

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

BEST PRACTICES SPIRITUAL FORMATION MODELS
IN THE CHRISTIAN HYBRID CHURCH

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Crystal D. Stalling

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2023

BEST PRACTICES SPIRITUAL FORMATION MODELS
IN THE CHRISTIAN HYBRID CHURCH

by Crystal D. Stalling

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

February 17, 2023

APPROVED BY:


Rusty N. Small, Ph.D., Dissertation Supervisor


Stephenie R. Guess, Ed.D., Second Reader

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore best practice spiritual formation models and the perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation in the hybrid church community brick-and-mortar and online church settings for individuals in Christian hybrid churches. The concern was whether the churches effectively implemented best practice models through their traditional brick-and-mortar locations and digital platforms that would cause individuals within the Christian community to experience spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is generally defined as “the holistic work of God in a believer’s life whereby systematic change renders the individual continually closer to the image and actions of Jesus Christ” (Pettit, 2008, p. 19). In the model of social network formation, Centola (2010) suggested, “Many behaviors spread through social contact. As a result, the network structure of who is connected to whom can critically affect the extent to which a behavior diffuses across a population” (para. 1). Interpretative phenomenological analysis was an appropriate qualitative design for collecting data via semistructured interviews, allowing participants to respond to open-ended questions and provide insight in their personal experiences. Nine purposively selected participants provided sufficient data to answer the research questions. The sample comprised Pastors, Elders, Directors of Spiritual Formation and Christian Education, and congregants who had attended the traditional or online church community at least twice weekly for a minimum of 1 year. The video-recorded virtual interviews underwent transcription and upload into Dedoose software for coding and data analysis, including reviewing and examining data from individual interviews. Common themes and patterns emerged from coding. The findings showed that with effective models in place for digital platform interaction, using digital platforms to attend church—including Biblical

teachings, engagement opportunities, prayer, and connecting—could encourage spiritual formation in an individual’s life just as in a local physical church setting.

Keywords: Christian spiritual formation, traditional discipleship, digital discipleship, traditional attendees, online attendees.

Copyright © 2023. Crystal D. Stalling. All rights reserved.

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

Dedication

This research, dissertation, and Doctor of Philosophy in Christian Leadership and Christian Ministry are dedicated to the many people who have supported, prayed, and encouraged me throughout this journey. First, I would like to express my profound gratitude to my heavenly Father, who has provided me with the determination, stamina, intelligence and the grace needed to endure this process. I am extremely grateful to the Lord for redeeming me and calling me to the ministry of the gospel.

Further, I would like to thank all the people who have played a prominent role in my life throughout this academic journey. My research and this dissertation are both dedicated to the memory of my parents, Reverend Colonel L. Jones and First Lady Ludie M. Jones, who took me in as an adopted child, raised me, and instilled in me a love for the Holy scriptures. I also dedicate this research to my biological mother, Staisha Thompson, whom I love deeply. I am especially thankful for my loving husband and partner in ministry, Calvin, who has supported me from start to finish as I spent long hours completing this project. I am eternally grateful for my daughters, Emerald, and Jasmine, and my five grandchildren, Daijah, Gabrielle, Amora, Caleb, and my soon to be born grandson Elijah. You all are dear to my heart; thank you for understanding and giving me my space when needed. We have sacrificed numerous amounts of family time together, but just knowing you were there cheering me on was a source of encouragement that helped me to endure the process. I am blazing the trail for you. Catch me if you can! I'm confident you will; I believe in you. I love you all deeply, and your support throughout this journey was the wind beneath my wings.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the faithful Liberty University professors that have encouraged and inspired me to finish strong. This research work could never have been possible without the guidance and support of my distinguished professors. Particular thanks to Dr. Rusty Small, my dissertation supervisor, who knew all the right words to say when I needed encouragement to push me across the finish line. A special thanks to Dr. Stephenie Guess for your expertise and being such an important member of my dissertation committee. I appreciate you. Thank you Dr. Laura Hamlett Schlater, for your superior editing assistance. With humble gratitude, I acknowledge the Pastors and their congregants who took part in this research study, thank you for your time and participation.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	3
Copyright	5
Dedication	6
Acknowledgments.....	7
List of Tables	13
CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN	14
Introduction.....	14
Background to the Problem	15
Theological Literature.....	15
Theoretical Literature.....	17
Thematic Literature.....	18
Statement of the Problem.....	19
Purpose Statement.....	20
Research Questions.....	21
Assumptions and Delimitations	21
Research Assumptions	21
Delimitations of the Research Design.....	22
Definition of Terms.....	22
Significance of the Study	23
Summary of the Design	25
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	26
Overview.....	26

Theological Framework for the Study	26
Theology of Spiritual Formation	28
Spiritual Formation in the Local Physical Church Setting	49
Spiritual Formation in the Virtual Church Setting.....	49
Perceived Best Practices for Spiritual Formation Models in Virtual Church	50
Virtual Church	51
Summary of Theological Framework	52
Theoretical Framework for the Study	53
Digital Platforms.....	54
Faith and the Digital Culture.....	56
Embracing Virtual Church for Growth	58
Related Literature.....	59
Spiritual Formation in a Physical Church Environment	59
Spiritual Formation in an Online Environment	60
Discipleship and Social Media.....	62
Distance Learning	64
Diversity in the Body of Christ.....	71
Cultural Intelligence.....	72
The New Normal.....	73
Digital Pastors	74
Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature	75
Rationale for Study	75
Gap in the Literature	77

	10
Profile of the Current Study	78
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	80
Research Design Synopsis	80
The Problem.....	80
Purpose Statement.....	81
Research Questions.....	82
Research Design and Methodology	83
Setting	85
Participants.....	86
Role of the Researcher	86
Ethical Considerations	87
Data Collection Methods and Instruments.....	88
Collection Methods.....	88
Instruments and Protocols.....	90
Procedures.....	95
Data Analysis	95
Chapter Summary	100
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS	101
Overview.....	101
Compilation Protocol and Measures	102
Demographic and Sample Data	104
Participant Demographic Data	104
Participant 1T.....	105

Participant 2T	105
Participant 3T	106
Participant 4D	106
Participant 5D	106
Participant 6T	107
Participant 7T	107
Participant 8T	107
Participant 9D	108
Interview Transcript Data Set	108
Data Analysis and Findings	109
Coding Approach	111
Research Question 1	111
Research Question 2	113
Research Question 3	116
Research Question 4	120
Research Question 5	123
Research Question 6	125
Research Question 7	126
Evaluation of the Research Design	127
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS	129
Overview	129
Research Purpose	130
Research Questions	130

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications	131
Research Limitations	140
Further Research	141
Mixed-Methods Approach	141
Explore the Pandemic’s Effects	141
Expand the Research Population Beyond Georgia and Illinois	142
Summary	142
REFERENCES	144
APPENDIX A	155
APPENDIX B	157
APPENDIX C	158
APPENDIX D	159
APPENDIX E	161
APPENDIX F	162
APPENDIX G	164
APPENDIX H	166
APPENDIX I	168
APPENDIX J	169
APPENDIX K	172
APPENDIX L	174

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Demographic Data.....	105
Table 2. Length of Participant Interviews.....	108
Table 3. Synopsis of Interview Questions, Key Concepts, and Themes	109

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

“Go, therefore and make disciples of all the nations.”
—*Matthew 28:19a, NKJV*

Introduction

As the Christian community continues to carry out the Great Commission presented in Matthew 28:19–20, it has increased its presence on digital platforms. The concern is whether the church effectively communicates and implements perceived best practice models that influence spiritual formation in the lives of the attendees of the hybrid church’s brick-and-mortar and online communities. A hybrid church offers spiritual development opportunities in the traditional brick-and-mortar location and through digital platforms. In this study, the researcher occasionally uses *traditional meeting space* to describe the brick-and-mortar location of the church. *Members* and *attendees* are terms used interchangeably to describe the congregants. The researcher will use digital, virtual, and online interchangeably to describe the church’s live stream platforms. The church must fulfill its role to make disciples through various means other than the physical brick-and-mortar location. Fulfilling the Great Commission of Jesus Christ goes further than “to pursue the lost, win them to Christ, and baptize them,” requiring “that we invest our lives into others in such a way that they learn to obey everything Jesus has taught us (Matt. 28:20)” (Earley & Gutierrez, 2010, p. 60).

This study was an exploration of the perceived best practice models that transcend the traditional church culture implemented to influence spiritual formation in the lives of believers and nonbelievers in the traditional and online communities. Engagement opportunities with the Word of God precede spiritual formation in an individual’s life. Paul, the writer of the book of Romans, addressed mind renewal as he spoke to the congregants in Rome, denoting a transformational experience upon their intentionality to renew their minds (Romans 12:2).

According to Earley and Gutierrez (2010), “Memorization was a prime learning technique of the first century. Beginning at age five, Jewish children would memorize large portions of the Torah” (p. 44). In the oral culture of the first century, people had to either “visit the synagogue to read the copies” or memorize The Scriptures; they were not as fortunate as the congregants today to have their own copy (Earley & Gutierrez, 2010, p. 44). As the culture of society shifts, the church’s spiritual formation models must meet its demands and include tools relevant to today. With the increased digital focus of contemporary culture, it is vital to ensure the church stays relevant in reaching its attendees and teaching and making disciples. Technology’s large-scale tools have provided avenues to enlarge the church’s territory to express and reveal itself (Reinke, 2022). Without proper spiritual formation models for traditional and virtual attendees, churches might not communicate effectively in society.

The background of the study appears in the first chapter, along with an analysis of the reasons why the existing research on this population is insufficient. The chapter also provides a statement of the problem, purpose statement, and guiding research questions, followed by assumptions and delimitations, the research design’s limitations, definitions of terms, the study’s significance, and a summary of the study’s design. Also included is an explanation of why researchers should further investigate the perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation models in the Christian hybrid church within the context of the study’s theological and theoretical frameworks.

Background to the Problem

Theological Literature

Due to the increase of technology use in society, churches have begun to use various online platforms and delivery methods, such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom,

and others, to spread the message of the Kingdom of God. Virtual church membership has taken a principal role in church plans for those who choose not to participate in traditional meeting space settings or might not be residents of the city of the church's physical location. Virtual church membership comprises groups of Christians experiencing spiritual growth through a digital church community (Campbell, 2020). Although some churches have chosen to exist in digital space only (Collinson, 2020), the researcher will not address that form of church. The church's mission consists of reaching people worldwide and making disciples (Matthew 28:19–20). Reinke (2022) identified, “God deposited a wealth of innovations and technological potential into creation, not to lead us into temptation, but to reveal what we most love and where we place our greatest trust” (p. 192). An effective model for spiritual formation implementation through various means, such as digital platforms, is critical to a church's effective outreach and discipleship success. There has been a growing increase in Christians' use of digital media to attend church, beginning with the COVID-19 pandemic prohibiting individuals from gathering in traditional meeting spaces (Mat Staver, 2020). According to Lowe and Lowe (2018) “Much of the literature about virtual communities from a theological perspective has centered largely on the practice of distinguishing embodied from virtual as a way of elevating the bodied community over the digital community” (p. 108). Digital church affiliation has become acceptable among Christian churches. Exposure to the gospel of Jesus Christ, whether in a brick-and-mortar or virtual setting, is a platform for a spiritual formation encounter in the attendee's life (Pettit, 2008). In scripture, Paul influences the congregants to encounter God's word to experience a mind renewal, which would prompt transformation in the believer's life (Romans 12:1–2).

A substantial percentage of Christian young adults search the internet to interact with the Christian community, whether in the form of church services or online content (Barna, 2013).

The increase in online church attendance has caused a need to discover how spiritual formation occurs outside the traditional embodied model. Scripture suggests that “the local church” plays a significant role “in facilitating” spiritual formation in the Christian life (Samra, 2008, p. 112). Romans 12:1–2 reveals “that the more...readers [Christians] associate themselves with Christ or define themselves in relation to Christ and with the community of believers in Christ, the more their character will be conformed to the character of Christ” (Samra, 2008, p. 112). This field of study remains under researched in terms of empirical data.

According to Hutchings (2010), “The online strategies developed by churches and pastors in coming years will play a major role in shaping the future of Christian communication” (p. 18). Spiritual formation occurs in a person’s life in the form of good or bad and has not always been a part of church terminology (Willard, 2000). The key is to understand how to best form spiritual formation in a person’s life according to Christ’s methodology. The literature review was an exploration of perceived best practice spiritual formation models implemented in the Christian hybrid church in Georgia and Illinois for the hybrid traditional and virtual church setting by way of live stream online platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Zoom, and others.

Theoretical Literature

Thus far, the chapter has provided a brief review of the theological basis for spiritual formation. It is important to look specifically at spiritual formation in the literature related to the church and its models for discipleship in traditional and online congregants. Chandler (2014) defined Christian spiritual formation as:

An interactive process by which God the Father fashions believers into the image of his Son, Jesus through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit by fostering development in seven primary life dimensions (spirit, emotions, relationships, intellect, vocation, physical health and resource stewardship). (p. 19)

The 2011 Council of Christian Colleges and Universities report presents “spiritual formation as the biblically guided process in which people are being transformed into the likeness of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit with the faith community in order to love and serve God and others” (McRay et al., 2018, p. 271). There is a growing need for new skills in spiritual formation and pastoral care as the global church undergoes profound transformation “(e.g., global awareness, cultural competence, technological proficiency, etc.)” (p. 294). Greenman provided another common definition for spiritual formation as “spirit and human-led process by which individuals and communities mature in relationship with the Christian God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and are changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of God” (McRay et al., 2018, p. 271).

Saines (2017) argued that “deep approaches to learning offer a vision for ecclesial learning that will draw from many and varied context where diversity is increasingly our experience” (abstract). The researcher continued, “Creative but transformative learning that is ‘world involving’ precisely because it is ‘God involving’ and vice versa, can help the church mirror approaches to mission that reflect discipleship and mission in the name of the Triune God” (abstract). Given its theological makeup and mission, the church should produce community of learners. Obtaining an understanding of the church’s educational philosophy and objectives is necessary to inform and shape the manner in which church leaders plan and carry out the processes of instructing and being educated (Saines, 2017).

Thematic Literature

Throughout the course of the development of the Christian church, scholars identified and developed the concept of formation, along with all of its varied imagery (Issler, 2010). Issler

(2010) discussed six themes in through Jesus's Sermon on the Mount specific to spiritual formation:

1. Inner Heart Formation (Matthew 5:20)
2. Missional Participation (Matthew 5:1–16)
3. Scriptural Saturation (Matthew 5:17–20)
4. Seeking/Loving/Depending on God (Above All) Matthew 6:1–34)
5. Relational Attachment as Jesus's Church (Matthew 7:1–12)
6. Two Kingdom Discernment (Matthew 7:13–27) (pp. 370–373)

The Sermon on the Mount indicates the ongoing spiritual formation that should be evident in Christian character. The message that Jesus taught on the Mount reveals how Christians should live.

Statement of the Problem

There has been a dramatic increase in online church participation. The virtual environment has caused an unprecedented outlet for spiritual formation (Campbell, 2020). To date, few scholars have compared the effectiveness of spiritual formation in the virtual environment. Virtual spiritual formation is a new field of study with few established best practices. Most research concerning spiritual formation is specific to a face-to-face audience. There is an increasing concern over how best to deliver material and encourage spiritual development in an online environment. Making disciples is the primary component of the church's mission. The church must remain relevant to its congregants and potential attendees who participate at the brick-and-mortar locations and digital platform settings. Best practice models for spiritual formation will be essential tools for churches to utilize in carrying out the church's mission. Ogundiran (2013) stated that the church's responsibility of "the Great

Commission goes beyond winning some souls for Christ. It involves developing these souls to spiritual maturity, and making them stand out as Christians of godly character and disciple-makers who are poised to transform their world for Christ” (p. 5). Spiritual formation includes “educational endeavors as well as the more intimate and in-depth process of spiritual direction” (Willard, 2000, p. 254). This research focused on perceived best practice models for spiritual formation in the Christian hybrid church in Georgia and Illinois, and the lived experiences of individuals who attend the traditional brick-and-mortar and virtual church settings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore best practice spiritual formation models and the perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation in the hybrid church community brick-and-mortar and online church settings for individuals in Christian hybrid churches. The definition of spiritual formation used in this study was “the holistic work of God in a believer’s life whereby systematic change renders the individual continually closer to the image and actions of Jesus Christ” (Pettit, 2008, p. 19). Centola’s (2010) model of social network formation suggests that “many behaviors spread through social contact. As a result, the network structure of who is connected to whom can critically affect the extent to which a behavior diffuses across a population” (para. 1). Churches need an effective model for hybrid traditional settings and digital platforms for Bible teaching, encouragement, strengthening one another, prayer, and connections with the Christian community. Developing a framework effective in ministry would ensure churches’ relevance in the technology-driven world.

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the perspectives of Christians from the hybrid church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and spiritual formation?

RQ2. What are the perspectives of Christians from the virtual church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the virtual church community and spiritual formation?

RQ3. What are the perceived benefits and weaknesses of attending the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and virtual church community affiliated with Christian churches?

RQ4. What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the hybrid church brick-and-mortar attendees?

RQ5. What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the virtual church attendees?

RQ6. In what ways do churches use technology to continue their discipleship ministry and influence spiritual formation in attendees?

RQ7. Do churches find using technology an effective means of influencing spiritual formation in the attendees?

Assumptions and Delimitations

Assumptions and delimitations help frame the research for the reader. Assumptions serve as a starting point, and delimitations provide boundaries. This study's assumptions and delimitations follow.

Research Assumptions

The following assumptions were foundational to this study and its conclusions:

1. The Christian community participating in digital platforms for the purpose of virtual church, which consists of Biblical teachings, encouragement, strengthening one another, prayer, and connecting with the Christian community, could encourage spiritual formation in an individual's life just as in a local hybrid brick-and-mortar church setting.
2. More people are open to replacing their traditional church attendance with virtual church attendance.
3. Digital platforms pertinent to Christians are good for community interactions and constant fellowship for strengthening and encouragement.
4. Digital platforms are reshaping how people engage in church.
5. Digital church is effective in causing spiritual formation to take place in an attendee's life and is an asset and enhancement to the hybrid church brick-and-mortar agenda for carrying out the church's mission.
6. Few models exist to develop Christians through digital platforms.

Delimitations of the Research Design

This study focused on two Christian hybrid churches in Georgia and Illinois. Males and females 18 years and older, leaders, and senior pastors who attended church twice a week for at least 1 year in a traditional or online church setting were eligible. Individuals who attended less than 1 year, less than twice weekly, or were affiliated with Christian churches outside Georgia and Illinois were excluded.

Definition of Terms

1. *Digital platforms*: Social media sites and delivery methods such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Zoom (Campbell, 2020).
2. *Hybrid church*: A church that offers spiritual development opportunities in the traditional brick-and-mortar location and digital platforms.
3. *Spiritual formation*: "The holistic work of God in a believer's life whereby systematic change renders the individual continually closer to the image and actions of Jesus Christ" (Pettit, 2008, p. 19).
4. *Virtual church community/membership*: Groups of Christians experiencing spiritual growth through digital church (Campbell, 2020).

Significance of the Study

The analysis of the participants' lived experiences led to a better understanding of how churches could be more effective in influencing spiritual formation in the lives of traditional and online settings attendees. In today's society, "The broadening of community through technology affects all aspects of life in the 21st century, including the church" (Thomas, 2014, p. 1; Garner, 2019). Most individuals use and consume digital media and technology on a daily basis, and some more than others. Everyday life is increasingly interwoven with digital media and technology: People's friends and coworkers use it, news media cover it and its global impact, government agencies utilize it to convey information, and more.

Garner (2019) suggested that people around the world are surrounded by media and technology to the point that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to break free. COVID-19 led to the need for a paradigm shift that included a variety of dimensional digital activities in line with society's technology culture (Beyer, 2020; Dunlow, 2021; Earls, 2020; Jun, 2020; King, 2020). Technology will continue to be important to churches as in the transition to a postpandemic society. Church leadership will need to continuously devise new ideas and approaches for effective online spiritual development (Dunlow, 2021). During the peak of the pandemic, digital discipleship enabled many churches to maintain a successful ministry. Although pastors and other leaders were unable to personally interact with their followers, they could relate to congregants on a deeper level than that enabled by merely listening to a sermon online. Digital discipleship initiatives were means to unite individuals, foster feelings of community within the church, and support believers' faith in the face of adversity (Dunlow, 2020; Short & Lemke, 2021). Pastors might use social media technologies to expand their reach into a variety of unexplored areas. It is necessary to be able to communicate personally and share

information with people on a larger, often global scale than would be possible through conventional routes. Social media technology has transformed society, providing a feeling of regeneration and revival (Burkhalter, 2020; Moncrief et al., 2015).

Wyche et al. (2006) studied a group of pastors in regard to their roles and the influence of technology. The majority of pastors responded with a list of responsibilities that included “educating the laity through mechanisms such as Bible study groups, preaching which largely focused on the Sunday service communications, and pastoral care of the laity such as visiting sick parishioners or counseling those in spiritual or personal crisis” (p. 202). This study’s findings could help churches and denominations identify perceived best practices and develop or adjust current models to enhance spiritual formation in individuals attending the hybrid church traditional and online settings. Research shows that “connecting people in meaningful relationships with God and other Christians for spiritual growth is important to leaders in online ministries” (Thomas, 2014, abstract). Therefore, “As the church realizes the potential impact of the Christian message on the relationship between technology and spiritual need, it is necessary to evaluate the role of discipleship in relation to this emerging technological platform” (Thomas, 2014, p. 3).

The practical significance of this study was the achievement of three objectives. As indicated in the central research question, the first objective was to explore the perceived experiences of attendees who attend church at the brick-and-mortar location and through online platforms. The second goal was to gain key insight from those experiences that could help others who engage in traditional and digital church platforms for spiritual growth. The researcher desired to produce results adaptable into a form that motivates churches and a practical guide for producing spiritual formation in the lives of traditional and digital attendees more effectively.

The third objective was to inspire research into other facets of this topic, such as spiritual formation models for churches and experiences of traditional and digital church attendees. The hope is that nontraditional methods will continue to expand to enhance the traditional church setting, and future scholars will examine other aspects of the experience.

Summary of the Design

This study had an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design. IPA “gives researchers the best opportunity to understand the innermost deliberation of the ‘lived’ experiences of research participants” (Alase, 2017, p. 9). The sample size of IPA studies is small (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). In this study, nine qualified participants took part in semistructured, one-on-one interviews over Zoom or StreamYard. Open-ended interview questions allowed the participants to share their experiences without limitations. The interviews were a means to explore how traditional and online church attendees describe their experiences as they relate to spiritual formation. After transcribing the interview recordings, the researcher coded and analyzed the transcripts to identify emerging themes utilizing the Dedoose software application. Dominant themes were isolated, and rich findings were produced. The study’s recommendations add to the literature concerning spiritual formation in the lives of traditional and online congregants.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

“...But be transformed by the renewing of your mind...”
Romans 12:2b, NKJV

Overview

The Christian Church has grown its presence on digital platforms as it continues to carry out the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the ends of the world. Amen. (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Matthew 28:19-20)

The concern was whether the church effectively implements models through digital platforms that will cause individuals within the Christian community to experience spiritual formation on the same level as those in physical attendance at a local church setting. Because many churches operate from a hybrid standpoint, implementing best practice spiritual formation models will enable them to effectively carry out the Great Commission of Jesus Christ and fulfill the purpose and mission of the church in its physical location and digital presence.

This chapter addresses the study’s theological and theoretical frameworks. There is a review of the related literature. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature, a restatement of the gap in the literature, and the details of the current study.

Theological Framework for the Study

The church’s primary mission is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to the lost (Matthew 28:19–20; Stott, 2015). Van Engen (1996, as cited in Verster, 2022) asserted,

[The] mission is understood as the glorious proclamation in word and deed over many borders such as faith and non-faith and church and non-church to lead the people out of darkness to God’s wonderful light in all aspects of their lives for this life and the eternal life with God. (p. 1)

Using traditional methods as a sole means of communication to carry out the mission of Jesus Christ in an increasingly technology-driven society is becoming more challenging. The church faces a problem it needs to fix swiftly to continue its evangelistic efforts without disruption. Churches would do well to increase their visibility in online communities because modern society is more digital, particularly after the pandemic forced the closure of many institutions of worship. The perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation in a physical church setting compared to the perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation in a virtual environment is unknown. Erickson (2001) stated,

The meaning of the term church can best be seen against both the Greek and the Old Testament background. The Greek word which is used in the New Testament for church (*ekkēsia*) referred in classical Greek simply to the assembly of the citizens of a city. The closest Old Testament equivalent (*qāhāl*) is not so much a specification of the members of an assembly as a designation of the act of assembling. In the New Testament, the word church has two senses. On the one hand, it denotes all believers in Christ at all times and places. This universal sense is found in Matthew 16:18, where Jesus promises that he will build his church, and in Paul's image of the church as the Body of Christ (e.g., Eph. 1:22–23; 4:4; 5:23). More frequently, however, "church" refers to a group of believers in a given geographical locality. (p. 340)

The church of God is built "through His Word as He calls individuals into His fellowship. Once a person is incorporated into the church, he belongs to Jesus Christ" (Towns, 2008, p. 628). The church is the people that God has chosen to be his own; just as they belong to him, he also belongs to the church (Erickson, 2001). Scripture also refers to the church as the Body of Christ, as Towns (2008) noted, "The picture of the body is the most used analogy of the church" (p. 636). In scripture, Christ is presented "as the head, and the church as the body. The members of His body are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head (Eph. 4:15)" (p. 636). This image suggests that, like Christ's physical body, the church is now the center of his activities. The global church (Eph. 1:22–23) and local churches both employ this metaphor (1Cor. 12:27; Erickson, 2001).

Tan (2014) asked five experts to contribute to research by providing input on spiritual formation and the local church. Tan commented, “I believe that the role of the local church in spiritual formation in Christ should be the primary or major role or goal of every local church” (as cited in Barton et al., 2014, p. 293). When asked about the purpose of the church, TenElsof stated, “The church is God’s family and exists to lovingly hold, support, and grow each member in their relationship to God for fulfillment of their God-given mission” (as cited in Barton et al., 2014, p. 292). Similarly, Barton et al. (2014) asserted, “The church (capital C) is the Body of Christ on the earth now and it is the primary context in which we grow up in every way into him who is our head (Eph. 4:15)” (p. 294). Chandler (2014) argued that “the local church is foundational in this process from not only a biblical and theological perspective but also a developmental, relational, and missional one” (as cited in Barton et al., 2014, p. 294). According to Wilhoit (2014), “Spiritual formation takes place in community and the community in which it should take place is that of the church” (as cited in Barton et al., 2014, p. 294). If it is to continue helping people grow in their faith in Christ, the local church must rediscover its original purpose. The purpose of God’s family, the church, is to help all individuals mature in their walk with God so they can more effectively carry out the work God has given them to do in the world (Barton et al., 2014; Callam, 2001; Falconer, 2001).

Theology of Spiritual Formation

When the Apostle Paul addressed the church in a letter regarding spiritual gifts, he clarified the Divine purpose of the gifts to the Body of Christ and God’s desire for his people to equip and be equipped. Paul penned in scripture,

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the

knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021, Ephesians 4:11-12)

This passage of scripture teaches the reader that continual growth among the people of God is essential as God's plan is fulfilled on earth. According to Towns (2008), "The church (*ecclesia*) is a group of 'called out ones.' The word *ecclesia* comes from the Greek preposition 'out' and the Greek verb to call" (p. 627). The church:

Has a twofold meaning: (1) they are called out from the world and their previous ungodly life-style, (2) they are called together for a purpose. This purpose is to carry out the Great Commission" of teaching God's word and making disciples. (Towns, 2008, p. 627)

It is the revelation of the Word of God that initiates transformation in the believers. In Romans 12:2, disciples are encouraged to renew their minds on God's word for a transformational experience. Towns (2008) noted, "The church is built upon Divine Revelation" (p. 627). In scripture, as Jesus spoke to those that believed in Him, He promised that continuing in his teachings would put them in a place where the truth of God's word would cause a spiritual formation in their lives" (John 8:31–32). According to Seelig (1993),

The Church, then, is an agency created by God through Christ (Colossians 1:18) and empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:6-8). It consists of persons who have responded to God's love and are seeking to do His will. The Church is persons in a special relationship with each other, bound together in *koinonia*. It is not an end in itself, but an instrument or channel through which God seeks to draw humankind unto Himself. (p. 4)

Spiritual formation is not limited to Christianity, but its practice among other religions (Willard, 2000) was excluded from this study. Willard (2000) identified that there is no "current denomination or local congregation that has a concrete plan and practice for teaching people to do" all that The Scriptures teach, and "very few even regard this as something we should actually try to do, and many think it to be simply impossible" (p. 256). Willard suggested that fully understanding spiritual formation and its process would require a "psychological and theological understanding of the spiritual life" (p. 256).

The Apostle Paul's message to the church was that spiritual formation should be every Christian's experience. Paul urged the Galatians to be like him and not fall into legalism or false teachings. Paul the Apostle addressed the congregants in the churches of Galatia as his children, stating, "My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you" (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021, Galatians 4:19). He desired continual transformation in their lives as they followed the pattern laid before them. Every disciple of Jesus Christ must be willing to experience the journey of spiritual formation (Johnson, 2020). Jesus stated in scripture, "if anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021, Luke 9:23). Johnson (2020) noted, "God has graced the church to facilitate an atmosphere of growth in both individuals and the Body of Christ. ...The church helps structure a...rule for life that helps humanity embrace a pathway of spiritual growth" (p. 10). From a natural perspective, "As the head controls our bodies, so Christ must be given preeminence. The head always gives direction to the body, so Christians must be willing to receive His orders" (Towns, 2008, p. 637). This statement denotes discipleship, as Jesus clarified in sharing with his disciples the expectations of a follower: "Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021, Matthew 16:24–25). According to Balentine (n.d.),

The term "discipleship: covers several different sorts of behavior from biblical to contemporary usage. Whereas in the Bible the term *mathētēs*—derived from *manathanō*, the verb for "teach"—applies principally to student-followers of a teacher, once the Christian tradition exalted the unique role of Jesus as teacher (Matt 23:8), the term began to focus on the tenor of Christians' ethic of following Jesus. In contemporary ethical usage, 'discipleship' often refers to personal submission to Jesus and to self-denying commitment to a way of life congruent with Jesus's lordship. (n.p.)

As shown in Paul's behavior on the road to Damascus, an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ begins with the willingness to surrender to the transformational experience that the

Word of God reveals to the believer (Acts 9:1–9; Kim, 2020). Several factors prompted Paul’s spiritual formation: Jesus being the only one who could change his life, his reverence for the Lord, his gratitude for God’s unconditional love extended toward him, God’s promise of rewards, the new identity he found in Christ, the mandate that gave him clear purpose, and his desire to develop a closer relationship with the Lord (Kim, 2020).

Based on the church’s mandate “to build believers” (Towns, 2008, p. 641), Paul saw it necessary to warn the church at Corinth about building the church. According to Towns (2008),

A church can be weak and immature constructed of wood, hay, and stubble. Or it can be strong and mature composed of gold, silver and precious stones (1 Cor 3:10–15). If it is immature, it reflects impatience, jealousy, strife, division, pride, arrogance and unbecoming behavior. If it is mature, it reflects a growing love, a unity of faith, and a steadfast hope. (p. 641)

A focus on discipling through the message of the kingdom of God enables building the church according to Scripture. Towns (2008) stated, “The Great Commission is fulfilled by finding sheep (making disciples), folding sheep (baptizing), and feeding sheep (teaching)” (p. 643).

When the church fails in its primary duties of teaching and making disciples, it fails to reflect the true reason for its existence.

Several mediums are available through social networking sites and evangelical institutions (Butler, 2013) to enhance the church’s ability to reach beyond the traditional setting to establish community, influence spiritual formation, and fulfill the Great Commission. Reinke (2022) identified that “everything is creation exists to serve a higher purpose than itself” (p. 142). Because people are the creation of God, established in Christ Jesus to carry out the great actions that God planned in advance for us to do, people are His artistry (Ephesians 2:10). Specific to technology and the church, “The same dynamic works in human innovation. The

innovative brilliance of natural man exists for a higher purpose beyond itself, namely for others to use in glorifying God in service to his mission on earth” (Reinke, 2022, p. 142).

Spiritual Formation and the Gospel

Throughout the Bible, scripture states that disciples of Christ who maintain their connection with Jesus, the preaching of the gospel, and their connection to His community experience continual growth (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 193). Acts 4:12–16 provides evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Apostles by way of “signs and wonders”; as a result, the community of God grew. Not only did individuals experience transformation from the spreading of the gospel, but the community underwent spiritual formation. Being properly connected from an ecological standpoint brought positive results: increasing the number of followers and transforming them to God’s people.

Failing to maintain a connection with Christ through the Gospel and His community has negative results. Paul addressed the church in his letters when the people of God began to disconnect from Christ and His community at the church in Galatia and started to believe teachings other than those of Christ, for which Paul laid the foundation. In disconnecting from the Gospel, the believers regressed in their faith and relationship with God (Galatians 3:1–4, 5:7–8). It is crucial believers to stay connected to what John reveals as the “True Vine” (John, Chapter 15). This connection brings spiritual formation, enabling believers to produce the God kind of fruit: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law” (Galatians 5:22–23, New King James Version). As believers undergo spiritual transformation, they are no longer under the power or the curse of sin that comes with condemnation. Spiritual formation brings freedom.

Spiritual Formation: The Trinity, the Image of God, and Salvation

Spiritual formation took place in the saint's life at the birth of the early church.

According to Acts 2:1–4, the believers in the upper room experienced a spiritual transformation, as they all received the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues. This was a corporate experience in which the lives of the upper room community were transformed (Lowe & Lowe, 2018).

The Trinity. The trinity presents a relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The trinity provides a pattern for the Body of Christ that follows: Being created in His image to represent Christ in the earthly realm and bring glory and honor to His name. Genesis 1:1–2 and John 1:1,14 showed that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit had worked together in harmony from the beginning of time.

According to Pettit (2008):

As Klaus Issler puts it, Christian spirituality involves a deepening trust and friendship with God for those who are in Christ Jesus. ...It is an ever-growing, experientially dynamic relationship with our Trinitarian God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—through the agency of the indwelling Spirit of God. (p. 38)

This deep relationship between God and His people is a true reflection of the Trinitarian God in which believers are created to reflect His image.

The Image of God. Mankind was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Pettit (2008) stated, “Also, we are inherently relational because we are made in the image of a relational God. Thus the rugged individualism and ‘long-ranger Christianity’ so prevalent in America is opposed to God’s intention” (p. 39). Scripture shows that a part of God’s plan was for mankind to have relationships with each other as a community as they experience relationships with Him as the Creator (Pettit, 2008, p. 39). Despite the creation of man to have fellowship with the Creator, Genesis 3:1–24 shows that an interruption in human progress took place when

mankind disobeyed God. As a result of the fall in the Garden of Eden, man is now in need of spiritual formation (Pettit, 2008). It is through spiritual formation that the believer experiences restoration. Scripture 2, Corinthians 2:17 reads, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new” (New King James Version). A “new creation” denotes that the believer is no longer held accountable for past sin and disobedience, instead reconciled to God by way of the blood of Jesus.

Salvation. Salvation is relational and involves fellowship, connecting, an interaction that produces growth (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 138). God invites those who accept Him to enter into a covenant relationship with Him (Pettit, 2008). John 1:12 states, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name” (New King James Version). According to Lowe and Lowe (2018), “Our union with Christ provides a vital and necessary connection to all the required spiritual nutrients Christians need to ‘grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ’ (2 Pet 3:18)” (p. 140). Lowe and Lowe (2018) stated,

The importance of reciprocal relationships can also be found in the Old Testament. Daniel Elazar argues that “in all of its forms, the key focus of covenant is on relationship.” Every biblical covenant creates a covenant obligation “designed to reinforce mutuality” between the covenant partners. Jacob Milgrom gets more specific when he notes that “the reciprocal relationship between God and Israel is one of the hallmarks of the covenant” summarized in Deuteronomy 26:17–18. ...Nelson Glueck wrote the definitive study on the Hebrew covenant word *hesed* and offers valuable insights that enhance our understanding of reciprocity in biblical covenants. (pp. 176–177)

Reciprocal interaction among God’s people also appears in the New Testament. Lowe and Lowe asserted, “Paul, along with other New Testament writers, employs the reciprocal pronoun *allēlōn* to describe how connected believers relate to each other as members of the new covenant community formed through the blood of Christ (Lk 22:20)” (p. 179).

Spiritual Formation and Worship

When it comes to worship, one must consider the heart of the person. According to scripture in Matthew 5:8, “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God” (New King James Version). It is worshiping God from a pure heart than will bring spiritual formation into a person’s life. According to Lowe and Lowe (2018) “Spiritual formation...is about how to actually go about engaging with the presence of God, walking with him day by day, moment by moment, in worship, prayer, obedience, witness, spiritual disciplines, or whatever” (p. 64).

Spiritual Formation and the Community

It is evident in scripture that God’s body (church) is consistent of not just one individual but many members with a variety of gifts (1 Cor. 12). If Christ body (church) is to carry out His will here on earth by way of Matt. 28:19–20, the church must operate as a community, connecting individuals to Christ as well as one another and experiencing constant growth and fruitfulness. According to Smith (2014), “This is Paul’s vision for the church and thus for each congregation—evident throughout his writing, but particularly in Ephesians 4. It is clear: the expectation is that each congregation will be a maturing community” (p. 182).

Connections. Matthew 12:23 reveals, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand” (New King James Version). According to scripture, when Christians fail to connect to Christ as the True Vine and to other believers in Christ, their division will cause desolation. Desolation as a result of disconnecting from Christ is sin and puts one back under the power of the law of condemnation. The scripture also reveals that individuals not connected to Christ will not stand, thus being unproductive or unfruitful. According to John 15, the God kind of fruit can only be produced by abiding in His [Christ’s] love. This scripture reveals that connecting to Christ and His

community is an essential part of spiritual formation. Lowe and Lowe (2018) stated, “The Christian’s connection to Jesus (union with Christ) infuses the believer with Christ’s holiness and makes believers spiritually contagious” (p. 193). Christians are to be the salt that influence other to taste the goodness of the Lord. The people of God should be the flavor enticing nonbelievers to want to be a part of His glorious kingdom. Lowe and Lowe (2018) asserted,

As the Spirit of God works in and through the connections and interactions that comprise the spiritual ecology of the church, the holiness that characterizes individual believers and the Body of Christ as a whole spreads as a contagious spiritual influence from one member to another. (p. 195)

In Matthew 5:13, Jesus told the multitudes, “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing” (New King James Version). Spiritual formation through the Gospel of Jesus Christ empowers believers to impact the lives of other believers and nonbelievers. According to Lowe and Lowe (2018), “Connection terminology is the language of ecology that emphasizes the way which different components of an ecosystem organically connect to each other to form a whole of interconnecting organisms that share nutrients and resources” (p. 138).

The early church experienced tremendous growth as a result of connecting as a community in the Word of God, prayer, and fellowship with one another (Acts 2:42). In John 15, Jesus’s teaching shows the benefits of connecting and the penalty of failing to bear fruit. It is Christ’s desire for the Body of Christ to be fruitful in producing good works. According to Lowe and Lowe (2018) “The reciprocal nature of the connections and interactions between vine and branches conveys the spiritual nutrients needed for the branches to produce fruit” (p. 140).

Process of Christian Formation

Spiritual formation is an ongoing process in the life of a Christian (Pettit, 2008). There are a variety of ingredients that facilitate and promote the spiritual growth of the believer.

Believers who are void of these ingredients will experience slow or no spiritual growth and, as a result, will be unable to please God (Romans 8:7–16). The following subsections present the necessary ingredients that facilitate and promote the spiritual growth of Christians.

A Surrender of the Heart. Spiritual formation starts internally deep within the heart. David understood this when he penned in Psalm 51:10, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (New King James Version). Only God can cause a spiritual formation to take place in the believer to the point that they become a new creation according to 2 Corinthians 5:17. Pettit (2008) stated, “Spiritual formation involves attention to both inside (‘heart work’) and outside (‘mouth work’)” (p.126). Being in touch and aware of one’s inner emotions allows the individual to become aware of areas that need to be surrendered to God, facilitating spiritual growth.

According to Pettit (2008), “There is a great need for character development because most people haven’t developed adequate character for the tasks they faced. ...Stories exist of people who were unable to stand the pressure of leadership. ...That pressure revealed existing flaws” (p. 158). Believers must be exposed to an environment that encourages growth. Some environments are not as pleasant as others, yet it is in these surroundings that God does His perfect work in shaping and molding the believer (Pettit, 2008).

James said, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (James 1:1–4, New King James Version). Pettit (2008) asserted, “Most psychologist would agree that ‘people develop character over time, primarily through socialization.’ If this is true, we possess a desperate need for true community in which we can grow and be nurtured” (p. 159). According to scripture in Ephesians 4:11–15, it is

through one's spiritual connection to the Body of Christ that facilitates and promote spiritual growth. God has placed various gifts (apostles, prophets, evangelist, pastors, teachers) in the Body of Christ to equip and edify the saints (Pettit, 2008). Pettit asserted, "Such mature character is necessary to the creation of godly leaders who transforms lives, families, communities, societies, and yes, even the world" (p. 161).

Receive and Reciprocate the Love of Christ. Believers are empowered to receive the love of Christ and share it with others they come in contact with (Galatians 5:13). To effectively walk and share Christ's love, believers must relinquish being self-centered and view others as Christ sees them (Pettit, 2008). In Mark 12:31, Jesus stated, "And the second, like it, is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (New King James Version). The same grace believers receive from Jesus Christ is the same grace they must extend to others. It is through this type of love gesture that one experience spiritual growth. 1 John 4:8 states, "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (New King James Version). Abiding in the Heavenly Father and His love facilitates spiritual growth in the believer.

In John 15:7, Jesus stated, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (New King James Version). Fruit denotes spiritual growth and maturity in Christ. Learning to love others as Christ so loved provides continual opportunity for growth in the believer's life (Pettit, 2008). It is not enough just to love God; loving and maintaining a true relationship with God also requires loving one's neighbor. According to Smith (2014), "The Scriptures could not be more clear: we are called to love God and neighbor; this is the human vocation" (p. 127). Pettit (2008) noted, "The ability to love others well is possible only when we 'grasp how wide...long...high and deep is the love of Christ.' It turns out that the power to love is the power of God in us" (p. 173). The love of Christ

in believers should cause them to desire what is good and beneficial for others. According to 1 John 3:16-18, the love of Christ that believers received as children of God should be love they outwardly express in their everyday actions toward and interactions with others. According to Smith (2014), “As Christians..., we eagerly seek the way of truth so that we are marked by wisdom and understanding. But the pursuit of wisdom, learning and understanding has meaning only if it is governed by the law of love” (p. 128).

Have a Secure Sense of Identity. It is imperative that believers know who and whose they are in Christ. According to Pettit (2008), “The only way we, as God’s men and women, can provide the leadership needed in the days ahead is if our sense of personal identify is firmly grounded in our relationship to Jesus Christ” (p. 194). God will allow His children to go through various trials and suffering as He did Paul (Acts 9:20–30). In turn, these hardships are what bring children of God to a place to where they learn who they are in Christ (Pettit, 2008).

Pettit (2008) explained that “identity...includes our temperament and our gifts, our strengths, weaknesses, and character flaws. Identity includes who we have become as a result of the life experiences God has taken us through. These experiences...have shaped and molded us” (p. 183). When believers become secure in their identity in Christ, they have reached a place where they can put others or ministry as a priority. Matthew 6 encourages the believer not to worry about daily cares but to put God’s work first. Coming to a true place of identity in Christ promotes growth and maturity in believers, empowering them to live the sacrificial life discussed in Romans 12:1–2 and freeing them to walk in the spirit (Galatians 5:16–25). A clear picture of Jesus being secure in His identity in the Heavenly Father appears in John 13:1–20, as Jesus began to wash his disciples’ feet. Having a different perspective of what Jesus was doing, Peter felt he was not worthy of this act of kindness. Secure in God and His purpose, Jesus exercised

the freedom to be who God had called and purposed Him to be in the earth. Believers must take on the same identity as Christ by serving one another (Howell, 2003).

Pray and Discern Daily. Jesus told his disciples in Luke 18:1, “Men always ought to pray and not lose heart” (New King James Version). This scripture says to believers that, without God, they lack the ability to do what needs to be done; dependences on God is vital and necessary. Pettit (2008) noted, “The problem is that we move too fast in life doing our own thing to slow down to dance the slow dance of discernment with God” (p. 209). It is through prayer that believers communicate with God and exercise the authority that God has given His people. Prayer is essential to the believer’s ability to discern (Pettit, 2008).

God wanted believers to know that, through prayer, they would gain strength to endure. Jesus had a consistent prayer life, and in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul encouraged the Church of the Thessalonians to always pray (Copeland, 2001). Prayer is an essential component of a Christian’s life. Prayer brought victory to Paul and Silas when they were in jail (Acts 16:25–34). As a result of the church praying, Peter experienced God’s power in a supernatural way (Acts 12:5–19). Pettit (2008) suggested, “Your prayers should be for Him to create His character and His wisdom in you. When your actions, thoughts, and desires reflect God’s priorities, then you are in a better place to discern well” (p. 209).

Fast. Jesus revealed to his disciples in Mark 9:23 that there are some things in life (trials, trouble, hardship, sickness) that will require prayer and fasting. It is revealed through the Prophet Isaiah that fasting causes deliverance in the believer’s life (Isaiah 58:6–9). Jesus, the believer’s greatest example who provided a pattern to follow, fasted 40 days and had to endure temptation when he was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. Believers need the power to endure various forms of temptation and achieve breakthroughs in the weak areas of their lives that they

battle daily (Lindsay, 1994). In the Old Testament, Daniel fasted to put himself in a posture to hear from God (Daniel 10:2–3). According to Lindsay (1994), “Esther recognized that her most powerful weapon in a critical hour was to enter into a fast” (p. 29). It was through prayer and fasting that Esther discerned how to handle the king.

Grasp the Word of God and Walk by Faith and not by Sight. In Romans 10:17, the scripture reveals, Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (New King James Version). Believers must put themselves in a position to receive the Word of God. Hearing the preached word from a called-out believer is one of the ways for Christians receive the Word of God. According to Pettit 2008, “It is a ministry that God has used down through the centuries as an instrument of the Holy Spirit to enable people to live, act, and think as Jesus himself would” (p. 247). Experiencing transformation through the Word is what gives Christians the courage to walk by faith and not based on what they can see with the natural eye. The writer reveals in Hebrews 11:6, “Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (New King James Version). In Hebrews 10:38, the writer lets believers know they have to live by faith. Faith is a process of spiritual formation. It is by constant digestion of the Word of God that one’s capacity for faith increases.

Hinson (2003) asserted,

Faith is so important that it is mentioned over three hundred times in the Bible. The first reference to believing in God is found in the story of Abraham... (Genesis 15:6). This particular step of faith is so important that the above statement is repeated three more times in the New Testament (Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). The power of our faith rests in the object of our faith. At the foundation of all love is a belief in the object that is loved. If I do not believe in a person, I cannot love him. The same is true in our relationship with God. Without faith it is impossible for us to know Him or love Him. Faith is the starting point in our spiritual journey. (pp. 17–18)

In Romans 10:9 Paul told believers that if they would confess to the Lord Jesus in the power of the Resurrection, they would experience salvation. This confession must take place in thought, word, and deed. John tells the reader, “And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 John 4:4, New King James Version). Believers make confessions daily; the problem lies when the confessions that believers speak are in contrast with the Word that God has spoken. Christians should not let their confessions be controlled by past or current situations, trials, or problems. It is through spiritual formation that a believer will begin to utilize God’s Word in every situation.

Theology, Psychology, and Spiritual Formation

Spiritual theology provides understanding of how the Holy Spirit works in individuals’ lives (Crisp et al, 2019). Many feel that reading the Bible is sufficient to influence spiritual formation in their lives. Crisp et al. (2019) suggested that “training in spiritual theology would greatly assist pastors, theologians, Christian psychologists, and believers in understanding the process of growth in the Spirit” (p. 22). The study of “spiritual theology” is concerned with whether there is any “extrabiblical wisdom” that can be unearthed, which would be beneficial for comprehending the process of spiritual development and taking part in it.

According to the teachings of the Christian faith, the purpose of human life and, by extension, the purpose of all work, is a collection of values having to do with God’s love and loving one’s neighbor as well as being transformed into the image of Christ. The goal of all of Christians’ teaching is the love of God and neighbor and the transformation of the listener into the image of Christ through the work of the Spirit. Consequently, it is clear that pastors and theologians should perform spiritual theology in the most general sense, bringing out the spiritual implications and application of theology.

By bridging the gap between the theological substance of faith and the practice of faith and providing a theory of the process of development, spiritual theology serves the church as well as the fields of theology and psychology. The adoption of spiritual theology by Christian leaders would be beneficial for a number of reasons, the most important of which is the provision of a “realistic and meaningful understanding of the process of spiritual growth” (Crisp et al., 2019, pp. 35–36) in a fully integrative manner. This process culminates in achieving the goal of conforming of the believer to the likeness of Christ within the context of a community of holy people.

In the 1950s and 1970s, evangelicals started investigating whether psychology and theology could be combined “as a response to the deconstructive and secularizing influences of modernity” and as a means of integrating “Christian communities” into broader therapeutic approaches (Sandage & Brown, 2018, p. 30). This occurred for two reasons: to combat the negative effects of modernity and to integrate Christian communities into broader therapeutic approaches. Psychologists and Christians have long struggled with the question of whether Christian principles and methodologies need explicit recognition or application in the psychotherapeutic process as well as how spiritual formation and psychological development intersect (Crisp et al., 2019).

Spiritual Formation and Faith

The Scripture teaches its reader that faith necessary to please the Heavenly Father (Hebrews 11:6). Having faith is a prerequisite to Christian spiritual formation. The concept of faith means that one believes the gospel is true and is living according to it (Maddix, et al., 2020). Maddix et al. (2020) asserted, “A common idea of faith used throughout the centuries has been a threefold faith centered on Christ through the mind, the will, and action” (p. 12). The

Scriptures reveal the necessity of faith. To please Him, individuals must believe that God exists and that He rewards those who are sincere (Hebrews 11:6). Hearing the news of the coming of the Kingdom of God is essential for anyone who wishes to gain faith. Therefore, faith is developed and nurtured by hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17) and the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Bible also teaches that the messenger is just as crucial as the message itself. As a result, no one can hear unless the message is communicated by those who have been selected by God (Romans 10:14–15). Kruse (2012) noted, “Genuine faith involves both confession with the mouth and belief in the heart. . . . These are not separate activities but two aspects of the one expression of faith in Jesus as Lord” (p. 410). Individuals do not have genuine faith if they believe in their hearts but do not confess with their tongues. It would be hypocritical to make a confession with one’s words while harboring doubts in one’s heart (Kruse, 2012). Maddix et al., (2020) noted,

Based on the use of terms related to faith in The Scriptures, a relationship between these terms begins to emerge when focusing on the subject of faith formation. Generally speaking, the faith (*pistis*) is believed (*pisteuō*) and produces belief/faith (*pistis*) that grows into the characteristic in life recognized as faithfulness (*pistos*). (pp. 14–15)

Waggoner (2008) wrote, “The church is called, directed, gifted, and empowered to make disciples. . . . What does the Bible mean when it uses the term disciple? The Latin term *discipulus*, derived from its verb form *discere*, means to learn” (p. 12). The author identified a disciple as:

A follower of Jesus Christ. It implies obedience. It implies a lifestyle that demonstrates spiritual formation in terms of character and service. It means to be like Christ. The word *discipleship* refers to a deliberate process of moving Christians forward spiritually. Paul summarizes this process in his letter to the Colossian church. (p. 14)

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he stated, “We proclaim Him, warning, and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. I labor for this, strive with His strength that works powerfully in me (Col. 1:28–29)” (Waggoner, 2008, p. 14).

Scripture is clear that making disciples starts with proclaiming the good news. Included in this proclamation is the act of proclaiming the gospel to those who are lost. Christians impart the knowledge and the Word of God to those who turn away from their sins and believe; in doing so, Christians seek to mature into a Christlike character. The chances of audience members experiencing spiritual development in their lives increases in proportion to the amount of time they spend listening to the Word of God (Wagganer, 2008).

Distance Learning in the Early Church and Spiritual Formation

Throughout the history of the Christian Church, Christians have attended to the process of spiritual development (Wilhoit, 2020). Because of its recent rise in popularity, the phrase “spiritual growth” has appeared in a range of Christian contexts (Teo, 2017). The term could have a variety of implications depending on the context in which it is used. Although the history of the phrase can be traced to Roman Catholicism, it communicates a completely different sense when used in the context of Christian Evangelicalism.

The focus on spiritual growth is not new. People undergo a metamorphosis throughout the book of Acts as a direct consequence of participating in various activities, such as “worship, service, prayer, mentoring, conflicts, and teaching and preaching” (Wilhoit & Howard, 2020, p. 5). As a consequence of their growth, they became known for their “countercultural love and compassion” (Wilhoit & Howard, 2020, p. 5), which enabled them to be fearless ambassadors for Christ in an environment that was hostile to their religion (Foster, 1998; Green, 2002; Scorgie, 2011). Due to their work spreading the Word of God, they received recognition for these qualities.

During the third and fourth centuries, elders in the desert crafted highly intricate patterns of formation as a means of communicating the gospel’s radical appeal (Burton-Christie, 1993;

Dysinger, 2005; Nouwen, 1991; Wilhoit & Howard, 2020). These patterns developed over time, allowing individuals to convey the stark beauty of the desert through the use of these patterns. Benedict of Nursia was active in establishing a comprehensive rule centered on the process of formation throughout the sixth century. The purpose of writing this rule was to make it possible for monasteries to fulfill their roles as “a school for the service of the Lord” (Fry, 1982; Wilhoit & Howard, 2020).

Centuries later, Martin Luther promoted an approach to the interpretation of Scripture (prayer and meditation on the text in the context of the problem of man’s existence) that modified monastic practice for any serious believer. This method was known as the “monastic adaptation,” and this strategy was often referred to as the “monastic technique” (Wilhoit & Howard, 2020, p.5; see also Pelikan et al., 1999). John Wesley played a pivotal role in the establishment of a wide range of venues in which smaller groups might support and encourage one another in their endeavors to live holier lives (Henderson, 2016; Watson, 2002; Wilhoit & Howard, 2020).

In the epistle writings, Paul, on several occasions, sent messages to the congregants by letter to communicate the will of God for the Lord’s church by encouraging, correcting, and equipping them (Philippians 1:1–6; Colossians 1:1–29). Although the Apostle Paul had never visited the church in Rome, he understood that spiritual formation could occur in a person’s life, even if delivered through distant methods (Forrest & Lamport, 2013). Forrest and Lamport (2013) suggested, “His relationship with the recipients is analogically similar to the relationship between professor and student in an online educational paradigm” (Abstract), which is comparable to the virtual category format utilized to communicate the message of the kingdom of God for spiritual development. Spiritual formation is of such importance for the Body of

Christ's maturity that God had the Apostle Paul instruct the church to reflect Him in their behavior. In his letter to the church, Paul urged, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021, Philippians 2:5). As the church embraced technology and the digital world to teach the Word of God, a true reflection of Paul's mindset and spreading the Gospel remained among and operating through Christ's believers. In a continual effort to carry out the Great Commission as a church, Dunlow conducted a study entitled "Technology and Ministry During a Time of Pandemic," "discover[ing] that most churches engaged in digital discipleship to facilitate spiritual growth and community" during the pandemic (Short & Lemke, 2021, p. 442).

The Great Commission

The Great Commission is the evangelical mission given to the followers of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8; Luke 24:26–49; Mark 16:15–16; Matthew 28:18–20). Evangelism is just the beginning of the Commission. Christians need to be instructed on the New Testament teachings of Christ's precepts. Becoming more Christlike is the ultimate goal of discipleship, and this is achieved by consistent exposure to and subjection to the Word of God (MacDonald, 1995).

Effective Communication Methods

During the pandemic, churches began implementing new communication measures with their members through digital platforms (Penna, 2020). Effective communication channels are vital to the church's relationship with its members. Many people preferred to attend church or Bible study through the Zoom digital platform over social media options because it gave them more of the sense of community they would get from physical attendance (Penna, 2020). Nunez (2014) found that "participants referred to the community and their involvement within the community as important elements to their spiritual formation experiences" (p. 119). However,

digital platforms have been challenging for church members, especially those not accustomed to utilizing these platforms for online worship services and Bible studies (Penna, 2020). Butler (2013) asserted, “By nature, individuals are social beings. As a result, knowledge and growth come through interaction within a social context and that which is gleaned is dependent upon both the quantity and quality of information which is given” (p. 22). Penna (2020) found that “changes in channel usage had varying effects on the communication of churches at large, ...online church communication has to be done carefully due to the highly personal nature of spirituality” (p. 60).

Communication was critical to the Apostle Paul. He asked the church to pray that he would boldly declare the revelation of the kingdom of God so that, through salvation, others could experience spiritual formation in their lives (Ephesians 6:19). Proverbs 18:21 informs the reader that “death and life are in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit” (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021). Nunez (2014) noted, “The love of God is explained by the idea of salvation in which God sent his son Jesus Christ to die for the sins of humanity. When a person accepts salvation...they receive a life new and changed” (p. 52). Societal shifts necessitate flexibility within the Christian community and its methods of communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ (Doody, 2010). The church’s success in today’s society will require a change of transmission from solely “traditional church sermons to include online church communities, as well” (p. 39). With a new mode of communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ, the church must develop a “theology of change...to reach a generation that will no longer accept the old methods” (p. 40).

Spiritual Formation in the Local Physical Church Setting

Customarily, the church implements models for spiritual formation in the local physical church setting. Many people are becoming more acclimated to experiencing church from the comfort of their homes or on the go from their vehicles, in the airport, or from wherever they are at the time. Despite these individuals' preferences for convenient, less site-bound services, spiritual formation models for the traditional church setting remain relevant and must not disappear due to the popularity of digital spaces that have infiltrated the traditional style of worship. Perhaps digital church is a learning experience that is pushing the church beyond its traditional four walls and styles of worship. The Epistle to Hebrews 10:23–27 encourages the congregants to stand fast in their faith, stating,

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021)

Harris (2020) reported, “There has been a decline in attendance at mainline Christian churches, documented in recent years, leading to a loss of spiritual formation” (p. 16). Conversely, Sunday school models implemented in the African American Baptist Churches of the GBSC of NC showed an increase in spiritual formation in the lives of Sunday school attendees (Harris, 2020).

Spiritual Formation in the Virtual Church Setting

The scriptures are apparent in their messages to the disciples of Jesus Christ. Hagenbuch (2020) noted, “Social media technology, which may present itself as a new package to some, is actually not new since Christians have been called to share salvation’s message to all nations” (p. 115). “New media” has affected the Christian “theological and religious perspective” pertaining to “one another...[and] also with our heavenly Father” (Baker, 2017, *Who’s Shaping Whom?*).

Among the Christian community, “Overenthusiasm to the latest digital up-sync comes at a price, often with little to no reflection on conforming consequences” (Baker, 2017, *Conforming & Transforming*). Paul warned the church about allowing “cultural and individual-shaping in various ways” (*Conforming & Transforming*). He urged, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021, Romans 12:2). The internet has provided Christians with an avenue for more community relationships and involvement often previously absent (Doody, 2010). Doody (2010) noted, “The Pew Research Group...reported that religious online communities make a significant contribution to the church” (p. 19). Virtual church settings now offer “enhanced features such as teachings and secure chat rooms for church members and students to help them connect with others on a regular basis” (p. 19).

Perceived Best Practices for Spiritual Formation Models in Virtual Church

Today’s technology platforms have enhanced the church’s outreach in many ways. Hagenbuch (2020) noted, “Theology should push technology forward toward a safer, inclusive, healthier world. Rather than being reactive to technology, theology should be proactive with technology. As a vehicle can be beneficial...with the goal of sharing Christ’s love intentionally” (p. 61). According to Doody (2010), “Community is not simply achieved by employing technology. ...The heart of the believer totally committed to proclaiming the Gospel must be added to the technological equation to reach a true Biblical community” (p. 17). An influential online community is one that is family-focused and creative in its branding identity, offering relative and “substantive content” and “a free flow of information” (p. 18). Further, Grayson (2017) stated, “The impact of technology on kingdom building has perpetuated the need for the

digital pastor” (p. 47). Digital leadership would be beneficial, consisting of “the removal of traditional leadership hierarchy and the development of a more open flow of information and leadership” (p. 48). Gould (2013, as cited in Grayson, 2017) found that:

When used wisely and well, social media can help the church:

- Build Christian community within and beyond church-the-building
- Celebrate the sacraments
- Deliver time-sensitive news and information
- Educate newcomers about your church
- Enhance the website’s functionality as a local, regional, or national presence
- Gather feedback from congregants
- Minister to the homebound and those unable to attend
- Organize, publicize, and invite people to events
- Preach the Gospel
- Model Gospel values and Christian love
- Provide a safe, secure place to gather for online fellowship
- Share stories to deepen faith and inspire action. (pp. 57–58)

When utilized, digital platforms can be an asset to churches (Grayson, 2017). Patterns traditionally used by the church could be less attractive to people due to digital community opportunities. Research shows “an increase in the usage of social media by pastors” (p. 60). Churches focused on maximizing digital platforms while providing traditional forms of worship could have the most participation and experience a higher increase in membership.

Virtual Church

Technology has impacted the lives of everyone in contemporary society (Mullins, 2011). Technology advancement could “provide the church with unique opportunities to minister outside both the physical and methodological walls of the church” (Mullins, 2011, p. 1). With technology readily assessable from tablets, mobile phones, and desktop computers, the church should determine how best to “use this medium to connect [people] to the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (p. 1). People have various reasons for accessing churches online; as a result, the church has begun to take on the responsibility of being accountable to online viewers. According to

Paul, it is the church's responsibility "to equip God's people for acts of services" (p. 7). In Ephesians 4:11–16, Paul stated to the congregants,

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head Christ 6 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021)

Scripture presented gospel preaching as a method of equipping congregants to impart the necessity of and acknowledge that God has anointed individuals to prepare the people of God for service (Romans 10:14, 17). Although some feel there is no opportunity for personal connections and development spiritually, research shows that churches implementing strategies to cater to the digital community produce effective connections and spiritual formation in their viewers' lives (Mullins, 2011).

Summary of Theological Framework

Exploring the church's role in spiritual growth will require identifying best practices of spiritual formation models to enhance implementation in physical locations and digital communities. Traditional worship methods associated with physical locations would serve as relevant models only if they contained new communication models that influenced online communities' development and spiritual growth. In today's society, new media plays a significant role in how theology and religious communities interact with one another and Jesus Christ (Baker, 2017). God's Trinitarian work in the believer's life comes from the church carrying out the universal mission of the church in its fullness (Matthew 28: 19–20).

The more exposure that others get to the Word of God, the greater the chances of churches' local and global influence. The church has experienced a decline in attendance at its physical location (Harris, 2020). Consequently, online communities now significantly influence churches (Doody, 2010). Churches that maximize the use of digital platforms by implementing spiritual formation models conducive to the traditional physical and virtual settings would be most effective in carrying out the Great Commission of the church.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

Centola (2010) found that digital platforms designed for social networking that provide users with more interactive tools and opportunities will have an advantage over those with fewer opportunities. Centola concluded, "Many behaviors spread through social contact. ...As a result, the network structure of who is connected to whom can critically affect the extent to which a behavior diffuses across a population" (para. 1). Centola provided a structure for describing phenomena, asserting,

There are two competing hypotheses about how network structure affects diffusion. The "strength of weak ties" hypothesis predicts that networks with many "long ties" (e.g., "small-world" topologies) will spread a social behavior farther and more quickly than a network in which ties are highly clustered. ...This hypothesis treats the spread of behavior as a simple contagion, such as disease or information: A single contact with an "infected" individual is usually sufficient to transmit the behavior. ...The power of long ties is that they reduce the redundancy of the diffusion process by connecting people whose friends do not know each other, thereby allowing a behavior to rapidly spread to other areas of the network. ...The ideal case for this lack of redundancy is a "random" network, in which, in expectation for a large population, each of an individual's ties reaches out to different neighborhoods. ...The other hypothesis predicts that because clustered networks have more redundant ties which provide social reinforcement for adoption, they will better promote the diffusion of behaviors across large populations. (para. 1)

This section comprises three subsections: Digital Platforms, Faith and the Digital Culture, and Embracing Virtual Church for Growth. Larajo et al. (2014) found that social networking sites and individuals' behavior are connected. Social media is such a source of influence that "it

is important [to] understand that social media is not just a virtual space disconnected from life” (Lewis, 2018, *Social Media: Sharing and Connection*, para. 1). Lowe and Lowe (2018) stated “Social network analysis suggests that people connected in a social network influence one another in a variety of ways” (p. 127). Community-building occurs through various interaction opportunities that influence spiritual formation (Butler, 2013). Christakis and Fowler found that “like a disease, various beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and norms can spread through social networks. Evidence from their work and others indicates that alcoholism, happiness, depression, suicides, and even obesity spread from one person to another through social connections” (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 128). Lowe and Lowe asserted “Our place within social networks and the relationships we develop with others lends itself to mutual, whole-person development. Reciprocity in relationships doesn’t simply enhance social development; it enhances physical, psychological, spiritual, emotional, and moral development as well” (pp. 132–133). In a case study, Butler (2013) found that an instructor’s relationship with students attending evangelical institutions utilizing online learning platforms had a positive experience prompted by constant engagement, which contributed to their spiritual growth. By implication, churches that develop spiritual formation models requiring congregation interaction in traditional and virtual settings could significantly and effectively impact ministry.

Digital Platforms

The discipleship model in John 15:1–16 addresses the need to foster relationships within the Body of Christ and with the Heavenly Father while doing the work of the ministry to meet individual and church needs (Shirley, 2017). Online church communities utilized as a supplement to church activities could enhance and foster relationships among the Body of Christ (Waters & Tindall, 2010). Digital platforms provide a means by which churches can establish

and influence relationships with those inside and outside the church. This model is apparent in Scripture, where Jesus's discipleship model "included The Scripture (Matt 13:13–15; 24:37–40), his authoritative teaching (Matt 5:21–48), his miracles (Luke 6:30–44), the community of disciples (Luke 22:7–22, and hands-on ministry experiences (Luke 10:1–15)" (Shirley, 2017, p. 376). With their reach and popularity, digital platforms have created a paradigm shift in how the world interacts socially.

The church can take advantage of available platforms to share the message of the kingdom and impact believers' lives. Social media provides opportunities for stronger relationships, which influences spiritual formation. Lewis (2018) stated, "One of the key aspects of faith formation is the expectation that spending time with God in Bible study, prayer, and worship will influence how Christians behave, and it is now possible to do aspects of these activities digitally" (p. 525). Digital platforms are available in many forms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Zoom, and YouTube.

Churches have begun to utilize social media platforms to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ further, reach the lost, and equip the people of God. According to the Pew Research Center (2021), "YouTube and Facebook are the most-widely used online platforms, and its base is most broadly representative of the population as a whole. Smaller shares of Americans use sites such as Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and LinkedIn" (Which Social Media Platforms are Most Common, para. 1).

The Pew Research Center (2021) identified, younger individuals are likelier to use online sites than older people. Social media digital platform use also varies by demographic. The Pew Research Center noted, "A vast majority of adults under the age of 65...use YouTube. Fully 95% of those 18 to 29...use the platform, along with 91% of those 30 to 49 and 83% of adults 50 to

64” (p. 5). Further, “Seven-in-ten Facebook users say they use the site daily, including 49% who say they use the site several times a day” (p. 8).

Faith and the Digital Culture

The Church was given the mission to go into the world and preach the Good News to everyone, and even today, it considers spreading the faith to be one of its most important responsibilities. This cultural revolution in communication requires the attention of the Church, bringing new possibilities and difficulties for the church’s mission of evangelization while demanding a broader conversation between “faith and digital culture” (Zsupan-Jerome, 2011, Abstract). The intersection of faith and digital culture has advanced the kingdom of God. Individuals prefer virtual church attendance options by connecting to Christian communities through digital platforms (Campbell & Garner, 2016). Church leaders have discovered ways to reach beyond their four walls and the local community to enrich individuals’ lives with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Buch and Bartley (2002) identified, “The need for both teachers and trainers to take learning styles into account is greater today than ever before, due to the increasing use of technology-aided instruction. Technology has added many new ‘delivery mode’ options to the traditional face-to-face classroom format” (p. 5). Perkins (2012) asserted, “Christians are called to love God and to love others in a mutually beneficial way that glorifies God” (p. 14). The Scripture provides insight into how the Christian community must interact (Perkins, 2012):

37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. **38** This is the first and great commandment. **39** And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (*King James Version*, 1969/2017, Matthew 22:37–39)

Facebook plays an essential role in the biblical community, allowing Christians to interact with and encourage other Christians (Perkins, 2012). Technology in the form of digital

social platforms allows people to come together and collaborate despite disparate physical locations. Payne (2000) explored the connection between technology and collaboration and how technology could enhance the work environment. As members of a research group collaborated using technology from different geographical locations, they became more familiar with each other and began to build community. According to Strickland (2004), “While some would propose the only authentic expression of community is face-to-face associations, many others argue one can experience genuine community in a virtual world—one in which one may never physically be in the presence of another person” (p. 10). The intention of “cyberchurches” is not to replace “face-to-face community, but rather supplement it and sometimes ‘stand in the gap’ when participation in a local congregation is not possible” (p. 38). Virtual church could be vital for homebound individuals, senior adults, or anyone “who cannot physically come to a worship service” (p. 71). Strickland’s findings suggest that a virtual church would be a good outreach tool allowing people to view their worship services before deciding to attend in person.

Lomachinska and Grebenyuk (2020) stated,

The Internet contributes to the transformation of forms of expression of religiosity, thanks to the opportunity to participate in various Internet communities, a person receives a “second religious identity”—after all, a person is no longer only a member of a specific religious community, but also a member of the world community who conducts discussions on social and religious issues, and virtual life in this case can be more informational and spiritually rich than life in reality. (p. 57)

Local pastors must understand the need to minister and meet the needs of their local congregations and those beyond the church’s four walls (Roberts, 2011). Roberts (2011) identified that churches do not fully embrace the opportunity to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ through the internet. Whereas broadcast time on television or the radio might be above the church’s budget, internet time is affordable. The airways allow churches to spread the gospel worldwide without leaving the local vicinity. Roberts suggested, “A preacher today should

remain open to the most prolific communication tool in human history. The internet is a dynamic means of reaching the world for Christ. It requires no travel and no high maintenance or extreme overhead cost” (p. 7).

Embracing Virtual Church for Growth

Lines (2020) argued that “congregations must accept social media as a reality in order to grow and thrive in the digital age” (p. 1). The COVID-19 pandemic “forced many churches into the digital world whether they wanted to embrace it or not” (p. 1). Paul wanted Christians to know that, even in difficult times, “all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021, Romans 8:28). Despite worldwide challenges brought by the pandemic, there is a heightened awareness of churches’ need to reach beyond the four walls to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ and make disciples. Lines found that church membership declined because “most churches have not been able to find a way to be relevant in our modern society. Nothing speaks of irrelevance more than simply being absent from a place where most people are already” (p. 26). If the church is to be effective in reaching and discipline, it must embrace digital platforms. Reduced church gatherings due to the global pandemic could reduce spiritual formation in Christian life (Adegboyega et al., 2020). It is customary that “one of the foremost activities of the church is the frequent gathering for singing, praying, reading of the scriptures, eating communion and other social events” (Implications, para. 3). As a result, “These activities facilitate spiritual growth, and enhance social connections among congregants, resulting in strong relational ties and social capital of a congregation” (Implications, para. 3). During the pandemic, 92% of people attended virtual service at the Church of England (Village & Francis, 2020). Virtual church presents options to continue fostering connection and social interaction among their congregation.

Related Literature

Attempts to better understand the phenomenon of perceived best practice spiritual formation models in the hybrid traditional brick-and-mortar/online church settings have indicated various challenges. The following section presents a critical review of the multiple subtopics directly related and relevant to the subject matter of this research, including the theories and postulations surrounding the effectiveness of spiritual formation in a traditional church setting compared to a virtual church setting. Although the discussion is not exhaustive, it provides a foundation for understanding the complexities and the diversity of ideas reflected in the literature.

Spiritual Formation in a Physical Church Environment

God divinely enables spiritual formation “through three essential resources: God’s Word, God’s Spirit, and God’s people (the church)” (Pettit, 2008, p. 45). First, Paul encouraged the congregants to experience transformation by exposing themselves to the Word of God, which would renew their thinking and release them from ungodly behaviors. Second, the Holy Spirit plays a role in spiritual formation. Jesus promised His disciples that the Holy Spirit would be a helper and guide, leading them in truth. Third, the church plays a role in spiritual formation in the Christian life, which occurs due to interaction with a “community of believers” (Pettit, 2008, p. 47). Perkins (2012) discussed Blok’s “nine characteristics [associated with the social connectedness theory]...(belonging, common purpose, ownership, conversation, small groups, accountability, decision-making, involvement, and gifts) that are common to thriving communities. These same characteristics are articulated within The Scriptures as part of healthy biblical communities” (p. 12).

Spiritual formation is not a single act but “consists of the Trinitarian work of God in the lives of genuine believers in Christ through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit” (Pettit, 2008, p. 52). Paul expressed what it meant to be a Christian to the church in Corinth: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021, II Corinthians 5:17). His message to the church shows spiritual formation as an ongoing process experienced by Christians daily. Spiritual formation was apparent in Paul’s life, as he declared to the church, “Therefore, I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. I discipline my body and bring it unto subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021, I Corinthians 9:26–27). Paul expressed his concern for congregants lacking in maturity in Christ when he stated, “My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you” (*New King James Version*, 1982/2021, Galatians 4:19). Paul’s prayer shows that his listeners lacked the maturity needed to become more like Christ.

Sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ requires the church to reach beyond its brick-and-mortar walls and build community. Although several churches have mastered effective ministering through digital platforms, the level of perceived effective spiritual formation experienced by attendees in traditional and virtual settings is undetermined. Community can be “used in terms of fellowship, those with whom a person connects with on a regular basis” (Gorrell, 2016, p. 9).

Spiritual Formation in an Online Environment

As a result of declining local church attendance, church leaders are seeking ways to maintain their presence (Lee, 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic led to further declines because of

social distancing requirements and stay-at-home orders (Burkhalter, 2020). Burkhalter (2020) asserted, “Now more than ever the expectation and reality of attending or engaging with others have evolved into an online space that allows individuals, groups, and even congregations to interact, view, respond, and be part of something collectively” (p. 4). Simultaneously, the desires of local church congregations are expanding. They now also “seek to share community with other church members in traditional modes and through virtual technologies” (Lee, 2006, p. 2). Online communities are continually growing. Despite the surge, scholars debate whether a genuine community can be cultivated or is a false perception of what community is about (Lee, 2006, p. 5). Hess (2010) suggested, “By adopting a relational model of teaching and learning we can better align our programs of Christian education with our fundamental understandings of the faith. Digital technologies can help us do this more fully and more effectively” (p. 281).

In a study on distance learning, Holdener (2010) found two areas of concern for students: whether the current models “address discipleship growth” and whether the online “professors...address discipleship and spiritual formation needs of their students” (p. 4). Spiritual formation is continual spiritual growth that leads to maturity in Christ and affects how a person thinks, talks, and behaves. Tran (2010) examined online learning for theological students and “conditions conducive to transformational learning” (p. 9). Theological studies indicated concern about distance learning impacting the overall outcome of transformation. In an online study of theological students, Tran found that “eighty percent of the participants reported having perspective transformation” (p. 164). Data analysis indicated that “conditions conducive to their transformation consists of two major components—in-ministry and integrative learning strategy—which were influenced by two other elements including physical presence and divine element” (p. 164). Online communities have become a means to reach more people.

Relationships built and sustained at the same time “provide multiple platforms...with a wide and diverse audience” (Cloete, 2015, p. 6). Gorrell (2016) asserted, “Conversion is about the change of individuals and communities. Processes of Christian formation through the Holy Spirit and within Christian community cultivate conversion” (p. 27). Oentoro and Idayanti (2021) encouraged every church to become a “smart church”:

A smart church is defined as a discipleship model and church ministry supported by state-of-the-art technology. More than just a virtual or digital church that airs services online to replace services in a church building, the smart church presents a church and its mission: building relationships and making disciples on a digital platform as a seamless ministry. (p. 205)

Discipleship and Social Media

Practicing what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is central to what it means to be a Christian. At any point in history, those who have heard Christ’s call to follow Him and have answered that call are known as disciples. Responding to Christ’s call (Mark 1:16–20), pursuing a relationship with Christ regardless of the cost (Matthew 10:34–39), demonstrating the love of Christ toward others (John 15:12–17), participating in community gatherings (Acts 2:43–47; Matthew 18:20), and going to the furthest reaches of the planet to preach the gospel are all components of this discipleship according its portrayal in the Bible (Matthew 28:16-20; Garner, 2019). Peck (2018) provided a more in-depth definition of discipleship, elaborating on the many skills and abilities a disciple should have:

Christian discipleship is a major, all-encompassing theme of the Bible-Old and New Testaments alike. Pivotaly articulated in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20), it addresses all dimensions of life, is deeply grounded in teaching and mentoring, and applies to practically all age levels. Its content includes but is not limited to expectations such as comprehensive Bible knowledge, witnessing strategies, interpersonal relationships, apologetic skills, logical reasoning, world/life-view integration, parenting, teaching, personal integrity, spiritual warfare, faith-learning integration, stewardship of creation, sustained allegiance, miracles, and so on. (p. 243)

If using social media is going to be a component of a plan for discipleship, the leaders of that strategy need to be conscious that not everyone is an active user of social media. In a study on community, discipleship, and social media, Williams (2015) recognized four types of social media users: casual, ghosts, interactive, and intentional. Casual users are individuals who periodically visit different social media sites but do not interact on a consistent basis. These individuals are not considered active users of social media. The second category is ghost users because, although they have social media profiles, they do not post anything. Their profiles do not include personal information, and these individuals do not take part in the interactions that occur on social media. The third type is interactive users, which are those individuals who routinely communicate with other users across a variety of social media platforms. The last type of people who use social media are intentional users. These are the individuals who plan interactions with other people via the internet medium of social media. A plan for discipleship must include considerations for how to approach each of these distinct categories of social media users (Williams, 2015).

In the 1980s, dial-up bulletin boards became one of the early examples of Christian expression in online forums. People shared various resources on the boards with the goal of enlightening members of church communities—in particular, clergy. Members shared resources for pastoral care and educational instruction, as well as endeavors into the developing world of the internet “for the purposes of evangelism and mission” (Garner, 2019, p. 29). The missional component has continued to grow in later internet and social media settings, taking a variety of forms through the course of their evolutions (Garner, 2019). The Gospel of Matthew mandated Christians to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18–20) and Acts called them to “witness to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:7–8). These messages have been adapted to facilitate

evangelism in both the traditional offline world and the internet-enabled virtual one (Garner, 2019). The internet has provided evangelists with the tools and possibilities to employ in combination with preexisting media outlets because of the ability to reach people with the gospel, also known as the Good News of God.

Distance Learning

Distance learning is an alternative learning environment used by churches and academic institutions “outside the boundaries of face-to-face contact [and] typically online” (Ke & Hoadley, 2009, pp. 488–489). Distance learning does not foster an environment of learning communities; an online learning environment must create community through interaction and commonality. The Apostle Paul often communicated with the congregants from a distance, writing letters that taught proper conduct for the Body of Christ, which, when applied, would be transformational for the learner (Morris, 2012). The goal of distance learning specific to the church is effective outcomes under the understanding that “making disciples is a dynamic, not a static activity; it is transformative, not just informative” (p. 2). Warren (2009) noted, “Paul’s contemporary technology tools consisted of papyrus, ink, and courier—an early form of distance education” (p. 40). According to Lee (2006),

In spite of the controversy associated with the adoption and use of new styles of worship and communication technologies in the 21st century church setting, scholars such as Babin & Zukowski (2002), Careaga (2001), Jewell (2002), Sweet (2000) and Wilson (2000) along with church leaders and congregants (Doorey, 2004; Hope & Booth, 2003; Lee, 2005a) are calling for greater use of new communication technologies in order to present the Christian faith in ways that people in the new century find to be more relevant to their communication needs. Scholars, who observe local church trends, assert that using newer communication technologies to create a richer communication experience may be the most relevant way to communicate the Christian faith within a changing culture (Babin & Zukowski, 2002; Sweet, 2000) and communicate with younger generations in particular. (p. 7)

Ceasing face-to-face classroom activities due to COVID-19 and using digital platforms as an alternative, academic institutions had to make quick adjustments to improve learning opportunities for online learners (Chakraborty et al., 2021). Charkraborty et al. (2021) examined students from an Indian university, where 65.9% perceiving the physical classroom as a better learning environment for them than online. With distance learning, the students missed having interactions with their classmates and fellow students.

Facebook, YouTube, and the Kingdom Message

Leading companies utilize Facebook for recruitment, and political parties engage the social media platform for campaigning and meetings (Hempel & Kowitt, 2009). Facebook's audience is vast. As Hempel and Kowitt (2009) declared, "If Facebook were a country, it would have a population nearly as large as Brazil's. It even edged out the U.S. television audience for Super Bowl XLIII, which drew a record-setting 152 million eyeballs" (para. 2). Facebook is now attracting the more mature audience as users who have found it to help their lives to be "more productive-and a lot more fun" (para. 3). ComScore revealed that the typical user spends an average of 169 minutes on the site monthly. In a study of "how Christian college students manifested their understanding of biblical community on Facebook" (p. 5), Perkins (2012) "described how eight college students' understanding of biblical community was influenced by family, church, and college, and how that understanding manifested itself in the Facebook community" (pp. 5-6). Churches and Christian colleges use digital platforms to extend their reach, allowing Christians to experience spiritual formation regardless of physical location (Perkins, 2012). Using digital platforms for ministry, church leaders have found that "recruiting, assimilating, and retaining membership is necessary and important part of church organizing and with the advancement of technology the church must look at changing their traditional practices

and step into the future” (Burkhalter, 2020, p. 7). Blok (2008, as cited in Perkins, 2012) found that “community is about the experience of belonging...to belong is to be related to and a part of something” (pp. 11–12). Church leaders who fail to acknowledge social media’s role in achieving their missions might see lesser growth in today’s culture (Burkhalter, 2020).

Instruction Strategies for Online Learning

Online learning environments with space for student interaction and immediate response capability could enhance and help create an atmosphere of community (Holdener, 2010).

Although a significant challenge in online learning is communication, research participants felt this was due to the lack of visibility of other students. Therefore, online learning environments must contain structured “guidelines for learning interactions and discussion among learners” to keep students on track (Holdener, 2010, p. 161).

Kietzmann (2011) suggested the “honeycomb structure” could be a helpful tool for businesses who want to embrace social media. Firms can monitor and understand how social media activities vary in terms of their function and impact “by analyzing the seven building blocks,” which are “identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups.” (Kietzmann, 2011, p. 250). The honeycomb structure allows firms to develop a congruent social media strategy that is “based on the appropriate balance of building blocks for their community” (p. 250). Consequently, the model could be an essential contributor to the construction of spiritual formation model for church discipleship.

In the past, consumers used the internet primarily for the purpose of consuming material, such as reading it, watching it, and using it to make purchases of goods and services.

Contemporary consumers, on the other hand, are increasingly turning to online platforms—such as content-sharing websites, blogs, social networking sites, and wikis—to generate, alter, share,

and debate information found on the internet. These actions exemplify the phenomenon of social media, which can considerably influence a company's reputation and revenue and even its ability to continue existing (Kietzmann et al., 2022).

Online Community Challenges

Churches face challenges in building online communities, perhaps because of their traditional customs and unwillingness to work beyond them (Covarrubias, 2021). Covarrubias (2021) found that "people born after the 1960s who have any desire for spiritual formation were not inclined to seek a church but would rather seek for alternative" (p. 2). Therefore, church leaders should embrace the available means of technology as an open door to reach those who have chosen not to attend a physical church. Covarrubias (2021) noted, "Frost and Hirsh (2013) believe that what Christian leaders need to combat this challenge is imagination, creativity, innovation, and the willingness to take risks" (p. 2). For churches to remain relevant today, they must "remain aware of cultural changes and context" (p. 23). Covarrubias continued,

The Church cannot afford to hold on to embedded practices while the postmodern culture drifts away in search of transformative experiences. According to Frost and Hirsch (2013), the Church must adjust to a different mode of understanding and engaging with surrounding contexts. Postmodernism is calling for a radical reformation, one that reforms its practices to reach new generations and subcultures without compromising the gospel. (p. 25)

The church must be more urgent in its ministry strategy to acknowledge the younger generation's beliefs, opinions, and ways of doing things (Covarrubias, 2021). It is time for a paradigm shift. Covarrubias noted, "Pillay (2020) states that the new landscape calls for resilience and adaptation, embracing new ways of doing and being church" (p. 26).

Academic Institutions Are Not Exempt. E-learning is internet-based distance education that makes use of information and communication technology to provide educational or training programs to students or trainees whenever they want, wherever they want. Students and

educational institutions faced challenges in the transition to online learning. A growing number of postsecondary educational establishments have implemented e-learning, which enables them to take advantage of its many benefits. E-learners have access to a wide variety of materials and information at any time and from any location. However, insufficient preparation could lead to failure. An institution's readiness to launch an e-learning system is essential to its effective implementation (Al-araibi et al., 2019).

Holdener (2010) identified challenges such as “difficulty faced in connecting with students, communicating across the diverse backgrounds of students, managing the virtual space and asynchronous timing of the learning environment, becoming too comfortable or casual with their conversations, and teaching a particular subject” (p. 66). Further, “Relationships between students and the online professor seemed to lack the hierarchy or authority that is typically found in face-to-face course environments” (p. 71). An organization's level of innovation affects its performance (Covarrubias, 2021). Six research studies found that technical difficulties are a significant factor in the failure of e-learning adoption, and three studies suggested that a lack of technology infrastructure was to blame (Al-araibi et al., 2019). Another set of findings indicated the lack of readily available software and hardware as a contributing factor to the failure of e-learning adoption. Across the literature, technology is the most frequently mentioned barrier to e-learning adoption.

Facilitating a Sense of Community Online

With approximately two billion members, the Christian religion has become the most active in employing distance learning applications. This activity is due to the many seminaries, schools, and institutions linked with the Christian religion (Rogers & Howell, 2020). People will be more likely to follow God and make an attempt to improve if they feel like they belong

somewhere. Furthermore, the process of making disciples takes place in a close-knit group among members who are comfortable sharing their lives with one another. Churches must meet the demand for community among their members by creating a digital space for congregants to participate fully. The accessibility of leaders for casual conversations or ministries helps to foster feelings of community and belonging through these settings (Oentoro & Idayanti, 2021).

Facilitating community through the use of an online presence might have a significant effect on the church's plan to assist spiritual growth in the lives of its visitors. Cloete (2015) suggested that "digital technology provides the church with more tools and opportunities to reach more people with the gospel and is therefore seen as having a positive influence on church activates and institutional structures" (p. 2). It is possible to form a community within a digital culture, where the community is "more person-centred and need-centred than place-centred" (p. 3). Digital platforms provide space for users to build relationships and social bonds across geographical boundaries (Cloete, 2015).

Rovai (2002) defined community as "a social community of learners who share knowledge, values, and goals" (p. 322). Churches that gather their members and others in digital spaces for shared knowledge of God's word, Christian values, and the church's overall vision create a community of believers. The COVID-19 pandemic's effects "propelled the Church to adjust to external pressures and re-imagine how to conduct ministry. The Church not only learned that innovation is important, but also that the willingness to adapt is vital for survival" (Covarrubias, 2021, p. 25). Churches should use online services as digital platforms for ministry to provide socialization and strengthen communities (Burkhalter, 2020).

With the assistance of digital technology, religious educators could make better use of the Christian principles and instructional approaches they use, which could have a significant impact

on their efforts (Hess, 2010). Hess (2010) identified five ways digital technologies could assist educators in teaching their attendees:

(1) providing a richer, more multiply intelligent environment within which to learn; (2) providing more opportunities for real collaboration; (3) giving pastoral leaders a better angle of vision on the challenges their congregations are facing and the specific assumptions with which they enter learning; (4) providing better access to primary-source materials; and (5) overcoming constraints of geography and time. (p. 289)

Social Exclusion and the Church. Many people suffered psychology strain and damage as a result of the COVID-19 mandatory isolation policies put in place to stop the spread of the virus. As the world reconnects, the church must go beyond its conventional forms of discipleship and engagement with the community to meet the spiritual needs of its attendees. Throughout the pandemic, digital platforms became a central place to establish communities, engage, and nurture relationships (Budd et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Vargo et al., 2020). Although interaction has begun to shift back to a sense of normalcy, many individuals became comfortable with and gained a liking for engaging and experience worship service in the digital space as a way to engage with their church community.

Without maximizing the digital space and the many ways to engage with their attendees, churches could have a negative psychological effect on congregants, leading them to suffer from social exclusion. Twenge et al. (2001) found that “social exclusion led to an increase in aggression” in relationships (as cited in Baumeister et al., 2007, p. 509). In another study, Baumeister and Tice (1990) “surveyed the literature on anxiety and concluded that being rejected or excluded was the most common and best-established cause of anxiety” (as cited in Baumeister et al., 2007, p. 511). The church’s goal is to have an impact on listeners’ spiritual development without adding to the problem of social isolation, which could result from the church’s failure to investigate more digital channels to communicate with its congregation.

The author of the Hebrew text urges the reader not to neglect getting together with other members of the Christian community, but to focus on methods to uplift and inspire one another (Hebrews 10:24–25). One strategy the church might use to prevent social exclusion is to embrace the opportunities offered by digital platforms to enforce and promote interaction within the Christian community while simultaneously teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. In making use of digital platforms, the church would be making a broad exhortation to Christians everywhere to maintain a consistent pattern of attending worship services.

Collective acts of worship and service undoubtedly provide individuals with a source of “strength, comfort, nourishment, and joy” (MacDonald, 1995, p. 2192). Christians who are going through difficult circumstances likely view collective acts as “special encouragement” from the Lord in their time of need. It is always possible to fall into the trap of separating oneself from the congregation and becoming a “secret disciple” (p. 2192); this is a danger that cannot be eliminated. The spread of the gospel occurs through genuine, healthy connections between people. When the Body of Christ stops growing and changing, connections get stale, and global outreach ceases, Christianity becomes an organization instead of a movement. The church and its members are in harmony when their relationships with God, one another, and individuals in the non-Christian world are healthy. Examining one’s stewardship in light of a lost and broken world is a way to evaluate one’s spiritual well-being (McManus, 2013).

Diversity in the Body of Christ

Virtual church brings diversity to the Body of Christ and its mission in line with the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul dealt with diversity in the church of Corinth as he laid out principles of unification. He reminded the congregants at the church that the Body of Christ contained a diversity of gifts that would manifest through individual believers. Paul clarified the

diversity of gifting and warned the people of God about division within the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–25). Implementing digital platforms in the church’s agenda allows for diversity in ministry work. Paul’s objective for the church at Corinth was for those in the Body of Christ to become perfected in maturity. Their willingness to submit to diversity in the Body of Christ would be a true reflection of spiritual formation manifesting in their lives. Seelig (1993) asserted, “The local church is Christ’s Church and has the incredible responsibility for providing the channel through which the Kingdom of God may find expression” (p. 5).

Cultural Intelligence

Diversity and cultural intelligence work in tandem. Livermore (2016) claimed, “Diversity by itself does not lead to better innovations...but cultural intelligence is what makes the difference. ...The cultural intelligence of the individuals on a diverse team determines whether the team’s diversity promotes or deters innovation” (p. 19). The benefits of “culturally intelligent personnel are the growing realities of increasingly diverse markets and the growing diversity among members of the workforce” (p. 19). The Apostle Paul penned in scripture,

19 For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; **20** and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those *who are* under the law, as under the law, that I might win those *who are* under the law; **21** to those *who are* without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those *who are* without law; **22** to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some. **23** Now this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I may be partaker of it with *you*. (*New King James Version* 1982/2021, 1 Corinthians 9:19–23)

Operating as a culturally intelligent, innovative team “requires the ability to take on the perspective of your colleagues and users” (Livermore, 2016, p. 51). Paul demonstrated this ability in his ministry to benefit others so they might experience salvation. Livermore (2016) noted, “This requires not only learning how to read individuals one at a time but also learning how to see the tendencies, patterns, motivations, and connections across a particular cultural

group” (p. 51). The church must be willing to utilize all methods to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ: “It is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes” (*New King James Version* 1982/2021, Romans 1:16).

Data Analytics Tracking Utilization for Spiritual Formation. Data analytics tracking is a useful instrument the church could use to assist with its discipleship strategy. Companies commonly use data analytics to track consumers’ behaviors (Berman, 2012; Gutzler, 2014; Hess, 2014; Trusov et al, 2016). Gutzler (2014) suggested that “data collection and analysis could be the key to providing a deeper faith life to the people of our congregational communities” (p. 23). By tracking a congregant’s involvement in church, “It is possible to evaluate a member’s ‘depth’ as more data points become available at the circle of committed and core” (p. 29). Congregational participation could be enhanced by a deeper familiarity with family and individual demographics (Gutzler, 2014).

The New Normal

Oentoro and Idayanti (2021) suggested that churches accept the hybridform of worship as the new “normal way of doing church” and therefore understand that “online services do not necessarily reduce the expression of reverence” (p. 203). One effect of the global pandemic was normalizing worshipping from home, which Brook (2020) predicted could become just as popular as the traditional setting. A “new paradigm of discipleship and service” (Oentoro & Idayanti, 2021, p. 203) that will engage the congregation and grow the church for the future is necessary for churches now that the traditional style of conducting church services has been replaced with a more technological one. Churches and their attendees’ responses to the global pandemic indicate a reliance on technology to continue congregants’ spiritual development. Moving from traditional to at-home worship has shown positive results and prompted a closer relationship

within the Body of Christ among the congregation as they utilize digital platforms for gatherings (Brook, 2020). Oentoro and Idayanti discussed “the need for churches to build discipleship culture while integrating digital platforms as the backbone of the ministry” (p. 202). According to the Bilangan Research Center, “Less than half of the churches surveyed (49.9%) stated that they would continue live streaming or doing online services after the pandemic ends” (Oentoro & Idayanti, 2021, p. 203). Jesus speaks on newness in Scripture: “Nor do they put new wine in old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved” (Matthew 9:17; Oentoro & Idayanti, 2021). Church leaders need a mindset change, embracing technology as they continue relating the message of the Kingdom and influencing spiritual formation.

Digital Pastors

Social media has added a new channel to ministry. Digital pastors, focused primarily on the digital aspect of ministry, could improve a church’s ability to implement perceived best practice models for virtual attendees effectively. According to Coppedge (2016), “When church leaders realize that social media isn’t a fad but instead a fundamental shift in interpersonal communications, the need for such a position will become apparent” (p. 1, as cited in Grayson, 2017, p. 46). Wise (2009) explained, “A digital pastor is someone who is forerunning the technological advances in communication and integrating them faithfully into the life of his or her traditional church” (p. 1, as cited in Grayson, 2017, p.47). Media and religious messengers have conflicted because of public incidents of unethical behavior (Redd, 2007), which could be why some religious leaders and churches reject online platforms. Churches now have the opportunity to reestablish their reputation with society, which is an ideal time to rebuild trust. Humanity needs a spiritual formation amid the current worldwide pandemic. The scriptures

declare, “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (*New King James Version* 1982/2021, 2 Chronicles 7:14). Social media is a mutual ground where people connect with others, share, and become aware of what is happening in the world (Gorrell, 2016). Social media platforms are a place where people can connect. Gorrell (2016) noted, “People are formed through engaging (getting their bodies and emotions involved and connecting with others), creating (doing something with information), and reflecting (inquiry, hunting assumptions, integrating content into meaningful framework, sharing stories, critical reasoning) within Christian community” (p. 23). Research shows that “social media helps congregants to love God, follow Jesus, and/or love others” (p. 128). Despite the negativity surrounding media and religion, social media platforms have been an asset in spiritual development and growth (Gorrell, 2016). The internet and other forms of digital media provide a view into the church and an opportunity for the church to reach out to the world (Oentoro & Idayanti, 2021).

Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature

Rationale for Study

Using digital platforms for the work of the kingdom of God has become controversial (Lee, 2006). Even lepers shared the good news they experienced because of God’s intervention; their heartfelt compassion would not allow them to keep it to themselves. If the lepers had failed to communicate the “good news” of provision to the others, they could have died from starvation (2 Kings 7:6–9; Earley & Wheeler, 2010, p. 54). The expectation is the same for God’s people. Believers in Christ Jesus should utilize all means available—such as various digital platforms and delivery methods, like Facebook, YouTube, Zoom, Instagram, and websites—to produce

live broadcasts for others' benefit. Individuals could suffer spiritual death or malnourishment if they lack the opportunity to receive the message of the Kingdom of God, which brings spiritual formation to the listener's life. Earley and Wheeler (2010) noted, "A literal translation of the word 'gospel' (*euangelos*) is 'good message' or 'good news.' ...The word *evangelism* literally means to communicate good news" (p. 55). The authors explained, "Jesus' death on the cross to pay for [the world's sins] and open the way for us to get to God is good news. But having such information does others no good unless, or until [it is shared]" (p. 55).

Church closures during the COVID-19 pandemic increased the need to utilize digital platforms to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ (Beyer, 2020; Dunlow, 2021; Earls, 2020; Jun, 2020; King, 2020). Achieving a transformational outcome requires the church to ensure that virtual participants experience spiritual formation on the same level as those who attend church activities in a local physical church setting. Grayson (2017) recommended further research on how transiting from attending a local physical church setting to a virtual setting impacts the "spiritual development after making this change" (p. 113). Another suggestion was to conduct "a study that examines the attendees' reasoning for their choice of church mode" (p. 113). This study will benefit churches implementing effective models of spiritual formation in physical and virtual church settings. Spiritual formation affects the believer's soul and everyday life encounters. Individuals could find their purpose in life as well as their daily recognition of God's presence and the Holy Spirit's influence in their lives profoundly altered by an appreciation of and commitment to spiritual growth. Positive chances could occur regardless of a person's religious convictions. God desired nothing less than absolute transformation for those who have surrendered their lives to Him and the Church He has created (Trigg, 2004).

Participation in online communities has helped cultivate knowledge, which is crucial and a vital component for Christian maturity (Gorrell, 2016). In Gorrell's (2016) study, "Survey participants described finding information online that is meaningful to them because it helps them to love God, love others, and/or follow Jesus and positively impacts their Christian formation" (p. 143). Gorrell suggested further research to determine the level of spiritual formation in an individual participating in Christian community activities online. The researcher suggested "conduct[ing] a longitudinal study of several case study churches that are willing to commit to engaging in conversation about social media, practices related to connection and disconnection, and theological reflection toward media literacy" (p. 228). Another recommendation for "future research is to conduct case studies of exemplar churches that use social media for Christian formation and education" (p. 228). The church's success in implementing effective spiritual formation models depends on its ability to strategize and communicate through and to the digital arena. Shirley (2017) asserted, "As individuals and as the church, we must seek to 'understand the times' rather than simply dive aimlessly into the electronic ocean. ...Awareness of the nature of the internet...its benefits and drawbacks" (p. 388) is a step the church must take. Additional research is needed to provide spiritual formation models for churches that use digital platforms for ministry.

Gap in the Literature

There is a lack of literature on effective models that produce spiritual formation in physical church attendees compared to virtual attendees. There is a gap in research regarding effective ways to carry out the Great Commission through digital platforms for virtual attendees to experience spiritual formation on the same level as those attending a physical church setting. It is the church's obligation to share the gospel of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19–22). The Pew

Research Center (2021), among others, examined trends of online users on digital platforms. However, no researchers have explored the specific impact of spiritual formation on individuals who attend the physical church setting compared to those who attend the digital church setting.

God has given His people a promise concerning the building of His church: “God is committed to the building of his Church. The Church is God’s idea and God’s plan for the fulfillment of spiritual formation in the lives of his children (Acts 2:42–47)” (Trigg, 2004, p. 9). Whether in a physical or virtual location, “Only God can make the church grow (1 Cor. 3:6)” (Trigg, 2004, p. 9). The literature review showed “there is not much in the way of a ‘map’ or model that Christian end-users can use to guide them in creating spiritual formation practices that specifically address the spiritual challenges in” (Kang, 2017, p. 30) the lives of believers in Christ Jesus. Accordingly, “Future studies are needed in the areas of recruitment, assimilation, and retention using social media platforms” (Burkhalter, 2020, p. 6).

Profile of the Current Study

For the church to be successful in its mission of discipleship, it is essential that it be aware of and able to function across a variety of digital platforms to disseminate the message that is the Kingdom of God. Embracing digital technology is important, given the difficulties the church has experienced in reaching congregations through means other than the traditional setting. Reaching out to those who are lost and providing congregants with the resources they need to carry out the Great Commission that Jesus Christ gave must be a priority for the community of Christians who make up the Christian church. Therefore, church leaders must be aware of digital platforms’ crucial contributions to ministry and congregants. Digital services are experiences of spiritual development for people.

There is ongoing confusion about the most effective approach to teaching content and fostering spiritual growth within the context of the internet. As a result of the increased prevalence of technology in today's culture, churches are beginning to employ online platforms and delivery methods such as Facebook, livestreaming, and YouTube to disseminate the message that the Kingdom of God is near (Campbell, 2020). Burkhalter (2020) asserted, "The church that is struggling to reach out to communities by counting on their physical presence alone will only benefit from adding an online presence. Social media platforms can bring a quicker awareness of the church within community" (pp. 198-199). In the absence of the application and modification of best practice models, attending church only online, as opposed to the hybrid church brick-and-mortar environment, could prevent individuals from properly experiencing spiritual growth. The church community that congregates where the vast majority of individuals come together has the potential to have a substantial influence on the modern world. Extending the church's reach is necessary for the spiritual development of an individual's life.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Christian community is heading toward a major paradigm shift in its traditional style of weekly worship services. Leaders face challenges implementing Christian education models that influence spiritual formation in the believer's life, whether attending a hybrid church's traditional location or online on a digital platform such as Zoom, Facebook, or YouTube. As technology expands the opportunity for outreach, the church's use of digital platforms will increase, with some believers choosing not to return to corporate worship in the traditional church setting. The concern is whether the church effectively implements best practice models for the brick-and-mortar and online church attendees that will influence spiritual formation. This chapter presents the research methods used in gathering data to describe the perceived lived experiences of the participants. The chapter includes the following categories: research design synopsis, setting, participants, role of the researcher, ethical considerations, data collection methods and instruments, and data analysis.

Research Design Synopsis

The Problem

There has been a dramatic increase in online church participation, with the virtual setting creating an unprecedented environment for spiritual formation (Campbell, 2020). To date, few researchers have examined the effectiveness of spiritual formation in the virtual environment. Virtual spiritual formation is a newer field of study with few best practices established. Most research concerning spiritual formation is specific to face-to-face audiences. There is a growing concern over the best way to deliver material and encourage spiritual development in an online environment. Due to the increasing use of technology in society, churches have begun to utilize various online platforms and delivery methods, such as Facebook, live stream, and YouTube, to

spread the message of the Kingdom of God (Campbell, 2020). Many have also implemented virtual church membership for those choosing not to participate in the hybrid church brick-and-mortar setting. Virtual church has become a popular choice for many nontraditional Christians (Campbell, 2020). The increase in online church attendance indicates the need to discover how spiritual formation occurs outside the traditional model. According to Lowe and Lowe (2018) “Much of the literature about virtual communities from a theological perspective has centered largely on the practice of distinguishing embodied from virtual as a way of elevating the embodied community over the digital community” (p. 108).

Attending church virtually instead of the hybrid church brick-and-mortar setting could lead to a lack of effectively experiencing spiritual formation in the absence of best practice models’ use and adjustment. A significant percentage of Christian young adults search the internet to interact with the Christian community, whether in church or online content (Barna, 2013). Romans 12:1–2 revealed, “The more...readers [Christians] associate themselves with Christ, or define themselves in relation to Christ and with the community of believers in Christ, the more their character will be conformed to the character of Christ” (Samra, 2008, p. 112). To date, this field of study of traditional and online churches perceived effectiveness of its spiritual formation models remains underresearched with few empirical data. According to Hutchings (2010), “The online strategies and best practices developed by churches and pastors in coming years will play a major role in shaping the future of Christian communication” (p. 18).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore best practice spiritual formation models and the perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation in the hybrid church community brick-and-mortar and online church settings for individuals in Christian hybrid

churches. The definition of spiritual formation used was “the holistic work of God in a believer’s life whereby systematic change renders the individual continually closer to the image and actions of Jesus Christ” (Pettit, 2008, p. 19). Hybrid church is a church that offers spiritual development opportunities in the traditional brick-and-mortar location and digital platforms, defined as social media sites and delivery methods such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Zoom (Campbell, 2020). Virtual church community is defined as groups of Christians experiencing spiritual growth through digital church. Centola (2010) proposed the model of social network formation, asserting, “Many behaviors spread through social contact. As a result, the network structure of who is connected to whom can critically affect the extent to which a behavior diffuses across a population” (para. 1).

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the perspectives of Christians from the hybrid church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and spiritual formation?

RQ2. What are the perspectives of Christians from the virtual church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the virtual church community and spiritual formation?

RQ3. What are the perceived benefits and weaknesses of attending the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and virtual church community affiliated with Christian churches?

RQ4. What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the hybrid church brick-and-mortar attendees?

RQ5. What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the virtual church attendees?

RQ6. In what ways do churches use technology to continue their discipleship ministry and influence spiritual formation in attendees?

RQ7. Do churches find using technology an effective means of influencing spiritual formation in the attendees?

Research Design and Methodology

The focus of this study was to explore the perceived best practices spiritual formation models and its impact on congregants' lives in Christian hybrid churches. Previous research focused on spiritual formation models in the traditional setting with little emphasis on the digital setting, which has become the primary way to worship for many. Therefore, a qualitative study was the best approach in exploring how the Christian hybrid church's spiritual formation models impacted the lives of its traditional and online attendees. A phenomenological design was appropriate to identify the perceived effective spiritual formation models in the Christian hybrid church traditional and online setting and its effectiveness in attendees' lives. The study indicated the benefits, strengths, weaknesses, and attributes of spiritual maturation in congregants' lives. Qualitative research can help "confirm or modify existing theories or practices" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 89). A "phenomenological research is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). Therefore, "The focus on qualitative inquires is on describing, understanding, and clarifying a human experience. It requires collecting a series of intense, full, and saturated descriptions of the experience under investigation" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 139). Nonrandom sampling enabled selecting participants who had experienced spiritual formation models from a hybrid brick-and-mortar and virtual church setting representative of a larger population. "The question as to their

understanding of biblical community is important to help understand how their activity in the online world satisfies what may be lacking in the offline world” (Hempel & Kowitt, 2009, p. 8). In essence, “Churches will better serve the cause of Christ by keeping abreast of how the virtual world interacts with the real world” (p. 8).

Practical models for digital platform interaction with Christians participating in the virtual church setting could encourage the same spiritual formation in an individual’s life as in a hybrid brick-and-mortar church setting. Data collection in this qualitative IPA study occurred through participant interviews.

IPA is the most-used approach in psychology research. The design focuses on the participants’ meanings and lived experiences, with data collected via semistructured interviews (J. A. Smith, 2011). IPA researchers “seek idiographic accounts of people’s views and perceptions: how participants themselves as individuals make sense of their experience. The researcher then gathers these accounts to propose a general description of the phenomenon” (Finlay, 2011, p. 140). The IPA design was in line with the study’s purpose: to understand the impact of best practice spiritual formation models in the lives of the traditional and virtual attendees in Christian hybrid churches. IPA studies allow the participants to share their lived experiences.

As the primary means of data collection, the researcher conducted, recorded, and transcribed participant interviews. The interview questions focused on the lived experiences of selected participants as it relates to spiritual formation and the models utilized to impact the lives of the congregants. Information from the participating churches’ websites provided another source of data, allowing the researcher to capture other useful information that was not apparent the interviews (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Upon approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher sent emails with an introduction to the study and the consent form to Christian hybrid churches in the Southeast, Southwest, and Midwest. After receiving the responses from two regions, the researcher worked with the executive leadership and co-pastors to select participants for the study. Next, the researcher contacted the participants and scheduled interviews.

Setting

The two churches selected to participate in this study were Christian hybrid churches in the U.S. Southeast and Midwest that provide brick-and-mortar and digital church settings through various platforms and delivery methods, such as Facebook, Zoom, live stream, and YouTube. The churches in the U.S. Southwest opted out of the study. The mission of the Illinois church is "to be a wholistic, diverse ministry for the entire family grounded in love; in order to save the lost, disciple believers, build strong families and to be change agents for Christ in this community" (Illinois Church, 2022). The church's spiritual formation models aims to influence the participant to: "Connect, meet new people. Grow, using the topics or curriculum being chosen and Go, by taking on an outreach project." The mission of the Georgia church is "to ultimately change lives by reaching and equipping people through the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Georgia Church, 2022). With its spiritual formation models, the Georgia church encourages attendees to connect, engage, grow, and serve. The congregation sizes are 1,200 active members in Georgia and 1,500 active members in Illinois.

The researcher collected data through semistructured interviews, allowing participants to respond to open-ended questions without limitations. Eight interviews occurred on Zoom; due to technical difficulties, PT8's interview took place on StreamYard. The scheduled time for each

interview was 1 hour. The researcher video- and audio-recorded each interview, saving the files on a secure, password-protected device.

Participants

The sample size for a phenomenological study ranges from three to 10 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The objective was to recruit eight to 10 participants to maximize the data credibility. The goal was to understand the current existing spiritual formation models and the benefits and perspectives of Christians from the hybrid church brick-and-mortar and online church communities affiliated with Christian hybrid churches in Georgia and Illinois concerning spiritual formation. All participants were from Christian hybrid churches in Georgia and Illinois and attended either the traditional or online church setting weekly. The participants selected from each church consisted of a Bishop/Senior Pastor, a Co-Pastor, Elders, an Executive Director of Ministry, a minister, and lay members. Each participant had experienced the traditional or digital church setting weekly for a minimum of 2 years. The interviews occurred via the Zoom and StreamYard video conferencing platforms. All participants selected their homes ($n = 5$) or churches ($n = 3$) for the interviews except one, who chose a secure office at her job. Each environment provided a comfortable setting for the participants. The sample comprised three African American men and six African American women.

Role of the Researcher

This researcher planned, collected, and carefully documenting qualitative data from nine participant interviews about their experiences with traditional and online church settings in Christian hybrid churches in Georgia and Illinois. The researcher's perceptions of spiritual formation in the hybrid church brick-and-mortar setting have been shaped by personal

experience, which “introduces a range of strategic, ethical, and personal issues into the qualitative research process” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 183). Creswell and Creswell (2018) continued, “With these concerns in mind, the inquirers explicitly identify reflexively their biases, values, and personal background, such as gender, history, culture, social economic status (SES) that shape their interpretations formed during a study” (p. 183). Since 1974, the researcher has served in various capacities in the Christian-based traditional and online church, including Lead Pastor. As a member of the church community, the researcher was involved in implementing Christian education that would influence spiritual formation in the lives of members who attended the hybrid brick-and-mortar and digital locations. Based on the nature and extent of involvement in the Christian hybrid church community, the researcher brought certain biases to the study. Bracketing was a technique used to mitigate any preconceptions from interfering with the study. The researcher wrote memos throughout data collection for analysis and reflection (see Cutcliffe, 2003; Tufford & Newman, 2012). To ensure objectivity, the researcher strove to eliminate bias and consider only the data collected from participants.

Ethical Considerations

The IRB approved the study on August 1, 2022, with a modification approved on August 17, 2022 (see Appendix A). The modification entailed shifting the sample from Christian evangelical hybrid churches to Christian hybrid churches to obtain a broader sample population. The gatekeeper for the Illinois participants was the Bishop/Senior Pastor of the church, and the Georgia participants’ gatekeeper was the Co-Pastor of the church. After contacting the gatekeepers via email to provide an overview and rationale for the study (see Appendix B), the researcher received a letter from the participating churches granting permission (see Appendix C). Following the authorization to conduct the study with congregants of the selected churches,

the researcher held a Zoom meeting with prospective participants. The Bishop/Senior Pastor of the Illinois church transferred the interview scheduling responsibility to the Executive Director of Ministry. The Co-Pastor of the Georgia church provided a list of selected participants to the researcher for contact and interviewing scheduling. All raw data from the research, including recorded interviews, transcripts, and notes, remained in the researcher's office and stored on a password-protected computer. After interview transcription, participants received an assigned number and pseudonym to maintain privacy and confidentiality. Any details disclosed by the participants that could potentially identify individuals were removed. To protect the participants' rights, the researcher submitted all documentation in compliance with the IRB (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Qualitative researchers can use several instruments to collect data, observe behavior, or conduct interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The human lived experience could emerge through the transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994).

Collection Methods

Data collection to explore the impact of the perceived best practice spiritual formation models in the Christian hybrid church traditional and online attendees involved two phases. The researcher began by contacting the executive staff of the Georgia and Illinois Christian hybrid churches to seek their approval to conduct the study. The Research Permission Request Form (see Appendix B) went to the executive staff of the Georgia and Illinois churches, who granted permission. The official approval notification emails from the Georgia and Illinois churches are in Appendix C. The next step was working with the Georgia and Illinois churches' executive staff to schedule interviews with the selected participants. The executive staff emailed the nine

selected participants' names and email addresses. IPA studies include semistructured or unstructured interviews with two to 25 participants (Alase, 2017). IPA researchers are primarily concerned with quality and not quantity “and, given the complexity of most human phenomena, IPA studies usually benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 46). The researcher contacted the nine individuals and sent the research recruitment letters (see Appendices D and E), including an overview of the study and the consent forms (see Appendices F and G). The nine invitees indicated their willingness to participate in the study via email and confirmed they met the initial criteria. Each participant received a follow-up recruitment letter (see Appendices H and I) as a reminder of the study overview and deadline to participate. The researcher collected data via interviews with nine participants, including leadership and lay members who met the criteria for the study. Semistructured interviews allow room to ask probing questions based on the respondent's answers and follow the participant's interest (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The nine web-based video participant interviews occurred on Zoom or StreamYard between August 27, 2022, and September 29, 2022. The researcher recorded and manually transcribed each interview.

Second, the researcher reviewed the Georgia and Illinois churches' websites. Multiple forms of data are appropriate in IPA studies, such as interviews and websites (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Using a second data source allowed the researcher to gather significant information that might have been missed during the interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The additional data were a means to gather detailed information that might have been missed during the interviews. Researchers can collect audio, visual, and digital data from places such as social media sites or web pages consisting of photographs, videos, and text (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Instruments and Protocols

This section includes a detailed explanation of the instruments and protocols employed during the data collection process.

Interviews

The researcher sought to establish a rapport with the participant by beginning the interview with a brief introduction to the study (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Qualitative researchers should prepare and use an interview protocol as a guide for asking questions and recording answers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The primary data collection method for this study was semistructured interviews with open-ended questions, which were appropriate to explore the phenomenon under investigation. IPA involves a “detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience” (Smith, 2011, p. 9). The questions were means to understand the spiritual formation models implemented for its attendees and their lived experiences. The “IPA approach is used in many qualitative research studies to investigate and interpret the ‘lived experiences’ of people who have experienced similar (common) phenomenon” (Alase, 2017, p. 11). Six preliminary questions preceded the interview questions:

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
2. What’s your gender?
3. Are you a member of a Christian hybrid church in Georgia or Illinois?
4. What is your leadership role?
5. Do you attend a hybrid traditional brick-and-mortar church setting and/or virtual church setting?
6. How often do you attend the hybrid traditional brick-and-mortar and/or virtual church setting?

The interview questions followed the research questions they addressed (see Appendices J–L).

RQ1. What are the perspectives of Christians from the hybrid church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and spiritual formation?

IQ1. Do you attend prayer groups in the traditional church setting?

IQ2. How often do you attend prayer groups in the traditional church setting?

IQ3. Do you attend small groups in the traditional setting? If yes, how often?

IQ4. What effects has attending the Christian hybrid church traditional brick-and-mortar setting had on your life?

IQ5. What motivates you to attend the Christian hybrid church traditional setting vs. the virtual setting?

IQ6. Do you feel certain benefits needed is missing for those that chose to attend the virtual church setting in place of the hybrid's traditional church setting?

IQ7. Have you received positive feedback from attendees of the traditional church setting and/or virtual church setting that express improvement in their relationship with God? If yes, in what ways have the attendees expressed their relationship with God has improved?

IQ8. In your own words, tell me what is a Christian disciple?

IQ9. Could you describe to me your understanding of Christian worship?

IQ10. What's the role of prayer in your church?

RQ2. What are the perspectives of Christians from the virtual church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the virtual church community and spiritual formation?

IQ1. Do you attend prayer groups in the virtual church setting?

IQ2. How often do you attend prayer groups in the virtual church setting?

IQ3. Do you attend small groups in the virtual church setting? If yes, how often?

- IQ4. What effects has attending the Christian hybrid church virtual church setting had on your life?
- IQ5. What motivates you to attend the Christian hybrid church virtual setting vs. the brick-and-mortar setting?
- IQ6. Do you think virtual church can support and enhance the attendee's relationship with God? How has it enhanced your life?
- IQ7. Do you feel your relationship with God has improved because of your interaction and attendance in a virtual church community? If yes, in what ways?
- IQ8. What are some of the joys you have experienced regarding leadership in an online ministry?
- IQ9. What is your understanding of Christian fellowship? What role does Christian fellowship play in virtual discipleship?
- IQ10. Could you describe to me your understanding of Christian worship?
- IQ11. In your own words, tell me what is a Christian disciple?
- IQ12. What's the role of prayer in your church?

RQ3. What are the perceived benefits and weaknesses of attending the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and virtual church community affiliated with Christian churches?

- IQ1. What is the benefit you see in attending a hybrid brick-and-mortar church setting vs. a virtual church setting?
- IQ2. What is the benefit you see in attending a virtual church setting vs. a hybrid's traditional brick-and-mortar church setting?
- IQ3. What are the perceived weaknesses of attending the virtual church setting vs. the hybrid brick-and-mortar church setting?
- IQ4. Do you feel certain benefits needed is missing for those that chose to attend the virtual church setting in place of the hybrid's traditional church setting?

RQ4. What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the hybrid church brick-and-mortar attendees?

- IQ1. Are you aware of spiritual formation models being implemented for the hybrid's traditional brick-and-mortar attendees? If yes, can you provide insight or copies of these models?

- IQ2. Share with me the best example of someone who is being disciplined through your church who attends the traditional and virtual church setting.
- IQ3. How has your church changed since the COVID-19 pandemic to engage with its attendees and influence spiritual formation?
- IQ4. Some churches and leaders do not see the value of changing to reach this generation. How has your church changed in general to reach this population and influence spiritual formation?
- IQ5. Do your prayer groups meet in the traditional and virtual setting?
- IQ6. What are the purpose, mission, and vision of the church you attend?
- IQ7. What key obstacles have you overcome as a church regarding online discipleship?
- IQ8. Does your church have a discipleship strategy? If so, what is it?
- IQ9. Does your ministry have a discipleship theory/philosophy associated with your discipleship strategy? If so, what is it?
- IQ10. Share with me your best example of someone who is being disciplined through your church and attends the traditional and virtual church setting.
- IQ11. What role does evangelism play in your ministry?
- IQ12. What opportunity does your ministry give for people to respond to the gospel in the traditional setting and virtual setting?
- IQ13. What opportunities does your ministry provide for people to engage in Christian fellowship in the traditional setting and virtual setting?

RQ5. What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in virtual church attendees?

- IQ1. Are you aware of spiritual formation models being implemented for the hybrid's virtual church attendees? If yes, can you provide insight or copies of these models?
- IQ2. Share with me the best example of someone who is being disciplined through your church and attends the traditional and virtual church setting.
- IQ3. How has your church changed since the COVID-19 pandemic to engage with its attendees and influence spiritual formation?
- IQ4. Some churches and leaders do not see the value of changing to reach this generation. How has your church changed in general to reach this population and influence spiritual formation?

- IQ5. Do your prayer groups meet in the traditional and virtual setting?
- IQ6. What are the purpose, mission, and vision of the church you attend?
- IQ7. What leadership attributes do you think are important for leading a virtual ministry?
- IQ8. What key obstacles have you overcome as a church regarding online discipleship?
- IQ9. Does your church have a discipleship strategy? If so, what is it?
- IQ10. Does your ministry have a discipleship theory/philosophy associated with your discipleship strategy? If so, what is it?
- IQ11. Share with me your best example of someone who is being disciplined through your church who attends the traditional and virtual church setting.
- IQ12. What role does evangelism play in your ministry?
- IQ13. What opportunity does your ministry give for people to respond to the gospel in the traditional setting and virtual setting?
- IQ14. How does using your virtual church setting engage the Bible?
- IQ15. What opportunities does your ministry provide for people to engage in Christian fellowship in the traditional setting and virtual setting?
- IQ16. What, if any, opportunities do your church provide to train leaders to disciple others virtually?

RQ6. In what ways do churches use technology to continue their discipleship ministry and influence spiritual formation in attendees?

- IQ1. How has technology changed how the church engages with its attendees?
- IQ2. What forms of technology and social media platforms are you currently using to engage with the attendees?

RQ7. Do churches find using technology an effective means of influencing spiritual formation in the attendees?

- IQ1. What forms of technology and social media platforms are used to engage with the attendees?

Procedures

The IRB submission included the consent forms (see Appendices F and G), permission request letter (see Appendix B), and recruitment letters (see Appendices D and E). After receiving IRB approval, the researcher sent an introductory letter to the Georgia and Illinois churches' pastoral staff explaining the study rationale. After receiving permission to conduct the study from the pastoral staff of both churches (see Appendix C), the researcher received a list of selected participants from the executive staff. The researcher contacted the selected participants via email (see Appendices D and E), subsequently scheduling and holding interviews via Zoom and StreamYard. The participants returned their consent forms prior to their scheduled interviews.

Each participant consented to interview video and audio recording, with files kept on the researcher's password-protected computer in the work office. All study data are in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's possession and will remain confidential to respect each participant's privacy and preserve research integrity. The researcher must provide a safe and secure environment for all data collected (Alase, 2017). After reviewing the video-recorded interviews multiple times, the researcher manually transcribed the recordings using Microsoft Word and uploaded the transcripts into Dedoose qualitative software for analysis, coding, and theme identification.

Data Analysis

This section presents the data analysis methods utilized for this study. Qualitative data analysis has multiple steps, including transcribing interviews, typing notes, repeatedly reading material, organizing the data, coding the data, and deriving themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative data analysis is a complex, time-consuming process (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The researcher performed several data analysis strategies, such as using software for data organization and categorizing themes that could include “specific topics, characteristics and attributes, actions, processes, emotions, beliefs, values, evaluations” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 345). The researcher added subcodes to categories and themes, dividing data into meaningful units for individual coding. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) noted that not all data would be “clear-cut” but might need to be “systematically broken into small segments—perhaps by individual phrases or sentences, or paragraphs—that will be coded separately” (p. 346). Qualitative researchers identify “noteworthy patterns and relationships among the codes” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 349). The researcher also pays close attention to “tensions and contradictions within the data set” and “actively—and conscientiously—resists temptations to find commonalities that don’t truly exist, make sweeping generalizations that aren’t accurate, or jump to quick but unwarranted conclusions” (p. 350). A final strategy involved staying focused on the study’s guiding questions to address the problem and questions.

As a researcher prepares to code and identify themes, following the research interview protocol assists in gathering useful information that contributes to the research topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data analyzed came from qualitative computer software (Dedoose) and hand (manual) coding. Computer software is faster and more efficient, stores and organizes the data, and makes locating and assigning codes easier with spreadsheets. Dedoose works well with textual data such as interviews, transcripts, open-ended responses, and still images (Provalis Research, n.d.). The rationale for using Dedoose was to maintain efficiency in collecting, analyzing, and organizing study data.

The interview protocol serves as a structured guide or agenda for the interview. The interview began with an opening question, allowing participants to share information about their personal or professional lives. The content questions centered around the phenomenon of the selected topic. Probing questions were a way to elicit more information and clarify participants' statements.

The coding process also consisted of organizing the data and themes based on information obtained on the study phenomenon and as documented in the literature. Categorizing and labeling notes indicates themes and could include “people, places, or events in a setting” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 194). Themes help the researcher build additional layers surrounding the phenomenon. Coding consists of preparing, assigning, compiling, reviewing, grouping, mapping, and creating a narrative (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Trustworthiness

It is necessary to establish validity and reliability in a qualitative study. Ensuring trustworthiness entails following specific procedures to check for the accuracy of the research findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Trustworthiness in qualitative research is “evaluated by looking at credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Adler, 2022, n.p.).

Credibility

Achieving credibility consists of looking for “convergence (triangulation) within [the] data: Many separate pieces of information should all point to the same conclusion” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 350). Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommended using multiple procedures to validate research findings—such as triangulation, detailed descriptions of the findings, clarification concerning the bias surrounding the researcher and the study—and

spending time developing an understanding of the research topic. The researcher ensured multiple validity procedures by triangulating the data gathered from interviews. Credibility came from bracketing to prevent researcher bias or preconceived ideas from manipulating the data (see Moustakas, 1994). Using software (Dedoose) for data analysis removed the possibility of data manipulation. The IRB approved the data collection instruments before the researcher began data collection.

Dependability

Dependability occurs by providing detailed descriptions of the setting, participants, and data collection and analysis process to enable replication of the study. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) noted that dependability “accounts for the ever-changing contexts within which qualitative research studies take place—and urging one another to provide in-depth descriptions of data-collection methods” (p. 239). Tobin & Begley (2004) recommended “ensur[ing] the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented” (as cited in Nowell, 2017, p. 3). To confirm the dependability of this study, this researcher documented the qualification of the participants selected for this study. Documenting the informed consent process showed that the participants willingly engaged in sharing their experiences about the research topic. The research questions were structured to reflect the research topic, and the response to the open-ended interview questions provided the data to answer the research questions.

Confirmability

The researcher maintained an audit trail with detailed descriptions of the steps taken and their rationale from beginning to end. An audit trail “provides a record that can both verify research activities and offer information to others who might be interested in undertaking a similar study” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 241). To achieve confirmability, researchers base

conclusions on in-depth descriptive findings similar to those of other studies (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Nowell, 2017). Triangulation of data sources allows readers to determine whether research bias played a significant role in the study. The researcher practiced ongoing reflexivity to reflect on any biases or preconceptions that could influence the study. The researcher also maintained a journal during the coding and analysis phases to ensure reflexivity.

Transferability

Leedy and Ormrod (2019) identified transferability as the “criteria for judging whether the results from a study are plausible and believable from participants’ perspective and if the finding can be applied to other settings” (p. 239). The findings of this study could address the gap in spiritual formation in the lives of individuals who attend hybrid brick-and-mortar and virtual church communities. Christian churches could use the findings to establish effective models for spiritual formation among hybrid brick-and-mortar and virtual church attendees. The study could indicate the best practices and strategies needed to implement models for effective spiritual formation in the lives of hybrid brick-and-mortar and virtual church community members. Christian university students pursuing Master of Divinity, Master of Theology, and doctoral degrees could benefit from this research as they develop leadership strategies once they graduate and serve within the church. Determining transferability is the job of the reader, not the researcher. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated, “The researcher is responsible for providing thick descriptions, so that those who seek to transfer the findings to their own site can judge transferability” (as cited in Nowell, 2017, p. 3).

Chapter Summary

The qualitative study had a phenomenological research design to explore the perceived best practice spiritual formation models in attendees of the Christian hybrid church traditional and virtual church settings. The researcher captured data from online video interviews with nine respondents who attended the traditional or virtual setting of Christian hybrid churches in Georgia and Illinois. Semistructured interviews with open-ended questions were the primary means of data collection, and the researcher also examined additional digital material on the participating churches' websites. Data collection and analysis met the trustworthiness standards for an IPA qualitative study.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

*“The words of scholars are like well driven nails...”
Ecclesiastes 12:11b, NKJV*

Overview

This study was an exploration of the perception and lived experiences of traditional and online church attendees in Christian hybrid churches in Georgia and Illinois regarding spiritual formation. A qualitative IPA approach allowed the participants to share their stories. The study involved interviews with leadership and lay members from two participating churches to explore the perceived best practice spiritual formation models and their effects on its attendees. All pastors, leaders, and lay members interviewed from the traditional and online communities expressed that their experience included either growth or empowerment to maintain their connection to their church family and relationship with Jesus Christ. With most church spiritual formation models geared toward the traditional setting, this study was necessary to explore whether the church effectively implements best practice models through its traditional brick-and-mortar location and digital platforms that will cause individuals within the Christian community to experience spiritual formation. The research questions that guided this study were:

RQ1. What are the perspectives of Christians from the hybrid church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and spiritual formation?

RQ2. What are the perspectives of Christians from the virtual church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the virtual church community and spiritual formation?

RQ3. What are the perceived benefits and weaknesses of attending the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and virtual church community affiliated with Christian churches?

RQ4. What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the hybrid church brick-and-mortar attendees?

RQ5. What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the virtual church attendees?

RQ6. In what ways do churches use technology to continue their discipleship ministry and influence spiritual formation in attendees?

RQ7. Do churches find using technology an effective means of influencing spiritual formation in the attendees?

Chapter Four details the compilation protocol and measures, demographic and sample data, data analysis and findings, and research design evaluation. The goal was to identify emergent themes from the interviews.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

The researcher vetted churches through an online directory identifying churches' ministry beliefs, activities, and locations to identify Christian hybrid churches in the U.S. Southeast, Southwest, or Midwest. The researcher emailed an invitation to participate to 10 churches' senior pastors and administration to obtain a sample size of three churches (see Appendix B). Two churches responded affirmatively, providing participant contact information to schedule interviews. The sample population was pastors, leaders, and traditional and virtual church attendees affiliated with the Christian hybrid churches in Georgia and Illinois. Each participant took part in a semistructured qualitative interview conducted and recorded for later transcription through the online Zoom and StreamYard platforms. In addition to capturing the recordings on the videoconferencing platforms, the researcher used a secondary auto-recording device as a backup.

Two sets of interview questions were necessary to analyze the intentionality of the groups from senior pastors' and co-pastors' perspectives (see Appendix J). The researcher also explored the perceptions of intentionality and equipping from the perspectives of the traditional (see Appendix K) and online (see Appendix L) church communities. The researcher secured nine qualified participants for the study, selecting each church's pastor and other individuals according to their involvement in the spiritual formation models and attendance status in the traditional and online communities. After the church provided a list of participants, the researcher sent a follow-up recruitment letter to the selected individuals establishing a deadline to participate. The researcher also attached a copy of the IRB-approved informed consent letter for recipients to review and return prior to their scheduled interviews (see Appendix F for the IRB-approved informed consent letter template for pastors/leaders and Appendix G for the IRB-approved informed consent letter template for congregants). All participants received a pseudonym consisting of a letter and a number, which the researcher used to protect their confidentiality.

The purpose of the interview was to explore the ministry engagement opportunities utilized as spiritual formation models to influence spiritual formation and disciple the churches' traditional and online attendees. The pastors and leaders were familiar with or directly worked with the church's spiritual formation and discipleship ministry for traditional and online attendees. The semistructured interviews with the Senior Pastor/Co-Pastor and Leader of Christian Discipleship and Christian Education from each church ranged from 1 hour and 30 minutes to 1 hour and 56 minutes. Each interview began with an introduction and a brief description of the study and included probing questions to obtain data pertinent to the research questions. The interviews closed with an expression of gratitude. The pastors and leaders

provided detailed insight into the church's vision, mission, theory, and philosophy for Christian discipleship and spiritual formation for its traditional and digital community.

The researcher exported the interview recordings into Otter.ai software for transcription. After reviewing the first transcript, the researcher decided to manually transcribe the interviews, adopting a direct approach for thoroughness in organizing, analyzing, and coding data. Listening to the video-recorded interviews allowed the researcher to capture the emotions behind the participants' stories. The researcher replayed the interviews multiple times to ensure thorough transcription into a Microsoft Word document and upload to Dedoose software for further coding and identifying themes. Before coding, the researcher reread the transcripts to get a sense of direction. The research then began to code the data, allowing codes to emerge from the data instead of auto-coding. According to Creswell (2018), social science researchers "allow the codes to emerge during the data analysis" (p. 196). The coding process occurred methodically and slowly to prevent missing any major themes.

Demographic and Sample Data

Participant Demographic Data

Nine members of two Christian hybrid churches in Georgia and Illinois received invitations to participate in the study. Table 1 presents the demographic data of the nine respondents (three male, six female) who accepted the invitation to the research study. Six participants primarily attended the traditional church setting (P1T-P5T), and three were dedicated online church attendees (P1D-P5D). The participants ranged from leadership to lay members. The researcher contacted one additional church and an alternate church that initially accepted the invitation to participate, then later opted out of the study.

Table 1*Participant Demographic Data*

Participant	Gender	State	Title	Type Attendee
P1T	Female	Georgia	Co-Pastor	Traditional
P2T	Female	Georgia	Director of Spiritual Formation and Discipleship	Traditional
P3T	Female	Georgia	Minister	Traditional
P4D	Female	Georgia	Lay Member	Digital
P5D	Male	Georgia	Lay Member	Digital
P6T	Male	Illinois	Bishop/Sr Pastor	Traditional
P7T	Female	Illinois	Executive Director of Ministry	Traditional
P8T	Male	Illinois	Elder	Traditional
P9D	Female	Illinois	Elder	Digital

Participant 1T

P1T is the Co-Pastor of a Christian hybrid nondenominational church in Georgia. She is responsible for assisting with the oversight of the church, including feeding the flock, discipling congregants, and implementing various programs, classes, and activities that influence spiritual formation in the lives of traditional and online attendees. She is a traditional church attendee and participates in the online church community. Her interview responses indicated a thorough knowledge of the discipleship strategy and spiritual formation models currently used for the betterment of the traditional and online congregation.

Participant 2T

P2T is the Elder of Christian formation and discipleship in the Christian hybrid church in Georgia. She is a traditional church attendee who also participates in the online community. P2T provides leadership and oversight for Christian discipleship, children's ministry, and youth and adult ministry for the traditional and online communities.

Participant 3T

P3T is a minister and traditional attendee in the Christian hybrid church in Georgia. She is very active in the traditional setting and provided essential insight into her personal experience of spiritual formation. When asked, “Are you aware of spiritual formation models being implemented for the hybrid traditional brick-and-mortar church attendees?” she indicated a true spiritual formation experience. However, she was unfamiliar with the term “spiritual formation” associated with a specific model utilized by the church to influence its attendees. It is evident in her lived experience that she has encountered spiritual formation in the traditional setting.

Participant 4D

P4D is a member of the digital community of the Christian hybrid church in Georgia and resides with her family in another state. She has been a member of the digital community for the past several years and is involved in the weekly online services. Her responses indicated familiarity with the spiritual formation models implemented for online attendees, She has benefited from by engagement opportunities offered by the church to its digital community. When asked, “Are you aware of spiritual formation models being implemented for the hybrid traditional brick-and-mortar church attendees?” she responded, “Yes. Their discipleship model includes community.” Highly energetic, P4D showed true joy and excitement from her lived experience as an online member of the Georgia church.

Participant 5D

P5D is a member of the digital community of the church in Georgia and resides in another state with his family. His interview responses indicated a life-changing experience as a digital attendee. When asked, “What effects has attending the hybrid’s virtual church setting had on your life?” he responded, “It’s really powerful in a lot of different ways.”

Participant 6T

P6T is the Bishop and Senior Pastor of the Illinois church who is a traditional church attendee and a part of the digital community. As a visionary, P6 play a major role in overseeing and constructing the spiritual formation models for the church's traditional and online communities. When asked about his pastoral role in the traditional and online setting, he responded,

I am the Senior Pastor of the traditional and digital setting. I have a Lead Pastor for the digital setting. As Senior Pastor, I do the ministering in both settings. Currently, I provide content for the digital community. We are going to move to a place where I and others will provide content just for that community.

Participant 7T

P7T is the Executive Director of Ministry responsible for Christian education and assimilation of the membership at the Christian hybrid church in Illinois. She is a long-time traditional attendee and also participates in church online. When asked, "What motivates you to attend the Christian hybrid church traditional setting?" she responded, "The connection with the people. If it was only virtual, the only reason I would come in person would be for the personal connection. That would be the only thing I would feel like I needed."

Participant 8T

P8T is an Elder in the Illinois Christian hybrid church. He is a traditional attendee and is responsible for overseeing one of the church's tribes, which is a part of the spiritual formation models of the church. Tribes are groups established for pastoral care of membership. When asked, "What motivates you to attend the hybrid traditional brick-and-mortar church?" he responded, "I am an in-person learner. I use the virtual opportunity when I am traveling because when I am away, I cannot attend the traditional setting."

Participant 9D

P9D is an Elder in the Christian hybrid church in Illinois. She is a member of the digital community who is responsible for teaching baptism via Zoom. When asked, “What motivates you to attend the Christian hybrid church online community?” she responded,

I have health challenges, and due to the COVID environment, it provides a safe space for me to stay connected to my church family and at the same time receiving the teaching and encouragement I need. It also allows me to perform my duties as an Elder from the digital platform.

Interview Transcript Data Set

The interview process began on August 27, 2022, and concluded on September 29, 2022. The researcher worked with the Executive Staff of the Illinois church and the Co-Pastor of the Georgia church to recruit participants for the study. Table 2 shows the participants, interview start times, and interview durations. The nine interviews lasted for 461 minutes.

Table 2

Length of Participant Interviews

Participant	Start time	Duration (minutes)
P1T	8:06 p.m.	60
P2T	2:57 p.m.	80
P3T	12:11 p.m.	40
P4D	1:02 p.m.	58
P5D	12:35 p.m.	55
P6T	11:55 a.m.	60
P7T	5:54 p.m.	46
P8T	4:28 p.m.	30
P9D	12:51 p.m.	32
Total		461
Average		46

Data Analysis and Findings

In this section, the researcher presents the data analysis and findings relative to the effectiveness of lived experiences and spiritual formation models among traditional and online attendees. The nine semistructured interviews occurred with open-ended questions. The researcher developed three categories of questions to reflect leadership, traditional experiences, and virtual experiences. Participants received the same questions, except for a few tailored toward the role or setting the participant attended. Data collection was from five individuals from the Georgia church and four from the Illinois church. After interview transcription and review, the researcher performed content analysis using Dedoose software. Before coding, all transcripts received extensive reads to allow familiarity with the content and emotions of each participant's story. Data analysis occurred separately for leadership and lay members. Next, the researcher established the themes associated with the research questions and supporting significant statements. Nine distinct themes emerged, each associated with a research question. Table 3 presents a synopsis of the interview questions, key concepts, and themes.

Table 3

Synopsis of Interview Questions, Key Concepts, and Themes

Research question	Key concepts	Themes and subthemes
RQ1. What are the perspectives of Christians from the hybrid church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and spiritual formation?	Traditional attendees' experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual growth and improvement in traditional space • Corporate worship experience
RQ2. What are the perspectives of Christians from the virtual church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the virtual church community and spiritual formation?	Virtual attendees' experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual growth and improvement online • Build relationships beyond local community • Engagement opportunities

Research question	Key concepts	Themes and subthemes
RQ3. What are the perceived benefits and weaknesses of attending the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and virtual church community affiliated with Christian churches?	Benefits of traditional setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensified experience in the sanctuary • Fellowship with the congregants-in-person • Safe space • Spiritual care and compassionate touch
	Weaknesses of traditional setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limitations • Religious routine
	Benefits of online setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility • Convenience • Safe environment
	Weaknesses of online setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limitations • Technology issues • Isolation • Distractions
RQ4. What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the hybrid church brick-and-mortar attendees?	Spiritual formation model for traditional setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement opportunity for learning in person • Evangelism
RQ5. What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the virtual church attendees?	Spiritual formation model for online setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement opportunity for learning online and connecting • Evangelism
RQ6. In what ways do churches use technology to continue their discipleship ministry and influence spiritual formation in attendees?	Enhanced digital presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based platforms
RQ7. Do churches find using technology an effective means of influencing spiritual formation in the attendees?	Produced growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth through digital means • Maintain connections with community and church

Coding Approach

Dedoose was the qualitative software used to organize and analyze collected data and categorize themes, including “specific topics, characteristics and attributes, actions, processes, emotions, beliefs, values, evaluation” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 345). The first coding cycle occurred using the themes that emerged from the initial interviews, and the second coding process entailed mapping the codes to the study’s research questions. After a thorough review and multiple transcript readings, the researcher generated themes from the codes and added subcodes for further analysis (see Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). As a result, the dominant themes emerged. This section includes the prominent themes and findings for each research question.

Research Question 1

RQ1 focused on the experiences of the traditional attendee and their lived experiences specific to spiritual formation. Answering RQ1—What are the perspectives of Christians from the hybrid church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and spiritual formation?—entailed exploring the participants’ lived experiences to understand how they perceived spiritual formation in the church setting they attended. Participant 1T felt that attending the traditional church setting had matured her into the leader she is today. Each interview participant attributed their involvement in the traditional church setting to their spiritual growth. Participant 3T said she needed to see her shepherd in person and suggested there is an aroma in the sanctuary that cannot be experienced elsewhere. Six participants felt the need to be in community in person, as in-person connections were essential.

The theme that aligned with this research question was spiritual growth and improvement in person with a subtheme of corporate worship experience. This theme emerged from the central

answers and perceptions of each participant. The respondents' perceptions of spiritual formation aligned with connecting and fellowship with their church family. Participant 7T attributed her motivation to attend the traditional setting to an opportunity to connect with people. Participant 8T's purpose for attending the traditional setting was growth and fellowship. It is something the participants look forward to; it is something they need. When asked, "Do you feel certain benefit needed is missing for those that choose to attend the virtual setting versus the traditional setting?" Participants 1T, 2T, and 3T did not hesitate in their responses. They felt very strongly about the need to be in the sanctuary; if they chose to worship virtually, they would be void of the experience of connecting with their church family. The researcher attributed this topic to a corporate worship experience and chose it as a subtheme. The following interview questions and respondents' answers were related to RQ1:

IQ1. What effects has attending the Christian hybrid church traditional brick-and-mortar setting had on your life?

P1T: "It has grounded me in my faith. I have developed and grown as a leader. Being able to get up before people and preach, pray. I am who I am today because of what I learned growing up in the traditional setting."

P2T: "I have keys. I would go to church on Saturday night, sleep just to be a part of worship on Sunday morning, because of what church has meant to me in my life."

P3T: "It has had a positive effect pertaining to my spiritual growth from childhood to adulthood. It has contributed to my awareness of what having a relationship with God is all about, what coming to the sanctuary is all about. The sheep needs to see their shepherd in person."

P8T: "Church is where we go to fellowship, learn, and come together as community."

IQ2. What motivates you to attend the Christian hybrid church traditional setting vs. the virtual setting?

P1T: "I don't know if I could be a member of a church and never go there...never could go and be around people...I don't know how spiritually nurturing that would be for me. And that could be I'm a product of a different era; I'm a church baby; I'm a church girl of traditional church."

P7T: “The connecting with the people. If I was only virtual, the only reason I would come in person would be for the personal connection. That would be the only thing I would feel I needed.”

IQ6. Do you feel certain benefits needed is missing for those that choose to attend the virtual church setting in place of the hybrid’s traditional church setting?

P1T: “Yes, I believe that relationship and fellowship...that might be missing. You can get the word; you can pray. There is an element of touching people that I think we may miss. People that are online only, and we never get to know them.”

P2T: “The community component, I think God moves in community the way He does not move in individual settings. It wasn’t good for Adam to be alone, [so] the first community was instituted. Sometimes we have to remind people though you are digital, you are still a part of this community.”

P3T: “Yes, the physical touch that’s needed, the spiritual care and compassionate touch that you cannot get virtually. For me, sometimes just sitting in the sanctuary is fulfilling. I previously had surgery, [and] I went to the traditional setting because I wanted to make sure I was in the place even while physically recovering. I didn’t stay for the whole service, but being in the place, I believe another layer of healing takes place in your spirit that you benefit from physically.”

Research Question 2

RQ2 focused on the experience of the digital attendees and their lived experiences specific to spiritual formation: What are the perspectives of Christians from the virtual church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the virtual church community and spiritual formation? The online attendees had a positive view of their experiences of spiritual formation in the digital setting. Participant 4D’s story exemplified experiencing spiritual formation from online engagement. She shared how her entire family began to experience better outcomes in their lives as a result of the teaching she received from her church via live stream. She was very passionate and excited as she spoke; the researcher could feel her heart and the presence of the Lord as she told her story. Her marriage was better, her finances were better, and she experienced spiritual growth in areas she had not found it before. She mentioned fasting, which she had never done before. The teaching she received from

her pastor online has been life-changing and produced spiritual growth. When asked, “Do you think virtual church can support and enhance the attendee’s relationship with God?” she replied “yes” because of her personal experiences. 5D’s story showed that his experience as an online attendee had been impactful, leading him to experience growth in his walk with the Lord. He expressed joy in reaching beyond his local community and connecting with other brothers and sisters in Christ as he engaged in online church opportunities.

Participant 2T is an Elder over the spiritual formation and Christian discipleship department. She had not only experienced growth herself but had to opportunity to teach and witness the growth of others in the online setting. When asked the question, “Do you feel that your relationship with God has improved because of your interaction and attendance of a virtual church community?” P2T smiled as he responded “yes” and explained that he had found a good church home. The theme that aligned with this research question was spiritual growth and improvement online, which was the dominant factor in the participants’ responses. The subthemes of building relationships beyond local community and engagement opportunities, which both churches offered. The following interview questions and the respondents’ answers were related to RQ2:

IQ3: What are some of the joys you have experienced regarding leadership in an online ministry?

P1T: “I would say some of the joys is...watching the young people take more leadership. Because we see more young people engaging and leading with technology. Running the stream, running the cameras...I think that’s one of the joys. It’s made room for more young people to lead and actively be involved in ministry”

P2T: “Those that I have been blessed to have the opportunity to help shepherd, see our digital community grow, and experience spiritual formation those in different states.”

P6T: “Being creative.”

IQ4: What effects has attending the Christian hybrid church virtual church setting had on your life?

P4D: “I did not realize how spiritually dry and lacking my life was until I started attending church again. Gaining clarity and understanding of who God is and the role He plays in my life has opened my eyes to the presence of God in our life. Every aspect of our lives has been dramatically improved since we have been attending virtual church. Our physical and mental health, my job is much better. Our marriage is so much stronger. Our children have been blessed. Reconnecting with God through virtual church has changed our life for the better. I didn’t know anything about fasting, [but] I’ve learned to make fasting a part of my lifestyle. It has played a major role in helping me to be in focus with God, my purpose, and His plan for my life.”

P5D: “Well, it’s been, I think, really powerful in a lot of different ways. I think...for our family, having a church home is good and there is regularity of worship...that you know the experience is filling...and uplifting and...they talk about real things. They deal with real issues. And it’s not just that they are funny, I like the people you know we get in the chat and joke and the jokes that people are saying...it’s a community and so I think that part is...kind of powerful and somewhat unexpected. I’ve never done anything virtually like this. It’s not teachings. It’s not like conferences and those kinds of things. It’s a different...kind of community...but that part has been really good. Initially...it was a strange experience you know, you don’t know the people, you don’t know the place, and you just kind of trying to observe...I think the things you can observe perhaps are different than in a place. You could feel it differently. But...I think that there is a point to where you realize that you know this really is just a blessing and a benefit to our lives.”

IQ5. What motivates you to attend the Christian hybrid church virtual setting vs. the brick-and-mortar setting?

P4D: “We were faithful members of a physical church in the local community in which we live. I had several miscarriages; finally, I put it on the altar and walked away. It was a struggle; it was difficult during those times. We reached out to our local church for prayer, and we didn’t receive any support, so it wasn’t a good fit for us anymore. We visited several churches in the area, and nothing really spoke to us in the way that the [Georgia church] did when attending virtually. The way which the bishop teaches and breaks down the concepts of The Scriptures has enlightened us. It has influenced the way we study The Scriptures.”

IQ6. Do you think virtual church can support and enhance the attendee’s relationship with God? How has it enhanced your life?

P4D: Yes, we have personally experienced growth in God since we have been attending virtually.

P5D: “Yes.” [*smiles*]

Researcher: “In which ways?”

P5D: “Well [*shrugs*]. I think about it in different ways. I understand that there are places that are holy. There are places that you know the ground is sacred...it’s something in that place, and so that is real...but that’s not only one place, that place you know can exist in

many places. But understanding I think that the spirit is everywhere, and in all things it's like you can connect, and at the same time, there's not just the connection I think to God and the spirit of God, but it's the connection to the people of God....I remember the first time, and it was so vivid [*closes eyes*]. They are really talking about us. They are talking to us, [and] they never called our name. He was talking about the sheep, 'Hear the shepherd's voice'...and that there are sheep in many forms like this is not my only flock like there are many flocks of sheep and I knew...he was talking about us."

IQ7. Do you feel that your relationship with God has improved because of your interaction and attendance of a virtual church community? If yes, in what ways?

P5D: "Oh yes! [*laughing*] I think partly because we had not found a good church home for us... Our experience was individual, family... Now we are reading, and we're praying... They have powerful singers...but they have different styles of music, and I think music is an important place of connection. Sometimes I think...the way the music speaks to you makes all the difference. Sometimes...I think...virtually, that's been kind of an interesting experience. Sometimes they are recorded, and sometimes there are people singing live in the live stream, and the style of music is different. Sometimes it's more Pentecostal, and other times it's like..."Are they moving toward Christian rock?" ...I think just being with music and being with community—those things have made all the difference. And then also, you know, I think leadership...I think that makes a big difference, too."

Research Question 3

RQ3 focused on the experience of the benefits and weaknesses of the traditional and virtual church setting: What are the perceived benefits and weaknesses of attending the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and virtual church community affiliated with Christian churches? The purpose of this research question was to explore the participants' perceptions of the benefits and weaknesses of traditional and online church settings. Participant 6T felt nothing could replace the power of God manifested in corporate worship. Each participant described being in the sanctuary as feeling an intense presence they could not find elsewhere, and some described a special type of aroma in the sanctuary of God. When asked, "What benefit do you see in attending a hybrid brick-and-mortar church setting versus a virtual church setting?" each participant referenced the presence that dwells in the sanctuary and the experience of worship under the same roof as the attendees. The theme aligned with this research question regarding the

benefits of the traditional setting was intensified worship experience in the sanctuary, with the subthemes of fellowship with the congregants, in person, safe space, spiritual care, and compassionate touch. The following interview question and respondents' answers were related to RQ3.

Benefits of Traditional Setting: Intensified Worship Experience in the Sanctuary

IQ1. What is the benefit you see in attending a hybrid brick-and-mortar church setting vs. a virtual church setting?

P1T: "It's something that you get...when you come together bodily that you get in-person, that you don't get online. It's easy to get distracted when you are online. In the sanctuary, you are more present in the moment. It's something about seeing people in person, touching people, and hearing people's voices in person."

P3T: "It's just something special about being in the physical building. You have such a greater experience because you have folks who are gathered together for one purpose. A coming together in community to pray and worship and experience the delivery of the Word of God. It's intensified when you are in community in the building. The sanctuary has always been that safe place to experience the power and presence of God."

P6T: "You curate your own faith with respect to the digital. Nothing replaces the power and presence of God and the corporate accountability. You can do stuff wrong alone. There is something about being in the church where you actually come and have to show up. I think now the church is working through what that looks like."

P8T: "Personally, because I'm an in-person learner, when I have the opportunity to participate in the local congregation in person, it becomes more relevant to me."

Benefits of the Virtual Setting: Flexibility

The purpose of RQ3 was to explore the perceptions of online church attendees about the benefits they see in worshipping online versus the traditional setting. Flexibility was the dominant response. The participants appreciated the opportunity to worship wherever they were and connect with a church beyond their local community. The theme that aligned with this research question regarding the benefit of the virtual setting was flexibility, which emerged from the three online attendees' answers. P9D expressed that, due to her health challenges, virtual church was a safe space for her to worship and stay connected to her church family. Participant 5D felt online

attendance was freeing, giving him the flexibility to stay connected with others and participate. P4D said that virtual church allowed her to tune in to the worship service on the days she had to work (i.e., flexibility with subthemes of convenience and safe space). The following interview questions and the respondents' answers were related to RQ3.

IQ2. What is the benefit you see in attending a virtual church setting vs. a hybrid's traditional brick-and-mortar church setting?

P4D: "It provides the opportunity to attend church past your local community barrier. It has been moving and life-changing. Bishops have prophesied over our life. The teaching we have received has changed our lives. The benefit is you can always go back and rewatch the live stream. You can pause the stream to take notes. It allows you to worship on your own time, your own way, and from wherever you are (home, work, etc.). Sometimes I'm working during service times, but since I am virtual, I can watch it when it's actually live. It also gives me the opportunity to worship with both campuses."

P5D: "Well, I don't really see a versus. I mean, there are some differences... I think they both serve the same function, that is, keeping us connected to God, keeping us connected to others...just keeping our mind right. So, I think those things are present in both. I think there are some differences. I find that, in some ways, the virtual campus is somewhat freeing."

P9D: "The benefit for me is the opportunity to stay safe due to my health challenges and still receive the word and stay in fellowship with my church family."

Weakness of Traditional Setting and Virtual Setting: Limitations

The purpose of RQ3 was to explore the perceived weaknesses of the traditional and virtual settings. Each participant's response surrounded limitations concerning the traditional and virtual settings. The traditional setting is not as flexible as the virtual setting. If worshippers cannot attend service on the designated days and times, they miss the chance to experience live worship. In the virtual setting, the participants expressed limitations in which church activities they could attend. Participant 4D was concerned because her children could not participate in the church activities on Youth Sundays. She was also somewhat sad she could not take part in church-sponsored activities, such as cookouts. Viewing those activities virtually is not the same as sitting at a cookout, enjoying food with one's church family. Each participant mentioned

experiencing technology issues with online viewing, including the live stream freezing or the sound going out. These challenges could be frustrating, as viewers can often not go back to watch what they missed. The theme that aligned with this research question about the weaknesses of traditional and virtual settings was limitations; the three subthemes were technology issues, isolation, and distractions. The following interview questions and the respondents' answers were related to RQ3.

IQ4. Do you feel certain benefits needed is missing for those that chose to attend the virtual church setting in place of the hybrid's traditional church setting?

P4D: "Yes, the church had an anniversary cookout that we were able to stream virtually, but it wasn't like being there in person, experiencing the food, laughing, and talking with the congregants. There are activities that the youth have that my children cannot participate in because we are virtual. On Youth Sunday, the kids can't really participate. I really miss them being able to participate in the youth day activities."

P5D: [*Looks up toward the ceiling, thinking*] No. Well, I tried to give it a thought like...there is something that I feel like I am missing. Is there something that I feel like I want that I'm not getting? [*thinking*] Is there something more important that I feel like I need I'm not getting? [*shaking his head no*] I don't think so. I feel like maybe there will be sometimes where I need something, and I'll see if it could be delivered in this capacity. As I said earlier, when we needed prayer, there was someone there to pray with us. I...feel like there is community...so I don't know, I don't have anything in mind."

P9D: "If I'm not there and my elders or ministers get together, I've missed out. There might be some information that I have to get secondhand. When the spirit moves there, I can still sense His presence here, but it seems more intensified when you are all in one place."

IQ4. What are the perceived weaknesses of attending the virtual church setting vs. the hybrid brick-and-mortar church setting?

P1T: "Technology issues. It can also lead to isolation. A lot of people are dealing with mental health issues because they have isolated themselves. Also, how do you reach people physically in a crisis moment?"

P4D: "We live in the pacific daylight time zone, so we cannot attend the weekly prayer teleconference calls at 6 a.m. (EST). As of right now, it's not recorded for us to listen to the replay. We are not there physically, so we don't have the opportunity to go to the altar and have the team lay hands on my family and pray for us. To feel the warmth of the hugs and dancing in the aisle, running around the church in praise, looking at the high

beams and structure of the church. I believe that something is lost between the translation of the virtual and the traditional setting.”

P5D: “The only major weakness that I have encountered is really the technical parts...there are times where either on our end or occasionally on their end ... it’s glitching, and it’s stopping. I’m trying to hear, and it’s going back...sometimes that can be a difficulty. You kind of feel like if you were there at least that kind...of barrier wouldn’t be there. So, I think sometimes that technical part, you know, can be a thing ...sometimes even like the volume goes down, and now I’m turning it up and I can’t hear it... All those kind of things could be a concern, but I think overall...you know, you just kind of roll with that.”

P6T: “The lack of accountability, the lack of there is power in numbers coming together. The Holy Spirit fell when they were all in one room. Not when they were in their individual basements, doing the dishes and watching service. We are going to have to really work through what that looks like. We have the millennials and the Gen Z’s who are very relational. I am so concerned about the millennials and the Gen Z’s because they are so relational, they have to be together, and because we are not together, I see a drop, so we have to figure that out.”

P9D: “Sometimes the live stream freezes or drops. If it starts up again, you do have the opportunity to go back and watch it. Also, I don’t get the opportunity to physically fellowship with my church family.”

IQ13. What key obstacles have you overcome as a church regarding online discipleship?

P1T: “Attendance, people engaging digitally; it’s so easy to get distracted when you are online.”

P2T: “That I can’t come across the room and hug people. We used to take time in our services where we said you are not complete until you have received and given seven jugs. Sometimes people would cry when you hug them. Conversations with people at the altar when they get saved. That personal piece that you experience when you are in the same room physically with other people.”

Research Question 4

RQ4 focused on the traditional attendee and their lived experiences of perceived best practice spiritual formation models: What best practices and models exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the hybrid church brick-and-mortar attendees? Participant 7T is the Executive Director of Ministry, assisting with the spiritual formation material in the lives of the attendees. She shared the various programs implemented in the Illinois church to influence

spiritual formation. The church aims for its congregants to Connect, Grow, and Go, a philosophy focused on producing maturation. She said the Illinois church spiritual formation models consisted of new believers' classes and Christian discipleship through small groups that gather weekly to study the Bible. All classes are available in person and online, with the lessons centered on group members' needs. The church used a curriculum-based software, Thinkific, to develop lesson plans for spiritual formation. Another engagement opportunity was that in becoming new members, individuals became part of a tribe for pastoral care. Tribes are small groups led by an Elder, who serves as the point of contact for membership and cares for each member. Several classes are web-based, enabling attendance from home.

Participant 2T is the Elder of Christian Discipleship and Spiritual Formation in the Georgia church. The Georgia church spiritual formation models is geared toward the traditional and the online community and is being enhanced for a more effective reach. The Georgia church offered several engagement opportunities through discipleship classes, Sunday school classes, and online Bible study via Zoom. Participant 2T said the spiritual formation models was an organic model, adjusted based on the needs of the church's members and community. The theme that aligned with RQ3 was engagement opportunity for learning in person, which emerged from participant responses' about numerous engagement opportunities as a part of their spiritual formation model. The following interview questions and respondents' answers were related to RQ4.

IQ1. Are you aware of spiritual formation models being implemented for the hybrid's traditional brick-and-mortar attendees? If yes, can you provide insight or copies of these models?

P2T: "The spiritual formation of our digital community, we like to refer to it as a digital community and not a splicing of two things to become one. We are a church that has a digital community as well as a physical community. We do have spiritual formation for both of those aspects. Because of the pandemic, we were driven to think about ways to reach other people to develop an organic model, meaning that it's not etched in stone, to

develop an organic model that can meet the spiritual formation needs of the digital community and the physical community. So, we began to open up our Christian discipleship classes via Zoom and for our institutionalized church. Our mission statement is ‘to teach relevant, knowledgeable information that influences the individual to develop and fulfill both their thirst and appetite to be closer to God.’ We recognize that we as individuals can’t fortify that for someone. We can only make things available, but the person has to be invested in their own relationship with God. We teach, ‘How are you investing in yourself to fortify and strength your relationship with the tools that we are making available for you?’”

P7T: “For both that are online as well as those that come regularly, our methodology for assimilation for maturation is through our Life Groups and our classes. Those are primarily on Zoom, which people who are online can access, as well as those who attend Sundays in person can also connect in this way. We have New Members Class, which is the first thing that the person who joins the church will go to, and we have an online version of that, that they can take online and complete it, and we have an in-person version of that for people who come to the traditional setting. Those that attend virtual church can also attend in-person new members’ classes. Each member is also assigned to a Tribe for pastoral care.”

Researcher: “The online version of the new members class. Is that a curriculum format?”

P7T: “It is a complete replica of what is given in person for the new members class. It’s just in video format with questions.”

Researcher: “How is it set up?”

P7T: “It’s a course through Thinkific.”

Researcher: “Is that a software that can be used to implement courses online that you can add your own curriculum to it?”

P7T: “Yes.”

Researcher: “How often do life groups meet?”

P7T: “Three 8-week sessions throughout the year weekly, three times a year. These are 8-week groups that people can sign up for based on their interest topics. Some of them are foundational ones that’s always done, such as Financial Piece, Grief Share, Foundations going through books of the Bible, Faith Builders for new believers taking them through spiritual discipline. We use the Life Group setting for people to connect to members of the church. The goal is to Connect, Grow, and Go. Connect, meet new people. Grow using the topic or curriculum being chosen, and to Go. Each life group takes on an outreach project that they do at the end together.”

Researcher: “Is there a written curriculum for new members/Life Group that you can provide me a copy of for this research project?”

P7T: “No, it’s vast. We have [a] new members class curriculum. We use different topics that are already actually based on small-group curriculum or books.”

Researcher: “What type of teaching or topics does the curriculum consist of?”

P7T: “That they have some type of video teaching; the leader of the class is not necessarily teaching them. We have people that have been trained to facilitate the material. It’s not a teaching like [a] Sunday School environment. It’s a Life Group, so everybody is participating, and one is facilitating the material. We have new members class, which is [one of] the first things that the person who joins the church will go to, and we have an online version of that, that they can take online to complete it, and we have an in-person version of that for people who come to the traditional setting. Those that attend virtual church can also attend in-person new members class.”

P6T: “The virtual right now we are putting together. All spiritual formation centers around Life Groups. Our mission for life groups is ‘Connect, Grow, and Go.’ We just simply took the life groups and put them online. Next year we will make some attempt to have some of those life groups in-person in a home, café, or at the church. Right now, in particular, I do leadership development each month with my leaders, and I have more attendance with my leaders online [Zoom] than I did in person.”

IQ6. What are the purpose, mission, and vision of the church you attend?

P6T: “We are a holistic church grounded in love in order to save the lost, disciple believers, build strong families and be change agents for Christ in the community.”

Researcher: Have the vision of the church changed since the pandemic?

P6T: “The vision has not changed; the delivery system has changed.”

Research Question 5

RQ5 focused on the experience of the virtual attendee and their lived experience as it pertains to perceived best practice spiritual formation models: What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the virtual church attendees?

The purpose of this research question was to explore the online attendees’ perception of the spiritual formation models implemented in the church. Both the Georgia and Illinois churches offer virtual engagement opportunities, just as in the traditional setting. They have uniquely incorporated the use of apps for the digital setting to reach those who need prayer or would like to give their life to Christ. The Illinois church utilizes the text by mobile app for attendees to

respond to the altar appeal; the Georgia church had a text app in which individuals could text the word “decision” and receive a response from the person assigned to that ministry. Both churches have extensive engagement opportunities for attendees and spiritual formation models geared toward engaging and connecting. The theme that aligned with this research question was engagement opportunity for learning online and connecting. The following interview questions and the respondents’ answers were related to RQ5.

IQ1. Are you aware of spiritual formation models being implemented for the hybrid’s virtual church attendees? If yes, can you provide insight or copies of these models?

P9D: “There is [an] opportunity to attend Bible study or Life Groups each Wednesday that is a part of your growth and development. Sometimes special worship services are held, such as revivals during the week. We also have the partnership, which is the leadership of the church. We meet once a month for training, [which] is a part of how to better serve the people of God and how to participate in other events and help our Bishop further the ministry of the church.”

IQ4. Some churches and leaders do not see the value of changing to reach this generation. How has your church changed in general to reach this population and influence spiritual formation?

P1T: “We have not only moved to streaming our services live, [but] we also purchased quality equipment. We’ve updated our website; we are obtaining an app so that individuals can engage with us. We are investing more resources into enhancing our digital presence.”

P6T: “The seven last words of a dying church [are] ‘we have always done it that way,’ and that’s not us. We’ve changed our order of worship 10 to 15 times during this period trying to get the right flow. In terms of spiritual formation, we are constantly looking at what’s working and what’s not working.”

IQ13. What opportunity does your ministry give for people to respond to the gospel in the traditional setting and virtual setting?

P2T: “In the virtual setting, we have an app and a QR code. The QR code asks you if you want to be saved, restored, or need prayer. If you click ‘save,’ it instructs you to dial a number in which someone will answer and lead you to Christ. In the traditional setting, we use the QR code. When scanned and completed, it goes to the point person that day, [and] then after service, they will meet with you. You then attend the new members class, which is hybrid, which is web-based. It’s a link you complete your lessons and graduate.”

P6T: “We make the appeal. All they have to do is text the word ‘decision’ to [redacted]. We go into the community; we are very strategic about how we do evangelism. We do a huge easter resurrection campaign getting people to respond.”

Researcher: “If I am an online attendee and I text the word ‘decision’ to [redacted], what happens?”

P6T: “My team responds to you.”

IQ14. How does using your virtual church setting engage the Bible?

P6T: “We put The Scriptures up where they can see them. We also match them with graphics that speak to that particular text.”

IQ11. What, if any, opportunities does your church provide to train leaders to disciple others virtually?

P2T: “Every year, at the top of the year, we do a leadership training. This year will be focused on training how to teach in the digital space: how to be language-sensitive, filters necessary to be effective in digital teaching, your content, what do you say to the scientist, being prepared, and being relevant.”

Research Question 6

RQ6 focused on technology and its utilization in influencing spiritual formation: In what ways do churches use technology to continue their discipleship ministry and influence spiritual formation in attendees? The purpose of this research question was to explore the perception of the attendees when it pertains to technology and spiritual formation. Participant 1T, the Co-Pastor at the Georgia church, shared that technology has changed how the church engages with its participants. The attendees have more opportunities to engage with church activities online. Extensive online opportunities were not available at the Georgia church pre-COVID. Participant 6T, the Bishop and Senior Pastor of the Illinois church, reported that since 2019, the church had experienced fewer people giving their lives to Christ and attendees partaking in baptism. According to the annual report, 36 people gave their lives to Christ in 2019; in 2020 and 2021, there were only three and two, respectively. Two people gave their lives to Christ in 2021, compared to 69 in 2019 and 19 in 2020. The leaders of both churches are working to discover the

most effective way to influence spiritual formation in the lives of their attendees, with a primary goal of mastering the digital space. The theme aligned with this research question was community-based platforms with the subtheme of digital enhancement for better presentation.

The following interview questions and the respondents' answers were related to RQ6.

IQ1. How has technology changed how the church engages with its attendees?

P1T: "It changed a lot out of necessity. We have decided to stream our services online and offer other engagement opportunities for the congregants online."

P2T: "We did always have a hybrid model. There was always some digital opportunity to where you could go and pull archives and listen to some past teachings. As a result of the pandemic and the government's instructions to be particular on how to hold services, we found the need to start streaming."

P6T: "According to our annual report: In 2019, 36 people gave their life to Christ. In 2020, three people gave their life to Christ, [and] in 2021, two people gave their life to Christ. In 2019, 69 people rededicated their life to Christ; in 2020, 19 people rededicated their life to Christ; in 2021, 13 people rededicated their life to Christ. In 2019, 97 people joined [the] church; in 2020, 45 people joined [the] church. In 2021, 21 people joined [the] church. In 2019, 106 people were baptized; in 2019, 45 people were baptized. In 2020, three people were baptized. In 2021, one person was baptized. We never shut down during the pandemic. In terms of my team and I, we did live digital worship on Sunday. Sunday mornings, I did not prerecord the worship service. I did it live and streamed. On Wednesdays...e-church was prerecorded. I think that kept my church together. It kept my core together. A lot of my colleagues recorded and hit play on Sundays. I felt more of a connection to the people to literally be live digital than recorded digital. We came back probably earlier than many of the African American churches. When the governor gave churches permission to come back, we came back."

P7T: "We've always used technology. When the pandemic hit, we kept it moving because we were already doing e-church. We [weren't] doing it every week, but at different times of the year when attendance was less. We've always streamed, so when the pandemic hit, we just had more people online than in the sanctuary. The only thing we had to do was tighten up our online presence, meaning making it a better product for online."

Research Question 7

RQ7 focused on technology and its utilization in influencing spiritual formation: Do churches find using technology an effective means of influencing spiritual formation in the attendees? The purpose of this research question was to explore how churches use technology to

implement their spiritual formation models. Both the Georgia and Illinois churches are present on popular social media platforms and other digital delivery methods, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. They were also accustomed to Zoom and StreamYard, web-based video services on which they stream their weekly services; the Illinois church also uses Roku to stream live. All platforms were ways to have a broader reach and engage participants. The Scripture teaches that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be preached and taught to all nations (Matthew 28). The participating churches have chosen to utilize these tools and extend their reach as they carry out the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. Their traditional and online attendees shared their perceptions of spiritual formation, including growth. The theme that aligned with this research question was growth through digital means. The following interview questions and the respondents' answers were related to RQ7.

IQ1. What forms of technology and social media platforms are used to engage with the attendees?

P2T: “Facebook, YouTube, StreamYard, Twitter, [and] Zoom are used to stream worship services and other engagement activities and training. Teleconference is utilized for reading of The Scriptures and prayer.”

P7T: “Zoom for life groups. Online, we have a streaming platform that we use through live stream; we stream through to...[the] website. We also stream to Facebook, YouTube, and Roku.”

Evaluation of the Research Design

This qualitative study had a phenomenological design, which enables focusing on an individual's lived experiences with a given phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this study, the lived experiences explored were with the best practice spiritual formation models in the Christian hybrid church traditional and online attendees. The phenomenological design was appropriate to elicit detailed data from semistructured interviewees' responses to open-ended questions. Data analysis “culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individual who

have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). The nine major themes that emerged from the study were spiritual growth and improvement in traditional space, spiritual growth and improvement on online engagement opportunities, intensified worship experience in the sanctuary, limitations, flexibility, engagement opportunities for in-person learning, engagement opportunities for online learning, community-based platforms, and growth through digital means. As a result of using the phenomenological design, the researcher understands the experiences of traditional and online attendees and the perceived best practice spiritual formation models implemented in the Georgia and Illinois Christian hybrid churches.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

*“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter.”
Ecclesiastes 12:13a, NKJV*

Overview

This phenomenological study was an exploration of perceived best practice models transcending traditional church culture and implemented to influence spiritual formation in the lives of believers and nonbelievers in traditional and online communities. The researcher has evaluated data that could potentially benefit churches and leadership. Given the church’s role, it has a significant impact on society. Wagganer (2008) asserted, “The church is called, directed, gifted, and empowered to make disciple” (p. 12). Similarly, Towns (2008) stated, “The Great Commission is fulfilled by finding sheep (making disciples), folding sheep (baptizing), and feeding sheep (teaching)” (p. 643).

Five experts were asked to contribute to research by providing input on spiritual formation and the local church. Tan commented, “I believe that the role of the local church in spiritual formation in Christ should be the primary or major role or goal of every local church” (Barton et al., 2014, p. 293). When asked about the purpose of the church, TenElshof stated, “The church is God’s family and exists to lovingly hold, support, and grow each member in their relationship to God for fulfillment of their God-given mission” (p. 292). Similarly, Barton (2014) asserted, “The Church (capital C) is the Body of Christ on the earth now and it is the primary context in which we grow up in every way into him who is our head (Eph. 4:15)” (p. 294). Chandler (2014) expressed, “The local church is foundational in this process from not only a biblical and theological perspective but also a developmental, relational, and missional one” (p. 294). The fifth contributor, Wilhoit, stated, “Spiritual formation takes place in community and the community in which it should take place is that of the church” (Barton et al., 2014, p. 294).

When it comes to helping people grow in their faith in Christ, the local church must rediscover its original purpose. The purpose of God’s family—the church—is to help all individuals mature in their walks with God so they can more effectively carry out the work God has given them to do in the world (Barton et al., 2014; Callam, 2001; Falconer, 2001). Many churches have found ways other than the traditional methods to influence spiritual formation in the lives of its congregants. They are becoming “smart” churches that are evolving more than simply being. Rather than being “just a virtual or digital church that airs services online to replace services in a church building, the smart church presents a church and its mission: building relationships and making disciples on a digital platform as a seamless ministry” (Oentoro & Idayanti, 2021, p. 205)

Chapter Five is a summary of the conclusions drawn from data collection and analysis. This chapter focuses on the potential implications and applications of the research and concludes with the study’s limitations and suggestions for future research.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore best practice spiritual formation models and the perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation in the hybrid church community brick-and-mortar and online church settings for individuals in Christian hybrid churches.

Research Questions

Seven research questions guided the study.

RQ1. What are the perspectives of Christians from the hybrid church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and spiritual formation?

RQ2. What are the perspectives of Christians from the virtual church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the virtual church community and spiritual formation?

RQ3. What are the perceived benefits and weaknesses of attending the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and virtual church community affiliated with Christian churches?

RQ4. What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the hybrid church brick-and-mortar attendees?

RQ5. What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the virtual church attendees?

RQ6. In what ways do churches use technology to continue their discipleship ministry and influence spiritual formation in attendees?

RQ7. Do churches find using technology an effective means of influencing spiritual formation in the attendees?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

Spiritual Formation Models In The Church

With this study, the researcher explored perceived best practice spiritual formation models in the Christian hybrid church traditional and online attendees. In many ways, the church is the primary institution in the lives of its members and visitors responsible for shaping their spirituality. (Barton, et al., 2014). The conclusions and implications provide an increased understanding of how traditional and online attendees perceived their lived experience at the Christian hybrid church where they participate and the spiritual formation models in place to influence congregants.

At the study's outset, one of the assumptions was that participating in digital platforms for virtual church—consisting of Biblical teachings, encouragement, strengthening one another, prayer, and connecting with the Christian community—could encourage spiritual formation in an individual's life just as in a local hybrid brick-and-mortar church setting. The conclusions, implications, and applications presented in this chapter focus on the lived experiences of nine attendees consisting of leadership and lay members of Christian hybrid churches in Georgia and Illinois.

Research Question 1 Conclusion

RQ1 was, What are the perspectives of Christians from the hybrid church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and spiritual formation? The theme that aligned with this question was spiritual growth and improvement in traditional space. As the researcher analyzed the interview responses, it became evident that each participant had experienced continual growth. All five participants who attended the traditional church setting expressed an intensified corporate experience from being in community in the same place, under the same roof. All participants' responses indicated a strong bond associated with worshipping corporately in the sanctuary among other congregants and being rooted and grounded in their faith. This finding aligned with Butler (2013), who asserted that, "By nature, individuals are social beings. As a result, knowledge and growth come through interaction within a social context and that which is gleaned is dependent upon both the quantity and quality of information which is given" (p. 22).

Research Question 2 Conclusion

RQ2 was, What are the perspectives of Christians from the virtual church community who are affiliated with Christian churches with regard to the attendance of the virtual church

community and spiritual formation? The theme that aligned with this research question was spiritual growth and improvement online. Data analysis showed that online congregants had experienced exceptional spiritual formation through digital platforms; they could identify with the aroma present in the traditional setting of being in the sanctuary. Each online participant expressed a life-changing experience from the preaching and teaching they received while participating in the live-streamed digital church setting. Two online participants often felt as if the pastor spoke directly to them, like they were sitting in the sanctuary.

Lowe and Lowe (2018) asserted, “Our place within social networks and the relationships we develop with others lends itself to mutual, whole-person development. Reciprocity in relationships doesn’t simply enhance social development; it enhances physical, psychological, spiritual, emotional, and moral development as well” (pp. 132–133). All three online participants reported experiencing growth because of their involvement in the digital church setting. Butler (2013) found that an instructor’s relationship with students attending evangelical institutions utilizing online learning platforms prompted by constant engagement was a positive experience for students, contributing to their spiritual growth. The participants showed passion in relating their experiences of encountering spiritual formation, including positive life changes in their marriages, finances, and families; some saw online worship as a lifeline. This finding aligned with Burkhalter (2020), who found that gathering online provided an interactive community with collective growth. Similarly, Grayson (2017) found more open communication and new ways of leadership in the online setting. Centola (2010) suggested that digital platforms designed for social networking that provide users with more interactive tools and opportunities will be more advantageous than those with fewer opportunities. Centola concluded, “Many behaviors spread through social contact. ...As a result, the network structure of who is connected to whom can

critically affect the extent to which a behavior diffuses across a population” (para. 1). Larajo et al. (2014) found that social networking sites and individuals’ behavior are connected. Social media is such a source of influence that “it is important [to] understand that social media is not just a virtual space disconnected from life” (Lewis, 2018, para. 1). Lowe and Lowe noted, “Social network analysis suggests that people connected in a social network influence one another in a variety of ways” (p. 127).

Research Question 3 Conclusion

RQ3 was, What are the perceived benefits and weaknesses of attending the hybrid church brick-and-mortar community and virtual church community affiliated with Christian churches? The themes associated with this research question were intensified experience in the sanctuary (benefits in the traditional setting), flexibility (benefits in the online setting), and limitations (weaknesses in the traditional and online settings). A significant finding was the shared experiences of participants who attended the traditional and online settings. All participants reported intensified experiences, whether from being in the actual sanctuary or enjoying the flexibility of the virtual environment. Online attendees did not have to miss church because of work or other activities; they could access the live stream from wherever they were and engage in live worship with their church community. This finding aligned with Campbell and Garner (2016), who found that individuals prefer virtual church attendance options by connecting to Christian communities through digital platforms.

The participants’ perspectives aligned with Paul’s encounter with Jesus on Damascus Road (Acts 9), a place outside of a physical building or sanctuary. Paul’s encounter was no less life-changing than if he had met Jesus in the temple. Samra (2008) noted, “Paul...believed that the more his readers associate themselves with Christ, or define themselves in relation to Christ

and with the community of believers in Christ, the more their character will be conformed to the character of Christ” (p. 112). Perhaps the Lord was trying to teach His people how to encounter Him in modern places beyond the four walls of the church. As a result of a discipleship problem, churches are declining in growth (J. E. Smith, 2018). Learning how to translate methodology from The Scripture for discipleship would frame the church’s message to fit into the culture of the community in which it is to abide. The online participants were excited about experiencing church beyond their local community, which they saw as a God-sent opportunity.

Research Question 4 Conclusion

RQ4 was, What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the hybrid church brick-and-mortar attendees? The theme associated with this research question was engagement opportunity for in-person learning. Analyzing the data specific to this research question showed that the Georgia and Illinois churches had begun to make adjustments to better service and influence spiritual formation in the lives of the traditional and online communities. Both churches offered a range of engagement opportunities for their congregants in traditional and digital spaces. Their spiritual formation models includes discipleship classes, small groups, and weekly in-person and online worship services. Both churches strove to replicate the traditional service in the digital format, making the adjustments necessary to meet the online culture. P6D stated, “We are all walking around in a dark room with a lighter, flicking it, trying to get it to light. And the one that figures it out will be the one that gets the prize.” When asked the question “Are you aware of a spiritual formation model being implemented for the hybrid’s traditional brick-and-mortar and virtual church attendees?” P2T explained,

The spiritual formation of our digital community, we like to refer to it as a digital community and not a splicing of two things to become one. We don’t reference ourselves

as a hybrid church. We are a church that has a digital community as well as a physical community. We do have spiritual formation for both those aspects. Because of the pandemic, we were driven to think about ways to reach other people to develop an organic model, meaning that it's not etched in stone, to develop an organic model that can meet the spiritual formation needs of the digital community and the physical community. So we began to open up our Christian Discipleship Classes via Zoom and for our institutionalized church. Our mission statement is "to teach relevant knowledgeable information that influences the individual develop and fulfil both their thirst and appetite to be closer to God." We recognize that we as individuals can't fortify that for someone. We can only make things available, but the person has to be invested in their own relationship with God. We teach "How are you investing in yourself to fortify and strength your relationship with the tools that we are making available for you?"

P2T further explained what the church's spiritual formation model involves,

We do symposiums, weekly Sunday School. During the pandemic, we move to both a campus model and to a discipleship model, and in that moment, we recognized that we had to move our teaching to address the community; therefore, it couldn't be a Sunday School class. Within those 2 years of the pandemic, the need for discipleship was more centered around "Where is God in the midst of this?" So that changed our whole curriculum. We started reviewing the Scriptures with a spiritual lens: "What is the word behind the text? What are we hearing now when we look at 'Go ye unto all the world and make disciples?'" So not only was we dealing with the pandemic piece and isolation, we started to see people that look like you and I [who were] executed in the street in isolation from those who were to serve and protect. So, do I want to talk about Genesis and the Pentateuchs, or do I need to address the social imagination and the responsibility of Christ disciples in a moment where people are being killed in the streets? So, we used terms like "organic teaching." During that time, we went through a series. We made it available on Sunday mornings, Tuesdays afternoons, Wednesdays, Fridays, whenever the teaching could be available. We did a prophetic series during that time, then we did a series with a double entendre So we did a series, "Interpretation Matters": How now do we interpret a 3,000-year-old text that's a living text? How are we addressing the pandemic, social injustices, people being murdered in the street? And now, because of the digital community, everybody in the world can see it. What is the response of the local church to the people? We can't tell people that are hungry, "I'm going to pray for you that you get food." So, it demanded a different look even for Matthew 28: How do we "go" now? What do we do now with that text? What is the organic meaning of that text? Does that text transcend to 2022, and even now, postpandemic, what is "go" now into all the world where the airports have shut down? So, we had to move our curriculum to meet the needs of the people, which is why we have a more of an organic model and even that, even now— We took a 60-day sabbatical from Christian Formation classes because we were fasting and listening to the voice of the Spirit. One of the models now we are trying to create is a podcast model, which is both guide/logical and instructional because that now has become a need. Part of our command is to be living epistles, both read and known. It is not to be scripted epistles. We don't just lift up the script and regurgitate it; we live it. So now what is that saying? As the Director of Christian Formation and Discipleship, I can't put my head in the sand when someone says, "What are we going to

do about George Floyd? Is the church rallying?” What is our response? Wherever there is a catastrophe on any scale, there is, for the church, opportunity. So now how do we discern the opportunities in the catastrophe? This is what our spiritual formation model is cultivated around.

This finding is significant, in line with Shirley’s (2017) identification of churches’ need to understand the current environment, which could lead to the identification of a best practice spiritual formation model.

Research Question 5 Conclusion

RQ5 was, What best practices and models, if any, exist in Christian churches to develop spiritual formation in the virtual church attendees? The theme associated with this research question was engagement opportunity for learning online and connecting. The participating churches had enhanced their digital presence and launched multiple engagement opportunities for virtual attendees to experience weekly. J. E. Smith (2018) noted, “A study of the life and ministry of Jesus and that of the Early Church demonstrates a commitment to making disciples resulting in exponential growth” (p. 10). Interviews with the Georgia and Illinois churches’ leadership showed the significant measures undertaken to ensure that traditional and online attendees experienced growth through engagement opportunities. The accessibility of leaders for casual conversations or ministries helps to foster a feeling of community and belonging through these settings (Oentoro & Idayanti, 2021). The leaders expressed their experiences as spiritual formation, which they attributed to the teachings and spiritual formation models currently implemented in their churches. This finding responds to Gorrell’s (2017) recommendation for research on implementing effective spiritual formation models.

Research Question 6 Conclusion

RQ6 was, In what ways do churches use technology to continue their discipleship ministry and influence spiritual formation in attendees? The theme associated with this question

was community-based platforms. Interviews with nine participants showed that both churches utilized technology to influence spiritual formation in the lives of their congregants. To enhance engagement with traditional and online attendees, the Illinois church utilized web-based platforms and delivery methods for engagement, such as Zoom, Roku, teleconferencing, Facebook, mobile texting, RightNow Media, B-Roll, and Thinkific. Currently using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Zoom, and teleconferencing to engage with attendees in person and online, the Georgia church is also working on a logical and instructional podcast to enhance learning opportunities for their congregants. The COVID-19 pandemic required the participating church leaders to reassess their spiritual formation models and methods for the betterment of their ministry and attendees. The findings related to RQ6 aligned with Habenbuch (2020), who supported churches' use of technology to preach the Gospel and spread God's love. Centola (2010) identified community-based platforms as providing the most interactive tools and opportunities. This finding also aligned with Perkins (2012), who found that digital social platforms enabled interaction, unity, engagement, and encouragement among Christians. Cloete (2015) suggested that "digital technology provides the church with more tools and opportunities to reach more people with the gospel and is therefore seen as having a positive influence on church activities and institutional structures" (p. 2). It is possible to form a community within a digital culture, where the community is "more person-[centered] and need-[centered] than place-[centered]" (p. 3). Digital platforms provide space for users to build relationships and social bonds across geographical expanses (Cloete, 2015).

Research Question 7 Conclusion

RQ7 was, Do churches find using technology an effective means of influencing spiritual formation in the attendees? The theme associated with this research question was growth through

digital means. All participants interviewed revealed a positive and growth-filled experience due to their church's use of technology to enhance learning. Weekly Bible study at both churches is available through digital platforms only, which has increased attendance. Each church will keep online Bible study as a standard way of reaching beyond its four walls to influence spiritual formation in the lives of attendees. For example, when asked the question, "How has technology changed how the church engage with its attendees?" P2T shared,

We didn't always have a hybrid model, there was always some digital opportunity to where you can go pull from the archives and listen to some past teachings. As a result of the pandemic and the government instruction to be particular on how you hold church services, we found the need to start streaming. So now because so many churches are now streaming, we see the need to view our church as a product and access how we stand apart from others. So that our members won't feel compelled to go to others streaming service instead of their local church membership. We also had to review the length of service, the worship experience that would influence connection and engagement verses just listening to church while doing other things such as cooking etc. Is what being taught causing engagement number to increase or decrease? We also do a lot of phone call ministry, there is a team of us that break up the membership list by alphabet and call to engage with members that we haven't seen (we haven't seen you on Facebook, YouTube etc.) we haven't seen your engagement through comments etc. When we have special services such as anniversaries, resurrection Sunday, we make the phone call to encourage members to participate in the traditional setting. We also partner with Core that sit in the foyers for people to come and get vaccinations, you can get your temperature taken. We have rearranged our seating taping them off to provide space between each attendee. In all these adjustments we've seen our digital presences grow. Now since we have attendees that have committed to being a part of our church in Washington State, the United Kingdom we now have to serve this community that have joined our platform. We are looking at having a digital pastor someone that pastors that community and facilitate digital classes. We are partnering with some of our youth to go over and teach the elderly community, how to utilize basic technology such as how to receive alerts about the services and how to view the services live. We are taking our Christian Formation classes to a Podcast Model. Technology has changed our comfort level.

Along similar lines, Butler (2013) found that evangelical institutions' use of online learning platforms encouraged constant personal and spiritual growth among students. Also, Gorrell (2016) found that social media platforms have been an asset in spiritual development and growth. One of the more significant findings from this study aligned with Oentoro and Idayanti

(2021), who suggested “the need for churches to build discipleship culture while integrating digital platforms as the backbone of the ministry” (p. 202). According to Bilangan Research Center, “Less than half of the churches surveyed (49.9%) stated that they would continue live streaming or doing online services after the pandemic ends” (Oentoro & Idayanti, 2021, p. 203).

Research Limitations

The study entailed interviewing nine attendees of Christian hybrid churches in Georgia and Illinois who shared narratives of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the traditional and online church settings. The participants discussed church-implemented programs that influenced spiritual formation in the attendee’s, how their lived experiences are associated with the traditional and online attendance. The study’s findings were limited to the subjective understanding and experiences of the nine participants and their ability to recall experiences. The participants could have unknowingly overestimated their spiritual formation competencies to avoid appearing inept, or they might have underestimated their competencies to avoid making their church look ineffective in developing its congregants.

The researcher’s experiences or lack thereof were also study limitations. After conducting, listening, transcribing, and reviewing participant interviews, the researcher noted opportunities for follow-up questions to elicit more information. At times, the participants could not provide specific information about programs the church offered as a part of its spiritual formation models. The qualitative phenomenological design was another limitation. A case study would have enabled an in-depth study on a variety of spiritual formation models and the impacts on participants of Christian hybrid churches.

Further Research

Although this study yielded valuable data about traditional and online attendees of the Christian hybrid churches in Georgia and Illinois, further research could provide additional insights related to the importance of this topic. This study was delimited to Christian hybrid churches in Georgia and Illinois and their congregants who attended twice weekly for a minimum of 1 year. There are many ways to modify the study for future research.

Mixed-Methods Approach

Researchers could follow this study's procedures to examine traditional and online attendees and the perceived effectiveness of the current spiritual formation models of different Christian hybrid churches. A phenomenological design was appropriate to explore the phenomenon of interest in this study. Researchers could use a mixed methods approach to compare the effectiveness of perceived best practice spiritual formation models in the Christian hybrid church among traditional and online attendees. Such studies could be to determine the gap between the level of effectiveness of traditional and online attendees and ways to lessen the gap.

Explore the Pandemic's Effects

Future researchers could explore how this study's topic relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. The global pandemic led to a shift in how people engage in church, with decreased traditional attendance and increased online attendance. This study showed that effective spiritual formation models could influence traditional and online attendees' spiritual growth. A topic for exploration could be whether increased online church attendance presents a significant opportunity for churches to reassess and restructure their spiritual formation models. New approaches might allow them to capture and include more creative ways to influence attendees, both in the traditional setting and online. Additionally, researchers could look more closely at

how COVID-19 has impacted church attendance and changed spiritual formation models to fit the hybrids expansion of digital discipleship.

Expand the Research Population Beyond Georgia and Illinois

Researchers could conduct a qualitative study that is not limited to Christian churches in Georgia and Illinois and includes a larger sample of traditional and online church attendance. Such a study would provide information from churches in other states that covers a wider range of topics. Researchers could include a larger sample of traditional and online churches across the United States. It would also be helpful to capture the experiences and perspectives of a larger sample of participants from each setting, both traditional and online attendees, to include surveys and focus groups, which might give valuable information. With such studies, researchers could contribute a range of new insights.

Summary

Online church attendance has increased, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore best practice spiritual formation models and the perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation in the hybrid church community brick-and-mortar and online church settings for individuals in Christian hybrid churches. The study's findings could give churches a greater understanding of how their spiritual formation models affect their traditional and online attendees. Churches could use this information to develop more impactful ways to influence spiritual formation in traditional and online attendees.

Conducting this study entailed gathering a significant amount of valuable information. The most important findings emerged in two of the themes arising from the qualitative data analysis: spiritual growth and improvement in the traditional and online setting, and flexibility of the online setting. Both themes relate to the assumption that the participants' faith is not

diminished as a result of their attendance at online services, and that there is a significant advantage to having the choice between traditional worship and online worship. Church leaders must have the capability to recognize and adapt to the times for the church to effectively carry out the mission that Jesus Christ bequeathed to His followers. Jesus addressed the crowd and instructed them on the importance of having discernment and being knowledgeable about the requirements of the Kingdom:

And he said also to the people, When ye see a cloud rise out of the west, straightway ye say, There cometh a shower; and so it is. And when ye see the south wind blow, ye say, There will be heat; and it cometh to pass. Ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky and of the earth; but how is it that ye do not discern this time? (Luke 12:50–56, King James Bible, 1769/2017)

One of the key methods of carrying out the Heavenly Father's will is the church. Therefore, church leaders must have good judgment about fulfilling the Kingdom's goals, including discipleship, which various mediums can provide.

REFERENCES

- Adegboyega, A., Boodie, S., Dorvie, H., Bolaji, B., Adedoyin, C., & Moore, S. (2020). Social distance impact on church gatherings: Socio-behavioral implications. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, *31*(1–4), 221–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2020.1793869>
- Adler, R. H. (2022). Trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Human Lactation*, *38*(4), 598–602. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08903344221116620>
- Al-araibi, A. A. M., Mahrin, M. N. R. B., & Yusoff, R. C. M. (2019). Technological aspect factors of e-learning readiness in higher education institutions: Delphi technique. *Education and Information Technologies*, *24*(1), 567–590. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-018-9780-9>
- Alase, A. (2017). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A guide to a good qualitative research approach. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, *5*(2), 9–19. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.5n.2p.9>
- Baker, S. (2017). Who’s shaping whom? Digital disruption in the spiritual lives of post-familial emerging adults. *Journal of Youth and Theology*, *16*(2), 117–143. <https://doi.org/10.1163/24055093-01602003>
- Balentine, S. E. (Ed.). (2015). Discipleship. In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics*. Oxford University Press.
- Barna. (2013, October 15). *How technology is changing millennial faith*. <https://www.barna.com/research/how-technology-is-changing-millennial-faith/>
- Barton, R. H., Chandler, D. J., Tan, S.-Y., Tenelshof, J., & Wilhoit, J. C. (2014). Spiritual formation in the church. *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, *7*(2), 292–311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/193979091400700212>
- Baumeister, R. F., & Tice, D. M. (1990). Anxiety and social exclusion. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *9*(2), 165–195.
- Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., DeWall, C. N., & Zhang, L. (2007). How emotion shapes behavior: Feedback, anticipation, and reflection, rather than direct causation. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *11*, 167–203. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868307301033>
- Berman, S. J. (2012). Digital transformation: Opportunities to create new business models. *Strategy & Leadership*, *40*(2), 16–24. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10878571211209314>
- Beyer, E. (2020, May 24). Digital worship may stay around; no rush to reopen as some churches grow participation online: Faith in the time of COVID-19. *Wisconsin State Journal*.
- Blok, P. (2008). *Community: The structure of belonging*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

- Brook, J. (2020). Church at home: A reflection on congregational life during Covid-19. *Lutheran Theological Journal*, 54(2), 99–101.
- Buch, K., & Bartley, S. (2002). Learning style and training delivery mode preference. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 14(1), 5–10. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13665620210412795>
- Budd, J., Miller, B. S., Manning, E. M., Lampos, V., Zhuang, M., Edelstein, M., Rees, G., Emery, V. C., Stevens, M. M., Keegan, N., & Short, M. J. (2020). Digital technologies in the public-health response to COVID-19. *Nature Medicine*, 26, 1183–1192. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-1011-4>
- Burkhalter, R. D. (2020). *Pastoral use of social media technology to recruit, assimilate, and retain church members: A qualitative descriptive study* (Publication No. 28155946) [Doctoral dissertation, Grand Canyon University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Burton-Christie, D. (1993). *The word in the desert: Scripture and the quest for holiness in early Christian monasticism*. Oxford University Press.
- Butler, J. E. (2013). *Instructor interaction as it relates to facilitation of spiritual development with an evangelical institution: A case study* (Publication No. 3605936) [Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Callam, N. (2001). The mission of the church in the perspective of the World Council of Churches' text on the nature and purpose of the church. *International Review of Mission*, 90(358), 237–242. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2001.tb00288.x>
- Campbell, H. A. (Ed.). (2020). *The distanced church: Reflections on doing church online*. Digital Religion Publications. <https://doi.org/10.21423/distancedchurch>
- Campbell, H. A., & Garner, S. (2016). *Networked theology (engaging culture): Negotiating faith in a digital culture*. Baker Academic.
- Centola, D. (2010). The spread of behavior in an online social network experiment. *Science*, 329(5996), 1194–1197. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1185231>
- Chakraborty, P., Mittal, P., Manu, S. G., Yadav, S., & Arora, A. (2021). Opinion of students on online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 3(3), 357–365. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.240>
- Chandler, D. J. (2014). *Christian spiritual formation: An integrated approach for personal and relational wholeness*. InterVarsity Press.
- Cloete, A. L. (2015). Living in a digital culture: The need for theological reflection. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 71(2). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i2.2073>

- Collinson, M. (2020, April 17). *Like it or not, online services are here to stay*. Church Times. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/17-april/comment/opinion/like-it-or-not-online-services-are-here-to-stay>
- Copeland, G. (2001). *A call to prayer: Intercession in action*. Harrison House.
- Coppedge, A. (2016). *Predicting church trends: Pastor of social & digital communications*. Accessed January 3, 2021, from <http://anthonycoppedge.com/predicting-church-trends-pastor-of-social-digital-communications/>
- Covarrubias, A. (2021). *The church in a fast-changing world* (Publication No. 28543924) [Doctoral dissertation, Azusa Pacific University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Cox, W. F., Jr., & Peck, R. A. (2018). Christian education as discipleship formation. *Christian Education Journal*, 15(2), 243–261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739891318778859>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Crisp, T. M., Porter, S. L., & Ten, E. G. A. (Eds.). (2019). *Psychology and spiritual formation in dialogue: Moral and spiritual change in Christian perspective*. InterVarsity Press.
- Cutcliffe, J. R. (2003). Reconsidering reflexivity: Introducing the case for intellectual entrepreneurship. *Qualitative Health Research*, 13(1), 136–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732302239416>
- Doody, D. C. (2010). *Survey of best practices for the development of online religious communities* (Publication No. 3423855) [Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Dunlow, J. (2021). Digital discipleship: A study of how churches in New York used technology for adult discipleship during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Christian Education Journal*, 18(3), 458–472. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07398913211046364>
- Dysinger, L. (2005). *Psalmody and prayer in the writings of Evagrius Ponticus*. Oxford University Press.
- Earley, D., & Gutierrez, B. (2010). *Ministry is... How to serve Jesus with passion and confidence*. B&H Publishing.
- Earley, D., & Wheeler, D. (2010). *Evangelism is... How to share Jesus with passion and confidence*. B&H Publishing.
- Earls A. (2020, May 1). *Few churches gathered, more moved online in April*. Facts and Trends. <https://factsandtrends.net/2020/05/01/few-churches-gathered-more-moved-online-in-april/>

- Erickson, M. J. (2001). *Introducing Christian doctrine* (L. A. Hustad, Ed.; 2nd ed.). Baker Academic. (Original work published 1992)
- Falconer, A. D. (2001). The church: God's gift to the world—On the nature and purpose of the church. *International Review of Mission*, 90(359), 389-400. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2001.tb00309.x>
- Finlay, L. (2011). *Phenomenology for therapists: Researching the lived world*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Forrest, B. K., & Lamport, M. A. (2013). Modeling spiritual formation from a distance: Paul's formation transactions with the Roman Christians. *Christian Education Journal*, 10(1), 110–124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131301000109>
- Foster, R. J. (1998). *Streams of living water: Celebrating the great traditions of Christian faith*. HarperCollins.
- Frye, T. (1982). *Rule of Saint Benedict in English*. Liturgical Press.
- Garner, S. (2019). Imaging Christ in digital worlds: Continuity and discontinuity in discipleship. *Communication Research Trends*, 38(4), 21–30.
- George, G., Haas, M. R., & Pentland, A. (2014). Big data and management. *Academy of Management Journal*, 57(2), 321–326. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/amj.2014.4002>
- Gorrell, A. W. (2016). *Social media, churches, and Christian formation* (Publication No. 10140149) [Doctoral dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Gould, M. (2013). *The social media gospel: Sharing the good news in new ways*. Liturgical Press.
- Grayson, P. L. (2017). *The spiritual development of online church attendees compared with traditional church attendees* (Publication No. 10639143) [Doctoral dissertation, Dallas Baptist University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Green, J. B. (2003). Doing repentance: The formation of disciples in the Acts of the Apostles. *Ex Auditu*, 18(1), 1–23.
- Gutzler, M. D. (2014). Big data and the 21st century church. *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 53(1), 23–29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12085>
- Hagenbuch, W. (2020). *Won't you be my neighbor? Creating an interconnected onsite and online Christian community* (Publication No. 27957947) [Doctoral dissertation, Lancaster Theological Seminary]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

- Harris, C. E. (2020). *The impact of Sunday school participation on spiritual formation in African American Baptist churches in North Carolina* (Publication No. 28264905) [Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Hempel, J., & Kowitt, B. (2009). How Facebook is taking over our lives. *Fortune*, 159(4), 34–41.
- Henderson, M. D. (2016). *John Wesley's class meeting: A model for making disciples*. Evangel Publishing House.
- Hess, M. E. (2010). What difference does it make?: E-learning and faith community. *Word & World*, 30(3), 281–290.
- Hindson, E. (2003). *Courageous faith: Life lessons from Old Testament heroes*. AMG Publishers.
- Holdener, J. M. (2010). *Instructional design: Seminary faculty teaching experience and spiritual formation in an online environment* (Publication No. 3412639) [Doctoral dissertation, Capella University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Howell, D. N. (2003). *Servants of the servant: A biblical theology of leadership*. Wipf & Stock.
- Hutchings, T. (2010). The internet and the church: An introduction. *The Expository Times*, 122(1), 11–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524610377955>
- Issler, K. (2010). Six themes to guide spiritual formation ministry based on Jesus' sermon on the mount. *Christian Education Journal*, 7(2), 366–388. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131000700209>
- Johnson, C. M. (2020). *4D's of spiritual growth: The local church's role in spiritual growth and discipleship* (Publication No. 27997133) [Doctoral dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Jun, G. (2020). Virtual reality church as a new mission frontier in the metaverse: Exploring theological controversies and missional potential of virtual reality church. *Transformation*, 37(4), 297–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378820963155>
- Kang, Y. (2017). *Spiritual design thinking: A culturally and technologically informed model of spiritual formation for Silicon Valley* (Publication No. 10601096) [Doctoral dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Ke, F., & Hoadley, C. (2009). Evaluating online learning communities. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 57(4), 487–510. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-009-9120-2>
- Kietzmann, J. H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I. P., & Silvestre, B. S. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 241–251. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2011.01.005>

- Kim, T. D. (2020). The spiritual formation of Missionary Paul's life: The perspective of seven motivators by Kenneth Boa conformed to his image. *Korea Evangelical Missiological Society*, 52, 275–303.
- King, J. (2020, April 8). *Pandemic moves April's religious holidays online*. WAMC Northeast Public Radio. <https://www.wamc.org/post/pandemic-moves-aprils-religious-holidays-online>
- Kruse, C. G. (2012). *The pillar New Testament Commentary: Paul's letter the Romans*. William B. Eerdmans.
- Laranjo, L., Arguel, A., Neves, A. L., Gallagher, A. M., Kaplan, R., Mortimer, N., Mendes, G. A., & Lau, A. Y. (2015). The influence of social networking sites on health behavior change: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*, 22(1), 243–256. <https://doi.org/10.1136/amiajnl-2014-002841>.
- Lee, W. D., Jr. (2006). *Understanding the use of new media-technology in the 21st century local church: A case study of media use at Orlando Faith Assembly of God Church* (Publication No. 3211773) [Doctoral dissertation, Regent University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2019). *Practical research: Planning and design* (12th ed.). Pearson.
- Lewis, R. M. (2018). Social media, peer surveillance, spiritual formation, and mission: Practicing Christian faith in a surveilled public space. *Surveillance & Society*, 16(4), 517–532. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v16i4.7650>
- Lincoln Y. S., & Guba E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Lindsay, G. (1994). *Prayer & fasting: The master key to the impossible*. Christ for the Nations.
- Lines, C. J. (2020). *The great digital commission: Embracing social media for Church growth and transformation* (Publication No. 27955399) [Doctoral dissertation, Duke University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Livermore, D. (2016). *Driven by difference: How great companies fuel innovation through diversity*. Amacom.
- Lomachinska, I., & Grebenyuk, P. (2020). The phenomenon of missionary activity of Christian churches in the virtual space. *Skhid*, 169(5), 54–59. [https://doi.org/10.21847/1728-9343.2020.5\(169\).215022](https://doi.org/10.21847/1728-9343.2020.5(169).215022)
- Lowe, S., & Lowe, M. (2018). *Ecologies of faith in a digital age*. IVP Academic.
- MacDonald, W. (1995). *Believer's Bible commentary*. Thomas Nelson.

- Maddix, M. A., Kim, J. H., & Estep, J. R. J. (2020). *Understanding faith formation: Theological, congregational, and global dimensions*. Baker Academic.
- McManus, E. R. (2013). *An unstoppable force: Daring to become the church God had in mind*. David C. Cook.
- McRay, B. W., Barwegen, L., Haase, D. T., Karianjahi, M., Larson, M. L., Ribbe, R., Schwanda, T., Setran, D. P., & Wilhoit, J. C. (2018). Spiritual formation and soul care in the Department of Christian Formation and Ministry at Wheaton College. *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 11(2), 271–295.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1939790918795629>
- Moncrief, W. C., Marshall, G. W., & Rudd, J. M. (2015). Social media and related technology: Drivers of change in managing the contemporary sales force. *Business Horizons*, 58(1), 45–55. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2014.09.009>
- Morris, R. E. (2012). *Teaching to make disciples in a higher education online learning environment: A comparison of the literature of online learning, the objectives and practices of three Christian colleges, and the letters of Paul* (Publication No. 3528128) [Doctoral dissertation, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Mullins, J. T. (2011). *Online church: A biblical community* (Publication No. 3454046) [Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Nouwen, J. M. (1991). *The way of the heart: Desert spirituality and contemporary ministry*. Harper One.
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), Article 1609406917733847. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Nunez, A. M. (2014). *Students' spiritual formation at a Christian university: A hermeneutic phenomenological study* (Publication No. 3674159) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Phoenix]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Oentoro, J., & Idayanti, E. (2022). The smart church, a new normal church in digital era. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 669, 202–205.
- Ogundiran, V. (2013). *Making disciples of Jesus Christ: Implementing an effective discipleship strategy for churches in American* (Publication No. 3564392) [Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

- Payne, D. L. (2000). *Creating community through collaboration and technology: A study of the collaborative process created to produce a provincial curriculum guide for the education of certified dental assistants in British Columbia* (Publication No. 304673577) [Master's thesis, Royal Roads University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Pelikan, J. (Ed.). (1999). *Luther's works*. Fortress Press.
- Penna, H. L. (2020). *(In)effective communication strategies among church leadership: Assessing the influence of communication channels on effective communication between church leadership and their members during the coronavirus shutdown* (Publication No. 28027190) [Doctoral dissertation, Baylor University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Perkins, P. W. (2012). *The manifestation of biblical community understanding in a Facebook community: A qualitative study among Christian college students* (Publication No. 3516832) [Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Pettit, P. (Ed.). (2008). *Foundations of spiritual formation: A community approach to becoming like Christ*. Kregel Academic.
- Pew Research Center. (2021, April 7). *Social media fact sheet*. <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Language and meaning: Data collection in qualitative research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 137–145. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.137>
- Provalis Research. (n.d.). *QDA Miner*. <https://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/>
- Redd, S. S. E. (2007). *Lived experiences, televangelism, and American media: Lessons learned from individuals' reflections and media accounts about the PTL* (Publication No. 3298891) [Doctoral dissertation, Regent University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Reinke, T. (2022). *God, technology, and the Christian life*. Crossway.
- Roberts, S. P. (2011). *Virtual preaching: Using the internet to proclaim God's word and engage in discipleship* (Publication No. 3457734) [Doctoral dissertation, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Rogers, P. C., & Howell, S. L. (2004). Use of distance education by religions of the world to train, edify and educate adherents. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 5(3), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v5i3.207>

- Rovai, A. (2002, September 24). Sense of community, perceived cognitive learning, and persistence in asynchronous learning networks. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 5(4), 319–332. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516\(02\)00130-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(02)00130-6)
- Saines, D. (2015). Learning to be the church: The value of learning theory for discipleship and mission. *Pacifica*, 28(3), 290–307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1030570X16683967>
- Samra, J. G. (2008). *Being conformed to Christ in community: A study of maturity, maturation and the local church in the undisputed Pauline epistles* (Vol. 320). Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Sandage, S. J., & Brown, J. K. (2018). *Relational integration of psychology and Christian theology: Theory, research, and practice* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315671505>
- Scorgie, G. (Ed.). (2011). *Dictionary of Christian spirituality*. Zondervan.
- Seelig, S. W. (1993). *Tools for renewal: A strategy for revitalizing the plateaued church* (Publication No. 9320130) [Doctoral dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Shirley, C. (2017). Overcoming digital distance: The challenges of developing relational disciples in the internet age. *Christian Education Journal*, 14(2), 243–494. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131701400210>
- Short, S., & Lemke, D. L. (2021). Technology and ministry during a time of pandemic. *Christian Education Journal*, 18(3), 441–443. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989132111046366>
- Smith, G. T. (2014). *Called to be saints: An invitation to Christian maturity*. IVP Academic.
- Smith, J. A. (2011). Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Health Psychology Review*, 5(1), 9–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2010.510659>
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. SAGE Publications.
- Smith, J. E. (2018). *Cultural based discipling according to the strategies of Jesus* (Publication No. 10829185) [Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Staver, M. (2020, August 7). *CA: No water and power for worship*. Liberty Counsel. <https://lc.org/newsroom/details/20200807ca-no-water-and-power-for-worship>
- Stott, J. (2015). *Christian mission in the modern world*. InterVarsity Press.
- Strickland, G. E. (2004). *The internet and the church: Online activity and perceptions of its significance in a local congregation* (Publication No. 3137342) [Doctoral dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

- Sun, L., Tang, Y., & Zuo, W. (2020). Coronavirus pushes education online. *Nature Materials*, *19*(6), 687–687.
- Teo, W. (2017). Christian spiritual formation. *Emerging Leadership Journeys*, *10*(1), 138–150. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41563-020-0678-8>
- Thomas, J. N. (2014). *An analysis of discipleship in online environments* (Publication No. 3634640) [Doctoral dissertation, Dallas Baptist University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Towns, E. L. (2008). *Theology for today*. Cengage Learning.
- Tran, N. (2010). *Transformative learning in online theological education: A case study of an online program at a theological seminary* (Publication No. 3486515) [Doctoral dissertation, University of North Texas]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Trigg, I. A. (2004). *Spiritual formation in the church and its impact upon spiritual free agency* (Publication No. 3143723) [Doctoral dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Trusov, M., Ma, L., & Jamal, Z. (2016). Crumbs of the cookie: User profiling in customer-base analysis and behavioral targeting. *Marketing Science*, *35*(3), 405–426. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.2015.0956>
- Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2012). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, *11*(1), 80–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325010368316>
- Twenge, J. M., Baumeister, R. F., Tice, D. M., & Stucke, T. S. (2001). If you can't join them, beat them: Effects of social exclusion on aggressive behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *81*(6), 1058–1069. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.81.6.1058>
- Van Engen, C. (1991). *God's missionary people: Rethinking the purpose of the local church*. Baker Publishing.
- Vargo, D., Zhu, L., Benwell, B., & Yan, Z. (2021). Digital technology use during COVID-19 pandemic: A rapid review. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, *3*(1), 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.242>
- Verster, P. (2022). Perspectives on church and mission: The missional church and metaphors for the church. *Verbum dt Ecclesia*, *43*(1), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2379>
- Village, A., & Francis, L. (2020, November 6). Faith in lockdown: Experiences of rural Church of England clergy and laity during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Rural Theology*, *18*(2), 79–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14704994.2020.1818385>
- Waggoner, B. J. (2008). *The shape of faith to come: Spiritual formation and the future discipleship*. B&H Publishing.

- Warren, D. P. (2009). *Factors influencing Christian church volunteers' perceived sense of community in an online learning environment* (Publication No. 3374781) [Doctoral dissertation, Regent University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Waters, R. D., & Tindall, N. T. J. (2010). Marketing churches on the internet: An analysis of the dialogic potential of Christian web sites. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 15(4), 369–381. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.400>
- Watson, D. (2002). *The early Methodist class meeting: Its origins and significance*. Wipf and Stock.
- Wilhoit, J. C., & Howard, E. B. (2020). The wisdom of Christian spiritual formation. *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 13(1), 5–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1939790920903841>
- Willard, D. (2000). Spiritual formation in Christ: A perspective on what it is and how it might be done. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 28(4), 254–258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009164710002800402>
- Williams, M. (2015). Community, discipleship, and social media. *Christian Education Journal*, 12(2), 375–383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131501200209>
- Wise, J. (2009). *Why you'll need a digital pastor*. Accessed January 3, 2021, from <http://bedeviant.com/need-a-digital-pastor>
- Wyche, S. P., Hayes, G. R., Harvel, L. D., & Grinter, R. E. (2006, November 4–8). *Technology in spiritual formation: An exploratory study of computer mediated religious communications* [Paper presentation]. Proceedings of the 2006 20th Anniversary Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work, Banff, Alberta, Canada.
- Zsupan-Jerome, D. (2011). *Digital media at the service of the Word: What does internet-mediated communication offer the theology of revelation and the practice of catechesis?* (Publication No. 3449279) [Doctoral dissertation, Boston College]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

APPENDIX A

Liberty University Institutional Review Board Letter of Exemption

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 1, 2022

Crystal Stalling
Rusty Small

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-1080 BEST PRACTICES SPIRITUAL FORMATION MODELS IN THE CHRISTIAN EVANGELICAL HYBRID CHURCH

Dear Crystal Stalling, Rusty Small,

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

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.



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

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

From: do-not-reply@cayuse.com  
Subject: IRB-FY21-22-1080 - Modification: Modification
Date: August 17, 2022 at 11:50 AM
To: [REDACTED]

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 17, 2022

Crystal Stalling
Rusty Small

Re: Modification - IRB-FY21-22-1080 BEST PRACTICES SPIRITUAL FORMATION MODELS IN THE CHRISTIAN HYBRID CHURCH

Dear Crystal Stalling, Rusty Small,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY21-22-1080 BEST PRACTICES SPIRITUAL FORMATION MODELS IN THE CHRISTIAN HYBRID CHURCH.

Decision: Exempt - Limited IRB

Your request to revise your participant criteria to include pastors, leaders, and attendees of Christian hybrid churches in the Southeast, Southwest, and Midwest as opposed to similar individuals associated with Christian Evangelical hybrid churches in the Southeast has been approved. Thank you for submitting your revised study documents for our review and documentation. Your revised, stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study in Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B**Research Permission Request Form**

Date

Participant Name

Church Name

Street Name

City, State, Zip

Dear Participants Name

As a graduate student in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy in Christian Leadership degree. The title of my research project is Best Practice Spiritual Formation Models in The Christian hybrid church, and the purpose of my research is to explore the perceived best practice spiritual formation models and the perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation in the hybrid church traditional and virtual church setting.

I am writing to request your permission to contact members of your church to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to contact me to schedule a web-based interview which will be held on Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The data will be used for the purpose of this study. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission respond by email to [REDACTED] A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Crystal Stalling, Ph.D. Candidate
Researcher, Liberty University

APPENDIX C**Letter of Permission**

August 14, 2022

Crystal Stalling, Ph.D. Candidate
Researcher Liberty University

Dear Crystal Stalling

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Best Practice Spiritual Formation Models in The Christian Hybrid Church, we have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [REDACTED].

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

- We will provide our membership list to Crystal Stalling and Crystal Stalling may use the list to contact our members to invite them to participate in her research study.
- We grant permission for Crystal Stalling to contact traditional and virtual attendees to invite them to participate in her research study.
- We will not provide potential participant information to Crystal Stalling, but we agree to send her study information to traditional and virtual attendees on her behalf.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]
Co-Pastor
[REDACTED]

APPENDIX D

Senior Pastor or Leader Recruitment Letter

Re: Humble Request to Meet Regarding Beneficial Research

Dear Participants,

As a graduate student in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. I am conducting research as part of the requirement for a Doctorate in Christian Leadership Degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the perceived best practice spiritual formation models and the perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation in the hybrid church traditional and virtual church setting. I am writing to invite eligible participant to join my study.

Participants must be senior pastors or leaders, 18 years of age or older, who are familiar with the spiritual formation models established for traditional and virtual attendees. Participants will be invited to participate in an interview on Zoom or Microsoft Teams and will last approximately 1 hour. The interview will be recorded. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

Additionally, I am inviting your church attendees to participate in my study. If willing, you are asked to either email a recruitment letter to your attendees or provide me email addresses for your attendees and allow me to email them a recruitment document. Attendees will be invited to participate in an interview on Zoom or Microsoft Teams and will last approximately 1 hour. The interview will be video recorded. Names and identifying information will be requested as a part of this study, but participants identities will not be disclosed. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

To participate, please reply to this letter by contacting me by email at [REDACTED] or by phone to schedule an interview at [REDACTED].

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me by email prior to or at the time of the interview.

I am requesting that the first notification to go out to potential participants at the beginning of the first week and your organization or I will email or provide some type of a reminder at the beginning of the second week.

Again, to participate, please provide confirmation via email at [REDACTED] or via telephone at [REDACTED]. Thank you for your support with my significant educational endeavor.

Warm regards,

Crystal D. Stalling, Doctoral Candidate
Rawling School of Divinity
Liberty University
1971 University Blvd.
Lynchburg, VA 24515

APPENDIX E

Church Attendee Recruitment Letter

Dear Participants,

As a graduate student in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. I am conducting research as part of the requirement for a Doctorate in Christian Leadership Degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the perceived best practice spiritual formation models and the perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation in the hybrid church traditional and virtual church setting. I am writing to invite eligible participant to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and attend the traditional or virtual church setting at least twice a week for a minimum of one year. Participants will be invited to participate in an interview on Zoom or Microsoft Teams and will last approximately 1 hour. The interview will be video recorded. Names and other identifying information will be requested as a part of this study, but participants identities will not be disclosed.

To participate, please reply to this letter by contacting me by email at [REDACTED] or by phone to schedule an interview at [REDACTED].

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me by email prior to or at the time of the interview.

Warm regards,

Crystal D. Stalling, Doctoral Candidate
Rawling School of Divinity
Liberty University
1971 University Blvd.
Lynchburg, VA 24515

APPENDIX F

Consent – Pastors and Leaders

Title of the Project: Best Practices Spiritual Formation Models in the Christian Hybrid Church
Principal Investigator: Crystal Stalling, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a senior pastor or a leader, 18 years of age or older, who serves in a leadership position that works with or is familiar with the spiritual formation model that exists in the Christian hybrid church in which you are serving. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

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

The purpose of my research is to explore the perceived best practices of spiritual formation models if any exist in the Christian hybrid church in the Southeast, Southwest, and Midwest.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participate in an interview to be conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The interview will last approximately 1 hour and be video recorded.
2. Additionally, I am inviting your church attendees to participate in my study. If willing, and if you have not already done so, you are asked to either email a recruitment letter to your attendees or provide me email addresses for your attendees and allow me to email them a recruitment document. Attendees will be invited to participate in an interview on Zoom or Microsoft Teams that will last approximately 1 hour. The interview will be video recorded. Names and identifying information will be requested as a part of this study, but participants' identities will not be disclosed.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include understanding the strengths and weaknesses in the Christian hybrid church traditional and virtual church setting and the perceived effectiveness in the lives of the attendees.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

Liberty Univ
IRB-FY21-2:
Approved or

- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

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

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

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

The researcher conducting this study Crystal D. Stalling. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Rusty N. Smalls, at [REDACTED].

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

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

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

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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

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

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Liberty Uni
IRB-FY21-
Approved c

APPENDIX G

Consent – Church Attendees

Title of the Project: Best Practices Spiritual Formation Models in the Christian Hybrid Church

Principal Investigator: Crystal Stalling, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and a weekly participant of a Christian church in the Southeast, Southwest, and Midwest with a hybrid brick-and-mortar church setting or virtual church setting at least twice weekly for a minimum of one year. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

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

The purpose of my research is to explore the perceived best practices of spiritual formation models if any exist in the Christian hybrid church in the Southeast, Southwest, and Midwest.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participate in a web-based interview via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The interview will last approximately 1 hour and be video recorded. Names and identifying information will be requested as a part of this study, but participants' identities will not be disclosed.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include understanding the strengths and weaknesses in the Christian hybrid church traditional and virtual church setting and the perceived effectiveness in the lives of the attendees.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Liberty University
IRB-FY21-22-1080
Approved on 8-17-2022

Is study participation voluntary?

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

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

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

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

The researcher conducting this study Crystal D. Stalling. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Rusty N. Smalls, at [REDACTED].

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

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

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

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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

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

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Liberty University
IRB-FY21-22-1080
Approved on 8-17-2022

APPENDIX H

Senior Pastor or Leader Follow-Up Recruitment Letter

Re: Humble Request to Meet Regarding Beneficial Research

Dear Participants,

As a graduate student in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. I am conducting research as part of the requirement for a Doctorate of Philosophy in Christian Leadership Degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the perceived best practice spiritual formation models and the perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation in the hybrid church traditional and virtual church setting. Last week an email was sent to you inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to respond if you would like to participate and have not already done so. The deadline for participate is September 30, 2022.

Participants must be senior pastors or leaders, 18 years of age or older, who are familiar with the spiritual formation models established for traditional and virtual attendees. Participants will be invited to participate in an interview on Zoom or Microsoft Teams and will last approximately 1 hour. The interview will be video recorded. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

Additionally, I am inviting your church attendees to participate in my study. If willing, you are asked to either email a recruitment letter to your attendees or provide me email addresses for your attendees and allow me to email them a recruitment document. Attendees will be invited to participate in an interview on Zoom or Microsoft Teams and will last approximately 1 hour. The interview will be video recorded. Names and identifying information will be requested as a part of this study, but participants identities will not be disclosed. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

To participate, please reply to this letter by contacting me by email at [REDACTED] or by phone to schedule an interview at [REDACTED].

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me by email prior to or at the time of the interview.

I am requesting that the first notification to go out to potential participants at the beginning of the first week and your organization or I will email or provide some type of a reminder at the beginning of the second week.

Again, to participate, please provide confirmation via email at [REDACTED] or via telephone at [REDACTED]. Thank you for your support with my significant educational endeavor.

Warm regards,

Crystal D. Stalling, Doctoral Candidate
Rawling School of Divinity
Liberty University
1971 University Blvd.
Lynchburg, VA 24515

APPENDIX I

Church Attendee Follow-Up Recruitment Letter

Dear Participants

As a graduate student in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. I am conducting research as part of the requirement for a Doctorate in Christian Leadership Degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the perceived best practice spiritual formation models and the perceived effectiveness of spiritual formation in the hybrid church traditional and virtual church setting. Last week an email was sent to you inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to respond if you would like to participate and have not already done so. The deadline for participate is September 30, 2022.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and attend the traditional or virtual church setting at least twice a week for a minimum of one year. Participants will be invited to participate in an interview on Zoom or Microsoft Teams and will last approximately 1 hour. The interview will be video recorded. Names and other identifying information will be requested as a part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

To participate, please reply to this letter by contacting me by email at [REDACTED] or by phone to schedule an interview at [REDACTED]

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me by email prior to or at the time of the interview.

Warm Regard,

Crystal D. Stalling, Doctoral Candidate
Rawling School of Divinity
Liberty University
1971 University Blvd
Lynchburg, VA 24515

APPENDIX J**Interview Questions – Pastors and Leaders**

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
2. What's your gender?
3. Are you a member of a Christian hybrid church in Georgia or Illinois?
4. What is your leadership role?
5. Do you attend a hybrid traditional brick-and-mortar church setting and/or virtual church setting?
6. How often do you attend the hybrid's traditional brick-and-mortar and/or virtual church setting?
7. Are you aware of spiritual formation models being implemented for the hybrid's traditional brick-and-mortar and virtual church attendees? If yes, can you provide insight or copies of these models?
8. How has technology changed how the church engages with its attendees?
9. What forms of technology and social media platforms are you currently using to engage with the attendees?
10. How has your church changed since the COVID-19 pandemic to engage with its attendees and influence spiritual formation?
11. Some churches and leaders do not see the value of changing to reach this generation, how has your church changed in general to reach this population and influence spiritual formation.
12. Do you attend prayer groups in the traditional church setting and/or the virtual church setting?
13. How often do you attend prayer groups in the traditional and/or virtual church setting?

14. Do you attend small groups in the traditional and/or virtual church setting?
15. How often do you attend the traditional and/or virtual church setting?
16. What is the benefit you see in attending a hybrid brick-and-mortar church setting vs. a virtual church setting?
17. What is the benefit you see in attending a virtual church setting vs. a hybrid's traditional brick-and-mortar church setting?
18. What are the perceived weaknesses to attending the virtual church setting vs. the hybrid brick-and-mortar church setting?
19. What effect have attending the hybrid's traditional brick-and-mortar and/or virtual church setting had on your life.
20. What motivated you to attend the hybrid's church traditional setting and/or virtual setting?
21. Do you think virtual church can support and enhance the attendee's relationship with God?
How has it enhanced your life?
22. Do you feel like certain benefits needed is missing for those that chose to attend the virtual church setting in place of the hybrid's traditional church setting?
23. Do you feel that your relationship with God has improved because of your interaction and attendance of a virtual church community? If yes, in what ways?
24. Have you received positive feedback from attendees of the traditional church setting and/or virtual church that express improvement in their relationship with God? If yes, in what ways have the attendees express their relationship with God has improved?
25. What is the purpose, mission, and vision of the church you attend?
26. What leadership attributes do you think are important for leading a virtual ministry?
27. What are some of the joys you have experienced regarding leadership in an online ministry?

28. What key obstacles have you overcome as a church regarding online discipleship?
29. Does your church have a discipleship strategy? If so, what is it?
30. Does your ministry have a discipleship theory/philosophy associated with your discipleship strategy? If so, what is it?
31. In your own words, tell me what is a Christian disciple?
32. Share with me the best example of someone who is being disciplined through your church that attend the traditional and virtual church setting.
33. What role does evangelism play in your ministry?
34. What opportunity does your ministry give for people to respond to the gospel in the traditional setting and virtual setting?
35. How does using your virtual church setting engage the Bible?
36. What is your understanding of Christian fellowship? What role does Christian fellowship play in virtual discipleship?
37. What opportunities does your ministry provide for people to engage in Christian fellowship in the traditional setting and virtual setting?
38. What, if any, opportunities do your church provide to train leaders to disciple others virtually?
39. Does your church provide opportunity for people to engage in worship virtually? If so, how?
40. Could you describe to me your understanding of Christian worship?
41. What is the role of prayer in your church?
42. Is there anything else you think I should know regarding the perceived best practice models utilized by your church for the traditional and virtual settings?
43. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

APPENDIX K

Interview Questions – Traditional Church Setting Attendees

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
2. What's your gender?
3. Are you a member of a Christian church in Georgia or Illinois?
4. Do you attend a hybrid traditional brick-and-mortar church community?
5. How often do you attend the hybrid traditional brick-and-mortar church?
6. Are you aware of spiritual formation models being implemented for the hybrid traditional brick-and-mortar church attendees?
7. Do you attend prayer groups in the hybrid's church traditional setting? If yes, how often?
8. Do you attend small groups in the traditional church setting? If yes, how often?
9. What is the benefit you see in attending a hybrid traditional brick-and-mortar church setting vs. a virtual church setting?
10. What are the perceived weaknesses to attending the traditional brick-and-mortar church setting vs. the virtual church setting?
11. What effect has attending the hybrid's traditional brick-and-mortar church setting had on your life?
12. What motivated you to attend the hybrid traditional brick-and-mortar church vs. virtual church?
13. Do you think attending the traditional brick-and-mortar church setting apart from attending the virtual church setting can support and enhance your relationship with God? If yes, in which ways? If no, why?

14. Do you feel that your relationship with God has improved because of your interaction and attendance of the traditional brick-and-mortar church setting? If yes, in which ways?

APPENDIX L

Interview Questions – Virtual Church Setting Attendees

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
2. What's your gender?
3. Are you a member of a Christian church in Georgia or Illinois?
4. Do you attend a virtual church setting?
5. How often do you attend virtual church?
6. Are you aware of spiritual formation models being implemented for virtual church attendees?
7. Do you attend prayer groups in the hybrid's church virtual setting? If yes, how often?
8. Do you attend small groups in the virtual church setting? If yes, how often?
9. What is the benefit you see in attending a virtual church setting vs. a traditional brick-and-mortar church setting?
10. What are the perceived weaknesses to attending the virtual church setting vs. the hybrid's traditional brick-and-mortar church setting?
11. What effects has attending the hybrid's virtual church setting had on your life?
12. What motivated you to attend the hybrid's virtual church setting vs. the traditional brick-and-mortar church?
13. Do you think virtual church attendance apart from attending the traditional setting can support and enhance your relationship with God? If yes, in which ways? If no, why?
14. Do you feel like you are missing out on certain benefits needed attending virtual church in place of the hybrid's traditional brick-and-mortar church setting? If yes, what benefits do you feel you are missing? If no, why?

15. Do you feel that your relationship with God has improved because of your interaction and attendance of a virtual church setting? If yes, in which ways?