

eVangelism: Making Online Connections

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Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

AST REB File number:	0042013
Title of Research Project:	e-Vangelism: Making Online Connections in the 21 st Century
Faculty Supervisor:	Dr. Susan Willhauck
Student Investigator	Sarah Grady

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

Approval Period: 1 November 2013 to 25 March 2014

On behalf of Atlantic School of Theology's Research Ethics Board, I wish you success in your research.

Dr. Alyda Faber
Chair, Research Ethics Board, Atlantic School of
Theology

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Abstract: Interviews took place with three different denominations: the United Church of Canada, The Anglican Church of Canada, and a Baptist congregation, all in the Halifax area. Four persons were interviewed, two clergy and two web ministers for their congregations. The purpose of the study is to explore how clergy use and understand their websites. The reason for this research is two fold: First, to increase the body of knowledge that we have on the topic of “online,” or virtual ministry. Second, explore how these themes might filter into the life of the church, as we know it today...

March 25, 2014

Introduction

My interest in church websites initially took root during my first year of study at the Atlantic School of Theology. Some of my classmates in their final year were looking for job postings in the church and, while helping them in their search, my first instinct was to Google the churches into which they were looking. What I found was curious, and in some cases a little bit disturbing. I discovered websites that were labelled “under construction”, and appeared to have been that way for more than a year; or ones with cheesy graphics and dated images that did not do much to inspire me to want to be a part of the congregation. Worst of all were those websites that featured flashy colours and questionable theology. I was also surprised by the number of churches that didn’t have a website at all.

That summer, as I was doing work for a national church youth event, I was tasked with calling around to various churches to confirm registration and to inquire whether they were looking for any funding. I had the name of the congregation and phone number for most of them, but what I did not have a lot of the time was the name of the minister. Again, my automatic go to for information

was to Google the church and look online to see if these churches had a website with contact information on them. Quite a few of them did, but again I was surprised by how many did not have websites, and even more surprised by how out of date and poorly designed so many of them were. I started to think a lot about what I was seeing. I wasn't sure why, but I had this nagging feeling that stayed with me. I felt like the churches whose websites were poorly done, or didn't have one at all, were missing out on a huge opportunity to connect with people.

I was reminded of the very familiar Matthew passage about salt and light: "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."¹

Was it possible that these congregations had lost some of their saltiness? Were they missing an opportunity to let their light shine and to show their good works? Were they missing an opportunity to invite others to share in the joy of community?

Purpose and Research Question

These experiences and questions are what have led me to my research. The reality is that we live in a networked world. Online is the place where the majority of people in our Western culture spend a good deal of their waking hours. The Internet

¹ Matthew 5:13-16, Holy Bible, *New Revised Standard Version* (All further reference to scripture in

has changed the way people are able to access information, in much the same way that the advent of the printing press did. Never before has information been so readily available as it is in this day and age. I wanted to dig deeper and see how churches were taking advantage of this technology. Therefore I wanted to know: how do clergy and congregations understand and use their websites? What did they see as the purpose for having a one? Perhaps most importantly of all, did they see their websites as a tool for evangelism? In order to address the issues raised by these questions this study will examine and analyse what the research and literature available has to say about the church, technology, and websites. Let us begin by examining the literature dealing with the impact of contemporary Internet technology.

Review of Literature

Technology and its use in the church is a heavily debated topic. There are still many clergy and congregation members who think that the use of technology in ministry is superficial, nothing but pandering to and accommodating the latest fads and consumer trends.² While in some cases this may be true, research shows that there are many ways that it can be used in effective and positive ways to help spread the Gospel. It is worth noting here that as a result of the rapid, almost explosive, rise and implementation of current information technology there is a considerable lag in the promotion, acceptance, and comprehension of the impact that the Internet has caused. Accordingly, many questions have been raised about church websites

² Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Media: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church*, (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Press, 2005), 9.

through research on the matter but there appear to be four dominant issues on the matter that continue to be addressed:

1. What are some of the challenges in creating and maintaining a church website?
2. What is the purpose of a church website?
3. Who is the website for?
4. Can a church website be an alternative form of church community?

This review of the literature on ministry and technology will focus on these four questions.

What are some of the challenges of creating and maintaining a church website?

Like many aspects of church life, it is hard to initiate and maintain a new approach to ideas such as current information technology in effective and meaningful ways. A website can be a challenge to create and maintain because of a few factors. For example, many people automatically assume that one of the barriers to having a website might be the cost. However, John Jewell, in his book *Wired for Ministry*, says that designing and maintaining a website is quite affordable. The real challenge is the sense of being overwhelmed with information.³ In *40 Days and 40 Bytes*, the authors suggest that a potential solution to the problem of affordability is to create a technology team in your congregation. This group can help to synthesize and organize the needs of information for a church's website and create a specific plan and timeline for implementing any changes to the website.⁴

³ John P. Jewell, *Wired for Ministry: How the Internet, Visual Media, and Other Technologies can Serve Your Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 89.

⁴ Aaron Spiegel, Nancy Armstrong, Brent Bill, *40 Days and 40 Bytes: Making Computers Work for Your Congregation*, (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 65.

Another challenge to creating and maintaining a church's website is the issue of copyright. In *Technology Tools for Your Ministry*, Tim Welch stresses the importance of respecting the artistic expressions that we use in the form of images, music, or writing from outside authors.⁵

Lastly is the challenge of security when creating and maintaining a church website. As we have seen with the public airing of sensitive information through Wikileaks and the public humiliation of major companies such as Target when their data is illegally accessed, security is a major concern. One must always be aware that privacy issues such as photos, birthdays, personal information (Social Insurance Numbers, PIN data, etc.), and financial records are all fodder for the inquisitive, or worse, the unscrupulous who may have the skills to break into data bases where such information is stored. With the online threat of identity theft, hackers, and viruses from software that we download it is important to be wary of the things that are going on a website.⁶ Churches will increasingly be of interest to the individuals, or groups, who recognise that such websites are rarely the province of sophisticated information technicians.

Jewell and Welch have both pointed out some key risk factors for us to consider when we take the church online. It is easy to forget to credit the images that we use in PowerPoint's or graphics that we obtain from Google or stock photography sites for our own websites. Welch in particular cautions us to be wary of who is able to gain access to the information we are putting online, yet neither

⁵ Tim Welch, *Technology and Tools for Your Ministry*, (New London, CT: Twenty Third Publications, 2008), 73.

⁶ Spiegel, Armstrong, & Bill, *40 Days and 40 Bytes*, 96-99.

Welch nor Jewell address any of the specific ways that we can protect ourselves from the threat of online identity theft, hackers, or viruses. Security and privacy of information being shared online is something that the person(s) responsible for the design and upkeep of any website must familiarize themselves with.

What is the Purpose of a Church Website?

Three possible purposes emerged from the research about the purpose of a church website. The first of these is to help people who are looking for a church home. Lynne Baab's research into the area of church websites for her doctoral thesis titled "Our New Front Door: How Congregational Web Sites Communicate Church Vision," addresses this issue. While looking for a new church home for herself, her research led her to ask three key questions about a church website: Does the site convey that spiritual seekers are welcome? Are questions about faith and God valued? Does it convey that people don't have to be perfect to attend?⁷ These three questions address the reasons why people would be looking for a church in the first place, while also addressing the importance of getting answers that invite the seeker to want to explore further with a personal visit to the physical site.

A second purpose, which is highlighted by Tim Welch, is that we want the website to reach out and engage others. At the same time, we want to share our faith and continue to walk with people as they grow in that faith.⁸ Using the Internet as a ministry tool, therefore, we can also assist people who are already attending church, as well as others who may be seeking a church home, by letting them know about

⁷ Lynne M. Baab, "Our new front door: How congregational web sites communicate church vision." *Congregations* 34 (2) (03/01), 7.

⁸ Welch, *Technology and Tools for Your Ministry*, 74.

new ministries, activities, and events.

The third purpose is to help people grow spiritually by providing them with additional resources. That being said, church web designers and clergy putting information on their websites need to be very discerning about the information being provided.⁹ In *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*, Quentin Schultz cautions the reader to be wary of *informationism* – where we become a non-discerning, vacuous faith in the collection and dissemination of information as a route to social progress and personal happiness.¹⁰ It is incumbent, therefore upon the web designer and the congregation to be aware of what the website actually says about the culture and mission of the congregation. It must not be misleading or superficial, but rather it must accurately reflect what that particular congregation wants to project in its invitation to worship and church life.

While there were differing viewpoints about the purpose, all three authors agreed that the information offered on a church website can be a valuable tool in building community, as well as reaching out to the community beyond the doors of the church building. These insights became important factors in my research. As I interviewed my participants and coded my research it became clear that building community and reaching out in new ways were important goals in the design and upkeep of a church website. In this way Baab, Schultz, and Welch's research help to affirm my own research findings. Let us now examine a third question that is frequently addressed in research on church websites:

⁹ Ibid, 88-91.

¹⁰ Quentin J. Shultz, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 26.

Who is the website for?

Frank Johnson identifies two populations when it comes to Internet usage and browsing websites that he refers to as Immigrants and Natives.¹¹ According to Johnson the people who are native Internet and website users are people born after 1962, while immigrants are those born earlier, and thus presumably less likely to use the information highway offered by the Internet as a channel for church shopping. He says that while there are some in the immigrant population who will access a church website for information, the native group is really the target audience. John Jewell refers many times to the “Net Generation” or “Gen N.” According to his research the people that fit into this category are quite a bit younger than Johnson’s projection. Jewell says that Gen N refers to anyone who is born after 1977. For him this is a generation that stays connected mainly through the use of technology and this may be the target audience for a church website. Jewell believes that a website, and digital technology in general, can provide us with an opportunity to knock on every door in a community, without turning people off.¹² This revelation of information is accessible to all, but he suggests that it is more likely that the Gen N group will use this approach. There are some deep implications in this inference, since it suggests that the generation gap between seniors and Gen N exists on multiple levels when each group prepares to research information. Print may be the channel of choice for seniors while the Internet appeals to the younger group. If this indeed accurate, then a church needs to be aware of how it can reach

¹¹ Frank Johnson, “*Effective Church Websites for Emerging Generations.*” Accessed at <http://www.Internetevangelismday.com/church.php> on October 4, 2013.

¹² John P. Jewell, *Wired for Ministry*, 147.

out to the greater community at large in different ways, while attempting to educate its own senior members about the possible advantages of Internet access. Such generalisations, of course, are dangerous because they tend to ignore new trends in activities in which each group may engage. Johnson and Jewell's categories are useful for beginning a conversation about Internet use, but they must necessarily be tempered with due caution about making broad inferences that do not take into account specific congregational cultures. Noting these concerns allows for greater insight into the value of the Internet, and this insight leads us into the last question that emerged from a review of the literature available on ministry and technology.

Can a website be an alternative form of church community?

This is the area where there seems to be the least consensus amongst the researchers. They each have a different take on how community is possible in an online setting and each author outlines some of the challenges to consider when designing a church website. Schultz's take is often sceptical about the values being created in this day and age through the use of the Internet. He says that cyber-technology runs through modern culture like an enormous combine, gathering the easy fixes and technological wizardry while discarding ancient wisdom.¹³ How can we remain faithful witnesses to Christ's call to live in community when community means sitting individually at a computer screen? Welch also echoes this concern. He says that we need to be aware that some isolation can occur in an online setting; however, he also believes technology has the power to foster collaboration and

¹³ Shultz, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart*, 196.

community.¹⁴

Jewell, on the other hand, suggests that authentic Christian community is essential to integrating technology and ministry in a disconnected world. He says that the challenge is moving past the question of whether there can be a community without being face to face.¹⁵ Shane Hipps cautions that online communities could potentially perpetuate consumerism without intentionality for communal practices.¹⁶ Hipps believes that we need to engage in new cultural realities, yet stay connected with the history of our spiritual heritage.

As noted earlier, it can seem like a huge task to reach out to the growing cyber community in safe, effective, and theologically sound ways. Research in the area of the online church community says that while these goals are achievable, they do present many challenges. Being aware of the challenges and being open to the possibilities will help us to move forward into the emerging generation of church and technology interaction. During the interview process my research participants were able to offer some specific examples of challenges, as well as future possibilities for their church's website that will help to expand on this point.

Reviewing the literature available was certainly helpful in discerning some of the challenges and possibilities that technological advances have opened up for the church. I felt, nonetheless, that there were still some unanswered questions and territory that hadn't been fully explored yet. I was still concerned about the issues surrounding security, consistency of message, constructing an appealing website,

¹⁴ Welch, *Technology and Tools for Your Ministry*, 88.

¹⁵ Jewell, *Wired for Ministry*, 62.

¹⁶ Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Media*, 158.

and creating a communication that accurately reflected the culture and mission of the congregation and its denomination. The need for a deeper understanding of these issues meant that I would need to do my own research using a qualitative method for collecting and analysing data so that I would have a first hand grasp of how some churches had contended with these concerns.

Research Method

Overview of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right. It cuts across disciplines, fields, and subject matter.¹⁷ Because of this, qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of particular populations. As defined by John W. Creswell, qualitative research:

“Begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem...Qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study...This up-close information gathered by actually talking to people and seeing them behave and act within their context is a major characteristic of qualitative research...We conduct qualitative research because a problem of issue needs to be explored.”¹⁸

For my research I had a specific population in mind that I wanted to interview: clergy and web designers with experience in the creation and upkeep of their congregational websites. The problem I had found with the church “online” was that

¹⁷ American Association of University Professors, “Should all disciplines be subject to the Common Rule? Human subjects of social science research, *Academe*, 88 (1), 1-15, as cited in Norman Denzin, and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Ed, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd Ed. (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2005), 2.

¹⁸ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2007), 36-39.

it is a relatively new phenomenon and as such there was a limited amount of research available on it. In particular, there was a lack of information available on church websites. As a result, I needed to choose a method of qualitative research that would generate theories and allow themes to develop organically with no preconceived hypothesis.

Grounded Theory Method

After reviewing the benefits and challenges inherent in each of the qualitative research methods I settled on grounded theory. Grounded theory was developed in 1967 by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, who felt that theories being used in research up to that point were not appropriately suited to the participants under study.¹⁹ The intent of grounded theory is to move beyond description and to generate or discover a theory.²⁰

This method was the most helpful to use for my research because there is not a lot of research available in relation to church websites. I did not start with any preconceived assumptions of what I was trying to prove with my questions. I was able to develop themes and a hypothesis naturally, by asking a series of questions of my participants and analysing what they had to say, rather than starting with a hypothesis that I was trying to prove. This approach helped to keep my research objective and to avoid prejudicial assumptions about the exemplars I would encounter in my field research.

¹⁹ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 63.

²⁰ Ibid.

Data Collection

For the purposes of my research I wanted to interview clergy and web ministers in a variety of Christian denominations who had knowledge of their church's website. The purpose of this approach was to allow for a broader base of information about how different denominations might approach their use of the Internet. In order to find potential interviewees` I extended an invitation by Facebook to see if any of my friends might be interested in taking part in my research, or if they knew of people who would be interested. A few of them responded with names and once permission was obtained to contact the persons that had been identified I sent email invitations to each participant and made appointments to meet with them. In the case of one participant our meeting took place via Skype due to weather conditions.

The four participants, two male and two female, all live in Nova Scotia and are employed by congregations in different capacities. My first participant is a full time creative arts media director for a Baptist congregation, the second is a quarter time web minister for a United Church, the third a full time United Church minister, and the fourth a full time Anglican Priest. For the purpose of referring to these participants I have given them each a name associated with technology or the Internet. For the male participants I have chosen Steve and Bill, as in Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. For the female participants I have chosen the names Sheryl and Meg. Sheryl Sandberg is the COO of Facebook and Meg Whitman is the CEO of Hewlett Packard. Each of these participants has had experience in the creation and upkeep of their congregations website.

Each of the interviews with my participants lasted between thirty-five and forty-five minutes. During the interviews each participant was asked a series of questions that were developed in consultation with my research consultant, Tom Power, and our Graduate Project Seminar Professor, The Rev Dr Susan Willhauck. Each interview was recorded using the “Voice Memo” technology available on my iPhone, and I also took field notes as secondary questions arose during the interviews.

Once my data had been collected I started the process of transcribing the interviews and moved from there to the open coding portion of the research method. I read through my data several times and then started to create some tentative labels for portions of data that summarized themes I could see developing. From here I moved to the axial coding where I started to identify relationships among the open codes. The last part of the process was the selective coding where I reread my transcripts and selectively coded data that related to the core themes I identified in the open and axial coding processes. Through the series of questions and answers these participants offered some great insights into some of the possibilities, as well as limitations, of the church online. Let us now turn to an examination of what the research has to tell us about church websites and the church online.

Data Analysis

There were four main themes that emerged from each of my interviews as I was doing my coding, and a fifth underlying theme that emerged from two of my interviews. The themes that emerged are as follows:

1. Welcome: The New Front Door of the Church.
2. Evangelism: A New Medium for the Message.
3. Community in Action: Who is the Church?
4. Connecting: Meeting People Where They Are.
5. Untapped Resources: What Are We Missing Out On?

Let us examine each of these themes in turn and see what the participants had to say about how their church website, or websites in general, relate to these.

Welcome – The New Front Door of the Church

In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ proclaims: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”²¹ When we welcome Christ, he never comes alone: he always brings friends. When we welcome Christ we also welcome the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, and, yes, sometimes the strange. The radical hospitality in which Christ has invited us to be a partner calls us to seek new opportunities to welcome the friend as well as the stranger. In our seven-day society, church is not the only option on a Sunday morning—a fact that Christian churches lament. Many congregations, because of this, are seeking new ways to reach out to those who are no longer coming through their physical front doors. My research has led me to see the possibilities of a church website as the new front door. I asked each of the participants to comment on the ways they were using their website as a tool to reach out to those exploring. What were the ways that they felt their website was a place of welcome?

²¹ Matthew 25:53

Bill said: “ I think the important thing that is on there is the worship schedule and the location of the church... The ‘who we are’ I think is important, too. What kind of parish we are... my hope is that people would also look at the ministry page. It’s a point of contact.”

Sheryl talked about the importance of the layout as being a way to welcome people when she said: “I am told that people can find what they are looking for easily. When I learned web development that’s the number one thing people would be frustrated about. If they go to a website and the navigation is not clear. It is very easy to navigate our website.”

Steve also expanded on this point when he talked about the things he kept in mind when designing the layout of the website. He said:

I want to make sure that it’s easy to find anything; that you can find things with three clicks or less. I don’t want stale data up there because that’s a turnoff for people... from my opinion I think it’s the same as any website, not necessarily just a church website. It should be able to tell you immediately what its all about.

What Sheryl and Steve said made a lot of sense if we think about a physical church building. When the doors are locked, or the main office and minister are hard to find, it does not feel like a place of welcome. Similarly, if information is not readily available on a church’s website that tells you who the congregation is, and what they are about, how does this reflect the radical hospitality of Christ?

It was Meg who talked specifically about the website as the new front door. She said:

It’s the door; it really is the door of our church. It’s more important than any other thing that we do. Every single new family, every single new parent that we’ve had come and check out baptism or to join the community have Googled us, they have

searched through the websites of churches... I always ask, 'How did you find us?' and they always answer, 'through your website.' It's the front door of the church that says who we are and what we believe.

Meg also talked about what she thinks make her congregation's site a place of welcome. She said: "Our website is very colourful and I always think it's immediately engaging... The other helpful thing is that I think it's intuitive and I think it's easy."

Whether they were expressing how their church website felt welcoming for visitors, or the aspects they kept in mind to make it easy to navigate, each participant articulated that a church website is no different from a physical church building. It needs to be able to reflect the welcome one would expect on a Sunday morning and offer the hospitality we are called to offer in the name of Christ.

Evangelism – A New Medium for the Message

The next theme that emerged from my research was evangelism—the new medium for the message. 20th century communications theorist and educator Marshall McLuhan famously referred to the medium as the message. McLuhan held that media shapes the way we think and that the printed word was fated to disappear. He predicted the advent of the Internet 30 years before the public knew anything about it. His prediction that the printed word would disappear is slowly becoming a reality with the advent of the Internet. Newspapers and magazines that were once available solely in paper format are now being accessed online and in the case of some publications they are *only* available online.

Today, "evangelism" is a word that many mainline Christians do not use. Perhaps it is because to those people who are not churchgoers, and are not familiar

with its true meaning, the word often conjures up the image of a sweaty preacher in his best Sunday suit prophesying and healing the masses on a TV screen. However, as a past AST grad project presenter pointed out, evangelism does not need to be a dirty word. Simply put it means to share the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel of Matthew decrees:

“Jesus came and said to them: ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you’”²²

This is the task that has been laid out before those of us studying for ministry, and it is certainly not an easy task. Theologian Shane Hipps draws on the work of McLuhan in his book *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*. Hipps says that our methods for communicating God’s message have undergone a series of seismic shifts. Thus, because the medium is the message, our media revolutions, from the printing press to the Internet, have led to unintended changes in our message.²³ This is not something that we should fear, however, nor should we shy away from the possibilities of evangelism in times of change, because long before McLuhan made the observation that the medium is the message, Jesus did the same thing. In the Gospel of Matthew he says:

“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise the skins burst and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”²⁴

²² Matthew 28:18-20.

²³ Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Media*, 88.

²⁴ Matthew 9:16-17.

Also before McLuhan's time theologian Martin Luther drew on this passage during the Reformation when he pushed the church to change the language used in worship liturgies to the vernacular. He felt that this change would allow lay leadership to become more prominent in the church. He famously said of the language of the church:

“And let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17) is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored; and, as the gospel itself points out [Matt. 14:20], they are the baskets in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments.”²⁵

Our modern day society has shifted into a new reality in which emails have replaced handwritten letters, text messages have replaced phone calls, and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have replaced face-to-face interaction; so, how is God's church responding? How are we changing the medium just as Jesus and Luther did so that people are still hearing the message? The current head of the Roman Catholic Church is one example of how one can change the medium so people are still hearing God's message. Pope Francis uses Twitter and other social media to connect with people of all denominations and faith traditions around the world. Clearly this is indicative of how a large mainline Christian denomination has embraced possibilities for discussing and spreading the Gospel in the 21st century. The popularity of Pope Francis and the Roman Catholic Church in general has soared in the last year. This is further proof that the Internet is a valuable tool for evangelism when used properly. Steve, Meg, Bill, and Sheryl all

²⁵ Luther's Works, American Edition, Vol 55, Eds Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St Louis & Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing & Fortress Press, 1955), 45.

talked about the ways they felt a church website could be and is being used as a tool for evangelism.

On her congregation's website, Sheryl posts podcasts and hardcopies of the minister's sermons. She found that people would leave messages saying: "I found your website and I have a troubled life and I found your pastor's sermons very uplifting."

For Bill it was something that he had in mind as he was designing the layout of the website. He said: "I definitely see a future in evangelism online...as far as the website for me the goal was to put the information up there and hopefully draw people in."

Meg proclaimed that:

"It is absolutely a tool of evangelism. It is *the* tool of evangelism next to word of mouth. I think the piece about evangelism is saying, "Well, here we are, we believe in God, this is how we practice our faith, this is what you will find if you come on Sunday morning."

Steve simply stated: "It's on the web, so it's potentially world-wide." He expanded on the ways that his own congregation's website was already being used as a tool for evangelism. He said: "We post our weekly messages online... so there's an online evangelism tool right there." When I asked Steve what explanations were available for a non-Christian or person exploring more on the Gospel on his church's website he also said:

"The way you deliver your message can change constantly just to be current or relevant to the culture. But the message itself doesn't change. We don't water that down, we don't. This is what we believe. How we present it may change, but not what we believe... I want people to see it right up front. I want it to say it's all about Jesus...I want it to reach people and for it to say: "We

care. It's important to God and it's important to us and here's what we're doing with our community."

These remarks from Steve lead us into the third theme that emerged around community in action and discipleship.

Community in Action or Discipleship – Who Is the Church?

We have been discussing so far about the possibilities of reaching out, welcoming, and engaging newcomers. Another important theme that emerged through my research was the need to excite and enliven the ministries of those people who are already engaged in the life and work of a faith community.

Each of the participants felt that showing who the church is, and the ways they are working together and in the community, is an important aspect of a website. It is important to them to have pictures of the community in action – whether it be church suppers, mission work they were involved in, or the various ministries each congregation had to offer, such as children's programs, women and men's ministries. This has a two-fold effect. It is a way to affirm the gifts being shared by people in the community. It also gives newcomers or members seeking a new ministry in which to take part a chance to see the community in action and understand better what it is all about.

Sheryl talked about how her ministry included trying to post pictures of things like the Christmas pageant with the kids in their costumes, or pictures and write-ups when there is a guest preacher. When I asked if she had any specific intention in mind when choosing pictures to go on the site she said: "Just the activities and the things that happen, what the people are doing and what the people are contributing."

Bill said that it is not only pictures that show the life and work of the community. He said: "We have a parish newsletter and it's all so you can download it. I also include a page about what's happening in the national church right on the homepage." He went on to talk about the links to their bishop's website, as well as links to the World Wide Anglican Communion. It became clear from all of the participants that links to other relevant sites, mission statements, or core beliefs were all important ways of highlighting what the church was about and how to access that data easily and accurately.

Meg brought up an interesting point about pictures on a website in her interview. When asked whether she felt that pictures showing the life and work of the congregation were important to a website she said:

"Absolutely. I mean if you just have empty pews, what does that say? I always think what does it mean when people are putting a picture of an empty building on their website? I think if you've got stuff up there, it should be with people in it."

As I reflected on the data from my interview it became apparent that pictures and links that show what is happening in the national church, or initiatives the congregation are undertaking are tools that help reinforce that the church is not a building; the church is the people of God at work, at play, and in worship as a community. The rich opportunities to reach out to a greater community were not limited by access only to the physical plant; rather, the opportunities were expanded considerably by literally allowing people around the world to engage with the church and its activities via the Internet. This enthusiasm, however, needs to be tempered by recognising that this experience is, after all, only a cyber experience; yet, even this allows for contact and potential growth, spiritually and

congregationally, as seekers discover possibilities to encounter the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We must also be mindful that in our enthusiasm to spread the word we don't forget to take the precautions Welch and Jewell talked about when it comes to sharing information and pictures. Each of the participants talked about the importance of obtaining consent for any pictures being shared and they all have consent forms available to give people before they use an image of someone else's work, or post pictures of people on their website. Steve also talked about the value of making sure the programs he used to create and maintain the website helped to keep it free of spam and viruses that may infect the site or allow a hacker access to private information.

Connection – Meeting People Where They Are

As each of my participants pointed out, in one way or another, people are online all day long. If a congregation does not have a presence there, it is a missed opportunity to connect with people, both new people and those who are already members of the congregation. There is considerable conversation in the church about "meeting people where they are." The interviewees pointed out that the place people are at is online: they are on Facebook, on Twitter, on Instagram, on Pinterest, and countless other blogs and websites. Each participant noted that they offered links to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube on their websites. Social media has exploded in the last 10 years and, as I have already mentioned, it has changed the way we interact with one another. The very definition of the word "social" means

time spent connecting, and media are the various communications channels that we use to connect.

We have the tools to meet people where they are. If Philip, in the book of Acts, can use the low level technology of ditch water to baptize a eunuch on the road, why can't we use Facebook or Instagram to connect with people outside of Sunday morning worship? Technology, and in particular the Internet, has made it easier than ever to connect with people quickly. It has also extended the reach of our connection further than it has ever been possible before. In his book *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan talked about how technology has made the world a much smaller place. He said: "Today, after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned."²⁶

McLuhan was ahead of his time with his thinking about the ways technology could change the ways that we interact with one another. The Internet has made it possible for us to connect with people around the globe instantly. On her congregation's website, Sheryl talked about the ways they are taking advantage of social media to connect with people. She said:

"We also use a lot of social media right now. We're on Facebook and Twitter and we are getting more of an audience through social media. I find articles and inspirational things like that and put them up there...people are not going to notice your online content unless you are on social media."

Part of Bill's ministry with the youth in his congregation is the closed Facebook group that he started for them. He sees this as a setting where open and

²⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 3.

honest conversation can happen for a younger generation who may not otherwise feel comfortable talk about their faith:

“The other big part of the ministry is Facebook. It is a place where youth are really able to open up and be themselves. Facebook is a great way to start conversations online – debates and things like that. That’s really where I see a lot of conversation is on Facebook.”

It was Steve who cautioned that when it comes to social media and instantly connecting with people, “You can’t please everybody, that’s not what we are trying to do. We are not trying to be people pleasers. We are just trying to make sure we offer relevant content for people.”

Steve’s insight into some of the dangers of social media (trying to be people pleasers) is an area where Quentin Shultz’s warning about “informationism” can be particularly helpful. We need to be discerning about the information we are offering in these forums and the conversations that we engage in through them.

During my interview with Meg, she shared a story from a few years ago. She started receiving emails from different people in the United Kingdom. At first the conversations were polite with questions about sermons she had posted, or the theology of the United Church, but in the end they simply wanted to fight with her about the fact that God didn’t exist. Meg’s interaction with these people wasn’t necessarily positive, nor was it a permanent connection, but it demonstrated the possibility to learn and grow in faith because conversations took place that otherwise would never have happened. The option was there to move into deeper conversations about God.

Untapped Resources

The final theme that emerged as I was interviewing my participants was “untapped resources.” When you create a website and your church goes online, you open up other online opportunities. We have already noted that social media is one of these opportunities; however, both Meg and Bill talked about their experiences in using Skype as a tool for connecting with people. Skype is a software application that allows people with a webcam and Internet connection to have a face-to-face interaction over the web.

Meg used this tool last year when she was leading a Bible study with her congregation. One of the participants was in a wheelchair and the space the Bible study was being held in made it difficult for him to attend. One possible solution for the parishioner to be able to join the conversation was by conference call. Meg tried this at first, but was not an ideal situation. At the parishioner’s suggestion, Meg tried using Skype at the next session. Both Meg and the parishioner noticed a big difference right away in how he was able to participate when they used this technology. He felt more connected to what was happening in the room than he had been when he was simply listening to others. The experience with Skype was more akin to that of being in the same room as the others, which in turn encouraged unencumbered dialogue amongst the participants.

For Bill, his experience in using Skype was for a baptism. A family member of a child being baptized was not able to attend the service for one reason or another, so a computer with Skype software was set up in the sanctuary facing the front of the church. The family member was able to share in the holy moment of baptism

from far away. Bill noted that while there are limitations to this technology, as clergy cannot baptise via Skype, it does allow for cyber participation. He commented that the Holy Spirit felt present, even from far away, for that family member.

Implications for the Church

No one can deny that technology has profoundly changed the way that we live and work in God's world. Whether we are typing on laptops, writing text messages, or using Kindles to read books; very few people in this world are not impacted by the recent advancements in technology. The work of ministry often requires us to use technology: we write sermons, prayers, and bulletins on our computers, we use sound systems on Sunday morning, and we respond to a seemingly endless numbers of emails most days. It is a fact that daily use of the Internet has become the norm for a large portion of the world's population, and, for an entire generation, "Google" has become the automatic "go to" when they are searching for answers.

For those of us who feel called to ministry what does this mean? What is the impact of this new age of technology and "Internet" generations on the work we have been called to do? Before we answer this question perhaps we need to address the much bigger one, and that is "what *am* I being called to do?"

We have already noted in Matthew 28:18-20:

"Jesus came and said to them: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age."

This is at the heart of our call to ministry. It is a concrete direction from Christ, a call to action in the world, and it also a reminder that we don't do this alone. Mark 16:15 declares: "And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation." These directions are a call to evangelism, and they seem simple enough; yet, in this day and age of disconnected physical human contact, how is it possible?

Historically, we are living in the Age of Information. Never in history has so much information been shared in such a short period of time, primarily due to the Internet. At the touch of a key websites abound through search engines such as Google, Bing, and Yahoo. What was once limited by demographics and time restraints is now open to the entire world via the "World Wide Web" and this means that there is a potential for us to reach out farther than we ever have before. This is a far cry from the time of theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, whose work we continue to study. Their writings and references to these early philosophers and theologians can be found in the very foundations of our doctrinal beliefs. Even more recent theologians such as Tillich and Niebuhr did not have the advantage that we have today of being connected through the Internet.

As a result, one might say that the advent of the Internet has been both an advantage and disadvantage to the world. Theologian John P. Jewell says that the Internet has provided us with remarkable potential for evangelism; there is the possibility of knocking on every door in a community without the disadvantage of

turning people off.²⁷ The Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, have a long-standing history of door-to-door evangelism. In today's increasingly private and secular world, this is not always welcome. Unknown people coming to our doors is bothersome for many of us, and often, when someone does come knocking, one of two things happens: we don't answer because we look out and see that it is someone we don't know; or we shut the door before we have heard everything the person has to say.

So how are we supposed to make new disciples if we can't reach out to them door-to-door? Do we wait for them to come to us? The scripture specifically says: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nation...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." The reality is that not many people are simply wandering in the front door of the church anymore. They don't seem to be wandering in the side or back door, either, for that matter. This is an area where the Internet, and, more specifically, a church's website, can be an effective tool for us to use in our efforts at modern day evangelism. It allows us to reach out and connect with people in a way that was not possible even twenty years ago.

Despite this convenience, we have also noted that there is a distinct disadvantage to using the Internet, or even having a website. The most problematic of these is that sitting at a computer is a very individualistic activity and this negates what we so often strive for in our churches: a sense of community. Shane Hipps says that it is strange that we spend so much time and energy on the issue of creating community, because Jesus tells us to make disciples, not communities. Despite the

²⁷ John P. Jewell, *Wired for Ministry: How the Internet, Visual Media, and Other Technologies can Serve Your Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 147.

fact that Christ never directly states: “go make communities,” it is an implicit assumption throughout the Bible as community is the soil out of which the flower of discipleship grows.²⁸ Because sitting at a computer can be so isolating, this may be a reason that people crave community. Scripture invites us to be something more: to connect with one another beyond our cell phones and computer screens so that we might participate in authentic community that is marked by proximity and permanence.²⁹ Entering into authentic community requires us to meet our enemies as well as our neighbours. In church we do this by passing the peace of Christ, connecting with each other at coffee hour, by singing and praying together, and by delving deeply into the scriptures so that we might understand more fully our relationship with God. Can all of this be achieved on a church website?

Authentic Christian community is the foundation of all effective outreach. In John 17:21-23, Jesus prayed:

“...that they may all be one, even as You, Father, are in me and I in You, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that You sent me. The glory which You have given me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as we are one. I in them and You in me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent me, and loved them, even as You have loved me.”

According to these verses, if Jesus’ disciples are one, the world will believe that God has sent Jesus. If Jesus’ disciples are perfected in unity, the world will know that God sent Jesus and that God loves them as much as Jesus.³⁰ The converse is true as well. If Jesus’ disciples are not one, then the world will not believe that God has sent Jesus (this also implies that the world will not believe in Jesus’ mission—the

²⁸ Hips, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Media*, 121.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 122.

³⁰ Johnson, “*Effective Church Websites for Emerging Generations.*”

world will not believe that Jesus died for their sins). If Jesus' disciples are not perfected in unity, then the world will not know that God sent Jesus and that the Father loves them as He loves Jesus. This infers that the environment of an authentic Christian community is required for effective evangelism and outreach. A conversion that takes place without a prior experiential knowledge of authentic Christian community must be considered suspect in its depth and permanence, and if that premise is true, what does it say about Internet evangelism?³¹

It is possible that through an invitation to come and join the wider church community, a website can fulfil this purpose of authentic community. A congregational website has the potential to be a new type of door into the church for those who are exploring their faith, and even for those who are already regularly attending members.³² Congregational websites have three audiences, two of them primary and one less prominent.³³ The first of these are congregational members who are looking for information about what is happening at the church. These people might also visit the website if there are links to podcasts of the service or online groups or forums happening, such as Bible study. This might even be a means of reaching out to people who are shut-ins, have moved into long-term care, or are in hospital.

The second group is potential visitors, people seeking a new church home, or exploring church in general. What is the website saying to them? How is the Gospel of Christ being lived out through word and image here? We miss an opportunity to

³¹ Ibid.

³² Lynne M. Baab, "Our new front door: How congregational web sites communicate church vision." *Congregations* 34 (2) (03/01), 75.

³³ Ibid, 75.

engage with these people and spread the Gospel if our congregational website is one that isn't welcoming or doesn't say who we are as a church or denomination.

The third group might be people from other congregations or other faith traditions looking for information or resources.³⁴ This could be a wonderful opportunity to connect and engage in conversation with other faith communities, even a way to explore ecumenism.

One of the key purposes of our work in ministry is that we want it to engage others. We want to share our faith and continue to walk with people as they grow in that faith.³⁵ This is the promise of Christ in Matthew and indeed many other passages, particularly as found in the Gospels. In Matthew 28:19 Jesus gives the Great Commission: "Go ...baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." In the baptismal covenant of the United Church of Canada we make the following promises. We promise with children and adults who are baptized that we will support and care for them in their life's journey. It is a reflection of the promise of Christ in doing so.

We are called to offer so many things as ministers. We are called to extend the grace, peace, joy, hope, and the love of God to everyone we meet and, in this day and age, we are offered some new and exciting ways to do this of which we must take advantage. A church website is one of these; however, behind every good church website, and all the promises of a warm welcome and relevant teaching, there must be an authentic group of people bound together in commitment to being

³⁴ Ibid, 76.

³⁵ Welch, *Technology and Tools for Your Ministry*, 74.

bringers of the Good News to anyone who might visit that website.³⁶ There are certainly some things that have changed about the face of offering ministry in today's digitally and technologically connected world. While the medium in which we evangelize and connect to one another has changed, the message from Christ has not. This was something that Steve talked about enthusiastically when he said: "We've obviously got the greatest message out there that needs to be told. It's our job to make it relevant, captivating, and engaging."

Concluding Remarks

To quote Brian McLaren: "Balanced minds cannot live on websites and chat rooms alone."³⁷ As each of my participants noted, while there are many positive aspects of a church website, there are also limitations. Meg talked about this when she said: "The whole reason for coming to church is the experience of worship. The experience is that you are there, and you are listening to the word, and you are singing, and you are engaged. It's the visual and tactile experience of being there."

Sheryl talked about the drawbacks of recording an entire service and putting that online. She observed: "An entire church service on podcast is kind of boring... There is a lot of paper shuffling and coughing that can be heard in the background." In her comment Sheryl points out that a website like any other communication that we use, whether that is preaching the word of God or offering music in worship, if not done well people won't connect with it.

Bill also made a good point when he said: "Congregations need to take ownership in the creation and upkeep of their online presence." This task has fallen

³⁶ Jewell, *Wired for Ministry*, 155.

³⁷ Hips, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Media*, 10.

to him, but he is a full time priest in a busy parish. This observation highlights another limitation of web ministry – finding someone who is not only capable in the area of web design, but someone who is willing to take on the task of the upkeep a website requires. Many congregations do not factor the cost of their presence online into their budgets.

Steve offered these words of wisdom: “Even on Sunday morning people have the world in their hand, so you better be more engaging than Wikipedia and Google and everything else out there.” My prayer is that this research will show the need for a good church website as an extension of ministry, not *the* way to do ministry in this day and age. As each of my participants said, it is a way in - a point of contact. It’s the invitation to the party, not the party. The party begins when you enter the front door and join the community.

The World Council of Church’s document “The Church Towards a Common Vision,” states that the proclamation of the kingdom of God today must continue throughout the world within rapidly changing circumstances.³⁸ This documents challenges churches to seek new ways to proclaim the Gospel and establish and maintain Christian communities. “The ‘emerging churches,’ which propose a new way of being Church, challenge other churches to find ways of responding to today’s needs and interests in ways which are faithful to what has been received from the beginning.”³⁹

³⁸ “The Church Towards a Common Vision” *World Council of Churches Publications*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214, 2013, 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

In the final analysis there are several points that need to be considered about the effectiveness of web-based ministry. First, there is the recognition that a website is, after all, not a replacement for worship services. Bill and Steve both commented that it is a portal to exploring what the service might offer, but it lacks the ambiance of the sounds, sights, and spiritual experience of communal worship. What may appear to be a deeply moving, quietly reflective experience on a website may, in actual fact, be a misrepresentation of the event. This can occur because editing to fit the “worship service” on the website may exclude babies crying, paper rattling, feet shuffling, and the volume of the music. In contrast, since these and other elements may be edited out, the service may appear to be dull and uninspiring. If the seeker is aware of these limitations, however, then a certain amount of honesty about the worship experience will occur.

Secondly, a poorly designed website will almost always fail to capture the current, web-savvy seeker. No matter how wonderful the worship service may be, if this is not translated to the website, no one will risk following up with a physical visit. Every one of the participants was adamant about the necessity of developing and presenting a quality website experience in order to encourage potential seekers. Out of date material, “Under Construction” notices, gaudy graphics, and sloppy design will only guarantee that no one will visit either the website or the church.

Thirdly, websites need to be addressed to multiple audiences, taking into account the membership who worship and support the church as well as the potential seeker. An active congregation will have much information to share, and a website that does this well will be visited often by seekers as well as the members

who want to be informed of upcoming events, pastoral needs, and opportunities to participate in congregational life. As Meg points out, pictures of an empty building do not inspire any one.

Fourthly, we stand on the threshold of an information revolution that rivals the Gutenberg paradigm. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw an unparalleled rise in Biblical literacy because of the widespread availability of books created by Gutenberg's great invention of the printing press. The printing press influenced the way information was shared for hundred of years and the same way that this invention revolutionized the way information was shared, so has the Internet. The World Wide Web has given us a new medium to use to spread the Word of God. Once again, we are experiencing an information explosion with almost limitless opportunities for evangelism. This is a moment in history we must seize so that we do not lose the impetus to share the gospel on a global basis. Jesus said: "Go and make disciples of all nations." Now we can.

Lastly, I do not wish to suggest that the Internet is the answer to the future survival of the church. It is, after all, only one of any number of tools available for ministry. It is, however, a very important tool because it is so widely used by so many levels of society, age, and interests. As stated earlier: it is not the party; it is the invitation to the party; but it is becoming an increasingly significant invitation and one we ought not ignore as the church moves into the 21st century.

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Research Ethics Board Proposal

Name of Student Investigator: Sarah Grady

Title of Research Project: Virtual Ministry: Making Online Connections in the 21st Century

Summary of Proposed Research

Description

The reality of the age we live in is that people are connecting more and more through the virtual world. Whether that be through emails and social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, text messaging, imessaging, and Blackberry PM, or applications for Smartphones such as “What’s App” and “Skype”; we live in a world that is connected less and less face-to-face, and more and more online. So how are churches responding? How are they using this to their advantage and staying connected through this tool? What is on their websites? Do they even have a website? I wish to explore these questions further and in particular I would like to focus on how clergy and congregations use and understand the websites they have.

Proposed Research Field

I would like to do my research by interviewing clergy in churches that have websites, as well as interviewing the people who are responsible for maintaining a church website.

Principle Research Consultants

Dr. Thomas Power – Faculty with Trinity College, University of Toronto
Rev. Dr. Russ Daye – Minister at St. Andrew’s United Church in Halifax, NS

Methodology

After reviewing the benefits and challenges inherent in each of the qualitative research methods the methodology I have settled on is grounded theory. I believe this method will be the most helpful to use for my research because there is not a lot of research available in relation to church websites. I do not have any preconceived assumptions of what I am trying to prove with my questions. This method should allow themes and a hypothesis to develop naturally, by asking a series of questions

of my participants and analyzing what they had to say, rather than starting with a hypothesis that I am trying to prove. This approach will help to keep my research objective and to avoid prejudicial assumptions about the exemplars I will encounter in my field research.

Potential Benefits from Study

Bringing to light some of the advantages of getting online in this day and age of technologically driven society.

Potential Risks from Study

I do not anticipate any potential risks, as the subject matter is not personal. If however, there are disagreements or theological differences that could lead to discomfort, I will acknowledge them and offer to terminate the interview and/or refer the participant to my supervisor for follow up.

Process for Obtaining Informed Consent

I will confer with clergy and ministry personnel in the Halifax region to suss out potential participants. Once potential participants have been identified I will extend an invitation using the materials attached in Appendix B and C. I will then arrange an interview place and time. At the beginning of the meeting and before the interview begins, I will share the background of my project, answer questions they might have and ask them to sign a consent form (see appendix C). They will be able to end the interview at any point and I will delete the recording if they decide to withdraw from the study.

Process for Protecting Identity of Participants and Confidentiality of Data

Protecting Identity of Participants and Storage and Destruction of Data:

- 1. Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent from research participants (by January 31, 2014), I will:**
 - a) provide one copy for the participants**
 - b) keep one copy for myself which I will place in a envelope separate from all other materials and store in a locked file cabinet in my home office.**

- c) provide one copy for my supervisor (Dr. Willhauck), also placed in a separate envelope, who will store it in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST.
2. Participants will be given code names. Audio tapes of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device. These digital recording devices will be kept in locked brief cases or safes and secured at all times during data collection from the time of Informed Consent through the public Grad Project presentations (March 11, 12, 13) and until deleted permanently from my device (no later than March 20, 2014).
 3. Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document. The Word Document transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer from the time of data collection until the final Grad Project paper is due on March 25, 2014.
 4. The public Grad Project Presentations take place on March 11, 12 and 13. On March 20, 2014 I will bring my recording device to my supervisor who will check to make sure all interviews have been deleted.
 5. When the final Graduate Research paper is submitted to my supervisor on March 25, 2014, the Word Document transcripts of interviews will also be submitted to her, either printed as hard copies or disposable CDs and deleted from my computer and trash bin.
 6. Dr. Willhauck will store transcripts of interviews in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST for one year and all data materials will be destroyed by shredding or crushing on March 25, 2015.

Appendix A: Proposed Questions

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Who is responsible for updating what is on the church website? (Tell me about your work and how you came to do it)
2. What is the purpose of your church's website? Who is it meant for?
3. Can you talk about how your church's website is used to promote something happening either in your congregation or in the wider church community?
4. Do you think your church's current website is welcoming to a visitor? If so, how?
5. Is there any explanation of the Gospel on the site for non-Christians who are exploring?
6. Do you think online evangelism is possible?
 - a) If yes, than please expand on how you believe this is possible, or on ways that the website for your church is already doing this
 - b) If no, than please say why you don't think it's possible
7. Does your website offer links to podcasts, online sermons, webinars, or any other form of online community?
8. Are there any pictures of the faith community on your website? If yes than how often are these updated and if not then please advise why.
9. Does your website explain how to receive help and counsel for a variety of problems that people come to church seeking answers for?
10. What do you think makes a good church website?
11. How do your own personal faith commitments help guide your work?
12. Who decides what goes on the website?

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate

To Whom It May Concern:

I am student enrolled in the Master of Divinity Degree Programme at Atlantic School of Theology. As a part of my course work under the supervision of the Rev. Dr Susan Willhauck I am conducting a study on church websites and will be interviewing people who are involved in the upkeep or design of these. The purpose of the work is to examine what ideas and experiences people have interacting with websites and is two fold: First, to increase the body of knowledge that we have on the topic of "online," or virtual ministry. Second, to explore how these themes might filter into the life of the church.

Your involvement would require a 30-45 minute interview to be conducted by me at your convenience. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and would be greatly appreciated.

The questions and the project are designed to move to the contours of your experience as you actively speak about what it is like to be a part of design and upkeep of your church's website. Interviews will be a one on one conversation with the interviewer. Please be assured that confidentiality will be protected and the identity of the respondent will be protected at all points during the research. The researcher will take notes and/or audiotape the conversation.

The tapes and transcript will be held in a secure environment until the completion of this course of study, at which time they will be destroyed. This project will be completed by the end of April 2014.

All information obtained in this study will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. Names and revealing facts will be changed, thus affording you anonymity. To further protect individual identities, this consent form will be sealed in an envelope and stored separately. Furthermore, the results of this study will be presented as a group and no individual participants will be identified.

Please note that this research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Atlantic School of Theology. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Alyda Faber at afaber@astheology.ns.ca, Chair, Research Ethics Board.

If you have any interest in participating in this study, please contact the undersigned at either 647-200-5951 or grady_sarah@hotmail.com.

With Thanks,
Sarah Grady

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

eVangelism: Making Online Connections

Sarah Grady

Atlantic School of Theology

660 Francklyn Street

Halifax, NS B3H 3B5

I am student enrolled in the Master of Divinity Degree Programme at Atlantic School of Theology. As a part of my course work under the supervision of the Rev Dr Susan Willhauck I am conducting a study on church websites and will be interviewing clergy, media directors, or lay persons who are involved in the upkeep or design of these. I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purpose of the work is to examine what ideas and experiences people have interacting with websites and is two fold: First, to increase the body of knowledge that we have on the topic of "online," or virtual ministry. Second, explore how these themes might filter into the life of the church.

Your participation in this project is appreciated. The questions and the project are designed to move to the contours of your experience as you actively speak about what it is like to work with your church's website. The researcher will take notes and/or audiotape the conversation.

The tapes and transcript will be held in a secure environment until the completion of this course of study, at which time they will be destroyed. This project will be completed by the end of April 2014.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please read the following and indicate your willingness to be involved by giving your signature at the bottom of this page:

I acknowledge that the research procedures outlined and of which I have a copy have been explained to me. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. I know that I can contact the researcher at anytime should I have further questions. I am aware that my participation in this study is purely voluntary and I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time. I understand that the personal record relating to this study will be kept confidential.

I know that the researcher will make every effort to keep all information obtained in this study as **confidential and anonymous** as possible. Names and potentially revealing facts will be changed, thus affording me anonymity. To further protect individual identities, this consent form will be sealed in an envelope and stored separately. Furthermore, the results of this study will be aggregated and no individual participant will be identified.

The following is a time line for the storage and destruction of data:

7. Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent from research participants, I will:
 - d) provide one copy for the participants
 - e) keep one copy for myself which I will place in a envelope separate from all other materials and store in a locked file cabinet in my home office.
 - f) provide one copy for my supervisor (Dr. Willhauck), also placed in a separate envelope, who will store it in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST.
8. Audio tapes of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device. These digital recording devices will be kept in locked brief cases or safes and secured at all times during data collection from the time of Informed Consent through the public Grad Project presentations (March 11, 12 and 13) and until deleted permanently from my device (no later than March 20).
9. Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document. The Word Document transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer from the time of data collection until the final Grad Project paper is due on March 25, 2014.
10. The public Grad Project Presentations take place on March 11, 12, and 13. On March 20, 2014 I will bring my recording device to my supervisor who will check to make sure all interviews have been deleted.
11. When the final Graduate Research paper is submitted to my supervisor on March 25, 2014, the Word Document transcripts of interviews will also be submitted to her, either printed as hard copies or disposable CDs and deleted from my computer and trash bin.
12. Dr. Willhauck will store transcripts of interviews in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST for one year and all data materials will be destroyed by shredding or crushing on April 27, 2015.

If you have any questions, please contact the student researcher, Sarah Grady, at 647-200-5951, or email at grady_sarah@hotmail.com.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of Atlantic School of Theology. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Alyda Faber at afaber@astheology.ns.ca, Chair, Research Ethics Board.

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participants Signature: _____ Date: _____

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records.

Appendix D: Letter of Appreciation

Sarah Grady
Atlantic School of Theology
660 Francklyn Street
Halifax, NS B3H 3B5
647-200-5951 *grady_sarah@hotmail.com*

Dear [Participant],

I am grateful that you were willing to participate in my research exploring how clergy and congregations use and understand their church websites. I appreciated your honesty in answering my questions and your insights into the church “online.” These insights have helped make this project a successful and interesting journey.

Your reflections in our interview time have contributed much to my own understanding of how church websites are vital to the life and work of the modern day congregation and for this I am sincerely grateful.

I hope this has been a rich and meaningful experience for you as well. Please feel free to contact me with any additional thoughts, concerns, or questions arising from our interview. Once again, thank you for offering your time and wisdom by participating in my research.

With gratitude and blessings,

Sarah Grady
Final Year Student (UCC)
Atlantic School of Theology, MDiv program