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Digital Faith: Law, Ethics, and Theology for the Online-Engaged Church

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1. Introduction

Afzal (2012) defines “information organizations” as “organizations that engage in all or one of the activities involving acquisition, organization, preservation, processing, recording, creation, assimilation, packaging, repackaging, presentation, dissemination, transfer, and access of information” (p. 102-103). Libraries, museums, publishers, music companies, and news channels are all examples of information organizations. I propose that North American Christian churches are information organizations. Weekly they create and present information in the forms of sermons, classes, bible studies, and music through organized events and activities. To support these activities they produce documents like newsletters, bulletins, and reports in print and increasingly digital formats. Churches are preservers of social and cultural data such as births, deaths, marriages, baptisms, and community events. Churches are voracious consumers and disseminators of educational, evangelistic, and worship materials that support a thriving publishing industry. Churches want to reach out to their wider communities, historically adopting new communication technologies like television and radio, and now using the power of the Internet and social media. Hutchings (2015) offers a contemporary overview of the many ways that Christian churches are engaging with technology to mediate faith and to e-vangelize their communities.

a. The Problem

The use of new information technologies for information creation, management, and dissemination tools can offer great opportunities to churches and religious groups. The use of these tools can also pose legal, ethical, and theological challenges that need to be managed by churches as responsible information organizations. This paper identifies potential information challenges observed while researching in churches, and suggests some ways churches and religious organizations can begin to address these challenges. The emphasis of this presentation is knowledge mobilization: giving back to the congregations that generously participated in these studies. Observations are drawn principally from ethnographic fieldwork in three Nova Scotia churches, a small suburban Baptist Church (referred to here as *New Governance Church*), a large suburban Baptist church (*Big Vision Church*), and a very large urban Roman Catholic church (*One Ship Church*). Data included congregational surveys, newsletters, book lists, and bulletin boards, as well as digital documents like websites, twitter feeds, podcasts, and Facebook sites. Formal and informal interviews were conducted with church leaders, and participant observations were conducted in worship services, classes, workshops, business meetings, and pastoral team meetings over a period of months at each study site.

This paper will explore a range of views of the use of new technology in religious contexts. Then the ways that information technologies were observed beneficially impacting church life will be considered. The challenges with the adoption of new technologies identified by church leaders, and from participation observations will be discussed, with insights from the literature. In conclusion a number of key areas of legal, ethical, and theological concern will be identified. The intent of this paper is to move beyond the research findings and begin to mobilize that new knowledge in a manner that helps churches effectively engage with new technologies.

b. Three Views of Religion and Media

Religious organizations can have very different views of media and new media. Campbell (2010) has described three views of the relationship between religion and media. The first is “media as conduit” (p. 44) where media is perceived “as a neutral instrument that can be used for good or evil, dependent on the manner in which it is used.” Religious groups who hold this view can adopt technological innovation with little ideological conflict, and use it to further the goals of the religious community. Examples of this kind of adoption in the 20th century might be evangelicals’ use of television and radio as evangelism tools (McCarthy, 2003), and the Roman Catholic Church’s use of film for positive cultural change (Ortiz, 2003). Campbell (2010b) noted, “Many religious Internet advocates have an idealistic view of the technology as an equalizing medium able to be moulded for religious purpose” (p. 45).

The second view suggested by Campbell was “media as a mode of knowing” (p. 45). From this perspective media technology is biased, and its values rooted in the nature of the technology. This could be demonstrated in the shift from print media to visual media where entertainment is prioritized over information, and also by our increasing dependence on technology (p. 46). Grant (2003) exploring Muggeridge’s (1977, p. 41) objections to television, a vehicle of fantasy being used for evangelism, wrote, “Religious users are encouraged to be suspicious of media lest they cultivate or unknowingly promote values through their interactions with media that run counter to their faith” (p. 46). In an earlier paper (Michels, 2010) this author challenged van der Laan’s attack on preaching and the Internet (2009). He argued, “The real religion is...the dominant forces of the technological society” (p. 276). By becoming part of technological society and the values it promotes, he proposed, the church loses its ability to critique the values of that society.

A third perspective looks for a middle ground between the earlier views: “media as a social institution” (2010, p. 48) where media, Internet or otherwise, are understood both in terms of their production, and the user’s perception of the content. This is a reflective approach that seeks to understand the nature of technology and its long-term implications, but also understands the nature of socially constructed messages. In *From the Garden and the City* (2011) Dyer offers his attempt to create that middle ground. He contends that most Christian critiques of technology are not based in theological and biblical principles but rather are rooted in where we sit on the technological timeline, “We question the young for the blind acceptance of the latest gadgets, but we do so driving our computerized cars to and from church sipping coffee grown on a different continent” (p. 28).

Echoes of each of these three views were identified in the interviews of church leaders: utopian views about technology, rejectionist views, and reflective views. Corporately however each church had chosen to enthusiastically engage with new technologies to support their ministries. Some leaders saw the use of new information technologies as a necessity. A leader from *One Ship Church* said, “I see technology changing the church, yes we need to be there if we are going to evangelize to youth who should be the present in the church, we need to reach them where they are at.”

2. Impacts of New IT

The three churches in this study used information technologies for a variety of purposes. First they used technologies internally to collect and manage data and to enrich their own worship and teaching. The churches used information technologies to broadcast their message out beyond their

walls. Finally the churches used information technologies to engage in wider conversations within and beyond their own congregation. This was the riskiest of information behaviours for the churches as it was the most difficult to manage and control. Technology use in three church contexts is considered: leading, worshipping and learning, and outreaching.

a. Leading

The original study focus was on church leaders' information seeking behaviour. Leaders included clergy, church staff members, and lay leaders. As well as interviews with many leaders, leadership meetings were also attended. In those meetings information technology used in two ways, all of which are common to office work settings. Research has demonstrated that clergy have long made use of computers (Wicks, 1999) and recent research has demonstrated the adoption of digital devices and social media as regular tools of pastoral ministry (Barna, 2012). This was also found to be the case among both ordained and lay church leaders in this study. First, leaders were observed regularly communicating using technologies like email, and Skype. Leaders exchanged emails to arrange meetings, make small decisions, and exchange information pertinent to the meetings. Leaders at *New Governance Church* exchanged relevant documents through Internet cloud services like Google Docs. Leaders were not always physically able to attend meetings, but were observed using technology to participate. In a crucial church meeting at *One Ship Church* to finalize a new vision statement one leader joined via Apple Face-time with an iPhone propped up at the end of the boardroom table. Several leaders expressed great enthusiasm about the use of technology. A *New Governance* leader declared, "I mean we can communicate with missionaries instantaneously" and a *One Ship* leader said, "It makes it much easier to access people at a larger level and it's easier to deal with the data afterwards and prepare documents and get them out quickly and easily."

An important characteristic of the leaders' information behaviour was the significance of people as trusted information sources (Michels, 2014). The pastor of *New Governance Church* shared that when his leadership team felt they needed official advice they Skyped a denominational leader for a real-time consultation during their meeting. Secondly, leaders also used technologies to gather information for decision-making both corporately and individually. As part of a re-visioning process, *New Governance Church* had to gather substantial community demographic information. Some of this material was gathered through meetings with community leaders, but the leaders also extensively accessed information from online government and business sources. Even in meetings, leaders were observed accessing online information using smart devices.

The three churches used information technologies to collect their own data. *One Ship Church* regularly used online surveys from Gallup to measure congregational engagement that they use for strategic planning. *Big Vision Church* uses membership management software to gather data on the church attendees. Their tool was used to check in children for services and activities, provided ID tags, track attendance and volunteer participation. The church databases also include names, photos, ages, financial data, and contact information such as addresses and emails. *New Governance Church* used Google Analytics to gather data on the online engagement through their website and social media. Many of the leaders described extensive use of online information sources for personal faith development and preparation for their leadership role. For example, a pastor at *New Governance* described the use of Youtube videos for personal devotions and websites for study materials and Bible commentary. A lay leader at *One Ship* described online religious news and information services

he subscribed to in a similar fashion as he did in his professional life. These online tools enriched the information environment in which church decisions are made.

Using technology in the leadership context also created challenges. One *New Governance* leader did not use email: “When I left work I left the computer....” Several leaders in that church voiced concerns that when online tools became the primary means of communicating, some members would be left out, and that these tools would diminish face-to-face interaction that they felt was valuable. Researchers such as Haight, Quan-Haase, and Corbett (2014) have researched the impact of the digital divide in Canada, and although some individuals may choose to “opt out,” many still cannot gain online access for reasons of cost, lack of skills, personal barriers, and limited literacy (p. 516). Leaders also raised concerns that technology had the potential to distract the leaders from their task: these things are good” suggested one leader, “but sometimes it changes, you know, the times for reflection or meditation on an issue. Sometimes I’ll say, “you know, we can find an answer, I’ll just look for it up,” as opposed to, “our greatest resource is going to have to be study and prayer....” Another leader observed “[technology] certainly doesn’t replace corporate prayer or individual prayer.”

The use of online information by leaders also raised theological issues. Several pastors expressed concern about church members accessing theological unsound materials. A leader complained, “ten years ago you wouldn’t have stumbled across that...it wouldn’t have been in your local bookstore.” The negative impact of the Internet on traditional religious authority has been an important theme in the sociology of religion literature. As early as 2000 Dawson identified the erosion of religious authority as a significant concern as the Internet became a place to find fringe and marginalized groups religious groups often in opposition to traditional religion. A considerable number of early studies focused on the concept of religious authority online. Counter to these studies however, Campbell (2007) in a study of Christian bloggers found however, found that they frequently referred to traditional religious authorities, and many used their blogs to affirm these authorities (p. 272).

When asked about information selection criteria, leaders frequently cited orthodoxy or “doctrinal soundness” as an important criterion. However, leaders in all three churches accessed materials from outside their religious tradition for personal growth or to support church decision-making. Baptist churches leaders accessed materials from a variety of protestant traditions such as Anglican, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, and Plymouth Brethren. Catholic leaders borrowed materials from evangelical sources like mega-church WillowCreek as church growth tools. Leaders, however, appeared to approach these sources critically, and were careful in assessing the theological compatibility of these sources. A visiting Catholic growth consultant noted, “Willowcreek can teach the revelation of Christ. We have the fullness of the revelation in Christ, Scripture and Tradition.” So the Catholic leaders actively filtered new information through their own theological traditions. The Baptist leaders, I observed, used materials only from within the evangelical movement. Although the Pastors’ fears seemed unwarranted, it is important to note these were leaders and were more theologically equipped to discern appropriate sources. The question remains if the same can be said for lay members as they engage the online.

Although not articulated by any leaders, their churches’ gathering of online and digital information raised potential legal and ethical concerns. Firstly, what obligations arise when a church gathers, mines, and exchanges data about their congregation and communities? Blaikie and Ginn state

correctly, “A cleric always knows or has access to various sorts of information. Some of that information is personal and confidential.” (2006, p. 363) They note most jurisdictions now have legislation governing the use of personal information. Some key principles they outline are that organizations are accountable for the information collected and are limited in their collection to the purposes intended. They must safeguard that information and be open about their information policies and practices (p. 368-370). Even when not obligated by law, churches have an ethical obligation to be good stewards of personal information.

b. Worshipping and Learning

In “Christianity and Digital Media” Hutchings (2015) briefly considers examples of online mega churches such as LifeChurch.tv that actively uses Internet tools to engage with thousands of viewers on a weekly basis with contemporary worship and teaching. Though significantly smaller, the three study churches used many of the same tools and techniques to engage their congregations. All had newer buildings designed to accommodate technologies, and each church used technologies to enhance their worship experiences. The auditorium of the newest facility felt more like a sound stage than a sanctuary, with a prominent stage, special lighting, projection screens, video cameras, and sound systems. One church employed part-time staff members with professional expertise in video and audio production.

As a participant observer on the AV team I was able to observe how the service was created and produced. The team used subscription software called *EasyWorship* to create dynamic visual presentations from a database of Christian media. The production team could upload media created in house or downloaded from the Internet. Each presentation was later archived as a project and a permanent record of the service. The sermon was also recorded and streamed live over the Internet. The live stream included a chat service for online viewers. Members of the congregation were regularly observed logged in online with smartphones and interacting during the service. The monologue was becoming a conversation.

Video and other media were used in sermons. One Sunday for example, the pastor played a Youtube video of a famous sermon “That’s My King” (Lockridge). Another church made heavy use of video clips during the services for weekly announcements, missionary moments, and storytelling. Although many videos were produced in house, the churches also used materials developed by local production groups, like *Muddy River Media*, and *John Paul II Media Institute*, and Christian media distribution groups like *RightNow Media*. For a period of time *Big Vision Church* had a second campus and broadcast the service live to the second campus. The use of new technologies enriched the services and allowed all three churches to preserve and publish their own content as podcasts through *iTunes* and their own repositories.

Churches who use media that they have not produced themselves must address copyright issues. Blaikie and Ginn note that, “copyright is an area of law frequently more honoured in the breach than the observance.” (2006, p. 404) Churches are not exempt from copyright obligations and are required to either get permission from the holder of copyright or obtain a license through a licensing collective (p. 405). All three of my study churches have licences through collectives like *Church Copyright Licensing International* to allow for the use of worship songs in their services, as well as other print and digital materials. The presentation of videos in meetings or the use of video clips downloaded

from Youtube also requires licensing while web streaming and podcasting, as a forms of broadcast, require different permissions and licenses. *Big Vision Church* no longer broadcasts the full service but only the sermon portion that is their original content.

The presence of cameras also caused tension in the Church. During one Sunday while I volunteered with the AV Team, a church member commented, "I think that there should be somewhere where people can sit without being on the camera." I noted after that that many members sat on the sides of the auditorium rather than the centre to avoid appearing in the streaming video. The ability to extend the boundaries of the service and create an interactive preaching experience offered the potential to transform traditional forms of preaching and worship, but not everyone was comfortable with the perceived invasion of their privacy. Although many churches are beginning to develop privacy policies, I was not able to find any privacy policy about the use of live or archived streaming video of services for any of the study sites.

c. Outreaching

New communication technologies allow churches to extend their reach beyond their own congregations. During my time volunteering with the AV Team I regularly watched offsite visitors log in to watch the streaming service and many identified themselves in the chat room. Most were friends or absent members of the church. They shared online in real time with members in the sanctuary. During one service the pastor shared that a former member of the church, now a student in another province, had emailed to say because of the live stream she felt like she was still a member of the church. I was surprised another Sunday morning to find members of a church in Tyumen, Russia had joined the service online, and passed on their greetings. They were also a small church streaming their service, and the two congregations briefly connected. Like the Longfellow poem, *The Arrow and the Song* (1890), they streamed a service in Cyberspace, it was downloaded, they knew not where.

Churches engaged online is not a new phenomenon and Helland (2011, p. 381ff) has described a long history of activity from bulletin boards, to listservs, to streaming media and even virtual churches. In *Exploring Religion Online* Campbell (2005) examined the idea of community building through online interaction, using online ethnography to investigate three online faith communities. The communities gathered for different purposes, but each became an important means of mutual support and encouragement for the participants. She described one community whose members shared physical disabilities that limited their participation in traditional churches (p. 91). Online they could find acceptance with others who understood their challenges and as one member indicated freely proclaim their faith (p. 157). In considering the characteristics of online community, Campbell also examined different religious and theological ideas about community. She considered at length the Biblical ideas of "Ekklesia", the assembly or congregation, and "Koinonia", the communion or fellowship (pp. 31-33). Although these ideas are inter-related, she distinguishes the state of being called together as an institutional and the relational community. These are important ideas for the church to grapple with as it extends its presence online.

After the Pastor shared with his congregation the student's email, a concerned church member approached him to stress that only those who are physically present should consider themselves members. That parishioner is not alone in his criticism of the online participant. In a 2009 article in

Leadership Journal emerging church pastor Bob Hyatt wrote, “there is no virtual church,” and contends that “because it has all the easiest and most instantly gratifying parts of community without the harder parts, it ends up misshaping us.” (August 26, 2009).

Many people experience the three study churches online, but these are not virtual churches, as they exist as traditional embodied communities. There are some opportunities for interaction but these are limited and controlled. Helland (2002) has proposed that Internet mediated engagement can be seen as “religion online”, primarily a one-to-many online communication, and “online religion” where religion is practice in the online environment and communication is two way. Most church online activity is the former “religion online.” Social media however, begins to challenge that. All three churches used social media as communication tools. A *New Governance Church* leader argued, “The more contact you can have with people, the better. If a person was already using Facebook or Twitter, we join the conversation where they are already having it.” Facebook and Twitter in that church began as a means of posting church announcements, but soon featured inspirational thoughts. Facebook was used to post “teasers” about upcoming sermon topics that would generate discussion among “friends.” This opened a dialogue during the sermon construction process. Twitter became an important means of reaching the church youth. Through followers and re-tweets through members personal accounts church tweets reached more than three times the number of members in the congregation. The two other churches were much slower in their adoption of social media but have gradually developed significant followings.

Social media adoption was not without resistance. One leader said he was “anti-Facebook.” In one leadership meeting on the web presence, a leader was adamant, “one of the problems of social media, you don’t get that relationship...Rather than calling up or talking to people you’re texting or twittering them...So you lose all that emotion...I think this is isolating people.” A leader at another church in defending its use said, “Awesome. I don’t use it but I love it...I’ve got a twitter account, I’ve tweeted once. I’m totally for the social media.” Churches need to be conscious of the ways online technologies build and undermine community. They also need to be conscious of the reach of their online presence. Churches, before venturing online need to ask who is speaking for the church online. In the three study churches clergy were active bloggers and tweeters, but relied on resident technical expertise. *New Governance Church* benefited from a Computer Science student internship to establish their online presence and help them address arising issues. *One Ship Church* has now employed a Communications Coordinator with over sight of the social media voice of the church.

3. Managing Information Challenges in the Digital Age

In this paper both information opportunities and challenges observed in the study churches were described. In summary there are six areas that church leaders need to carefully consider when approaching new information technologies.

- a. Churches must be aware of legal obligations around information.
 - i. *Copyright and Licenses* - Churches are responsible to understand copyright law as it applies to various forms of media and their uses. Unless the church is the creator of the content, or the use is permitted under a statutory exemption, permission must be given to use that content for church purposes.

- ii. *Personal Information* - Churches have a legal and ethical obligation to use personal responsibly and appropriately. They need to be aware of the laws that apply in their jurisdiction. Churches must ask why they are collecting this information, and ensure the information is safeguarded and accurate.
- b. Church must understand their ethical obligations to their members.
 - i. *Privacy* - Churches have an ethical obligation to protect the safety and privacy of their members. Privacy is an important social value and members expect their privacy will be respected. In a digital world this will raise additional challenges that churches will need to address. Some denominations have developed guidelines for church privacy policies (Baptist, 2012).
 - ii. *Inclusion* – New technologies offer ways to connect to new and diverse audiences and build community in new ways. However these same technologies can isolate and exclude members by extending the digital divide in congregations. Rather than avoid online conversations, churches need to be creative to bring in offline conversations.
- c. Churches need to wrestle with the theological implications of the online.
 - i. *Authority* – We live in the midst of an information explosion that offers a wealth of new resources to build the church. Church leaders must be clear on the role of these new tools, and wrestle with their responsibilities to teach and lead in the midst of a cacophony of voices. Charles Stanley and TD Jakes might be great speakers, but are not the leaders of the local church.
 - ii. *Koinonia* – New forms of community and communication will challenge our traditional ideas of fellowship and belonging. Churches will need to decide their obligations to the world they engage online. Churches will need to discover how to share and care in this new and wild space.

4. Conclusion

Information technologies are ubiquitous in western societies. It is virtually impossible to make it through a day without engaging with some form of new media either directly or mediated. Many churches are embracing new technologies to further their mission in their communities and globally. Equipping congregations to engage with the online can become be addressed through religious information literacy training (Gunton 2012). These challenges also create opportunities for information professionals to come alongside churches and assist them in developing their information policies. New technologies are neither to be avoided nor accepted uncritically, but can be adopted with great benefit, IF they first address the legal, ethical and theological implications.

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