Effectiveness of WhatsApp homiletics in the era of COVID-19 in South Africa

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Abstract

A recent experience, that of the lockdown due to the emergence of COVID-19 in South Africa, resulted in religious groupings, such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity, among others, turning to social media (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and YouTube, among others) as a significant means of communication, social interaction, as well as religious teaching. Due to space constraints, this discussion is limited to the homiletics of the Christian church, and does not include religions such as Judaism and Islam. As a precautionary measure against COVID-19, many churches used WhatsApp groups to reach out to their diverse membership in various demographic locations. The present study problematises the emergence of WhatsApp as a critical platform to disseminate gospel-related material; this platform presents material in a more fashionable form, and was not utilised much before the advent of COVID-19. The study discusses homiletics through WhatsApp in view of the following three main aims: (1) To demonstrate that COVID-19 is a reality and the lockdown was a necessary 'evil' to reduce its impact, (2) To reveal that the WhatsApp platform developed the preachers' sermon delivery skills without the personal presence of congregants, which is atypical of a conventional church gathering, and (3) To show that the WhatsApp group platform played a key role in church members accessing sermonettes, Bible teachings and prayer sessions, from the comfort of their homes. The research applied qualitative content analysis (thematic analysis), which examined content and themes of recorded human communications; responses were solicited from participants through email conversations. In addition, the study employed the so-called uses and gratification theory to demonstrate that users do derive some gratification from WhatsApp homiletics.

Keywords: Church; Content analysis; COVID-19; Effectiveness; Homiletics; Lockdown; Uses and gratification theory; WhatsApp

Introduction

A situation report by the World Health Organization (WHO 2020) reveals that, 'The first human case of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus causing COVID-19, subsequently named SARS-CoV-2, were first reported by officials in Wuhan City, China, in December 2019'. The coronavirus, then, spread throughout the world. In South Africa, the first cases of COVID-19 were reported between the end of February and March 2020 (South African Department of Health, 2020). A nationwide state of disaster was declared and it was not long before lockdown restrictions were implemented and enforced. During this time, activities in the country came to a standstill: factories, wholesalers, supermarkets, the transport system as a whole (e.g. commuter omnibuses), and schools, among other institutions, were either partially closed or forced to reduce the numbers of staff and clients/students congregating at a particular time. Mass movement of people on the streets

and the passenger capacity of taxis were also limited. As an additional measure to reduce the spread of COVID-19, people were required to wear masks in public, and sanitise places where people live or congregate, such as homes, churches, taxis, and clothing and grocery shops. People were advised to wash their hands regularly and maintain a 1.5m social distance. The media, in general (newspapers, radio, TV, and social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, SMS, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, etc.), was saturated with information, to create awareness of the threat posed by COVID-19.

Following the South African government's announcement of a lockdown and limitations on mass congregation, the three religious groupings known as Abrahamic faiths (i.e. Christianity, Islam and Judaism) were among those forced to devise strategies that used social media to sustain spiritual gratification for members, who could no longer meet personally. Social media made it possible to dispatch teachings from the Christian Bible, the Jewish Torah and Talmud, or the Muslim Quran and related faith documents, to members who are geographically and demographically distributed.

The thrust of the present study makes the Christian church the focus of attention, because the researcher is familiar with Christian traditions, particularly those that are evangelical. The researcher has observed that teaching/preaching from the pulpit by the clergy has undergone changes as a result of the absence of the congregation; the congregation is a common feature in a traditional church scene. Zviadadze (cited in Kgatle 2018:2) reports the manifestation of expression of religion in new media, such as video on YouTube, and a church bell as ringtone on a mobile phone. Up to this point, Facebook had been the biggest social media platform for disseminating the gospel (Businesstech 2017). The inherent limitations of Facebook stated by Kgatle (2018:4) have had a positive bearing on promoting the use of WhatsApp services for driving religious sessions in many churches, particularly during the lockdown.

The way it works is that an administrator is appointed, who enlists names and contact details of church members, thereby forming a WhatsApp group platform. Any church activities are posted on the group platform. Church members are informed of the timetable for Sunday church services, and when the Sunday service programme is due to commence, members (in their individual capacities) open their WhatsApp group platform and follow the audio of the church programme. Just as in a face-to-face church service, members on the group send their 'Amen' to show that they are actively involved. The question is whether biblical scholars who have written on the so-called new homiletic (Park & Wepener 2016; Eslinger 1987), and Hogan and Reid, in Connecting with the Congregation (1999), were already anticipating a technological advancement in the communication process, which has now arrived, in the era of COVID-19. Considering that homiletics is the art of preaching and communication, Gerrit Immink (2004:91) had not missed, when he wrote that,

Most homileticians are aware that the theology of preaching should not be isolated from reflection on the communication process. Homiletics is precisely the intertwining of theoretical reflection both on the proclamation of the gospel and on human discourse. Hence, De Wet and Kruger (2013) write, appropriately, that, '[t]he Word of God as ministered through preaching has the power to change people's lives'. Fattah (2015:115) explains further, by averring that, 'Rapid change and incredible development in the information and telecommunications technologies has affected all fields of life'. In the current discourse on homiletics in the era of the lockdown, discussion on WhatsApp group platforms is preferred: 'the participants mentioned the technical advantages of WhatsApp, such as simple operation, low cost, availability, and immediacy' (Bouhnik & Deshen 2014:218). Church and De Oliveira (2013) cite the following reasons for people's preference of WhatsApp as means of communication:

The low cost of the application combined with the ability to send an unlimited number of messages, immediacy, the desire to feel a part of the trend since their acquaintances have already adopted the application, the capacity to conduct an on-going conversation with many friends simultaneously, the knitting together of a community of friends or family, and a sense of privacy relative to other social networks.

Although critics (e.g. Ramose 2002; Shai & Iroanya 2014) argue that 'money, material possessions, technological innovation and development have eroded the humanist essence of the African culture; which is based on humanity [botho/Ubuntu]', people who used and benefitted from these platforms during the lockdown (e.g. pastors and church members) argue that social media plays a very effective role in communication and exchange of conversations, ideas and videos (Kgatle 2018:1).

This study adopted content/thematic analysis as a research approach, and the discourse is informed by the uses and gratification theory. 'The purpose of content analysis is to organise and elicit meaning from the data collected and to draw realistic conclusions from it' (Bengtsson 2016:8), while '[t]he uses and gratification theory assumes that users have alternative options to satisfy their needs' (Murthado 2017:88).

Theoretical framework

There are two communication theories that could be put to good use: The first one is Shannon and Weaver's model of communication, which argues that human communication can be broken down into six key concepts: sender, encoder, channel, noise, decoder, and receiver. The second one is the uses and gratification theory which is an approach to understanding why and how people look for specific media to satisfy their specific needs. According to Griffin (2012:368), uses and gratification theory focuses on the 'positive motivation and active use of the media content that can gratify individual recipients' needs' (see also Hossain 2019:16–28; Froget, Baghestan & Asfaranjan 2013; Ballard 2011; Quan-Haase & Young 2010). Individuals choose the social media they want to use for specific purposes and for particular individual satisfaction. Such 'selection exposure' can be identified in people's choices of network. The same selection exposure is observable in social media preference. Murthado (2017:88) remarks that, 'selective exposure means that the people chose the mass media and the message content that they believe is the most appropriate to their views, opinions and experiences'. Uses and gratification theory responds to the question, 'why do a group of people choose to use a particular media rather than the actual content offered' (Murthado 2017:88)? Thus, in utilising the uses and gratification theory, the study embraced qualitative content analysis as a research approach. The content enshrined in the responses of participants expresses individual temperaments, choices, preferences, and expected gratification. This study thus attempts to highlight the gratification that is expected from people's choice of a particular social media (e.g. WhatsApp) to provide access to sermonettes, Bible study, and gospel songs, among other services.

For Smith (1975:218), 'Qualitative analysis deals with the forms and antecedent-consequent patterns of form, while quantitative analysis deals with duration and frequency of form'. Some scholars prefer to use the phrase qualitative content analysis (e.g. Mayring 2014; Hsieh & Shannon 2005:1277–1288). Qualitative content analysis is 'a research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena' (Downe-Wambolt 1992:314).

We can acknowledge Fattah's (2015:117) revelation that, 'WhatsApp application is one of the most frequently used social media platform in the family of social networks'. Since its inception, when it was 'launched by Brian Acton and Jan Koum in November 2009, WhatsApp

succeeded to make its place in the top 20 leading applications in US by early 2011' (Prathap et al. 2014, cited in Shahid 2018:14). It is illuminating to realise that, 'Popular among smart phone users, WhatsApp was introduced primarily to exchange voice notes, videos, photos and text' (Nkrumah 2018:114). We should also consider Bouhnik and Deshen's (2014:217) explanation that,

WhatsApp is a Smartphone application that operates on nearly all current types of devices and operating systems. The application has been on the market since 2010; the declared purpose of the developers was to replace the existing SMS platform for a system that is free of charge in an ad-free environment. As a means of sending and receiving messages to and from individuals or groups, WhatsApp includes a variety of functions, such as text messages, attached images, audio files, video files, and links to web addresses.

Thus, 'WhatsApp can be viewed as a social network that allows people to access a great deal of information rapidly' (Bouhnik & Deshen 2014:218). WhatsApp is widely used as a means of communication, particularly by the generation born after technology (BAT), which usually has greater access to smart phones than the older generation born before technology (BBT) (Murthado 2017:88). Van Wyk (2017:1) conceptualises the discussion in the context of the South African church by explaining that the South African church society is influenced by such developments taking place globally and which clearly influence how local churches function. Thus, such global happenings to a large extent predisposed and influenced the role local churches played in the transformation process in South Africa.

Gibbs (2001) reflects that, '[t]he church should play a critical role in the transformation process if it is to be relevant in the 21st century and beyond', and proposes that the church embraces social media as a critical component of communication, because its membership comprises people (e.g. youth) who are familiar with modern digital technology. At the same time, I am mindful of Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe's proposition (2007, cited in Nkrumah 2018:114), that, '[b]y serving as a means of Internet-based social communication, Facebook enables subscribers to contact a list of friends with whom they can receive updates and exchange messages'. The present discourse is also conversant of Bouhnik and Deshen's (2014:217) scholarly views, which point out that 'WhatsApp groups are used for four main purposes: communicating with students, nurturing the social atmosphere, creating dialogue and encouraging sharing among students, and as a learning platform'.

Gragg and Sellers (2010, cited in Nkrumah 2018:114) explain that, '[a]s a relatively recent innovation, Twitter enables users to send and receive short messages or comments, termed "tweets"'. Cayari (2011:2) refers to YouTube and states that, '[d]igital technology has brought with it new media', and that YouTube was, at the time, the 'third most visited website in the world after Google and Facebook' (Curran, Morrison & McCauley 2012:379–388). While a street photographer can take and upload a WhatsApp video of a street singer who used a traditional home guitar to entertain both pedestrians and motorists with his lyrics on the impact of COVID-19 on schools, churches, the job market and industry in general, most established singers opt to use YouTube to market their music. During the era of the lockdown, many people accessed the gospel music that is disseminated through YouTube. I will expand on the expressions regarding WhatsApp homiletics by respondents in this study in due course. It is not only in South Africa that social media has become a critical component of the church. Ghanaians, for example, 'cannot seem to get enough of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, Chat-on, BB, Line, Instagram, Twitter and many others' (White, Tella & Ampofo 2016:2). In light of the above, there is a strong link between using WhatsApp homiletics and the use and gratification theory.

Research methodology

Two main approaches informed the present discourse: (1) Content analysis (a function of a qualitative approach, hence, qualitative content analysis (see Hsieh & Shannon 2005:1277–1288), and (2) Thematic analysis (Javadi & Zarea 2016:34–40; see also Rugwiji 2020). The two approaches are intertwined, because they both utilise content and themes that were decoded from previous research, as well as conversations with/responses given by participants. In utilising content analysis/thematic analysis, the main focus of the present study was to conduct a comprehensive study on the effectiveness of WhatsApp homiletics in the context of the lockdown due to COVID-19. Haggarty (1996:99) explains:

Content analysis is a research method which allows the qualitative data collected in research to be analysed systematically and reliably so that generalisations can be made from them in relation to the categories of interest to the researcher.

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define content analysis as follows: 'A research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' (p. 1278). Mayring (2001) explains content analysis as, '[a]n approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytic rules and step by step models, without rash quantification'. Hence, Patton (2002) concludes that content analysis is '[a]ny qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings' (p. 453). Meanwhile, Ibrahim (2012:40) posits that '[t]hematic analysis is considered the most appropriate for any study that seeks to discover using interpretations', and Mayring's (2014) analysis provides that '[t]heme analysis or thematic analysis occurs in the content-analytical literature at several points'.

Because '[c]ontent analysis can be used on all types of written texts no matter where the material comes from' (Bengtsson 2016:10), this study will refer to previous studies on themes such as church, COVID-19, homiletics, Facebook, LinkedIn, lockdown, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube.

Data collection

The study population consisted largely of pastors and lay persons of various church groupings/denominations. A purposive sample size of 40 was chosen to ensure wide coverage of representation on the effectiveness (or deficiency) of WhatsApp homiletics, because the researcher had the benefit of a professional relationship with the participants from two provinces, namely, Gauteng (Pretoria) and KwaZulu-Natal (Durban). Babei (2010) avers that purposive sampling is done when respondents are known; it is non-probability sampling technique. In this instance, participants already existed in the researcher's list of contacts.

On 6 May 2020, a sample of 40 potential email participants was identified and invitations to participate were dispatched accordingly – 26 responses were received. The respondents who participated comprised 10 pastors and 16 lay people. In consideration of confidentiality, the participants remain anonymous. In this study, participants are identified as P=Pastor; L=Lay person (hence, P1; L1, etc.). The following three main research questions were used to solicit responses (including additional comments) from participants via email: (1) How effective are the new innovations of WhatsApp homiletics? (2) Should these innovations be sustained for the future? and (3) Are these innovations inclusive?

Data analysis

Data analysis constituted extraction of meaning from the various responses regarding the effectiveness of WhatsApp homiletics. The email conversations were coded according to similarities (themes) using the Find function of the computer software. For example, variables (e.g. WhatsApp, homiletics, effective, innovation, sustained, inclusive) that were selected from the conversations using Find, were each allocated a distinguishing colour (e.g. yellow, green, red, etc.). All yellow-coded variables, for example, were then grouped together and each was assigned a number (e.g. 1, 2, 3, etc.), which was matched with the relevant respondent. The numbering was allocated in the order that responses were received by the researcher (e.g. P1=First pastor's response received; the same for L1=First lay person). The same content/thematic analysis was used for other variables that were coded with other colours. The highest frequency on a particular theme in the responses was taken as depicting the views of the majority who used WhatsApp homiletics. The frequency also depicts the importance attached to the theme(s) under investigation.

Participants were classified into two categories, namely, (1) pastors (P) and (2) lay persons (L). All pastors were men aged between 39 and 56. The gender imbalance is not surprising, because most mainline churches are patriarchal in character, which originates from two fronts: (1) Biblical texts themselves depict a patriarchal character, and (2) Church founders/predecessors were patriarchal (see, for example, Daniel 2010:126–139). The majority of the pastors represented the Lutheran Church, followed by Methodist, Roman Catholic and Baptist churches; others were from African initiated churches. All the pastors who responded are from the Gauteng Province and the city of Tshwane. Table 1 provides information on the 10 pastors who participated in the study.

Though the church remains patriarchal, the majority of congregants are women. The fact that most of the respondents of the present study were women, suggests that they are more religiously connected with the sacred institutions than men are. At the same time Guijt (2001:3) concedes that women exhibit higher tendencies to participate in research as respondents than men. Table 2 provides data on the lay person participants' demographic characteristics.

Table 3 shows that 16 (62%) participants commented positively on the effectiveness of WhatsApp homiletics, while 10 (38%) of them had various reasons for considering it ineffective. For example, L6 (female, aged 30), L8 (female, 35) and L15 (female, 58) pointed out that only a few church members have access to technologically advanced devices. On the question of sustainability, 18 (69%) agreed that WhatsApp homiletics could be sustained, and 8 (31%) disagreed – they alleged that the elderly are excluded. With regard to inclusiveness, 11 (42%) supported the notion that WhatsApp homiletics was inclusive, whereas 15 (58%) were negative. For example, L3, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, L10, L14, and L15 gave various reasons for believing that church programmes conducted through WhatsApp are exclusive. The main reasons cited include that the elderly, who were BBT, were unlikely to participate; not everyone can afford a smart phone; and the data required to access connectivity may be unaffordable. The following are examples of statements received from respondents:

- Could be exclusive to those who are not privileged to have the tools
- I feel that as a developing country, we are typically marginalised within or excluded from the mainstream processes of development
- No, especially in townships where networks are usually off and senior citizens not having smartphones. Data is also expensive

- No. The audience in the church presently comprises the younger generations and the older generation is unable to use WhatsApp; they depend on phoning and sending sms
- No, certainly not. You will always need humans to spread the word of God
- No, they are not inclusive. Only a small fraction of the members participate

Table 1: Ages and denominations of pastors (all men from Tshwane, Gauteng) who participated in the study

Pastors	Denomination	Age (years)
P1	Lutheran	50
P2	Lutheran	55
P3	Lutheran	49
P4	Lutheran	45
P5	Lutheran	45
P6	Methodist	45
P7	Methodist	45
P8	Roman Catholic	39
P9	Roman Catholic	39
P10	Baptist	56

Table 2: Demographic information of lay person participants

Laypersons	Region	Denomination	Location	Sex	Age (years)
L1	KwaZulu-Natal	Lutheran	Durban	Female	28
L2	Gauteng	Lutheran	Tshwane	Male	25
L3	Gauteng	Lutheran	Tshwane	Male	25
L4	Gauteng	Lutheran	Tshwane	Female	30
L5	Gauteng	Lutheran	Tshwane	Female	30
L6	Gauteng	Methodist	Tshwane	Female	30
L7	Gauteng	Methodist	Tshwane	Female	30
L8	Gauteng	Roman Catholic	Tshwane	Female	30
L9	Gauteng	Roman Catholic	Tshwane	Female	35
L10	Gauteng	Jehovah's Witness	Tshwane	Female	35
L11	Gauteng	AICs	Tshwane	Female	40
L12	Gauteng	AICs	Tshwane	Female	45
L13	Gauteng	AICs	Tshwane	Female	50
L14	Gauteng	AICs	Tshwane	Female	50
L15	Gauteng	AICs	Tshwane	Female	58
L16	Gauteng	Pentecostal	Tshwane	Female	55

Table 3: Positive and negative perceptions of participants on WhatsApp homiletics (N=26)

WhatsApp Homiletics	Positive Remarks	Negative Remarks
Effectiveness of the innovations	16 (62%)	10 (38%)
Sustainability of the innovations	18 (69%)	8 (31%)
Inclusiveness of the innovations	11 (42%)	15 (58%)

Major findings and discussion

Effectiveness of WhatsApp innovations

The views harvested by this study concerning the effectiveness of WhatsApp innovations amplify the need to adopt WhatsApp as an alternative means of conveying Biblical sermonettes to congregations during the lockdown. Indeed, Barhoumi (2015:233) reports that,

The learning process of integrating WhatsApp mobile learning activities is more effective for learning and teaching than the entirely in-class learning processes … Based on the results of the present research, WhatsApp mobile learning activities can be powerful and effective tools for students.

WhatsApp has a few shortcomings caused by generational gaps. Barhoumi (2015:233) reports that most young people are already using these innovations, however, people BBT may find it hard to pick up these innovations.

Barhoumi (2015:233) notes that most people find it difficult to connect to these media services due to socio-economic challenges (i.e. cost of data). Counterarguments in the discussion on economic costs indicate that older people who are up to date with recent technological advances find it easy and can afford to use WhatsApp, thereby improving the convenience of delivering biblical teachings in this way (McKinney, 2014). For example, P1 (male, 50) believes that the innovations are effective for people who are accustomed to using these innovations. L1 (female, 28) concurred that, 'For us as old church attendees getting sermons on our phones is invaluable. It definitely fills an important gap especially on Sunday mornings'. She added, 'We share them with family members and fellow Christians as far as the Cape. It also serves as discussion impetus during the week'. The findings find resonance with Murthado (2017:86), by suggesting that that these innovations will enable congregants and pastors to communicate with more people, especially the youth, who are heavy users of social media. Messages can reach people far and wide.

The depth and use of WhatsApp was amplified, particularly during the lockdown. For example, 'The innovations help with social distancing and staying at home keeps people safe in the meantime while we wait and pray for those who are working on finding the medicine to cure the disease' (P2 male, 55). Respondents stated that recorded sermonettes help people who are unable to read or write to listen to someone reading to them. This benefit illustrates the power of WhatsApp to circumvent the barriers related to literacy, compared to other social media. Going forward, WhatsApp could be the mainstay of communication for congregations. For instance, 'Even in the post COVID-19 era, because it is endowed with useful features, such as stop, pause, forward and rewind if they don't understand or want to listen to a sermon that moves or touches their souls' (P2 male, 55). The findings illustrate the effectiveness of using WhatsApp to save time, by eliminating church preparation activities. WhatsApp is a revolutionary innovation, the stylish use of which portrays a certain level of social status that edifies communication. 'On the other side truth be told', P3 (male, 49) said, 'youth are the most users of social media yet they do not seem to be interested in religious matters. Churches are

dominated by older generation that is not able to adapt to this innovation'. P4 (male, 45) and L2 (male, 25) agree that the innovations can be quite effective, as long as network connectivity is maintained, and that they are valuable and effective under the circumstances of the lockdown. These findings cut across the entire spectrum of social media. There is need to ensure that generational gaps are considered, and that assistance is provided to congregants on using applications. P5 (male, 45) affirmed:

I use both Facebook and what's up to enrich and reach my congregants. I can give a sermon each day to all congregants using WhatsApp group. It is only on Sunday that I go live on Facebook. I also bless bread and wine and ask members to eat with me while staying at their homes. They can use ordinary bread and water or porridge and water since they cannot access wafers and wine at their homes.

P5 (male, 45) said:

"I have created 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 to one another. 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.

P6 (male, 45) submits that COVID-19 has bought immense opportunities for the church community. According to him, those with the vision to see what lies ahead have realised that the church is among those institutions and businesses that will thrive. He remarked that the effectiveness of the innovations depends on the church seizing the opportunity with both hands, and beginning to invest in its use. Indeed, according to these findings, this is an opportune time for church leaders to take notice and start programmes that facilitate teaching congregants on how to use WhatsApp during church sessions. Because it deserves to be considered as urgent, this teaching be tackled as a topical issue during Sunday School Bible lessons. This teaching can involve both youths and adults by embracing a bottom-up approach, which gives young people a platform to showcase their ability, while strengthening their spiritual understanding (White et al., 2016).

There was a general convergence of thought among participants regarding the usability WhatsApp for communicating Church-related information. For example, P7 (male, 45) believes that WhatsApp is user-friendly, because one can listen to the digital sermons during one's spare time. P8 (male, 39) believes WhatsApp makes a positive contribution to communication; in fact, congregants are now able to communicate more actively than in the past, by using social media. As a teaching and learning platform, Shahid (2018:23) concurs that, 'WhatsApp has enhanced effective flow of information among students'. P8's and Shahid's remarks suggest that, through WhatsApp homiletics, pastors are gradually learning and developing skills needed for preaching using modern technology. P9 (male, 39) used a Sepedi phrase, 'Baruti ba bangwe' [some pastors] are not much gifted', even though they can sing and praise. P9 (male, 39) affirmed that,

I often watch podcasts on Facebook of preachers like Mamaseer and Phemelo Modoaise. I also watch American preachers on YouTube and often download scripture readings and services by Rabi's explaining the scripture from Hebrew and Armenian. And I buy CDs from the English church in Bloemfontein (Andrew Murray congregation). I also listen to the services on radio despite poor quality singing.

A minister of a Baptist congregation in Pretoria, P10 (male, 56) explained:

"As we all agree that during the lockdown, congregations of churches, mosques, temples and or synagogues who were fond of fellowshipping in their numbers were forced to stay in their homes. The impact of the lockdown on the church cannot be taken for granted. Some of the consequences of the lockdown to the church members include the following: perceived spiritual decay, isolation from the much-needed fellowship among members, laying of hands for the sick by the pastor and the absence from sermons preached from the pulpit, among others".

P10 went further to highlight that, "in order to circumvent an erosion and permanent spiritual decay, the church leadership (including the pastor) improvised an innovation of using the WhatsApp to conduct worship services. Members need to have a smart phone (or congregate with someone who has such a device) in order to either participate or to have access to the proceedings of the WhatsApp service. A WhatsApp group of the church is formulated. Prior to the church service, participants who will be playing different roles are identified, such as the Master of Ceremony (MC), among other role-players who are already known. Activities are posted on the App including audio and video footages (and or music). The preacher's sermon is either posted as an audio or video attachment. Prayer either by a pastor or any identified individual is posted as an App".

Regarding the effectiveness of WhatsApp, P10 said,

"The effectiveness of the WhatsApp homiletics and worship services lies in the responses of participants, prayer requests made and comments by individuals who do not participate but who follow up the developments of the WhatsApp service. Usually, comments are made on the WhatsApp group platform where people express their gratitude about either the sermon or spiritual solace or both as a result of the church service on WhatsApp. …"

An affirmation of the effectiveness of WhatsApp homiletics and worship services is evidence-based because it is made by an individual who actually utilised a WhatsApp group platform in order to reach out to congregants who are geographically and demographically situated in various locations in the comfort of their homes due to COVID-19.

The above declaration suggests that P10 is someone who utilises the WhatsApp group platform effectively to teach, preach, counsel and pray for members of his Baptist congregation. The findings signify the need for church leaders to be innovative in solving communication problems. For instance, the stay-at-home rule restricted pastoral home visits, which were usually used to personify the spirit in the proximity of a church member. Hence, the use of WhatsApp and its features can be used for covering this gap. P10 added:

"Every morning as well as every evening, members in the WhatsApp group receive a devotion on different biblical themes which functions as both an inspiration and an antidote to the absence from a physical church context. The interaction among members in response to the devotion enhances the spiritual gratification away from the church building. Sometimes the devotion specifically addresses illnesses such COVID-19."

Other participants who reported the effectiveness of WhatsApp homiletics are L3 (male, 25), L4 (female, 30), L6 (female, 30), L7 (female, 30), L9 (female, 35), L11 (female, 40), L12 (female, 45), L13 (female, 50), L14 (female, 50) and L16 (female, 55). Gillingham and Topper (1999, cited by Barhoumi 2015:235) concur that, '[i]nstant messaging is considered an effective tool for learning and teaching through social interactions'. Gillingham and Topper's opinion is sustained by Williams, Birch and Hancock (2012), who maintain the notion that '[o]nline lectures are more effective when combined with attending face-to-face lectures'. Barhoumi and Rossi (2013:281-308) also touch on the effectiveness of online teaching.

Indeed, such attributes have proved useful in the domain of religion, as confirmed by the study findings.

Sustainability of WhatsApp innovations in the future

The study findings indicate that using social media has sustained the church domain by making it possible for the church to continue executing at least rudimentary practices in the place of conventional pulpit preaching scenes. A similar view is shared by McKinney (2014:13), who reports that churches that adapted and adopted the use of social media quickly stand a chance of growing and sustaining the gospel. In this study, P1 (male, 50) admitted that, 'after working from home, virtual learning is now inevitable going forward; the price of data price is falling, and more social media will be used for sermons'. He stated that he expects more churches to start adopting this form of communication. P1 stated: 'Considering technological advancement scaling up in today's world, I would say that this is going to be the new norm moving forward'. According to P1, the world was moving towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution even before the COVID-19 outbreak. The notion of the Fourth Industrial Revolution was picked up by P9 (male, 39). Although some glimpses exist in support of the innovations, P9 appears to be unyielding on the question of sustainability, as reflected in the following statement:

If the church wants to stay relevant in the age of the 4th industrial revolution and COVID-19 it has to be smart and much faster to grasp the attention of the youth and Christians at large. Most people live on their phones. Go into any restaurant and people are no longer talking to each other, they type on their phones. You will have to be very innovative to reach the youth as the normal service is not going to convert any youth. It's only when their lives fall apart from drugs, alcohol, aids and unwanted pregnancies and they get counselling that they will most probably hear about the healing blood of Jesus Christ. Except for the charismatic churches, most churches are having difficulty in surviving as it's mostly adults and the old attending.

According to White et al. (2018:6), charismatic churches attract people with their showcasing and miraculous healing, and their claim of expulsion of the devil – even using social media to do so. The implications of these findings should encourage pastors to pursue spirited social media campaigns to sow the seeds of holiness among the youth.

Meanwhile, P2 (male, 55) reported that new technologies are emerging and affecting our lives in ways that indicate we are at the beginning of a new era, which will build and extend the impact of digitisation in new and unanticipated ways. P6 suggested there is need for enough time to practise, edit material, review, generate feedback and ensure that the equipment is regularly maintained. Both P7 (male, 45) and P8 (male, 39) were positive about sustaining the innovations. P8 stated that WhatsApp is much cheaper and more efficient than other social media platforms. P10 (male, 56) believes that the question of sustainability for the future of WhatsApp for homiletics and sermonettes may need further study. According to P10, if the culture of using WhatsApp is developed and sustained, it will help to reduce the number of congregants in the church building, which aids church compliance with the rules of the lockdown. He believes that some church members would prefer to stay at home, as long as they can receive the church proceedings through WhatsApp. P10's assertion supports sustaining WhatsApp homiletics:

Meanwhile, two important benefits of sustaining the innovation stand out clearly, namely (i) not every member of the church attends worship service consistently on any prescribed day. Their absence could be attributed to various reasons and prohibitions such as illness or critical family matters needing their attention. In that context, sustenance of the WhatsApp innovation becomes vital, and (ii) COVID-19 as an epidemic is not the only crisis that will affect humans

(and the church) in future. Through the experiences of the lockdown, believers have developed a culture of worshipping through WhatsApp in the eventuality of a crisis that may arise again in future.

L2's (male, 25) response referred to two opinions:

"Yes in the event that the church is lockdown but when the church is operational I don't see their effectiveness. The future is unknown; maybe the future church will not gather as we do. In that way they will be effective".

In my view, L2's opinion suggests that sustaining the innovations in the future is not guaranteed. These results are clear in explaining the role of technology in advancing religious activities in the long run. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 accelerated uptake of social media, particularly WhatsApp, for delivering sermonettes. There is little doubt, therefore, that adopting cheap and convenient platforms makes it possible to reach the spiritually weak and heal the sick. Routine faith-based activities can still be conveyed in the comfort of everyone's homes. Hence, the future of God-seeking gatherings will be determined by the ability to adopt and adapt to technology (Mateus, 2017:36).

Inclusiveness of new WhatsApp innovations

The findings indicate that WhatsApp, if adopted and taught properly to non-users, offers better inclusivity than other social media. However, as a developing country, South Africa is typically marginalised or excluded from the mainstream processes of development. P3 (male, 49) agrees that WhatsApp is inclusive, because it gives opportunities to those who cannot attend church services for various reasons (e.g. poor health, old age, facing difficulties walking, and working odd hours). In spite of his critique on the inclusivity of using WhatsApp for homiletics, P7 still supports the technological advancement that characterises our modern world:

Personally, this time has shown me the other side of the church; that technology will help us a lot in enlarging the church of God. The church must use modern technology, for example, reading the Bible from a Tablet. The use of a digital device for church service even after lockdown will enhance a skill which will be useful during a time of crisis such as the era of coronavirus and the lockdown.

The study findings reveal conscious elevation of WhatsApp as a useful social media application. Many users, particularly pastors, indicate an insatiable appetite for incorporating WhatsApp in mainstream church communication channels. These findings are in tandem with findings of Faimau and Behrens (2016:68), who report that, in choosing social media, aspects of inclusivity should be considered, so that some congregants are not left behind. Hence, the thrust of this study is anchored on the use and gratification theory. WhatsApp is considered the best option, for its ability to service both rich and poor people. The study results open an avenue for network service providers to consider continuing their offerings of tailored data packages, as had been available during the lockdown. For example, network providers had incentivised its users through area-specific and work-from-home offers, which helped to sustain the use of social media platforms, especially WhatsApp. Overall, using WhatsApp improved communication skills, and improved the adoption of technology.

Conclusion

This study established that social media has proven to be effective platforms for homiletics, as well as for conducting other church programmes outside the church building during the COVID-19 lockdown. While qualitative content analysis/thematic analysis was used to expose the content and themes emerging from the email conversations with participants, uses and

gratification theory was employed to explain that people (pastors and members of the church) derived gratification (or quenched their thirst) through WhatsApp homiletics and worship services outside a traditional church building environment. Three main themes were the foci of attention, namely, (1) Effectiveness of WhatsApp innovations, (2) Sustainability of WhatsApp innovations in the future, and (3) Inclusiveness of WhatsApp innovations.

The study found that the lockdown alerted Bible believers to reorient themselves to technological innovations, so that the church continues to exist outside the church building, because 'church' is not a building structure – church is an institution. At the same time, the study found that the question of inclusiveness needs serious consideration. The majority of qualitative responses expressed that the new WhatsApp innovations are not inclusive. For example, participants believed that that the younger generation were the main beneficiaries of WhatsApp innovations, because the older generation is unable to use WhatsApp – they depend on making phone calls and sending SMS. The church is challenged to come up with a technological innovation that accommodates all age groups in the church during such circumstances.

The study also explored claims that, although a WhatsApp group platform is usually designed and accessed by church members, it is inclusive. Someone outside the church is not necessarily excluded, but can technically be involved by acquaintances and church connections. In that sense, anyone can participate by joining the WhatsApp group upon being invited by a member of the church. The church does not exclude individuals outside the church, who wish to be part of the WhatsApp group. Members of the church who are technically 'excluded' are those who do not have smart phones. In that case, such members rely on other members to access church activities on WhatsApp. However, the study revealed that using YouTube for church services eliminates the culture of exclusion, because even non-members or members of other churches can join the larger believing community. The study explained that various platforms are available, so that every individual can become involved in piety, whenever they wish to do so.

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