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## Social Media and the Church

Danielle Nicolette Kelley

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Social Media and the Church

By: Danielle Kelley

Louisiana State University Honors College Thesis

Manship School of Mass Communication

Director: Dr. Lisa Lundy

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## **Executive Summary**

Born alongside the Internet, and coming of age simultaneously with the digital and mobile communication revolutions, millennials spend much time on screens for various reasons. Netflix entertains them, Pandora and Spotify sing to them, Google teaches them and social media profiles befriend them. Among these social media profiles are not only millennials' friends, but also their favorite celebrities, TV shows, news sources, restaurants and nonprofits. The best of these brands attempt to be authentic and create a sense of community. I noticed that few churches had their own social media accounts. Of the ones that held an online presence, the communication was typically one-way and not interactive. In other words, the few churches that did exist on social media generally did not present an engaging online community presence.

I began this project because I wanted to know why that feeling of community might exist within the confines of the physical church building but not the in the church's communication methods. To do this, I observed three churches with large millennial communities to figure out how those churches communicate with my generation via social media. I was curious why churches use social media, how churches use social media and what people wished to see on social media from their churches. From my research, I found that churches use social media to get people inside the physical church. They do this by mostly sharing events on social media. Church members enjoy being reminded about those events on social media, but they also wish to read about church programs, watch videos of sermons and be inspired by Bible verses.

## **Introduction**

Churches should not only exist on social media, but also provide compelling and engaging content to their congregations. This research covers why churches should have social media presences, how churches currently operate on social media and what parishioners want to see on social media from their church.

With multiple social media websites like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and LinkedIn, Internet users can connect with strangers across the continent or even the world. Many people are taking advantage of this opportunity. In fact, 73 percent of online adults use a social networking site, and 42 percent use multiple social networking sites (Duggan, 2013).

Social media is a way to influence followers, build connections with friends and form relationships with strangers. Of all the social media sites, Facebook proves to still be the most visited social media site, with 71 percent of those who use social media being on Facebook (Pew Research, 2013). Those who use Facebook are more trusting and have more close relationships (Pew Research, 2013). Interestingly, people over the age of 65 have increased their use of Facebook more than any other age group, from 35 percent using Facebook in 2012 to 45 percent using Facebook in 2013.

What does this mean for businesses, organizations, non-profits and churches on social media? First, it means the purpose of any organization on social media is to form relationships. The goal is not to sell, advertise, increase funds or increase attendance. While those goals can help be accomplished via social media, the ultimate goal is to build strong relationships with fans, friends and followers. While

for-profit organizations may use those relationships to increase sales, non-profit organizations use those relationships to bring the offline community online. For non-profits like churches, the challenge is not building the community – as it is already formed in the congregation – but to bring the physical community online. In other words, a church should use social media to make the relationships within the congregation even stronger than they are without social media.

Churches should stay in step with for-profit organizations when it comes to communication methods. The same communication tools are accessible to churches as are used by top corporations. As such, it makes sense for churches to avail themselves of tools that can help them engage congregants.

I observed three churches (Christ the King Catholic Church, The Refuge, Istrouma Baptist Church) during this research project. After initial secondary literature research, I then interviewed the pastor or priest of each church, as well as the churches' social media managers. Finally, I issued a survey for the churches' congregations.

After the interviews, I found that the churches are all on social media to reach as many people as possible, and because large numbers of people spend a lot of time on social networking sites. The churches also use social media because they grasp at any tool that could help spread their evangelical messages. All churches agreed that no group should be excluded in targeting messages. They want to reach as many people as possible because they feel a responsibility toward anyone that could possibly see their social media presence. All three churches use Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to promote their messages. All but Christ the King utilize

podcasts in addition to the three previous platforms. While no one should be purposefully excluded in targeting messages, churches should deliberately create messages with specific audiences in mind. In this way, the messages will be well perceived by different groups over a period of time, and the church will better reach “everybody.”

Leaders from all three churches agreed that the entire purpose of their presence on social media is to take the online community and build an offline community. In other words, they aim to get people in the doors of the physical church to build face-to-face relationships. Because they want to build offline community, the churches primarily use social media to promote events. Some use shareable graphics to promote the events, and some post photos after the event to recap and continue the conversation. Additionally, some churches post podcasts of sermons after Sunday for those who could not make it to church or who want to listen to the message again. Each church had a different stance on engagement. The Refuge doesn’t respond to any comments, positive or negative, while Istrouma responds to all comments. Christ the King typically responds via private message to give its social media a clean feel without clutter, or it will passively “like” comments and tags. All churches wanted to emit a warm, welcoming and accepting image via social media. Church leaders used their personal accounts to extend their churches’ ministries. One pastor uses Twitter to get feedback and help with sermons, while another uses Twitter to share relevant theology or lifestyle blogs and articles.

Of the 245 respondents who completed the survey, 82 percent attend Christ the King, The Refuge or Istrouma Baptist. Almost all have a Facebook account and

about 3/5 have a Twitter or Instagram account. More than half of the respondents said they use social media in relation to their church to be reminded about church events and to read about church projects, programs and/or mission opportunities. Almost half of respondents use social media in relation to their church to share community often or all of the time. However, almost all respondents said they never or rarely use social media in relation to their church to voice concern or criticism, and almost half of respondents never or rarely use it to show they are a part of the church community. Respondents said they like to see pictures, reminders of church events, Bible verses, podcasts of Sunday sermons and missionary updates on their churches' social media. Respondents answered they would most likely share or retweet their churches' posts dealing with church events, as well as inspirational quotes or Bible verses. Respondents overwhelmingly answered that they wished to see more inspirational posts or Bible verses on their churches' social media, as well as videos of sermons, events and worship. While most respondents knew whether or not their church published podcasts, few people actually download or listen to the podcasts. Respondents also use social media to follow their church leaders because they are friends in real life with their pastor or priest, and because they like reading the links the leader shares on his social media. Respondents also follow many other church leaders on social media, from pastor wives to the pope.

### **How can churches utilize social media?**

Before churches hop onto social media accounts, they should first make sure they have a written mission statement, content marketing strategy and website strategy, as laid out in Wise's communication pyramid. If a church doesn't have a



clear and concise mission statement or “Big Idea,” it should write one immediately. Once a Big Idea is established, the church should draft a content marketing strategy, which includes lists of what platforms the church will use to communicate its Big Idea, as well as a communication budget. Next, the church can create a website strategy and finally a social media strategy (Wise).



Once a social media strategy is drafted, churches should put it to work with two-way, symmetrical communication (Waters, 2011). This means all social media needs to be engaging, interactive and helpful. Some brands utilize social media with one-way communication, meaning the brand talks *at* its followers, and its followers do not talk back. Churches should instead use two-way communication by talking *with* its followers by fostering dialogue and continuing conversation. Posts should also be diverse when it comes to the type of message it is promoting. Lovejoy and Saxton suggest three different types of posts: information (ex: this event is at this time), community (ex: responding to a question about mission opportunities) and action (ex: volunteer at this service opportunity).

Based on survey answers, 28 percent of respondents did not know if their church produced podcasts and 30 percent of respondents download and listen to podcasts from other churches. Therefore, if a church produces a podcast, it should promote it on all social media channels so members are aware of the podcast and so members can download and listen to it easily. If a church does not produce a podcast, it should consider investing in producing one. Numerous people answered they would like to see more videos and podcasts of sermons, masses and worship ministries. Churches should fulfill the need of listening to God's Word when they ask for more of it. In addition to podcasts, respondents requested that churches share more inspirational quotes and Bible verses to encourage them throughout the week. One suggestion would be to post a scripture of the day.

It is also essential that churches share visual communication often, be it photos, videos or graphics. Many respondents answered they like sharing graphics with event information because that was how they invited their friends on social media to that event. Respondents also liked seeing their friends and family in photos and were more likely to share those images.

On top of the church using social media, church leaders should also utilize every social media available to them. Pastors and priests should consider using social media to engage with their flock and to share relevant information. When people want to read about God outside of Sunday services, the pastor or priest should be available to share blogs and articles relevant to their congregation. Whether leaders like it or not, people view pastors and priest on social media as an extension of the church's social media.

Because respondents said they mostly use church to be reminded about church events or to read updates about church projects, programs and/or mission opportunities, churches must continue to post these things. One way to do this is to promote an event a few days before, and to recap an event after with photos or video. Churches could also give updates about ongoing missions and programs in the city, across the nation and across the globe.

While it is essential to Christian belief to not exclude anyone in churches' communication methods, each post should target specific groups of people. For example, one picture on Instagram might target middle school Christian students to invite their classmates to youth group. Another post on Twitter might ask college students to retweet to raise awareness of a church service program, like free Thanksgiving meals. Another post on Facebook might include an uplifting Bible verse to encourage followers during their workweek. With this in mind, the church isn't excluding anyone, but intentionally reaching specific demographics.

## **Literature Review**

There is little literature on Christian churches on social media, and it is unclear why there is so little. Is there little literature because few churches are utilizing social media, or is it simply that few researchers have looked into religious organizations and their use of social media?

### **Social media platforms**

Out of the numerous social media platforms, the ones most studied are Facebook and Twitter. Facebook is a personal social media site where members are “friends” with their real-life acquaintances and “like” brands they buy, organizations they are part of, and places they visit. Members may post statuses, share links and upload photos and videos.

Twitter is a microblogging social media site where members share “tweets” containing 140 characters or less. Those tweets may include text, links, photos and videos. Tweets may also include hashtags. A common hashtag can link a tweet with dozens or hundreds of other tweets. This creates a marketplace of ideas, where members can converse with people across the globe with common interests.

The average Internet user spends about 4.6 hours on social media per week, and 91 percent of Americans age 18-34 have adopted social media. Because many people are on social media for an extended period of time, it is essential that churches reach their audiences on these platforms (Wise, 2014).

Americans who attend church regularly are more likely to share their faith online than those who don't attend regularly. A fifth of Americans share their faith publicly online, and nearly a half of Americans see others share their faith online.

While 20 percent of respondents said they share their faith online, 40 percent said they share their faith offline. Of the respondents, white evangelicals and black Protestants were more likely to share their faith online than people of other denominations (“Religion and Electronic Media” Pew Research Center).

### **Why churches should utilize social media**

Gone are the days when a stagnant website would suffice as enough digital information for a nonprofit. Nonprofits should utilize social media sites in order to inform their followers, bond with their followers and call their followers to action (Lovejoy, Saxton, 2012). “No longer can organizations allow information to remain static, but the information they provide must compete with many more voices in the vast online communities. (Auger, 2013, p. 370). While social media should not be a church’s only form of communication, it is an important platform that can increase audience reach and spread its messages. Social media is a way to serve customers, or in the church’s case, serve the congregation (Lovejoy, Waters, Saxton, 2012).

Justin Wise, author of *The Social Church*, explains that all church communication should be based on pyramid-levels. The most important levels are at the bottom. Only after a church accomplished the bottom level can it move up the pyramid and so on. Wise’s pyramid looks like this:



“The Big Idea” is a clear, concise statement about a church and what it stands for. “A simple Big Idea is specific to the community and the people within it. In other words, it should be engaging enough to appeal to an outsider yet border on nonsensical to those who don’t participate actively in the church community” (Wise, 2014, p. 129). A Big Idea is a short and simple mission statement for a church, and all communication strategies should be based on that Big Idea. If a communication strategy doesn’t center on a church’s mission statement, it is useless. Before embarking on any communication, a church must know its mission statement, or Big Idea. After deciding upon a Big Idea, a church can then move onto creating a content marketing strategy, which describes how a church communicates in broad terms. A successful content marketing strategy includes the media and platforms the church will use to promote the message, the target audience of the message and the estimated cost of implementing the message. After creating a content marketing plan, a church can then build a website strategy. Because many people only look at a website for 7-12 seconds until deciding whether to stay or leave the site, it is

essential the home page promotes the Big Idea to entice the audience to explore the site further. After creating a website strategy, a church can finally create a social media strategy. “An effective social media strategy is a by-product of a clear and compelling Big Idea.” (Wise, 2014, p. 131).

Wise explains that churches should use every method of communication at their disposal because of basic Christian theology. “God, in a word, is interactive” because “Immanuel” – one of Christ’s names – translates to “God With Us” (Wise, 2014, p. 68). Because Christians believe Jesus spent time on Earth to be with humans, churches should likewise be present where people are. In this case, churches should be on social media. Wise compares churches spreading Biblical messages on social media to Martin Luther printing Bibles in German. In both cases, the Bible is more accessible to the common people. When Luther printed the Bible, the church’s message was readily available to everyone instead of just the priests. Similarly, the church’s message today is readily available to everyone on social media and the Internet. People don’t necessarily have to go to the physical building of the church to hear the preaching of the Bible. Instead, they can watch live-broadcasts of sermons, listen to recorded podcasts and read theology blogs online. This is extremely convenient for those who cannot attend physical church because of illness or trips out-of-town. However, churches should simply exist on social media. Churches must understand what type of content people want to see on social media in order for churches to be successful on platforms.

Social media is also one of the most financially sound ways to communicate. It is free to manage almost all social media platforms. It may cost money to hire a

social media manager, but churches can rely on volunteers to manage social media if funds are tight (Curtis, 2010).

Social media is always changing, which makes it even more important to consider using the platforms. “As social media expands, it is essential for public relations practitioners to recognize the resourcefulness of these tools and take advantage of every available opportunity to effectively reach their publics.” (Curtis, 2010, p. 92).

Auger argues that nonprofits should use social media even more than for-profit organizations because nonprofits depend on volunteers and donations. “They also rely on general public support for their very existence.” (Auger, 2013, p. 369). Though these organizations may not have imagined a form of communication like social media in their creation, or even at the beginning of the millennium, they must adjust and adapt to the platforms. (Auger, 2013). The church started via word of mouth. Social media is no different than the church’s beginnings, except that the conversation is online rather than in person.

### **How churches should utilize social media**

Research by Waters and Jamal (2011) reveal that nonprofit organizations on Twitter are more likely to use one-way communication than the suggested two-way communication. Those organizations that did use two-way communication were also more likely to engage in asymmetrical communication than symmetrical communication. For example, organizations asked followers to complete surveys or get involved more so than asking for feedback. Many tweets also included links directing the followers to an outside site (Waters, 2011). However, the researchers



suggested that social media managers should consider if they are actually bonding with the followers on the outside sites, or if they should instead “engage in dialogue and foster relationship growth” on Twitter. Therefore, practitioners should consider two-way communication rather than focusing on one-way communication (Waters, 2011, p. 323).

Social media communication should also be “timely, responsive, persuasive and transparent to compete within this large marketplace of ideas.” (Auger, 2013, p. 370). Practitioners should also avoid “negative message characteristics that imply propaganda,” and instead use a “persuasive message structure.” (Auger, 2013, p. 374).

Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) said many successful nonprofits that utilize Twitter have three types of tweets: information, community and action. Of all the tweets they coded, 58.6 percent were informative, 25.8 percent built community and 15.6 percent asked from action. Information tweets simply shared news and facts. Community tweets gave recognition and thanks, and were also responses to other Twitter users’ tweets. Community tweets “foster relationships, create networks and build communities on Twitter though tweets that promote interactivity and dialogue.” Action tweets ask followers to join a cause, attend events or donate (Lovejoy, Saxton, 2012).

Bridges suggests churches could use Twitter to remind the congregation about services. “Twitter is not, however, a good place to discuss theological issues or answer any but the simplest questions.” (Bridges, 2013). He also suggests utilizing

YouTube by sharing brief videos explaining the Rosary, or interviewing the elderly to document an oral history of the church (Bridges, 2013).

## **Obstacles**

Even though research has shown that social media, if used effectively, can improve relations, some churches still don't use the platform. One reason is lack of resources like time and staff (Briones, 2011).

Some nonprofits don't use social media because it is difficult to gain approval and understanding from leaders, as they are typically from an older generation that does not understand the potential in the platform. In many nonprofits, the elderly make up the largest percentage of donors and volunteers. It is argued that because more older people donate and volunteer than younger people (who use social media), there is no point in wasting resources into this platform (Briones, 2011).

According to a New Theology Review article, more than half of the Catholic websites observed did not promote a social media presence (Bridges, 2013). Bridges concludes that priests have so many demands, they do not have the time to worry about managing social media. He suggests getting the youth involved, with appropriate adult supervision, because they typically know more about social media than priests and because the activity makes the youth feel useful (Bridges, 2013).

To gain approval, Bridges suggests producing a plan with well-produced examples and a way to measure effectiveness. He also suggests "several parishes might want to collaborate on a project by sharing equipment and expertise." (Bridges, 2013).

Another obstacle some might face is the argument that the message may be diluted because of the medium. Wise gives the example of the importance of a love letter from his wife. If his wife sends him an email telling him how much she loves him, he will smile and enjoy it. However, if his wife writes him a handwritten note with the same exact words, he will immensely enjoy it more because the medium matters more. “If the medium is the message, writing by hand is the slow cooker and social media is the microwave” (Wise, 2014, p. 106). So, while social media is important and accessible, it doesn’t have the same impact of being in a physical church community. However, Wise argues social media’s pros outweigh its cons. “If the one who cannot be bound by space, time, the Red Sea, or our religion, if the one who speaks through deceivers, donkeys and dead men, if God is the one who confounds death, surely he can find a way to speak through an Internet connection. Can he not?” (Wise, 2014, p. 111).

Building on the current research about social media and churches, the purpose of this study was to discover why and how people use social media in relation to their church to better enable churches in their social media messaging.

## Methods

There are many different ways to evaluate social media use in churches. In order to complete the most detailed and concise research, I decided to select three local Baton Rouge churches to observe and evaluate: Christ the King Catholic Church, The Refuge and Istrouma Baptist Church. These churches were selected because of their denominational diversity and young adult presence. Christ the King is a Catholic church, located across the street from LSU's campus. According to Christ the King Evangelization Director Jordan Koonce, about 2,000 people attend all the masses each week. LSU students make up a large portion of Christ the King's members. However, non-students attend Christ the King mass as well. The Refuge is the college ministry of a non-denominational church called The Chapel on the Campus. The Refuge is housed in the same building as The Chapel, which is located just outside the gates of LSU. Almost all of The Refuge's attendees are LSU students. The Chapel's College Pastor of The Refuge, Chris Cook, estimated that about 400 students attend Sunday services on average. Istrouma Baptist Church is a Southern Baptist church located in Baton Rouge about 15 minutes from LSU. Istrouma has a large college ministry, but the church caters toward people of all ages. Families also make up a large portion of the church. Istrouma Communications Director Laura Fuson said that about 2,000 people attend church weekly. Despite the differences in denomination, size and demographic make-up, all three churches agreed in many ways of how and why churches should use social media.

First, church leaders and social media managers were interviewed. The purpose of the interview was to understand fully why the church uses social media,

how the church uses social media, and if the social media plan is effective based on goals like church attendance or tithes received.

After in-depth interviews, a survey was sent to the respective congregations to discover how the congregants feel about the church’s social media presence and why they primarily follow their church on social media. As all three churches have strong and flourishing student and young adult ministries, and as millennials are known for using social media, it is important to understand whether or not these target outreach audiences are seeing the churches’ social media posts.

	Estimated weekly church attendants	Facebook followers	Twitter followers	Instagram followers
Istrouma Baptist Church	2,000	1,518	423	411
Christ the King Catholic Church	2,000	1,246	73	99
The Refuge	400	1,418	418	94

## Results

### Interview Results

#### **Churches use social media because “it’s where people are.”**

All three churches said they used social media because “it’s where people are,” as Istrouma Baptist Church Communications Director Laura Fuson said.

Istrouma Senior Pastor Jeff Ginn expanded and said churches should use every tool available to spread the Gospel.

“We’re in the communications business, as much as anybody,” Ginn said. “John 1 says, ‘in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ And then, ‘the Word became flesh,’ which of course is Jesus. We’re all about the Word and the message, so communication for us is essential in accomplishing the mission God’s given us.”

Christ the King’s Father Josh Johnson agreed. He said that churches should follow Jesus’s example and meet people where they spend time.

“Jesus met us where we were at, so we need to meet them where they’re at. A lot of our students are on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram – especially now more than a few years ago – so we try to make our presence known [on social media] so they know we’re there,” Johnson said.

Chris Cook, The Chapel’s College Pastor of The Refuge, further explained that churches should analyze not just which platforms people are using, but also how they are accessing those platforms. For instance, with the rise of mobilization, churches should look at mobile-friendly platforms.

“We’ve seen the change in devices. People aren’t sitting in front of computers anymore to connect. They’re on their phones, so [we prioritize] Twitter and Instagram before Facebook,” Cook explained. It is important to note that Cook’s congregation is composed of mostly college students, as The Refuge is the college division of the larger church, The Chapel.

### **Churches want to reach “everyone” on social media**

When asked whom they were trying to reach on social media, all churches responded, “everyone,” with some citing the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 16-20).

Johnson said he wants to communicate with “everybody” because he feels responsible for all he could come in contact with, especially those within his parish. Because LSU’s campus lies within his parish and Christ the King is located across the street from the gates of LSU, he specifically targets LSU’s students.

“We want to reach everybody because everyone was created with the capacity to receive the love of Jesus Christ – everybody. Particularly we target our students first and foremost. From there, we go broad,” he said. “We’re responsible for all these souls that are entrusted to us, whether they like it or not, so we pray for everybody.”

David Mills, The Chapel’s College Administrator, manages the social media for The Refuge. He held similar sentiments to Johnson, and cited The Refuge’s mission statement for his views. The Refuge’s mission statement is, “sharing Jesus with the world, beginning with the campus of LSU.” The Refuge is also located just outside LSU’s gates.

“Theoretically, I suppose [we want to reach] the world, beginning with the campus of LSU. In all actuality, we know that the availability of our information is not accessible to everyone. We’re trying to communicate to all of the undergraduate and graduate students on LSU’s campus,” Mills said.

Istrouma Baptist also tries to reach “everyone,” but Fuson targets different audiences with each post. For example, she targets middle school and high school students on Instagram, college students and young men on Twitter, and grandparents and young moms on Facebook.

“There are those who say, ‘if you try to hit everybody, you hit nobody,’ and I understand the sentiment of that, but I don’t see how you can exclude anyone,” Ginn said.

However, while churches want to reach “everybody” on social media, each post should be particularly tailored and planned toward a specific audience. As Wise says in his personal blog, “Social networks are not digital billboards. They are not one-way channels meant to blast information into the faces of people connected to those channels.” By targeting specific audiences in different posts instead of broadcasting to anyone who will listen, churches will be more successful in trying to reach as many people as possible (JustinWise.net).

### **Social media should reflect the church’s mission statement**

As stated in *The Social Church*, churches should first have a concise mission statement, and then structure the content marketing strategy, website strategy and social media strategy around the “Big Idea” (Wise, 2014).



Christ the King's mission statement is longer than the other two churches', but it is all-encompassing: "Christ the King Parish is a diverse, international community, formed to be a living ministry of Jesus Christ among persons on the campus of Louisiana State University and in the Diocese of Baton Rouge. Mindful of the mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ through the Roman Catholic Church, we actively, publicly profess our faith through worship and evangelization; nurture our faith through educational and formational opportunities; promote social justice; foster unity, charity, and respect for all legitimate expressions of our Catholic Tradition; create an environment that is safe, hospitable, and welcoming to all." Johnson said Christ the King shares mass and other church events' times on social media to invite other to partake in worship. Christ the King's Evangelization Director Jordan Koonce, who manages the church's social media, said she likes to nurture the congregation's faith by sharing fun facts about the Bible or the Catholic Church.

"On social media [we] throw in some fun facts, whether it be about the Bible or a saint or church history, so students can learn more. For example, 'man crush Monday' might by Pope John Paul II," Koonce explained.

Istrouma Baptist's mission statement is, "We glorify God by making disciples of all nations." Ginn said he actively avoids mission drift – when people forget what an organization's end goal is – by sharing the mission statement in numerous ways. His sermons center around the mission statement, and the mission statement is even painted in five-foot tall letters on the church building's wall. To Ginn and Fuson, social media is another way to share the mission statement. Istrouma's

sermon podcasts, baptism videos and children's camp highlight videos have been downloaded in more than 75 countries.

"We know that Istrouma's information and Istrouma's stories of life change are going all over the globe. In that way we are getting to all the nations," Fuson explained.

As stated earlier, The Refuge's mission statement is, "sharing Jesus with the world, beginning with the campus of LSU." Mills used the analogy of the trellis and the vine, as made popular by Colin Marshall and Tony Payne's book, "The Trellis and the Vine."

Mills explained that the vine represents the spirit of God and His people, while the trellis is "systems and structures we use to help facilitate and implement ministry. One can operate without the other, but the two in conjunction work better. Social media has been a part of that trellis, a track on which we can get information out to people, tracks on which we can get information out to people." Cook further explained that social media is a tool to get people in the door to communicate face-to-face with others and form community.

"Social media forges the opportunity to connect with an audience and bring them in to things we have going on, where there's actual people who can share the Gospel and can communicate who Jesus is," Cook said. "We use it to mobilize people who are drawn to different events and environments."

### **The point of social media is to build offline community**

All churches agreed that offline community is preferable to online community, though social media has the ability to bring people into the physical

building of the church, much like the trellis and the vine analogy. The Refuge built an app with the goal of bringing people into smaller and smaller groups and communities. Cook believes that personal invitations are more effective than being invited to church by a church's social media account. He said the only people who would come on their own to The Refuge for the first time are already actively involved Christians, and he's more interested in reaching non-believers than those who already attend a local church.

"One of the things we care most about is getting people into smaller groups of people. We believe life change happens in circles, not rows. We believe that life change happens best in real life, not the interwebs," Mills said. "That's one of the ways we designed the app: find a small group, find where they are, who is leading them, how to get in contact with them... It does various things, the things we care the most about, which is getting people in environments where the Holy Spirit can work. That happens best in small groups."

Similarly, Johnson said Christ the King's social media posts are all about building offline community. "The ultimate purpose [of social media] is salvation of souls, to be honest with you. That's what we're here for. It's all just a means to an end," Johnson said. "If we post a social event that has nothing to do with Jesus, it's so people can form community. You can learn God from your neighbor... The end goal is to aid them in their walk toward eternity."

Johnson further explained that Christ the King posts event notices on social media to encourage members to get involved in church and utilize their spiritual gifts. Christ the King shares times of praise and worship, adoration, Bible studies

and chant and prayer happen to encourage people to meet inside the church to worship God. “Whatever you feel called to, whatever you want to get plugged into to get closer to Jesus, [we post it],” Johnson said.

Ginn of Istrouma also agreed. “I would think [social media’s purpose] is primarily to, if possible, to connect people to the body life. Actually, we want them to become a part of who we are and to connect with us,” Ginn said.

### **Churches utilize Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and more**

All three churches utilize Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The Refuge and Istrouma Baptist both publish podcasts, and Istrouma uses Vimeo. All three church social media managers have complete jurisdiction over social media and don’t need permission to post. Istrouma has multiple social media accounts for its separate ministries (children’s ministry, students’ ministry, college ministry, etc.). Fuson is an administrator for those accounts, but allows the respective departments to post to those accounts as they please. None of the churches have a hashtag for the church. Christ the King used the hashtag #makemassmatter after a church member was inspired to create the hashtag after a mass series of the same name. After Christ the King used the hashtag, it caught on and other members used it as well. The Refuge considered creating a hashtag based on an upcoming sermon series; the idea was similar to Christ the King’s, but both came up with the idea separately.

### **Churches use social media to promote events**

All churches mostly use social media to promote events, but some go beyond that and post photos, videos and links. Each church had a different opinion on how to engage and respond to people on social media. Istrouma responds to all

comments publicly, Christ the King responds to comments via private message, and The Refuge responds to no comments. Christ the King only responds via private message in order to keep a “clean” social media page, and The Refuge doesn’t respond to comments because leaders would rather “face-to-face” interaction instead of “screen-to-screen” interaction. However, leaders at The Refuge are currently reevaluating that strategy.

Istrouma uses social media to primarily promote and recap events. The church also posts photos, graphics and links to Vimeo videos, ticket purchasing sites and newspaper articles about the church. Fuson said she reminds the followers of Sunday worship times, and also posts podcasts of the Sunday sermon afterward.

“I post anyone’s photos I can get my hands on. I love putting photos on social media. They get the best play. They get the best return, especially photos of people’s precious little children and grandchildren, because that’s what they like to share and comment on,” Fuson said. She also engages with the followers by responding “to everything – positive or negative.”

Christ the King also posts mostly events on its social media. The church also posts “fun trivia facts or informational things about the church or an inspirational scripture verse.” For example, the church utilizes popular Internet trends like “#MCM” (Man Crush Monday) and “#WCW” (Woman Crush Wednesday) with Biblical figures or saints.

Christ the King passively “likes” comments and tags. When someone asks a question on the church’s social media, Koonce said she will send the answer in a private message to keep the pages “clean and user-friendly.” Koonce posts graphics

created by students, and will encourage the congregation to share their own pictures from events. For example, one congregation member posted an Instagram photo of Bible study. Later, a friend contacted the congregation member about how to get involved in that Bible study; the friend now attends the Bible study.

The Refuge only uses social media to promote events. Typically, the church doesn't respond to positive, negative or neutral comments. However, church leaders are currently reevaluating whether to engage via social media.

"We want face-to-face, eyeball-to-eyeball, breathing-in-the-same-room interaction. The more that Refuge as an entity interacts from screen-to-screen, it feels like there's people who are less likely to have the want or need... to be face-to-face or eyeball-to-eyeball. 'I got my question answered via Twitter, so there's no need for me to come in,'" Mills said.

### **What image of their church they want to be perceived**

When asked what image of their church they want to be perceived on social media, all church leaders used similar adjectives: accessible, open and welcoming.

Cook hopes people see The Refuge as an accessible community. "I want people to feel like The Refuge is an accessible environment in which they can go find answers to life's questions, and that myself and the rest of the staff are accessible," he said. He further explained that he wants people to see that The Refuge is providing an "opportunity for them to connect" to a community.

Johnson said he wishes people could see on social media that Christ the King is "informative" and "intentional." He also said that he wants people to know that the members of Christ the King are "disciples" just by looking at the church's social

media. Koonce added that she wants people to perceive Christ the King as “relevant,” “open” and “intentional.” She also wants people to see that Christ the King preaches that “faith matters. We don’t want to be wishy-washy.”

Fuson said she wants people to see Istrouma as a “welcoming” place with a community for each person. She referenced numerous ministries and classes for people of all ages and marital statuses, as well as specific classes for people going through rough times in life.

“Maybe if you’ve even had a bad experience with church before, maybe church is different than what you remember it. That church is here for you at Istrouma, and it might be different than what you remember,” she explained.

Ginn further explained that he wishes people see Istrouma as a “warm” place where you can find a “family of faith.”

“We’re trying to portray a warm image, an accepting image, a cordial image,” Ginn said. He said he also hopes people see that Istrouma is “fun,” “Christian” and “contemporary.” “We’re not archaic. We’re in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not the 19<sup>th</sup>.”

### **Should church leaders have personal accounts?**

All three church leaders have personal Facebook and Twitter accounts. Istrouma’s Ginn also manages his personal Instagram account.

Ginn uses his social media to connect with his congregation and even get help to write his sermons. For example, he asked on Twitter what subjects people pay too much attention and energy to that do not have any actual worth. Because his Twitter is linked to his Facebook, he got dozens of responses on both Twitter and Facebook. He even used some of the comments in his Sunday sermon.

Johnson uses his personal accounts to get to stay in touch with his congregation. Once, he even used it to be a peacemaker. When two people began to argue theology on a Facebook post he was tagged in, he quieted the battle by encouraging them to message him privately for his thoughts.

“For some reason, people like to argue over the Internet – something they wouldn’t say to someone’s face. Let’s just squash this right now. Everything got settled,” he explained.

Cook only uses his Twitter account because of his position in Refuge. In fact, a member of his congregation even began the account for him. Cook further explained that he particularly likes to share relevant religious blogs, as well as interesting news articles from news sources that his congregation typically doesn’t read, like the BBC instead of Fox News or CNN.

“I wouldn’t be on Twitter if it wasn’t for The Refuge. I’ll use my Twitter handle differently than The Refuge Twitter handle will. I put more personal stuff... to make myself more accessible to them,” Cook said. “Every once in a while, I’ll tweet Bible verses. I see it less as people caring that much about my life, but when I see articles or e-books I like, I love to find them and retweet them.”



## Survey Results

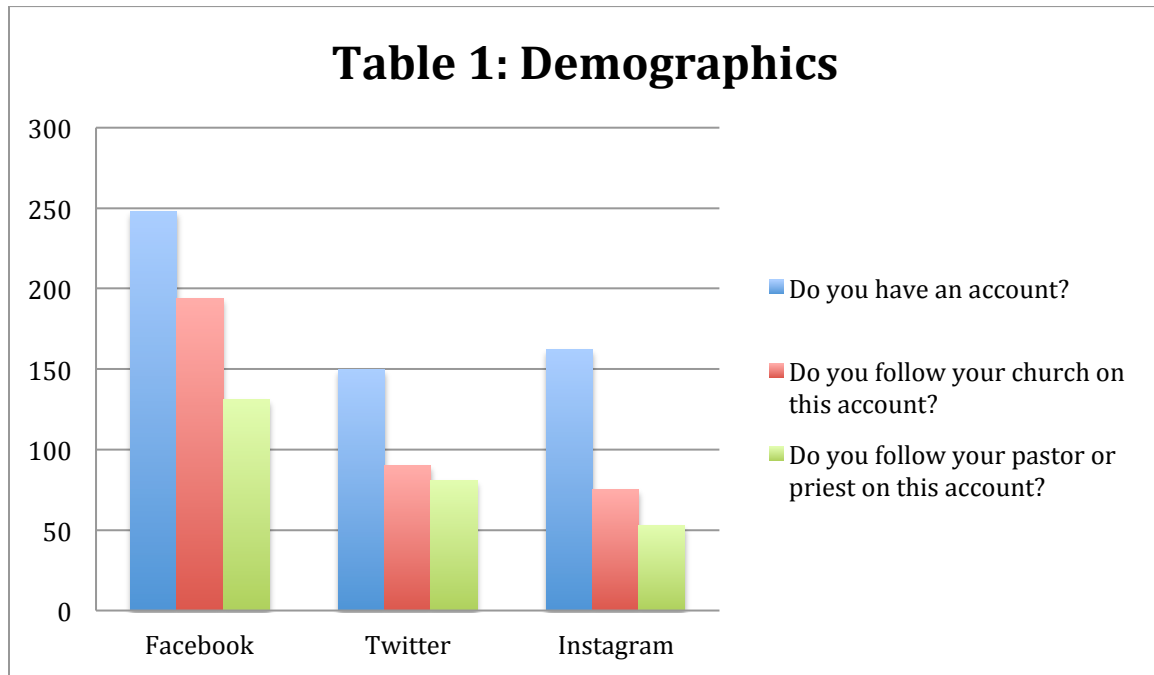
### **Demographics**

About 245 respondents completed the survey in whole. Of those 245, 30 percent were male and 70 percent were female. Thirty-three percent were age 18-22; 10 percent were 23-29; 16 percent were 30-39; 18 percent were 40-49; 13 percent were 50-59; 7 percent were 60-69 percent; and 2 percent were 70 and older. Of the 245 respondents, 34 percent were college students and 66 percent were not college students.

Fifteen percent of those surveyed attend The Refuge, 18 percent attend Christ the King, 50 percent attend Istrouma Baptist and 18 percent attend a different church. The vast majority of respondents attend church regularly; 32 percent attend church more than once a week, 53 percent attend once a week, 11 percent attend 2-3 times a month, 1 percent attend once a month and 2 percent attend less than once a month.

Almost all respondents (95 percent) have a Facebook account, and more than half have a Twitter account (57 percent), an Instagram account (62 percent) or a Pinterest account (57 percent). Thirty-seven percent have a YouTube account, 12 percent have a Vine account, 9 percent have a Tumblr account and 7 percent write on a different blogging site. Half the respondents check Facebook multiple times a day, and more than a quarter (26 percent) check Facebook daily. Twenty-one percent of respondents check Twitter multiple times a day, and 11 percent check Twitter daily. Ninety percent of respondents follow their church on Facebook, 42 percent follow their church on Twitter, and 35 percent follow their church on

Instagram. Half of the respondents are Facebook friends with their pastor or priest, 31 percent follow their pastor or priest on Twitter, and 20 percent follow their pastor or priest on Instagram.



**Why do people follow their church on social media?**

When asked why they follow their church on social media, more than half of the respondents (51 percent) answered they like to be reminded about church events often or all of the time. More than half (50.8 percent) answered they often or always use social media in relation to their church to read about church projects, programs and/or mission opportunities. Almost half (46 percent) answered they use social media in relation to their church to share community often or all of the time.

Nearly all respondents (94.2 percent) said they never or rarely use social media in relation to their church to voice concern or criticism. Almost half of

respondents (48.8 percent) said they never or rarely use social media in relation to their church to show they are a part of the church community.

When asked how often they use social media in relation to their church to get Biblical inspiration, respondents gave a diverse mix of answers. Thirty-two percent answered often or all of the time, 30 percent answered sometimes, and 37.9 percent answered never or rarely.

**Chart 1: I use social media in relation to my church... to be reminded about church events**

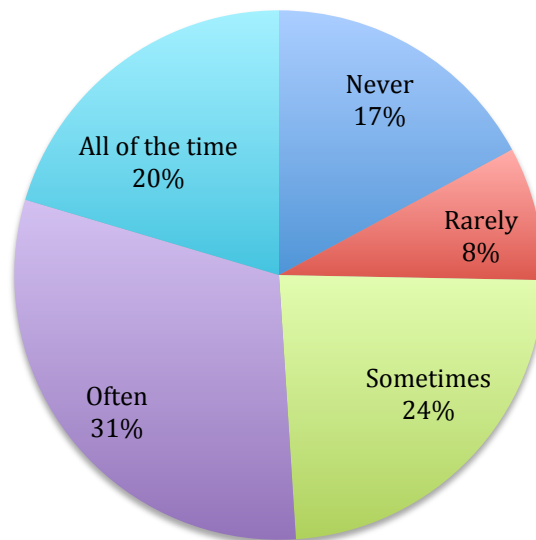


Chart 1 reinforces that churches are doing right when they post event-heavy information. Fifty-one percent of respondents answered they like to be reminded about church events on social media often or all of the time. Churches should continue to post event details on social media to give their followers the information they need and want.

**Chart 2: I use social media in relation to my church... to read about church projects, programs and/or mission opportunities**

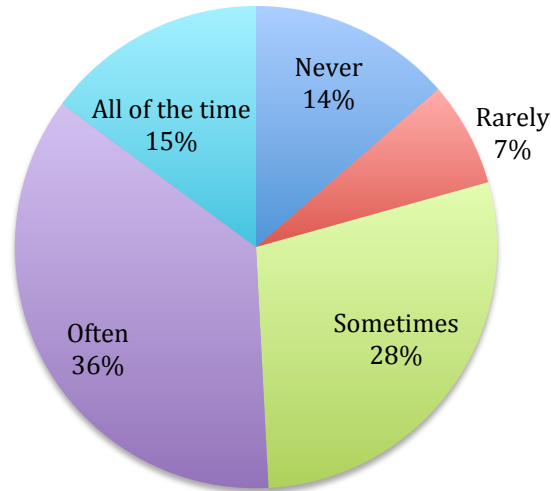


Chart 2 shows that people want to stay updated on what the church and its members are doing for the community. Churches should share updates on its missionaries, service and community events.

**Chart 3: I use social media in relation to my church... to voice concern or criticism**

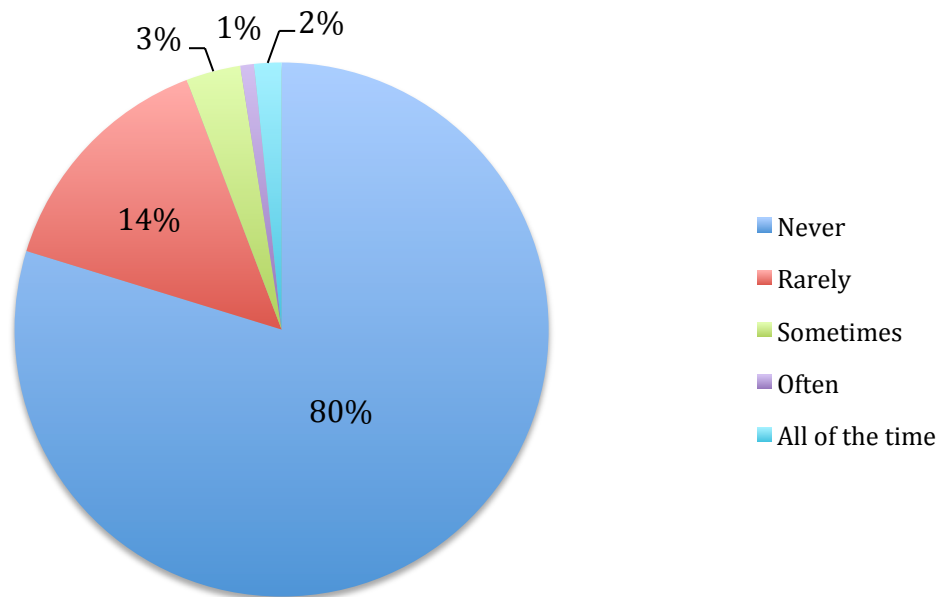


Chart 3 shows that hardly anyone uses social media in relation to their church to voice concern or criticism. This chart argues that churches concerned about negativity on their social media should not worry. Therefore, all churches on social media should be open and allow their followers to comment and post freely on the accounts.

**What do people want to see on their church’s social media?**

When asked what content their church currently posts that they enjoy, respondents overwhelmingly answered that they enjoy event reminders, event recaps and photos. Below are some examples of why they enjoy pictures:

- “Pics of my kiddos at different activities”
- “Pics of events to show that they are fun”





When asked what content they would like to see more of in their church's social media, respondents answered inspirational quotes or Bible verses more than anything else. One respondent even answered simply, "Less announcements, more Bible." Others gave similar answers:

- "Encouraging posts"
- "Spiritual encouragement during the week"
- "Inspiration or encouragement that refers to the last lesson taught"
- "A daily Bible verse or inspirational quote"
- "More encouraging words, pictures"
- "Continuous/more uplifting things whether it be a Bible verse or something encouraging."

Another respondent went into more detail and answered, "Online Bible studies that we could all do at our own pace, and then post our answers to a board or blog to share with others. Also, a place to post questions about Bible scriptures. Sometimes as I'm reading, I don't understand what the passage is saying. It would be great to have a place to post that question and one of the pastoral staff members post a response." Respondents also requested more access to Sunday sermons and masses. One suggested a live stream of mass, another suggested "weekly sermon summaries and links to downloads," and yet another suggested "more of a continuation of the message from Sunday's service."

Some respondents even asked for "podcasts of events other than the Sunday message," particularly music and worship ministries. See their answers below:



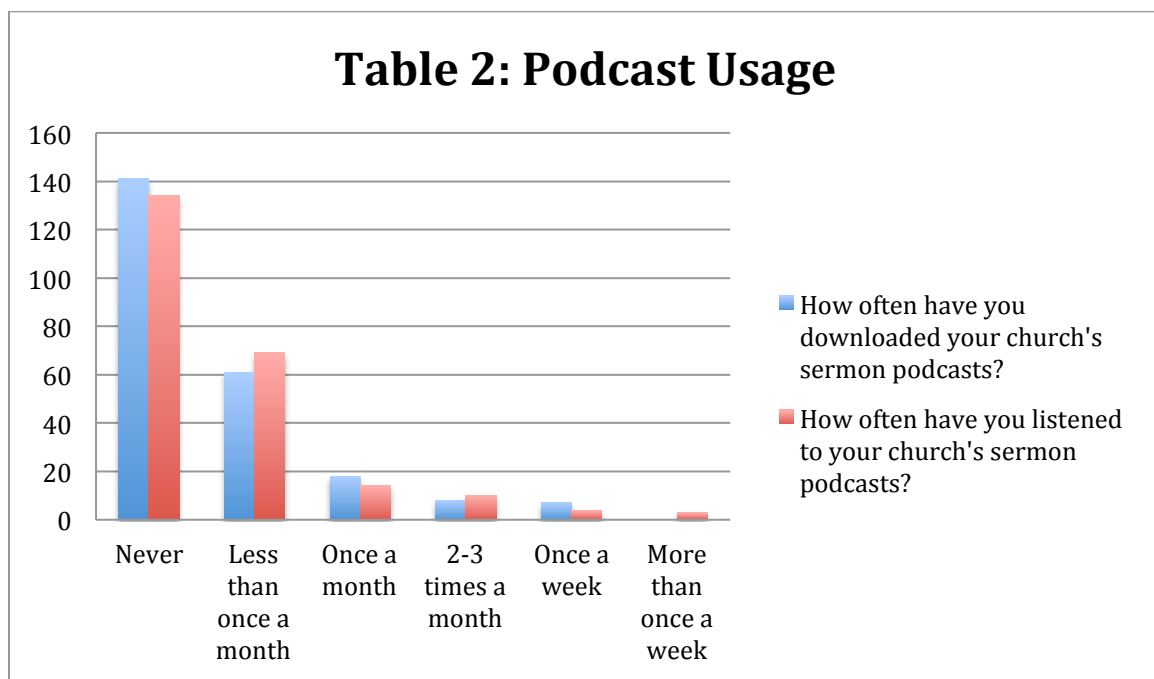
- “It would be nice if the church’s music program and sermons were available for online access and/or download.”
- “Recordings of praise and worship from services”
- “Video footage of worship ministry”

Multiple respondents requested more access and publicity the English as a Second Language (ESL) program for their church, as well as more updates of the church’s missionaries around the world. Some respondents suggested blogs and articles from church leaders, church members and even “other church’s or pastor’s tweets, posts and videos.” Similarly, respondents requested that their church share relevant blogs and articles about Christianity in general, even if someone outside the church wrote it. Finally, people suggested the churches continue to post event reminds and recaps, along with photos of events. One respondent asked for a graphic or flier promoting events so he or she could share the invitation with friends.



or once a week. Twenty-nine percent said they listened to their church’s podcast less than once a month.

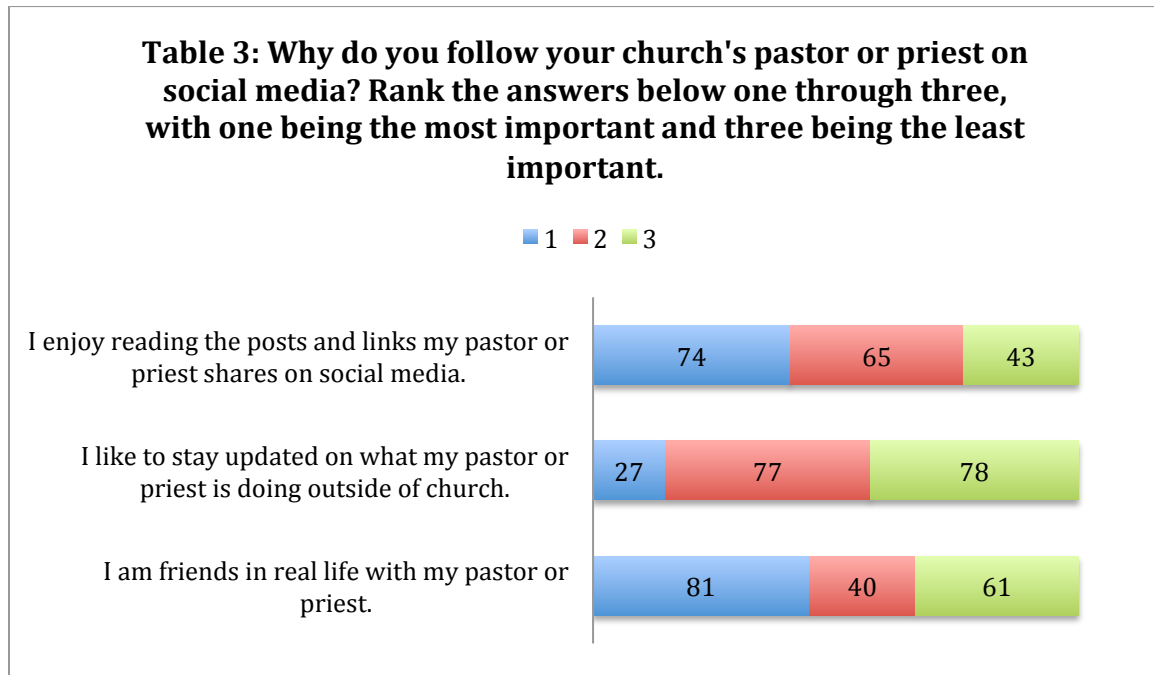
Despite the fact that few respondents listened or downloaded their own church’s podcasts, 30 percent of respondents download and listen to other church’s podcasts. It is unclear whether that 30 percent download other church’s podcasts because their church doesn’t produce podcasts, because they are unaware that their church produces podcasts, or because they just want more Biblical inspiration on top of their church’s podcasts. It is also possible people don’t listen to sermon podcasts because they already heard the sermon during Sunday church services, or because the podcasts are too long.



**Why do people follow their pastor or priest on social media?**

The No. 1 reason 44.5 percent of respondents say they follow their pastor or priest on social media is because they are friends in real life with the leader. The No. 1 reason 40.7 percent of respondents say they follow their pastor or priest on social

media is because they like reading the links the leader shares. Only 14.9 percent of respondents said the No. 1 reason they follow their pastor or priest on social media is because they like to know what the leader is doing outside of church.



It is interesting to note what percentages of respondents follow their church and follow their pastor or priest on different platforms. Of the respondents who are on Facebook, 78.2 percent follow their church on Facebook, and 52.8 percent of respondents who are on Facebook are Facebook friends with their pastor or priest. Sixty percent of respondents who are on Twitter follow their church on Twitter, and 54 percent of respondents who are on Twitter follow their pastor or priest on Twitter. Of the respondents who are on Instagram, 46.3 percent follow their church on Instagram, and 32.7 percent of people who are on Instagram follow their pastor or priest on Instagram.

It should be noted that all three church leaders of The Refuge, Istrouma Baptist and Christ the King manage their own Facebook and Twitter accounts, while

only Ginn has an Instagram account. That might explain why only 32.7 percent of respondents who have an Instagram account follow their pastor or priest on Instagram, though that correlation cannot be proved.

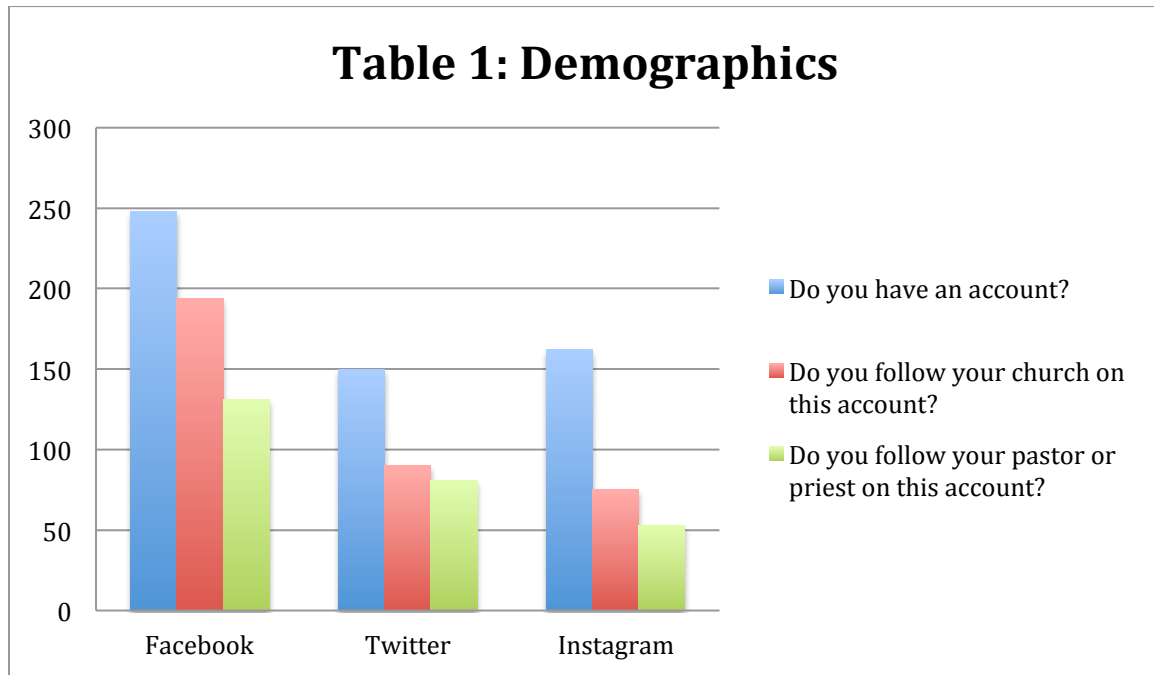


Table 1 is also seen on page 32

Respondents not only follow their main priest or pastor on social media, but also other ministry leaders. In fact, 68.7 percent of people follow other church leaders on social media. Student/youth minister was most popular with 44 percent of respondents saying they followed them, then music/worship minister at 39 percent and college minister at 37 percent. Respondents also followed children’s ministers, women’s ministers, men’s ministers, elders, mission’s leaders, pastors’ wives, associate pastors and the pope.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

### **What platforms should churches be on and why?**

The majority of churches should have accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. If the church wishes to reach people of all ages, it should not exclude any of these three platforms. Churches should aim to reach all audiences, so it is essential to be on these platforms. While churches wish for every single person to read their social media posts, that is not logistically possible. Therefore, posts should be targeted toward specific demographics. With the combination of all the posts and different audiences in mind, the church will in essence reach “everyone.” Facebook can be used to reach nearly everyone on social media, but each post should have an audience in mind. For example, social media managers should write posts in mind for young moms, college students, grandparents and other target audiences. Twitter can be used to primarily reach college students, young men and businesses, and Instagram can be used to communicate with middle school, high school and college students. Use images on Instagram that would resonate with each individual audience.

### **What types of posts should churches share?**

Respondents primarily use social media in relation to their church in order to be reminded about events and to stay updated on what the church is doing. Therefore, churches should promote events days in advance and provide constant updates on church programs, services and mission opportunities. Additionally, respondents wished to see more inspirational posts, including daily Bible verses, as well as podcasts, photos, blogs and videos. In order to evenly spread these posts out,

create monthly content calendars. Respondents particularly like sharing graphics with event details as a way to invite their social media friends to the event. Or, if managers are promoting a Sunday sermon or mass, they share the Bible verses that will be preached before Sunday. After the event, send out recap posts. Recap posts can include photos of the event, a video synopsis of the event or even a blog post about the event. If sermons are recapped on social media, include a link to download a podcast of the full sermon.

If the church has a podcast, promote it. Nearly 30 percent of respondents were unsure whether their church produced a podcast. About the same number of respondents downloaded and listened to podcasts produced by other churches. People want to listen to podcasts, so if a church does not produce a podcast, it should consider starting one. It can simply be a recording of Sunday sermons or masses, or even the ministerial team discussing a Bible passage.

If the church has a blog, promote it. Respondents said they enjoyed reading their leaders' and fellow church members' take on different Biblical issues and ways to live a Christian life. Blogs can include Bible studies, event recaps, church member testimonials or anything that promotes God and the church. If a church does not have a blog, it should consider starting one. At the very least, share links on the church's social media of outside relevant blogs and articles.

In addition to promoting podcasts and blogs on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, churches should also promote those three social media platforms in as many ways as possible. Links to the sites should be included in church-wide emails

and printed publications. Widgets of the platforms should be included on the homepage of the church website.

People will interact with churches on social media, and will expect quick responses from the church just like they would from any other organization. Respond to all comments, positive, negative or neutral. Responses should be open to the public to foster a welcoming and helpful social media presence.

### **Leaders as an extension of the church**

Church members view pastors and priests as extensions of the church, so leaders should use their personal social media accounts as such. First, it should be known that people are always watching. Just as a pastor or priest would hold himself to the highest standard in the community, he should also hold himself to the highest standard on social media. Many respondents follow their church leaders on social media because they are either friends in real life with the leaders or because they enjoy reading the articles and blogs the leaders share. Pastors and priests should not be afraid to share blogs on theology and Christian life practices, or even articles about social justice and Christianity across the world. Church leaders can also use social media to their own personal advantage. By asking for help with sermons and masses on social media, congregations will give feedback and answers. Leaders should engage with church members on social media just as they would engage with them in the church's walls.



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## Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. What church do you attend?

- The Refuge
- Christ the King Catholic Church
- Istrouma Baptist Church
- Other

2. How often do you attend church?

- Less than once a month
- Once a month
- 2-3 times a month
- Once a week
- 2-3 times a week

3. What social media accounts do you have?

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Pinterest
- Vine
- YouTube
- Tumblr
- Blogging site

4. How often do you check Facebook?

- Never

- Once a month
- 2-3 times a month
- Once a week
- 2-3 times a week
- Daily
- Multiple times a day

5. How often do you check Twitter?

- Never
- Once a month
- 2-3 times a month
- Once a week
- 2-3 times a week
- Daily
- Multiple times a day

6. On what social media accounts do you follow your church?

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- YouTube
- Vimeo
- Blog

7. Are you Facebook friends with your pastor or priest?

- Yes

- No
- I do not have a Facebook account.

8. Do you follow your pastor or priest on Twitter?

- Yes
- No
- I do not have a Twitter account.

9. Do you follow you pastor or priest on Instagram?

- Yes
- No
- I do not have an Instagram account.

10. What other church leaders do you follow on social media?

- Music/worship minister
- College minister
- Children's minister
- Student/youth minister
- Women's minister
- Men's minister
- None
- Other

11. Why do you follow your church's pastor or priest on social media? Please rank the answers below one through three, with one being the most important and three being the least important.

- I am friends in real life with my pastor or priest.

- I like to stay updated on what my pastor or priest is doing outside of my church.
- I enjoy reading the posts and links my pastor or priest shares on social media.

12. Do you know whether or not your church produces podcasts?

- Yes, my church produces podcasts.
- No, my church does not produce podcasts.
- I do not know if my church produces a podcast.

13. How often have you downloaded your church's sermon podcasts?

- Never
- Less than once a month
- Once a month
- 2-3 times a month
- Once a week

14. How often have you listened to your church's sermon podcasts?

- Never
- Less than once a month
- Once a month
- 2-3 times a month
- Once a week
- More than once a week

15. Do you download and listen to other church's podcasts?

- Yes

- No

16. I use social media in relation to my church...

- To be reminded about church events (never, rarely, sometimes, often, all of the time)
- To get Biblical inspiration (never, rarely, sometimes, often, all of the time)
- To read about church projects, programs and/or mission opportunities (never, rarely, sometimes, often, all of the time)
- To share community (never, rarely, sometimes, often, all of the time)
- To show I'm a part of the church community (never, rarely, sometimes, often, all of the time)
- To voice concern or criticism (never, rarely, sometimes, often, all of the time)

17. What content would you like to see more of in your church's social media?

18. What content does your church currently post that you enjoy?

19. What kind of social media content from your church are you most likely to share or retweet?

20. Are you a college student?

- Yes
- No

21. What is your age?

- Under 18
- 18-22
- 23-29
- 30-39

- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60-69
- 70 or above

22. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female



## **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

1. What is your name and full title at this church?
2. What drew you into the ministry?
3. How long have you been in the ministry? At this church?
4. What communication methods does your church use to reach the church members?
5. What communication methods does your church use to reach outsiders?
6. Who is in charge of those communication methods?
7. What social media accounts does your church use?
8. Why did you decide to utilize social media?
9. When did you start using those accounts for the church?
10. What is the purpose of social media in this church?
11. What is the church's mission?
12. How does social media affect that mission?
13. Who are you trying to communicate with on social media?
14. Do you respond to positive messages, posts, comments or tweets?
15. Do you respond to negative messages, posts, comments or tweets?
16. What topics are discussed on social media?
17. What links do you share on social media?
18. What photos do you share on social media?
19. Does anyone have to approve social media posts or does the social media manager have sole jurisdiction?
20. What image of your church are you trying to portray on social media?