



# Effectiveness of Using Social Media for Preaching During Covid-19 Lockdown

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## Abstract

This study explored the use of social media as an approach to understand its effectiveness in preaching the Christian gospel by church leaders during the pandemic lockdown implemented in many countries across the world. In the technologically driven world of today, social networking sites have turned out to be an avenue where people extend their interactions by sharing their personal experiences and opinions to a wider audience. Social media (SM) is defined as “the various electronic tools, technologies, and applications that facilitate interactive communication and content exchange, allowing the user to move back and forth easily between the roles of the audience and content producers” (Hysenlika, 2012: 3). The term social media is fast becoming such an integral part of everyday life, as well as business operations, that its use has now become an everyday term for launching products, developing consumer loyalty and sharing news. It is recommended that churches that wish to stay connected and evangelize need to promote the use of and purchase relevant equipment. To be prepared, this requires identifying or recruiting talents and also the offering of rigorous training on being savvy on the ins and outs of technology use. The purpose of adopting an innovation needs to be clarified, well defined and aligned with the vision and mission of the organisation as well as its set goals. Sustenance for the future will require support for the team as they work to meet, plan, strategize, and brainstorm on trends to promote the gospel.

**Keywords:** Social media, technology, innovation, interactive communication, content.

## Introduction

The tools and approaches for communicating with people have tremendously changed greatly with the emergence of social media (Paquette, 2013). Social media platforms as means of communication to reach a wide audience have come to stay and some pastors of modern churches and ministries have done so well in taking advantage of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. However, many churches are still either hesitant to use social media or are using it poorly and not seeing any positive results (Howe, 2017). As the pervasiveness of social media grows in the twenty-first century, it would be “unwise to continue to ignore your church’s social media strategy and presence” (Howe, 2017). Just like any other organisation such as the church, using social media as an alternative platform to preach the gospel amid the coronavirus pandemic while observing social distancing is appreciated.

Many churches have resorted to using social media to continue preaching to their congregations. For the church to effectively use various platforms, social media needs planning (a strategy), people (someone in charge), and a purpose (measurable goals) to be effective (Edmondson, 2017). Those are some of the key strategies that will help the church engage both members and guests on social media. It is noted that as the omnipresence of social media grows, it would be imprudent to continue to ignore your church’s social media strategy and presence (Appel *et al.* 2020). This study looked at some of the arguments and counterarguments about the effective use of various social media platforms that an organization such as the church uses in preaching amid the pandemic of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdown.



## Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research method with a systematic document analysis, which allows researchers to study by basically consulting and making sense of written materials that are available either in the public or private domain. Sileyew (2019) noted that there are several approaches used in research as method and design. The research approach assists the researcher in reaching the research findings. This method permits “researchers to access various literature and determine the relevance of the documents that they consult based on their significance to the study” (Enaifoghe, 2020: 114). In this study, it is must be noted that various organisations including the church use media platforms such as Twitter to spread the gospel and share information; such information may include emergency procedures, upcoming events, live feed, and online streaming of church events for congregants.

This study used a survey methodology to collect data and reviewed literature relevant to the research. Systematic content analysis was used to analyse collected data. Literature was reviewed from different domains. To add credence to the information retrieved from various domains, the study used structured questionnaires to collect data on the topic under study. Preliminary data from the field proposed that the use of social media was becoming a potent addition to social organisational communicators’ toolkit. One of the leading assumptions and arguments of this study is that there is a paucity of peer-reviewed scholarship that has tested the use of social media as an intervention for desired effects.

## Literature Review

The conceptual literature review on the area of social media as a means of communication has become very popular in the area of communication in today’s society. That being said, many people are now questioning the reliability and effectiveness of using social media as a means of communication; they wonder if its use for communication is more positive or more negative (Harris & Charles, 2011). Largely, one needs to see both the pros and cons that are associated with social media communication and other aspects related to it, both good and bad. To begin with, we need to look at the issue of how social media affects the closeness of our society’s relationships. Many scholars have debated this issue many times with different people making efforts to determine whether or not the use of social media for communication and sharing information brings users closer (Jamal, 2012; Harris & Charles, 2011; Gonzalez, 2010; Kevin, Graham & Temple, 2011), or perhaps make people more distant from one another (Di Pietro & Pantano, 2012).

One of the compelling arguments is that using social media platforms for communication brings users closer and there are even certain research studies whose results seem to reflect that belief (Derania & Naidu, 2015). A study conducted by The University of Texas at Austin illustrates the results which suggest the use of social media strengthens society’s social ties (Wilson, Gosling & Graham, 2012). Young (2011) noted that “the phenomenal growth of Web 2.0 technologies has given a voice to the masses”, and one predominantly successful site of such platform is Facebook. The scholar further noted that Facebook was launched in February 2004 enabling students of Harvard University to communicate online. As this study focuses on the effectiveness of various social media as a toolkit for communication worldwide, it looked at the acceptability of social media by modern churches as a case study.

Social media as a communication platform can be an effective tool in conveying information and in describing current issues to the targeted public audience. Various kinds of social media play different roles but with one main purpose, which is to spread information on an urgent basis and share it with a wide range of people (Derania & Naidu, 2015). It is vital to understand how to share information strategically via social media to control the information shared online with other people. With the arrival of coronavirus also known as COVID-19, many churches have adopted the use of social media to preach the word of God (Howe, 2017). There are



several ways to leverage the impact of social media, using online content, photography and more to reach their audience (Di Pietro & Pantano, 2012).

This paper explored the effectiveness of using social media as a way of communication by churches in preaching during COVID-19 lockdown. The term ‘social media’ referred to several web-based applications through which individual users interact with one another. The interactivity is what distinguishes social networking sites from traditional or static websites. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2012: 11) view social media applications as encouraging “users to share their personal experiences, opinions, knowledge, and maybe share their location sometimes”. These social connections can contribute to a sense of engagement or loyalty among other social media users. Jamal (2012) argued that the impact of social media (SM) and social network services are undeniable. The scholar further noted that “[s]ocial web applications are particularly so pervasive that finding innovative ways to incorporate them into our everyday lives for profit or educational use is a constant activity for some” (Jamal, 2012: 22).

This study identifies the best practices that are acknowledged in scholarly literature for effective use of social media platform as a convenient medium of communication, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights the collective means to improving the use of social media and web tools. Through a broad conceptual literature review, this study demonstrates how an effective interaction synergy could be established, with the use of various social networking media for online church supportable user engagement. Few data indicate “not only that more and more Canadians are using the internet at home in their daily lives, for a review of internet and social media usage trends” (Statistics Canada, 2010a), but that they are “engaging in an ever more diverse array of online activities” (Lewis, 2010: 4). These undertakings ultimately reflect the increasing integration of what is known as online tools into the Canadians’ personal and professional lives, with the shift from static “Web 1.0” platforms to the extremely dynamic, interactive, and shared qualities of Web 2.0 (Statistics Canada, 2010b).

In addition, Leger Marketing Inc. (2016) states that the evidence of the increasing popularity of online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, suggests that organizations like the church can develop feelings of trust and devotion to the use of social media. Derani and Naidu (2015) articulated that such developments are already creating extensive awareness in the use of Web 2.0 and the use of social media platforms in research, policy and practice. The specific limits and definition of these terms, according to Statistics Canada (2010c), are still in the embryonic state within the available literature.

As the number, diversity, and inter-operability of new web-based and mobile platforms continue to proliferate, the characteristics and subcategories denoted by the term “social media” will need to be further disaggregated and refined (Derani & Naidu, 2015).

The observational studies on the area of the study show an abundance of both informal social conversations related to public issues and organized social activities on leading social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook.

The quality of information available to users on these platforms is highly variable raising some concerns that social media users are exposed to unopposed viewpoints that counter the core public (Muzee & Enaifoghe, 2020: 87).

Social media is presently being utilized by different public organizations, including health, business, government institutions (the church for sharing information and ministration), as a broadcasting platform to amplify messages from traditional media sources (Derania & Naidu, 2015). Few examples of such include the radio, television, print media, and “an entirely new way of collaborating and co-creating content with target audiences” (Derania & Naidu, 2015).



Contemporary organizations have had to acclimatise their communication strategies to integrate user-created content and feedback (Gáti & Markos-Kujbus, 2012).

The process of engaging users to co-create content, to rate, rank and comment on communications, more so than the resulting message, is increasingly perceived to give a heightened authenticity to messages, improving trust in, and building users' relationships with, organizations (Welsh & Wright, 2010: 23).

The use of social media, unlike the traditional media campaigns, provides innovative opportunities to establish and interject public concern messaging into daily online conversations in Uganda (Muzee & Enaifoghe, 2020: 87). Embracing social media as tools for communication by leading public organizations such as church ministry reflects that these tools are increasingly necessary to reach demographics that are abandoning traditional broadcast technologies. The traditional broadcast technologies such as telephones, television, for the teens, or a substantial share of the public are speedily transforming the method in which they interact with authorities. Social media have become an important part of reaching the world and is a great place to start a virtual ministry due to the pandemic situation around the world.

To address the main objective of the study, it is important to understand what role does social media plays during the COVID-19 crisis? Today, social media as means of communication has transformed the way people interact with one another in modern society, using different platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram (Edmondson, 2017). These various platforms have become primary sources of information around the world (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). Kristine de Valck (2018) argued that social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are also vehicles for fake news and disinformation. During a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the question is how should social media be mastered and effectively employed in a responsible approach? Appel *et al.* (2020), argued that social media provide churches with an incredible opportunity that helps them reach more audiences and construct deeper, more meaningful and expressive connections with many individuals in the pew.

However, when you incorporate the various means in which churches may use it, and the challenges that surround what to post, many churches are seen to be hesitant to use social media as tools (Appel *et al.*, 2020). Perhaps they are using social media platforms inadequately and not seeing any positive results.

Social media provides churches with an incredible opportunity to reach more people and create deeper, more meaningful connections with people in the pew. But, when you combine the various ways churches can use it and challenges around what to post, many churches are still either hesitant to use social media or are using it poorly and not seeing any positive results (Chu, 2011).

The question is how do you use social media effectively for the benefit of ministration or preaching? According to Chi (2011), based on how some churches have been effectively using social media before the advent of COVID-19 and the consequent lockdown, there are certain rules to help guide one's strategy. Research shows that social media provide an incredible opportunity for church leaders to reach more people and thereby creating deeper, more evocative connections with congregants in the pew (Gonzalez, 2010); this is more strategic. The strategy to be adopted when choosing to use social media platforms as a means of communication include developing a social media policy. Unfortunately, a scholar noted that as a result of the world that we live in, it is important for churches to become proactive about "protecting their ministry by developing a social media policy" (Chu, 2011: 2). In developing a social media policy, the church must define what is considered appropriate to post and how it will be handled in the case of any negative state on the front end, which is critical.



Just like everything else that the church does, adopting a social media platform is simply seen as another tool to help people cultivate a better relationship and be closer to Jesus. Using a social media platform effectively in preaching the gospel of Christ is not a silver bullet (Gould, 2015). Nonetheless, when a church decides to adopt a social media platform as a strategy to stay connected with the members of the congregation, even beyond COVID-19, it will be surprised at how it can help reach more people outside. This will automatically increase engagement in the community, and therefore lead people deeper in their commitment and have a deeper relationship with Christ. How does social media influence an organization like the church? Effectively using social media can have a major influence over an organization and its culture.

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come (Matthew 24:14)

One of the ways the organisations are influenced by social media is by sharing positive news – in other organisations, employees can use social media as tools to share positive news. Kihl (2018) believes that the recent announcement that Apple (electronic gadget company) is now a trillion-dollar company was shared via social media. Sharing positive news as such, even in the church, can help impact the culture of the church or organisation by building a bigger brand and showcasing a better outlook of the organisation as a way to effectively use social media for preaching too.

### **The Importance of Using Social Media as a Tool in preaching the Gospel**

To effectively use a social media platform as a tool in preaching is seen as playing a key role especially in reaching out to a larger audience. It is vital to know how to manage digital communication in a local church. A scholar states that it is also important to stay current with current trends because the rapidly changing “world of social media can seem like an overwhelming task” (Gould, 2015). It is vital to identify the social medium as a platform that makes sense for your church community. The question is how can one choose the platform that is an effective tool for the church? Meredith Gould (a veteran social media expert, author, and sociologist) has helped answer the above question and more in her best-selling book *The Social Media Gospel*. Gould attempted to provide an easy-to-understand, step-by-step guide to the digital ministry for those wishing to embrace new technologies to build community and deepen faith.

According to Goodread (2015), Gould delivers new content with humour, helpful tips, and counsel anchored in practical experience. The key focus on the topics is effective church communication such as “*Building and ministering to online communities; Privacy and self-disclosure in the digital age; Integrating communications across digital platforms; Managing and monitoring social media; Faith storytelling with visual social media and; Hashtag development and live-tweeting*”. Kyle Matthew Oliver, who is a digital missionary, acknowledged that Gould Meredith’s book is very straightforward with the themes: “Church is more than a building, online life mirrors offline life, strategic thinking guide’s wise decisions”.

The gift of *The Social Media Gospel* lies in Meredith's frank and accessible advice for putting those principles to work in a ministry landscape we can all find overwhelming (Kyle Matthew Oliver).

In choosing the right social media platform, it must be noted that various types of social media play different roles but with one main purpose which is to disseminate information and share it with a wide range of people. In the past two years, many church visitors have found vital information on the church’s website before their visit. This demonstrates how social media can be used to create the right positive image and influence people’s decisions. Having an online presence includes using other social media platforms, which is a major draw for many guests, second only to personal invitations (LaGuardia, 2015). The scholar further noted that “if that is the case, then it only stands to reason that churches, especially those concerned about



fulfilling Jesus' Great Commission, need to think intentionally and "missionally" about the use of social media" (LaGuardia, 2015: 1).

The importance of adopting the use of social media is not restricted to the church leadership or administration alone. Meredith Gould (2013), the author of "*The Social Media Gospel*," confirmed that adopting effective social media is a church-wide approach that has to do with a church's philosophy of ministry. This simply implies that every person in the church should be able to get involved and think critically about how social media could help harness the power of evangelism and sharing testimonies in a world that has entered the digital age - the fourth industrial transformation of technologies. The foreword of Gould's book states:

In many ways, the church is blazing new paths with social media. Now is the time to do a new thing, to proclaim God's word in new and exciting ways. It is good to read about social media; it is good to think about how you're going to move forward. Sooner or later the time will come when you just have to take the plunge. "The Social Media Gospel" will help you. (Gould, 2013: 3)

LaGuardia (2015:1) argued that if the modern church is teaching that each person is a minister, with the gift of sharing the Gospel, it then means that the use of social media should come under the calling to the ministry of the lordship of Christ. To prevent posting irrelevant or damaging messages, the church leadership or elders should put social media policy in place that, no word should be published online through social media about the church without some level of spiritual scrutiny. There are several models for social media usage, according to LaGuardia (2015:2). These models could be the church's guide for Christians on the appropriate use of online communication. In this effect, this will help the church in general (including members) to appropriately make good use of social media effectively in preaching the gospel.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This article adopted the uses and gratification theory in exploring the effectiveness of using social media for preaching during COVID-19 lockdown. The uses and gratification theory argues for the effects of using media on people. The theory explains how people use media for their personal need and thereby get satisfied when their needs are achieved (Mehrad & Tajer, 2016). This simply implies that the theory sustains the argument as to what people do with media other than what media does to people. The approach to understanding why and how people dynamically seek out explicit media to satisfy specific needs is known as the uses and gratifications theory (UGT). Vinney (2019) argued that UGT is an audience-centred approach that helps understand mass communication. Deviating from new media effect theories which raise the question of what media do to people, while UGT asks the question of what people do with media? (Grellhesl & Narissra, 2012).

This article attempts to evaluate the connection by applying the uses and gratification theory to understand how effective using social media for preaching during COVID-19 lockdown is. This communication concept is positivistic in its methodology, which is constructed in the socio-psychological communication practice, as it focuses on communication at the mass media scale (Severin, 2000). The theory discusses how media users purposefully choose a certain media platform that will satisfy their given needs and thereby allowing them to further enhance their knowledge, relaxation, social interactions or companionship as well as a diversion for them (McQuail, 2010). The theory helps us to understand the assumption that members of the audience are not just passive consumers of media. The audience, rather, has the power to control their media consumption, while assuming an active role in construing and integrating the use of media into their own lives.

In contrast to other theoretical perspectives, the uses and gratification theory states that the audiences are responsible for selecting specific media to meet their needs as well as their necessities to achieve gratification. According to Vinney (2019), the uses and gratifications



theory emphasises that people use media to gratify their specific desires and needs. Contrary to many other media theories that perceive media users as passive, uses and gratifications perceive users to be active agents who have control over their media consumption. Krcmar (2017) states that the uses and gratifications method asks rudimentary questions regarding why people choose the media, including their motives for those choices, for instance, to learn and to pass time. The choices concerning the medium itself and the specific media content. As such, the members of the audience are observed to be engaged and active users. The key takeaways of the uses of gratifications theory are that gratifications characterize people as both active and motivated in selecting the media they choose to consume.

Furthermore, the theory ultimately relies on two ideologies, which include the media users as active in their selection of the particular media they consume, and that they are consciously aware of their apparent reasons for selecting diverse media options (Vinney, 2019). The grander control and choice is brought about by the introduction of new media, which has opened up innovative opportunities for uses and gratifications. The pandemic has motivated greater exploration in research which has led to the adoption of media platforms as innovation of new gratifications, particularly with regards to social media. The uses and gratifications research is typically focused on the satisfactions media users sought. Vinney (2019) states that as the introduction of media technologies continue to proliferate, research on uses and gratifications theory has become more imperative than ever before in understanding people’s drives for selecting media and the fulfilments they get out of it. Taken together, “...uses and gratifications theory stresses the power of the individual over the power of the media” (Vinney, 2019).

### Discussion of findings

This study explored the effectiveness of using social media to preach the gospel by church leaders, due to the raging global pandemic. The situation with the outbreak of coronavirus or COVID-19 in Wuhan, China and the consequent spread of coronavirus in countries led many state governments to implement total lockdown while observing social distancing. Others experienced partial economic lockdown; many businesses were forced to close down while others were getting back to the gradual reopening of economic activities. Many organisations including churches resolved to use media platforms to stay connected with their members and carry on preaching the gospel. A survey was conducted through the distribution of structured questionnaires; the findings are analysed in the next sections.

**Table 1. Innovations value**

How effective are these innovations?	Should these innovations be sustained for the future?	Are these innovations inclusive?
About 80% of the respondents indicated that the use of social media is largely effective as means of communication and preaching by the church amid the coronavirus pandemic. About 20 % believe that it is ineffective.	About 68% of the people indicated that the adoption of innovative means to stay connected to the people while preaching amid coronavirus pandemic is not sustainable for the future, while 32% of the respondents believe that it is sustainable going forward.	Up to 90% of the respondents indicated that the use of social media is largely not inclusive due to the economic and financial capability of every individual. Many church members are poor and cannot afford it. The remaining 10% are hopeful that the new normal will gradually force everyone to be on board.

This research was meant to understand the effectiveness of the use of social media platform as a means of communication during the pandemic lockdown. In the technologically driven world of today, social networking sites have turned out to be an avenue where people extend their interactions by sharing their personal experiences and opinions to a wider range of audience.



## How Effective are these Innovations?

Innovation is defined as the introduction of something new and without the introduction of new forms of technology for communication (innovation), there is not anything new, and without anything new, there will be no development and advancement. If an organization such as the church and religious leaders are not making any progress by reaching out to their members, it is simply seen not to be making progress and stay relevant amid COVID-19. These organizations like the church in this context often work with other individual organizations, not disregarding that it can sometimes be very challenging to fully understand the apparent impact of innovation in the society at large. The majority of the participants indicated that in the past, most people ignored these innovations as it was easy to go and have a conversation with someone but with the COVID-19 pandemic, we are now forced to use technology innovation to communicate.

The overall purpose of the survey was to understand and explore how social media has been used to fill the space of church services amid the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Social media such as Zoom, WhatsApp recorded sermonettes, YouTube etc. are circulated to fill in these gaps created by social distancing. Some respondents indicated that “as more and more people use various forms of technologies as the innovation it will be an everyday life, remember telegram, analogue telephones, cell phone, and now people are using the application to chat and meeting rooms are offered to the public for free”. One respondent stated:

It is hard to tell; most young people are already using these innovations but the older Generation still finding it hard to pick these streaming messages. Most find it difficult to connect to these media services due to Socio-Economic Challenges, i.e. cost of Data. These are very effective to those who have been using these innovations daily before.

It is further noted how new smart televisions (TVs) now have these applications; you do not need a computer for this. The findings from respondents about the use of social media such as WhatsApp and email to distribute the questionnaires for a survey show how diverse different groups are.

## Should these innovations be sustained for the future?

It is important to be aware that the virtual church is currently taking off across social conferences and beyond. Many congregations are forced to go on self-exile from their sanctuaries by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic around the world. Churches are advised to practice social distancing and have no contact meetings. However, some churches have now preferred the term “physical distancing” while trying to maintain social ties online with their congregations. One respondent indicated that:

Considering what the world is facing today, I would say that this is going to be the new norm moving forward. Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, the world was moving towards the fourth industrial revolution, rather it was being introduced.

Technologies are emerging and affecting our lives in ways that indicate we are at the beginning of a new era that builds and extends the impact of digitization in new and unanticipated ways. In the near future, you will be able to reach the elderly, and also people who are physically challenged.

The above findings indicate that the use of social media is sustainable, based on the fact that emerging technologies are already affecting people’s lives in many ways. The adoption of these emerging technologies indicates that we are at the beginning of a new era. This new era which is sometimes referred to as the new normal builds and extends the impact of digitization in new and unanticipated ways. It is important to choose the right social media



platform as indicated by LaGuardia (2015), who says one must be aware that various types of social media play different roles but with one main purpose. The main purpose is to disseminate information and share it with a wide range of people. In the past two years before the arrival of the new normal: COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing, many church visitors had found vital information on some churches' websites before their visit.

This shows how imperative social media can be used to create the right positive image and influence people's decisions. Having an online presence includes using other social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which is a major draw for many guests, second only to personal invitations (LaGuardia, 2015). What many people say to God in their benedictions, due to no contact or physical meetings, they find themselves saying it to each other, such as: *"As we leave this place but never your presence..."*. Indeed, more pastors and church members are present with and for one another online via free conference calls and affordable video-conferencing and live streaming options. Nevertheless, some respondents believe that the use of social media to connect to church meetings online is not sustainable.

I do not see sustainability as it has financial implications for internet connectivity. We need funds and to receive communion. Lastly, I think during the lockdown, Govt should have put church attendance regulations in place like those of attending funerals.

Another respondent indicated that the people who make up the church need to be able to fellowship with one another in a physical environment where they exercise the act of touching while communing with each other;

I don't think so, church communities and congregants require physical touch and warm close love, the current setup, taking forward will create distance from congregants.

The list of options of having online meeting include the use of Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts, Facebook Live, YouTube, Vimeo and so on. All social media applications require the use of mobile data to connect. It, therefore, confirms the above statement that using social media applications has a cost implication.

Many churches use virtual technology for worship, Bible study, devotions, prayer and church meetings. It is noted that these activities could be more essential during the pandemic. These are trying times of anxiety, social distancing or separation from everyone and possible financial weakening in many households. There are equally more churches that are also trying to avert financial debility by turning to online giving. Some churches are using a variety of mobile apps, to sustain their weekly giving.

They are learning how to use and convince tradition-bound members to use Tithe-ly, Venmo, Vanco, PayPal and other giving apps, as well as virtual banking and text-to-give solutions.

Furthermore, the church is increasing as online instructions are given to church leaders to help them start and learn broad possibilities of using online innovative technologies. These comprise of how to resourcefully improve the presentation of their online sermons as well as Bible lessons. New possibilities have become ostensible as quite a several growing viewers and callers hook up and join the online service through live streaming or Zoom worship service or Bible study. Even some from afar often connect which exceeds the number of people who would attend these gatherings onsite. A respondent indicated that:

I have created a WhatsApp group for those who are members of other church denominations who always request the sermons that I send to my congregants. It means the number of participants is increasing daily as they share the message.



While some people find the use of social media users to connect with people even outside their church group, they see it satisfying their uses of various application platforms. Another respondent said:

It also allows people to raise questions and share their views. It is also a learning process for people who never used these gadgets before. You can even pray for people while sitting at home. I hope I will continue to use this even after the lockdown is lifted. For me, they are very useful.

The above findings support what Institute of Business Ethics (IBE) (2019: 1), indicating that "social media has become widespread in today's society and is used in ways that shape politics, business, innovation and much more". It provides "an easy platform where organisations and individuals can share news, opinions and maintain contact easily" (IBE, 2019). Social media gave everyone a voice (Appel et al., 2020). "On the other hand, it also gave everyone a voice" (Brian, 2017). Young (2011) noted "the phenomenal growth of Web 2.0 technologies that have given a voice to the masses", and one predominantly successful site of such platform is Facebook. Facebook was launched in February 2004 enabling students of Harvard University to communicate online. More so, viewers often use the text-chat feature to engage by offering comments and questions. And if they are told about the church's online giving portal, many generously use it to donate to its ministry, a practical example is the Tindley Temple UMC in Philadelphia:

The church has live-streamed its Sunday worship services and Monday evening Bible studies for several years received a dramatic increase in viewers and donations on March 22 and 23. The Rev. Robert Johnson, the pastor, also received numerous chat greetings from people he has known throughout his 27 years in pastoral ministry (Alexis, 2019).

### **Are these innovations inclusive?**

The biggest challenge that is associated with these innovations is that they are not often inclusive. Findings show that some of the church members do not have access to electronic gadgets to stay connected to online meetings during the pandemic lockdown. It was indicated that some members within the church congregation cannot afford mobile data; so it is difficult to state that using social media platform is sustainable and inclusive. People who are regarded as poor or low-income earners are left out. A respondent indicated that:

Life will never be the same again beyond Covid 19, we will all be forced to have gadgets, and data, somewhere the government will have to subsidise some of these instruments as they will be enablers going forward.

More findings show that "the 4th Industrial Revolution is here and forced on us". It is imperative to sustain them while finding alternatives for the elderly congregants. There is a need to address the inclusiveness of these new technologies as means by which church leaders communicate and spread the word amid coronavirus pandemic. One respondent noted:

No, they don't cover everybody especially the early ones who are not technology-wise and those who can't afford data. And a lot of things from the Service are being cut off to save time and money. Definitely no, not all Congregants have access to the devices, those who have access might not have data.

The above findings contradict the study conducted by The University of Texas at Austin, which illustrates that the use of social media helps to strengthen society's social ties (Wilson, Gosling & Graham, 2012). In times of national or international crises, our faith is tested. At the same time, though, an opportunity presents itself where those who are attending church but



wavering or those who are not regular attendees, find themselves in a desperate need and search for God. One respondent commented:

Not really main audience presently are the young generations and older generation are unable to use WhatsApp they depend on phone and messages.

The church is aware that many of its members may be at different spiritual “levels” of technological awareness, but as a connected family, they support each of their brothers and sisters through prayer and words of encouragement (Alexis, 2019).

The question is when those opportunities present themselves and the standard options to drive to church and fellowship are removed by said crisis, how can your church quickly adapt and implement an appropriate strategy to ensure you are shining the light of hope to those who may find themselves more rooted in the cave of despair?

The First UMC Palmyra began “live-casting” with its services through Facebook Live “[w]hile we are still perfecting the system, we were able to share our worship with many people,” - Rev. Jim Anderman (*lead pastor of UMC Palmyra*).

Our first week of services was viewed by over 1,000 people.... That means more people watched on Sunday than our average attendance.

We will continue to Livestream our services so that even after the crisis has passed the unwillingly absent will be able to participate from afar.” The church, like many others, plans to use Zoom video-conferencing for small group gatherings also.

The Rev. Lorelei Toombs, the pastor of *Willow Grove UMC*, gathered and shared a partial list of churches that have been live streaming worship services for a while.

You can find them and others on our website’s Coronavirus Ministry Response page. Please send us your church’s Livestream or videoconferencing worship information, so we can add it to our roster.

No doubt all of this new connectivity will change and expand the ways many churches do church long after this pandemic crisis ends (Alexis, 2019: 2).

It is a virtual silver lining around the dark, or the threatening cloud that COVID-19 has cast over us. Some online sources are available to help church leaders take their worship and other forms of gatherings from their now-empty sanctuaries into the world. Findings show that inclusiveness is inevitable. A respondent indicated that

Digital technology fails where we take matters for granted and not do the two above paragraphs. This is when we assume that everyone is savvy or the Youth will do it. Or it can be left for experts. All people in the community OUGHT to be trained in the technology. Some services and meetings, such as Bible Study Group, Faith Sharing etc. will be virtual.

Whether people join at home or wherever they must be able to use the zoom or any other platform. As the church community has been exposed by COVID-19, congregants have been thrown at the deep end unprepared. They still are not ready as they wait for the lockdown to be scaled down. On the other hand, the church is where it is because of the complacency of inward-looking. A respondent noted that

we have cared about those that come every Sunday to the church, now as we plan for Reaching out, we need to beware how globalized the field of the mission is: plural religiously and none, secular, irreligious, un-churched, atheist.



There are diverse languages, cultures, traditions, sexuality and many more. So, if you are reaching out effectively, (1) as you gain experience, you are not only sustaining but you keep making it better and better; (2) and because you set out realizing the need to be inclusive, (3) as you reach as many people, the response may be equally good and growing (maybe even varied) beyond your imagination.

This means, in addition, that one must keep realigning to meet new arising needs; re-imagining strategy; and re-configuring much better ways to use and grow your Digi-Tech. Those with talents of innovation may come out to suggest and test skills to innovate even further. If you are open-minded, your community may be wide but interconnected. Is it not how it should be, have the world at the fingertips?

### **Concluding Remarks**

The study explored how effective the use of social media can be amid the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown in the preaching of the gospel by church leaders. The lockdown that was implemented early in 2020 in many countries across the world has many implications on the economies of many nations, individual households and the way communication and meetings are organized. The COVID-19 crisis revealed individuals', communities', and economies' weaknesses, necessitating a rethinking of how economic and social practises are organised. The situation necessitates robust solutions focused on unity, cooperation, and accountability. While observing social distancing, many organisations such as churches have developed different virtual platforms such as Zoom to stay connected to the church members. In the technologically driven world of today, social networking sites have turned out to be an avenue where people can extend their interactions, by sharing their personal experiences and opinions to a wider range of audience. The effectiveness of the use of new technologies and innovations depends on the church seizing the opportunity with both hands and beginning to invest in it accordingly.

It is recommended that churches that wish to stay connected and spread the word would need to upgrade to, and be prepared, to identify or recruit talents, that can and offer rigorous training on being savvy on the ins and outs of the technology. The purpose of adopting these innovations would have been clarified, well defined and aligned with the vision and mission of the organisation as well as set goals.

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