

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR EVANGELISATION: A CASE OF FULL GOSPEL CHURCHES OF KENYA (FGCK)-MERU COUNTY

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Abstract

The study's objective was to analyse the use of social media in evangelisation. The study employed a descriptive research design to seek information from various congregants. Interview guides, observation schedules, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and questionnaires were used to collect data. The clergy and lay leaders were interviewed, and the congregants of different age groups filled out questionnaires. Key informants were selected by the use of a purposive sampling technique coupled with stratified random sampling. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, whereas descriptive quantitative data analysis was performed in SPSS 21. The results indicated that social media had been used for evangelisation through ICT tools such as mobile phones and computers. However, the use of social media for evangelisation has been faced with various challenges, including lack of internet connectivity, misuse of social media by non-Christians through posting of pornographic materials and unavailability of ICT tools. Some proposed ways of mitigating these challenges include educating Christians on the proper use of social media for evangelisation and maintaining active Gospel-based church websites.

Key terms: Social media, evangelisation.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Despite the great potential that social media offers for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of operations in Christian society, several challenges have prevented the wider adoption and use of social media (Moberg, 2018). Technology always has both bad and good effects (Bainbridge, 2012). One of the major negative effects of Technology is that it has displaced traditional culture to our great harm (Sims, 2012). It has greatly altered the traditional culture of Christianity, especially in the way that worship and church work is conducted. MacArthur (2011) says that pervasive technology has compromised Christians' sense of what is appropriate behaviour according to God's Word. He also notes that "the Church believes it is in direct competition, not simply opposition, to the world and must, therefore, use the world's own methods (technologies) to attract the attention of the lost and, in many cases, the membership of the church".

Social media has become one of the most popular means of communication in today's world. It is a platform where people's thoughts, views, and opinions on various topics are shared. In addition, it has become a powerful tool for marketing and advertising. The Church has also recognised social media's potential and started using it for evangelisation. There are many ways in which social media can be used for evangelisation. It can be used to create awareness about the Church and its teachings. It can also be employed to reach out to people far away from the Church and build relationships with them.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Ring (2013), hate sites that attack and defame religious beliefs have posed a challenge to the church. This has potentially resulted in low acceptability of social media among Christians. However, according to the Synod of Bishops (2008), this challenge can be countered through church-related groups, which are now creatively present on social media platforms and much informed concerning them. Additionally, the church can use social media creatively to preach the Gospel.

Although social media is a door opening to a glamorous world and empowers people to enrich others in turn, it is not everything about it that is safe and true (Foley, 2002). This is because it gives people an immense opportunity to do good and harm (Ring, 2013). However, this is an implication that social media can be very harmful. For instance, Social media often disrupt the attention of congregants during sermon delivery (Eston, 2016). This is due to its distraction of church members from the essential spiritual work of sharing the Gospel and building up their faith (Hull, 2020).

To address this, it is crucial to set clear expectations for how social media should be used in ministry and keep these platforms strictly focused on promoting the church's mission. It may also be helpful to designate a dedicated team that can provide ongoing support for social media initiatives within the church. This will prevent tainting the use of social media by Christians. This study, therefore, aims at finding ways of mitigating the above challenges for effective use of social media in the promotion of the Great Commission. Moreover, there are threats of improper use of the internet by Christians, whereby some Christians watch programs that are not in line with the doctrines of the Bible (Kigamba, 2018). In response to the aforementioned, John Paul II (2000) stated that Christians should learn and practice the skills of discerning the appropriate content of social media, especially for children. In regard to the fore stated, children need serious guidelines on social media (Swaby, 2016 & Haddon, 2014).

According to John Paul II (2002), church leaders have a duty to utilise all the available social media platforms for God's glory as they serve humanity. However, leaders who are not part of the technological change face difficult barriers to digital conversion in comparison to their contemporary counterparts (Koontz, 2007). According to Francis (2011), some of the church leaders do not possess ICT tools that enable access to social media platforms. These categories of leaders argue that the use of social media should be for children or younger audiences.

To support the above statement, Bwire (2019) asserts that a lack of skills may hinder people from embracing social media. Many church members do not have the technical skills to fully use social media applications (Dodgson et al., 2006). This limits the ability of churches to take advantage of ICT-based solutions. In addition, Christians who lack skills in using social media platforms and tools may oppose their use. According to Alade (2020), preachers and those seeking baptism and those who need mentorship and discipleship lack adequate training.

As much as possible, training regarding social media should be provided to the clergy and lay leaders (Foley, 2005). This is because church leaders ought to understand social media (Githinji, 2011). Through this, they will appropriately utilise the media in churches (Belmonte, 2009). This will create a positive attitude towards the use of social media and reveal the best tools and platforms to apply in evangelisation. In addition, developing user-friendly resources that can be used by those with limited ICT skills and partnering with other organisations that can provide technical assistance. It is also vital to ensure that all members of the church have access to the necessary technology, which can be a challenge in some rural areas. In view of the foregoing discussions, this study aimed to identify more challenges posed by the use of social media based on evangelisation. Additionally, it aims at highlighting critical responses to such challenges. Further, the study aimed to find out how the church is dealing with challenges associated with the use of social media in evangelisation.

According to Gerhardt and Mackenzie-Philps (2018) and Church et al. (2015), one of the main challenges is related to preaching. In order to convey the message of their faith effectively, many churches are now using social media like WhatsApp and Facebook rather than relying solely on traditional methods. However, it can be difficult for church leaders to effectively use these platforms in their preaching and teaching. This is because they may not have the necessary technical skills to create and edit the information posted on social media or may not be familiar with how to effectively use social media platforms in their preaching. As a result, many churches are still struggling to effectively use social media in their preaching. To bridge the above gap, this study aimed to find out the levels of ICT skills held by both leaders and congregants.

In addition, churches face a challenge related to training for baptism (Murray, 2018). Many churches now offer online courses or downloads that can help people prepare for baptism. However, there are often issues with access to technology and the Internet and literacy levels in the communities where churches are based (Shaw & Black, 2008). As a result, many people may not have the opportunity to take advantage of these training resources. Therefore, this study sought to find out the academic qualifications of FGCK Christians to enable them to access materials used for training for baptism from the ICT platforms.

Moreover, ICT has been used by churches effectively by churches for mentorship (Lanker, 2010). Online forums and social media groups have been set up expressly for mentorship purposes. However, there are still several challenges that need to be addressed in order to make these platforms more effective. For example, many people who participate in online forums and social media groups do not have the same level of commitment as those who attend face-to-face meetings (Hutchings, 2011). As a result, it can be challenging to build strong relationships and provide effective mentorship online.

Churches also face challenges when it comes to discipleship (Harder, 2018). There are many resources available online that can help churches with this task (Williams, 2015). However, disciple-making is a complex process that requires more than just access to information. It also requires personal interaction and guidance from a mentor or leader (Nae, 2021). As a result, churches trying to use social media for discipleship need to focus on building relationships and creating opportunities for people to meet face-to-face.

Moreover, Wolcott et al. (2008) asserted that there is often a lack of understanding about how social media can be used to support the work of churches and their members. This means that churches have little incentive to invest in ICT infrastructure and training for staff to enhance the proper use of social media. Additionally, investing in ICT infrastructure and training can be expensive, and many churches do not have the financial resources to do so (James, 2018). According to Jameson (2018), some church members may also be reluctant to embrace new technologies, preferring to stick with traditional methods that they are comfortable with. This resistance can make it difficult to implement social media-based solutions.

Despite the above challenges, Marwah (2014) asserts that the church can overcome them by developing a clear plan on how social media can be used to support the work of the church. This plan should be designed to address the specific needs of the church and its members. It should also note the available resources, both financial and human. Moreover, partnering with other organisations that have expertise in using them could also be crucial. These partners can provide technical assistance and training, which can help churches develop the skills and knowledge needed to use social media effectively. Therefore, this study was important in order to come up with more ways of dealing with obstacles posed by the use of social media for evangelisation.

3.0 RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Challenges in the Use of ICT

The researcher sought to first identify the challenges posed by the use of social media. All the respondents (100%) reported that there are challenges in the use of social media. The most common challenge, as cited by 75.9 per cent of the respondents, was the lack of skilled technological personnel. Other common challenges across the four churches were unavailability of ICT tools and lack of internet connectivity, as cited by 64.8 per cent and 53.7 per cent of respondents, respectively, as shown in table 1 and figure 1 below. This agrees with the words of Francis (2011) that some of the church leaders do not possess ICT tools, which makes them argue that the implementation of ICT should be for young people. Moreover, Bwire (2019) asserts that a lack of ICT skills may hinder its uptake. In view of the aforementioned, Christians who lack skills in using ICT platforms and tools may oppose their use.

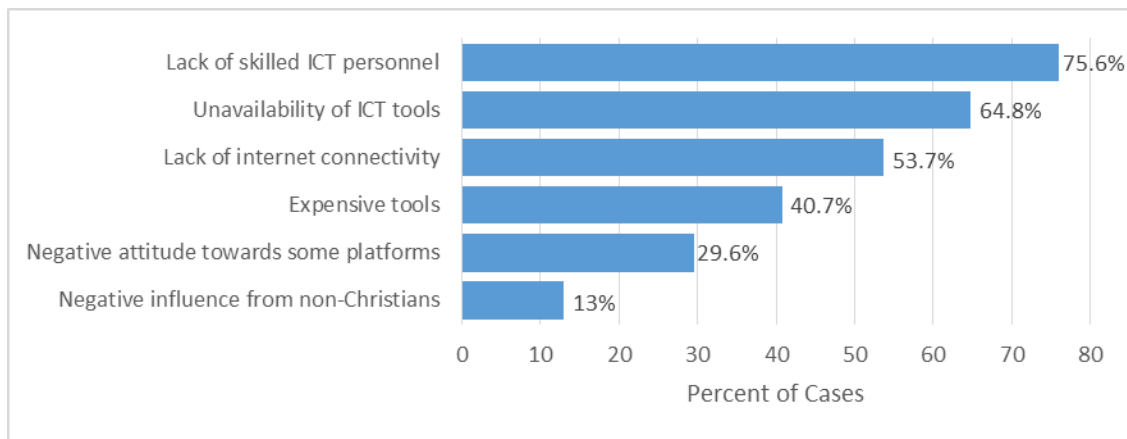


Fig 1: Challenges Facing the Use of Social Media in Full Gospel Churches of Kenya

Table 1: Challenges Facing the use of Social Media in Full Gospel Churches of Kenya

\$Q13b_MRS Frequencies				
		Responses		Per cent of Cases
		N	Per cent	
Challenges in the use of ICT	Lack of internet connectivity	29	19.3%	53.7%
	Unavailability of ICT tools	35	23.3%	64.8%
	Lack of skilled ICT personnel	41	27.3%	75.9%
	Negative attitude towards some platforms	16	10.7%	29.6%
	Expensive tools	22	14.7%	40.7%
	Negative influence from non-Christians	7	4.7%	13.0%
Total		150	100.0%	277.8%

In as much as the use of social media has been very beneficial for FGCK, there are various challenges facing the use of social media platforms for evangelisation. These challenges include the breakdown of ICT tools like laptops and phones with delayed and expensive repairs or replacements. The churches also experience frequent power outages during the Sunday services, which renders most of the ICT tools unusable in the absence of a backup power source.

Some members do not have smartphones; hence, they cannot access some of the social media platforms such as Whatsapp, Facebook and YouTube. On the other hand, some members who have smartphones lack money to purchase airtime or internet bundles which are necessary for them to access the messages sent via the social media platforms like Whatsapp or watch YouTube videos.

Another challenge faced is the language barrier. Communication done using social media platforms is often in English. However, the communication does not reach all members, especially the elderly and those with lower levels of education. A challenge that was similar across all churches, as mentioned by the clergy, is that there are inadequate skilled human resources to provide ICT support in the church, which hinders the extent of the use of social media platforms.

The use of social media in evangelisation does not come without challenges. Some of the issues that the elders pointed out were the breakdown of ICT tools when handled by unqualified personnel. These breakdowns interrupt social media use until repairs are done, and, in some cases, they attract expensive replacement costs. Another common issue faced across all churches was power outages, which prevent the use of ICT tools to access social media platforms.

There are many challenges encountered when operating the ICT tools in FGCK. For instance, some appliances/tools may get destroyed or break down, causing service interruptions. An example of this is when microphones and amplifiers are malfunctioning so that the congregants cannot clearly hear the pastor speak, or they produce loud screeching sounds that affect the congregants' sense of hearing.

Further, the broken down tools usually attract high costs of repair or replacement for the church. If the funds for making new purchases or doing repairs are not immediately available, then the use of ICT tools is halted for a while until the funds can be raised. Also, there are frequent power outages at the churches, which interrupts the use of ICT tools where no power backup is installed. Some of the challenges that the Sunday school teachers face while using social media platforms revolve around the lack of power connection at their churches, which hinders the use of these tools during Sunday school classes. With regard to follow-up programs, some kids are out of reach due to the lack of mobile phones or money to purchase airtime. Other times, since the phones belong to the parents, there is delayed feedback, as the children do not always receive the teachers' messages on time. As for the kids who have access to phones, laptops and the internet, the teachers noted with concern that these same phones sometimes expose the children to immoral materials like 18+ rated movies and songs, which contradict what they learn in Sunday school.

Ways of Mitigating Challenges Facing the use of Social Media in the Church

As illustrated in figure 2 and table 2 below, it was noted that challenges facing the use of social media could be mitigated through various approaches. The most popular solution that the respondents proposed was the training of ICT personnel at the churches (85.1%), seconded by the education of congregants on the proper use of social media platforms (78.7%). The third possible solution to these challenges, as proposed by 42.6 per cent of respondents, involved maintaining an active church website populated with messages from the Gospel. To support the idea of training ICT personnel that was highlighted by the majority of the respondents, Foley (2005), Githinji (2011) and Belmonte (2009) state that training regarding ICT should be provided to the clergy and lay leaders because they ought to understand ICT. Through this, they will appropriately utilise social media in evangelisation and create a positive attitude towards its use.

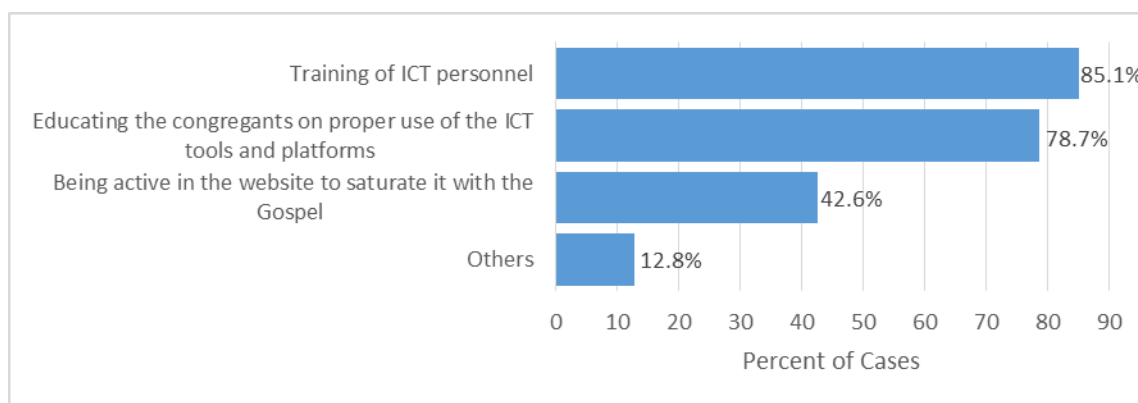


Fig 2: Ways of Mitigating Challenges facing the use of Social Media in FGCK

Table 2: Ways to Mitigate Social Media Usage Challenges

\$Q14_MRS Frequencies				
		Responses		Per cent of Cases
		N	Per cent	
Ways to mitigate ICT usage challenges	Being active in the website to saturate it with the Gospel	20	19.4%	42.6%
	Training of ICT personnel	40	38.8%	85.1%
	Educating the congregants on the proper use of the ICT tools and platforms	37	35.9%	78.7%
	Others	6	5.8%	12.8%
Total		103	100.0%	219.1%

Some of the measures that can be taken to deal with the challenges brought about by the use of social media include: finding alternative sources of power or installing backup generators at the churches; purchasing more ICT tools; engaging more skilled ICT personnel to provide ICT support; engaging translators and interpreters who can send the messages in the local languages; hence increase the number of congregants reached by the messages. In addition, the Bishop and majority of (3 out of 4) pastors interviewed held the opinion that the churches should engage commercial internet providers to install Wi-Fi, which would enhance network connectivity for all members; hence no need to purchase bundles when in church. The services would then flow smoothly and be free of network interruptions, as is the case when using purchased bundles. In addition, the church should conduct ICT training for members so that they are able to use social media platforms with ease.

The youth could also be encouraged to take ICT-related courses outside the church, which would help sharpen their ICT skills. However, the Bishop and some pastors had concerns about the youth's use of social media platforms. They recommended that the church focus on creating awareness amongst the youth regarding misleading information on the internet, which may affect their moral standards.

These challenges can be mitigated by training ICT technicians in the church on the proper use of ICT tools and handling them. It also helps to restrict the people who have direct access to the ICT tools so that

unqualified people are not allowed to handle the tools. Some elders (5/8) held the opinion that the church should employ permanent ICT technicians to handle the tools at the church to ensure proper handling and management of the tools. In addition, it was recommended that power outages could be handled by purchasing and installing backup generators at the churches.

The ICT technicians suggested training church members on the use of ICT tools and social media platforms, which would make ICT use more efficient, especially when members are away from the church during the pandemic. In addition, there was a general need to purchase power backup across all four churches, which would reduce the interruptions of Sunday services due to power outages. One of the technicians added that since the ICT tools are quite expensive to purchase and maintain, the church members could be sensitised on the need to contribute toward a kitty for ICT tools.

The teachers proposed that parents should be willing to let their children use their phones in case they cannot purchase separate ones for them. However, the parents should supervise phone usage to prevent the kids from watching adult content that may be misleading and negatively affect their character or thought process. Further, the purchase of power backup tools like generators for use during Sunday classes would resolve the issues of a power outage, hence allowing the smooth progression of classes.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: Social media is both a practical and ineffective tool for evangelisation. While it can help to connect with people who may not be reached by traditional means, it is crucial to be aware of the disadvantages of using social media for evangelisation. These disadvantages can be elementary to reaching people who are already Christians, and it can be straightforward to spread false information. However, despite these disadvantages, social media can be a very effective tool for evangelisation if used correctly.

Recommendations: ICT tools and platforms that have been used have been of great importance in evangelisation and should, therefore, continue to be used as widely as possible. This is because the core mandate of social media use is to reach out to the whole world and to achieve this; the church should embrace the use of social media platforms, which have converted the world into a global village. The church should therefore invest in ICT, which should be upgraded occasionally since it is dynamic. In addition, all current and future churches should have training commensurate with the utilisation of social media in church activities. This is meant to enhance evangelisation.

Moreover, it suggested that the church should invest in a series of training for ICT personnel and provide in-service courses to the continuing ICT personnel to sharpen their skills. Further, there should be introduced standardisation of ICT personnel's remuneration with consideration of the cost of living in order to make the suggested use of social media effective. Additionally, in order to connect with new converts using social media platforms, the church should hold forums for educating congregants on the proper use of ICT tools and platforms. This will allow FGCK to enjoy the benefits of using social media platforms, including the ability to reach a lot more people simultaneously while storing information for later reference. Finally, in order to mitigate the challenges hindering the use of social media in evangelisation, it is suggested that the church should ensure internet connectivity in all its congregations.

This will enhance effective evangelisation. In addition, the church should invest in ICT education for youth church development. It will also make it easy for the church to evangelise the world.

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