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Strategies of Addressing Challenges Related to Social Media Use in Youth Ministry: A Study of Protestant Churches in Kesses Sub County, Kenya

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Abstract

The level of utilisation of social media platforms towards evangelisation and youth ministry activities has been found to be low. The advantages of social media in reaching out to the youth through the gospel of Jesus Christ are many as evidenced from cross country studies. This study was conducted to recommend strategies that the Church could adopt to make sure that social media use in youth ministry activities increases among Pentecostal churches in Kenya. The study was conducted in Uasin Gishu County that is dominated by quite a number of protestant churches. The study was conducted in Kesses Sub County involving protestant churches (240) youth pastor and youth leaders. In sample size selection, 30.0% of the churches (80 in number) were chosen resulting to a sample of 400 respondents. Data collection was through interview and questionnaire. Analysis of data was done using descriptive statistics for quantitative data and thematic content analysis for qualitative data. Results show that respondents suggested various strategies that protestant churches can use to promote and increase their presence in the social media platforms because majority of youths are present there. the Churches should consider purchasing of the right facilities (computers, network adapters, standby generators, lighting system, sound mixers among others) would also beneficial not only to youth ministry but Church as a whole in using the social media platforms to evangelise. To parents, there is need for them to support their kids acquire or use technological devices to access youth ministry content shared by their Churches. To youth departmental leaders, there is need for them to have a well workout plan and programme on how, what and when they are broadcasting their services to ensure the highest number of youth are reached from their remote or virtual locations.

Key Words: Kenya, Uasin Gishu, Strategies, Challenges, Social Media, Youth, Ministry

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Introduction

As given authority in Matthew 28:16-20, the gospel can be proclaimed in different ways since Jesus did not single out a particular method of preaching the Good News. In the early Church of Apostles shared the Gospel through formal preaching and teaching with the people they met in different journeys that they undertook. This means that believers of the Word need to come up with various means of evangelisation to both the church and those in sin. Therefore, the church has to adapt with changing times by embracing modern technological advances in telecommunication as long as they ensure that the Good news is not adulterated but presented clearly, compassionately and honestly (Akwasi, 2019). This paper focuses on how social media is used for youth ministry activities. Chukwudi, Afan, Ogu and Monday (2016) said that social media sites have become important mediums for information disseminations in this century by indicating that they are invaluable tools that a Christian need to utilise to reach other people with the message of salvation.

The use of social media platforms for church activities has been enormously increased as the world is battling with the outbreak of the novel COVID-19 globally (Adebowale, 2020; Shereen et al., 2020). This has also provided an opportunity for Christians to be exposed to other forms of worship, liturgical practices and preaching than they are usually accustomed to. In other to know the effect of social media on the church, it is necessary to make certain the level of church awareness of social media websites, computer literacy of members, and policy on social media, primary purpose of each member on the social media website, time spent on social media websites and so on. These are performance indices to evaluate the effect of social media on the church. It is not sufficient to conclude whether the effect on the church is positive or negative (Hesse, 2019).

In the quest for the church to stay in constant communication with their members and beyond and to reach a large audience, the utilisation of social media platforms has become the order of the day (McKinney, 2014). In South Africa, Matobobo and Bankole (2021) said that religious leaders use social media to interact, share, and advertise church programmes. The social media platforms facilitated church elders to create online closed communities involving; district church communities, church executive board, departmental leaders and communities of elders where communication and decision-making activities took place. Social media platforms have been vastly used by Ghana churches especially the Charismatic churches undertake their church activities (White, Tella & Ampofo, 2016). The numerous uses of social media platforms by churches as evident in Ghana have brought about the so called 'church without walls'. This move has made churches easily propagate the gospel without geographical boundaries. The country (Kenya) has not been left behind in adoption and use of social media as the following sites; Instagram, YouTube, Skype, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, LinkedIn and Flickr (Njoroge, 2013). Data shows that there were 12 million active Kenyan users on WhatsApp monthly, 7.1 million on Facebook, four million on Instagram, 8 million on YouTube, and one million each for LinkedIn and Twitter in the year

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2018 (Wanjiku, 2020). With so many Kenyans using the Internet and social media, Kenyan churches need to seriously consider how these platforms are utilised by the church and un-church, as the churches interact with their congregants, potential church members and other stakeholders on social media.

Statement of the Problem

Research conducted in Kenya found out that there is growing number of Kenyans relying on viewing televangelists than going to Church on Sundays. This has resulted to reduction of number of youth attending Church daily on Sundays. Most of them end up flocking online forums for spiritual knowledge and nourishment. It is not clear therefore whether the Churches in Kesses are using social media to minister and evangelise to the youth or not. The problem is further compounded by inadequate studies that have been conducted concerning social media use in youth ministry in Kenya. This study looks at strategies that Churches needs to adopt to promote the use of social media in youth ministry.

Review of Related Literature

In United States, Crumpton (2018) determined how the needs of the internet Church differed from the traditional Church, and how this dynamism was strategic in determining the most effective method of serving the e-Church community. From the results, Crumpton suggested that pastors needed to consider the major benefits of online Church; the convenience that online religion permits, the unrestricted usage of a multiplicity of platforms, and the cost efficacy of reaching the world for Christ. This study examined workable strategies that could be adopted by youth ministries among Protestant Churches in Kesses Sub County, Kenya.

In South Korea, Suk (2010) study was to shed light on the essence of the Church internet ministry from the biblical and ministerial angles and to suggest effective strategies for Churches launching an internet ministry. The researcher conducted a literary review of online ministry and a case study of the Sarang community Church. Basic Web analysis, an interview, and a survey were performed to analyze Sarang's case and to draw lessons from it. Suk found out that the most serious challenge to Sarang's internet ministry was the constant decline of its visitors and the lowest growth potential of page visit per hour. The decline came due to withdrawal of the young generation aged 10 – 29 in the social media platform.

As part of recommendations, Lee suggested that Church Web sites needed to be filled with meaningful and resourceful contents to quench the spiritual thirst of the young people whose number was declining. Just as there is a shortage of drinkable water during floods, the young people suffer from spiritual thirst that cannot be slaked by any kind of information flooding the social media sphere. This issue can be addressed by supplying young people with quality spiritual resources. In Saudi Arabia Al-Mosa (2015) study aimed to identify the role of social media in the social and religious values of The World Islamic Sciences and Education University students.

The study applied the survey and descriptive designs with the target population being students who enrolled in the first academic semester for the year 2014-2015. The sample of the study was selected through stratified random method as it comprised of 334 male and female students. Questionnaire was used to collect data after its validity and reliability were checked. To answer the study's questions, means and standard deviations for every field of the study's field in addition to One-Sample T-test were used. Results showed statistically significant differences in the social and religious values attributed to means of social media.

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In light of the results, Al-Mosa suggested the necessity of highlighting the value aspect of means of social media, studying the problems that hinder the activation of the role of social media in the youth value reforming and conducting similar studies with different variables. The gap created in this study is that it focused on religious values of Muslim students whereas this study is centered on Christian values.

In Nigeria, Badmos (2014) explored the factors that affect the use of social media and determine the percentage contribution of the factors to the success or failure of the Church. A total of 200 questionnaires were administered to different Church members. In this research, the survey areas covered only 14 Church denominations in Nigeria. The result obtained placed a high premium on the group account, enlightenment, privacy and security policy issues on social media usage in the Church. It is therefore necessary for the Church leadership to encourage the use of Church group account, develop members' enlightenment training programme on social media usage, and also advice on workable privacy and security issues on the social media websites.

Chukwudi, Afan, Ogu and Monday (2016) through their study, found out that Babcock University spiritual life division have been utilising social media sites to evangelise to more than 500,000 people virtually. This has resulted to increased views on the social media platforms handles to reach their members and non-members even in hostile environments where face to face gospel is not allowed. Ononogbu and Chiroma (2018) research found out that the Church in Nigeria appeared to be sleeping through the social media revolution. Particularly, the effect of the Church's activities and programmes on social media was found to be minimal, bordering on total insignificance, since Church was yet to establish a meaningful presence in the world of social media. Even though social media promote hyper-individualism and an over-reliance on entertainment – qualities that undermine the spiritual goals of the Church – when engaged correctly, however, the Church can enhance her message and mission among young people using social media. In fact, conventional wisdom suggests that social media can be an effective tool for the Church and youth ministries in Nigeria since they currently provide the most cost efficient and effective forms of outreach, surpassing radio and television.

In Kenya, Mwangi (2015) studied PCEA Langata Parish and its response to challenges of ministering to the youth. PCEA is a mainstream Church started by Scottish missionaries but has continued to experience low numbers of youth in services. The study sampled sixty-three respondents, forty youth, ten Church leaders, ten Church members and three pastoral team leaders. The research employed questionnaires, interviews, observation and participation as the data collecting instruments. In responding to youth's specific concerns PCEA Langata Parish formed two sub-committees to deal with matters of youth and make recommendations. Youth were given position of vice chairperson of Church management board; more youth were involved in Church activities like, praise and worship, making intimation and leading the service, more funding of youth programmes, strengthening performing programmes and revitalising less effective ones.

Wanjiku (2020) desired to know the dynamics of framing social media communication by churches in Kenya by studying one church; Infinite Fellowship Ministries (INFEMI). The study used mixed method research approach. Data was collected through interviews and questionnaire. Result showed that framing at the church was an active, collaborative effort between church leadership and their key leaders in the media team. Nevertheless, the success of this was dependent on the church vision, number of volunteers,

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costs of broadcasting and negative publicity that they received when streaming their services online. Despite the setbacks, members and church leaders were committed towards fulfilling the great commission and therefore did not focus on the negative publicity that they received. The researcher recommended that for successful achievement of online ministry gains, the church was required to develop a working social media policy to ensure its effectiveness.

Materials and Methods

This study employed concurrent triangulation mixed method research design that allows use of qualitative and quantitative aspects. In terms of research design, this research employed descriptive survey to collect data. This study was conducted in Churches located in Kesses Sub County, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. Statistics from Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2019) indicated that the Sub County had 156,478 people. Kesses is one of the sub counties of Uasin Gishu. The target population for this study included 240 Protestant Churches in Kesses Sub County.

The respondents to be targeted were Youth Pastors (240) in those Churches together with four youth (960) leaders per local Church which may include either the (Chair, Vice, Secretary and Treasurer). At least 30% of the target protestant Churches (240) were selected as the sample (80) for the study. Thus, 80 Churches were sampled for the study. Four youth and 1 youth ministry pastor were selected randomly and purposively selected respectively from the 80 Churches making a sample of 400 respondents (80 Youth Pastors and 320 youth leaders). Data was collected by means of questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Questionnaires were meant for the youth while interviews for Youth Pastors in the sample Churches in the sub county. At first, quantitative data were coded and entered in SPSS database (SPSS Version 26.0). Quantitative data was analysed using frequencies and percentages. Qualitative data from interviews and open-ended questions was analysed using content analysis which is a primary message centered methodology (White, Tella & Ampofo, 2016).

Results and discussions

The study sought to know the strategies that youth departments among other stakeholders may use to ensure the effective use of social media in youth ministry activities in Kesses Sub County. Therefore, Youth Pastors were asked to recommend suggestions that can be made with regard to improvement in the way social media is used in youth ministry. Here are some of the suggestions as reported by Pastor No. 9:

The Church should be involved in purchasing the devices to the needy youth in Church.

This means that to enable all youth' access youth programmes broadcasted on social media, there is need for Church to consider purchasing devices to enable youth who do not have smart phones access the services like others whose parents are able. This means that Churches should make efforts to provide social media platforms to the youth. Youth Pastor No. 15 also suggested the following:

Create awareness to everyone on the importance of social media. The Church should also make sure that internet is available in the Church to enable use of

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social media platforms for youth ministry activities. Our Church leadership should put free Wi-Fi in Churches so as to cut cost of use of bundles thus easing the youth on the expense of using social media.

The response made above shows that education on the benefits and disadvantages of using social media platforms need to be done so that everyone becomes aware. This means that Church leadership, parents and youth need to be educated on the importance of social media youth ministration activities. On the other hand, Pastor No. 23 recommended the following strategy:

There is need for the Church youth leadership to create religious content that would be attractive to the youth hence increasing their participation rate.

This means that there is need for a shift in the way the content being broadcasted is prepared. Considering the evolving nature of technology, Church youth departmental leaders need to make their presentations and content shared on social media attractive and appealing to the youth to capture their attention and ensure that the spiritual message being shared in order to achieve its targeted objective. Another Pastor No. 30 also pointed out this is what needs to be done:

Church leadership should try to communicate Church youth events through social media and encourage the youth to get information through social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, email other networks mentioned in the study.

Another Youth Pastor No. 19 noted;

Youth Pastors should post encouragement and other counselling sessions to social media platforms since social media for youth groups don't only have to be as a means of announcement services and event times, but it is a great avenue to minister to a large variety of people.

Further, Youth Pastor No. 59 added that;

Youth departmental leadership youth should utilize more than one platform, usually when I hear the term, "social media," I automatically think of Facebook. Maybe that is because I am of the middle-aged generation who gravitates to Facebook more than other networks. It is important to realize that not everyone uses the same social media platform. As a pastor, it is important to do some research to see what the majority of your audience use. Do they use Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Google Plus? Do you want to reach the parents of the youth as well to extend communication? If the youth gravitate towards Twitter, but their parents use Facebook, then it may be beneficial to use both social media platforms instead of just focusing on one. Communication, then, is optimized the most effective way.

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The researcher also asked the youth leaders to provide their recommendations on what needs to be done to ensure effective utilisation of social media in youth ministry activities. The responses were coded in numerical form, analysed and are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Suggestions on Improvement of Social media Use in Youth Ministry

Suggestions	Frequency	Percent
Purchase of computers and installing free Wi-Fi	49	16.0
Social media awareness	45	14.7
Train youth leaders on the importance of embracing social media	35	11.4
Adequate support to enhance creation of relevant youth programmes	32	10.5
Establishing a website to augment other social media platforms	31	10.1
Parents to provide or give chance to their youth to access media gadgets	27	8.8
Have a workable programme in terms of strict timelines with orderly topics for the youth to follow	27	8.8
Youth leaders to make sure language use on youth resonates with them	21	6.9
Allow internet use in Churches	21	6.9
Churches, leaders sending sermons, verses online frequently	18	5.9
Total	306	100.0

Source: Field Data 2023

Results in Table 1 show that most youth leaders appeared to agree with recommendations given by their Youth Pastors that there is need to ensure that their Churches have installed proper infrastructure and facilities to effectively support online ministry. During interviews, some of them claimed that the gadgets they were using did not belong to them and therefore whenever they were unavailable, these gadgets were not effectively utilised. Another emerging recommendation from the findings is that proper training is needed to ensure that the social media ministry succeeds. This training will enhance Youth Pastors' capacity to create quality content that will resonate with the youth. Furthermore, there is need for the social media platform agenda to be co-opted as a normal service programme for youth ministries.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the study, the issue of poor preparation by majority of Churches to install supportive infrastructure for social media platforms usage was one of the main obstacles to its effective usage of social media in youth ministry. Youth lack of access to gadgets that would support their view, reading or even listening to podcast messages contributed to low usage, lack of parental support towards their children usage of social media applications contributed to its low usage among other challenges as presented in chapter four. Various respondents put forward various recommendations and suggestions that they believed would improve the usage of social media in youth ministries in Kesses Sub County, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya.

To enhance knowledge and usage of social media, there is need for youth departments across Churches to be educated and trained on various social media platforms and the kind of

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message or information that is suited to share in order to reach all youth with the message of the redeeming grace. To increase the usage of social media, Church leadership needs to support youth departments to procure required technological appliances to enable them broadcast their services to different social media platforms. The first thing that the churches should do is to make sure there is internet connectivity in their Churches. The adoption and usage of social media as alternative channel of youth ministry activities need to be anchored not only on providing the infrastructure resources required by a policy guideline. This means that the Church decision making body should develop policies that will guide the usage of social media platforms in youth ministry activities by showing the dos and don'ts. Furthermore, the policies will help the Church have structures through which matters pertaining to live streaming of services are handled without causing confusion. This will also enable the Church activities not to go against the Church doctrines and beliefs but operate within the confines of their Church practices.

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