

Social Media Engagement and Christian Formation in US Churches

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Abstract

This paper will report initial findings from a national survey based on 775 congregants living in 37 states, from over 25 denominations, and two case studies of US churches (Spring 2015). This paper will describe the research project and discuss how Christians and churches in the United States are currently using social media, perceptions of these practices, opinions about how social media should be used, as well as implications of this research for Christian formation and education in churches and seminaries.

Media scholarship has pointed to significant shifts regarding participatory practices in social media, perceptions of community life, and how people obtain knowledge (thus how information is spread). Media scholarship has also named a new set of skills (mostly social) that need pedagogical attention.¹ In order for Christian religious education to continue to be a transcendent, ontological, and political activity,² religious educators should pay attention to media culture in order to pay attention to how God continues to reveal God's self in the world.³

Henry Jenkins coined the term *participatory culture* in his first book, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*.⁴ Jenkins is an American media scholar and Provost's Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts, and Education at the University of Southern California. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture* (Jenkins was its principal investigator), provides a list of the qualities of participatory culture:

1. relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement,
2. strong support for creating and sharing creations with others,
3. some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. members who believe that their contributions matter, and
5. members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created).⁵

¹ Henry Jenkins et al., *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2009), 5-6.

² Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry The Way of Shared Praxis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 11-12. Transcendent education is "[education that] encourages people to interpret their lives, relate to others, and engage in the world in ways that faithfully reflect what they perceive as ultimate in life, that is, from a faith perspective." Education is an ontological activity in that "education attends to, engages, and shapes their [people's] whole way of 'being.'" Education is a political activity because "the knowledge to which it gives people access, how it does so, and the influence it has on people's 'characters,' all shape how people live their lives together in both private and public realms."

³ Mary E. Hess, *Engaging Technology in Theological Education: All That We Can't Leave Behind* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 1.

⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992).

⁵ Henry Jenkins et al., *Confronting the Challenges*, 5-6.

Jenkins recognizes that, “participatory culture is not new—it has in fact, multiple histories.”⁶

Jenkins defines participatory culture in his book *Spreadable Media* as “a range of different groups deploying media production and distribution to serve their collective interests.”⁷

Clay Shirky’s book, *Cognitive Surplus*, has helped to further explain participatory culture. He describes the growing assumption “that media includes the possibilities of consuming, producing, and sharing side by side, and that those possibilities are open to everyone.”⁸ Participatory culture assumes that everyone can be both a consumer and a producer. The distinction between amateur and professional is blurred. In a word, people want to participate.⁹

The term participatory has become an important concept in the digital age and is being utilized in multiple fields. The concept of participation describes a whole range of possibilities and activities. Jenkins writes, “the term *participation* has emerged as a governing concept, albeit one surrounded by conflicting expectations.”¹⁰ This is because, “the nature of participation in the digital age is a complicated matter.”¹¹ Not only do these terms have multiple meanings and understandings, the idea that culture is becoming more participatory does not imply equal access to participation. Jenkins explains,

When we describe our culture as becoming more participatory, we are speaking in relative terms—participatory in relation to older systems of mass communication—and not in absolute terms. We do not and may never live in a society where every member is able to fully participate...Insofar as participation within networked publics becomes a source of discursive and persuasive power—and insofar as the capacities to meaningfully participate online are linked to educational and economic opportunities—then the

⁶ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University, 2013), 297.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸ Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: How Technology Makes Consumers into Collaborators* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), 213.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 175.

¹¹ Jenkins, *Spreadable Media*, 194.

struggle over the right to participation is linked to core issues of social justice and equality.¹²

Nickesia S. Gordon in *Social Media: Pedagogy and Practice* argues that social media by nature is neither democratic nor inclusive.¹³ However, while social media may not be democratic or inclusive in design, it can be democratic and inclusive in use. Howard Rheingold in *Net Smart*, commenting on Jenkins' concept of participatory culture, explains, "Done mindfully, digital participation helps to build a more democratic, more diverse culture—a participatory one."¹⁴

There are digital enthusiasts (Henry Jenkins, Clay Shirky, danah boyd, Mimi Ito, Cathy Davidson, and Howard Rheingold) and then there are those who are more critical of social media and technology and leery of its positive impact on culture, people, and religion (Brad Kallenberg, Sherry Turkle, Jaron Lanier, and Nicholas Carr). There are also those who primarily attempt to understand the implications of social media (Elizabeth Losh, Manuel Castells, Heidi A. Campbell, Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman). William Powers in *Hamlets Blackberry* stresses that similar to all tools in human history, there are benefits and costs to social media.¹⁵ Education is the link to helping people to not only recognize the costs and benefits, but to recognize how "human agency, not just technology, is key."¹⁶ This research project studied influences of participatory culture on US Christians, current social media practices (of congregants and churches) and their relationship to Christian formation, as well as existing avenues for Christian formation in churches.

¹² Ibid., 193-194.

¹³ Nickesia S. Gordon, "Social Media and Participatory Communication: The UNDP and the Diffusion of Empowerment," in *Social Media: Pedagogy and Practice*, eds. Kehbama Langmia et al. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2014), 222.

¹⁴ Howard Rheingold, *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2014), 114.

¹⁵ William Powers, *Hamlets Blackberry* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 194.

¹⁶ Rheingold, *Net Smart*, 56.

Research Questions

Overarching Question

Is there a relationship between people's beliefs, perceptions, and practices related to social media and their Christian formation?

Broad Questions for Survey and Case Studies

- (1) What are the perceptions of the use (or nonuse) of technology and social media at churches?
- (2) How do participant's beliefs and perceptions about Christian formation relate to their social media practices?
- (3) How are Christians in the United States engaging in social media?
- (4) Does social media engagement impact Christian formation?

Research Methodology and Design

I designed and conducted a mixed methods research study using survey and case study. I chose a mixed methods approach in order to engage descriptive analysis. This was a theory building study. The project was primarily exploratory.¹⁷ I hoped that collecting diverse types of data would help me to understand the research problem.¹⁸ Therefore, I used multiple forms of data collection. This project also used praxis-theory-praxis methodology for gathering data.¹⁹ I studied current praxis of churches and congregants regarding social media practices and avenues of Christian formation and examined theory related to participatory culture and Christian education in order to reflect further on current praxis and provide a broad description of social

¹⁷ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009), 18.

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁹ Mark Lau Branson, *Praxis Introduction*, Vimeo, 2011, accessed June 11, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/14066441>.

media engagement and Christian formation in United states churches, as well as an in-depth description and analysis of current praxis at two churches.

The survey had thirty-eight questions, four open-ended and thirty-four closed questions, in three sections. The first section collected data regarding age group, gender, ethnic-racial identity, and location. This section also inquired about the respondent's church role(s), church size, denomination, and church attendance. The next section asked questions about social media engagement in the church the respondent attends. I used practical theologian Mark Lau Branson's church formation triad in *Churches, Cultures & Leadership* to shape questions about Christian formation and education in churches.²⁰ Branson writes, "a church's identity and agency are shaped by how we attend to God, to each other and to the world we live in."²¹ Therefore, this section also solicited participant's opinions regarding what has helped congregants to connect with God, other congregants, and people outside of their church within the past year. The lists of possibilities for these questions included social media sites such as Twitter, Instagram, and The City.

The third section inquired about personal social media use. Three of the questions in this section were designed to help us learn about how often congregants use email and what other kinds of social media accounts congregants have. The next three questions ask about how often congregants check, post, share, and create online. Given my definition of Christian formation includes every dimension of a person, physical, social, emotional, and intellectual, we wanted to study how often people used social media to try and make sense of the ways social media may be impacting congregants whether they realize it or not.

²⁰ Mark Lau Branson and Juan Martínez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 61-62. There are three arenas of church formation: spiritual (attending to God), congregational (attending to one another), and missional (attending to neighborhood and the world).

²¹ Ibid., 61.

In *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins describes three challenges. One of the challenges of participatory culture is helping young people reflect on their participation.²² Therefore, we also designed four questions with likert scales in order to learn if churches help congregants to reflect on their social media use, whether or not congregants want their church to help them reflect, whether or not the participant's Christian beliefs impact their social media use, and if participants had ever thought about the relationship between their social media use and Christian beliefs.

The survey then asked participants whether social media should be used in their churches to do various activities such as innovate together or educate one another and whether or not social media should be used for discussing communal, national, or global issues. Likewise, the survey asked if participant's church should use social media to participate in peacemaking, raise awareness about social justice issues, or learn about people in communities near and far.

This section of questions was framed by my literature review of participatory culture and necessary new media literacies, namely the work of media scholar Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers*,²³ *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture*,²⁴ *Spreadable Media*,²⁵ and *Convergence Culture*,²⁶ Howard Rheingold's *Net Smart*,²⁷ and Cathy Davidson's *Now You See It*.²⁸ In *Spreadable Media*, Jenkins explains that social media users expect to be able to respond to, dialogue about, or discuss with others the information they come into contact with.²⁹ I wondered if this was true for congregants in churches.

²² Jenkins, *Confronting*, 105-106.

²³ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

²⁴ Henry Jenkins et al., *Confronting*, 5-6.

²⁵ Henry Jenkins et al., *Spreadable Media*.

²⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

²⁷ Howard Rheingold, *Net Smart*.

²⁸ Cathy N. Davidson, *Now You See It: How Technology and Brain Science Will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2012)

²⁹ Jenkins, *Spreadable Media*, 60.

Assuming that people want to participate as Clay Shirky demonstrates in *Cognitive Surplus*³⁰ and Manuel Castells describes in *Networks of Outrage and Hope*,³¹ these questions were designed to help us understand the ways congregants want to participate. Jenkins also asks in his book *Convergence Culture*, “How much participation is too much? When does participation become interference?”³² I designed questions that would help determine the extent to which congregants want to participate with their church, online.

The survey also had open-ended questions in the second and third sections. These questions inquire about whether or not social media helps participants to love God or others, what types of social media the participants wish their church would use, and whether a respondent’s social media use is related to their Christian formation. These questions were designed to further explore the overarching question about the possible relationship between social media practices and Christian formation.

For the second phase of the project, I conducted case studies at two churches, which included surveys, participant-observation, and six focus groups. I studied one church that is characteristically media-savvy³³ in Washington DC and has approximately 200 congregants, nearly all millennials. The church was planted three years ago and used Google Ads and twitter to garner participation. I also wanted to research a church that does not use social media at an institutional level for spiritual, congregational, or missional formation.³⁴ Formation includes education, programming, practices, activities, and disciplines. The second case study was at a

³⁰ Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus*.

³¹ Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012).

³² Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 20.

³³ Media-saavy meant several things. First, the church had an engaging website with photos and a description of the church, its mission, and faith statement. I also wanted a church that had several social media accounts and a lead pastor or leadership team that uses social media to engage with congregants on a regular basis. The lead pastor of the church I studied said the church was both media-saavy and intentional about its pervasive use of social media and technology at the institutional level.

³⁴ Branson and Martínez, *Churches*, 61.

church in northern California with approximately 250 people. It is a multigenerational Presbyterian church that was planted over thirty years ago. Both of the churches for the case studies were deliberate about their use (or nonuse) of technology and media.

Site Visits

During participant-observation at each of the churches for the case studies, I wanted to understand whether either uses social media or technology during the worship service. I was also interested in the ways that congregants participate (or not) during the worship service and what types of people were in each congregation.

The pre-focus group survey that was filled out in five of six focus groups (all except the youth focus group) was designed to help me learn more about the participants in each focus group. Similar to the national survey, the age, gender, and ethnic-racial identity of participants helped me to understand ways the focus groups were both limited and diverse. Also, age group, length of church attendance, and church roles may impact a congregant's perceptions of the relationship between social media engagement and Christian formation and a congregant's beliefs about whether or not the church should or should not use social media. I will consider this when analyzing the transcripts of the focus groups.

The focus group's questions were designed to explore the overarching research question. Therefore, I asked about the participant's beliefs, perceptions, and practices related to social media. I wanted to explore how the DC church uses social media and why. Questions were designed that would help determine whether congregants wanted the church to use social media and technology (in the ways that they did). For the northern California church, I designed focus group questions that would help me understand why the church does not engage with social

media and technology at the institutional level. I wondered if leaders and congregants were in agreement or not about this choice?

I also designed questions that investigated the avenues for Christian formation at each church in order to understand whether the avenues for Christian formation named by leaders were the same avenues of Christian formation named by congregants. During the focus groups, I asked leaders about the mission of each church and congregants about the most meaningful experiences of their church. These questions were designed to understand the relationship between the church's aims and congregant's actual experiences.

Biases

There are a few things about me that will influence the way I analyze the data from this project. I am a digital enthusiast who believes the possibilities for learning, creating, and relating online are interesting. I have lived in southern California for the past thirteen years. Undoubtedly, living in this part of the United States has shaped my perspective on the church and Christian formation. I am also a committed and long time Christian who is an ordained Mennonite pastor. I have worked in churches for the past twelve years. All of these things influence the way I see participatory culture, social media, the church, and Christian formation.

Limitations of the Project

The national survey was primarily shared on Facebook and through email. Also, the survey was a link participants had to access using a computer or smart phone. If a participant wanted to take the survey that did not use Facebook or email (and this happened) the participant had to type in the URL for the survey. Therefore, a limitation of the study is that I was not able

to get the perspective of people who were unwilling or unable to access the survey link via computer or smart phone. It was easiest for people with access to technology and competency in using a computer to take the survey. Also, most of the questions in the survey were based on human memory.

There were some limitations with the case studies as well. I was only able to attend one worship service at each church. This provided a limited perspective of what each church is like every week. Also, the two churches were very different, in composition, and years they have been in existence. Therefore, I was not comparing and contrasting two similar congregations with only one variable (use or nonuse of social media). There are many differences between the churches.

In addition, the lead pastor had to go out of town during my time at the Washington DC church, so I never met him in person, he was not in the leader's focus group, and did not lead during the worship service I participated in. Finally, I made a mistake and did not properly record the congregant focus group conversation at the DC church. Therefore, the focus group notes were written from memory. However, I immediately wrote down everything I could remember about the conversation the evening it happened. I also added to these notes the next day and emailed the entire focus group to ask if there was anything that should be edited in my notes.

Population and Sample

DC Case Study

The first case study was in Washington DC with a church of approximately 200 congregants,³⁵ nearly all millennials.³⁶ The church is non-denominational and was planted in DC approximately three years ago.³⁷ Thirty-three congregants filled out the national survey (with the church's unique link). Most of the congregants were between the ages of twenty-five and thirty³⁸ and the lead pastor was thirty-three years of age.³⁹

The majority of the survey respondents were female, but I do not know the female to male ratio in the entire congregation. Both women and men participated in the focus groups and worship service⁴⁰ and both sexes led various parts of the service. The majority of the DC church's congregants were Caucasian.⁴¹ However, survey respondents from the DC church also identified as "African American," "Black/African-American," "Mexican American," "Hispanic," and "a mixture." During participant-observation, I wrote in the field notes that there was "some diversity in ethnicity, but a young crowd." There was not much range in the age of participants in the service I attended. I only observed two people who appeared to be over the age of thirty-five and observed that no person at the worship service appeared to be under eighteen years of age.

The congregant focus group had three males and five females, between twenty-one and thirty-one years of age, half of which were between twenty-one and twenty-four and the other

³⁵ The participants in the leadership focus group reported the size of the congregation.

³⁶ The term was originally used to describe people who would reach adulthood by the new millennium but is used more broadly to describe people who were born between 1980 and 1995.

³⁷ This was reported by the church leaders focus group.

³⁸ The majority of the church's survey participants were in this age group.

³⁹ The participants in the leadership focus group reported the age of the lead pastor.

⁴⁰ I took field notes on female and male participation in worship during the participant-observation period.

⁴¹ This was reported by the church leaders during the focus group discussion. Also, the majority of survey participants identified as "Caucasian."

half were between twenty-five and thirty-one years of age.⁴² All of the congregant focus group participants reported weekly church attendance.⁴³ As a listener, I was immediately intrigued by their ages. The church seemed to be engaging the imagination and participation of millennials (something few churches in the United States are presently able to do). In the congregant pre-focus group survey, participants identified as “Caucasian,” “multi-racial,” “African-American,” and “Indian.”

Most of the congregants in the focus groups had only been attending the church between six months and one and a half years.⁴⁴ Also, the majority of survey participants reported that they had been attending the church for one to three years. However, this makes sense given the church has only been in existence for three years. During the focus group discussion, participants reported working in the following areas/companies: intern for human rights organization, intern at capital hill, in the Peace Corps, attorney for the government, event coordinator, digital marketing, medical student in MD program, and employee at the Smithsonian institute.

The church leadership focus group participants were between twenty-five and thirty-three, all of which were male and Caucasian.⁴⁵ Three of the participants in the congregant focus group also marked in their pre-focus group survey that they are in a leadership role at the church. Therefore, the two focus groups had six participants who reported having some sort of leadership role and five congregants who reported that they did not have a leadership role.

One participant helped the lead pastor begin the church and the other two have been in leadership between one and a half and two years.⁴⁶ One participant identified himself as the part-

⁴² The participants reported their age in a pre-focus group survey.

⁴³ The participants reported their church attendance in a pre-focus group survey.

⁴⁴ The participants reported how long they have attended the church in a pre-focus group survey.

⁴⁵ The participants reported their age and ethnic-racial identity in a pre-focus group survey.

⁴⁶ The participants reported how long they have been in leadership at the church in a pre-focus group survey. The participant who helped begin the church noted this during the focus group discussion.

time associate pastor for the church and reported that he also worked in a coffee shop and was pursuing his Master of Divinity.⁴⁷ The other two participants were on the board of directors for the church.⁴⁸ One of the two on the board of directors reported that he is an attorney and the other reported that he has a job in International development with the United Nations World food program working in their financial operations department. He is also the treasurer for the church.⁴⁹

Northern California Case Study

The second case study was at a church in northern California with approximately 201-300 people.⁵⁰ It was a multigenerational Presbyterian church that was planted over thirty years ago.⁵¹ Congregants ranged in age from just weeks old to over ninety years of age.⁵² Thirty-eight congregants filled out the national survey with the church's unique link. The majority of the survey respondents were between forty-one and fifty years of age. However, ten survey participants were between the ages of eighteen and forty, twelve were between fifty and seventy years of age, and one participant was over ninety-one years of age.

The majority (97%) reported weekly church attendance and most of the survey participants had attended the church over sixteen years. This was a multiethnic church. The survey participants identified themselves with the following ethnic-racial identities: "Asian," "Asian American," "Chinese," "Chinese American," "Taiwanese American," "Japanese American," "Asian and Hispanic," "half White and half Chinese," "Eastern European," "Ukrainian," "White," "Black," and "Caucasian."

⁴⁷ This was reported during the focus group discussion.

⁴⁸ This was reported in the pre-focus group survey.

⁴⁹ The participant reported his job and church role during the focus group discussion.

⁵⁰ The majority of survey respondents chose this answer.

⁵¹ I observed that the church was multigenerational during participant-observation and the church leaders focus group participants reported the denomination and age of the church.

⁵² I observed this during participant-observation and one of the congregants in the survey reported that they were over ninety-one years of age.

The first congregant focus group had seven participants, two females and five males between the ages of twenty-five and fifty, the majority being between the ages of forty-one and fifty.⁵³ All of these congregants worked in the technology industry for the same company. The participants identified themselves in the pre-focus group survey as “Chinese-American,” “Chinese,” “Asian American,” and “White.” Six of the seven participants reported that they have attended the church for fifteen or more years and one person reported they had attended the church for more than eleven years. All seven reported weekly church attendance in the pre-focus group survey. Also, in the pre-focus group survey, one participant identified as an “elder” at the church, one as a “youth leader,” one as an “elder” and “youth leader,” and four reported “none of the above.”

The second focus group with church leadership had five participants, four females and one male between forty-one and sixty years of age.⁵⁴ All of these participants oversaw a ministry at the church. One participant was the choir director, one was the church school leader, and the other three participants reported that they were part of the pastoral staff.⁵⁵ The participants identified themselves in the pre-focus group survey as “Chinese-American,” “Chinese,” “Asian,” and “Caucasian.” The five participants reported in the pre-focus group survey that they have been in leadership at the church between thirteen and twenty-five years, with one participant reporting “twenty-five plus years.”

The third focus group of congregants had five participants, three females and two males who had attended the church between nineteen and thirty-one years and reported weekly attendance at the church.⁵⁶ The participants were between forty-one and sixty years of age and

⁵³ This was reported in the pre-focus group survey.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ These details were reported both on the pre-focus group survey and during the focus group discussion.

⁵⁶ These details were reported in the pre-focus group survey.

self-identified as “Chinese-American,” “Chinese,” “Irish-American,” and “Caucasian” in the pre-focus group survey. In addition, two of the females indicated “none of the above,” when asked to indicate church roles, though one of them reported that they invested in youth by engaging in “tutoring” and asking them [youth] one-on-one at church and on Facebook or via email about school.⁵⁷ One female reported that she was a “Sunday School/Christian education teacher” and “youth leader” at the church.⁵⁸ One of the male participants was the “treasurer” of the church and the other was in “leadership” and an “elder.”⁵⁹

The final focus group was with two youth leaders and four teenagers.⁶⁰ I did not give these participants a pre-focus group survey. However, during the focus group, the teenagers reported that they were between fifteen and seventeen years of age and had attended the church their whole lives. I did not ask any of these participants about their ethnic-racial identity.

National Survey

The requirements for participating in the survey were that a person live in the United States, be eighteen years of age or older, and attend church. In total, 775 people completely filled out the survey. Respondents were from thirty-seven states and more than twenty-five Christian denominations, with a median age of thirty-eight. In fact, 104 people between sixty-one and eighty years of age responded. The majority, 204 participants, were between thirty-one and forty years of age.

The state with the most survey participants was California with 327 respondents. Kentucky had the next highest response rate with fifty-nine participants. Given that I live in

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ They self-identified as either a teenager or youth leader during the focus group discussion.

California and was born and raised in Kentucky, and shared the survey through my Facebook status, this makes sense. While collecting data for the survey, I had 1,205 Facebook friends.

Eight states had between twenty and fifty-nine participants. Seventeen states had between five and nineteen participants. The majority, 66.3% of respondents identified as female and 33.7% identified as male. A question in the survey that asked about racial-ethnic identity was open-ended and still needs to be coded. However, it appears the majority of participants identified as Caucasian, though people from multiple ethnic groups responded to the survey.

The majority of survey participants (85.6%) reported attending church weekly. The number of years participants attended their church was spread out between all of the options. However, 274 participants attended their church sixteen or more years, while the next largest group of respondents (152 participants) attended their church for one to three years.

The majority of respondents identified as non-denominational at 181 participants. The next largest group with 79 participants marked “other” seemingly because their denomination was not listed. The largest denominational affiliations represented in the survey were Presbyterian Church USA (89 participants), Methodist (51 participants), Baptist (49 participants), Mennonite Church USA (47 participants) and Mennonite (42 participants).

The survey invited respondents to indicate any role they have at church. Eleven possibilities were listed and the majority of participants (259) marked “none of the above.” However, 239 respondents marked “leadership” and 208 participants identified as “Sunday school or Christian Education teacher.” It is unclear without more analysis how many of the respondents marked more than one role.

The survey asked, “Approximately, how many active participants (people who regularly attend worship services) does your church have?” This question formed a slight bell curve with

most of the survey participants (159) reporting that they attended a church with 101-200 congregants. However, the next largest group (150) attended a church with 51-100 congregants and 131 participants attended a church with 201-300 congregants.

Initial Reflections on Case Studies

The focus group conversations have not been analyzed. However, two things surfaced after reflecting on the time spent with both churches. First, it appears that age and context heavily influences perspectives on faith and technology. Second, whether or not a church uses social media or technology at an institutional level, leaders and congregants should discuss social media and its impact on Christian formation. Possible questions churches might explore are:

- How are congregants using social media?
- What are the theological implications of social media engagement?
- How might social media impact the missio dei?
- Are there social media channels we should be using at our church? If so, what and why?

Initial Survey Analysis

How are churches using social media?

The survey asked respondents about the types of technology and social media that were used in worship services in their churches within the last year. They could check all that applied. The majority (78%) of participants reported that their church used websites in their worship services. The survey explained website use could mean a website was just mentioned or that a website's facts, information, or stories were shared during a worship service. Also, 55.5% of

participants reported that their churches used PowerPoint during a worship service. The survey provided the following examples of Facebook use: sharing people's status updates, sharing stories posted on Facebook, and sharing articles or videos posted to Facebook. A significant amount of participants (53%) reported their church used Facebook in worship services within the last year.

Over half of the respondents marked film clips. Approximately one third of the respondents also checked that their churches used other types of videos from the Internet as well as music videos from the Internet in their worship services. In addition, 27.9% of participant's churches used pictures or memes from the Internet during a worship service. More churches (23.5%) used stories/posts from blogs of congregants *in* the church than stories/posts from popular bloggers (17.8%). With storytelling being one of the most helpful and compelling ways people can experience transformative learning, blogs may be a helpful way to introduce stories in churches and contribute to Christian formation. Finally, 19.7% of congregants also reported that their church used Twitter (examples of Twitter use: sharing popular tweets/quotes, sharing articles shared on Twitter, pictures shared on Twitter, sharing tweets that are trending, sharing tweets about a subject the whole nation is talking about) during worship services.

The survey asked a similar question about how technology and social media has been used in the last year in the participant's church's Sunday School/Bible study/Christian Education. Again, website had the highest percentage at 49.5%, but overall use of social media seemed to drop significantly for this type of church programming. The next most frequent type of media used were film clips at 29.9% and other types of videos from the Internet at 28.5%. An interesting change in this question was that 28.5% of respondents marked, "I don't know," (whereas only 2.7% marked this related to worship services) rather than "none of the above"

which suggests that though most of the respondents attend worship services weekly, nearly a third of participants may not attend Sunday School/Bible study/Christian Education hour.

A large amount (94.7%) of survey respondents reported that their church had a website and 72.3% reported their church had a Facebook page. It appears that a quarter to a third of participant's churches intentionally used email and Facebook to hear from and connect with their congregants. Beyond email, websites, and Facebook, the majority of churches do not have other social media accounts. Here is a chart of the other possibilities in the survey:

Twitter account	21.4%
Instagram account	15.6%
YouTube channel	10.9%
Vimeo channel	8.0%
The City account	7.6%
Pinterest account	1.7%
Tumblr account	1.0%
GodTube channel	.4%

How are congregants using social media?

The majority of survey participants (93.8%) used Facebook. Also, between 42% and 57% used twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, Youtube, Pinterest, and/or Instagram. In addition, 23.3% of respondents play interactive games online. What is perhaps most astonishing is 77.2% of respondents reported they *check* social media multiple times a day, and another 11% reporting checking social media once a day, for a total of 88.2% of US congregants reporting that they check social media daily.

The amount of people who *post* or *share* daily drops dramatically though, with 23% reporting that they *post* and 20.4% reporting that they *share* daily or multiple times a day. The survey describes posting as when someone posts their own ideas or experiences and sharing being when someone shares articles, videos, links, that are other people's work. Even though the

numbers drop significantly, when combining the numbers of congregants who post multiple times a day, once a day, a few times per week, and once a week, it appears 60.9% of US congregants post their own ideas or experiences every week online. When the same numbers are combined for sharing, the majority (55.4%) of congregants share other people's work/ideas etc., each week online.

Respondents reported that they *create* online far less than they view, post, or share. However, even with just 28.9% of US congregants reporting they create something via social media every month (combined monthly, weekly, daily percentages), this still means more than one in four respondents create online each month. It is even more interesting to discuss the posting, sharing, and creating of survey respondents when comparing these activities with participant opinions about what their church should use social media for. For example, 55.5% of survey respondents said their church should use social media "to create and innovate together." Therefore, even though the majority of congregants do not do this alone, many respondents were open to creating with their church community. Likewise, 65% of congregants reported that social media should be used "for fellowship/interaction between congregants" and 63.7% "to pray for one another." Given the amount of congregants that post and share each week, it appears churches could use social media for nurturing relationships between congregants, namely keeping up with one another during the week and praying for one another.

The majority of respondents also believe social media should be used by their church "to exchange or share ideas" (71.6%) and "to educate one another" (59%). However, it is difficult to determine what sorts of ideas and information respondents would like to be shared through social media (beyond casual updates), given only 54.9% would like to use it "to discuss community issues," less than half (45.1%) would like to use social media "to discuss theological issues," and

then only 41.5% reported churches should use it “to discuss global issues.” Even lower, only 39.6% believe churches should use social media “to discuss national issues.” In fact, in the question that listed the possibilities of discussing community, theological, national, or global issues, 37.2% of respondents marked, “we should do some or all of these things but not with social media.” Therefore, this invites the questions, what sorts of ideas would the 71.6% like to discuss online? And, why are global issues more appealing than national ones?

The top two things US congregants would like churches to use social media for are “to learn about what missionaries are doing around the world” (75.1%) and “to learn about people in other places so we can pray for our world” (72.9%). Another popular response was that churches should use social media “to learn about people in other communities near and far” (72.9%). It appears US Christians primarily want to use social media to pray and keep up with other people’s lives (whether in their church, missionaries, or in communities in other places in the world).

However, 60% also believe churches should use social media “to advocate for social justice” and 59.9% “to raise money for good causes.” The numbers drop by approximately 10% and below half when it comes to churches using social media “to evangelize/share the gospel” (48.4%) or “to participate in peacemaking/reconciliation” (47.2%). For this question, 11.6% marked, “we should do some or all of these things but not with social media.” All of these are examples for how churches might use technology and social media for spreading information, building relationships, and garnering participation. It appears that it would be wise for church leaders and congregants to discuss these possibilities and decide together how each particular community might use social media for congregational, spiritual, and/or missional formation.

Connecting with each other, God, and the world

The survey asked congregants about what at their churches has helped them to connect with one another, God, and people outside of the church within the last year. Respondents could check all that applied. Unsurprisingly, the top answers related to helping congregants connect with *each other* were worship services (89.3%), ministry events such as potlucks or fairs (79.7%), volunteering at church (77.5%) and small groups (75.3%). It is impossible to tell whether worship services at the participant's churches are participatory. However, ministry events, volunteering, and small groups are generally all activities that require active participation and bidirectional (back and forth) activity where not just one person is talking, but everyone is engaged.

In an interesting turn, email was another popular answer with 69.8% of congregants marking this. Email was chosen more often than sermons (68.4%), Bible study (68.4%), or service activities (64.6%). More than half of respondents also chose Facebook (59.2%) which was checked more often than Sunday school/Christian Education (57.1%), eating in each other's homes (52.8%), and retreat/trip (47.3%). Also worth noting, 17.0% of respondents chose Instagram and 13.1% marked blogs.

The next question asked about what has helped congregants connect with *God* in the last year. Again, the top answers were expected with worship services (98.0%) and sermons (92.5%) being the most popular choices. However, is this because worship services and sermons are in fact the best ways most US Christians connect with God in their church or because congregants primarily attend worship services (over other possibilities on the list) or because participants *assume* these two things help them connect to God (or should) whether they in fact are most helpful or not? The survey does not ask how or why worship services and sermons connected congregants to God in the last year so this must be left to speculation.

Small group was marked by 70.2% of respondents and volunteering at church (69.5%), ministry events (66.4%), and Bible study (66.2%) were not far behind. Sunday school/Christian Education at 56.3% was marked far less than sermons or worship services. This may be because the participant's church does not have Sunday school/Christian Education or because many participants do not attend Sunday school/Christian Education at their church (as suggested above).

Again, email (47.4%) and Facebook (40.1%) were chosen by a considerable amount of participants as things that help them connect with God. Other questions in the survey may point to why this could be, as many participants explained that the information they receive on the Internet helps them to love God and/or others in response to an open-ended question. In addition, 78% reported their church used email to share announcements. Also, 40.9% marked that their church had a way of posting prayer requests online and 37.9% reported their church utilized Facebook messaging to have conversations with each other. Likewise, 36.6% reported that their church had a way to talk with other congregants from the church online and 24.7% marked that their church had a way of posting responses to the worship service online, all of which may contribute to feeling both connected to God and each other. Therefore, social media could assist churches with getting feedback and communication regarding sermons and worship services. Social media could also help churches to hear congregant concerns, prayer requests, and stories.

The survey also asked how often church leaders use social media during the week to connect with congregants. "Every week" was marked most often by 39.9% of respondents. However, when participants were asked how often they use social media to connect with leaders of their church, the most popular response was "never" with 31.9% choosing this answer. Then, when asked how often congregants use social media to connect with each other, 42.6% chose

“every week,” the post popular answer. Therefore, congregants connect with each other far more often than they connect with (or respond to) church leaders. It appears in the survey and both case studies that congregants are using technology to nurture relationships horizontally but not with leadership.

Next, the survey asked about what has helped congregants connect with *people outside the church* in the last year. This is where the top answer marked dropped considerably. Service activities was marked most often at 54.8% and ministry events (49.5%) was the second most popular answer. In fact, 14% of people marked, “My church does not help me connect with people that do not attend our church.” It appears churches are not quite sure how to use sermons (26.3%) or worship services (35.4%) to encourage people to connect with people outside of the church in the same ways churches use these two things to help congregants connect with God and each other.

Social media dropped significantly in popularity with this question too, though Facebook was marked by 24% and email was marked by 17% of participants. Part of a church’s work is to help congregants to attend to the world and their neighbors (missional formation), and it seems apart from serving others or throwing an event, churches are not quite sure how to help congregants do this.

Reflecting on Social Media Engagement

The survey asked participants both whether their church helps them to reflect on their social media use and whether congregants want their church to help them reflect on their social media use. Despite the fact that 77.2% of respondents check social media multiple times a day and another 11% check it once a day, the most popular response to both questions was “neither

agree or disagree.” Likewise, 17.3% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that their church should help them reflect on their social media use.

On the other hand, 67.2% of respondents reported that they have thought about the relationship between their social media use and Christian beliefs and 81.1% of participants claimed that their Christian beliefs impact the way they engage with social media. The significant difference between responses related to reflection and the church and reflection and the participant may point to pervasive expressive individualism in US culture. Respondents seemed to believe they are reflective people on their own, versus people who are reflective because of their Christian community.

Christian Formation

The ability to love God and neighbor online was related to information/gaining knowledge (especially information that inspires or broadens one’s perspective), praying for others, connection and communication, feeling encouraged online, sharing (thoughts, experiences, theology, gospel). There were approximately eighty people who said something like “I do not use social media for these purposes” (to love God or their neighbor), “I don’t know,” or “I don’t believe social media helps me do these things,” or a mix of each of these types of statements.

Participants responded to an open-ended question that asked, “Do you believe your social media use and your Christian formation are related? Why or why not?” Participants wrote a range of answers including, “not applicable,” “no, not at all,” “yes, in a negative way,” to “yes and no,” to “yes, because of the information provided,” “yes, because of how I use it,” and “yes, because everything is related to my Christian formation.”

Eight respondents wrote “not applicable,” which suggests they do not use social media. Twenty people said something like, “No, they are not related.” One person wrote, “My Christian formation is social media agnostic.” Another explained, “No. Those two aspects of my life are separate.” Then, four respondents were somewhat more specific about why their social media use and Christian formation are not related, explaining that social media is just a tool, and just like other forms of media, it has nothing to do with faith formation.

The next theme in this question (and a very popular category) was that the participant’s faith was formed elsewhere or was formed long before they started using social media. One person explained, “No. My relationship with God began way before social media took off. I strive to build my relationship with Him through His Word solely, and not by what others say or don't say on social media,” and another wrote, “I was a Christian for decades before I started using any social media.” Similarly, another person wrote, “My Christian formation did not happen because of social media, it was because of my foundation as a child when my heart for Christ was formed. I use social media to engage with others not to build and strengthen my faith.”

Then, there was a group of people who were skeptical of social media explaining that while it may provide access to resources or other Christians; it only “minimally” or “loosely” is related to their Christian formation. Five people wrote, “not really.” One person wrote, “Not really. The only times I feel like it contributes is when I read online articles that are educational/spiritual in some form. Otherwise, I would not say that they are integrated.”

Then, there were people who explained that they did not know what the question was asking, were unsure what “Christian formation” means or do not know if they are related. One

person wrote, “I have not given much thought to how they are related.” Another wrote, “probably. I’m not super sure how.”

Then, there was a significant group of people who believed social media is related to their Christian formation, but in a negative way. This group described social media as a “distraction,” “artificial,” a tool that is “disruptive of Christian formation,” and keeps people from connecting with one another face-to-face. Participants also described social media as causing them to compare themselves to other people and be too inward focused, or care too much about what others think.

Then, there were others in this category that believed Christians should be doing other things with their time such as engaging with “God centered interfaces.” One person wrote, “I think they are related, in that they function as oil and water. The more that social media is used, the more I think Christian formation is limited.” Another, “Yes. I think my Christian formation is negatively impacted by social media use. Facebook distracts me from being attentive to God in my life. I feel almost addicted to it. That cannot be God’s intention for my life.” One person explained, “Yes, social media does have the ability for the devil to take over.” Another wrote, “I bet a lot of people would be embarrassed to have everyone know their search history.”

There was another category of people who said something like “yes and no.” In this group, people suggested that social media could impact Christian formation, if used correctly or wisely. On the one hand it can “distract,” is potentially “isolating,” “addictive,” “affects anxiety levels,” and can “be used to hurt people,” and affect one’s discernment of “the moving of the Spirit” and might also “lead to sinful content.” On the other it “can be used to encourage” and “allows for information to be shared and community to be built.” A good representative of this theme wrote:

I am convicted to pray more for social issues when I have numerous friends posting about them. Alternatively, I am encouraged when friends post about their faith. I think I am also formed for the worse at times. There are often posts that make me struggle with my faith. For example, when friends end up in very intense and not uplifting arguments about faith or related issues on Facebook. Or being bombarded with information and ads on social media that play into a negative self-image make me struggle with my Christian formation and self-image.

Other respondents explained that social media can be related to Christian formation because it is a tool that can be used or should be used for good. These respondents explained that social media could help Christians spread the gospel, grow spiritually, be encouraged, connect with others, or have theological discussions. In addition, a large group of participants suggested that social media is related to Christian formation because of the information they get through it: “opportunities for service,” “theological articles,” “Christian blogs,” “daily devotionals,” “meditations,” “worship videos,” “podcasts for spiritual growth,” “formative YouTube videos.”

Congregants also explained social media allows them to follow other Christians such as popular bloggers, pastors, or theologians and they learn from them online and their faith is deepened or knowledge is expanded. Similarly, some respondents explained that social media is directly connected to their learning or growth as a Christian because they “learn a lot about God and faith through social media,” or it “provides for me a place to see from other perspectives that I would not normally be exposed to,” and “Brings perspectives and ideas about God, belief practice into focus” and/or they “discuss theological, social and political issues on social media.” Respondents also felt social media is related to their Christian formation because it connects them to other Christians.

There was a significant group of participants (approximately seventy people) who said either just “yes,” or “sure” or something similar to social media is related to their Christian formation because everything they do is related to who they are as a Christian. For example one

person wrote, “Yes, everything is related to my formation as a disciple of Jesus.” Six people wrote, “Yes-everything is part of my Christian formation.” Another said, “Absolutely, just like everything else in life. What we do affects who we are, who we are becoming.” Another explained, “Yes, they are related. My Christian life and formation includes every aspect of my life, behaviors and thoughts, the patterns of how I structure my day and spend my time.”

The most popular type of yes response was that social media is related to Christian formation because of how the respondent uses it. People explained that Christianity impacts the way they interact with social media and thus is related to their Christian formation. Many respondents wrote that the way they interact on Facebook is based on their Christian identity. Respondents in this category explained that their posts, the content they read, how they interact with others (i.e. their behavior online) is regulated by their faith and therefore, social media is related to their Christian formation. One person explained, “It's more of a reflection of my faith than a tool I use to grow it.” Another wrote, “I believe that our actions are related to our Christian identity, but that is related more to content than to actual social media use. I don't consider social media usage to be an outcome or formation to my faith.”

Many respondents discussed that online actions reveal whether someone is a Christian writing things like the following:

- “It should be obvious, even in my use of social media, that I am a Christ - follower.”
- “I am cognizant that I am a public witness to Jesus in these settings.” I have to make sure I correctly respond to issues in a way that reflects what I believe no matter what others are saying.”
- “Yes, because you have to be extra careful when conversing with someone online to be kind. It is a discipline.”
- Yes, because I believe others see how I act/interact and can relate that with me living a life more like Jesus
- “Before I post or share anything, I always consider how my words will reflect on my faith - I want what I say to point others to Christ, not see me as a hypocrite.”
- “I have to be careful about what I post or ‘like’ because I don't want people who do not know me well to think I'm a hypocrite I do t want to lose my witness so I'm careful.”

- “Yes it's about restraint, discernment, accountability and measuring my words carefully.”
- “Yes. I don't post vulgar stories on Facebook due to my Christian beliefs.”

The phrase “Christian formation” proved to mean many different things for participants: something that happened a long time ago, something that was formed without social media and is thus not impacted by it now, something that requires face-to-face interaction or church, Bible, prayer, something related to behavior (viewing good content, praying for people, being careful about posts/shares, being like Jesus online), information (theological content, awareness, multiple perspectives, learning), connection with other Christians, and something that is always happening because it is impacted by everything (e.g. actions, thoughts, behaviors, interactions, relationships, patterns).

Few people were able to describe how engaging in various practices, especially daily, consistently forms them as a Christian. Likewise, most participants named one dimension of Christian formation rather than seeing formation as multidimensional. Most participants were unable to describe how, over time, God through the power of the Holy Spirit, shapes a person to be a follower of Jesus socially, emotionally, physically, intellectually, and spiritually within Christian community. The relationship between social media engagement and Christian formation needs to be further studied.

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