy. Moreover, the lack of an adequate evaluation methodology accentuates the lack of such a strategy. The current use of congregational digital communication is largely a voluntary affair, since it is usually managed by volunteers on an *ad hoc* basis. Possibly this can simply be ascribed to the fact that the Gutenberg generation is in control of digital communication in this context, and is attempting, in effect, to say to the Google generation: "Can you imagine carrying out ministry during the last five hundred years and getting away with, 'Sorry, I don't "do" books'?" (Sweet 2012: e-source). But the converse also applies: "Can you imagine doing ministry in the next five years and getting away with 'Sorry, I don't do Facebook'?" (Sweet 2012: e-source). Digital communication is more than just the electronic communication of congregational activities. Congregations that function within a fluid network society should earnestly consider devising a proper and effective digital and electronic communication strategy for the congregational ministry. The use of technology and social media "… [makes] congregational activities more congruent with the everyday lives of members" (Thumma 2010:9).

3.   CONGREGATIONS WITHIN THE *AETAS DIGITALIS*, THE DIGITAL AGE

The foregoing investigation provided a preliminary empirical description of the role played by technology within the congregation. The crucial question is that of whether it is essential for congregations to take cognisance of the digital age. In order for congregations to be contextually relevant, it is necessary for them to have a thorough understanding of the epistemological foundations of the digital age and, secondly, to acquire

new social and religious skills. A more in-depth discussion of these two aspects will now follow.

3.1 A thorough epistemological foundation regarding *aetas digitalis* is a prerequisite for relevant congregations

One does not have to be an expert to realise that we are living in a digital world. For example, by the third quarter of 2014, Facebook already had 1,35 billion active users, while Twitter had 284 million subscribers (Statista 2015). Meanwhile, by December 2014, Instagram had grown to include 300 million monthly users. Approximately 14,1 billion active email addresses also existed by the end of 2014 (Radicati 2013), while 11,944 billion searches were undertaken on Google alone during 2014. In order to remain relevant within the *aetas virtiualis* – the new digital age – congregations must take cognisance of the following facts in the shaping of relevant ministries:

i. Technology is not value-neutral. In other words, contemporary digital media do not comprise a transparent window that affords us an objective, value-free glimpse of reality. In this regard, John Dyer (2010:35) observes:

> Technology is the means by which we transform the world as it is into the world that we desire…what we often fail to notice is that it is not only the world that gets transformed by technology; we are also transformed.

Our choices of, and frequent use of digital media may potentially change our own understanding of, and interactions with reality. In their research focusing on the impact of digital media on the brain, Small and Vorgan (2008:21) found, precisely, that "…[m]any of us are developing neural circuitry that is customized for rapid and incisive spurts of directed attention". Carr (2011:118) describes the consequences of this reduced concentration span as follows:

> The Net seizes our attention only to scatter it. We focus intensively on the medium itself, on the flickering screen, but we're distracted by the medium's rapid-fire delivery of competing messages and stimuli.

Social media have indeed become the new opium of the masses in many arenas, as pointed out by Kester Brewin (2012 Kindle):

> If religion was once the opium of the people, then social networks and the "always on" culture of the 24-hour news cycle are the

> drip-drip of methadone to keep us docile, titillated, flattened and poorly informed, while we dupe ourselves into believing we are more alive, more connected, more enriched and better liked.

ii. Technology plays a dominant role in the public embodiment of faith. "It is reasonable to argue that public media have become the primary structure for engaging with the sacred" (Lynch 2012:93). Christian literature, TV channels, radio stations, CDs, podcasts, videos, blogs and web-pages have become the media of preference through which religion reaches the popular "market squares", and which assist in the shaping of individuals' and communities' faith. In 2005 already, the Barna group found that more people used Christian media to connect with God than the number of people who actually went to church (Barna 2005)). In a further 2013 study on the so-called "millennial" generation (persons between the ages of 18 and 29), for whom the digital world is their preferred space for play, socialising, working and living, the Barna group found that 7 out of 10 "millennials" read the Bible on an electronic screen, while 56% based their choice of congregation on visits to various congregational websites and other social media. 38% of "millennials" use the Internet to verify facts that they have encountered in church; and 5 out of 10 actively take part in online discussions pertaining to religious faith. Moreover, amongst millennials, 1 person out of 10 donates money to his or her church online on a monthly basis (Barna 2013) (. Members of the so-called "generation Z" (persons who were born between 2002 and the present day) possibly pose an even greater challenge to the church than the "millennial" generation. Their perceptions of reality, according to Wise (2014), are even more geared towards viewing the whole of reality from the perspective of contemporary media, within which their values are shaped and their primary socialisation takes place.

iii. Religious interactions and experiences within the digital world differ from those that occur in other contexts.

> Religious expressions on the internet are not precisely the same as those in real life. That is, religious practices in the virtual or online realm are not available for study in the same way as those in the material world of unmediated experience (Johns 2013:238).

The absence of direct, one-to-one interactions and physical contact is leading to new ways of communication, new possibilities in terms of understanding and interpretation, and new embodiments of relationships within the digital sphere.

> The simultaneity and interactivity of digital communication makes possible a participatory construction of meanings through negotiation. This has enormous consequences for faith formation through religious education, teaching and preaching (Palakeel 2006:178).

The dominant role of text, graphics, sound, video, as well as of different combinations of these (the so-called "hypertext" phenomenon) within contemporary technology, is creating a new technological front that could both promote and, at the same time, restrict the communication of religious meanings. In this context, communicators or senders have much less control over the creation of meaning than ever before, because all images, sounds and texts are received and interpreted separately from the existing boundaries of time and physical space. The process of conveying meaning within the digital sphere has thereby become more fluid than ever. This could give rise to anything ranging from the phenomenon of "compassion at a distance" (Takazawa 2013:1) to a dramatic increase in religious detachment (Pewforum 2012).

iv. The influence of existing religious traditions is decreasing dramatically within digital spaces. New dialogue partners are coming to the fore in this context, as well as new themes of discussion, amidst forms of interaction that are more open in nature, and also faster. The hierarchical church system is taboo in these "flat" electronic environments where positions of authority do not count for much. Tim Bednar (quoted in Garner 2013:259) pertinently summarises the sentiments of the new generation:

> We aren't convinced that pastors know more about following Christ than we do. We tire of having their vision delegated to us and instead are looking for the church to embrace our visions and dreams.

In place of the customary loyalty to formal religious structures, new "clans" and "tribes" are coming to the fore within digital spaces, where people assemble in smaller groups around shared themes, actions, projects and ideas, and form specific digital identities.

3.2 New social and religious skills are a prerequisite in relevant congregations within the *aetas digitalis*

i. Digital literacy at the congregational level requires creative equipment with a view to the understanding and relevant usage of contemporary technology. Digital media have opened up a new world before us, in which existing and former media (and cultures) converge.

> Literacy today is not just the ability to read and write texts or to do pure impassioned and critical reasoning, but the capacity to make sense of

the multi-media and multi-sensorial communication of audio-visual-textual stimuli, with multi-layered meaning (Palakeel 2006:177-178).

As bearers of the keys of God's kingdom, and as those to whom the life-transforming message of Christ has been entrusted, congregations cannot do otherwise than to communicate in the language of the culture and media of the day. This requires a broadened spirituality in which believers are guided towards an understanding of the fact that digital reality comprises an integral part of reality, and that contemporary technology entails much more than the presence of a mere super-storage space for information in cyberspace. In other words, believers must know that their presence on, and involvement in Facebook, Twitter, Instagram web-pages and other social media can be regarded as a legitimate form of expression of their belief in Christ, which requires the same attention, reflection, planning and prayer as in the case of the normal Bible studies, cell groups and worship services that form part of congregational life. In the place of building commissions, congregations now need digital teams and the insights of experts from the life-world of the so-called "millennial" generation, as well as ample budgets for technology.

ii. In order to restrict the dangers of the fragmentation, hyper-individualism and deficient social relationships that could result from continual exposure to contemporary technology, the communal identity of the church must be actively pursued and practised in new and imaginative ways. "The Net, by design, gives individuals the capacity to fragment information and use it however they choose" (Wheatley 2012:97). Within this new digital reality, where individuals often wield supremacy as controllers and manipulators of information, the need for a communal identity of faith is more prominent than ever. Local congregations must play a leading role in order to palpably give shape to believers' communal identity as part of the body of Christ and of the new people of God here on earth, as alternative, healing communities. Relationship-driven gatherings and imaginative community projects that effectively address the needs and questions arising from local contexts, are essential. Communities also need new forms of table fellowship in order to jointly celebrate the new life in Christ. Digital contact should culminate in *koinonia*, in magnetic fellowship between believers, otherwise the narrative of faith has not yet been fully related or lived in practice. Leonard Sweet (2015:3) rightfully points out that:

> The story of Christianity didn't take shape behind pulpits or on altars or in books. No, the story of Christianity takes shape around tables, as people face one another as equals, telling stories, sharing memories, enjoying food with one another.

The inherent need of human beings to find sense and meaning in their existence, above and beyond themselves, is more acute than ever within the *aetas digitalis*, as is also the need for transparent relationships (cf. also Hart & Hart Frejd 2013). A relevant presence within the digital world, and concrete embodiments of Christian *koinonia* and love elsewhere within reality, comprise the essential building blocks of a communal identity of faith in the digital age. These spheres must continuously supplement and influence one another.

iii. Neutralisation of the so-called "spotlight effect". With reference to the observation made by the Nobel Prize winner, Daniel Kahnemen (2011), that many people only make use of that information which is currently at hand and ignore the rest (the so-called "what you see is all there is" approach), Heath and Heath (2013:1-2) describe this phenomenon as the "spotlight effect." This means that many individuals focus on those bits of reality that appear on their radar screen, but ignore the rest, on which the spotlight has not fallen. This "spotlight effect" creates great challenges within the flat www. world, in which people are continually subjected to an avalanche of information, images and sounds within their direct field of vision, which eventually shape their values, ideas and opinions. Without the necessary guidance of experts and mentors to assist them to see "the bigger picture" and to make informed judgements about information on the basis of the right principles, believers could rapidly lose their way.

> This "everyone-is-a-media-outlet" syndrome (cf. Shirky 2008:55ff) could even give rise to different forms of digital banality in a bid to further scale the heights of the never-ending statistical popular lore of virtual space. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a re-evaluation by specialists and experts who serve as opinion-formers in the context of cyberspaces, and whose opinions should necessarily carry more weight than those of persons who randomly release uninformed, naïve standpoints into the digital environment (Joubert 2010:55).

Congregations that wish to remain relevant within the *aetas digitalis* must undergo a shift from being mere providers of the correct information, to becoming mentors, co-travellers and wise guides who assist one another, as well as others, to make sense of this information in order to apply it, to the glory of God and for the benefit of others.

4. THE BENEFITS DERIVED BY CONGREGATIONS FROM THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Congregations cannot escape from the contemporary context and the need to be relevant. The same applies to the digital age. What are the benefits that congregations can derive from using technology? Thumma (2012:6-9) identifies the following advantages:

• *Innovativeness*. The social context is constantly changing and congregations need to keep the communication of their message relevant. By using technology, a congregation is signifying its willingness to accept change, and its openness to innovation.

• *Distinctiveness*. A congregation needs a clear and profound mission and direction in order to have an identity that differs from that of other congregations, thereby positioning itself within a community. The communication of this vision and mission occurs through the use of technology to the advantage of the congregation.

• *Vitality.* Congregations engaging in a greater use of technology "…are more likely to describe their worship service as innovative, joyful, thought-provoking, and inspirational" (Thumma 2012:7). A more extensive use of technology leads to vitality, participation and involvement in a congregation.

• *Congregational growth.* Declining congregations may opt for technology as a last resort, or the use of technology may lead to conflict in congregations, so it is not absolutely guaranteed that the use of technology will lead to congregational growth. Nevertheless, the use of technology may nurture growth; and when it is "…combined with willingness to change, contemporary worship, a clear vision and sense of purpose, and younger members and families, the growth potential of a faith community increases dramatically" (Thumma 2012:9).

> Ministry should be, even must be, a technological hybrid venture in this day and age. But technology is not an end in itself. It has to be employed strategically and intentionally as a component of the overall ministry effort of the congregation (Thumma 2012:9).

Congregations cannot – and should not – escape from engaging and using the digital age, and functioning and ministering creatively within it.

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