LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

A CASE STUDY ON LEADERSHIP AND DIGITAL MEDIA STRATEGY FOR

PROLONGED ABSENCES

Submitted to Dr. Rod Dempsey

In fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of the

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by

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Thesis Project Approval Sheet

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ABSTRACT: A CASE STUDY ON LEADERSHIP AND DIGITAL MEDIA STRATEGY

FOR PROLONGED ABSENCES

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Liberty University School of Divinity, 2023

Mentor: Dr. Rod Dempsey

The COVID-19 pandemic created difficulties for the Western Church to meet together as it had normally done for generations. The question that arises is, "How is the church to continue its mission of reaching people with the Gospel and make disciples that make disciples when it is not able to gather together in the same manner as before?"

This project will seek to determine the best strategies and tools that the modern Western Church can use to fulfill its mission through an online digital media strategy during these prolonged absences. A case study of Bedrock Church Sarasota and the strategies that were implemented because of the global pandemic will be conducted to determine the best practices used to reach people with the Gospel and make disciples during periods of prolonged absences.

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Chapter 1

Bob Dylan is a man that is ahead of his time. Dylan has been attributed to the saying, "The times they are a-changin."[1] This saying could not be a more fitting quote for the time in which the world finds itself. In the middle of what may be the most significant communication shift since the invention of the printing press or the creation of broadcast media, the Western Christian church finds itself at a crossroads. The most significant shift in church ministry in the last 500 years is happening right now. Not since the Protestant Reformation in the Christian faith have things begun to change dramatically. Churches and ministries are having to change the way in which they do ministry at an exponentially faster rate.

The world in which ministry is taking place is rapidly changing and has changed incredibly quickly. "Meetings were a time where we could get up, stop staring at a screen, and interact with someone face-to-face," Black said. "You're not getting that break in your day anymore. It's a continuation of staring at the screen. That's not going to make people as enthusiastic as they once were."[2]

The result of the greatest communication and socialization shift has caused the need for the Westernized church to reconcile with their need to adapt to the current cultural climate. The shift in the cultural and social normality's that ruled much of Western society over the past twenty years has only been exacerbated and accelerated by the global COVID-19 pandemic. During this global pandemic, questions that many churches had avoided for decades on how to

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[1] Bob Dylan, "Bob Dylan Quote: 'The Times They Are a-Changing.,'" accessed February 14, 2022, https://quotefancy.com/quote/950268/Bob-Dylan-The-times-they-are-a-changing.

[2] Jonathan Black, "How COVID-19 Has Changed the Way We Meet," accessed August 31, 2022, https://today.duke.edu/2020/10/how-covid-19-has-changed-way-we-meet.

deal with leadership, discipleship, and the Great Commission's fulfillment in a new way in a digital age was thrust to the surface.

The question that arises from the global pandemic that the world has just experienced is, "How should the church continue to do ministry during a global pandemic and especially during prolonged physical absences?" Many churches and ministries face the reality that there is no defined time frame for prolonged physical absences. What may be scarier to many is that prolonged may mean that things never return to the same. Ministries must and will need to adjust and adapt to this ever-changing culture and global circumstances faced in the future.

Ministry Context

Starting in the year 2020, and stretching to the present, the global COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way in which ministries operate exponentially quicker than the church has in the past. Ministries and churches were dealt with the responsibility to adapt to the current physical and social limitations to continue to minister to the people that attended their church at the time of the pandemic, let alone reach non-believers with the Gospel. Carey Nieuwhof noted, "Churches need to stay focused on the mission (leading people into a growing relationship with Jesus) and be exceptionally innovative in our model."[3]

The data on the COVID-19 pandemic's toll on churches is only beginning to emerge. Here is where the data lies currently. According to the Barna research group, in 2020, the state of the American Church was looking a bit bleak. They said, "Even when they do loosen, the majority of people, especially older people and those in the high-risk categories, will not

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[3] Carey Nieuwhof, "10 Predictions About the Future Church and Shifting Attendance Patterns," CareyNieuwhof.com, last modified 2015, accessed August 31, 2022, https://careynieuwhof.com/10-predictions-about-the-future-church-and-shifting-attendance-patterns/.

immediately return to our church gatherings. After all, health experts have been warning us for

months now that the best thing we can do to protect ourselves and protect others is to stay at

home if at all possible."[4] At the time of the writing of this paper, Pew Research Center found:

> But while in-person religious attendance has begun to rebound, it still is far from normal. Most people who say they generally attend religious services at least once or twice a month (58%) say they have not attended during the past month. And just four-in-ten U.S. Christians (39%) plan to go in person to church services this Easter Sunday, which is sharply lower than the 62% who say they typically go to church on Easter.[5]

Tony Morgan states it perfectly when he says, "Even when they do loosen, the majority

of people, especially older people and those in the high-risk categories, will not immediately

return to our church gatherings. After all, health experts have been warning us for months now

that the best thing we can do to protect ourselves and protect others is to stay at home if at all

possible."[6] The global pandemic has dramatically influenced the way in which people attend

church, if they are attending at all. The shift in how people engage in socialization and

community has significantly influenced Western Christianity's cultural norms and the Sunday

morning experience.

The ritual of regular church attendance has been interrupted due to the global pandemic.

Families attending church together weekly or on a semi-regular basis had shifted entirely. People

were no longer able to participate in church in the way in which they had previously. The

inability to meet caused a significant shift in the current church context and pattern of people's

regular spiritual practices. Since the beginning of the church, people have gathered in person

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[4] "What Research Has Revealed About the New Sunday Morning," Barna Group, accessed August 27, 2021, https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning/.

[5] "U.S. Religious Life Slowly Returns to Normal Amid COVID-19 Pandemic," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, 2021, accessed February 14, 2022, https://www.pewforum.org/2021/03/22/life-in-u-s-religious-congregations-slowly-edges-back-toward-normal/.

[6] Tony Morgan, "7 Shifts Churches Need to Make Because of the Coronavirus," TonyMorganLive.com, 2020, accessed August 27, 2021, https://tonymorganlive.com/2020/04/15/7-church-shifts-coronavirus/.

regularly. Suddenly, the global pandemic made that nearly impossible for many individuals. Regular rituals and practice of Sunday morning church services were interrupted.

The prolonged absence caused a tremendous shift in how many churchgoers and non-church attendees saw church participation and their own identity within the group. For most people, a basic understanding of church is to attend a Sunday morning service. This regular ritual and practice were interrupted entirely and, therefore, tremendously affected how people viewed and saw the necessity of church involvement. Many people began asking themselves, "Is church participation necessary?" or "Why did I attend church in the first place." What was revealed due to the prolonged absence was that many faced an existential church identity crisis. Now, it must be stated that many of these questions were already lurking underneath the surface of the Western church participation psyche, but they were revealed because of the pandemic in a new way.

For many, the mere participation in a service or attendance at a service was identified with their faithfulness and participation in their beliefs. Never has church attendance been as impossible in many areas for people in the West. The inability to gather regularly created for many a relational gap in their relationships with God and others. The failure to connect with people face to face regularly has caused many to leave their church, and church in general, behind.

It became so significant because there was a cultural belief and ideology attached to church attendance and spirituality. For many people, church attendance became a measuring stick to understand how they were doing in their spiritual life and whether they were walking in their faith. Church attendance has never been a good measurement of faith and spiritual health, but this took away for many the ability to measure themselves as they had up until this point.

Not only has the pandemic significantly impacted those who simply attend church regularly because of tradition and repetition, but it also affected those who found deep meaning and spiritual connection through participation in regular services. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how people experience, participate, and find relationship in and through their faith. For many, this was not a gradual process but one that seemingly happened overnight. There was an abrupt change in the way in which people lived their lives.

The issues that arose were exacerbated for many since the pandemic did not just change the way in which they experienced their spiritual lives, but it changed their entire lives. Suddenly, and without warning, every aspect of people's lives was altered due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. People could no longer attend work, family functions, birthday parties, or simply go to the store without being faced with the constant pressure of the global pandemic. Every aspect of an individual's life was affected by the sudden change that the entire world had experienced. For many, this was one moment where the church was needed more than ever but they were unable to attend it in a typical fashion due to the restrictions caused by the changing developments and policies concerning the COVID-19 safety protocols.

This pandemic did not just affect a particular part of the country. Rapidly, the entire nation closed as each state began to implement its own lockdown and quarantine processes. Churches all over the United States were affected by the closing of their religious services. While some, a small minority, of churches continued to meet, most churches and Christians in the United States, as well as the world, experienced a dramatic shift in their spiritual practice.

It is interesting to note that this dramatic shift in the spiritual practice of many Christians has had a bit of a different effect on various age groups and demographics. According to The

Washington Post's research on cellphone foot traffic data, one can see the impact of these trends

in Figure 1.1.
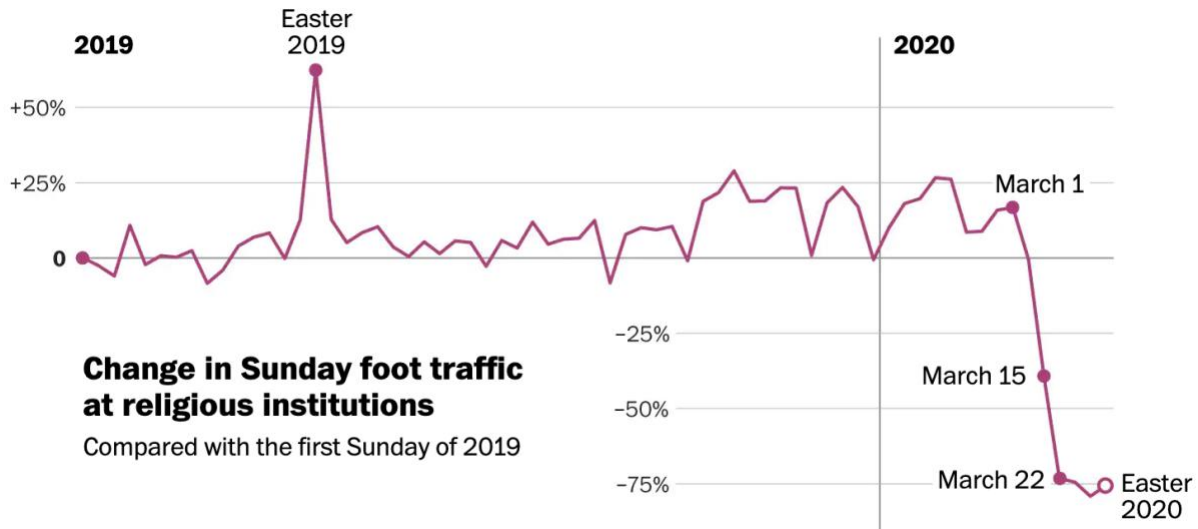
Figure 1.1. Change in cellphone foot traffic.[7]
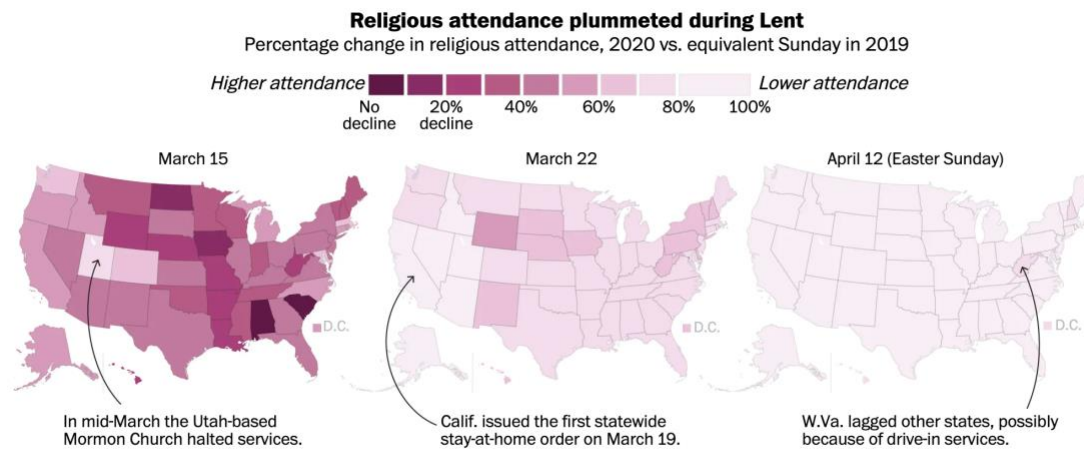
Figure 1.2. Change in religious practice during Lent, 2019 vs. 2020.[8]

As can be clearly seen from figures 1.1 and 1.2, the regular attendance of churchgoers

decreased by nearly 100% in many areas of the United States. This is not an entirely new

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[7] Sarah Pulliam Bailey et al., "Cellphone Data Shows Coronavirus Kept Churchgoers at Home in Every State on Easter," Washington Post, 2020, sec. Religion, accessed August 27, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/04/17/cell-phone-data-coronavirus-churchgoers-home-easter/.

[8] Ibid.

problem, though. The closest data that researchers had to the circumstance found in 2020 could be found in the Flu epidemic of 1918. The church was faced with the same dilemma that many were in recent history. Kristen Rogers reminds readers, "In 1918, many churches around the world closed their doors to save lives. Without financial support, some churches eventually closed permanently, while others survived with dropped-off donations and served as hospitals instead of sanctuaries. For some families, the home became the altar."[9]

The response by the global church community varied. Some churches continued to meet, and the spread of the 1918 flu proliferated. Others agreed not to meet and suffer the consequences when they reopened.

Finally, there is a third group of innovators. These churches began to innovate in ways that they could connect with people and God. Rogers states, "The press, for one, acted as a sort of liaison between leaders and members: Through local papers, leaders stayed connected with members by providing hope and ways to practice their religion. Readers were encouraged to study scripture readings or Sunday school lessons, or worship alone or with family."[10]

With COVID-19, the church found itself in the middle of a global pandemic that, at the time of this writing, continues to ravage the world. The results from being within the pandemic to coming out to have been paramount. The effects of the pandemic continue to be seen. Many churches and ministries continue to grapple with how to effectively lead their people well. People still need rituals and are still adjusting to the "new normal" while learning how to walk through the pandemic. Churches continue to be tasked with the imperative to lead, serve and love

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[9] Kristen Rogers, "For Churchgoers during the Covid-19 Pandemic, a Deadly Lesson from the 1918 Flu," CNN, accessed August 27, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/03/health/churches-covid-1918-lesson-wellness/index.html.

[10] Ibid.

people amidst the pandemic. The rituals of meeting regularly and gathering as a congregation, as well as meeting in groups, have been interrupted but can still be accomplished through other methods.

Problem Presented

Leaders of churches and ministries face a plethora of problems. The global pandemic has only exacerbated those problems and presented many leaders with brand new ones. The reality of the situation is that there is not necessarily a "playbook" that outlines how to deal with a global pandemic and how to lead through one of the most significant global crises the world has ever seen. Leaders are faced with decisions that they never thought possible. For many leaders, this is the first time that they must consider how to lead and reach people in the context of a global shutdown. Every traditional avenue of church leadership and spiritual formation has been removed due to the inability to meet in person for extended periods of time, what was supposed to be a two-week lockdown turned into an over eighteen-month dilemma.

For many, leadership has always been done face to face and in the context of relationships. How does one maintain their leadership influence when they are no longer able to meet with the people that they are leading?

Further, the problem that many leaders face is not simply how to serve a short period of time being physically distanced from those that they lead but how to maintain their leadership and influence with people over extended and prolonged absences. No longer will short-term solutions work for a leader that genuinely wants to lead people.

In all reality, this problem will not only exist if there is another pandemic that ministries may face. There may be a time when the Western Church is unable to meet publicly. How do

Christians best utilize modern technology to reach people with the gospel? The problem that many ministries face is not just one of crisis but may be one of persecution as well.

Finally, the problem is further exacerbated when one thinks of not only leading the people that they already have under their care but also how to reach new people. Jesus said in Matthew 28:18-20, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age," (translation). How is the church to disciple the people that they know about further? How are they going to reach the world and make disciples of all nations when all the countries are shut down, and there is no foreseeable end to their separation? The problem that many church leaders face is how to lead and reach people during a global pandemic or prolonged absences.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry thesis project is to help church leaders have a plan to help lead and reach people with a digital media strategy. For this researcher, the hardest part about ministry through the course of COVID-19 was that there was not a playbook on how to deal with a global pandemic or, in all reality, persecution. During the height of the pandemic, all leaders were facing the fact that they were in an extended and prolonged absence from many people which they were leading and that nearly one to two-thirds of their attendees had disappeared. This issue will require a digital media strategy to help reach new people and disciple the people that they already have under their care. The goal of this paper is to give

leaders a digital playbook on how to reach people in the current circumstance that they find themselves in.

It is extremely a significant time in world history for a leader to reach and minister to the people that are around them during a global or prolonged absence to have taken place. The invention of the Internet and the mass adoption of the Internet, live streaming and on-demand watching has created a platform for leaders to reach and disciple people all over the world. This project aims to give leaders a plan and the tools necessary to engage effectively during this time and in future moments of absence or persecution. It is not enough to know that there are tools available to leaders to reach the masses; they must also know what tools are most effective, why they are effective, and how to produce the tools in the most effective way.

The benefit of this paper is that it will give leaders tangible tools and guides necessary to reach people. It is the belief of this author that the principles presented in this paper will be able to sustain methodology changes that are necessary to achieve an ever-changing world. This project will help to enhance the leadership influence of ministry leaders in some of the most desperate times that people will face, but it will also give leaders the tools that they need to have when there is another prolonged absence. The benefit of this research will not only make church leaders more effective in their mission to serve God by helping to reach all nations with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and making disciples of those nations, but it will also mean that more lives are transformed by the power of the Gospel. This paper and the tools and principles presented are extremely practical. This paper will go beyond the philosophical approach of reaching people and fulfilling the Great Commission to a hands-on approach to leadership. Leaders will become more effective in reaching people, whether those people are believers or not, which is what the mission of the Church is all about.

Basic Assumptions

This section of the paper will discuss the basic assumptions that were brought into this research project. Most research has predetermined objectives that will influence the direction of the study. In the following section, those assumptions will be listed and explained.

The first assumption that must be determined and discussed is the point that the Church is meant and built to gather. It is assumed from the arguments of Scripture that the church is meant to gather with one another. The word "ecclesia," which the word "church" is translated from, literally means "a political assembly of citizens of ancient Greek states."[11] Implied within the very definition of the word that is translated church is the idea of gathering and coming together. In each instance, one sees a letter written to people in the New Testament. It is written to an assembled group of people where that letter would be read aloud to the group. Not only is this evident in the New Testament but also in the Old Testament. Within the Jewish culture, it was clear that the people of God would gather in synagogues regularly.

The second assumption that is made within the paper is the fact that the Gospel, the good news of the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, needs to spread forward and does not change due to the inability to meet. It is important to remember that the mission of the church does not change when churches are not able to meet physically. This has been seen as an example in so many different instances where the underground Church has grown due to the fact of the mission going forward. It is vital that churches and ministries understand that the mission continues regardless of the ability to meet. The assumption of this paper is that during times in which preferable methods may not be able to be used, the Gospel can still move forward, and the

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[11] "Definition of ECCLESIA," accessed August 31, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecclesia.

mission of the church can still be reached through digital media strategies during prolonged absences.

The third assumption of this paper is the fact that principles, not methods, determine the direction and progress of the church. Many may argue that the methodology proposed within this paper is not a preferred nor applicable methodology for the church to engage the world. This paper assumes the fact that methodology is not preached in the Bible, but principles are. It is important to remember that the principles of the Bible and the Gospel moving forward in the lives of people is vital. It is assumed that principles presented in the Bible for reaching people are not violated in the methodologies that are shown in the paper.

Further, it is assumed within this paper that the necessity of church governance is upheld within the methodology presented. It is vital to remember that the Bible gives a framework and emphasis on the importance of a plurality of leadership within the local church to correctly lead that church. The principles of church leadership and governance should be upheld and emphasized within the model proposed. It is important to remember that there is no change or no distinction in leadership that is made in the model presented. All church leadership should be upheld with the importance that is given within the Bible.

The message of the Bible is not predicated on the physical gathering of believers. The message can still be adequately disseminated even when the church is unable to gather physically. An example of this would be letters that were passed around from various church gatherings in the New Testament. It was assumed and seen within the Scripture that the physical gathering of all believers at one time and in one place was not necessary for the message and true mission of the Church to continue.

This paper in no way attempts to disregard or replace the importance and emphasis of physical gatherings for the body of Christ. It is important to remember that this paper is built upon the assumption that physical meetings will have been halted or are not deemed reasonable during this time. It is important to note that the preferred method presented within Scripture is the physical gathering of believers. This method of gathering is preferable for numerous reasons, including the importance of being known and seen. It must be noted that one of the weaker aspects of the method that will be presented in this paper is the fact that there is a lack of accountability and transparency within this model. One of the most critical aspects of the physical gathering of believers is the community that can be built. It is understood within this paper that the digital media strategy to reach individuals is inferior to the physical gathering of believers presented within Scripture. Thus, this paper does not seek to replace the physical gathering of believers but instead seeks to present a model that continues to engage people while physical gathering is not permitted.

People have an innate need for community. It is understood and assumed within this paper that this will be one of the most significant challenges for the church during times of prolonged absences. It is understood that there are many gaps within this model, but this model is here to present a way for it during times of necessity. The community can be built within this model, but it will be inferior to the ability to gather physically.

A further assumption of this paper is the fact that the church will be able to gather digitally during a period of prolonged absences. This model does not assume that the gathering of believers will be illegal, even when gathering online. It is important to note that many of the methodologies presented within this paper during the time of illegality will be considered null and void due to the circumstance. Thus, it must be clearly stated that this model is presented

when the physical gathering is not permitted, but the gathering of the church digitally is still permissible. If at any moment the church is banned from meeting, other strategies, and methodologies for gathering should be implemented for the continuation of church growth.

The assumption that true discipleship and community can be built within a digital media strategy will be addressed later in this paper. The reality is that this community may look somewhat different and may be lacking in some areas, but during a time of prolonged absence due to the global crisis this community will still be valid. This paper acknowledges that there are some weaknesses to the lack of physical gathering, but a genuine community can happen within this environment. Much of this is already happening within Christian communities, and people are growing in the community around an online presence. This idea will be further discussed in further chapters.

One of the most important aspects of this entire exercise is the fact that digital media will become more and more affordable, allowing more ministries to get involved and be a part of what is happening online. The equipment that can be used that is high quality is more affordable than ever. The assumption is that more leaders will be able to access high-quality equipment at a much lower price point, making it easier to access high-quality content.

Definitions

1080p- With 1,920 pixels displayed across the screen and 1,080 pixels running from top to bottom, one ends up with a lot of pixels. When one multiplies the number of pixels across (1920) and down (1080), the total is 2,073,600. Referred to as pixel density, this number is the

total number of pixels displayed on the screen. In digital camera and photography terms, it's about two megapixels.[12]

Algorithm- An algorithm is a mathematical set of rules specifying how a group of data behaves. In social media, algorithms help maintain order and assist in ranking search results and advertisements.[13]

Avatar- An avatar is a visual representation of a person for use in digital contexts. It's usually a computer-generated image, such as a bitmoji. On social media, the term "avatar" also refers to an individual's profile picture—the image that represents them on the platform. Most individual users choose a photo as their social media avatar, sometimes supplemented by a digital frame or filter. For brands, the company logo is usually the best avatar choice.[14]

Click-through rate (CTR)- CTR stands for click-through rate, which is a metric that measures the number of clicks advertisers receive on their ads per number of impressions.[15]

Church- The universal Church is a heavenly and eschatological assembly of everyone— past, present, and future—who belongs to Christ's new covenant and kingdom.[16]

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[12] "What Does the Term 1080p Mean?," Lifewire, accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.lifewire.com/what-the-term-1080p-means-1846837.

[13] "How Do Social Media Algorithms Work?," Digital Marketing Institute, accessed September 1, 2022, https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/blog/how-do-social-media-algorithms-work.

[14] "Avatar," Social Media Marketing & Management Dashboard, accessed September 1, 2022, https://blog.hootsuite.com/social-media-definitions/avatar/.

[15] "Click-Through Rate (CTR): Understanding CTR for PPC [PPC U]," WordStream, accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.wordstream.com/click-through-rate.

[16] Jonathan Leeman, "The Church: Universal and Local," The Gospel Coalition, accessed September 3, 2022, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-church-universal-and-local/.

Conversion Rate- The conversion rate is the number of conversions divided by the total number of visitors. For example, if an eCommerce site receives two hundred visitors in a month and has fifty sales, the conversion rate would be fifty divided by two hundred, or 25%.[17]

Deep Fake- Deep fakes are videos and images that have been digitally manipulated to depict people saying and doing things that never happened. Most deepfakes use artificial intelligence to alter video and to generate authentic-sounding audio. These clips are often produced to fool viewers and are optimized to spread rapidly on social media."[18]

Digital Streaming- Digital streaming refers to any media content – live or recorded – that is delivered to computers and mobile devices via the Internet and played back in real time. Podcasts, webcasts, movies, TV shows and music videos are common forms of streaming content.[19]

Direct Message (DM)- A direct message is a private form of communication between social media users that is only visible to the sender and recipient(s).[20]

Encoder- A live streaming encoder is a tool that converts video content into a different format. The purpose of encoding a video is to create a digital copy of the video that can be transmitted over the Internet. Digital video content can be embedded or streamed lived right onto a website. [21]

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[17] "Conversion Rate," Optimizely, accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.optimizely.com/optimization-glossary/conversion-rate/.

[18] Veronica Stewart, "LibGuides: Misinformation and Disinformation: Deepfakes," accessed September 5, 2022, https://libguides.uaptc.edu/c.php?g=620558&p=6812551.

[19] "What Is Streaming - Definition, Meaning & Explanation," Verizon Fios, accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.verizon.com/info/definitions/streaming/.

[20] "What Is a Direct Message and When to Use It," BigCommerce, accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.bigcommerce.com/ecommerce-answers/what-is-a-direct-message/.

[21] "The 10 Best Live Streaming Encoders (Hardware + Software) in 2022," Dacast, last modified 2022, accessed September 1, 2022, /blog/live-stream-encoding-software/.

End User- the ultimate consumer of a finished product.[22]

Engagement Rate- Engagement rates tell how engaged followers are with specific social content. A reasonable engagement rate shows that a specific person or page is winning their followers' attention and that they're interacting with the produced content. However, a strong social media engagement rate differs for every social media platform.[23]

Follower- In social media, a follow represents a user who chooses to see all another user's posts in their content feed.[24]

Hashtag- a word or phrase preceded by the symbol # that classifies or categorizes the accompanying text (such as a tweet).[25]

High Definition (HD) Video- HD Video refers to video that is of higher resolution and quality than standard-definition video. The definition of video, in general, refers to the number of pixels in a display. A pixel is the smallest visible element on a display. With HD video, there are more pixels packed into a display, producing a sharper, cleaner image.[26]

Instagram TV (IGTV)- IGTV allows creators to upload high-quality, long-form, vertical videos. IGTV allows Instagram users to create channels where they can upload videos between

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[22] "Definition of END USER," accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/end+user.

[23] Adobe Express, "Your Guide to Social Media Engagement Rates. | Adobe Express," accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.adobe.com/express/learn/blog/what-is-a-good-social-media-engagement-rate.

[24] "What Is 'following' and What Does It Mean on Social Media?," BigCommerce, accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.bigcommerce.com/ecommerce-answers/what-is-following/.

[25] "Definition of HASHTAG," accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hashtag.

[26] "High Definition (HD)," Haivision, accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.haivision.com/resources/streaming-video-definitions/hd-high-definition/.

fifteen seconds and ten minutes long. Large accounts can upload videos that are up to sixty minutes long.[27]

Internet Church- Internet church, online church, cyber-church, or digital church refer to a wide variety of ways that Christian religious groups can use the Internet to facilitate their religious activities, particularly prayer, discussion, preaching, and worship services. The Internet has become a site for a religious experience which has raised questions related to ecclesiology because some Christian traditions insist that an online gathering cannot be considered a church.[28] Insights- A social insight is defined as consumer feedback from social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Social insights are obtained by observing and analyzing social conversations about a brand, product, or even an unmet need or problem.[29]

Mention- Social mentions include any mention of a business on social media.[30]

Metaverse- Broadly speaking, the technologies companies refer to when they talk about "the metaverse" can include virtual reality—characterized by persistent virtual worlds that continue to exist even when a consumer is not playing a game—as well as augmented reality that combines aspects of the digital and physical worlds.[31]

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[27] "What Is IGTV (Instagram TV) and How Do I Use It?," Meet Edgar, last modified 2020, accessed September 1, 2022, https://meetedgar.com/blog/what-is-igtv/.

[28] "Internet Church," 2022, accessed September 3, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Internet_church&oldid=1094182556.

[29] Melissa Chue, "How to Get, Analyze, and Use Consumer Insights from Social Media," accessed September 1, 2022, https://blog.digimind.com/en/insight-driven-marketing/how-to-get-analyze-and-use-consumer-insights-from-social-media.

[30] Chloe West, "Social Mentions 101: What Are They and Why They're Important," Sprout Social, last modified 2020, accessed September 1, 2022, https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-mentions/.

[31] Eric Ravenscraft, "What Is the Metaverse, Exactly?," Wired, accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.wired.com/story/what-is-the-metaverse/.

RSS Feed- RSS Feed is a family of Web feed formats used to publish often updated content such as blog entries, news headlines or podcasts. An RSS document, which is called a "feed," "web feed," or "channel," contains either a summary of content from an associated web site or the full text. RSS makes it possible for people to keep up with their favorite web sites without having to check them manually. This flow of content between websites and users is called "web syndication."[32]

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)- SEO stands for "search engine optimization." In simple terms, it means the process of improving one's site to increase its visibility when people search for products or services related to the site's business in Google, Bing, and other search engines.[33]

Story- A Story is a full-screen vertical image or video, with optional filters and effects, that is shared to a certain social media feed for twenty-four hours. After that time elapses, it is no longer accessible to friends and followers.[34]

Social Proof- This is a psychological and social phenomenon wherein people copy the actions of others to undertake behavior in a situation. The term was coined by Robert Cialdini in his 1984 book *Influence: Science and Practice*. The concept is also known as informational social influence.[35]

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[32] "Really Simple Syndication," 2020, accessed September 1, 2022, https://simple.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Really_Simple_Syndication&oldid=7235528.

[33] "What Is SEO / Search Engine Optimization?," Search Engine Land, accessed September 1, 2022, https://searchengineland.com/guide/what-is-seo.

[34] Jessibelle Garcia, "What Are Social Media Stories and Why Are They Everywhere?," MUO, last modified 2021, accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.makeuseof.com/social-media-stories-everywhere/.

[35] "Social Proof," 2022, accessed September 1, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Social_proof&oldid=1088799372.

User Generated Content (UGC)- UGC, also known as consumer-generated content, is original, brand-specific content created by customers and published on social media or other channels. UGC comes in many forms, including images, videos, reviews, a testimonial, or even a podcast.[36]

Vlog- a blog that contains video material.[37]

VUCA Enviroment- VUCA is short for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, and serves as a catchall for "Hey, it's crazy out there!" It's also misleading: VUCA conflates four distinct types of challenges that demand four distinct types of responses.[38]

Web 2.0- Web 2.0 (also known as participative (or participatory) web and social web) refers to websites that emphasize user-generated content, ease of use, participatory culture, and interoperability (i.e., compatibility with other products, systems, and devices) for end users.[39]

Web 3.0- Web 3.0 represents the next iteration or phase of the evolution of the web/Internet and potentially could be as disruptive and represent as big a paradigm shift as Web 2.0 did. Web 3.0 is built upon the core concepts of decentralization, openness, and greater user utility.[40]

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[36] "What Is User-Generated Content? And Why Is It Important?," Social Media Marketing & Management Dashboard, 2022, accessed September 1, 2022, https://blog.hootsuite.com/user-generated-content-ugc/.

[37] "Definition of VLOG," accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vlog.

[38] Nate Bennett and G. James Lemoine, "What VUCA Really Means for You," Harvard Business Review, 2014, accessed September 1, 2022, https://hbr.org/2014/01/what-vuca-really-means-for-you.

[39] "Web 2.0," 2022, accessed September 1, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Web_2.0&oldid=1106610355.

[40] "Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 Definitions," Investopedia, accessed September 1, 2022, https://www.investopedia.com/web-20-web-30-5208698.

Limitations

For the purposes of this research project there are numerous limitations that must be considered. First, this is a simple case study on the effectiveness of these methodologies used within a single church setting.

The quality of the content that is provided can have tremendous impacts on the "success" of various methodologies. There is a marked difference in what is defined as appealing and what may work within the demographic of a particular ministry.

Consistency of posting content is a large factor in the success of the content in reaching people. What may be consistent to one group of people is not to another.

Likes and shares are other aspects that can greatly influence the effectiveness of the content that is shared. The people factor steps in here. The success of a post or video truly depends on the type of people that are being reached and their willingness to like and share content.

Finally, geography plays a large part in the effectiveness of the content provided. Different regions of the nation, as well as the world, will respond to different types of content differently. It is important to note that this content was tested in a very specific place within the world.

Delimitations

The biggest limitation that is set upon this research project is the fact that it is limited to the social media accounts of Bedrock Church Sarasota. No other social media accounts were considered in this project.

Thesis Statement

Strategic use of digital media platforms are successful in helping a church reach people. The Church's mission, to reach people with the Gospel, and to make disciples during a time of prolonged absence where meeting physically is impossible can be accomplished through these strategies.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

For many young people today, it is hard to remember a time when there was not the Internet, smartphones, iPods, iTunes, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. For people younger, or in their mid to late thirties, the Internet and technology is something that is completely ingrained into who they are. They are "native" to the Internet and modern personal technology. Understanding the Internet and knowing its usefulness is something that they understood from adolescence. In fact, it is almost impossible to imagine how everyday life could be lived without the use of technology and digital media. The use of digital media within the context of the church has only grown in the recent past, and its importance in normal church life has increased. Since it has developed so much within the current church context, it is vital for church leaders' understanding of the use of digital media when trying to reach people and continuing the mission of the church during a time of prolonged absences.

The Internet has completely changed the way in which people live their lives today. Modern, westernized people have migrated most of their lives to a digital context. Their calendars, entertainment, reading, and social interactions have migrated into the digital world in the past few decades in a rapid fashion. For most Americans, using the Internet is a daily part of their lives. People from all over the world can access the web and are able to engage the world around them.

In fact, most people today can be linked to the Internet at almost any moment. They have the Internet available on their mobile phones, and there are even cars that now have 5G ultra-high-speed service and can act as a Wi-Fi hotspot. Convenience has only created a greater use of digital media. With the internet and digital media content literally at people's fingertips, it is no wonder to see how quickly it has become an essential part of their lives.

Further, now the internet is one of the last "truly" free places on earth, and it is a place where ideas and opinions can be shared freely and, many times, anonymously. This is an incredible opportunity to reach people with a digital media strategy during prolonged absences. That freedom of not only use but also expression must remain true to reach people with a digital media strategy during prolonged absences.

As the use of technology continues to grow and as it becomes a part of the everyday lives of people, it is crucial that the Church begins to consider what influence they can have on it and how it can influence people using technology. Not only that, but the Church needs a digital media strategy on how to use technology in the best way possible. Technology is shaping the future of the world, and therefore, it is going to shape the way in which Christians engage the world around. Technology can make Christians much more effective in the way in which they share their faith and engage the world. It also has the ability for the Church to reach the world in a much quicker and more efficient way. The danger is that it also can water the church down and break true fellowship. If the church is not careful, it can be led down a perilous path if their understanding of technology is not correct.

Dangers to Consider

The freedom that can be found on the internet has changed the way people think and act. The "normal" social structures and dynamics have been changed by technology. It has opened people's eyes to the world around them. While there are some tremendous upsides to the use of digital media, especially during a prolonged absence, there are some consequences that must be briefly considered.

There are some negative consequences that come with the advancement of a digital media strategy. With so much freedom, there is the opportunity to miss information. Christians are living in a time where "truth" is something that is harder to come by, and people's personal emotions are taking hold of a person's truth. This point is seen so clearly in the election of Oxford Dictionaries' word of the year in 2016: "In late 2016, Oxford Dictionaries selected 'post-truth' as the word of the year, defining it as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.'"[1]

The role of the church is to share the "truth" of the word of God. This is going to be more challenging as time continues. There are two main reasons for this. Consider the reasoning from a Pew Research article on the spread of misinformation:

> More specifically, the 51% of these experts who expect things will not improve generally cited two reasons:
>
> The fake news ecosystem preys on some of our deepest human instincts: Respondents said humans' primal quest for success and power – their "survival" instinct – will continue to degrade the online information environment in the next decade. They predicted that manipulative actors would use new digital tools to take advantage of humans' inbred preference for comfort and convenience and their craving for the answers they find in reinforcing echo chambers.
>
> Our brains are not wired to contend with the pace of technological change: These respondents said the rising speed, reach, and efficiencies of the internet and emerging online applications will magnify these human tendencies and that technology-based solutions will not be able to overcome them. They predicted a future information landscape in which fake information crowds out reliable information. Some even foresaw a world in which widespread information scams and mass manipulation cause broad swathes of public to simply give up on being informed participants in civic life.[2]

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[1] Janna and Lee Rainie Anderson, "The Future of Truth and Misinformation Online," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, 2017, accessed September 5, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/10/19/the-future-of-truth-and-misinformation-online/.

[2] Ibid.

This results in a few possible dangers and challenges for a digital media strategy. First, it will make communicating the truth of the word of God more challenging in that people are more so going towards information that will help them "survive" as they are and to disregard information that challenges their current view. The Church will need to use the best digital media ecosystems, use the best and most reliable resources, and do so in an engaging and non-threatening manner.

Second, there is going to be a lot of misinformation and the Church is going to need to learn to cut through that information to be heard. As was seen in the COVID-19 pandemic, a prolonged absence only accelerates the spread of misinformation. As the digital media landscape expands and while the mass adoption of it grows the potential to be lost in a sea of disinformation is there.

Finally, it is easier than ever to mimic or fake online content. Churches and leaders are going to have to be aware of this danger. "Deep Fakes," a technology that can completely alter audio, video, and images, is going to be something that the church must be aware of.

> Therefore, the same voice-cloning technology could be used for phishing, defamation, and blackmailing. When deepfakes are deliberately deployed to reshape public opinion, incite social conflicts and manipulate elections, they have the potential to undermine democracy […] Deepfakes are the perfect tool for disinformation campaigns because they produce believable fake news that takes time to debunk. Meanwhile, the damages caused by deepfakes — especially those that affect people's reputations — are often long-lasting and irreversible […] Credibility in authorities and the media is being undermined, creating a climate of distrust. And with the rising proliferation of deepfakes, politicians could easily deny culpability in any emerging scandals. How can someone's identity in a video be confirmed if they deny it?[3]

Audio, video, and image content can be quickly augmented to make an organization or person say whatever they would want. As a result, the Church needs to be prepared to combat

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[3] Benjamin C. M. Fung and Sze-Fung Lee, "The Use of Deepfakes Can Sow Doubt, Creating Confusion and Distrust in Viewers," The Conversation, accessed September 5, 2022, http://theconversation.com/the-use-of-deepfakes-can-sow-doubt-creating-confusion-and-distrust-in-viewers-182108.

misinformation or if they are "faked." This will result in an overall lack of trust in video and media content online, something the Church will need to overcome.

The Place of the Internet Church

Explanation of the Church

What exactly is the Church? What is the role of the Church universally and locally? Can the Church grow into the modern age, and should it? Understanding the role and functions of the Church is fundamental to understanding what the Church is to be and helps to clarify the conversation of whether the Internet Church is a Church and whether a digital media strategy is applicable, especially during a time of prolonged absences.

Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible describes the Church as follows, "The NT understands 'church' to refer to the visible expression of the gathered followers of Jesus Christ who have been grafted into a community created by God, under the banner of Jesus Christ, embodying in an anticipatory way the life and values of the new creation."[4] From this definition of the Church, it is clear to see that the Church is to be a gathering of believers, but what is meant by visible? Can the visible body be one that gathers digitally? The question that arises is, "Does this necessitate the physical gathering of believers, or can it mean something different in a modern context?"

It must be stated that for the purposes of this project that the lack of physical gathering is only being considered in the event of the inability to meet. This paper is not proposing that an online digital media strategy should replace the physical gathering or that it is an altogether

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[4] Allan J. McNicol, "Church," ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 252.

better form of gathering, but rather that it does fit the requirements of the Church when necessary.

The answer to the question of whether the digital gathering is acceptable and viable is quite simply "yes." The gathering, as in all cases, refers to believers that belong to the Church coming together but does not necessitate that physical gathering take place. When one talks about the gathering of believers, this was a physical gathering during the time of the early Church, but it does not mean that people cannot gather in different ways now. Only in recent history has there been the ability to gather online. So, historically, the Church is the group of people that belong to a local church, and when writers are referring to the Church as a gathering, it has meant, for the entirety of history, the physical gathering in a particular place. Now, what Christian leaders are finding is that there can be a new avenue of gathering that does not necessitate being in the exact physical location.

Not only is the Church a place where people gather and belong to a group more significant than themselves, but it is also the place where certain aspects of the Christian life are lived out. Now, it must be stated that the physical gathering does not have to be the only place where various elements of the Christian faith can be done, but throughout history, it would have been the only option.

It is essential at this point of the project to define the meaning of "Church," as it will be used within this paper. When the word "Church" is used, it means to include all of God's people. There is no distinction between denominations or localities here. The purpose of this paper is to give all churches (local and global) a strategy for reaching people during prolonged periods of absence from physical gatherings. It is understood that the principles that are established here are for the worldwide Church with local church implementation.

The Function of the Church

The Church has a couple of main functions that will be discussed in detail below.

Understanding the functions of a church is vital to understanding having a digital media strategy

for online engagement.

1) The Church is, first and foremost, the inclusion of all believers. The Church is not

simply a building, nor has it ever been referred to that way until more recent history. Mark Dever

states that "the church is not a place. It's not a building. It's not a preaching point. It's not a

spiritual service provider. It's a people- the new covenant, blood-bought people of God."[5]

2) The Church is to perform the two sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism. It is

important to look at the importance of these two sacraments for the Church:

> How does it do that? How can these heavenly citizens know who "they" are, both for
> their own sake and for the sake of the nations? To answer that question, Jesus provided
> covenant signs for members of the new covenant: the entrance sign of baptism, whereby
> people are baptized into his name (Matt. 28:19); and the ongoing sign of the Lord's
> Supper, whereby they affirm one another as members of his body (1 Cor. 10:17).[6]

3) The Church is a place of accountability and fellowship what Scripture refers to as the

"one another" statements. "'One another' is two words in English, but it's only one word in

Greek: ἀλλήλων (ah-LAY-loan). It's used 100 times in 94 New Testament verses. Forty-seven of

those verses give instructions to the church, and 60% of those instructions come from Paul."[7]

4) The Church is a place of discipline. One of the greatest aspects of the local church and

the universal Church is that of accountability. Christians are to be there to help one another in

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[5] Mark Dever, *What Is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 34.

[6] "The Church: Universal and Local," 9Marks, accessed September 3, 2022, https://www.9marks.org/article/the-church-universal-and-local/.

[7] Jeffrey Klanz, "All the One Another Commands in NT (infographic)," accessed on September 3, 2022, https://overviewbible.com/one-another-infographic/.

their pursuit of becoming Christ-like people. This would follow in the footsteps of the teaching from Matthew 18:15-18.[8]

5) The Church is place of worship, teaching, and reaching new believers. One of the main reasons for the existence of the Church is to teach the Word of God and to worship the Lord. This is seen clearly in commands that Christ gives the Church, especially those found in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20.

The use of digital media strategies, as well as the use of the online Church, can facilitate these vital functions of the Church if there is an ability to gather digitally. There are a few caveats that must be considered later within the body of the paper. Historically, and due to the process of some of these roles, there need to be multiple people present at one time, but it is believed that groups can gather digitally.

It must be taken into consideration that there was not a possibility of an online gathering during the time in which Scripture was written. The closest circumstance to this situation in Scripture is when Paul is writing to churches that he cannot be with physically at the time. The theological backing and further insight into the use of epistolatory letters will be discussed in the theological section as a biblical model for a discipleship model with the lack of the ability to gather.

It must be stated once again that the model being presented may not be the preferred model, but it is being proposed that it is a model that can be put into place when the physical gathering is not feasible. Even in the circumstances where one cannot gather physically, Paul states how much he would like to be with them rather than writing the letters. There is no arguing that there can be a sense of community through online avenues, but some of these

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[8] Jonathan Leeman, "Church Discipline," The Gospel Coalition, accessed September 3, 2022, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/church-discipline/.

necessitate there being a need for physical proximity with someone. While necessity can be argued in some of these arguments, Christians must also ask themselves what the ideal situation is and whether they should strive to meet that ideal.

<div align="center">The Sacraments</div>

There are two central ordinances that are given to the church to perform. They are the Lord's Supper and baptism. Both are shown in the context of remembrance of the cross and the sacrifice that Christ made for believers. The Lord's Supper is meant to be a gathering of believers whereby they take bread and drink and consume it in remembrance of the sacrifice that Christ made for the Church. One author makes the point that the Lord's Supper is

> fellowship with God (Gen. 18:17–33; Ex. 33:9–11; Num. 12:7, 8), between Christ and his people (John 14:23), by the Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1), of believers with one another (Eph. 4:1–6). The Lord's Supper is so called (1 Cor. 10:16, 17) because in it there is fellowship between Christ and his disciples, and of the disciples with one another.[9]

Once again, it is clear to see that this is to be done with other believers and in the community with them. What the biblical writers seem to be inferring here is that this is to be done physically. The question that arises is, even if people are collected in a chat room, is it truly a gathering of people?

Baptism is another ordinance that is extremely important to the life of the Church. In fact, this is the more public of the two ordinances. Baptism, at its very core, is to be a public proclamation and identification with the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. One New Testament commentator makes the point that "an ordinance immediately instituted by Christ (Matt. 28:19, 20), and designed to be observed in the church, like that of the Supper, 'till he

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[9] M. G. Easton, *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1893), page number.

come.'"[10] This writer goes as far as to say that not only are these ordinances to be done publicly but physically in the Church.

In either case, the point can be made that these two ordinances are to be done in the physical witness of others. There seems to be, at the very essence of these two ordinances, the need to conduct and participate in these ordinances in physical proximity to one another. It is believed that this can be accomplished in an online environment. If the need is to witness these two sacraments in the presence and accountability of others, it seems to be possible to do this through an online gathering of people. Both are done publicly and in the presence of others. Given the technology that is available to people today, both ordinances can be done publicly without the presence of physical gatherings. One may consider a Zoom meeting, Facebook Chat Room, or Instagram Live as such environments to consider.

One further note must be made specifically about baptism. The role of baptism, biblically speaking, is to create a public profession of faith based upon what has happened to a person on the inside. While it may not be preferable, it is possible for one to confess through water baptism that Christ has saved them without a physical person physically baptizing them, but someone does need to lead them through this moment. It may not be preferable, but it is doable.

True Community?

What is true community, and can one have that online? Many will make the argument that community cannot truly happen online, while others state that there can be a more authentic community online, as this is a community that people have chosen to be in. Some of the aspects of true community that come to mind are the ability to be known, to be held accountable, to look

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[10] Easton, *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, page number.

after the needs of others, to feel companionship, and to contribute to a greater "good." One writer

makes this point when talking about online communities:

> I'm talking about self-organized, self-sustaining communities of purpose, communities of action, communities of circumstance, communities of interest, communities of inquiry, communities of position, communities of place, and communities of practice--real people, bonded into a tribe, protective of the members of their family. Second Life is the modern exemplar of how and why online communities are authentic--even though one can (and often does) hide behind a posh and dead-sexy avatar and a posh and dead-sexy nom de plume. Second Life might even be more authentic because it allows members to cast-off the shackles of family names and the genetic inheritance of body and shape, and redefine oneself as one desires to be--arguably, as one is more authentic on Second Life, where one may become the man or woman (or purple pony) that one is on the inside.[11]

The point that the author is trying to make is that these are true communities where

people are truly taking care of one another, being held accountable, are finding companionship

and that they are being who they genuinely want to be.

Is the gathering of people online through chatrooms, Zoom meetings, or keeping up with

one another through social media really "community," or is it simply an extension of

community? Is this a holistic approach or just a partial one?

One must consider that there needs to be a separation made here. The material and

immaterial of a person are being separated in this community. The whole person is not there.

Christians must remember that people are mind, body, and spirit. It seems that at least one of

these is being left out. If the entire person is not there, then is this truly authentic? In fact, many

make point that people hide behind a digital avatar. How can this be truly authentic? The premise

of who the person is physically is built on a lie.

If one aspect of a person is left out from a particular type of gathering, namely being

present physically, it would seemingly negate authenticity from the start. This does not have to

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[11] Chris Abraham, "Online Communities are Most Authentic," Huffpost, October 25, 2013, accessed May 6, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-abraham/online-communities-are-mo_b_4156291.html.

be the case. While it seems obvious that people can put on a façade in the online community, the same is clearly true in the physical gathering as well. Yes, one can lie about some of their physical attributes in the online world, that is only one aspect of being known, and what seems to be a shallow one at that. This object falls flat upon further consideration.

One mistake that many people make is to compare the physical community and the online community directly. The question that often gets asked is whether the online community is genuine. It is important to remember that they are different, but it does not make one way of meeting less genuine. Church leaders need to set proper expectations for both types of communities. Amitai and Oren Etzioni write,

> Even with current technical limitations, online communities have several advantages. They let people bond without being in close proximity either spatially or temporally (unlike phone conversations, online communication can be asynchronous). Communities can evolve across national borders and time zones. They can encompass individuals who are homebound because of illness, age, or handicap. They are safer—a major consideration in many cities. Online discussion groups or forums can accommodate many more individuals than off-line meeting rooms can accommodate. And online communities have much stronger memories than off-line communities in matters ranging from the resolutions passed many town meetings ago to names of the founders of the community. Finally, people can explore new relationships or even new identities online—they are not constrained by their physical appearance or off-line identity, as Sherry Turkle of MIT has documented. An embodiment of these features of online communities is the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link). With its carefully crafted community guidelines, the WELL boasts a large membership and numerous discussion groups on topics ranging from "Women and Men" to "Science and Technology.
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> Real communities are better than virtual communities (at least as currently designed) in communicating affect, identifying participants and holding them accountable, and in providing group feedback (for example, cheering a speaker at a "real" town meeting).[12]

Yes, there are limitations to the uses of an online community, and there are obstacles to overcome and be creative with, but that does not negate the fact that in a time of prolonged

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[12] Amitai Etzioni and Oren Etzioni, "Communities: Virtual vs. Real," Science, July 18, 1997, accessed September 5, 2022, https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.277.5324.295.

absence that an online gathering should be considered less than genuine but rather seen for its strengths in a time of absence.

Thus, it is important to translate this into the Church. Can a Church truly be a Church without a physical community? Yes, when one boils down to the idea of true authenticity, people can be as genuine as they would be in a physical gathering. It seems important to note that once again, this is not preferred but gathering in genuine community is "doable" in an online presence.

Can a Digital Media Strategy Successfully Meet the Role of the Church?

The online Church can absolutely meet the needs of many people and can fulfill the roles of a Church. It cannot faithfully and solely fulfill all the responsibilities of the physical Church in the same manner, but it can fulfill those roles in an unconventional manner. The online Church should, therefore, not be thought of as a church but rather a ministry of the Church. There is absolutely a role for online Church, but, if possible, it must be supplemental and not ideal. In the case of this paper, it would be essential to gather through digital media venues and, therefore, must be considered completely viable during a period of prolonged absences.

Ideal vs. Possible

"What is ideal?" This is a question that must be taken into consideration. Many times, people will let a lack of ideal circumstances keep them from doing what is possible in the meantime. As stated previously in this paper, physical gathering is ideal, but this paper discusses a moment that falls short of the ideal physical gathering and asks what is possible.

What is the ideal way for a church to take place? This paper is not discussing the type of worship, order of service, preaching style, décor, or denomination of a church. This is another

paper altogether and is probably a very lengthy book at that. The simple question is, "Is the ideal place for the Church to be done physically or online?" As it has been previously discussed, the answer to that is a resounding amen for the Church to meet physically. The Church more faithfully accomplishes its mission when the body gathers. It is the assembling of believers and their work together and for one another that truly fulfills the mission of the Church. This can be done in a digital manner when necessary. In fact, Hebrews 10:25 makes the point that Christians are to not forsake the assembling of one another. Ideally, the Church is to physically gather, but the Church can be faithful in the assembling of one another with the types of technology that are available today.

The tendency is to throw "the baby out with the bath water." Church leaders must resist this tendency. The truth is that the online Church is not ideal, but it should not, therefore, be completely shelved. It would never be said that a parent's ideal relationship with their children is online. Children need to feel the embrace and kisses of their parents. They need to know what Mom and Dad are like. Now, would a person ever say that someone was a bad parent if they were overseas serving in the military and could not be there with their kids? Absolutely not!

Thus, to conclude this section of the paper, the point must be made that while the online Church and digital media venues can meet many of the tasks of the Church, they cannot do it as ideally as the physical Church. This means that the online Church is, therefore, a ministry of the local, physical Church and should not be substitutionary for the Church if possible. James 4:17 says, "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is a sin for them," (translation). Christians know that what is ideal, best, and good is the physical gathering of the body. Therefore, the online Church is not what is best and, if possible, should only be complimentary to the physical gathering of the Church.

Having made the point that digital media should not supplant the physical gathering of churches when it is necessary, it can do the job. Thus, churches must prepare and have a strategy to continue the work of the ministry digitally when meeting physically is not possible. The questions that now arise revolve around what the best way to do this is and what technologies are necessary.

A Historical Precedence

A Historical Model of Church Growth Through Persecution

Tertullian is quoted as saying, "The Blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the church."[13] Persecution is something that the Church has faced for generations. One of the reasons for a prolonged absence in the future may be that churches will not be able to meet because of persecution. The goal of this paper is not to talk through the reasons that the Church grows through persecution but rather that in times of persecution, there are prolonged absences and that by using technology and innovation, the Church has been able to grow.

For example, one might only think of the invention of the printing press and the ability to get the word of God in the language of the people. During times of persecution and prolonged absence, the invention of the printing press in the ability to get the word of God into people's hands helped the Church grow during times of great distress. It is important to note that during these times of prolonged absence from the public gathering of believers, the Church has progressed forward throughout history. This is important to know because there is a historical

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[13] Nicholas LaBanca, "Blood of the Martyrs Is Still Seed for the Church," Ascension Press Media, 2018, accessed September 6, 2022, https://media.ascensionpress.com/2018/09/17/blood-of-the-martyrs-is-still-seed-for-the-church/.

precedent for church growth and engagement during times of prolonged absences to the fact of

persecution.

In relation to the idea of persecution and church growth, a recent study completed

through Oxford University discovered some significant findings when it comes to church growth

and persecution. Their findings were paradoxical and encouraging for those facing persecution,

especially from the government. The researchers discovered,

> In a study of 166 countries from 2010 to 2020 published in the Oxford journal Sociology of Religion, researchers found,
>
> "The most important determinant of Christian vitality is the extent to which governments give official support to Christianity through their laws and policies. However, it is not in the way devout believers might expect. As governmental support for Christianity increases, the number of Christians declines significantly. This relationship holds even when accounting for other factors that might be driving Christian growth rates, such as overall demographic trends."
>
> The researchers found three paradoxes in the study: the paradox of pluralism, the paradox of privilege, and the paradox of persecution. The study showed that where Christianity has grown the most in recent decades, in Asia and Africa, it had to compete against other faiths and worldviews.[14]

This study was able to show there is the ability for churches to grow and the mission of

God to move forward in environments and circumstances that do not allow for the traditional

gathering of the people. This is vital to understand when it comes to the project at hand. It is

possible, even probable, that during prolonged absences and the use of digital media strategies,

the Church of God can not only continue to exist but thrive.

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[14] "Oxford University Study: The Church Grows under Persecution and Actually Languishes When It Has State Support," Standing for Freedom Center, 2021, accessed September 6, 2022, https://www.standingforfreedom.com/2021/05/oxford-university-study-the-church-grows-under-persecution-and-actually-languishes-when-it-has-state-support/.

One example of this is the growth of the underground Church in China, where people are not allowed to gather in large group gatherings. It has been during this time that the Church in China has thrived and grown exponentially, even in the face of hard persecution.

Historical Use of Technology During Absences

Martin Luther is one of the great leaders of the Church's history. He had his faults. However, one of the most significant aspects of Luther was how innovative he was. Luther was a reformer in every sense of the word. He was vital in helping to reform the Catholic Church and was then used as a springboard to start the greater Protestant Revolution.

Luther was an incredible theologian at the time, but he was also very adept at publishing. The ability to mass produce books had become a possibility during his time, and he took full advantage of that opportunity. There were times that Luther was unable to be in public or was hiding because there was a good chance that he would have been captured, jailed, or perhaps killed. As a result, Luther had to try to disciple people from afar where there were prolonged absences, or they were not able to meet at all. As a result, Luther used the most advanced form of media, the printing press, to get his message out and to reach people. Regarding Luther, Andrew Pettegree writes,

> But what made Luther truly exceptional was his willingness to step outside his own clear cast and reach out to the Christian people of Germany. They responded with an interest and enthusiasm unprecedented and recent history. By the end of 1522, his German works had been published in 828 additions. The next eight years would see the publications of some 1,245 more and an estimated total of 2 million copies. The production, sale, and distribution of these books with them was a mammoth undertaking. In the process, Luther and his friends had recast both German publishing industry to the reading public.[15]

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[15] Andrew Pettegree, Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe--and Started the Protestant Reformation (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2016), 144.

Luther used the technology of the day to reach the people he was unable to be with. Whether it was due to the prolonged absences of exile or due to his growing popularity throughout Germany and the world he used technology to reach people. This is clear precedence of using the technology of the time to reach more people and grow more disciples, even when one is unable to gather physically.

In fact, there is more modern precedence for this when it comes to the Church's response during a prolonged absence due to something like a pandemic. During the 1918 Flu pandemic, similar in some ways to the COVID-19 outbreak, churches and other gatherings were asked to stop meeting for a time. The reason was to slow the spread of the Flu. Some churches did not adhere to this, and there were some severe consequences for many of the people that attended these services.

There was a group of people who decided to adhere to the quarantine and decided to innovate instead of stopping to meet all together.

> The press, for one, acted as a sort of liaison between leaders and members: Through local papers, leaders stayed connected with members by providing hope and ways to practice their religion. Readers were encouraged to study scripture readings or Sunday school lessons, or worship alone or with family.
> In a published statement, a reverend suggested that families pray at the same time that services were usually held. And once the quarantine was extended to the end of October, First Presbyterian Church in Rushville, Indiana, urged families to make Sunday "a day of prayer and meditation in their homes."
>
> As the pandemic droned on, some newspapers shifted to having larger sections designated for guides to at-home Sunday services. In "Worship with the Star," a series by the Indianapolis Star newspaper, there was a full page that featured opening and adjourning hymns, scripture lessons and sermons.
>
> One reverend worked with a telephone company to facilitate dial-in services. "There was that sense of responsibility and wanting to really make sure that religion remained a focus in people's lives," Pfeiffer said. "The past really informs us about the present and then, if we can, hopefully it inspires us to work toward a better future."[16]

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[16] Rogers, "For Churchgoers during the Covid-19 Pandemic."

It is clear to see that while the Church adhered to the prolonged absence, they utilized the technology of the time to engage people outside of the church walls. The use of newspapers to give devotionals as well as full-on church services is an example of using the best technology of the time to engage and move the mission of a church forward. The use of the telephone and call centers was so forward-thinking for the time being. People were able to dial into services in order. Christians of the modern-day may think of it similarly to publishing a sermon online, creating a video, or live streaming an event. These churches used the best technology available to them to help them continue to engage people in need.

<div style="text-align:center">Use of Technology During Prolonged Absences</div>

As stated earlier, the Internet has an enormous impact on modern-day society. More and more people are being connected to the Internet every day, and technology is greatly affecting the way in which people conduct their lives. The uses and place of the Internet Church and a digital media strategy have been discussed previously in this paper. Now that the parameters for the Internet Church have been set, it is important to discuss the way digital media strategies can be used for the advancement of the mission of the Church. For leaders of the Church, especially leaders who are trying to engage people during a period of prolonged absences, it is vitally important that they learn to use technology well.

<div style="text-align:center">**The Internet**</div>

According to internetlivestats.com, there were over 3 billion Internet users in 2015. That means that over forty percent of people in the world can use the Internet. In the United States,

approximately 87% of the country are Internet users.[17] To blow off the Internet as a fad or

something that does not affect the daily lives of people. In fact, a brief look at those stats in mid-

2022 shows that Internet users have grown from 3 billion to 5.4 billion. The number of Internet

users in the last seven years has nearly doubled. To ignore the influence and mass adoption of the

Internet in the lives of people would be a grave mistake. The Internet has a huge influence on

people and is one of the only places where the market is truly a free market. The Internet will

continue to be a significant influence on the lives of people and will likely have a greater

influence in the future.

Leaders must have the ability to tap into this potential. Due to the sheer number of people

on the web and the ability to reach those people with the message of the gospel, understanding

that one must use the Internet to their advantage is paramount. The Internet can be an influence

enhancer. There are many ways to utilize the web to increase the amount of influence that a

leader has.

One such area of influence development is the ability to set a web page that truly helps to

get out one's message. Today, a website needs to be state of the art and speak into the lives of

people. Long gone are the days of simple and tacky websites. People need to be able to visit a

place that is engaging and simple. This is a great place to show videos of previous messages, to

cast vision, or simply to explain to people why a particular ministry exists. Pastors and leaders

are beginning to recognize this: "A strong web presence is now seen as essential by churches,

with nine out of 10 respondents saying websites are important to reimagining post-pandemic

church life."[18]

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[17] "Internet Users by Country (2016)," accessed May 6, 2016, http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users-by-country/.

[18] "Ministry Brands Releases Survey Data Revealing the Role of Technology in the Church During the Pandemic and Beyond," Ministry Brands, LLC, last modified 2021, accessed September 5, 2022,

Thom Rainer recently did a study where he asked people who were first-time guests to a church why they did not return. Of the reasons listed, the fifth most common was due to a bad church website. Rainer writes, "Most of the church guests went to the church website before they attended a worship service. Even if they attended the service after visiting a bad website, they attended with a prejudicial perspective. The two indispensable items guests want on a website are address and times of service. It's just that basic."[19] To further belabor the point, Christianity Today did research in 2012 in this area, and the results that they found were astounding. They found that 17 million non-church attendees visited church websites in a year. This statistic has held true if it has grown. According to research, "Half of all churches saw an increase during the pandemic."[20]

Additionally, Jeremy Weber found that 57% of church attendees had visited their own church website. Twelve percent of adults in America had visited a church website within thirty days, and that number jumps to 22% when increases the timeframe to six months.[21]

Of the people that visited these websites,

- 43% checked to see the times of services.
- 29% checked what activities are offered.
- 28% looked for a map or directions to the church's location.
- 26% watched streaming video.
- 26% listened to streaming audio.
- 22% checked to see what the church's religious beliefs are.

https://www.ministrybrands.com/blog/ministry-brands-releases-survey-data-revealing-the-role-of-technology-in-the-church-during-the-pandemic-and-beyond/.

[19] Thom Rainer, http://thomrainer.com/2014/11/01/top-ten-ways-churches-drive-away-first-time-guests/, [accessed on May 6, 2015].

[20] Ministry Brands, "The Cornerstones of Post-Pandemic Church Technology," accessed September 3, 2022,.https://online.ministrybrands.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Cornerstones-of-Post-Pandemic-Church-Technology-Ebook-2021.pdf.

[21] Jeremy Weber, "New Research Reveals Why People Visit Church Websites," Christianity Today, May 31, 2012, accessed May 6, 2015, http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2012/may/new-research-reveals-why-people-visit-church-websites.html.

- 18% requested prayer.
- 15% downloaded a podcast.
- 15% were checking out what denomination or group the church belongs to.
- 12% sent a message to the pastor or leader.
- 5% posted on a bulletin board or forum.[22]

As one can clearly see, it is imperative that a leader sets up a stellar website. It is well worth the investment to have a website professionally done. This allows the influence of the leader and the church to have a greater impact on the people that they are trying to reach. The use of the Internet can exponentially increase the influence of a leader and gives the church the opportunity to reach out to people. Leaders must invest in these media sources with great intentionality.

The importance of professionalism and design of a church website is more vital than ever. One statistic showed the importance of this fact: "46% say a website's design is their number one criterion for determining the credibility of an organization."[23] For leaders that want to maintain credibility, especially during a time of prolonged absences, having a website that looks professional, intentional, and well planned out will be vital.

The Shift from Web 2.0 to 3.0

In the past decade or so, there has begun a tremendous shift in the way in which the Internet is used. Currently, society is experiencing a significant shift in the usage of the Internet and how people interact with the Internet. It is vital to understand this critical shift in the usage of the Internet and how people use it to engage people properly during a prolonged absence. It is important to note that there may be some people that never actually return to church, at least not

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[22] Weber, "New Research Reveals Why People Visit Church Websites."

[23] "4 Vital Stats About Your Church's Website," Pinnacle Leadership Associates, accessed September 5, 2022, https://www.pinnlead.com/blog/2019/3/12/4-vital-stats-about-your-churchs-website.

in the traditional manner. The new wave of the Internet is going to dramatically shift the way in which churches, organizations, and people engage online. It is essential to trace the development of the web to understand this seismic shift.

Web 1.0 was the first iteration of the web, and it is one that many are familiar with. The Internet began in the early 1990s through the development of a man named Tim Berner-Lees. Berner-Lees created the web for information gathering and sharing. One researcher wrote, "Tim Berners-Lee, a British scientist, invented the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1989 while working at CERN. The Web was originally conceived and developed to meet the demand for automated information-sharing between scientists in universities and institutes around the world."[24] The original design of the web was data management and sharing. Therefore, the web was designed in a static format with almost no interactive aspects to it. As one researcher noted, "This was the age of static webpages retrieved from servers, a far cry from the slick content that is taken for granted today. Most internet users at that time were delighted by the novelty of features such as email and real-time news retrieval."[25] The web was designed to be more data-driven and scientific in nature.

Web 2.0 was the next iteration of the web that brought a lot more interaction to the space. The goal was not simply to give information but to do so in an interactive manner. Web 2.0 is the web that most are familiar with today. Web 2.0 was a dramatic shift from what the Internet was original created to be. One researcher discussed,

> Web 2.0 refers to a paradigm shift in how the internet is used. Over the past 15 to 20 years, the bland web pages of Web 1.0 have been completely replaced by Web 2.0's interactivity, social connectivity, and user-generated content. Web 2.0 makes it possible

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[24] "A Short History of the Web," CERN, accessed September 7, 2022, https://home.cern/science/computing/birth-web/short-history-web.

[25] The Investopedia Team, "Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 Definitions," Investopedia, accessed September 7, 2022, https://www.investopedia.com/web-20-web-30-5208698.

for user-generated content to be viewed by millions of people around the world virtually in an instant; this unparalleled reach has led to an explosion of this type of content in recent years.[26]

This is where streaming services, YouTube, podcasts, and social media began. Users became more involved in Web 2.0, and Web 2.0 really helped churches continue to engage during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is still a place for Web 2.0, and it is still the dominant form of the web. However, the times are changing, and they are changing quickly.

Web 3.0 is the future, and it is a future that the world has already begun to progress into. Think of Virtual Reality (VR), the Metaverse, etc. The direction of Web 3.0 is a much more individualist experience as well as an immersive experience. It is in the process of attempting to merge reality with the online experience. The web will essentially become smarter (more helpful to users) with artificial intelligence, but it will also become more immersive. Carey Nieuwhof recently did a podcast on this and gave a great summary note of Web 3.0: "Web 3.0 (or "web3") is a continual democratization of the Internet and will be marked by a convergence of technological innovations (like crypto, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence) to craft a more immersive and decentralized experience that focused on the individual (as opposed to companies (Web 1.0) and communities (Web 2.0))."[27]

This is extremely important for churches to understand as this is where the future is heading, and churches will need to be present in this iteration of the web because this is where people are heading. It is time now to make plans and begin to experiment as to how to engage in

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[26] The Investopedia Team, "Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 Definitions."

[27] Carey Nieuwhof, "CNLP 470: D.J. Soto and Nona Jones: An Introduction to the Metaverse, Web3, VR Church and What's Next Online and IRL," CareyNieuwhof.com, last modified 2022, accessed September 7, 2022, https://careynieuwhof.com/episode470/.

this version of the web. Further within the paper, the launching of new ministries within the metaverse will be discussed.

<p style="text-align:center">The Metaverse</p>

Web 3.0 is the growth and interest in the Metaverse. In fact, Facebook has recently changed its name to Meta in anticipation of the important and future prominence of the Metaverse. It is important to note that the meta-verse is in its infancy stages and early development. The total future of what the meta-verse looks like is not completely known, but there are already ministries and churches that have begun to plant churches within the meta-verse. One church that comes to mind is Life.Church out of Oklahoma.

What is the Metaverse? There is a lot to consider here. There is not actually one place, but it seems there are hopes to be a digital "world" in which people can participate in. Amanda Reaume writes, "The metaverse isn't one digital space but several digital spaces and experiences currently being created by companies to offer more realistic and immersive digital experiences."[28]

Loosely defined, "The metaverse refers to both current and future integrated digital platforms focused on virtual and augmented reality. It is widely hyped as the internet's next frontier and seen as a significant business and financial opportunity for the tech industry and other sectors."[29] One way to figure this out and possibly get a vision into the future is through the Steven Spielberg movie "Ready Player One."

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[28] Amanda Reaume, "The Metaverse? What It Is & What You Should Know | Seeking Alpha," accessed September 7, 2022, https://seekingalpha.com/article/4472812-what-is-metaverse, https://seekingalpha.com/article/4472812-what-is-metaverse.
[29] Reaume, "The Metaverse?"

It is within these digital spaces that there is a need for churches to launch in those areas to help reach people in those environments. There are currently churches and other ministries that have begun to launch ministries with the metaverse space. There is still a lot to discover and know what the best practices are as this is such a new area of study. One site that does give a lot of insight, training, and first steps is www.thechurch.digital.

It must be stated that the metaverse is such a new area, and it will play a role in a digital media strategy to reach people during prolonged absences. The time is coming and is beginning now that people will attend church in "physical gatherings" digitally. This may make prolonged physical absences easier to deal with. Since there is not much on this, and it is such a new technology, this paper will not focus on it as much, but it must be stated that this is part of the future of the church, reaching people through a new paradigm.

<div align="center">Social Media</div>

Social media is somewhat of a new phenomenon. In the history of the world, it is new to the scene. The premise is that people can join these networks to stay connected to "friends" (in most cases acquaintances) and be involved in one another's lives. The first pioneers of these types of networks were Myspace and Facebook, amongst others. Today people are members of multiple social media networks. Some of the most prominent are Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. As of March 2015, Facebook had 1.415 billion active users, Instagram had 300 million, Twitter had 288 million, and Snapchat had 200 million.[30] The numbers have grown in the time since then. According to recent research, these numbers have grown extensively. In

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[30] "Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2023, ranked by number of monthly active users (in millions)," Statista, accessed Feb 7, 2023, http://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/.

January of 2022, Facebook had over 2.9 billion users, 1.4 billion on Instagram, 436 million on

Twitter, 557 million on Snapchat, and TikTok (the newest) had 1 billion users.[31] Between 2015

and 2022, each platform had a minimum growth rate of 51%. The use and importance, and

impact, of social media on people have only grown exponentially. Churches must pay attention

and be engaged in these platforms.

One important note to make in the research here is that YouTube has grown into more of

a social media and video platform. Currently, YouTube has over 2.5 billion users. In 2020, over

500 hours of video content were uploaded to YouTube each minute, and "For many, watching

YouTube videos has become part of their daily routine. 62% of internet users based in the United

States report using YouTube every day. 92% access YouTube on a weekly basis, while 98% are

only using YouTube monthly."[32] YouTube has become one of the greatest tools for reaching

people in modern history.

The sheer number of people that are active members on social media sites demands that

churches and bi-vocational leaders are active in these networks. One author writes, "Due to a

constant presence in the lives of their users, social networks have a decidedly strong social

impact. The blurring between offline and virtual life as well as the concept of digital identity and

online social interactions are some of the aspects that have emerged in recent discussions."[33] In

fact, if one really wants to look at the impact of social media sites, one only needs to look at the

plethora of online dating sites. According to research done in 2014, and published by Berkeley,

1in 10 Americans have tried online dating. Forty percent of adults know someone who met their

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[31] "Biggest Social Media Platforms 2022," Statista, accessed September 5, 2022, https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/.

[32] "21 Essential YouTube Statistics You Need to Know in 2022," The Social Shepherd, accessed September 5, 2022, https://thesocialshepherd.com/blog/youtube-statistics.

[33] "Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2023."

spouse online. The top five online dating websites have nearly 1.35 billion users.[34] This number

has only grown since then. Recent reports show that 3 in 10 people have tried online dating, and

the number amongst young people is growing. To illustrate this point further, research has shown

that "While 48% of 18- to 29-year-olds say they have used a dating site or app, the share is 38%

among those ages 30 to 49 and even lower for those 50 and older (16%)."[35]

Additional data displays that 72% of US adults say that they use at least one form of

social media. On average, 82% of US adults between the ages of 18-64 use social media. The

two leading apps are Facebook and Instagram.[36]

All this data shows the importance that social media is having on the lives of people. The

importance and influence are only growing at an exponential rate. These are all sites where ideas

are shared freely and where people are exposed to new ideas daily. The freedom and anonymity

of many of these sites, and the lack of a face-to-face encounters, have led many people to be

extremely open with their thoughts and opinions. The Church needs to be present in these media

forms and be able to engage in these arenas. The engagement must be winsome and with a stance

of grace. Leaders need to be present in these forums, even if it is simply to show that they are a

part of the culture.

Social media allows all leaders to have a great sphere of influence. This gives the ability

to reach out to more people and provides them the ability to speak into their lives. Social media

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[34] Jenna Dutcher, "Big Data Seeks Online Love [Infographic]," Berkeley: School of Education, February 10, 2014, accessed May 7, 2015, http://datascience.berkeley.edu/online-dating-data/.

[35] Emily A. Vogels, "10 Facts about Americans and Online Dating," Pew Research Center, accessed September 5, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/06/10-facts-about-americans-and-online-dating/.

[36] "Social Media Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, accessed September 5, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/.

is an influence multiplier. Leaders would be unwise not to engage in these forms of media. If

over 80% or more of the population that they are trying to reach are on these platforms, it is vital

for these churches to participate in a strategic manner. This importance is only amplified in times

of prolonged absences.

One point of clarification needs to be made. What does one mean when speaking about

"engagement"? It is vitally important for all church leaders to learn social media and technology

etiquette. Social media is not a place to rant and bombard the latest cultural flaw. This is a

chance for people to live out their faith and show people what the Church is doing. Since there is

exposure to so many people, the upside of social media, as well as the Internet, also has a

downside. One mistake or flippant post can be disastrous. Church leaders need to be extremely

prudent in what they share online and the way they say something.

Further, leaders must leverage these platforms in the best way possible. It is important

that they, or someone that is running the social media for the church, begin to become familiar

with how to discern how to use these platforms well. This will mean understanding the trends

and algorithms that are used by these platforms. Natchi Lazarus notes,

> Collecting feedback can be crucial to the growth of a ministry. Knowing what people
> want, how they feel, and what they think can make all the difference to your planning.
> Social media is an easy, convenient and powerful tool to collect such information. You
> can make use tools like Facebook Polls and Twitter Polls. The additional benefit of such
> tools is, every time you use these tools, the overall engagement in each of these channels
> increases. An increase in engagement means a better ranking in the channel's algorithm.[37]

The more engagement one gets, the more the platform and influence can grow in helping

to engage in the mission of the Church during prolonged absences. Included in the idea of

[37] Natchi Lazarus, "15 Reasons Your Church Should Focus on Social Media Ministry," The Connected Church, 2018, accessed September 5, 2022, https://theconnectedchurch.org/reasons-church-focus-social-media-ministry/.

engagement are not just likes or reposts, but also how well churches are engaging in communication with the people that they are reaching. This is where Direct Messaging (DM) is so important for church leaders to understand and utilize. The importance of this engagement is summarized by Shay Clinch as,

> One of the best strategies to expand your reach on social media and connect better with your followers is by engaging with users and other social media accounts. When a user sends you a private message, comments on your post or video, tweets at you, or mentions you within their story, it's important to respond as quickly as possible. Social platforms like Instagram and Facebook reward accounts that interact heavily with their followers.
>
> In addition to responding to users engaging with your church's account, it's also important to interact with other accounts on their posts. Social media accounts want to see that you are active and will expand the reach of your posts as a reward. We recommend following some Christian thought leaders or influencers, worship artists, and other churches and interacting with their content.[38]

Not only is engagement important, but it is also important to know how to understand what is working. This is where analytics come in. Clinch further writes, "Rather than just guessing at what types of posts your followers want to see, you can take advantage of the analytics provided on social media channels for businesses. YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram all offer excellent tools for churches to be able to see a breakdown of their data on posts and videos to see key metrics such as likes, shares, saves, views, and comments."[39] When church leaders are to look at the importance of information that one is bringing, it makes clear that they are engaging correctly.

There are some metrics and insights that will truly begin to help one understand what is working to reach people online. According to ProChurch Tools, there are seven major metrics that need to be looked at closely when it comes to measuring engagement.

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[38] Shay Clinch, "Social Media for Churches: The Ultimate Guide," Missional Marketing, 2020, accessed September 5, 2022, https://missionalmarketing.com/social-media-for-churches-the-ultimate-guide/.

[39] Ibid.

The first is reach. This is simply the number of people that see a particular post. The reason that this is important is that it is telling the page owner what the algorithm likes. This is very important to understand. This will help with organic reach because the algorithm will push the content out for each church. Consider Brady Shearer and Alex Mills' discussion about online church engagement:

> Now, I pay huge attention to reach. Brady Shearer: Because it's the only metric that's more algorithm-based than it is people-based. What I mean by that, the reach metric is basically Facebook or Instagram telling me, "This is how good we thought your post was based on how it performed in the first 38 seconds it was out and so we decided to show it to this percentage of your following, versus this percentage."[40]

Post reactions a great indicator to see what people are engaging with and what they like. People will generally like something that they want to engage with, and it is a way to indicate what the church will want to make more of and post. Also, it is important to remember to interact with these engagements to show involvement and to create community. This may include liking a like or replying to people comments.[41]

Further, comments are a big area of engagement. The reason why is it takes more engagement to make a comment. Likes are easy to come by at times, but comments take effort. If someone is taking the time to comment, they need to be engaged. Shearer and Mills add, "Because they require more from the person that's following you. It's easy to double-tap on Insta and keep scrolling. It's easy to add a heart on Facebook and keep scrolling. But for someone to

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[40] Bradey Shearer and Alex Mills, "7 Social Media Metrics You Should Care About (For Churches)," ProChurch Tools, 2018, accessed September 5, 2022, https://prochurchtools.com/7-social-media-metrics-you-should-care-about-for-churches/.

[41] Ibid.

comment, that requires a lot more. For me, comments mean a ton. Even more than comments, at least on Facebook, are shares."[42]

Followers is a great way to engage overall influence. If church leaders are making posts that are engaging people, they will follow the church's content to get more of it. This is something of a personal endorsement or interest. Shearer and Mills note, "Number six, followers. This is not a per post metric, this is an overall metric."[43]

The last area to look at is the social engagement score. This is important because it gives an organization an idea of how much people are engaging with the content that the church is putting out overall. This is especially important during periods of prolonged absences. When there are no people in the room, and one cannot see the people's reactions, it is hard to see the type of engagement that is happing. One way to overcome this is to follow a simple formula:

> The simple version of it is taking engagement and dividing it by reach. Go into your Instagram insights and add up every like, comment, profile visit, saved post, and then let's say it equals 100, divide it by your reach which let's say is 1,000 for simple math, and you get a post score of 10. I have begun experimenting with a more advanced version of this.[44]

When church leaders have accessed all these areas, they are able to see the greater picture of what is happening in an organization, and it can give them a clear direction to move.

Overall, social media is too much a part of the current culture not to be a part of. Church leaders need to use these forms of media to increase their spheres of influence and to engage the culture in a winsome way. This is the avenue through which people choose to share and live their lives. It would be unwise not to be a part of this culture. It is not enough to just post during

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[42] Shearer and Mills, "7 Social Media Metrics You Should Care About (For Churches)," ProChurch Tools, 2018, accessed September 5, 2022, https://prochurchtools.com/7-social-media-metrics-you-should-care-about-for-churches/.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

prolonged absences; it is vital that churches are able to measure and analyze what is happening in the content that they create and how it is engaging people's lives.

Digital Visual Media

The ability to be able to share high-quality video and audio content is more and more important. People want to see videos that are of the highest production and quality. As stated previously, greater percentages of people are visiting a church website to download and watch or listen to content. Due to the nature of television today and the quality that a person can get in their homes, it is important to make sure that this content is of the very highest standard.

Good church leaders see the value in the ability to record something and to have it watched over 1,000 times. This increases their influence and can help them lead to a higher standard. Due to the importance of this technology, leaders must become proficient in the use of these types of media. If they are not able to do this, it would be extremely profitable for them to hire someone that is knowledgeable in doing this content. The ability to reach out to the world through digital media is too important to today's culture not to take advantage of it. One short example is YouTube. This site is solely a digital media site. People can upload content for others to view. The statistics of YouTube are staggering. According to its website, in 2015, YouTube had more than 1 billion users, hundreds of millions of hours are viewed every day, 300 hours of video content are uploaded every minute, and they are in 75 countries and available in 61 languages. To not be a part of this cultural juggernaut is foolish.[45] Those numbers have only accelerated. According to Global Media Insight, there are several statistics about YouTube that church leaders should be aware of to help them understand its importance.

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[45] https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html, [accessed on May 7, 2015].

- According to Statista 2022, over **2.6 billion** people worldwide use YouTube once a month.
- Technically, YouTube is the second-largest search engine after Google.
- YouTube is the second most popular social media platform. Every day, people watch over a billion hours of video and generate billions of views.
- Most YouTube users fall in the **age group of 15-35**.
- YouTube accounts for around 25% of global mobile traffic.
- With 74% of adult users, YouTube is the most popular online platform in the US.[46]

YouTube is going to be one of the most important tools for reaching people during a period of

prolonged absences.

One of the most important aspects that go into digital visual media is the quality of the

content that is provided. It is important to remember that gone are the days of low-quality, grainy

footage that is not shot well. At a minimum, the quality of content that should be pushed out on

all social media platforms should be 1080p. This is now the standard within almost all devices

and televisions sold and where people will consume digital visual content. In fact, this is so

important that, according to Colin Dixon,

> his testing showed that the quality of video watched had a big impact on engagement. Sensum test subjects were asked to watch high and lower-quality versions of a video. In a segment of the video where nothing particularly intense was happening, the test subjects were 10% more engaged with the high-quality version. During intense scenes, the difference was 20%.[47]

In fact, the research here goes on to say that lower quality content and streaming can cause

negative emotions as well. It is so important that a positive attitude be kept when in a season of

prolonged absence because it will be detrimental to reach if not.

Not only is video quality important to consider, but also the type of shot. If a shot is too

far away, there can be really no engagement. There are specifics to framing a shot properly that

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[46] "YouTube Statistics 2022 [Users by Country + Demographics]," Official GMI Blog, 2022, accessed September 5, 2022, https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/youtube-users-statistics/.

[47] Colin Dixon, "The Corrosive Impact of Poor Quality Video Streaming," nScreenMedia, 2017, accessed September 5, 2022, https://nscreenmedia.com/poor-quality-video-streaming-ruin-brand/.

will lead to better engagement. There are specific tips church leaders can follow to get the best shot or video to be the most engaging. First, one should think of their shots in thirds. The subject of the video should never be in the direct center of the shot. They should be between the left or right and the middle thirds. The subject should be shot from the elbows up as much as possible. The lighting of the video needs to be precise and clear. There should be no shadows on the subject's face. Movement can help, but only if the background of a shot is without movement. Finally, those running cameras should try to make the subject stand out by blurring the background. Also, if available, camera operators should switch between two different video shots if available. Figure 2.1 is an example of the type of framing that is important for quality video shots.[48]

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[48] "How to Frame the Perfect Video Shot," OpenReel, last modified 2021, accessed September 5, 2022, https://www.openreel.com/blog/how-to-frame-the-perfect-video-shot/.

Figure 2.1. Diagram of how to frame the perfect shot.[49]

One should notice how the subject is between the right third and the middle third. The background is blurry, leading the eyes to the subject. The camera is at eye level with the subject, and the shot is essentially from the elbows up.

Audio Quality

Audio is another essential for good online engagement. People will quickly disengage from content that is not clear and precise. This is especially true when it comes to podcasts. During a time of prolonged absences, podcasts and audio files are a great tool to engage people.

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[49] "How to Frame the Perfect Video Shot."

There are approximately 383.7 million podcast listeners worldwide.[50] In fact, from Apple alone,

there were nearly a 50-billion-episode downloads in 2018.[51] This is a staggering amount of

people. The two most popular podcast hubs are Apple Podcasts and Spotify. Both platforms must

be considered when trying to engage people with a digital media strategy.

One fascinating study discovered that trust and engagement are linked to audio quality.

According to their findings,

> "As soon as we reduced the audio quality, all of a sudden, the scientists and their research lost credibility," Newman said.
>
> The study is the latest to examine the issue of fluency – the ease with which something is processed – and how it can influence people's judgments about information and its sources.
>
> Schwarz and his colleagues have found that anytime something is difficult to process, people become distrustful. One study that he published last year showed that people are more likely to distrust eBay sellers with difficult-to-pronounce names. One of his earlier studies revealed that people rated exercise plans as easier to do when the instructions were published in Arial font rather than Brush or Mistral fonts.[52]

In this paper, tools and advice will be given as to how to film and create quality video

and audio to help engage people better.

Timesaving

Not only can technology help leaders be more effective in the sphere of influence, but

one of its greatest benefits is that it can help the leader save time. When these tools are used

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[50] Daniel Ruby, "39+ Podcast Statistics 2022 (Latest Trends & Numbers)," demandsage, 2022, accessed September 5, 2022, https://www.demandsage.com/podcast-statistics/.

[51] "Podcast Statistics - TrueList 2022," TrueList, accessed September 5, 2022, https://truelist.co/blog/podcast-statistics/.

[52] Emily Gersema, "The Quality of Audio Influences Whether You Believe What You Hear," USC News, last modified 2018, accessed September 5, 2022, https://news.usc.edu/141042/why-we-believe-something-audio-sound-quality/.

properly, they can truly help leaders save time. The ability to reach out to large groups of people at one time helps to reduce the amount of time that a leader needs to take to get a message out.

One of the greatest benefits of technology is the use of Bible study software that is available today. Programs like Logos and Bible Works can help leaders study sermons and special topics or even help with researching counseling techniques. Without these programs, leaders would have to spend hours researching or, as is the case many times, deliver sermons that lack depth and Biblical accuracy.

Technology can be a terrific time saver for leaders, and it is something that they will have to invest in. The investment in the proper technology and the proper use of that technology can help to make any leader more effective since they are more effective with their time.

Theological Foundations

What is the main mission of the Church? According to Matthew 28:18-20, it is clear to see that the main goal of the Church is to make Jesus known throughout the world, to make disciples, and to spread the good news of the gospel. The question that will be addressed in the following section is, "Can a digital media strategy meet the requirements to continue the mission of the church faithfully?" This section will build a theological and biblical foundation for the use of digital media to reach people with the mission of the Church.

The first question that must be addressed is, "What is a disciple?" This question is foundational to the understanding of whether the Church can build a digital media strategy to help continue to engage people during seasons of prolonged absences. According to Eerdmans Bible Dictionary, "Jewish and Greco-Roman history and literature provide examples of respected figures who gather disciples to teach and lead them. In the NT Gk. *mathētḗs* is used most often of

followers of Jesus, although it is also used to describe followers of other figures (e.g., disciples 'of John,' Mark 2:18; or 'of Moses,' John 9:28)."[53]

According to this definition, the primary role of a "disciple" is to be a learner of a particular person. Now, it must be stated that during this time it was hard to be a disciple or learner of someone without being in physical proximity to them. While it would have been impossible to be a true learner of someone during this period without being in physical proximity to them, today, that is not necessary. There are plenty of opportunities for people to be a learner or follower of somebody at a physical distance. In fact, it could be argued that many of the disciples were followers and learners of Jesus without physical proximity to him. Now when the argument is made that through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, it would seem to negate the argument, but people are able to be learners and followers of someone without a physical presence in their life.

This type of reasoning would be considered an "argument from silence." While the Bible does not specifically talk about a way in which one can be a follower of somebody without a physical presence that does not mean that it is not a distinct and very plausible situation. There is no biblical argument that one cannot be a disciple of Jesus and grow disciples of Jesus without being in a physical location. This is vital to the argument that the Church can be faithful in its mission during times of prolonged absences through a digital media strategy.

Old Testament Example

The next question that must be asked is whether there is an opportunity for this model of discipleship and church engagement within the Bible itself. One could argue that during times of

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[53] Peter K. Nelson, "Disciple," ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 348.

exile in the Old Testament, people were still able to connect with God and able to grow in their understanding of God, even when they were not able to be physically present in the temple.

A great example of this is the story of Daniel. In the book of Daniel, readers see that Daniel is in exile during the Babylonian captivity, and the normal way for the Jewish people to worship during that time had been removed from their grasp. It was believed that God resided in the temple, and that is where worship was to truly be done.

There are three major instances in the book of Daniel that readers can see where they were able to worship God in a true manner without the preferred time of worship due to the time of prolonged absence. Daniel and others decided to worship God and to be close to God in a different way. On three different occasions, Daniel decides that he is not going to defile his faith by adhering to the Babylonian practices of worship.

The first is Daniel's refusal to eat food given to idols. It was in the season that Daniel and a few others refused the King's food and instead chose to eat food that would not defile their faith. As a result of eating this food, Daniel and the others were stronger and healthier than those that ate food that they were not supposed to. In Daniel 1:15, the Bible says, "At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food," (translation)… Also, this shows that God blesses those who obey His commands and prospers those who trust Him. This incident would have been a lesson for the nation of Israel. God had demanded obedience to the Law. The punishment came because of disobedience, but even during a time of discipline, God protects and sustains those who obey Him and trust Him for their sustenance."[54]

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[54] J. Dwight Pentecost, "Daniel," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1331.

It is clear to see that God blessed these young men for their faithfulness. They were able to grow in their faith, and the nation of Israel would have taken this as a lesson. The people of Israel, because of the faithfulness of these young men, were able to worship, grow in their knowledge and see God at work during a time of prolonged absence from what was seen as a less than an optimal form of worship.

To further illustrate this point, one must look at the final miracle in the life of Daniel with his presence in the lion's den. The focus is not on what happened in the actual lion's den but on what happened afterward. After Daniel was rescued from the lion's den King Nebuchadnezzar rushes to see if Daniel is okay. After the young men are found to be without harm, Nebuchadnezzar makes a decree that all people of the kingdom should fear and trembling before the God of Daniel. He recognizes who the God of Daniel is, and the name of the Lord spreads throughout the entire kingdom. One commentator writes, "The purpose of miracles is set forth in this passage. Miracles are not wrought by God to 'show off' but to demonstrate to a lost world that he is the true God and should be honored. Neither was Daniel delivered primarily for his own benefit but so that the Lord could manifest to a lost king and a lost world his reality and power."[55]

The response of Nebuchadnezzar is important to respond to because Christians see the mission of the Church—to grow disciples and to spread the word of who God is throughout the world—accomplished because of the faithfulness of these men in a time of prolonged absence and in a non-conventional way. It is important to note that Christians see God's closeness and approval shown through the way in which he blesses and protects people. The story relates directly to the ability of the church to continue to fulfill the mission of the church during a season

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[55] Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, vol. 18, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 189.

of prolonged absence and through less-than-optimal circumstances. The best "technology" that Daniel and the others had was their faith. God used their faith to spread the good news of who He is.

New Testament Example

The New Testament may be the most remarkable example of using current technology to help reach and disciple people from a distance. The very reason that the New Testament epistles were written was to reach people and speak to those the Apostles themselves were not able to be with physically. Dr. Peter Head of Oxford writes this concerning the Epistles of the New Testament,

> As a result of the missionary impulse of early Christianity, with congregations established all around the Roman Empire, the apostles could not always be present to teach and encourage the churches. Letters provided the apostles, and Paul especially, a means of ministry at a distance.
>
> It is remarkable how much of the teaching of the apostles within the New Testament comprises these New Testament letters (there are 21 letters, and even Revelation has strong epistolary features). Like any other letter these had to be delivered by hand, and it is exciting that we have good indications of the names of some of the people who delivered Paul's letters in particular.[56]

It is clear to see that in the New Testament most of the books that are present are letters that were written to people at a distance for the purpose of fulfilling the mission of the Church, which is to make disciples.

There is one letter in the New Testament that illustrates the idea of discipleship from a distance more than any other. It is the book of Romans. Romans was written by Paul to a group of believers in the city of Rome. Historically, Paul had never been to that location to meet those

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[56] Peter Head, "Who Carried the Epistles" Tyndale House, accessed September 58, 2022, https://tyndalehouse.com/explore/articles/who-carried-the-epistles/.

people. Paul, in his introduction, talks about his great desire to visit and be with the converts and

believers in the city of Rome. Readers see this clearly in Romans 1:11- 13:

> I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles, (translation).

The purpose of the book of Romans is to instruct these young believers on theological

aspects of the faith and how to practically live those theological imperatives out in their daily

lives. Paul sees no need for him to not address, teach, encourage, and disciple this group of

believers during a season of prolonged absence. He used the most cutting-edge technology of the

time to accomplish this. A letter was the most cutting-edge technology of the time, and Paul used

it to fulfill the mission of the Church. The preferred method that Paul would have liked to have

been able to do was to meet with the believers in Rome physically, but he was prevented from

doing so. One commentator writes,

> Paul wanted the believers in Rome to understand that he had not intentionally neglected them. After all, Rome was the major city of the known world at that time. One might think that the "apostle to the Gentiles" (Gal 2:8; Rom 11:13) would have tried to visit there as soon as possible. So Paul wrote that he had "planned many times" to come to them, but up until then he had "been prevented" from carrying through with his plans (v. 13).[57]

This did not stop Paul, nor should it stop the modern Church from fulfilling the Great

Commission. This can be, and should be, the Church's great example of how to apply a digital

media strategy to reach people during a season of prolonged absences.

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[57] Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 68.

Theoretical Foundations

Research on the way in which churches and ministries can engage people online has been ongoing for a very long time. One can find studies on the top way to post and how to do that in a practical and important manner. There are sites that help with how to reach people in an online context. There are numerous examples of how to reach people online and what the best practices are under "normal" circumstances. Many of these strategies were discussed in the research done prior to this section of the paper.

The nuance of this research is how to do that during a period of prolonged absence and what are the best strategies to implement during that time. This research is based specifically on a case study of how Bedrock Church Sarasota implemented digital media strategies to engage people during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The uniqueness of this research is how previous strategies held up during the pandemic. What worked in helping to reach people are what principles and strategies were used to help continue the mission of the Church during a unique period of a forced absence from physical gathering.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The question that has been proposed within this paper is, "How can a church best engage the world around them in a meaningful and informative way during a time period in which physical gathering is limited or not allowed at all?" During such times, as meeting in person is not possible or limited, what is the best methodology to engage people through online platforms, such as social media, the Internet, the meta-verse and through other digital media strategies?

This paper will take an extremely practical and real-world approach to this question. A case study has been proposed to follow the historical data and digital media content was produced by Bedrock Church Sarasota. This paper will study the effectiveness of these digital media strategies to engage the church community and reach out to those that are not part of Bedrock Church community.

Further data of effectiveness of various digital media strategies will analyze the real time impact of these strategies as they pertain to church growth and engagement on the physical gathering of believers once they were able to return to regular physical gatherings again.

This chapter of the paper will discuss the methodology used to research the effectiveness of the various digital media, posts, and platforms to engage the church community within Bedrock Church Sarasota and the greater community. The engagement of a particular post will be determined on five major criteria: type of post, views, like, shares and further engagement with the digital media type through direct messages and reposts.

The most effective types of posts and platforms will be discovered as a historical review of the types of posts are studied. "Success" of a particular digital media, platform, or post will be determined and studied through these five major criteria and growth of the various platforms of Bedrock Church Sarasota will be assessed as various types of posts are made. Recommendations

of how churches can best use digital media platforms to engage their church members, as well as

the overall community, will be given based upon this research.

The types of post that will be reviewed in this research will be videos, both in long and

short formats, pictures of individuals and groups from the church, graphic posts, Scripture posts,

and event posts; each of these forms of a digital media strategy will be assessed through a

historical approach of Bedrock Church Sarasota. It is believed that over an extended period,

trends of types of posts will emerge that are most successful in engaging these communities.

Clarifications must be made for what each category means for a long video. A long video

is a video that lasts over 10 minutes in time. Anything under 10 minutes would be considered a

short form video. Picture posts are pictures with people from the church in the post. A graphic

post would be any kind of digital graphic that does not include people. For Scripture posts, the

post means any graphic that is posted of just Scripture. Event posts would be any type of event

post, whether that be video, graphic, or picture.

Intervention Design

The purpose of this research is to determine the most effectual digital media strategies to

reach people during prolonged absences. The goal of this research is to help churches and

ministries engage people during periods in which they are not able to meet in a normal fashion.

This enables these ministries to continue the mission of the Church to reach people with the

gospel of Jesus Christ and to make disciples.

By studying the efficacy of various types of digital media posts on different media

platforms, readers will have access to a real-world example of how various types of posts work,

and how they can help them to engage their church members and greater community.

Each of the digital media post types and platforms listed above will be studied over historical context from the very beginning of the global pandemic of COVID-19 to Fall 2022. This should give a baseline for readers to help understand how to engage people during and after prolonged absences. Numerous posts from each category will be studied, and that data will be analyzed as a trend for the use of digital media and will notice genres to engage people during these periods. The data will be analyzed in the following measurements: type of post, views, likes, shares, and further engagement with the digital media type through direct messages and reposts.

The social media that will be studied for this project is of one group: Bedrock Church Sarasota. These trends, along with research shown in the previous chapters, should give readers a basic understanding of the best types of digital media strategies to implement within their own context to reach people. It is important to note that when it comes to the Internet and the United States, there are not many differences between localities.

All these activities occurred on the various social media platforms of Bedrock Church Sarasota, including Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. These are the major platforms that most ministries using this research will use to reach their people. It must be noted that due to the evolutionary nature of social media platforms some of these platforms may be obsolete in years to come but it is believed that the principles derived from this research will help ministries to continue to reach people regardless of platforms.

This research has taken place over the past two and a half years since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research will begin with strategies that were implemented during the Covid lockdowns and will stretch out into the future to see how those methodologies have continued to reach people and continue to grow the church. Since some people have still not

returned to a physical church location because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the validity of the research still stands.

This data will be collected by showing true examples and pictures of actual digital media posts, and the results from those posts. That data will be collected over the trend of the two and a half years and analyze for effectiveness. Those posts will be placed within the body of this paper for the reader to see and understand.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

The data for this research was collected through various social media platforms. The remarkable aspect of all these different social media platforms is that they tracked the data for the researcher. To conduct the research, one simply needs to look back at the various types of posts and note the correlating data from each post. As a result, the data will be reviewed as it is stored on the various social media platforms.

As for the accuracy of the data collected, one must simply need to access the research and databases collected by the various social media platforms to verify the data. This makes the data collection extremely accurate, repeatable, and observable. Further, when available, the exact same post will be evaluated to disregard discrepancies related to time, length, or overall quality of the post.

Further, in accordance with the research done in preparation for this project, all the media that will be studied was done in HD quality to ensure that they best data could be collected. The quality of the video or image content should not have any bearing of the results of the research conducted.

To analyze the data properly, each form of digital media will be analyzed within the context found above. First, the researcher will look at the engagement and overall spread of the posts, and then analyze how those posts have either grown or diminished over time. It is believed that the trend of these posts will be able to be determined over the two-year period since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 4

This chapter of the paper will begin to discuss and analyze the data found over the past two years of the various types of posts. Three major platforms will be used to collect the stat of the first: Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Also, that it will be given from the use of Google, add word and digital media strategies to show engagement with the greater community as a whole. In the following chapter the data will be analyzed and synthesized to give readers the greatest understanding of a digital media strategy for prolonged absences.

Long Form Video
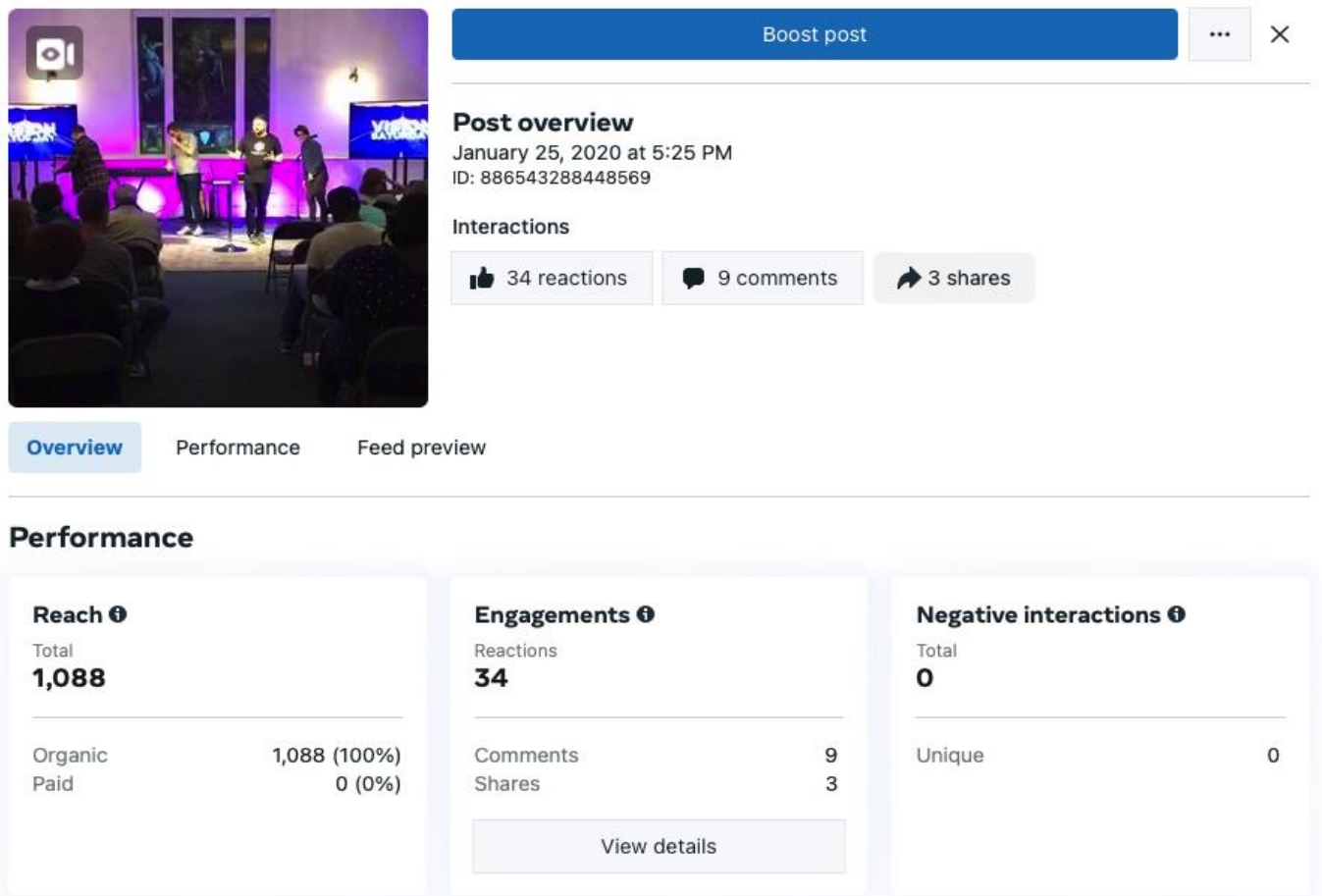
Figure 4.1. Facebook Post Overview from January 25, 2020.[1]

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[1] "Post Overview", Facebook Business, January 25, 2020, accessed February 21, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078&nav_ref=profile_plus_adm in_tool.

Figure 4.2. Facebook Post Performance, March 14, 2020.[2]
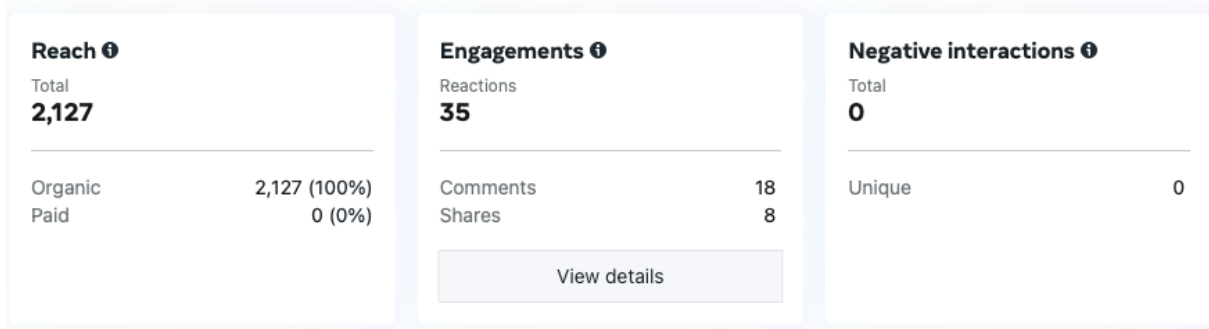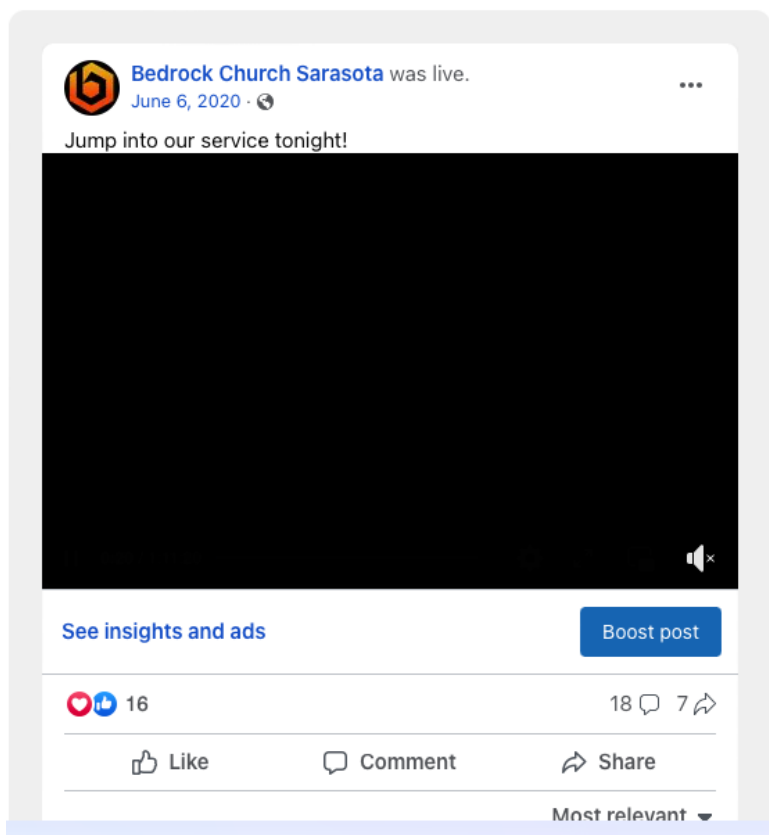
Figure 4.3. Facebook Post Performance, June 6, 2020.[3]

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[3] "Post Performance," Facebook Business, June 6, 2020, accessed February 21, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078&nav_ref=profile_plus_admin_tool.
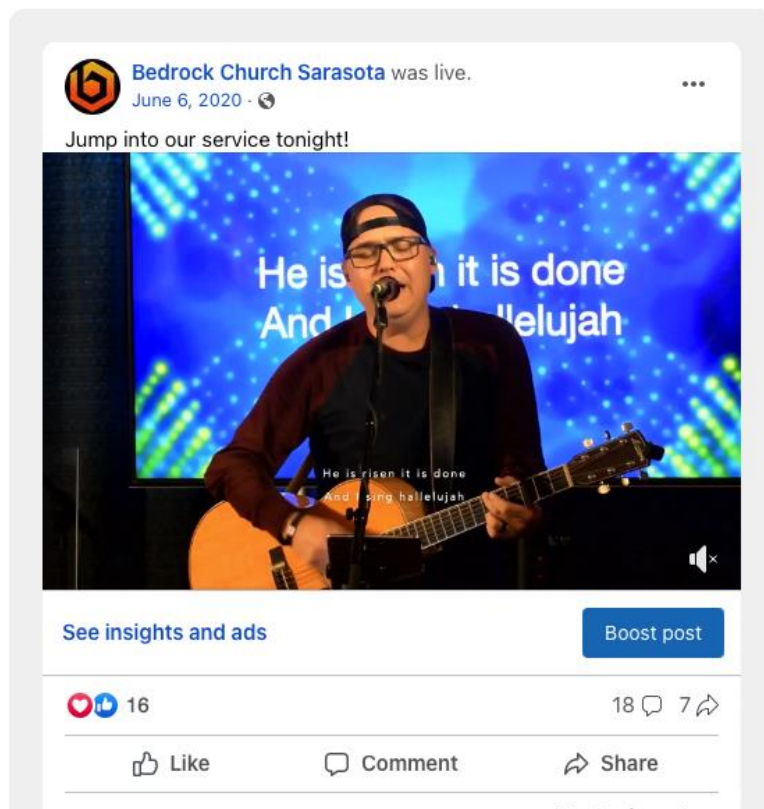
Figure 4.4. Facebook Post Performance, June 6, 2020.[4]

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[4] "Post Performance," Facebook Business, June 6, 2020, accessed February 21, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078&nav_ref=profile_plus_admin_tool.
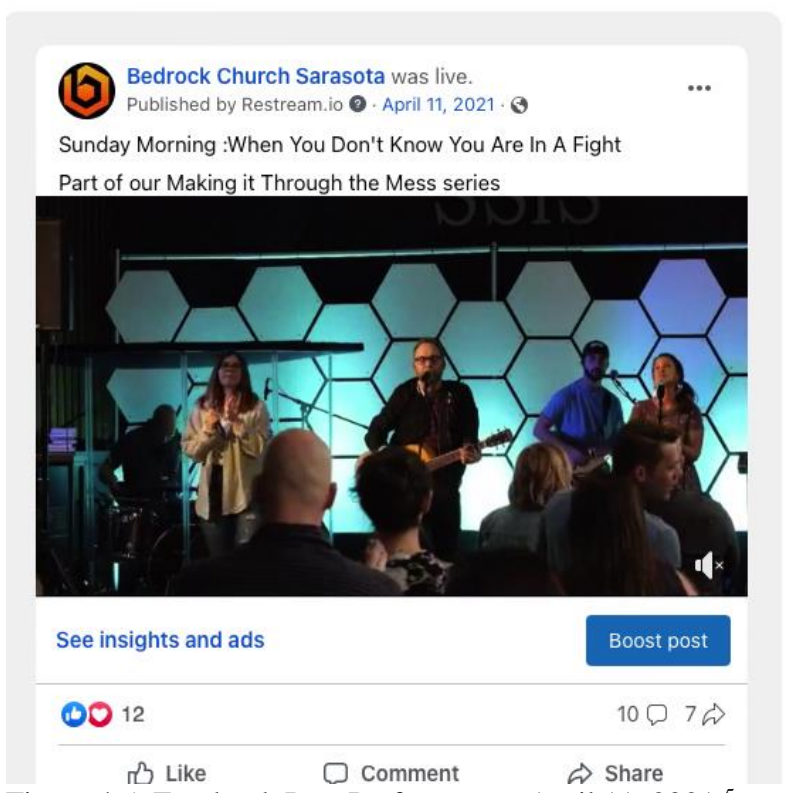
Figure 4.5. Facebook Post Performance, April 11, 2021.[5]

Figure 4.6. Facebook Post Performance, July 17, 2021.[6]
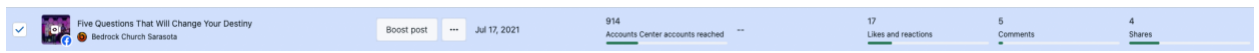
[6] "Post Performance," Facebook Business, July 17, 2021, accessed February 21, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078&nav_ref=profile_plus_admin_tool.

Figure 4.7. Facebook Post Performance, January 30, 2022.[7]
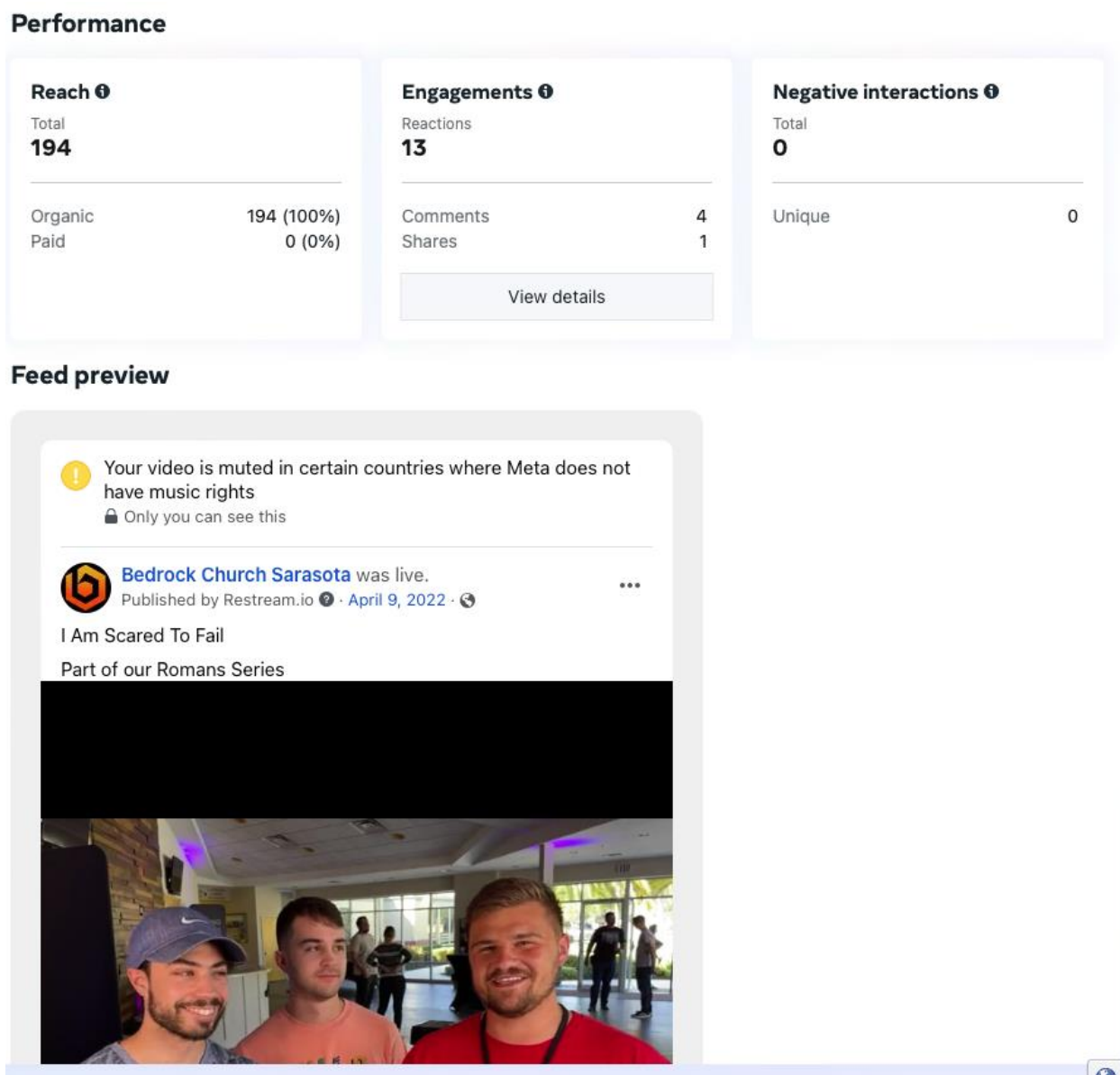
Figure 4.8. Facebook Post Performance, April 9, 2022.[8]
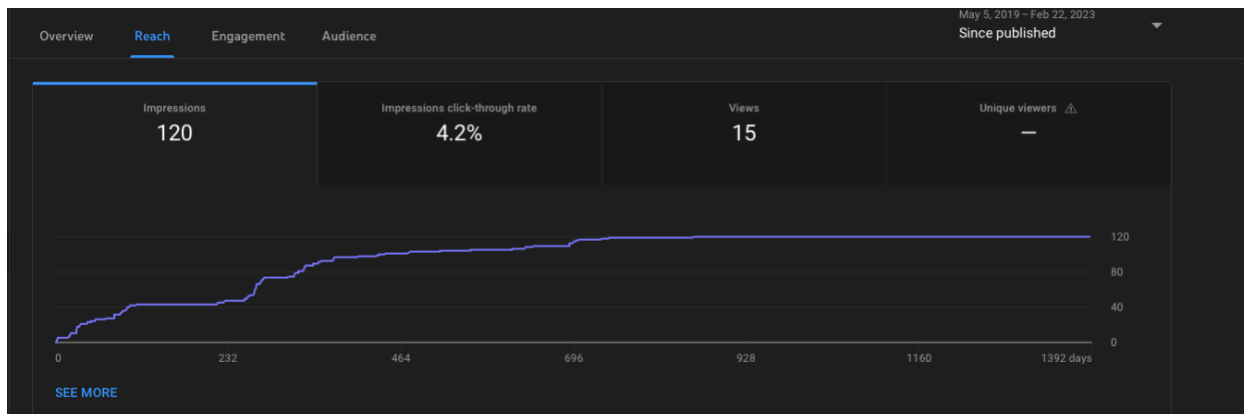
YouTube

Figure 4.9. YouTube Video Reach, May 5, 2019 – February 22, 2023.[9]
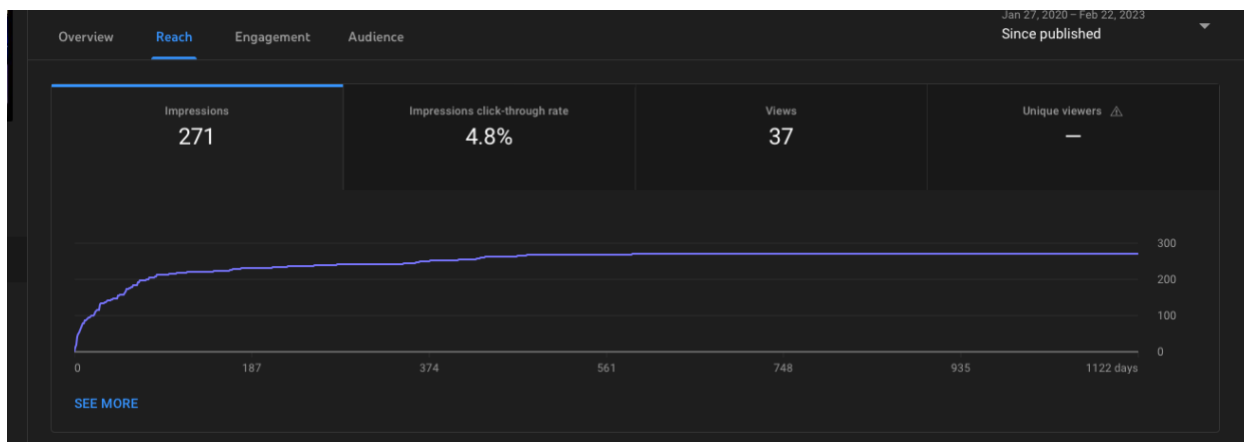
Figure 4.10. YouTube Video Reach, January 27, 2020 – February 22, 2023.[10]

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[9] "Video Reach, May 5, 2019 to February 22, 2023," YouTube, accessed February 21, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/abr9In3sIVQ/analytics/tab-overview/period-default.
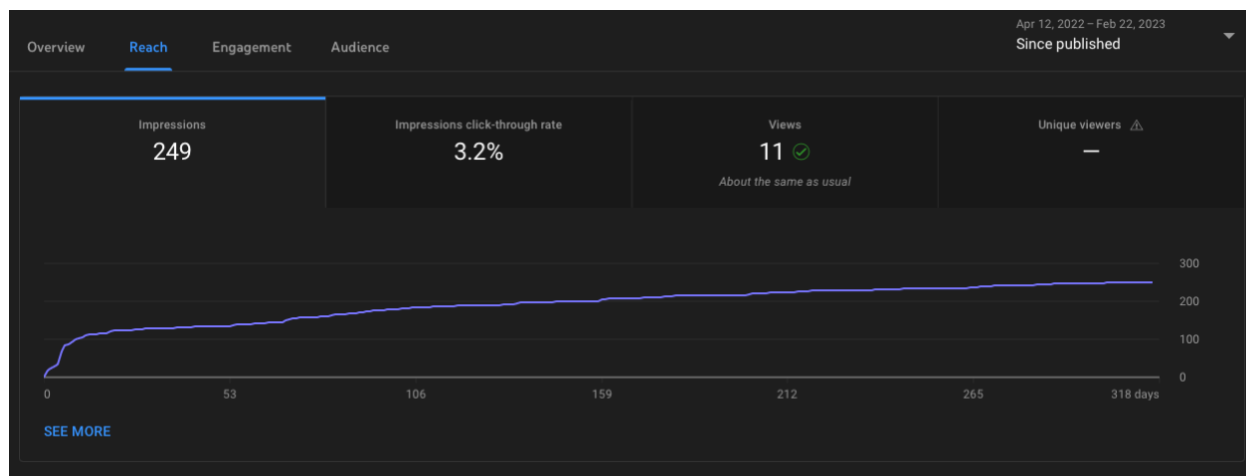
[10] "Video Reach, January 27, 2020 to February 22, 2023," YouTube, accessed February 21, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/kgn4bPCnaaw/edit.
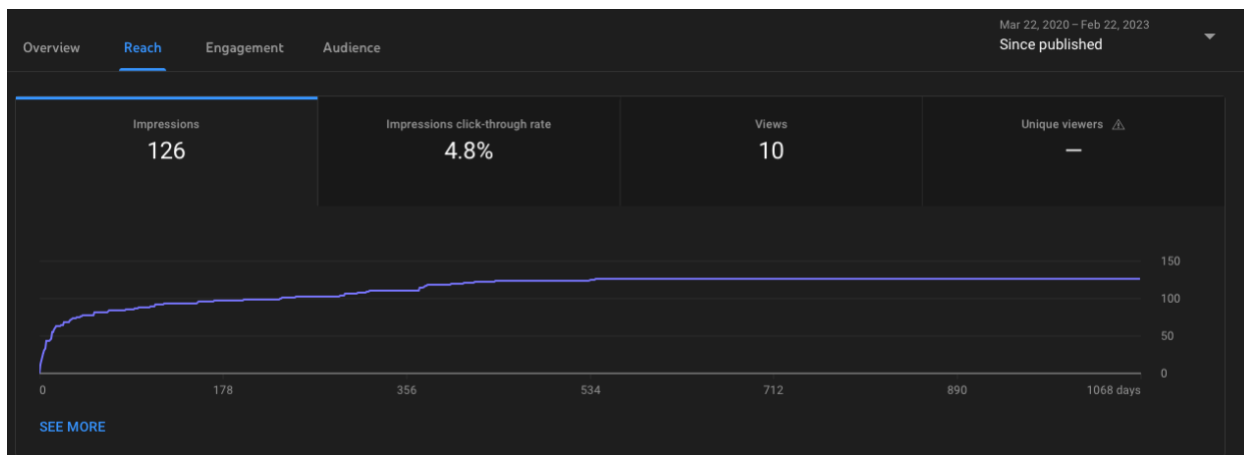
Figure 4.11. YouTube Video Reach, May 22, 2020 – February 22, 2023.[11]
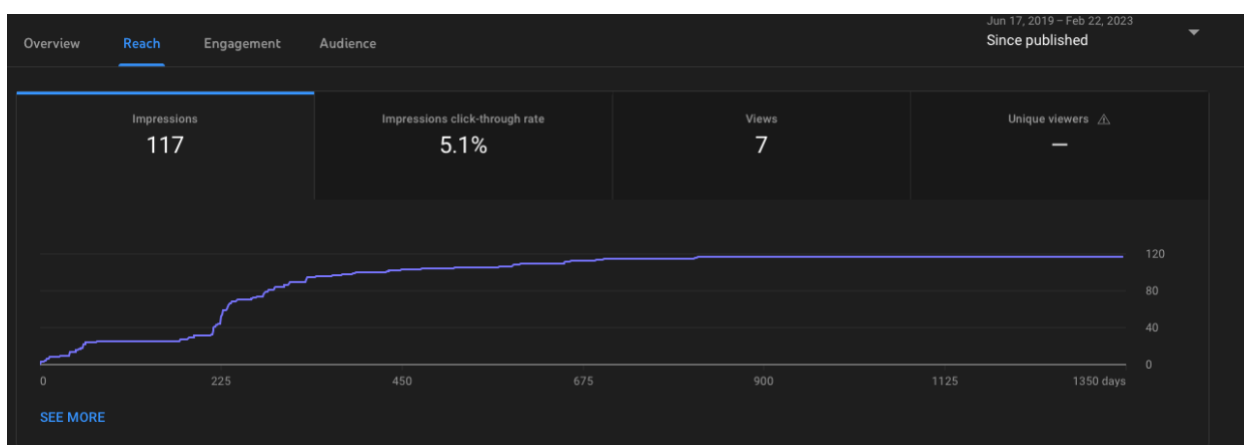
Figure 4.12. YouTube Video Reach, June 17, 2019 – February 22, 2023.[12]

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[11] "Video Reach, May 22, 2020 to February 22, 2023," YouTube, accessed February 21, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/c_L3O1gtaXI/edit.

[12] "Video Reach, June 17, 2019 to February 22, 2023," YouTube, accessed February 21, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/YC8y4yaJCLI/analytics/tab-reach_viewers/period-default.
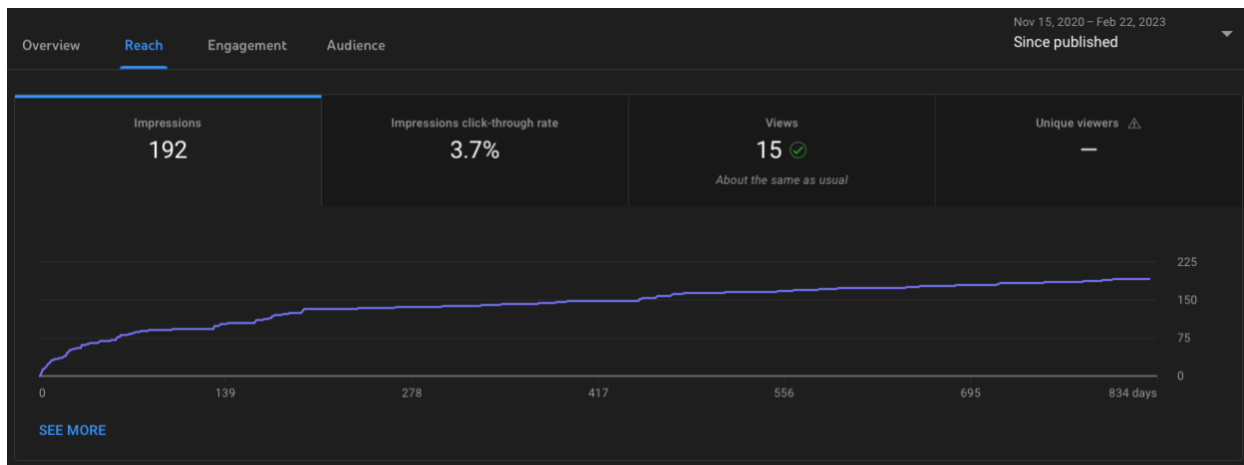
Figure 4.13. YouTube Video Reach, November 15, 2020 – February 22, 2023.[13]
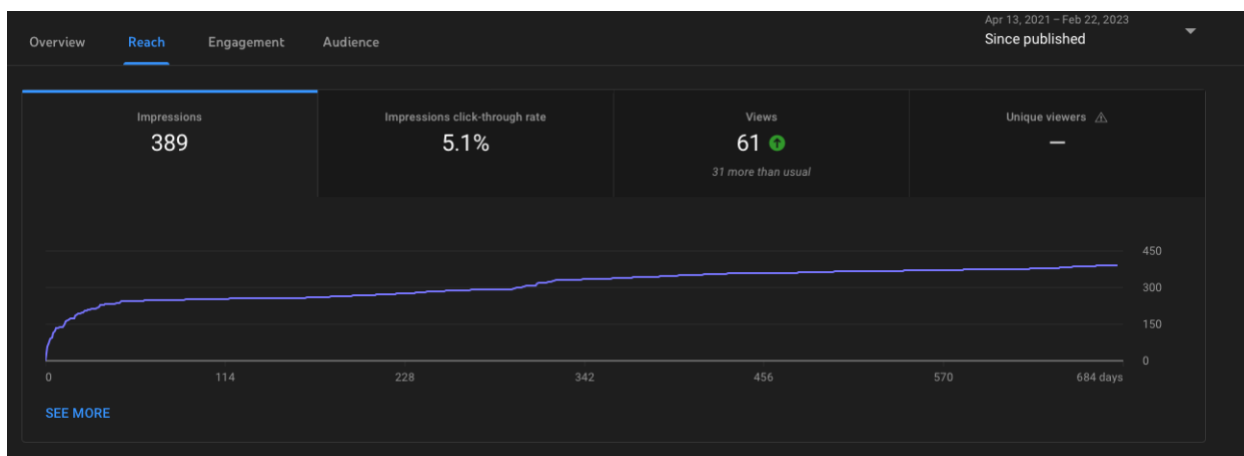
Figure 4.14. YouTube Video Reach, April 13, 2021 – February 22, 2023.[14]

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[13] "Video Reach, November 15, 2020 to February 22, 2023," YouTube, accessed February 21, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/Z9VoASYztTA/analytics/tab-overview/period-default.

[14] "Video Reach, April 13, 2021 to February 22, 2023," YouTube, accessed February 21, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/MauiFR_TRSA/analytics/tab-overview/period-default.
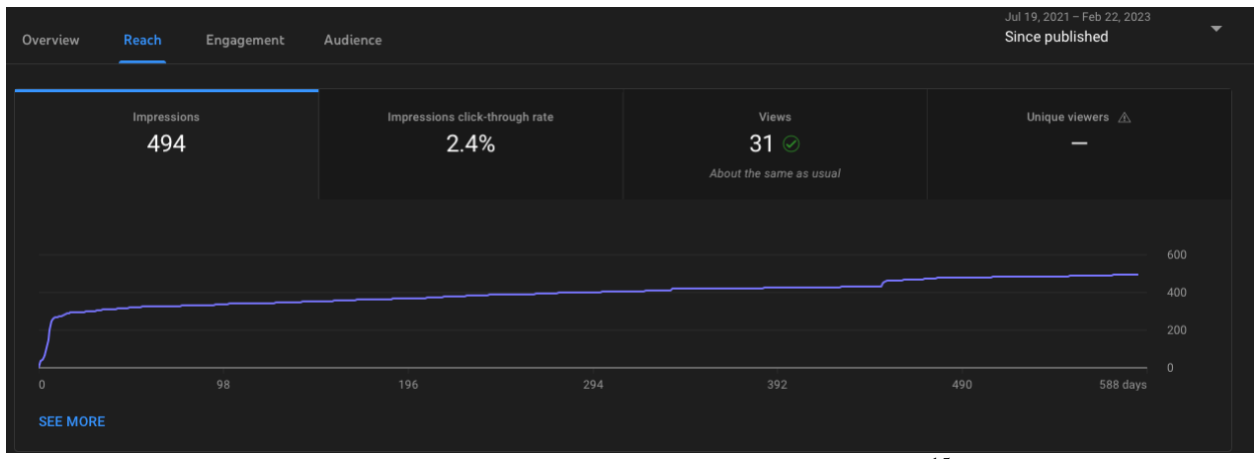
Figure 4.15. YouTube Video Reach, July 19, 2021 – February 22, 2023.[15]
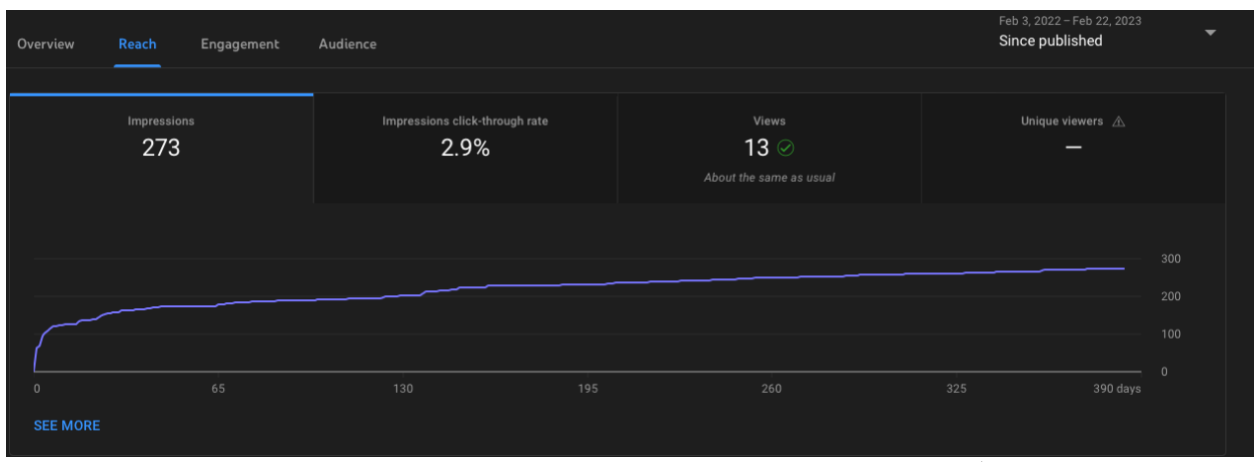
Figure 4.16. YouTube Video Reach, February 3, 2022 – February 22, 2023.[16]

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[15] "Video Reach, July 19, 2021 to February 22, 2023," YouTube, accessed February 21, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/oThPBevx5xc/analytics/tab-overview/period-default.

[16] "Video Reach, February 3, 2022 to February 22, 2023," YouTube, accessed February 21, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/-hn9V6csr-c/analytics/tab-overview/period-default.

Figure 4.17. YouTube Video Reach, April 12, 2022 – February 22, 2023.[17]
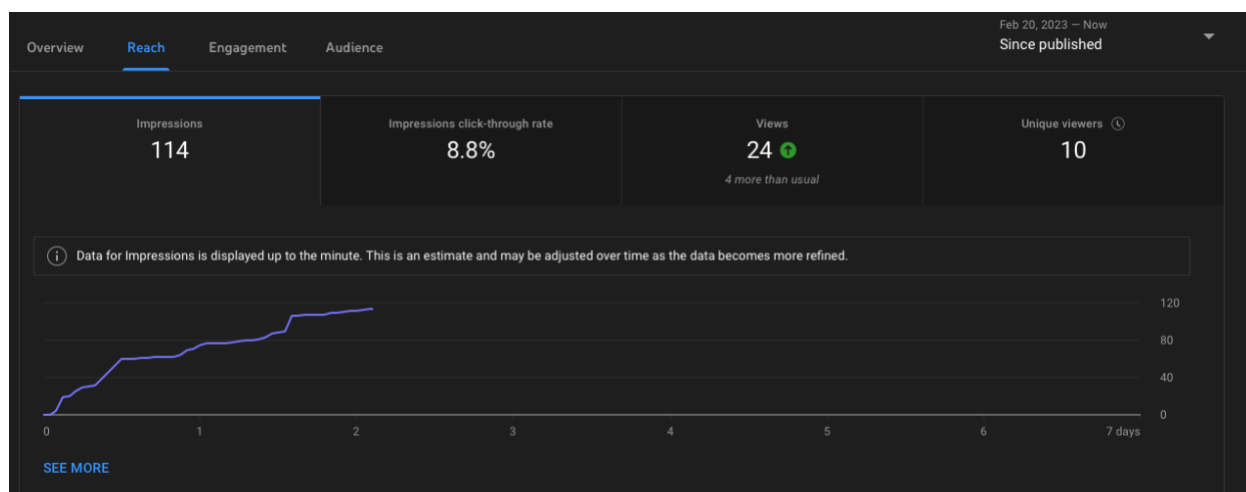
Figure 4.18. YouTube Video Reach, February 20, 2023 – February 21, 2023.[18]

As stated previously, longform video format, sermons in this case, play a vital role in the formation of an online digital media strategy. When considering the best way to reach people during a prolonged absence with a message, it seemed that Facebook was the greater exposure in the early days of the pandemic. It is true that the exposure videos get from Facebook has been

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[17] "Video Reach, April 12, 2022 to February 22, 2023," YouTube, accessed February 21, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/emcbBobniQo/analytics/tab-overview/period-default.

[18] "Video Reach, February 20, 2023 to February 22, 2023," YouTube, accessed February 21, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/zq7Vh4Gntpk/analytics/tab-overview/period-default.

higher over the entirety of the study, but engagement and viewership was higher by percentage on YouTube.

Exposure is important when talking about engaging people during a prolonged absence. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook increasingly became Bedrock Sarasota's greatest growth mechanism. Many people were engaging Facebook daily during the lockdowns, and the overall organic exposure that the church had far exceeded any other digital media platform. Exposure is extremely important, especially during a period where gathering is not an option. Facebook was far greater at establishing organic exposure to the people who were attending Bedrock at the time of the Pandemic, but it also helped to engage new audiences.

The research also found that the amount of time that people spent watching a particular video went up dramatically on YouTube as opposed to Facebook. Many times, Facebook only provided a short clip of a message in the thumbnail video. Many people would scroll past this quickly. This creates quick views, but not substantial views. YouTube, on the other hand, had a much greater view time where people stay engaged with the content for greater periods of time.

During the beginning of the study YouTube was accounting for approximately 20% of the exposure that Facebook was. Overtime, this has changed dramatically due to the migration of people who have started to view YouTube as a form of streaming entertainment over the past few years.

Another advantage of YouTube over Facebook is that YouTube provides viewers the next recommended video for them to watch. It's intentionally done so that creators can help viewers follow an entire series. This can lead to a series of viewership that can help people to engage more content.

From the research that was conducted, it can be concluded that long form video format is necessary, but not the greatest entry into engagement. The research shows that other forms of digital media content will engage people more readily, but long-term video format is better for creating a more invested audience. This is especially true of YouTube. The audience that engages on YouTube is more likely to be an invested audience rather than the Facebook audience.

This makes sense when one considers the reasoning for visits to each site. Many engage Facebook for social content where they can engage in some form of relationship with those that they know. People are scrolling through content and may see more content while there but their engagement of that content, i.e., viewership through likes and shares, are down. Many people go to YouTube to watch entire shows. This means that there will be less content seen but the engagement with that content is far greater as the research shows.

To further illustrate this point, in the most recent years of research YouTube has jumped up from the 20% mark on long form video content to 60% plus and sometimes exceeding Facebook when it comes to overall exposure. This is a trend that the research predicts will continue.

Not only is exposure on the rise on YouTube but the engagement rates are dramatically different as well. YouTube has an engagement rate (views) of around 6.2% while Facebook has an engagement rate of around 0.15%. That is nearly a 4000% increase in the likelihood of engagement between YouTube and Facebook when it comes to viewership of long format videos.

YouTube is where people go to consume content. From the research completed over the past two years, YouTube is going to be a better place for long format videos for multiple reasons.

As a real-world example, over the past few weeks, during the time in which this research took place, three families have come to the pastoral staff to let them know that they attend Bedrock regularly online. They originally found Bedrock through social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, but then began to follow along with weekly messages through YouTube. This has resulted in them coming to physical services and attending in person. One family is moving from a city over two hours way to attend Bedrock.

When it comes to long form video format it is vital that churches and ministries use these two platforms together to engage people during prolonged absences. In the following chapter a strategy will be given to help readers understand how to use these two platforms together to engage their current audience and potential audience more.

Short From Video

It must be noted that the short form video format, also known as shorts, did not exist for all platforms in the beginning. Shorts were just being created during this time. As a result, this research will show the greatest results from short form video from all platforms, but they cannot be compared side-by-side as some of this technology did not exist on certain platforms during the time of study. The first set of data will be that of Facebook and Instagram followed by YouTube Data.
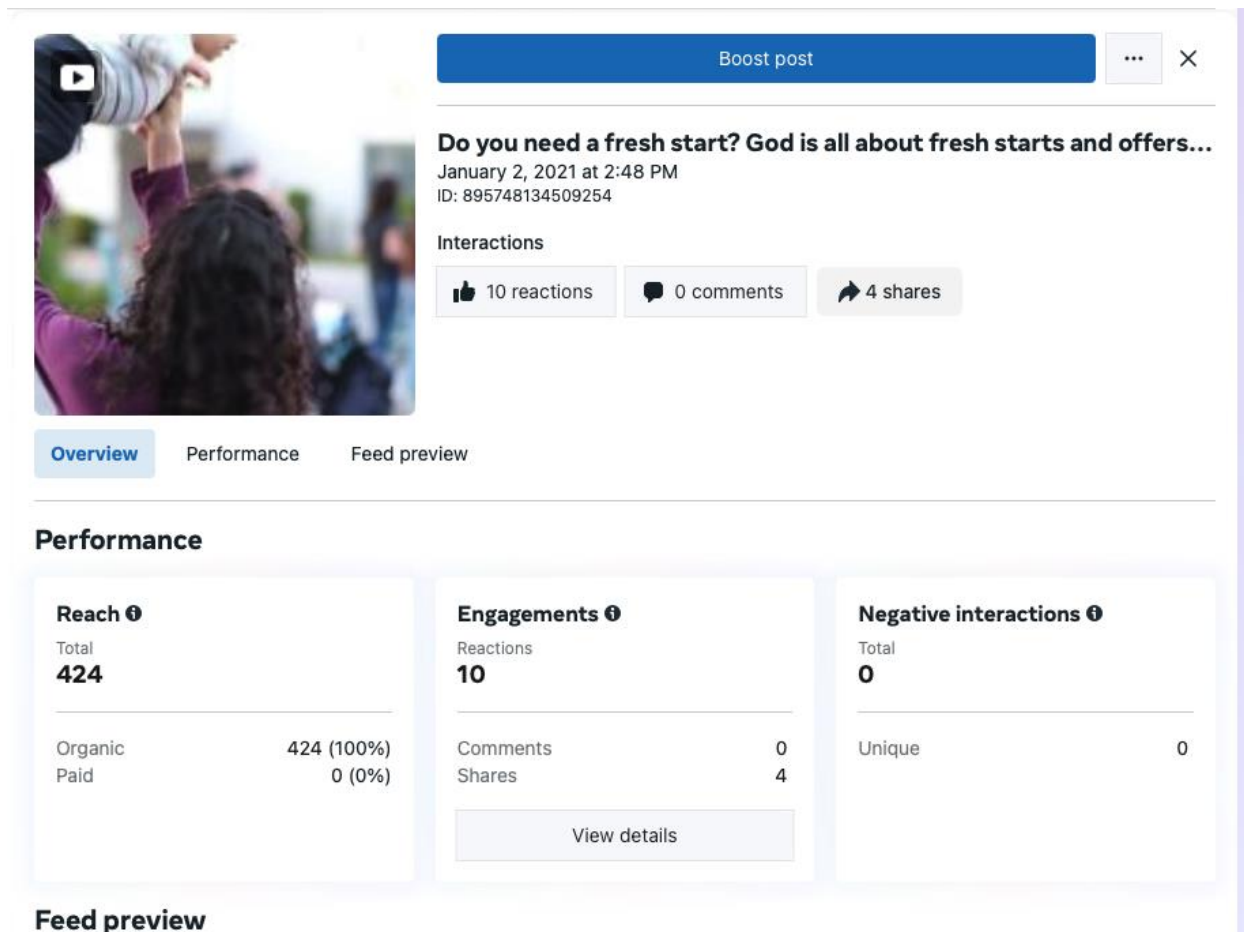
Figure 4.19. Facebook Post Overview, January 2, 2021.[19]

[19] "Post Performance," Facebook Business, January 2, 2021, accessed February 21, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078&nav_ref=profile_plus_admin_tool.
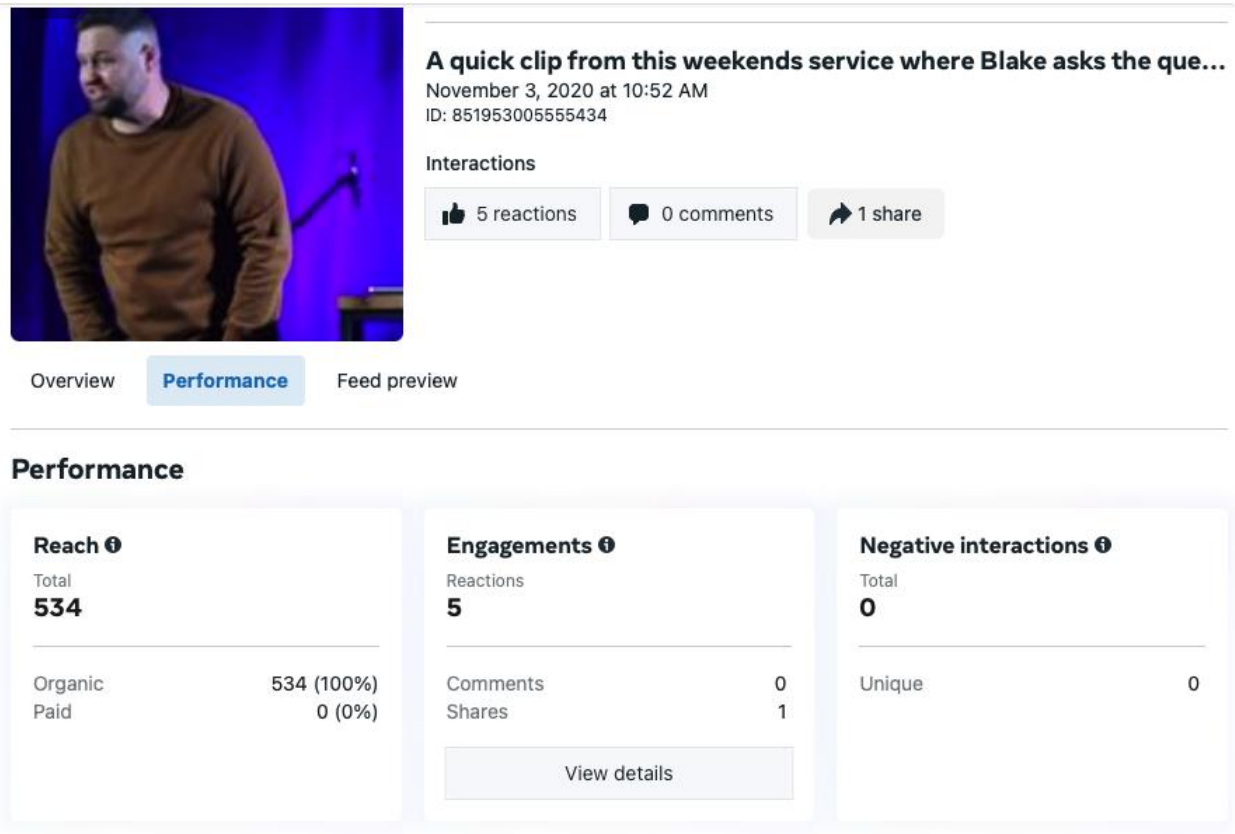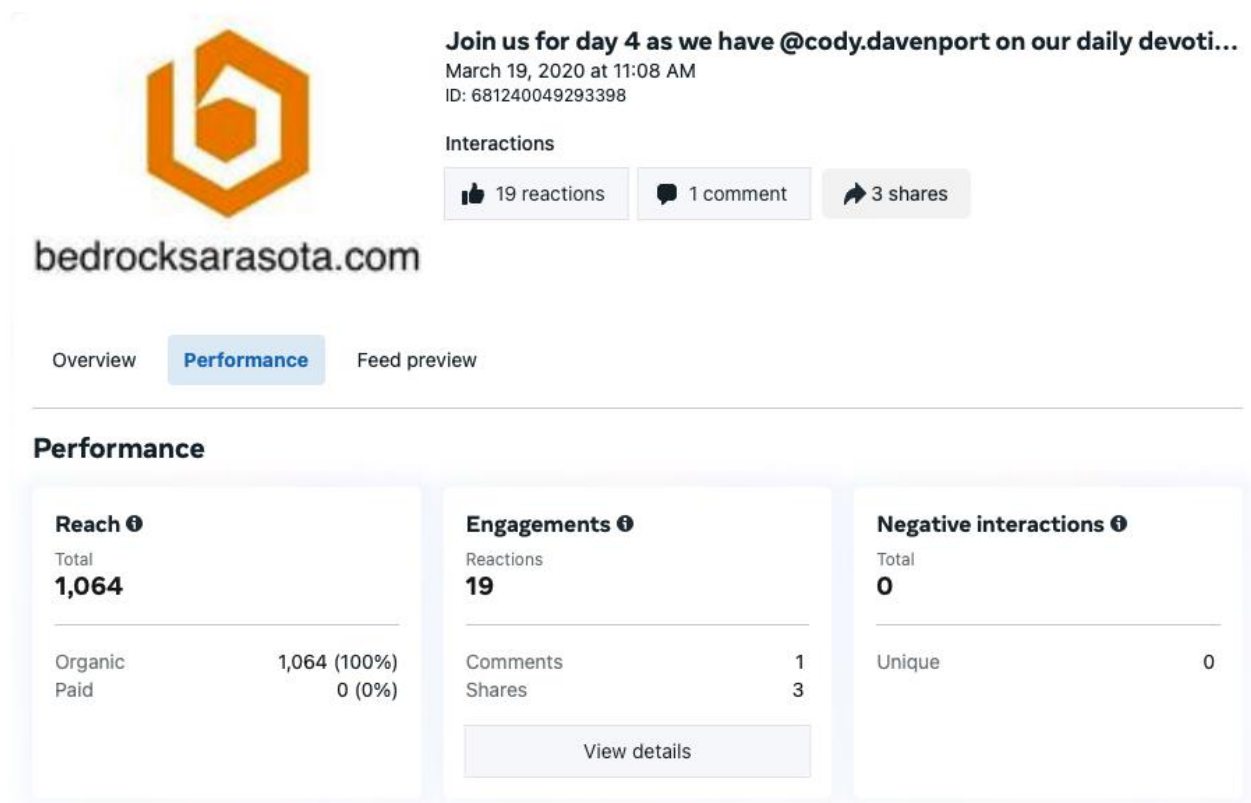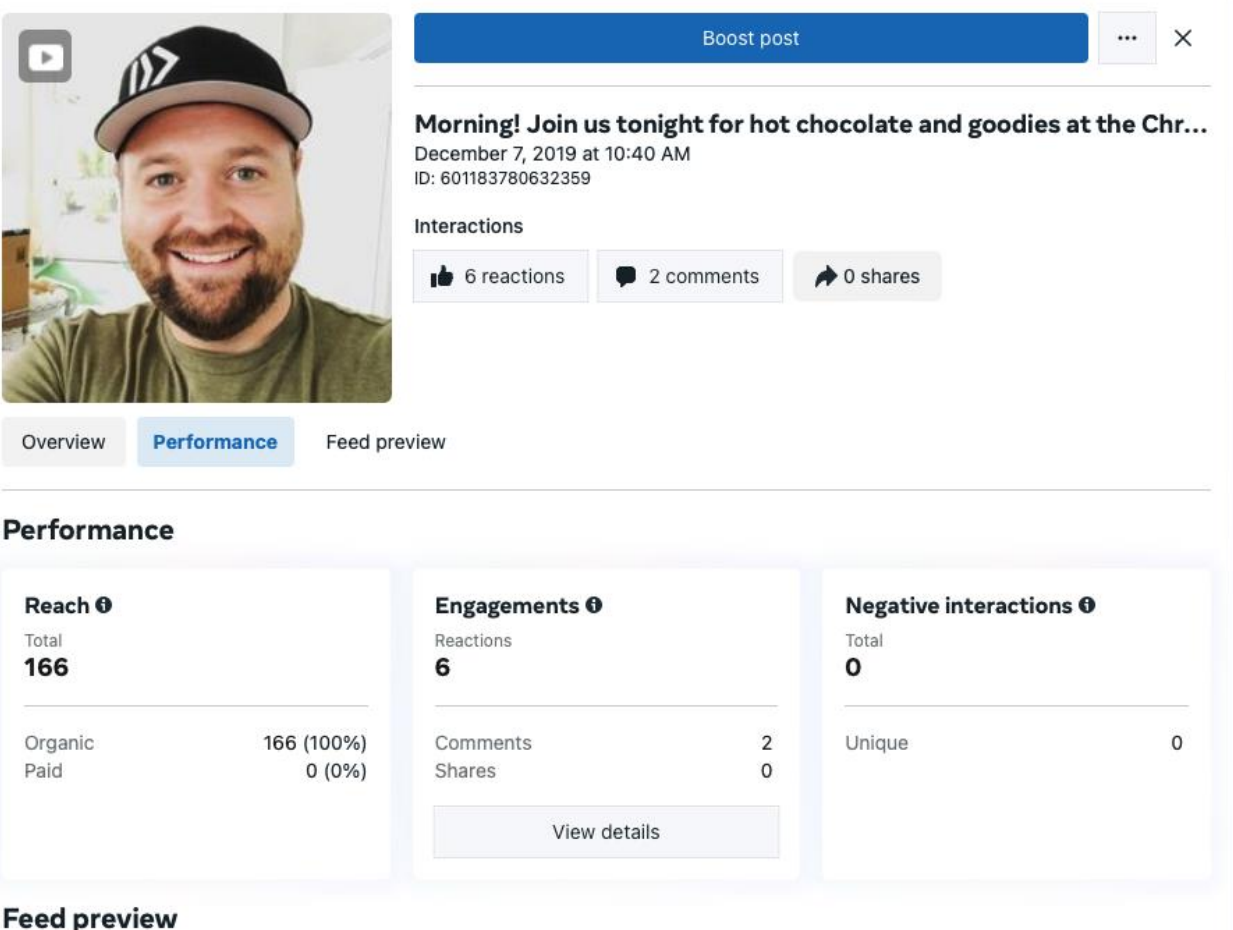
Figure 4.20. Facebook Post Performance, November 3, 2020.[20]

    [20] "Post Performance," Facebook Business, November 3, 2020, accessed February 21, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078&nav_ref=profile_plus_admin_tool.
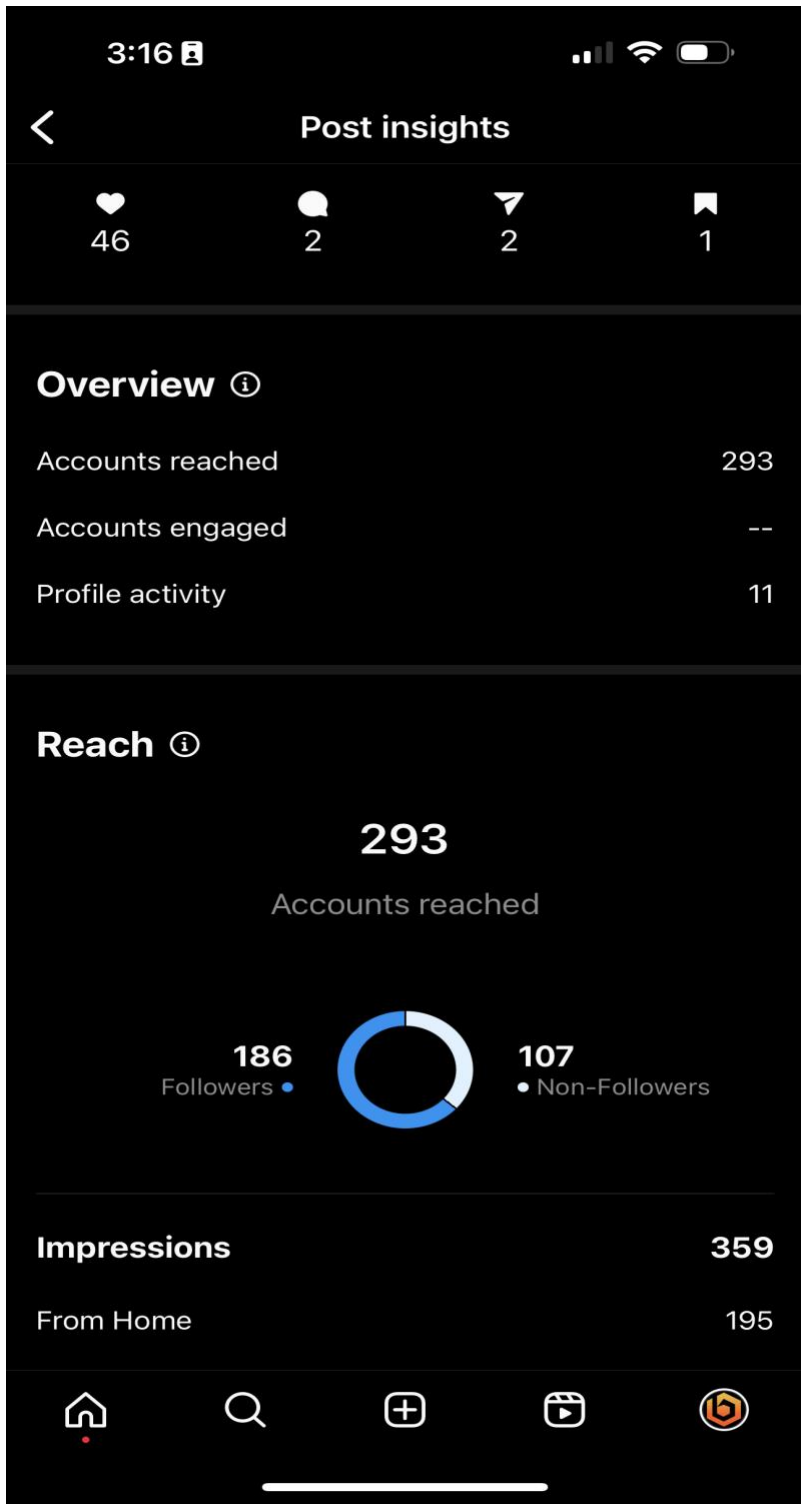
Figure 4.21. Facebook Post Performance, March 19, 2020.[21]

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[21] "Post Performance," Facebook Business, March 19, 2020, accessed February 21, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078&nav_ref=profile_plus_admin_tool.

Figure 4.22. Facebook Post Performance, December 7, 2019.[22]

Figure 4.23. Instagram Post Insights.[23]

Figure 4.24. Instagram Reel Insights.[24]

Figure 4.25. Instagram Reel Insights.[25]

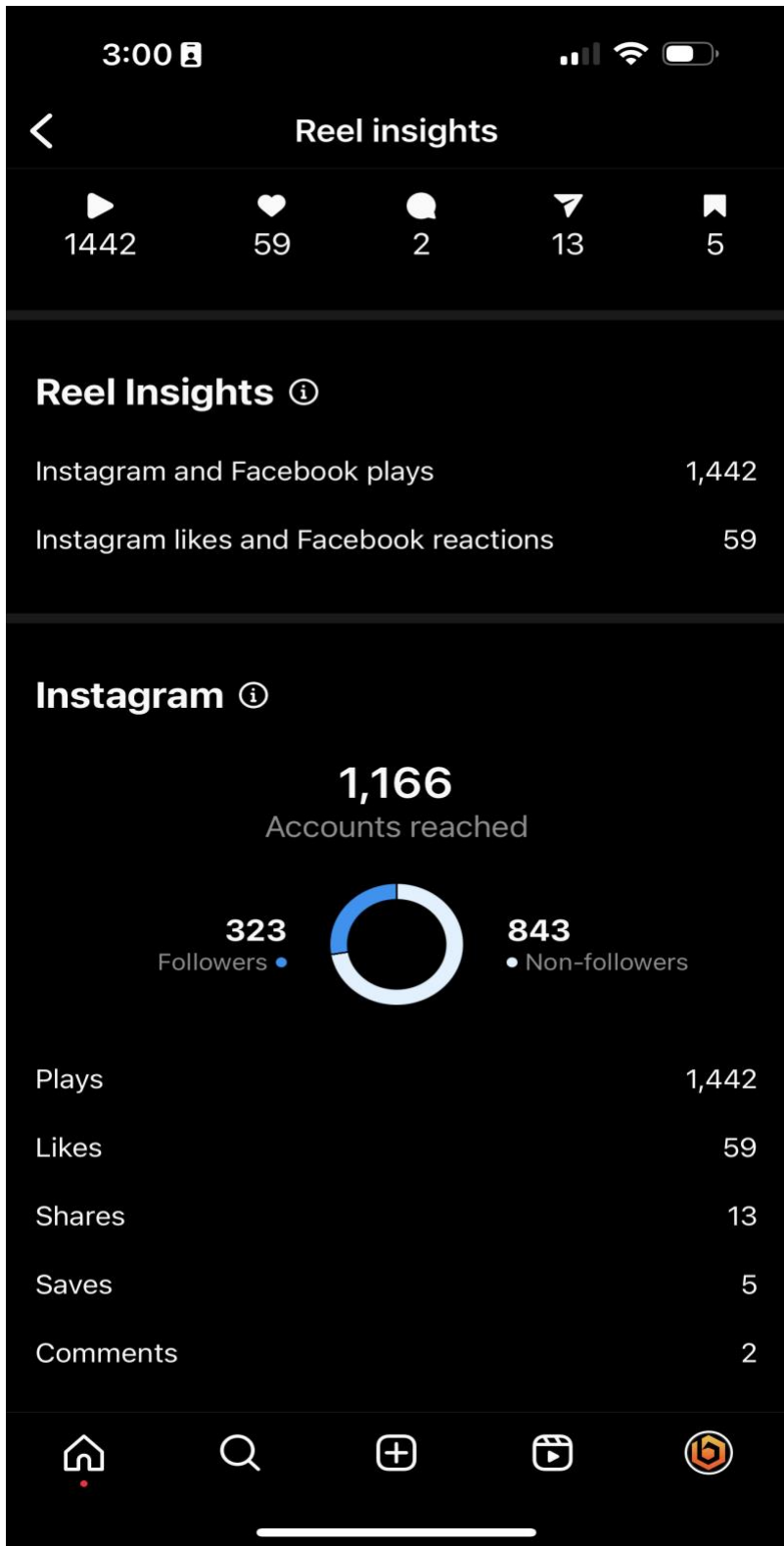
Figure 4.26. Instagram Reel Insights.[26]

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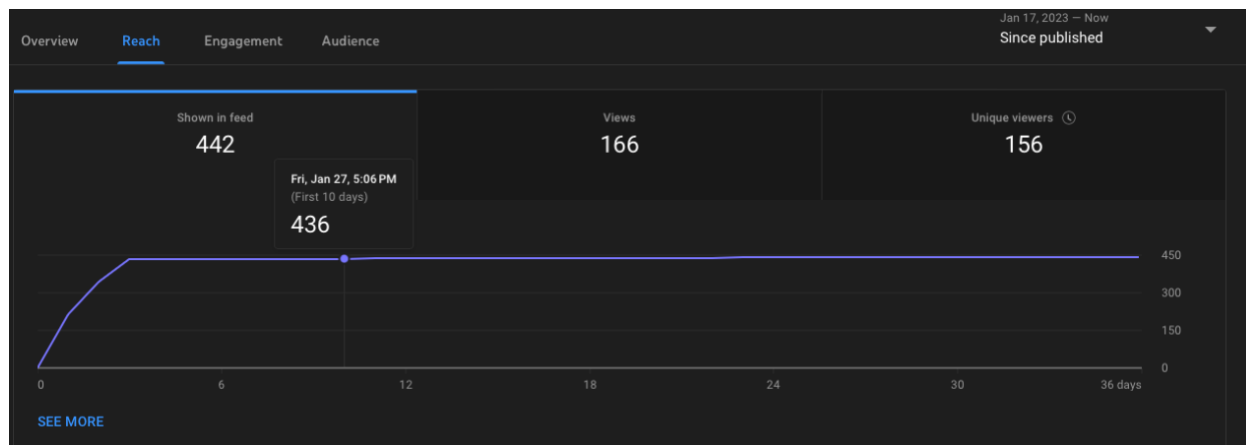[26] @bedrocksrq, "Reel Insights," Instagram, accessed Feb 21, 2023.

YouTube Shorts

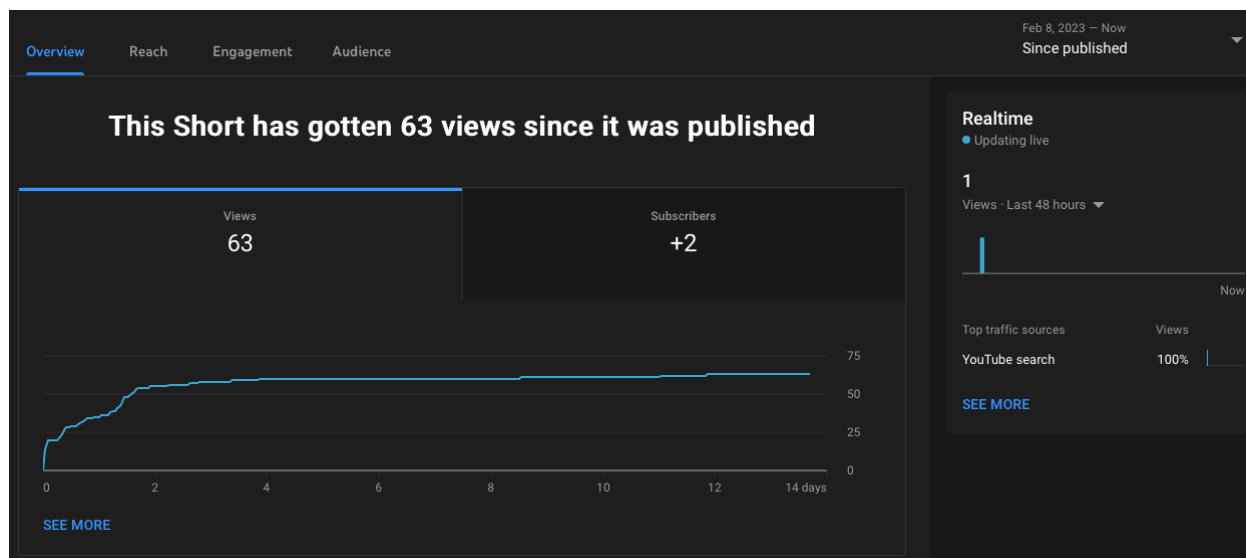Figure 4.27. YouTube Short Reach, January 17, 2023 – February 21, 2023.[27]

Figure 4.28. YouTube Short Reach, February 8, 2023 – February 21, 2023.[28]

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[27] "Short Reach, January 17, 2023 to February 21, 2023," YouTube, accessed February 21, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/cgMm_7x-3OU/analytics/tab-reach_viewers/period-default.

[28] "Short Reach, February 8, 2023 to February 21, 2023," YouTube, accessed February 21, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/02UzBtHRRNM/analytics/tab-overview/period-default.
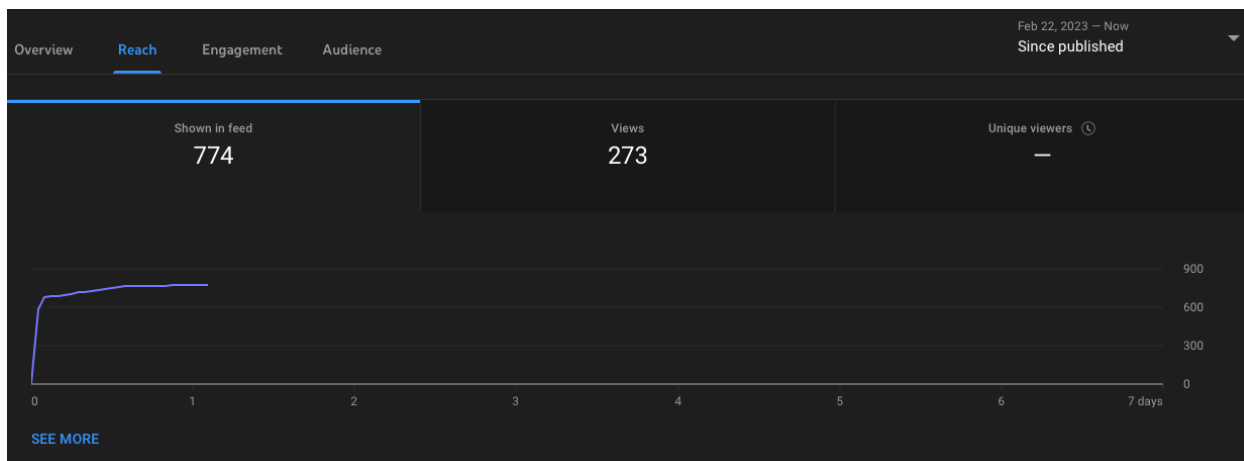
Figure 4.29. YouTube Short Reach, February 22, 2023 – March 1, 2023.[29]

Short form video format has evolved very rapidly over the past few years. That trend as accelerated rapidly in the past year or so. Each social media platform has begun to push shorter videos on their platforms. As of the time of writing of this research, the preferred time was between fifteen to sixty seconds for a short video. As a result, some of the research shows short form videos under ten minutes while other research shows videos within sixty seconds. It is important to note these trends when it comes to a period of prolonged absences. One will have to use the trends that the social media platforms are pushing to get more organic reach in their posts.

In the research conducted, the first platform that was studied to a great extent was Facebook. As was found with long form video format, Facebook did not have a natural push towards this media genre. While exposure was up on Facebook, engagement was down overall. Some videos would get nearly 1100 exposures but only 19 engagements. This equates to a 1.7% engagement rate. There was no significant rate of increase in the number of followers linked to this video content.

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[29] "Short Reach, February 22, 2023 to March 1, 2023," YouTube, accessed March 1, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/video/p-OxhUNcOgQ/analytics/tab-reach_viewers/period-default.

Instagram, while owned by Facebook, showed much greater engagement rates. As the research shows in figures 4.23 to 4.26, Instagram was able to get greater exposure and engagement. This was because this platform is more positioned to do so because of the way that the platform is designed. Not only did Instagram exceed the number of accounts, which were reached at the number of watches, it also exceeded the number of accounts to engage with the content. This means there is over 100% video watch rate. To further belabor the point, the engagement rate is 10 times greater than that of Facebook. The researcher saw on average an engagement rate of between 5-10% on an Instagram post as opposed to the 1.7% on Facebook.

Overall Instagram had a viewership rate of 40% greater when compared to YouTube. This must be considered with caution. At the time of this writing, the YouTube channel of Bedrock has 201 subscribers and the church's Instagram account has 723 followers. Although there may be more followers on Instagram as opposed to YouTube, Instagram still has a greater organic reach at this time due to content being more easily shareable.

One interesting fact that came out of this research was that the number of followers did not increase dramatically for Instagram, even though a greater number of viewers were reached, when compared to that of YouTube. As can be seen in figures 4.30 and 4.31, there was a greater effect on followers on the YouTube channel as to that of the Instagram channel over the same period. The Instagram channel grew by 2.2% over a thirty day period, while YouTube grew by nearly 10% during that same amount of time.
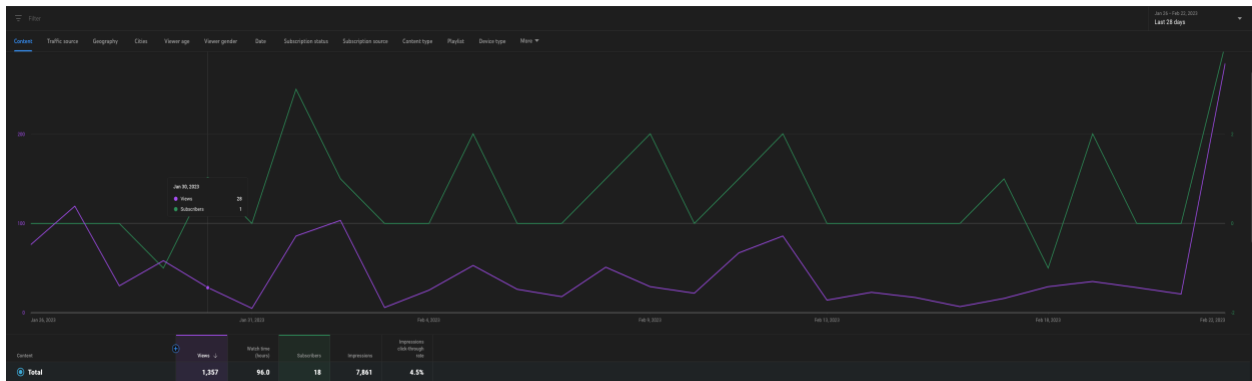
Figure 4.30. YouTube growth during 30-day period while making shorts.[30]

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[30] "Short Reach, January [date] to February [date]," YouTube, accessed March 1, 2023, https://studio.youtube.com/channel/UCpUPFh4iylLjlYZe75YZ5vw/analytics/tab-build_audience/period-default.
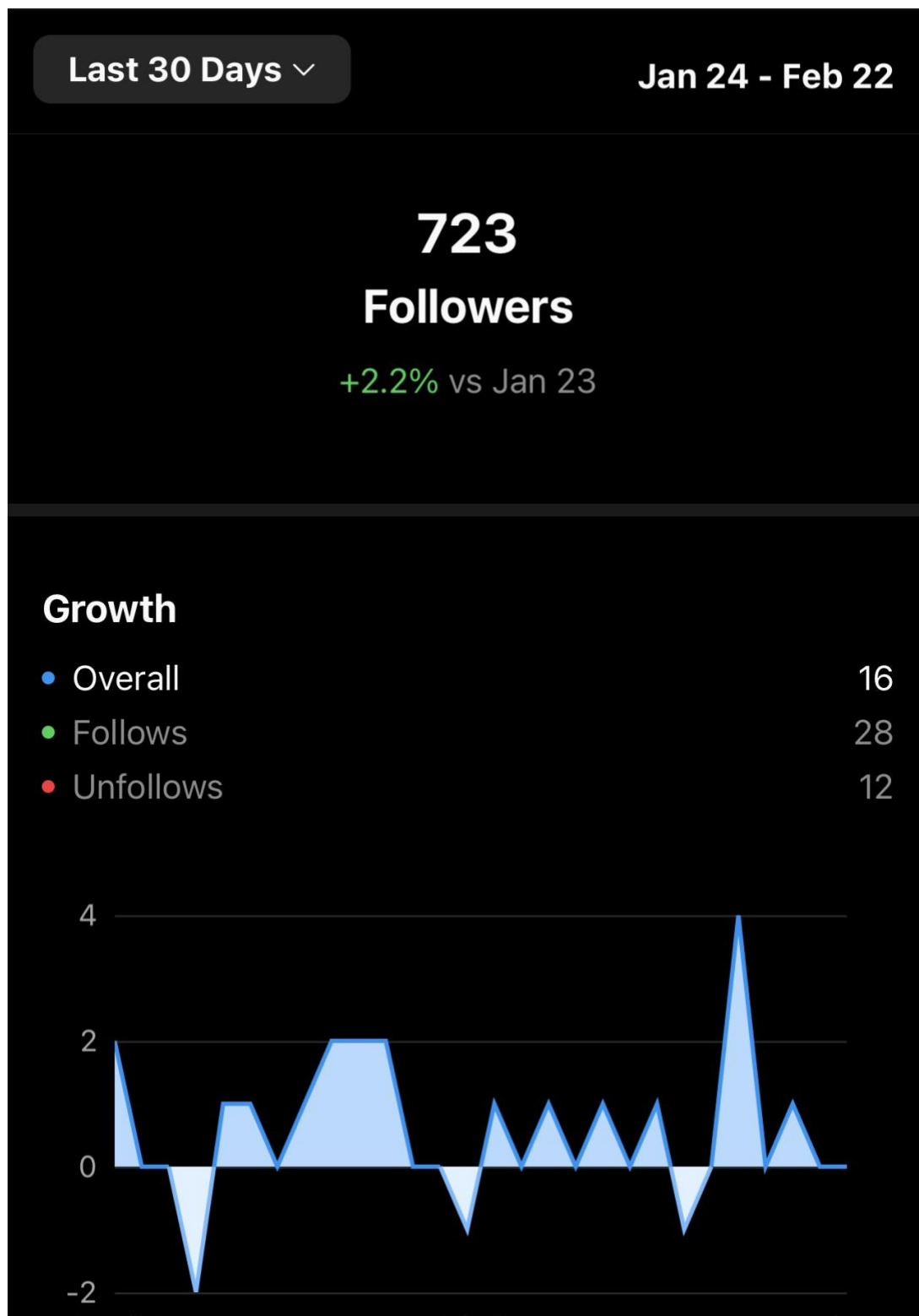
Figure 4.31. Instagram growth during 30-day period while making shorts. [31]

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[31] @bedrocksrq, "Account Growth," Instagram, accessed March 1, 2023.

What can be concluded from this research is that short form video content is engaged at a higher percentage rate on both Instagram and YouTube. It was a greater growth driver for YouTube but had significant growth increases on both platforms. At the writing of this paper, short term video content did not see significant changes on Facebook. These trends will have significant impact in engaging people with digital media strategies during prolonged periods of absence. These trends in video content will need to be used in a strategic manner to continue to engage people during these prolonged absences. Further implications and strategies will be implemented in the next chapter.

Pictures

Pictures of people are vitally important when it comes to having a digital media strategy for prolonged absences. When people can see themselves as part of a group and that they would engage with that group, it helps them to feel a sense of identity within the community. Pictures are vitally important, especially in the way that they are shot and edited. As seen in the previous research, pictures are vitally important when it comes to engaging people. This section of the paper will begin to discern and evaluate the use of pictures, and what social media platforms are most important when it comes to engaging people during a season of prolonged absence.

There were three areas considered when it came to pictures and how they were used to engage people during prolonged absences. The three criteria were reactions (likes), comments and shares. It is considered engagement; this gives people a sense of belonging during a period of prolonged absences. It is further engagement which can help people stay connected or become connected. This leads to more opportunity to reach people during periods of prolonged absences.

The two platforms that will be a valuated for effectiveness of pictures are Facebook and Instagram. Each set of pictures will be a valuated from 2019 to January 2023. Each set of picture posts that were evaluated were anywhere from 6-8 months apart but within the same year.

Pictures on Facebook between 2019 and January 2023
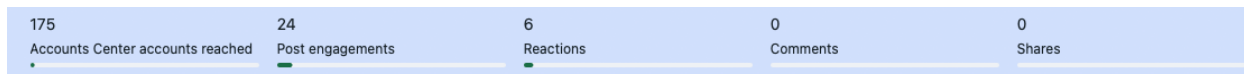
Figure 4.32. "What am I looking at here?"[32]

Figure 4.33. Picture Engagement, September 22, 2019.[33]

Figure 4.34. Picture Engagement, December 16, 2019.[34]
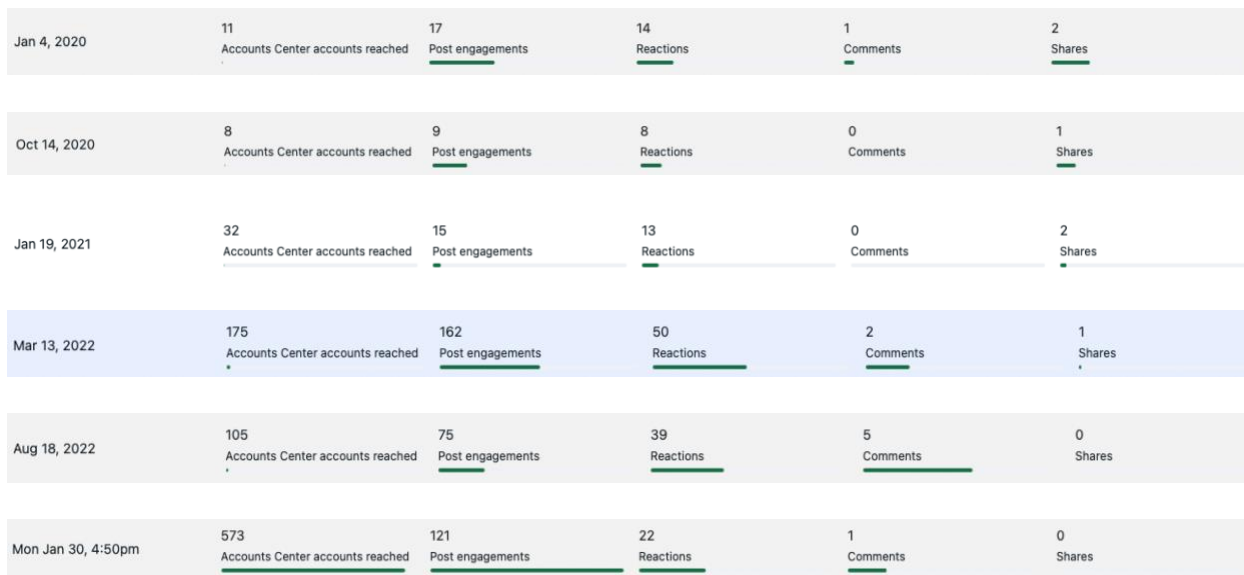
Figure 4.35. Picture Engagement, January 4, 2020 to January 30, 2023.

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[32] "I Don't Know What this is," Facebook Business, accessed March 1, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078.

[33] Ibid.

[34] "Picture Engagement, December 16, 2019," Facebook Business, accessed March 1, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078.

Pictures of Instagram 2019- Jan. 2023

Figure 4.36. "What Am I Looking At?"[35]

Figure 4.37. Picture Engagement, September 22, 2019 to January 30, 2023.[36]

Over the three years that the research considered, it was observed that engagement of posts has overall increased. This was especially true over the COVID-19 pandemic. Pictures of people within the church gathering helped to engage people that had not come together since the beginning of the pandemic. Pictures help people to see themselves within a particular situation, and that they can gather or belong to a certain group of people. This is especially important during a time of prolonged absence.

One important note must be made when considering the posts that were evaluated for this part of the research project. Each of these photos were posted at the exact same time and have been live since the time of posting. There are no other statistical anomalies to consider when discussing these picture posts.

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[35] Ibid. (Are you sure this is an ibid?).

[36] "Picture Engagement, September 22, 2019 to January 30, 2023," Facebook Business, accessed March 1, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078.

From September 22, 2019, there was an increase in engagement on all platforms by nearly 35%. It is important to note that the engagement rates increased while growth increased on both platforms. There are some marked differences in the type of engagement and percentage of engagement though.

Overall, due to the larger size of followers, Facebook had a greater overall exposure. This correlates to the fact that there are nearly 25% more followers on Facebook than there are on Instagram. While it is true that the number of Facebook followers is more than that of Instagram, the overall engagement of those followers is lower. When all the data is considered over the three years data period, Facebook had an average engagement rate of 22 engagements per post.

Instagram had another engagement rate altogether. Instagram averaged 52.5 engagements per post over the three-year data period. This was an increase of 40% when the two are considered and it is a considerably higher rate of engagement when considered next to the rate of return of the same exact posts on Facebook. This correlates to the fact that of Facebook users, 1.5% of users interact with a picture post. while 7.2% of Instagram users engaged with a picture post.

Graphics Posts

Graphic like media content is content that is extremely important when it comes to engaging people during prolonged absences. It should not be assumed that an organization can take pictures or make video posts every time they post. Graphic posts, or any digital content that does not include physical pictures of people from within the church or video content, are great alternatives. This type of content would include encouraging sayings, reminders, and Scripture quotes amongst others.

In this section of the paper graphic content, not related to advertisement for events, will be analyzed for engagement with the general audiences of Bedrock Church Sarasota. It is important to note that none of the content that was studied was in any way boosted or magnified within the social media platforms. For these types of posts both Facebook and Instagram will be analyzed for engagement. Engagement for these types of posts include likes, shares, and comments. All the data collected was done on the same content that was posted at the exact same time as to not skew the results of the findings.

The content posts that were made were studied over a three-year period and the posts were pulled from within eight months of each other during the same calendar year.

Facebook Graphics Content Posts

Date	Accounts Center accounts reached	Post engagements	Reactions	Comments	Shares
Jan 23, 2019	1	7	6	0	1
Sep 2, 2019	1	6	6	0	0
Jan 24, 2020	1	5	5	0	0
Sep 3, 2020	2	17	17	0	0
Jan 15, 2021	22	6	5	0	1
Jan 2, 2022	123	19	6	0	1
Aug 30, 2021	193	24	12	3	2
Jan 2, 2022	123	19	6	0	1
Sep 10, 2022	254	21	13	0	2

Thu Jan 19, 3:07pm	79 Accounts Center acc...	9 Post engagements	6 Reactions	0 Comments	1 Shares

Figure 4.38. Facebook Graphic Content Post Engagement, January 2019 to January 2023.[37]

Instagram Graphics Post Content

			Likes	Comments	Shares
Jan 23, 2019	0 Accounts Center accounts reached	--	27 Likes	1 Comments	0 Shares
Sep 2, 2019	0 Accounts Center accounts reached	--	13 Likes	1 Comments	0 Shares
Jan 24, 2020	2 Accounts Center accounts reached	--	16 Likes	1 Comments	0 Shares
Sep 3, 2020	5 Accounts Center accounts reached	--	19 Likes	0 Comments	0 Shares
Jan 15, 2021	13 Accounts Center acc...	--	19 Likes	0 Comments	0 Shares
Aug 30, 2021	234 Accounts Center acc...	--	21 Likes	2 Comments	0 Shares
Jan 2, 2022	197 Accounts Center acc...	--	20 Likes	0 Comments	12 Shares
Sep 10, 2022	327 Accounts Center acc...	--	35 Likes	2 Comments	4 Shares
Thu Jan 19, 3:07pm	157 Accounts Center acc...	--	19 Likes	1 Comments	0 Shares

Figure 4.39. Instagram Graphic Content Post Engagement, January 2019 to January 2023.[38]

Graphics posts had dramatically less engagement than other posts studied for this content. Overall, only 9.7 engagements were made on a Facebook graphic post and 21.5 engagements were made on Instagram post. These numbers are significantly lower than other posts studied for this research paper.

Instagram was the most likely place that a graphic post was going to be shared for others to see. This is when a user posts content to their own page or story. Instagram had by far larger

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[37] "Facebook Post Engagement, January 2019 to January 2023," Facebook Business, accessed March 1, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078.

[38] "Instagram Post Engagement, January 2019 to January 2023," Facebook Business, accessed March 1, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078.

numbers of sharing. The number of shares on Instagram were more than double that of the rate found on Facebook. Although the number of shares may not have been as high for Facebook, the number of times content was shared on Facebook was significantly different. In the data that was studied for this project Facebook users shared the content 66% of the time where Instagram users only shared the content 22% of the time. This is a statistical difference. This means that it is likely that more users saw Facebook content that was shared during the year even though a fewer number of people overall shared the content.

Although the content was more likely to be shared more often on Facebook, the overall engagement of the content when it came to graphics content posts was higher on Instagram. Overall, the researcher saw 0.7% of Facebook users engage with graphics content and 3% of Instagram users engage with the same content.

Events

The final type of post that will be included in the research for this paper is that of events. Events are something that is extremely important for congregations to advertise, especially when there are prolonged absences. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic events advertised included smaller group gatherings to help people begin to engage with one another again. It is important to note that many people use social media for their social calendars rather than other forms of media. This part of the paper will study the engagement and effectiveness of event posts on both Instagram and Facebook.

It is important to note that the same event was placed on each platform at the same time, and they have been posted for the same amount of time for the purposes of this research. The

research was taken over a three-year data period and each event was measured within an eight-

month period of the same year.

Facebook Event Post

Figure 4.40. Facebook Event Post Engagement, January 2019 to January 2023.[39]

Instagram Event Post

[39] "Event Post Engagement, January 2019 to January 2023," Facebook Business, accessed March 1, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078.

Jan 29, 2020	2 Accounts Center acc...	--	34 Likes	3 Comments	0 Shares
Jan 29, 2021	45 Accounts Center acc...	--	31 Likes	1 Comments	0 Shares
Sep 17, 2021	185 Accounts Center acc...	--	17 Likes	0 Comments	0 Shares
Jan 29, 2022	217 Accounts Center acc...	--	14 Likes	0 Comments	2 Shares
Sep 1, 2022	252 Accounts Center acc...	--	15 Likes	0 Comments	13 Shares
Tue Jan 31, 1:08pm	232 Accounts Center acc...	--	19 Likes	1 Comments	6 Shares

Figure 4.41. Instagram Event Post Engagement, January 2019 to January 2023.[40]

Events are some things that are important to the gathering of people and help in bringing people back together. It is important to see how individuals engage with event posts to see their ability to spread the post as well as their likelihood of attending.

Event posts were most likely to be shared most often. It must be considered that they are not shared in numerical value as often, but they are shared more often when posted. Sixty percent of the time, an event post will be shared by someone within the community.

On average, Facebook received 8.2 engagements per post when it pertained to an event. Instagram received 24.2 engagements per post. This led to .56% of Facebook users engaging with an event and 3.34% of Instagram users engaging with an event. What is key to this part of the research is that events were more likely to be shared more often but by fewer people than other types of posts.

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[40] "Event Post Engagement, January 2019 to January 2023," Instagram, accessed March 1, 2023, https://business.facebook.com/latest/posts/published_posts?asset_id=330886617662078.

Post Engagement Overall

Overall, the data found that Instagram and YouTube vastly outnumbered Facebook and overall post engagement. Overall, Instagram was the most likely platform to get some type of engagement with all types of posts. When it came to analyzing short form video content Instagram performed slightly better than YouTube, likely due to the number of followers and subscribers related to each social media platform. On the other hand, YouTube performed significantly better than Facebook when it came to long video format. Figures 4.43 and 4.44 will show the overall engagement of the various social media posts and their type of engagements in percentages of total viewership or followers.

Media Type	Facebook	Instagram	YouTube
Video (Long)		0.15	6.2
Video (Short)		1.7	7.5	8
Pictures		1.5	17.2	
Graphics		0.7	3	
Events		0.56	3.34	

Figure 4.42. Overall Percent Engagement for Social Media Platforms.
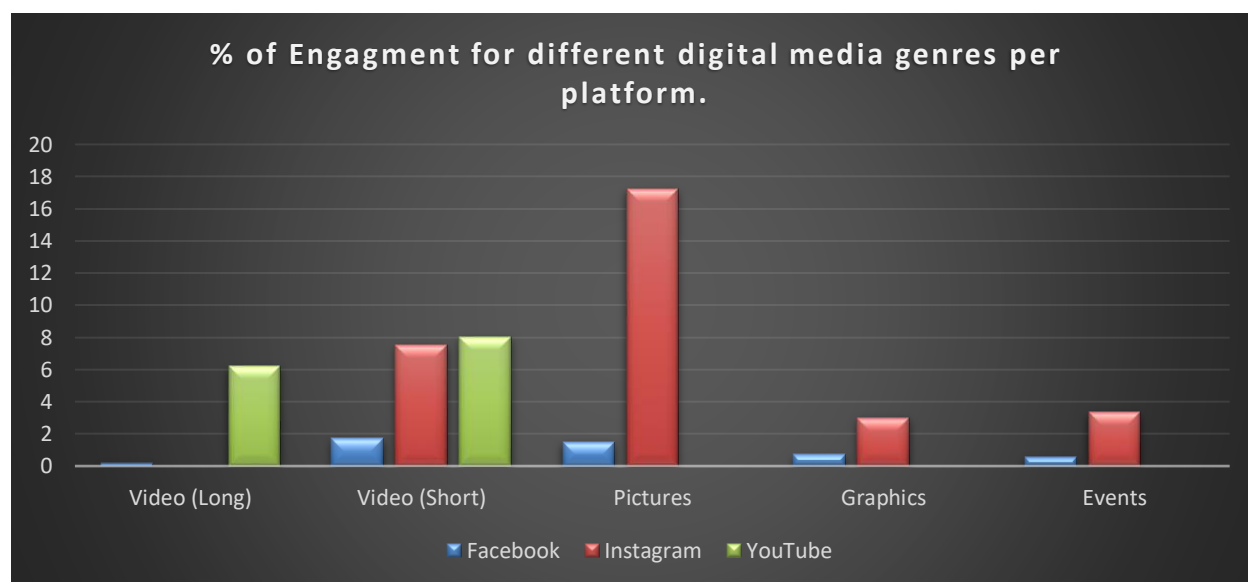
Figure. 4.43. Percent of Engagement for Social Media Platforms.

One interesting note from the research is that YouTube shorts had greatly increased the likelihood of subscription over the time of research. YouTube shorts increased viewership by nearly 10% in just under thirty days of content posts, as, at the time of this writing, YouTube has only begun to post shorts. This is a significant data point and one that will continue to trend in the event of a prolonged period of absence.

Analysis of the Findings

As a result of the research conducted over the past three years into the use of digital media strategies within a church context, the results were somewhat surprising. As it pertains to Bedrock Church Sarasota, their use of Facebook seems to be one of a great amount of exposure, but with very low engagement trends. While Facebook does play a vital role in a digital media strategy, it should not be considered the place of greatest impact or engagement. These results were extremely unexpected. At first glance, it seemed that Facebook had a large exposure format and that would mean a lot of engagement. What was revealed throughout the study was that Facebook does not have the engagement rates as one would expect.

Further, the use of short-term video to engage people both within the ministry and outside of the ministry has been profoundly surprising in its effectiveness. As a result of this research, Bedrock Church Sarasota has begun to heavily invest in the publishing of the short-term video content on all social media platforms that allow it. This has been the greatest engagement and growth trend that Bedrock Church Sarasota has seen on digital media strategies since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another area of surprise from the research conducted was the growing influence of YouTube as not just a digital media platform, but a social media platform as well. More and more people are spending time on this platform and using it to socialize. The prominence of YouTube as a video website has not waned, but it's gross as a social media platform has grown increasingly during the time of this research. Ministries must focus on the use and growth of their YouTube presence.

Another surprising result from the research conducted over was the significant increase in user engagement when it came to pictures of actual people at Bedrock Sarasota. These pictures trended in much higher engagement and helped people to feel like they could be a part of this organization. This content, because of the research conducted, has become more prevalent in the digital media strategy of Bedrock Church Sarasota because of this research.

Because of the research conducted the importance of a digital media strategy has only become more solidified in its importance within a ministry setting. The ability to engage new people, and to continue to engage current members of influence, is confirmed, and even magnified from the research conducted. What comes to mind is the adage that "if you want to catch fish you have to fish where the fish are." The reality is that if churches want to engage people and reach new people, they must be where the people are. Right now, people are on social media and ministries must have a strategy to reach those people. One of the greatest aspects of this research that has worked well is not only the type of post that should be made but also the frequency and timing of those posts is vital.

A Digital Media Strategy for Prolonged Absences

As a result of the research conducted over the past three years, the following digital media strategy has emerged as a vital, engaging, and sustainable strategy to engage people during prolonged absences. This is a very practical approach for ministry to use to engage people in effective manners at the current time. Listed below are the types of posts that are preferred and should be used in a weekly schedule.

Long form video – Long form video content is going to play a vital role in the ability of ministries to engage people during prolonged absences. First, during a time of prolonged absence, long form video format will be the only way in which people can engage with a full sermon. Further, the best platform to host and engage people with longform video format is YouTube. The research has shown that there is an engagement rate of over 6.2% on YouTube as opposed to 0.15% on Facebook. However, until such a time as the number of followers on YouTube exceeds that on Facebook, overall exposure will be higher on Facebook. As of now a strategy is being introduced to grow a YouTube presence of greater significance. Also, longform video format needs to be posted as soon as possible to the original air date of that content. For example, after the recording of a message on Sunday morning, that longform video format must be produced, edited, and posted no later than the morning of the following day. This strategy will be seen in the weekly post example.

Short form video – Short form video content was the surprising winner of the most engaging content that Bedrock Sarasota produced. The engagement rates of short form video content yielded the greatest amount of new follower engagement. It is believed that this trend will only continue to grow as the various digital media platforms continue to post this content. At the time of the writing of this paper, Instagram has the highest exposure to engagement rates, but

YouTube is growing. YouTube had a slightly higher rate of engagement but lower overall exposure. From the research conducted it is believed that this is the form of content that must be invested in the most.

Pictures – Pictures had a surprisingly high rate of engagement as related to the other forms of digital media genres. On Instagram, 17.2% of users engaged with the content while on Facebook, 1.5% of users engaged with a content. There is a stark difference between Instagram and Facebook in the total percentage of engagements, but the platforms outperformed on this genre when compared to the other genres of posts. People like to see and be a part of something real and those results show in the uptick in engagement of these platforms. Once again, Instagram had higher engagement rates while Facebook had greater overall exposure.

Graphics – The research found that graphics have a surprisingly low amount of engagement rate. Either platform did not exceed that of a 3% overall engagement rate. These are surprisingly low engagement rates with Instagram, once again, increasing the number of engagements and Facebook exceeding in overall exposure. What can be determined from this research is that graphics are necessary to post but they should not be the primary type of post a ministry is making if they want to engage people during prolonged absences.

Events – Events are some things that are necessary to advertise on social media platforms, but do not create large venues of engagement. It would be a mistake to use social media as a platform for event marketing in the future. While it is important to post events, this should not be the primary type of post if the purpose of a digital media strategy is engagement with those during prolonged absences. The research shows that Instagram had a higher rate of engagement although Facebook had a greater exposure overall.

Facebook – Facebook had overall much higher exposure rates than some of the other digital media platforms. Although they had a higher exposure rate, the amount of engagement on the platform was down significantly when compared to other platforms. This means that Facebook should be considered a place of exposure and not necessarily engagement. This means that the type of content that is posted there should be like that of other social media platforms, but the results that will be yielded are much lower. Facebook is vital to have as a digital media platform, but it does not yield the greatest engagement rates.

Instagram – Instagram, while owned by Facebook, yields much higher rates of engagement when it comes to digital media posts. If the goal is engagement with people during prolonged absences, there seems to be a higher rate of engagement on this platform across all genres of posts. Thus, Facebook would be used for general exposure, but effort should be made to increase Instagram followers as engagement is much higher.

YouTube – YouTube is growing in its importance within a digital media strategy for prolonged absences for ministries. At first, YouTube was mainly used for long form video content. The research showed that this is an excellent place for that genre of content and the trend will continue to grow. However, what was surprising from the research was the importance of YouTube for other types of social media digital content. YouTube seems to have involved to be more of a social platform. Ministries must engage with this growing trend of YouTube as a social platform and not just a media platform. Investment within this genre and social media platform must be continued.

Weekly Schedule Proposal

Before discussing a proposed weekly schedule, it must by noted that all content is edited

to the standards discussed in the research. A minimum 1080p is expected for all video content.

- Sunday – Pictures of the weekend service. Posted to Instagram and Facebook. This should be posted in 16:9 ratio with just the message. No worship.
- Monday – Sermon edited with Thumbnail posted to YouTube and published by 6 AM. Reposted to Facebook with YouTube link.
- Tuesday – Shorts from the sermon posted. These should be individually posted on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Add music to the post in the social media platform. Vertical video only.
- Wednesday – Midweek events post, Scripture or encouraging graphics. Posted individuals to Facebook and Instagram. Groups' post if available.
- Thursday – Another short posted (if available), Scripture reference or people post. Rotate this post each week between these three.
- Friday – Invite or reminder of services graphic on top of an actual picture post. Highlight a special volunteer to encourage and thank them.
- Saturday – Reminder post of services, a video invite or summary of service if church has Saturday night services.

Any special events or happenings need to be posted on top of these regularly scheduled posts

within 12 hours of the special event or occasion.

Chapter 5

Where Does the Research Go from Here?

There are numerous avenues of continued research because of this project. This project has looked at the social media and digital media strategies of Bedrock Church Sarasota from late 2019 to January 2023. This lead from within the pandemic, and out of it. One of the areas that must be considered for further research is the ever-evolving trends that take place within social media platforms. During these past three years, there has been a significant shift and not only within the type of platforms that are used most, but also the type of content that is pushed the most. Social media consumers have seen an increase in content in the short form video format as opposed to pictures or graphics. This was a significant shift that took place over that three and a half year term. Ministries must be able to identify and adapt to these changing trends within the different digital media platforms used to help engage those in their sphere of influence.

At the writing of this paper, social media platforms are all pushing vertical video that is between fifteen to thirty seconds long. The maximum amount of these short form videos is sixty seconds. This is a trend that has begun to take place in mid 2022 and will continue in the future. It is likely that this trend has started because of the rise of the social media platform TikTok. In order for ministries to continue to engage people with digital media strategies it is going to be vitally important for them to study and understand the trends in which social media platforms prefer. If churches can continue with the trends found on those platforms, and the content in which they are going to naturally push forward, they will have a much better likelihood of engaging the people that they are currently engaged with their ministry as well as those from outside of the ministry.

It is vitally important that churches also understand the rise of new platforms. Not only is it important to understand the trends in which these various platforms are engaging with, but they

should also be aware of the fast, and often viral, launches of new social media platforms. This is going to be especially important when trying to reach the younger generations. Each new generation has a platform that they tend to prefer and the rise of those platforms is cataclysmic. For instance, the boomer generation tends to prefer Facebook over other digital media platforms while millennials engage with Instagram at higher rates, and GenZ tends to interact with Snapchat and TikTok. There seems to be a trend that with each new generation there is a new platform in which they engage. If churches want to be on the forefront of engaging, not just people of a particular generation, but of all generations that are present within their sphere of influence, it is going to be vital that they understand the trend in the types of platforms that are used. This is going to be evolving all the time and something that ministries are going to need to be familiar with.

Further, not only do churches and ministries need to understand the launch and application of new platforms, but it is going to be vital that they understand, and use discernment, to engage with those platforms properly. Not all platforms are going to be conducive to engaging people in the way the church is called to do so.

To take this research a bit deeper, and to get a more robust understanding of the types of social media that engages people the most, more research into thumbnails and the efficacy of titles is going to be important for stronger engagement. The way in which contnent is packaged, not only in its look and presentation, but in the wording, and type of content that is used to advertise needs to be understood. It is going to become more and more important. This is due to the fact of saturation. Also, as the researcher has discovered with short form video and its takeover of social media platforms, the attention span of social media platform users should be considered. Therefore, creating engaging thumbnails and wording is going to increase the

likelihood of engagement with digital media content. Research into how to do this properly will be vital for the future of digital media strategies.

A good accompaniment to this research would be for readers to understand the powerful effect of SEO, and how to optimize the ability to reach people who are searching for different content on search engines. The use of Google and other search engines to get digital media content to new users is vital to understand when it comes to engagement and reaching new people. This research project did not focus on the use of SEO optimization to engage people, but that research would be vital to understand as an accompaniment to the research presented within this paper.

Sociology and the understanding of people's behavior is going to have a great impact on the type of media that ministries need to post during prolonged absences. Research is beginning to come out on the truest facts and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's psychological and social lives. When those effects are understood, in greater detail, it will give insight and guidance for ministries to engage people with some of their greatest needs. As of right now, early indicators show that social media and the use of digital media was in many ways positive for those who work in a time of prolonged absence. The entirety of the impact on people and their social and psychological lives is not fully understood. This will be especially true for the youngest generation affected by the COVID-19 pandemic especially when dealing with how the closing down of schools is going to have impacts on the social development of the youngest generations. To really understand how to use digital media to reach people with their greatest needs, further research is needed to understand the overall sociological and societal effects of prolonged absences.

Finally, one area of research that should be of interest in the future when related to the use of digital media strategies to reach people during prolonged absences is the use of the Metaverse. At this point in time the Metaverse is a quickly growing environment of online digital media content. This is an immersive Internet and relates to web 3.0. Further understanding of how to best implement and engage with digital media strategies in the Metaverse will be advantageous for churches. The Metaverse is something that ministries must understand in the future. The Metaverse will become a more significant and influential digital media platform as the future unfolds.

Comparatives to Previous Research

The research conducted in this paper is an expansion of research that has been done previously with many other contacts. The uniqueness of this research is that it focuses on the importance of these digital media strategies during a season of prolonged absence to continue the engagement of individuals from within a particular ministry and outside of the ministry. It is believed that this is a unique context and one that must be focused on in the future, as there may be more seasons to come of prolonged absences, and a digital media strategy will be paramount to the success and further growth of ministries.

Another area of uniqueness to this ministry is the use of short form video content to help reach people. This content is being pushed by social media platforms more and more at the current time and that its importance to engagement is somewhat untested but profound. The research in this area of digital media strategies is important for the future growth and implementation of this digital media genre in ministry contexts. This gives this current research

and uniqueness within the genre of social media postings and engagement in the current ministry context that church leaders find themselves in and will continue to be in in the future.

Further uniqueness to this data is that of not only view accumulation but overall engagement with the media itself. The research performed gives real world engagement data to the ministry of Bedrock Sarasota.

Findings

From the implementation of this research numerous findings were discovered. First, the overall exposure in the proliferation of Facebook seems to be waning in the current ministry context. There is a large amount of exposure on Facebook for mini ministries. It does not necessarily equate to new conversion of followers or engagement with the digital media strategy. This is a significant shift from previous years of digital media content. There has been an influx and transition to Instagram and YouTube as more engaging digital media platforms for social media posts. This is vitally important to understand when it comes to the strategy of engagement for prolonged absences. This shift should change and affect the way in which ministries engage in digital media strategies.

In addition to the weaning of Facebook, in the rise of other digital media platforms, this research also shared the importance of video format within the social media content. The shift to short form video content on social media platforms has grown increasingly over the past few years. This is a significant shift from previous social media posts. Many times, pictures and graphics were of high value, and video was thought of in the long form format. Now, due to the proliferation of Instagram and especially TikTok in society's current culture, the rise of short form video formats is meteoric in the current ministry context.

Engagement is something that is extremely hard to come by when it comes to social media posts. Previously, it was believed that "views" were a form of engagement, but that is not necessarily true. Views are simply that, a person viewing a particular digital media post. What was revealed from this research is grounded in the fact that engagement is much more difficult to come by. Ministries will need to be extremely strategic in the way in which they utilize social media to garner a sense of engagement and belonginess. Previously, it seems that social media was something that many churches had because they needed to, but it was not necessarily viewed as a tool to truly engage people. The COVID-19 pandemic showed ministries the necessity and gift that social media can provide when it comes to engagement with people. How to really engage people during these prolonged absences was profound from this research. It's not just simply making digital media posts in the hope that engagement is occurring but what type of posts and where to make those posts is vital to their success when it comes to engagement on digital media platforms.

Further, in the current context, not all digital media platforms are created equal. There are seasons in which certain social media platforms will be prominent, and there will be a season where they die. This is happening at an exponentially fast rate when it comes to a digital media strategy for prolonged absences. The approach of "if it's not broken, don't fix it" will not work when it comes to a digital media strategy. The mindset that must be adopted is innovation and striving towards what is new and engaging. This is something that is foreign to many ministries in churches, as has been seen throughout history. The modern church must use digital media and a digital media strategy to engage people in the age in which they are living in. Adaptation and progress are going to be vitally important in this environment. Also, the mindset that somehow an online digital media presence is not necessary or preferred must subside.

For ministries to engage in the future, the online digital media presence needs to be seen as equally as important as the physical gathering. This will be especially true during prolonged absences. An online digital media presence and a strategy to engage that world must be thought of in additional context. To truly engage people, the church must contextualize the gospel and engagement to reach people in their spheres of influence. It is no longer optional or just a para ministry of the church. This is part of the engagement of the church of the future and churches that adapt and create in reasonable and specific strategies to reach people on these platforms will be successful in the future.

Who Is This For?

The online digital media strategy as proposed in this paper is for any ministry that wants to try to engage people through online platforms. This will be especially helpful during times of prolonged absences, and if implemented before a prolonged absence, will help keep engagement going during those seasons. Any ministry that wants to continue to impact people for the kingdom of God, during seasons of prolonged absences, must adopt a digital media strategy as seen in this paper. It is firmly believed that if adopted this strategy will help engage people during these seasons of physical absence. This is not a strategy to simply engage young people within a ministry context. Many people's lives have moved into the online realm, and therefore more people, from multiple ethnic groups and age groups, are engaging with online digital content. This makes an online digital media strategy essential for ministries that want to engage people in the future.

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