

# **Ecclesiological Questions Arising from the Appropriation of Social Media by Christians**

**Polokelo Rantsudu & Lovemore Togarasei**

## **Abstract**

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*The appropriation of social media and other media technologies by churches and Christians have resulted in the shift in the practice of Christianity. Through a review of existing literature, this article considers the Christian doctrine of ecclesiology. It traces the traditional understanding of the ekklesia from Jewish to early Christian times. It then outlines how individual Christians are using the social media and other digital technologies in their practice of religion. Having noted that the use of these media are changing the way people practice their Christian faith, the article ends by raising ecclesiological questions that seek further research on the meaning of the ekklesia today.*

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## **Introduction**

Social media and digital technologies are a widespread global phenomenon that cuts across all societal strata and institutions indiscriminately. Even the church, which is often conservative, has not been spared from its pervasive influence. Literature posits that technologies frequently used in churches include telephones, computers, television, electronic mail, radio, YouTube and social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, (Togarasei 2012, Faimau 2017). Christians have embraced these technologies to participate in online religious activities such as prayers, sermons, ritual observance and sharing of testimonies and other messages. Olusola (2012:212) notes that though churches are participants in online religion, it is evident that individual Christians have actively embraced the use of social media for their personal, spiritual fellowship and upliftment. For some individuals, church attendance is no longer the sole way to spiritual satisfaction as they can now meet their spiritual needs through online religion. Online religion has transformed individuals' practice of religion as it can be accessed anywhere, anytime: in the comfort of one's home, the workplace and even whilst travelling. This development raises questions to do with the traditional understanding of the church (*ecclesia*). This article takes particular interest in individuals' use of social media for the practice of religion. It discusses ecclesiological questions which rise from the appropriation of social media by Christians. It has been observed by different scholars that generally, masses are actively involved in the use of social media and religion has not escaped this revolution (Helland 2004, Togarasei 2012, Gelfgren 2012:227, Faimau and Lesitaokana 2018: 2). Helland

(2004:23), points out that official religious organisations have flocked to the cyberspace, attempting to establish their presence, control and authority over a growing and developing sphere. Observing this in Africa, Faimau and Lesitaokana (2018) talk of the mediatization of religion. Christian churches, in particular, have fully embraced the use of social media and digital technologies in general. Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp have become channels for advertising church events in the same way they are used to advertise business services and merchandise (Faimau and Lesitaokana 2018:24). Besides advertising, Faimau and Lesitaokana (2018:24ff), also observe that social media is used by churches for digital storage and as a sense of agency. Whereas churches' use of social media, in our opinion, does not have a serious impact on traditional ecclesiology, it is our view that individual use of social media raises questions on traditional ecclesiology and calls for its review. The article therefore looks at the impact of social media on the traditional understanding of the church. Based on desk review, the article opens with a look at traditional ecclesiology. This will be followed by a review of what literature says about individuals' use of social media in their practice of Christianity before ending with an analysis of the impact of social media on ecclesiology.

### **Traditional understanding of the *ekklesia***

The word 'church' has its origins both in Jewish and Greek traditions. Discussing the ecclesiology of Paul, W. Barclay (1969:174-192) gives an elaborate background of the church. In the Jewish context, the word *ekklesia* is used to refer to the assembled people of Israel, e.g. at Mount Sinai when Israel assembled to receive the Ten Commandments (Deut.9:10, 18:16). Other texts referring to the assembly or the congregation of Israel are Deut. 31:30, Judges 20:2, 1 Sam. 17:47, 1 Kings 8:14, Psa. 22:22. In all these texts, a church is an assembled people. In the Greek context, *ekklesia* also referred to an assembly, but in this case the assembly was a political one. The Greek *ekklesia* was made up of all free citizens and in democratic setups, this assembly was the supreme decision-making body for all matters pertaining to the city. Thus, in both the Jewish and the Greek contexts, a church was defined in terms of assembly and belonging. This is the same position that we find in the New Testament, particularly as outlined in Pauline ecclesiology.

Using the term *ekklesia* about sixty-five times in his letters, Paul provides an adequate picture of the traditional Christian understanding of a church. He uses the term *church* sometimes to denote a local organization or body of professed Christian believers (1 Cor 1:2, Rom. 16:1, 1 Thess. 1:1, Gal. 1:2) and at other times the whole body of believers (Col 1:18). In these early

Pauline churches, a church was not a building as most of the churches met in houses (Rom. 16:5, 1 Cor. 16:9, Philm 2) large enough to accommodate the worshippers. Church then was defined in terms of congregation for purposes of worship and instruction and even in a wider sense, in every place and nation. The church as an organism is the complex structure of the body of Christ which carries on living activities by means of the individual believers who are distinct in function but mutually dependent on and governed by their relation to Christ, who is the Head. This definition is built on the Pauline presentation of the church as an organism under the figure of the body of Christ. Paul uses the figures of the body (1 Cor. 12), the bride (Eph. 5:22–32) and the building (1 Cor. 3:11; Eph. 2:20–22) to describe the church. These figures are used to illustrate the unity of the church as an organism. The body implies that the church needs the functioning of all the parts in proper working order (1 Cor. 12:12–26). The parts cannot therefore separate themselves from the body, so that as long as there is a body of Christ, it must be one (cf. Eph. 4:11–13). The bride relationship pictures one bride united forever with the bridegroom, Christ (Eph. 5:22–32). The inseparable unity of the figure allows for no polygamy or divorce. Likewise, the figure of the building emphasizes oneness. Each believer has her/his own special place in the building of which Christ is the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20–22). Of all these images, Paul frequently uses the image of church as the body of Christ, a use that has generally influenced the traditional understanding of a church. We shall therefore give this image more attention, as we prepare to analyse the ways in which the use of digital technologies and social media influence contemporary ecclesiology.

Paul uses the image of the body as a tool of admonition addressed particularly to the Corinthian community which was torn apart by schism (Togarasei 2007: 65-72). Because believers, through baptism in the Spirit and the Lord's Supper, are united in one body, then they ought, in their everyday lives, to live as members of one body and realize this unity in one body. It is Christ, not individuals, who makes the church one body. The concept implies vertical communion with Jesus and horizontal union with fellow believers, a phenomenon experienced in Eucharistic celebrations. The example of the Corinthian church provides a significant picture into early ecclesial life. The communal gathering is understood as making the participants members of Christ's body and of one another. Each member is inviolable and unique, but cannot function on its own. For Paul, seeing oneself and the community in this way creates a community consciousness. When communal consciousness pervades the gathering, the community provides tangible evidence to others that Christ lives. Because each individual is a member of Christ (leg, ear, eye, etc), a gathered community is Christ. Perhaps, we need to point

out that it is not the gathering alone that defines the church, but also the relationships of the individual members. Paul's model of fellowship for the house churches is constantly one of collaboration. The gathered community is greater than any one and even the sum of its parts. In fact the Augsburg Confession of 1530 during the Reformation defined the church in terms of assembly and togetherness as, "the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is preached and the sacraments administered" (Hanson 1997:198). Love characterizes this new mode of being community. In short, the ecclesial community fosters a sense of belonging and oneness.

### **Contemporary individual Christian use of social media and digital technologies**

Literature shows widespread use of social media for religious purposes by individuals. Helland (2004) highlights that as part of computer-mediated communication, the internet accommodates those individuals who wish to be religious outside the control of an organised religious institution. In this way, the internet has become the ideal form of communicating religious beliefs and practices in a social context in which syncretism, popular tradition and religion are among the most common forms of religious participation.

There are many religious groups which use different communication online forums such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc, to express their religious concerns. Individual Christians prefer these platforms because they provide for freedom of expression. These forums have become unofficial religious environments as some people have abandoned physical congregational meetings for religious services from the comfort of their homes. Togarasei (2018:87ff) outlines how individuals make use of social media and digital technologies to practice their Christian faith. First, some individuals take advantage of advances in broadcasting technology to participate in church services via television. As Togarasei (2018:87) writes:

They can comment via various media forms like WhatsApp, short message services (sms) or Facebook messenger and see their comments and/responses beamed on television screens. They can take videos or 'selfies' that can be shown on the different churches' television channels.

Second, Togarasei (2018:88) argues that social media and digital technologies make it theoretically possible that one can be converted to Christianity, make a prayer of confession and repentance and begin a Christian life without having physically interacted with anyone.

Use of different communication forums to meet one's spiritual needs is becoming popular and most preferred as it can be accessed regardless of time and space. In addition, the forums are used even when individuals have a chance to gather for worship. They offer other advantages such as freedom to fully participate and interact through chats compared to church gatherings where one becomes more of a spectator. Third, individuals also use social media for Christian 'fellowship', although that according to Togarasei (2018:89) is done virtually. WhatsApp has been identified as the most common platform for 'fellowshipping' through various WhatsApp groups function. Thus, although some users of social media and media technologies may remain active in official religious organisations/Christian churches, Togarasei's (2018) study conducted in Gaborone, Botswana, found out an increase in the number of people who profess to be Christians but do not physically fellowship with others as they practice online religion. There are no central authority figures online to limit the discussions, censor contributors or set boundaries on the religious participation that takes place. Helland (2004:25) notes that in this way, media becomes the vehicle of religion as religion also permeates the media. This is transforming the church in the sense that people can express their spirituality anytime and have varied ways of worship to choose from than following rigid set times and congregational laws. It is vital to note that the transformation has not altered the Christian mandate where conversion can still take place through the use of these mediums (Togarasei 2018) and thus does not demean the Christian faith.

The church has gone through transformation in relation to media since its inception. Gelfgren (2012:232) looks at the aims and goals related to the use of media within the church. He points out that around the 19<sup>th</sup> century, use of media was in the form of printing tracts and other publications that were spread by preachers and evangelists. Pentecostal churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission used media right from their inception in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Anderson 2004). Tracts comprised of an exhortation, a concise sermon and so called true but fictional story in which the reader could follow a sinner's spiral path to disaster or the tale of a lucky reborn person. The message was simple and the aim was to present the gospel for ordinary people.

Gelfgren (2012:235) states that many people believe in media and that has led to the rising of Christian blogs, Christian community in virtual world, chat rooms, Facebook fan pages, Twitter accounts, streamed videos and interactive web pages. There seems to be no limit to the amount of internet activities and materials. Internet communication is seen as easy, effortless,

ubiquitous, converging, and viral and it also connects people contrary to traditional communications. In other words the internet, through the different users, is seen as having the potential to connect people en masse and thus creating relations internally between members of the church as well as making outreach contacts. Gelfand cites Douglas Estes (2009:18) who wrote:

This type of Church is unlike any church the world has ever seen. It has the power to break down social barriers, unite believers from all over the world, and build the kingdom of God with a widow's mite of financing. It is a completely different type of church from any the world has ever seen.

Churches are involved in digital media for communication and their main impetus seems to be the drive to build relations within the church and with the people who are yet unchurched. Gelfgren points out that the motivation to use social media and digital technologies for communication is partly from a perception that the church (especially in the Western world) has lost its primacy and relevance in the lives of many people. This is supported by Brown (2009) who emphasized the need for churches to actively engage digital media and use different channels to communicate with people on regular basis since church attendance is declining and media religion rising. The Pew Research Center (2018), for example, noted that although 91% of respondents were baptized and raised as Christians, only 21% attended church services at least once a month. Furthermore, Bailey and Storch (2007:xiv) reinforce this by stating that many churches in the West are experiencing a period of decline and therefore see social media as a way to reconnect people and have relevance in their lives. In this respect, networking tools are seen by church representatives as having the potential and possibility to create meaningful relations. Bailey and Storch (2007: xiv) note that

There is a new passion for authentic communication. People want to be part of an open and honest conversation....One way communication is no longer enough... people are looking for those willing to open the door and let others inside. Blogging is a revolution in communication, community and authentic conversation: a revolution that churches cannot afford to ignore.

They posit that the church should meet people where they are. They highlight that Jesus met people where they were and the church must also meet people where they can be found. The church must appropriate social media and other digital technologies as its voices of fulfilling

their mission, as more people spend most of their time there. Social media takes people to their gadgets as they spend time surfing the internet to find what is of interest to them. Digital media is a means for the church to get involved in these private lives of people through the different web-based channels.

Gelfgren (2012:238) concludes that the internet and its related culture can work as a source of inspiration for churches as it is said to be one example of individual participation and involvement, creative user- centered content, production networking based on relations and active production rather than passive consumption. This will be a way to re-invent the church's role and overcome the often recognised dilemma with established institutions and inherited frozen traditions. The use of social media can be something that the institutions can learn from in order to become more significant to people who are not already included in the sphere of the church. The concept of "being connected" can, for example, function as a metaphor for how the church should be connected to people and also individual to other individuals.

L. M. Baab (2012:278) discusses the theology of the internet, its relationship to place, relationship and sin and the rise of the internet in human communication. He singles out the internet as a place where people spend significant amount of time enabling many ordinary Christians to have one on one conversations about their faith with believers and non-believers in contrast to a conventional top - down model of preaching through trained priests. The model provides a reality of the church as a collection of followers of Jesus Christ rather than a monolithic organization which occasionally pronounces unfavorably on contemporary society and is in turn, judged by its organizational failures. Jesus often encountered people individually, and social media gives the church the same Jesus-like personal access to people.

### **Ecclesiological implications of contemporary individual Christians' use of social media and digital technologies**

It is our view that the appropriation of social media and digital technologies by churches and individual Christians raises ecclesiological questions. We identify and discuss five such questions.

#### ***Should the church continue to be defined in terms of physical community?***

Traditionally, the Christian church has been distinguished by Christians gathering for worship and instruction as we have observed. The virtual church as practised in online religion calls for

a review of this understanding of the church. As stated, social media and digital technologies allow individuals to ‘fellowship’ without physical contact. Therefore, the church has to confront cyber technology that has given birth to electronic culture in which everything is explained in the binary format of 1-0-1-0-1, that is, digitations of everything (Helland 2000). In a study on how Americans pursue religion online, as early as 2001, E. Larsen (2001) says 25 % of internet users had gotten religious and spiritual information online. Online religion is surely disqualifying the traditional definition of a church in terms of physical gathering.

***Should the church continue to be defined denominationally?***

In a study on Christian identity in the age of social media and digital technologies, Togarasei (2018) observes that Christians who use online religion (‘religion surfers’ according to Larsen 2001), denominational affiliation was not of any importance. People considered themselves Christians without identifying with any of the many Christian denominations. Although this agrees with Pauline ecclesiology as outlined in 1 Cor. 1-4 (Togarasei 2007), from the time of the Reformation in Europe (Chadwick 1972) Christianity has been characterized by denominationalism with ecclesiology understood likewise. Even the missionaries, who brought Christianity to Africa, brought the divided church. The appropriation of social media and digital technologies by individual Christians raises questions against this ecclesiology. As Togarasei (2018) established, some Christians in Botswana who still believe in physically attending church services sometimes, use the internet to find out which church to attend on a particular day. They are not loyal to a particular denomination nor do they identify with any.

***Should the church continue to be defined by the practice of specific Christian rituals?***

In our discussion of traditional, especially Pauline, ecclesiology, we saw that the church has been defined as a congregation of believers who have been baptized and observe the Eucharist. Baptism and the Eucharist were at the centre of Pauline theology. Even in the Augsburg Confession, administration of sacraments like the Eucharist is one of the two hallmarks of a church. Should this continue to define contemporary ecclesiology? Do religious surfers understand ‘*ekklesia*’ in this sense? The reviewed literature proves that religious surfers do not observe this traditional understanding of the church. As Togarasei (2018) observed, a number of online Christians had not received baptism but had made a prayer of confession and were convinced they had received Jesus as their personal saviour. Having received Christ by repeating the words of the tele-evangelist and praying the sinner’s prayer online, ‘attending’ church services through television and live sessions via Facebook and fellowshiping through



WhatsApp groups, such Christians did not receive baptism nor did they partake of the Lord's Supper.

***Should the church continue to be defined in terms of its hierarchical structure and central authorities?***

The church has always been defined as an institution (Hanson 1897:184). The Pauline ecclesiology underlines the authority and structure of the church (1 Cor. 12, Eph. 4:1-4). The central authorities (the clergy) had authority over individual members of the *ekklesia*. They taught, exhorted, counselled and disciplined them. They were the sources of church doctrine, orthodoxy and defined heresy. This practice has continued in the traditional churches although Hanson (1997:185) has noted that beginning in the 1970s, some individual Christians in America were moving towards Christian individualism. The Roman Catholic Church ecclesiology, for example, has a bishop at the centre of the church. Online Christianity has challenged this ecclesiology. As indicated, online Christians prefer the online environment as it is flexible both in terms of doctrine and freedom from church authorities. Unlike in traditional churches where the church disciplines and even excommunicates some members as advocated by church fathers like Cyprian (Gonzalez 1984:88-89), the online church does not have such structures. Thus, Christian WhatsApp groups that are not denominationally affiliated are free to discuss Christianity without the fear and censure of church leaders. As pointed out above, there are free discussions online and individuals have the freedom to switch to a different online channel if they do not agree with what one particular preacher on a certain channel is saying.

***Should the church continue to be defined in terms of physical missionary activities?***

For long the church has been defined in terms of its engagement in sending and receiving Christian missionaries. We saw from the Augsburg Confession that preaching the gospel is one of the two hallmarks of a church. Paul commended different Christian churches (1 Thess. 1:6) for their participation in Christian mission. The church has continued to be associated with moving about preaching the gospel from place to place. In Africa, ecclesiology has been closely associated with the missionaries who evangelised a particular locality. The use of technologies that has saturated the entire universe has altered this traditional way of doing missionary work and understanding the *ekklesia*. Whereas tele-evangelism still maintained the identity of

missionaries and thus promoting denominationalism, social media and other new digital technologies have obscured this. Contemporary evangelists are making use of the internet to call people to Jesus without identifying their denominational identities. Online religion is changing some of the traditional ways to meet the Christian divine obligation without altering the great commission. Positively, digital technologies are enhancing the spread of the gospel and making the world one small village as information can be passed faster across the whole world.

## **Conclusion**

Existing literature demonstrates that social media is now increasingly being used by Christian bodies and individuals alike for evangelism, worship and spiritual upliftment. It shows that social media and digital technologies are being used by churches as bodies and by individual Christians without denominational affiliation. The church uses social media as a tool for communicating various messages and spreading of the gospel in real time, breaking spatial barriers and even reaching parts of the world such as China where the gospel is forbidden, and therefore operating underground. Individual Christians use social media and digital technologies to practise Christianity outside the traditional norms and structures. Although online Christianity breaks denominational and geographical boundaries, it is disregarding some aspects of the traditional church such as the observance of certain rituals. The meaning of the church is expanding rather than reducing since the church has taken advantage of social media to achieve what it could possibly not achieve in the past. The exhortation not to neglect meeting together (Hebrews 10:25) is now observed not in the form of physical meeting. It is mainly individual Christians' use of social media technologies to satisfy their spiritual needs without physically congregating that raises ecclesiological questions. These questions call for further research on what religious surfers consider to be the church in the age of social media and media technologies and the impact of these on traditional church authorities.

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