

**THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE
CHURCH ATTENDEES COMPARED WITH
TRADITIONAL CHURCH ATTENDEES**

by

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Abstract

Traditional church attendance is declining while online church attendance is increasing. Baby boomers are coming of age and becoming immobile, yet possess access to the internet. Millennials are choosing the convenience of technology over tradition. The question that the current study seeks to address is whether the virtual church can promote spiritual development as well as the traditional church through the utilization of technology. Spiritual development was defined as spiritual awareness and the quality of the relationship with God. The participants of the current study attended either traditional or online church and spiritual development was evaluated using the Spiritual Assessment Inventory. The results were obtained by using independent samples *t* tests with two of the five Spiritual Assessment Inventory variables having significant differences. Post hoc evaluations were performed to assess if age and gender impacted spiritual development along with an examination of relationships among the variables. The increased attendance of online church has created a need for more leaders who can employ the type of leadership that will succeed in the virtual environment. Digital leadership is the type of leadership that is typically utilized by leaders of virtual organizations. The current study compared the traits of traditional leadership and church to those of digital leadership and online church, as defined by the research.

Keywords: digital leadership, spiritual assessment, online church, cyber church, virtual church, leadership

Dedication

I dedicate my life's work to my Great Aunt Elizabeth Cochrane Gray. Aunt Liz helped me believe in family again through some of the hardest times in my life. Her unwavering faith in God and belief in me were life-saving. I will always remember her words of wisdom, "It can't rain every day." Thank you, Aunt Liz, for loving me – unconditionally, as Christ does.

I also dedicate this to my parents, Apostle Lornell and the late Elder Bobbie Grayson. I recognize that without you, I would not be me. Thank you.

Solomon Blade Grayson, son, you are my strength, motivation, and what keeps my heart filled with joy. Carnell, son, you have always inspired me to be better.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	x
List of Figures	xi
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
Introduction to the Problem	1
Background of the Study	2
Statement of the Problem	2
Purpose of the Study	3
Rationale	3
Research Questions	4
Significance of the Study	5
Definition of Terms	5
Assumptions and Limitations	7
Nature of the Study	8
Organization of the Remainder of the Study	8
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	10
Spiritual Development	11
Foundational Theorists	12
Spiritual Awareness	17
Quality of Relationship with God	19

The Traditional Church	23
Traditional Leadership	24
Traditional Church Community	28
Typical Traditional Church Attendees	29
Traditional Church Attendance Decline	30
Spiritual Development within the Traditional Church	33
Understanding the Online Church	35
Online Engagement, Online Community, and Online Spiritual Development	39
Benefits of the Online Church	42
Dissent for Online Religion	43
Online Communication Difficulties	45
Digital Pastor	46
Digital Leadership	47
Openness	48
Transparency	50
Digital Communication	51
Autonomous Followers – The Power Shift	52
Cloaked Followers and Other Disadvantages of Digital Leadership	52
Communicating the Gospel through Technology	54
The Increase in Pastoral Technology Usage	55
Social Media	56
Crowdsourcing	59

Live Video Streaming	59
Websites	59
Conclusion	60
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY	61
Introduction	61
Research Design	62
Target Population and Sample	62
Sample Size	64
Setting	65
Instrumentation and Measures	65
Pilot Study	70
Data Collection	70
Procedures and Data Analysis	71
Research Questions	72
Ethical Considerations	73
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS	75
Description of the Sample	75
Findings	77
Summary	89
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS.....	93
Introduction	93
Summary of the Study	94
Summary of Findings and Interpretation of Results	95

Post Hoc Analyses Discussion	97
Relationship Between SAI Scales	97
Gender and Spiritual Development	104
Spiritual Development and Age	106
Other Activities	108
Spiritual Development Activities	108
Implications	111
Limitations	112
Recommendations for Further Study	113
Conclusions	114
REFERENCES	115
Appendix A. Spiritual Assessment Inventory	134
Appendix B. Permission to Use Instrument	137
Appendix C. Permission to Use Instrument Without Impression Management Scale ...	138
Appendix D. Spiritual Assessment Inventory Scale Key	139
Appendix E. Participant Church Email Introduction	143
Appendix F. Participant Email Reminder	145
Appendix G. Preliminary Consent and Information for Participants	146
Appendix H. Demographic Questions	148
Appendix I. Initial Participant Email	149

List of Tables

Table 1. Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development	14
Table 2. Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development	16
Table 3. Spiritual Assessment Inventory Subscale Definitions	67
Table 4. Participant Church Membership Statistics	76
Table 5. Participant Age Ranges	77
Table 6. Spiritual Assessment Inventory Subscales Pearson Correlation Coefficients ..	82
Table 7. Additional Activities of Study Participants by Age	89
Table 8. Additional Participation of Study Participants by Percentage	109

List of Figures

Figure 1. Activities Outside of Worship Completed by Participants	88
Figure 2. Activities Outside of Worship Completed by Online Church Attendees	90
Figure 3. Activities Outside of Worship Completed by Traditional Church Attendees ..	91

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Technology brings a significant change to any organization that has a goal of successful service to people. Churches are also within the reach of this technological evolution. “With the rise of globalisation [sic], intensified by the development of modern technological society, the character not only of social life but also of Christian life has undergone significant changes” (Wong, 2008, p. 822).

Introduction to the Problem

The advent of technology has perpetuated an increase in the establishment of online churches (Gilmore, 2009; Hutchings, 2007; Smith, 2016; Wong, 2008). Virtual or online churches are religious organizations that provide worship services through digital methods such as the Internet, social media, and other online communication methods. These churches have a following of members that all connect within cyberspace via these digital vehicles. Additionally, the increase in online churches brings about a need for a new type of leadership for these cyber churches known as digital leadership (Gill, 2013; Li, 2010; Li, 2015; O’Neil, 2009). Digital leadership is the type of leadership provided by leaders of virtual organizations. Despite the rise in online church organizations, there is dissent as to whether or not these churches can effectively meet the needs of the members as well as traditional brick and mortar churches (Gilmore, 2009; Hutchings, 2007; Meadows, 2012; Stetzer, 2014).

Background of the Study

Traditional church attendance has been declining for the past few years (Barna Group, 2012; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007; Lipka, 2013; Paloutzian & Park, 2013, Pimpton, 2009; Whitesel, 2013). As society leans more on technology, online churches are growing in attendance (Cho, 2001; Lytle, 2009). Though some take issue with the lack of face-to-face exchange that is characteristic of online church (Gilmore, 2009; Stetzer, 2014), there are those who support church attendance in the virtual environment due to differing factors. For example, two of these factors are an aging population that may have less mobility but maintain access to the Internet (Paloutzian & Park, 2013; Weems, 2010) and a decline in traditional church attendance (Lipka, 2013; Pimpton, 2009). The current study sought to examine if worship attendance through technology promoted spiritual development comparable to worship attendance in the traditional church setting.

Statement of the Problem

Attendance at traditional brick and mortar churches has steadily decreased (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007; Paloutzian & Park, 2013, Pimpton, 2009) while online church attendance has increased (Cho, 2001, Keene, 1999). Pew Research also indicated the decrease in traditional church attendance (Lipka, 2013, p. 1). Paloutzian and Park (2013) stated that “faith communities have begun to employ digital connectivity to support their mission by making information more widely available and by promoting opportunities for interaction afforded by the Web 2.0 world” (p. 199). An increase in online church attendance and information provision by the church has created the need for church leaders to extend beyond providing leadership in

the traditional brick and mortar organizational environment to the cyberspace environment while ensuring that followers' spiritual development is not compromised within the new cyberspace environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to assess if the level of spiritual development within the online church was commensurate with the spiritual development of traditional church attendees. With the advent of online church attendance, the impact on spiritual development of church services delivered via the internet should be weighed against the traditional face to face method of service delivery. Regardless of the mode of church attendance, spiritual development should be a prominent concern of the church and the study evaluated if the online church is as effective as traditional church.

Rationale

According to Hall and Edwards (2002) "assessment of spirituality and religiousness has been an important topic for psychologists interested in religious issues" (p. 341). A developing religious issue is the debate of the efficacy of online versus traditional church (Gilmore, 2009; Hutchings, 2007; Meadows, 2012; Stetzer, 2014). Spiritual development is a combination of the believer's relationship with and awareness of God (Hall & Edwards, 1996). Morr (2003) stated "the essence of spiritual formation is the development of a maturing and trusting relationship with God" (p. 111). Hall and Edwards (1996) described spiritual awareness as the believer's communication with God. Hall and Edwards (1996) further expounded on the importance of communication with God as: "the scope of the Bible testifies to God personally communicating with

individual believers. Thus, in order to fully understand relationship with God, and spiritual maturity, the nature of communication with God must be examined” (p. 236). The believer’s relationship with God and awareness of God are important and are the variables used to assess the church member’s overall spiritual development.

Mohler (2014) stated: “The church is assigned the task of sharing the Gospel” (p. 1). In further discussing the Gospel in the digital age, this article went on to state that “Christians have been about this task for more than 2000 years, and we are now witnessing a resurgence in Great Commission vision and vigor in a new generation of Gospel Christians” (p. 1). When Jesus issued the great commission, no specific parameters were stated as to how this was to be done. In Matthew 28:19a Jesus instructed the disciples to “go ye therefore, and teach all nations...” (KJV). As a spiritual or religious leader, an intended result of teaching the life of Christ should be the spiritual development of the followers (Blanchard & Hodges, 2005; Yukl, 2013). With the increase of online church attendance, it should be questioned as to whether the traditional methods used to carry out the great commission have evolved. Jesus further stated, “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you,” in Matthew 28:20a. Can this teaching and spiritual development be facilitated successfully within the virtual environment and promote spiritual development?

Research Questions

Research Question 1 (RQ1) Is there a difference between the quality of relationship with God in online church attendees and traditional church attendees as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory.

Research Question 2 (RQ2) Is there a difference in the awareness of God between traditional church attendees and online church attendees as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory.

Significance of the Study

The efficacy of online churches was compared to traditional churches regarding the member's spiritual development, which is the member's quality of relationship with and awareness of God. The significance of the current study lies within the purview of the question of whether online church is meeting the spiritual developmental needs of the members as well as or comparable to traditional church. This question was salient as "in some cases an online church may offer someone their only possibility of being part of a Christian community, and in others may offer supplementary activities that are not available to them through their offline church" (Smith, 2016).

Due to a lack of research on this particular topic, the current study may spark an interest into the effectiveness of online church and spiritual development. The participating churches were the first exposed to this exact type of study and may be able to glean a better understanding of the differences that may exist in the spiritual development of online versus traditional church attendees.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout the current study. Some of the terms are used interchangeably.

Apps

Apps is the term commonly used for social media applications.

Church Attendance

Church attendance involves the attendees placing themselves in a location to hear the Word of God preached. This can be done online or at a traditional church location. Within the current study church attendance does not include additional activities such as volunteerism, serving as a staff member, attending extra-curricular programs, services during the week such as Bible study, or any events outside of the traditional Sunday morning service.

Community

Community refers to a group of common Evangelical believers that come together for a collective worship experience.

Digital Leadership

Digital leadership is a leadership style engaged by the leader of an online organization (Gill, 2013).

Evangelical

Webster's online dictionary defined evangelical as:

Belonging to or designating the Christian churches that emphasize the teachings and authority of the Scriptures, especially of the New Testament, in opposition to the institutional authority of the church itself, and that stress as paramount the tenet that salvation is achieved by personal conversion to faith in the atonement of Christ. ("The Definition of Evangelical", 2016, p. 1)

Online Church

The online church is defined as a church in which services are provided online via live or pre-recorded streaming, social media, and other digital applications.

Spiritual Awareness

Spiritual awareness is one's personal relationship and communication with God (Hall & Edwards, 1996).

Spiritual Development

Spiritual development is defined by Hall and Edwards (1996) as the participants' perception of their quality of relationship with God combined with their awareness of God.

Traditional Church

Traditional church is church held in a traditional brick and mortar building that the attendees must travel to and attend in person. Throughout the literature, the term traditional will be used interchangeably with physical or local.

Assumptions and Limitations

The terms cyber church and virtual church will be used interchangeably based on the usage of these terms by the various authors of the research that contributed to the current study. Outside of the research author's usage, the term online church will be used primarily within the current study.

It was assumed that all participants would respond truthfully. It was also assumed that the churches would provide the members email addresses or communicate via email and other means to attendees to encourage participation within the current study. A

possible limitation was if the participating church leadership limited access to the attendees or did not facilitate the follow up reminder communications to the attendees to promote participation from the attendees. Other limitations would be a lack of survey completion and if all the participants come from only one or two of the churches that have agreed to participate in the current study. The participants' church attendance was not tracked for the current study.

Nature of the Study

The current study was a quantitative study that compared the spiritual development between traditional church attendees and online church attendees. The current study used the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI) to measure spiritual development. Spiritual development was defined as the awareness of God and the quality of the participant's relationship with God (Hall & Edwards, 1996). The participants completed an online survey which indicated their mode of church attendance, which was either online or traditional attendance, and then the SAI was administered.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Chapter two will expound upon the components of spiritual development and examine foundational theorists that have developed theories or research that contribute to spiritual development. Furthermore, chapter two contains discussion on the traditional church, leadership styles, community trends, and spiritual development that occur within the traditional church will be addressed. The online church was examined with reviews of online spiritual development, community, and engagement. Finally, contemporary topics

germane to the online church, which include the digital pastor, digital leadership, and digital communication methods are discussed.

Chapter three will discuss the development of the instrument used to gather data and the methodology used for the current study. Additionally, the process designed to engage participant churches and the communication process with these churches and the participants will be disclosed. Chapter four will depict the results from the analyses and the final chapter will provide discussion on the results along with the limitations of the study, recommendations for further study, and the conclusion.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Spiritual development or maturity embodies the entire purpose of what church leadership is to work towards within the followers. Ephesians 4:13-15 (NIV) states:

until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

To develop the followers to spiritual maturity ensures that the followers reach the highest level of relationship with God and have a constant awareness of His presence.

With the advent of technology, the types of technology and its proper use must be taken into consideration. A modicum of wisdom in the use and understanding of not only the benefits of this technology, but also the liabilities that will surface due to the engagement of technology are paramount to the user's successful implementation of the technology. When combining the promotion of spiritual development and technology, can the positive traits of traditional leadership transfer to effective use in cyber space? The current study will establish the construct of spiritual development and discuss the theories that contributed to spiritual development, detail the characteristics of traditional church and leadership followed by discussion of the online church. The digital pastor and

digital leadership will be examined, concluding with a review of the technology available to online churches that can aid in the promotion of spiritual development in the online church.

Spiritual Development

Spiritual development, also referred to as spiritual maturity (Choi, 2012; Froehlich, Fialkowski, Scheers, Wilcox, & Lawrence, 2006; Keller, Mollen, & Rosen (2015), is defined differently within research (Hall, Meador, & Koenig, 2008; Houston & Cartwright, 2007; Ryan & Francis, 2012; Watts, 2011). Ryan and Francis (2012) postulated

Defining 'religion' and 'spirituality' is fraught with difficulty and varies substantially between academic disciplines. At a psychological level of analysis, both terms may be taken in some sense to refer to a set of beliefs, attitudes and/or behaviors, which reflect an understanding or acknowledgement of something numinous (i.e., deity, life force, etc.), which is beyond and/or greater than the individual, and which potentially influences or is able to be influenced by the individual. (p. 775)

Lockhart (2012) defined spiritual maturity as "...the daily, communal growth of an individual toward Christ-likeness and expressed in terms of an individual's basic attitudes, lifestyles, and activities based on scriptural truths. The individual models spiritual growth emotionally, morally, and socially" (p. 112). "Spirituality is popularly held to be that which pertains to the immaterial part of humans as contrasted with the physical material part" (Stranahan, 2008, p. 493). For the current study, spiritual

development will be defined in two dimensions which are the quality of relationship with God and awareness of God (Hall & Edwards, 1996).

Hall and Edwards (1996) stated one of the main ways that God communicates with man to enhance awareness of Him is through the human voice. “The human voice is defined as God speaking through someone conjointly...” (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 236). With the evolution of the use of the Internet within ministry, it is important to consider the human voice Hall and Edwards described from a digital perspective. Does technology enhance or inhibit the attendee’s spiritual development?

This following section of the literature will discuss the foundational theorists that have researched cognitive, spiritual, or faith development. The two domains that define spiritual development, quality of relationship with and awareness of God will also be examined.

Foundational Theorists

In terms of faith or spiritual development, there are key theorists that have laid the foundation. James Fowler was one of the first to provide a structured assessment of faith development.

Fowler listed six stages of faith. They are:

1. Undifferentiated Faith/ Intuitive-Projective Faith
2. Mythic-Literal Faith
3. Synthetic-Conventional Faith
4. Individuative-Reflective Faith
5. Conjunctive Faith

6. Universalizing Faith (Fowler, 1981, p. 113)

Parker (2011) described Fowler's faith development theory as a "multileveled description of the changing patterns by which humans make sense of and commit to transcendent values and reality" (p. 112). Fowler is recognized as a leader in faith development research. "Among academics, Fowler has a national and international reputation as the unequivocal expert on faith development" (Miller-Mclemore, 2006, p. 639). Moreover, his work continues to inspire more research on faith development. "James Fowler affirms the transcendence domain of the conceptual definition of spirituality by elaborating on the trend toward transcendence as one increases in age and faith" (Stranahan, 2008, p. 495). For over three decades, Fowler's stages of faith provided a theoretical framework for pastoral care, education, and developmental psychology. His stages of faith has generated a plethora of articles and studies worldwide (Parker, 2010). Lowe (2010) likened students' online spiritual development as having stages similar to Fowler's theory (p. 5).

Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg developed the theory of the stages of moral development. Table 1 depicts Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development, 2012, p. 1). Although Kohlberg did not address spirituality directly, it is worthwhile to note that stage three is particularly applicable to spiritual development based on the development of relationship. Within the SAI, some of the questions regarding spiritual awareness address guidance from God on decision making. Stage 4 of Kohlberg's theory, authority and social order, discussed rules and

Table 1.

Stages of Moral Development (Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development, 2012, p. 1)

Stage	Age Range	Description
1. Obedience/Punishment	Infancy	No difference between doing the right thing and avoiding punishment
2. Self-Interest	Pre-school	Interest shifts to rewards rather than punishment – effort is made to secure greatest benefits for oneself
3. Conformity and Interpersonal Accord	School-age	The “good boy/girl” level. Effort is made to secure approval and maintain friendly relations with others
4. Authority and Social Order	School-age	Orientation toward fixed rules. Morality is maintaining social order. Interpersonal accord is expanded to include the entire society
5. Social Contract	Teens	Reciprocity. Morally right and legally right may conflict. Prefers Utilitarian rules.
6. Universal Principles	Adulthood	Morality is based on principles that transcend mutual benefit.

morality, which are two variables that could guide decision making. When discussing ways to teach moral development, Kohlberg and Hersh (1977) stated, “The teacher must help the student to consider genuine moral conflicts, think about the reasoning he uses in

solving such conflicts, see inconsistencies and inadequacies in his way of thinking and find ways of resolving them” (p. 57). This is very similar to what a pastor does when teaching the gospel and promoting spiritual development.

Jean Piaget. Piaget’s theory of cognitive development involves four stages that start from birth through adulthood. Table 1(VU Help, 2015, p. 1) lists and provides a basic description of each stage. Piaget found that growth was promoted through interaction with others or social activity (Wilhoit & Dettoni, 1995). Wilhoit and Dettoni (1995) discussed Piaget regarding Christian development. “The ultimate goal of human development is for people to glorify God by becoming like Christ in every aspect of life” (Wilhoit & Dettoni, 1995, p. 59). Piaget was a theorist that often considered relational aspects in the research conducted (Inhelder, Chipman, Zwingmann, & Piaget, 1976; Piaget, 1979). As one goal of spiritual development is based upon the relationship with God, the relational concepts within Piaget’s theory are applicable.

Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky indicated that growth occurred based on culture and the mastery of the tools and tasks of that culture (Wilhoit & Dettoni, 1995). Vygotsky asserted “that knowledge is shaped, organized, and has meaning through communal acts” (Wilhoit & Dettoni, 1995, p. 124). Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) was defined as “the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help” (Culatta, 2011, p. 1). “Scaffolding is an often-used construct to describe the ongoing support provided to a learner by an expert” (Puntambekar, 2009, p. 1). Vygotsky “emphasized the role of social interaction as being crucial to cognitive development, so that learning first occurs at the social or interindividual [sic] level”

Table 2

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (VU Help, 2015, p. 1)

Age Range	Description of Stage
Birth - 2	Sensorimotor – Experiencing the world through senses and actions
2-6 Years	Preoperational – Representing things with words and images
7-11 Years	Concrete Operational – Thinking logically about concrete events and grasping concrete analogies
12-Adulthood	Formal Operational – Thinking about hypothetical scenarios and processing abstract thoughts

(Puntambekar, 2009, p. 1). Vygotsky's theory involves growth through relationship. It is also noteworthy to add that Vygotsky also supported the use of technology in developing the learner (Vygotsky, 2004).

Fowler's faith formation theory has a clear connection to spiritual development. Parker (2011) indicated that Fowler's theory is one of a few that can be used to understand a person's spiritual journey or development and Parker (2009) stated that based on the theory, Fowler had a developmental understanding of spirituality. It is also interesting to note that non-religious cognitive theorists have indirectly contributed to spiritual development as well. The relational aspects of Kohlberg's moral theory, Piaget's cognitive development theories, and Vygotsky's ZPD promote spiritual development through the development of relationships with others, which can include God.

Spiritual Awareness

Spiritual awareness is one of the dimensions of spiritual development per Hall and Edwards (1996). Within research, spiritual awareness and spirituality are terms used interchangeably (Bohm, 2007; Choi, 2012; Filipson, 2009; Watts, 2011; Woods & Woods, 2008). Spiritual awareness or spirituality was defined as the developing of a relationship within a community that is of utmost importance and raises awareness (Filipson, 2009) or the “sensing of a transcendent power” (Woods & Woods, 2008, p. 103). Choi (2012) stated:

...Christian spirituality does not focus on human beings who are seeking a relationship with self, others, or a sacred higher being. Instead, it is focused on God who offers a loving relationship, so a human being should respond to the "gracious calling" by having faith in Jesus Christ. (p. 23)

There are key verses in the Bible that indicate man’s awareness of God. 1 Corinthians 6:19 (KJV) stated “...know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?” Additionally, Acts 17:28a stated “For in him we live, and move, and have our being...”. Within the Bible there is clear indication that the Spirit of God is present within man and man should acknowledge or be aware of the Spirit’s presence. “Both the Old and New Testaments are replete with words about knowing God (e.g., Exod. 33:17; Deut. 7:9; Ps. 27:8; Hab. 2:14; John 17:21-23; Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:10; 1 John 5:20)” (Westerfield, 2014, p. 1). “Awareness is a capacity that needs to be developed, rather than being an automatic part of the Christian life” (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 237).

Spiritual awareness is developed in various ways. Daniel (2012) indicated spiritual awareness can be developed through traumatic experiences in one's life. "...when faced with trauma or grief, we find ourselves at a crossroads where there are unlimited options, including a bitter rejection of spirituality" (p. 22). Daniel (2012) further indicated, "...we can choose to allow the life-altering event to integrate with our personalities, alter our perspectives, and help us to focus less on what happened and more on why it happened and the valuable lessons gained" (p. 22). Matthew 5:3 (MSG) states "you're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule." Additionally, James 1:2-3 (MSG) states "Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors." Verse 4 (MSG) states further "Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way." These verses support the usage of trials and traumatic events to increase spiritual awareness, and Stranahan (2008) stated that a commonality in definitions of spirituality entails "the inner strength to cope with loss and difficulties in the present and hope for improved outcomes for the future" (p. 493).

Bohm (2007) and Holm (2008) listed traditional methods of developing spiritual awareness. Holm recommended scripture reading, common prayer, hospitality, discernment, and other techniques. Bohm implemented techniques such as group sessions to allow participants to discuss spirituality, retreats that involve silence, prayer, music, meditative walks, and journaling. Holm also encouraged the process of examining one's own consciousness systematically on a daily basis. During his time of service at the

Jewish Family Center, a community advocacy organization (“Welcome to Jewish Family Service of San Diego”, 2013), Bohm concluded within a discussion of spiritual growth and awareness, “when the agency leadership can provide tools and opportunities to strengthen and refresh the employees’ inner lives, those with whom we interact both directly and indirectly can be affected positively” (p. 19).

It is worthwhile to note that Watts (2011) postulated,

It is my conclusion that even in a person with profound intellectual disability, there exists a reflection of the image of God and a spiritual dimension, which some choose to call a soul, possessing the potential for spiritual awareness and development. (p. 240)

It is within this study that Watts (2011) also suggested the use of Piaget’s model to assess spiritual development within persons with learning disabilities as Watt’s supported the use of developmental stages, which was the structure of Piaget’s faith formation model and theory. Watt’s study supports the belief that everyone, even those with diminished mental capacity, is capable of experiencing spiritual awareness and spiritual development.

Quality of Relationship with God

Quality of relationship is the other dimension of spiritual development per Hall and Edwards (1996). Laurin, Schumann, and Holmes (2014) defined relationship as “connection or association” (p. 776). “The first pages of the Bible state that God created humanity to be in relationship with him and with each other (Gen. 1:26; 2:18; 3:8-9)” (Westerfield, 2014, p. 1). Harris (2014) opined that a relationship with God consisted of

the intimacy of the relationship and God's presence (p. 86). This connection or relationship is very important as Weingarten, Luborsky, Andrusyna, Diguer, and Descoteaux (2014) postulated "relationship with God can facilitate the adoption of beneficial behaviors, for example, by way of individuals feeling more secure and nurtured (by God) or by doing what God wants, when what God wants is beneficial or adaptive for people" (p. 135). Anderson (2014) further stated when discussing man's relationship with God

"There is... a relationship between secure attachment and spiritual maturity" (p. 1). It is evident from the beginning that God values relationship for man as Genesis 1:18 (KJV) states "And the LORD God said, it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him."

Keep in mind that "the model that Christ used in teaching the disciples was one of relationship, dialogue, and collaboration—Christ in the middle teaching outward..." (Lockhart, 2012, p. 95). The relationship with God can be life changing for the follower. Kirkpatrick, Shillito, and Kellas (1999) provided research to indicate that having a relationship with God staves off loneliness. Homan and Cavanaugh (2013) confirmed a relationship with God promoted positive body image in women and supported the notion that this relationship promotes overall health within people. "Religious people often perceive that they have a personal relationship with God, and this relationship may offer the ultimate source of unconditional acceptance" (Homan & Cavanaugh, 2013, p. 1531).

Studies have also shown a comparison between a relationship with God and man to that of a parent and child (Laurin et al., 2014; Rogers, 2002) and has further suggested

that the relationship with God is comparable to the relationship with another person (Homan & Cavanaugh, 2013). Reynolds (2012) stated “helping clients examine their relationship with God or the sacred will offer insights into relational functioning and how satisfied they might be in the current relationship” (p. 89). Reynolds (2012) further indicated that helping individuals with the relationship with God would subsequently improve the individual’s marital and other interpersonal relationships (2012). Westerfield (2014) reiterated that God wants intimacy and relationship with man as well.

Intimacy in Relationship. In Webster’s online dictionary intimacy is defined as “something of a personal or private nature” (“Definition of Intimacy,” 2016, p. 1). “An overview of Scripture points to intimacy with God as an experience that is not only possible but also desired by God, Jesus, and many of his followers” (Westerfield, 2014, p. 16).

There are instances throughout the Bible where God engaged in intimate, thoughtful relationship with man. In Genesis 1:19 God brought each animal he created to Adam to be named. In Genesis 6:9, God walked with Noah. Within the books of Genesis and 2 Samuel there were different instances of God directly speaking to Moses, Abraham, and David. Genesis 24:40 discusses God walking before Abraham and in Genesis 48:15 (KJV) Israel refers to God as “God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk.”

There are times in the Bible where God treated or referred to men as friends. Exodus 33:11 (KJV) states “And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.” James 2:23 (KJV) states “and the scripture was fulfilled which

saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.” When Moses asked to see God’s glory in Exodus 33:21-23, God agreed and did so in a manner that protected Moses so that he would not die. This is indicative of God seeing Moses as a friend for whom he cared.

When Isaiah was ministering to the nation of Israel, he likened Israel to a bride for God in Isaiah 62:5 (KJV). John 14:2 and 14:23 describe the future plans God has for mankind. Both of these verses speak of the preparations God is making for us to live with him for eternity. Finally, Revelation 21:3 states:

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. (KJV)

God clearly values relationship with man and for man. There are many other instances in the Bible that pertain to relationship with God. God’s design for relationship is important to spiritual development as relationship is what God intended.

Hall and Edwards (1996) listed three levels of development for the quality of relationship with God variable within the SAI. These are unstable, grandiose, and realistic acceptance. Persons with an unstable relationship are usually children or those that have experienced feelings of abandonment from others and have that same feeling with God (Hall & Edwards, 1996). These individuals blame God for imperfections in life and have trouble viewing God as loving or trustworthy. Individuals with a grandiose relationship typically are narcissistic and present themselves to be all important and better than others. This stage is prevalent in middle childhood years and early adolescence. The

final stage is realistic acceptance. This stage surfaces in late adolescence or adult years, and is one of maturity and consistency in relationship with God despite disappointments.

Just to give broader perspective it is noted that although McKenzie (2014) indicated high regard for the SAI, “it is only one measure of spiritual development at a given point in time” (p. 72). McKenzie (2014) further indicated that relationships change over time. Froehlich et al. (2006) noted what could be considered a key benefit of overall spiritual development in that “the more people matured in a spiritually-motivated relationship with God, the more people tended to mature in a spiritually-motivated relationship with one another” (p. 475). “The ability to display Godly love is a key sign of a mature Christian. God has called us to imitate him” (“Spiritually Mature Christians,” 2016, p. 1). Spiritual development is an important purpose of the church. The development and implementation of this purpose should evolve with the needs of the church members, whether these members are traditional or online church attendees.

The Traditional Church

The traditional church has always been a pillar of the community that is a brick and mortar building where families gathered weekly on the Sabbath day to worship God. This section of the current study will discuss the traditional leadership styles and structures that are typically embraced within traditional church settings to include hierarchy, closed leadership, and traditional church community. The decline in traditional church attendance is discussed as this may be a key contributor to the development of the online church. Finally, spiritual development within the traditional church is examined.

Traditional Leadership

This section will discuss research that is based on traditional leadership in face-to-face environments. Leadership is exceptionally important to any organization, including the church. “Leadership is a core competency of executives and effective organizations” (Sutherland, 2010, p. 101). Blanchard and Hodges (2005) defined leadership as “...a process of influence” (p. 4). When it comes to the impact on followers, Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) suggested, “leadership occurs when you move people from where they are to where they ought to be” (p. 34). When addressing leadership of online organizations, the differences between traditional and online leadership should be considered. The two types of traditional leadership concepts discussed are hierarchal and closed leadership as these leadership concepts contrast with open leadership which is prevalent in the leadership of online organizations (Li, 2015). The discussion of open leadership will occur in an upcoming section.

Hierarchal Leadership. The study of hierarchal leadership is important for understanding its impact on traditional and digital leadership. This section will discuss the history, concept, and results of hierarchal leadership. Webster’s Dictionary (“Simple Definition of Hierarchy”, 2017) defines hierarchy as

- 2a: a ruling body of clergy organized into orders or ranks each subordinate to the one above it; especially: the bishops of a province or nation
- b: church government by a hierarchy
- 3: a body of persons in authority

4: the classification of a group of people according to ability or to economic, social, or professional standing; also: the group so classified

5: a graded or ranked series (p. 1)

Based on Webster's definition, it can be inferred that hierarchy permits power distribution through leadership layers only if the leadership permits as the leadership controls the organization.

Church polity. During the colonization of America, denominationalism developed (Akin, Garrett, Reymond, White, & Zahl, 2004, p. 21) and provided the gateway for the establishment of multiple church polities. These various polities established different leadership hierarchies as the denominations deemed fit. Typical church leadership can be delineated into three typical categories (Akin et al., 2004; Toon, 2004). The first category is Episcopalianism, which consists of a hierarchy that starts with an archbishop who has a downline to a bishop, a rector, and finally the congregation (Toon, 2004, p. 12). The second category is Presbyterianism, which has a general assembly as the leadership followed by presbytery and a session, which are both groups of ruling elders, and finally the congregation (Toon, 2004, p. 13). The third category is Congregationalism (Toon, 2004, p. 15) which provides more autonomy for the local church and is led by a pastor, then a deacons' board, and finally the congregation. Some of the benefits of hierarchy are the provision of an obvious chain of command, a clear promotional pathway, and loyalty (Doucette, 2016). Yet, Akin et al. (2004) described this polity division as a "...blithering disarray of competing models, all of which lay claim to biblical authenticity; but which cannot all be correct" (p. 22).

Keeping in mind that “Christians have been divided on the subject of church polity for at least five hundred years” (Toon, 2004, p. 305), dissent within the church leadership, and subsequently the church, is highly probable. “Churches, as organizations, are also notorious for having entrenched power brokers” (Estes, 2009, p. 136). Despite the establishment of a set process of leadership, “too often the common church is weighed down with division, petty squabbles, and power struggles” (Whitesel, 2013, p. 30). Pimpton (2009) stated “additionally, changes in church policies or practices are often accompanied by resistance from members who cling to the traditional way things have been done” (p. 3).

The importance in understanding the history and effects of hierarchal leadership is critical to understanding the shift that is occurring away from this type of leadership. Gibbs and Bolger (2005) discussed the leadership shift in regard to postmodern Christian churches that were defined as emerging churches. Emerging churches move away from the polity that engages a closed leadership which presents opportunity only to some, conducts private meetings, and operates in exclusivity (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005, p. 202). “Within the church, many leaders represent a hierarchical and controlling understanding of leadership. This has resulted in a growing restlessness among many young leaders...” (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005, p. 214). The goal of the emerging church is to allow the congregation to set the agenda (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005, p. 202). “When leadership is understood as servanthood, the power remains with the people” (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005, p. 203). Emerging churches allow the servants to rule and not the powerful elite (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005), unlike traditional church hierarchy. Li (2010) indicated that this same type

of leadership shift was essential to digital leaders, which would include leaders of online churches as well.

Traditional closed leadership. In closed leadership, leaders make decisions with little to no regard for the followers. Gibbs and Bolger (2005) identified closed leadership as a key deficiency of the traditional church. Yukl (2013) expressed concern as to “whether leadership should be viewed as a specialized role or as a shared influence process” (p. 3). In a closed leadership environment, leadership is not a participative process but more of a dictatorship that has little communication, growth opportunity, or positive influence on the followers. The leadership does not understand that “grand dreams don’t become significant realities through the actions of a single person” (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 8).

Leaders in a closed leadership environment do not delegate well. This may be due to a variety of reasons. Yukl (2013) postulated these reasons may be the manager having a high need for power, insecurity, avoiding the risk of mistakes, subordinate lack of expertise, and so forth. A lack of delegation will ultimately decrease the leadership’s ability to enable others and to empower the followers, which is also indicative of a closed environment.

As stated previously, many churches are led by “entrenched power-brokers” (Estes, 2009, p. 136), which promotes a lack of the concepts that enable others as stated by Kouzes and Pozner (2003). Concepts that are adverse to open leadership, which is synonymous with digital leadership (Li, 2010), will not succeed in the virtual

environment of online church and may also be adverse to the online church attendees' spiritual development.

Traditional Church Community

Community is important to the church attendee. Morr (2003) stipulated "personal transformation, at the very least, requires skills that allow one to relate to God and to the community of faith" (p. 2). Van Deusen Hunsinger (2009) stated "It is the goal of all Christian practices, and at the same time it is something to be practiced" (p. 346). In discussing community, Van Deusen Hunsinger (2009) further stated

One of the most powerful signs of Christ's resurrection in the early church is the profound unity experienced among his disciples: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32). The depth of Christian fellowship that developed is understood to be one of the Spirit's most precious gifts. (p. 346)

When discussing the community of the traditional church, the definition of community must be established and then the demographics of the community. "There are many ways to describe the church: a fellowship, a congregation, a community" (Whitesel, 2013, p.30). Wilson (2004) defined community as "...members of Christ's body rubbing souls with one another, entering into one another's pain, and celebrating one another's victories" (p. 204). It can be assumed that community serves a purpose of being a place of inclusive growth and safety for the congregation. Lockhart (2012) postulated "spiritual growth is influenced and supported by not only a relationship with

God and Scripture but also relationships with teachers, mentors, fellow Christians, and significant others within the learner's scope of community” (p. 96).

Typical Traditional Church Attendees

The purpose of the discussion of traditional church attendees is to disclose the make-up of the traditional church to examine the trend of declining attendance that seems to increase with each new generation. This section will discuss the age groups and the potential reasons for some of these age groups waning church attendance. The make-up of the typical church community, as stated by Benke and Benke, (2001) consists of four groups. These groups are youth, generation X, baby boomers, and pre-baby boomers. As the youth group members are not included as participants in the current study, this group will not be included in the discussion and the pre-baby boomers are included in the baby-boomers and generation X groups for the current study.

The group mentioned most frequently when it comes to church attendance decline is generation X, or as Barna Group (2012) labeled this group, mosaics (Barna Group, 2012; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007; Paloutzian & Park, 2013). Generation X or mosaics range in age from 35 to 50 (Fry, 2015, p. 1). Hucker (2011) assessed the generation X attendees, individuals born between 1961 and 2001, have become “noticeably absent” over the recent years (p. 13). This is the age group that has a waning reverence for traditional church attendance and overall religiosity (Barna, 2012; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007; Paloutzian & Park, 2013). Moreover, generation X has a tendency towards having little ambition, less inclination towards marriage, trust issues, high suicide rate, drinking problems, vulnerability to stress, but yet are more socially conscious. Yet Herman (2015)

noted generation X develops “an interest in church not because they are on a search for truth but because of their desire for home and community” (p. 1).

Benke and Benke (2001) indicated that baby boomers made up 29.1% of the population (p. 11) and subsequently a large portion of the church attendees. Baby boomers range in age from 51 – 69 (Fry, 2015, p. 1). Some of the characteristics of this age group are low loyalty, nonaffiliation, high expectations, and weak relationships (Benke & Benke, 2001, p. 15). There is an additional group that needs to be mentioned, the millennials. Millennials are individuals that range in age from 18-34 (Fry, 2015, p. 1). This age group is declining in church attendance as well (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007). Based on the previously stated research, community is indeed important to the spiritual development of the attendee (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005; Lockhart, 2012; Van Deusen Hunsinger, 2009). When comparing online church to traditional church, the discussion of community and the tectonic trends regarding attendance and group characteristics within community is essential.

Traditional Church Attendance Decline

Traditional church attendance has been on a constant decline over the past few decades (Barna Group, 2012; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007; Lipka, 2013; Lytle, 2013; Paloutzian & Park, 2013, Pimpton, 2009; Whitesel, 2013). Paloutzian and Park (2013) attributed the decline to the baby boomers becoming more Internet savvy and less mobile due to health issues such as dementia (pp. 198-199) and due to isolation (p. 208). Additionally, Paloutzian and Park indicated that young adults, or millennials, are no longer interested in traditional church. Barna Group (2012) stated when it comes to

traditional church services “...the level of disaffection of young adults is striking. According to Barna Group, the younger generation is significantly less likely to describe positive outcomes while attending congregations” (p. 1). Even the mosaics that do attend are less likely to embrace traditional church.

Whitesel (2013) stated “...82 percent of Americans do not regularly attend any church” (p. 12). The Pew Research entitled “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious” supports a lack of church attendance as “while the share of Americans who say they attend religious services weekly is declining, the share who say they rarely or never attend religious services is rising” (Pew Research Center, 2015, p. 131). This study further indicated that three major research organizations, The Religious Landscape Studies, Gallop Poll, and the General Social Survey utilize different survey questions to gauge religious attendance, yet all have assessed a decline in religious attendance (p. 131).

Halo effect. It should also be taken into consideration that Hout and Greeley (1998) postulated that most people overstate church attendance on attendance surveys. Shattuck (2015) further supported church attendance misreporting and stated, “Americans tend to over-report socially desirable behavior like voting and attending church and under-report socially undesirable behavior like drinking” (p. 1). Shattuck (2015) named this practice the “halo effect” (p. 1). Additionally, Lipka (2013) also indicated common inaccuracies in church attendance reporting.

Going back as far as 2001, Benke and Benke (2001) indicated “70% of American adults are not born-again Christians and...60% are unchurched” (p. 6). More troubling is

the fact that 10% of Americans do not regularly attend church but profess to be Christian (Benke & Benke, 2001, p. 6). Barna Group (2008) categorized believers that do not attend services as “unattached” and placed one in four adults in this category (p. 1). Benke & Benke attributed non-attending believer statistics to the church’s failure to “effectively minister to the needs of a large segment of believers” (p. 6). More recent research indicates that the trend of declining traditional church attendance has remained consistent (Barna, 2012; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007; Lipka, 2013; Lytle, 2013; Paloutzian & Park, 2013, Pimpton, 2009; Whitesel, 2013). It is also worthwhile to note that in a recent General Social Survey, the answer to the question “How often do you take part in the activities and organizations of a church or place of worship other than attending services?” (GSS Data Explorer, 2014, p. 1) 33% of the 1517 respondents indicated never in 1991. By 2014 the number of respondents that indicated they never attended any additional religious activities increased to 45% out of 2538 respondents (GSS Data Explorer, 2014, p. 1). This indicates that in addition to a decrease in attendees coming to church for traditional worship services, there is a decrease in the attendance for other types of services as well. “We’ve all heard how church attendance is declining in America. The religious ‘nones’ are rising in number. Nominal Christians are falling away. But even more disturbing: fervent believers are becoming irregular in their church attendance, too” (Murrow, 2016, p. 1).

In Luke 2:49 Jesus stated “...I must be about my Father’s business.” If man is to be about our Father’s business as well, man must understand how the Father’s business is working. “The losses in worshipers [sic] year after year were more dramatic than what

data from the previous decade would have predicted” (Weems, 2010, p. 10). “If present trends continue, the percentage of the population that attends church in 2050 is estimated to be at almost half of 1990’s attendance—a drop from 20.4 percent to 11.7 percent” (Shattuck, 2015, p. 5). It should be noted that minimal research indicates a growth in church attendance, yet this growth is not in tandem with the human population growth and is seen as insufficient (Shattuck, 2015). In other words, “the church [growth] can’t keep up with population growth if it stays on its current course” (Shattuck, 2015, p. 5). Snow (2015) indicated that recent research showed that there was minimal tradition church attendance decline over the last 30 years. Yet, Luedtke (2016) postulated “...polls show that faith, attendance, engagement, and confidence are declining in Christian traditions. This trend is peaking in millennials and many individuals are becoming SBNR.” (p. 51). SBNR was the acronym for spiritual but not religious in Luedtke’s study.

With the continuing decrease in church attendance and the world’s diminishing view of the church (Gibbs & Bolger, 2005; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007) online church should be considered as a possible remedy to promote spiritual development in the absence of traditional church attendance.

Spiritual Development within the Traditional Church

Holm (2008) listed activities such as prayer and meditation to increase spiritual development. Bohm (2007) recommended traditional techniques such as group sessions retreats, meditative walks, and journaling, and self-examination as ways to increase spiritual development (p. 16).

Furthermore, most Christians observe key religious rituals that were performed in the Bible times within the book of Acts (Dixon, 1997; Estes, 2009). Acts 2:41 indicated the ritual of baptism and verse 42 stated the ritual of communion. Offerings and tithing were discussed in the book of Malachi in chapter 3. Additionally, there are weddings, instruction to care for the elderly and widows (Acts 6:1-7), and traditional rituals which are not in the Bible, such as christenings. There is also the instruction in Hebrews 10:25 that stated that believers are to meet regularly.

In reviewing a structured consistent spiritual development plan, the plan that Ogunji (2012) devised is one that is thorough and provides an excellent example of different methods to increase spiritual development. This plan discussed the processes in place for the integration of a total spiritual development plan. Ogunji discussed items such as funding, leadership recruitment, leadership development, program development and monitoring, facilities and assessment. It was also recommended sports participation for learners and leadership alike along with ensuring that the leadership staff lived the life and expectations that were taught. Other spiritual development motivation techniques recommended were awards for excellence in co-curricular activities and for qualitative faith based dimensions such as honesty, humility, or cooperation (Ogunji, 2012). The plan developer suggested that these awards be given at events such as chapel or other public ceremonies. Finally, Ogunji further mentioned traditional activities such as worship services, dining together, and community outreach programs.

There are also other traditional spiritual development activities such as weekly Bible studies, reading of uplifting books (Sasson, 2016), and small group participation.

Gateway Church in Southlake, TX, states the purpose of the small group structure as “in a church our size, it’s easy to just be a face in the crowd. Because of that, we’re a church of small groups, or as we call them, Gateway Groups. We have hundreds of Gateway Groups meeting throughout Dallas/Fort Worth with group leaders and members who are waiting to get to know you” (“About Gateway Church,” 2016, p. 1). Small groups can be demographically established or based upon any other commonality of the attendees such as gender, hobby, or ethnicity. When discussing the positive impact of music on spiritual development Ivanovic (2015) posited that “music has an enormous power over the spiritual side of our personality” (p. 97). All of the aforementioned activities or events contribute to the spiritual development of the traditional church attendee.

Understanding the Online Church

To provide understanding of the online church, this section will discuss the history and provide some discussion of online church. The nuances of online engagement, online community, and online spiritual development are reviewed along with the benefits of the online church. Dissent for online church will be considered as well.

When working to understand the online church, the history of its inception is worthy of note. “Religion surfaced on the Internet in the early 1980s. Bulletin board systems (BBSs) began on Communication Tree and religious discussions started on Usenet. The net.religion discussion list was used for conversations regarding religion, ethics, and morality” (Gilmore, 2009, p. 8). Additionally, “...in the early 1980s, publications like the *Christian Computing Magazine*, *Church Computer*, and *Using*

Personal Computers in the Church helped church leaders decipher how computers could be used in parish settings” (Lytle, 2009, p. 1).

The beginning. In 1986, the first religious service to be broadcast on the Internet was the funeral of the space shuttle crew of the Challenger (Gilmore, 2009; Hutchings, 2007). The result of this broadcasting was the ability to unite the community in a time of crisis (Gilmore, 2009). Since then online churches have increased in development and attendance (Gilmore, 2009; Hutchings, 2007; Wong; 2008). The Church of Fools boasted of being one of the first online churches having been established in 2004 (Smith, 2016; Ward, 2015). This was an online church that allowed the attendees to create avatars, virtual representations of themselves, and move about in the digital environment or online church. The leaders within the Church of Fools created avatars to distinguish themselves as ministers (Wooten, 2005, p. 107). Church of Fools initially started as an experiment and evolved into St. Pixels which provided services online until November of 2015 (St. Pixels, 2015). iChurch is another of the earlier online churches established (Smith, 2016) as well as Second Life Church (Gelfgren & Hutchings, 2014).

The development of networking or the ability to connect computers in different locations further perpetuated the development of online church as “paralleling the shift from personal computers to personal communications, technological advances that enabled computers to be networked facilitated Christians’ exploration of online relationships and evaluations of a computer’s usefulness for ministerial purposes” (Lytle, 2009, p. 1). To give an example as to the span that online church has provided, Mohler (2014) stated “Christians can take the Gospel into China, leaping over the ‘Great

Firewall,' as many Chinese citizens refer to the efforts of their government to keep information out" (p. 1). With online church the gospel can now go wherever it is needed and may not even be welcome.

Due to evolving culture and technology, "one of the greatest difficulties in writing about the developing social aspect of the Internet is keeping pace with its rapid changes" (Helland, 2005, p. 906). This difficulty is prevalent when working to define the online church. Since the 1980's online religious groups have given themselves the term of "church" (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016; Vincett, Obinna, Olsen, & Adogame, 2014).

Terminology. Various terms are used when discussing online church. Cho (2001) referred to online church as cyber church. Hutchings (2007) utilized the term online religion. While Dixon (1997) called church facilitated online cyber church. Estes (2009) defined an online church as "... a place where people professing to have faith in Jesus Christ gather regularly to be in meaningful community appointed to build up the kingdom – or more specifically, a virtual church is the confessing people gathering in a synthetic world" (Estes, 2009, p. 37). Dixon (1997) further qualified the online church as "the body of all Christians who interact using global computer networks" (p. 17). Dixon continued the definition of online church as "an electronically linked group of believers, aiming to reproduce in cyberspace some aspects of conventional church life" (p. 17). It is assumed that the aspects Dixon refers to are community and bringing others to Christ as these are discussed in his work. To support the equality of a virtual church to a traditional church, Estes (2009) also added, "a virtual church is a local church because it is a place, a specific group of people present together under the leadership of Jesus" (p. 68).

Stetzer (2014) posed the question of the ability for a church to exist online and delivered the following definition,

An online church ... is often intended to be an alternative way to be a part of the church, similar to another geographic campus. An online church of this type is a church that defines itself by being online—the online experience is intended to be just as appropriate as the physical gathering. (p. 1)

Based on Stetzer's response, there are different forms of online churches, one of which simply defines itself as one and acts as an additional campus or extension of a traditional church. Duff (2013) indicated that an online church can range from a simple website to total online existence. "Less dramatic iChurch websites are simply email lists where members discuss common concerns about the church or personal concerns about faith" (p. 22), to "...churches that exist entirely online with no link to a physical congregation or that have a physical congregation that is substantially augmented by online members (p. 23). When devising strategy to build an online church O'Connor (2016) stated that a website builder, a group to design the site, and the ability to communicate between the two was all that was needed (p. 29). O'Connor (2016) further stated:

There are five main elements to our online church: Home Page with links to our social media, other site pages, ways to donate and the story of how we came to be; Daily Chapel which offers inspirational readings, Bible studies, and YouTubes with messages and music; Last Week Today with a filmed one hour Methodist Church worship service as well as a variety of church music; an opportunity to meet face - to - face with other church together. Today family members on our

Get Involved page; and a way to donate to the site and other causes through PayPal on our Collection Plate page. (Abstract)

O'Connor's online church had a few different functionalities, yet was still basically a duplication of traditional church accessed through online media. It is important to separate what the online church is from the different characteristics and capabilities of the online church. Some online churches that are extensions of traditional churches have dedicated pastors and many of the functionalities O'Connor (2016) described. Others have developed the ability to perform sacraments and other religious events online. These capabilities will vary from online church to online church, yet based on the research, do not define or validate the church.

The current study focused on the descriptions provided by Ward (2015) and Duff (2013). Ward described the "hybrid trend" (p. 78) which involves a traditional church that has a traditional service and simulcasts online to viewers and considers the online viewers as an extension of the traditional church location, as another campus as described by Stetzer (2014). This definition is in alignment with Duff's (2013) description of having a physical location with the online viewers as an extension of the traditional church. Online churches that fit Duff's (2013) additional description of sole existence online will be included as well.

Online Engagement, Online Community, and Online Spiritual Development

Keene (1999) contended that "the World Wide Web is playing an important and rapidly growing role in helping laypeople think about their faith" (p. 774). Keene further indicated that the World Wide Web "helps build the community of God both by

increasing the flow of information...and by helping like-minded believers find and connect with each other” (p. 774). Gresham (2006) compared the importance of the adaptation of religious pedagogy for online environments to the translation of the message of the gospel of Christianity that God had to do to teach man His word (p. 25). Gresham postulated that the Internet allows many to grasp the Gospel who did not previously have that opportunity. Stetzer (2014) stated “...the best way to do church online is to intentionally work to move everyone possible from being alone on the screen toward being in community with others and being incorporated into a covenant community” (p. 1). Although Fenimore (2001) postulated “Virtual community is not the same as face-to-face community” (p. 87), Fenimore went on to state “many information technologies have been heralded for their ability to create community by removing the distance between individuals” (p. 87). Estes (2009) further supported the removal of distance by virtual community as virtual community allows individuals from different locations and backgrounds to form the church (Estes, 2009). This “allows people to use technology to create community” (Estes, 2009, p. 57). Estes mindfully maintained “It’s not the technology that creates community; it’s the people” (Estes, 2009, p. 57).

Duff (2013) pointed out a benefit for some of online community is that “...the wall of anonymity created by the computer screen allows some people to be less self-conscious about things that inhibit them from speaking in face-to-face encounters. They may become funnier, more relaxed, and more comfortable with themselves online” (p. 23). O’Connor (2016) recommended “Bible studies and book groups at coffee houses and bars, in parks, on hikes, etc.” (p. 84) in addition to filming forums and mini plays as

viable solutions to building online community. It should be taken into consideration as Smith (2016) acknowledged, that "...the concept of online community" (p. 12) may be "difficult to grasp without experiencing it" (p. 12).

Community and spiritual awareness. Community is important to spiritual awareness (Bohm, 2007; Holm, 2008). Thomas (2014) indicated that discipleship should occur in a traditional church, as online *koinōnia* is limited. "Technology is swiftly changing our environment and our culture. However, God remains the same. It is our relationship with one another, and thereby our relationship with God that in the end matters" (Stapleton, 2013, p. 70).

Lowe (2010) conducted a study on online spiritual formation for college students that concluded:

...that the following were consistent with presuppositions that spiritual formation occur [sic] in online courses: (a) enhanced spiritual formation as a result of increased knowledge, community development, and personal growth; (b) positively impacted spiritual development in light of peer and faculty relationships; and (c) assimilation of social and spiritual dimensions... (p. 4)

The participants of Lowe's study also "self-reported that interaction with fellow students positively impacted spiritual formation and reflected a sense of fulfillment for the participants" (p. 4), positive impact on their relationship with God, deeper knowledge of God, a stronger walk with God, and more focus on the relationship with God.

In an effort to promote community and spiritual development, one online church has trained "e-coaches" (Thomas, 2014, p. 197) to help the virtual followers follow the Bible

online (Thomas, 2014). The web helps “build the community of God both by increasing the flow of information...” (Keene, 1999, p. 774) and “helping like-minded believers find and connect with each other” (Keene, 1999, p. 774). As an example, “prayer is a tool, not only to help someone advance in their walk, but to bring them out of a place where they are trying to handle it alone” (Thomas, 2014, p. 204). Online services can still prevent the loneliness of the virtual believer which is one of the benefits of the relationship with God facet of spiritual development (Kirkpatrick et al., 1999). The discipleship that can be facilitated through online methods to reach those that are unreachable at the traditional church location is paramount. “The Great Commission is not merely about spreading the gospel in words, it is about embodying the gospel message in an incarnational manner by using new, flexible, and appropriate ways to proclaim the gospel afresh for those who do not relate to it in traditional ways” (White, Tella, & Ampofo, 2016, p. 6).

Benefits of the Online Church

Two of the major benefits of the online church are convenience and cost. Lytle (2009) indicated that “faith communities have begun to employ digital connectivity to support their mission by making information more widely available and by promoting opportunities for interaction afforded by the Web 2.0 world” (Paloutzian & Park, 2013, p. 199). The convenience that online religion permits (Gilmore, 2009) is “online technology makes it possible for students to learn without leaving their geographic location, home and work responsibilities, church communities, and ministry obligations” (Gresham, 2006, p. 25). Additionally, more individuals prefer the convenience of the online church

(Gilmore, 2009; Gresham, 2006). Online church is very beneficial for attendees that are ill or suffer religious persecution in their native countries as Stetzer (2014) indicated.

Online existence for an organization typically proves to be cost effective as there is little start up or operational costs, no need for approval from another organization, and initially reputation has not been established (Estes, 2009). Yet, in contrast, Thomas (2014) made a unique statement regarding the financial requirements for the online church. "...one of the most prominent intervening conditions emerging from this study was the struggle to fund online ministries" (p. 209). The research indicated that Thomas (2014) examined organizations that may have attempted to utilize costly technology rather than typical websites or free social media applications with no reference to salaries or other traditional overhead costs. Although funding was acquired, O'Connor (2016) explained the difficulty in engaging the funder's understanding of community in the virtual environment as being a funding hurdle. In contrast, Farrell (2011) noted the Protestant church as preferring online religion due to the cost effectiveness. When engaging more cost effective online media, online service can be a more cost-effective method to promote spiritual development for attendees. Additional benefits are the ability to reach the sick and immobile (Paloutzian & Park, 2013; Stetzer, 2014) and those that may suffer persecution because of the gospel (Stetzer, 2014).

Dissent for Online Religion

Despite support for online churches, there is also disagreement with the methodology. Cho (2001) theorized "some theologians argue that cyber churches do not meet user's spiritual needs and feed into the idea that God can be turned on and off with

the flick of a computer switch” (p. 1). Stetzer (2014) indicated that the online church should not replace, but enhance the traditional church attendance or serve as a supplement when traditional church attendance cannot be achieved. There is also disagreement to the lack of face-to-face fellowship within online church and the ability to reach followers in discipleship efforts.

.... although virtual church has a sense of community, it does not necessarily develop for its members into a sense of belonging, with feeling connected or investing themselves with the same intensity as they would have done in traditional Christian fellowship. (Wong, 2008, pp. 837-838)

The question of the ability to develop genuine community online is a consistent concern as Hutchings (2007) further posited “initial Christian responses to online religion lacked systematic observational grounding and drew heavily on assumptions regarding the importance of face-to-face meeting...” (p. 243). Hutchings went on to state further assumptions were being made as well in regards to “the nature of online community, the efficacy of the Internet as a medium for proselytism and the effects of the Internet on authority and accountability” (p. 243).

Further example of the limits of cyberspace existence is that online religious leaders may have to avoid discussing important rituals, such as baptism, if this cannot be done virtually (Thomas, 2014). The lack of these rituals can be perceived as unfavorable to spiritual development, particularly to spiritual awareness as Holm (2008) indicated that confession and communion were critical to spiritual awareness (pp. 170-171). Yet, recently there have been methods devised to perform some rituals online. Duff (2013)

discussed communion and confession being done online. The confession was done with the attendee posting sins anonymously on the online church website and communion was done with the attendee in front of their own personal computer or device following the pastor or church leader's instruction being broadcast online and using crackers or wine available within the attendee's home. Bryan (2016) discussed the impact of altar calls performed online and added a different perspective in that the online church leader has no way to gauge the amount of times the online sermons are heard or the effectiveness and reach of the online church's evangelism. Hutchings (2007) thought process was in alignment with Bryan (2016) as Hutchings also considered the lack of accountability of the followers to the teachings and the impact of the leader's authority within the online church. Hutchings (2016) stated "online church replaces local church for users, thereby undermining community, it intensifies the individual's control over their connections, reducing accountability, and it negates the body, weakening relationships" (p. 42). Gelfgren and Hutchings (2014) reduced Christianity in cyber space to "visual manifestation of a spiritual imagination, seeking to generate the kind of place in which God may be encountered" (p. 71).

Online Communication Difficulties

There are a few concerns with online communication difficulties for online organizations in addition to churches, however all of these concerns could be applicable to the online church. The lack of personal, face-to-face interaction with the instructor or leader and others in the community is a constant challenge for online organizations (Gilmore, 2009; Fredricksen, 2004). Fredricksen (2004) further opined concern with the

inhibition of online instructors easily to convey information and to make a personal genuine connection with the students. Additionally, technologies “make communication more difficult (by allowing key individuals to better mask their activities) ...” (Lupia & Sin, 2003, p. 329). Bryan (2016) indicated a loss in translation within the online church.

Watching a live church service disconnected from the discursive conditions of being there along with other audience members who intuit the specialized idiomatic vocabulary of the discourse may cause certain viewers to form opinions of what is occurring that differ dramatically from the speaker’s intention. (p. 209)

Digital Pastor

With the changing dynamics of technology and church attendance, any church teacher, leader, or pastor should want to ensure the leadership provided is necessary and valid. “More and more we are moving to a virtual society. We carry our Bibles to church on our Smartphones, iPads, iPhones, and Tablets. Our pastors often preach from electronic devices rather than from legal tablets or word-processed notes” (Stapleton, 2013, p. 67). Mohler (2014) stressed the importance of digital leadership by stating, “leaders who talk about the *real* world as opposed to the *digital* world are making a mistake, a category error.” (p. 1). Coppedge (2016) advised, “when church leaders realize that social media isn’t a fad but instead a fundamental shift in interpersonal communications, the need for such a position will become apparent” (p. 1). Technology is impacting the house of God and the leadership needs to ensure that the attendees’ spiritual development is still benefitting from the leadership’s efforts effectively within a virtual environment in addition to or outside of the traditional church environment.

The impact of technology on kingdom building has perpetuated the need for the digital pastor. “A digital pastor is someone who is forerunning the technological advances in communication and integrating them faithfully into the life of his or her traditional church” (Wise, 2009, p. 1). Furthermore, a digital pastor must fully understand the nuances, benefits, and risks of online existence and still be able to be as relational in the virtual environment as a pastor would in the traditional face-to-face environment (Wise, 2009).

Digital Leadership

The leadership a digital pastor must engage to promote spiritual development is different from traditional leadership. Although geared towards the educational field, Zhong (2016) provided a definition of digital leadership as “using technology resources (e.g., promethean board, computers, Chromebook, iPad, school management software, communication software, social media, online open education resources) to promote learning, teaching, and administration” (p. 10). The key characteristic in Zhong’s definition is the avid use of technology to facilitate the leadership. In addition to the use of technology, a key difference is that leadership in a virtual organization differs from traditional leadership (Li, 2010; O’Neil, 2009) regarding openness, communication, and other facets. The increase in online churches has increased the need for the examination and discussion of the provision of digital religious leadership, as digital leadership will impact the spiritual development of online church attendees. “Technology has profoundly altered...how leadership is practiced” (Li, 2015, p. 9). With the advent of technology, digital leadership must be engaged. “Digital leadership is understanding and

harnessing the power of digital technology to manage the digital stamp of your business in a way that is successful, safe and has integrity” (Gill, 2013, p. 1). Stated plainly, digital leadership is the leadership engaged by those who lead digital or online organizations such as online churches and ecommerce websites. “It is essential for virtual leaders to create e-leadership styles which have capacity to manage the virtual teams and virtual operations more effectively around the world” (Sahay & Baul, 2016, p. 55). The following sections will discuss openness, transparency, and digital communication as essential pieces that contribute to successful digital leadership (Li, 2010; Li, 2015; Li & Bernoff, 2008; Sahay & Baul, 2016). “Virtual team leaders or e-leaders must develop best practices that have capacity to face unique issues and challenges in the virtual organizations” (Sahay & Baul, 2016, p. 55).

Openness

A key difference in digital leadership is the removal of the traditional leadership hierarchy and the development of a more open flow of information and leadership. In discussing faith formation online, Lytle (2013) acknowledged, “many congregations are recognizing that hierarchical models are not always healthy for a community or its paid professionals” (p. 154). Lytle further stated faith formation online “enables a shift to embrace shared models of ministry and utilize distributive models of leadership” (p. 154).

“When millennials and digital natives are accustomed to sharing all aspects of themselves with their virtual friends, today’s top leaders seldom share the same passion for openness” (Li, 2015, p. 39). Fear of a loss of control prohibits most leaders from transitioning to digital leadership (Li, 2010). Digital leaders must relinquish traditional

hierarchical control (Sheninger, 2014) and accept that there is a shift of power from the leader to the followers as (Li, 2010,). A prime example of this would be Amazon.com. Previously, when one placed an order for an item, there was no feedback or guidance as to how reliable the item or the seller was. Amazon.com was one of the first businesses to promote obtaining feedback from the customer, and allowing this feedback to be used by future buyers, thus giving the customer and their feedback power in influencing future business. Mark Djani, the CIO of Kraft, discussed the “uncontrollable forces” (Tapscott & Williams, 2010, pp. 349 – 350) such as blogging, the sharing of intellectual property and social networks. These same forces are in effect for religious organizations as many churches have social network profiles and are the subject of blogs.

Additionally, the researcher of the current study has received intellectual property via websites and other technological means from churches. An example of this is one of the local mega churches in Dallas, TX, provides all of the students that attend their school of ministry with copyrighted study guides via the Internet. Each student has to log into a website and download the study guides for classes. Djani stated that the best approach to leadership with these forces “is to just let go – to open up, and empower people” (Tapscott & Williams, 2010, pp. 350). Digital leadership engages technology, connectivity, and personalization (Sheninger, 2014). Miller and Athan (2007), defined spiritual awareness teaching as a pedagogy that “emphasizes collective use of the classroom as an inherently spiritual space; the spiritual reality always operates” (p. 18). Miller and Athan (2007) further stated, that the teacher no longer runs the classroom and that the teaching can be done outside of a traditional classroom setting. For the online

church leader, this may be the leader sharing personal life experiences, the gospel, and other information through technology directly with followers without the filter of a leadership hierarchy that would possibly change or stall the leader's communication.

Transparency

Leaders must be prepared for all actions to be scrutinized and this scrutiny to be portrayed within minutes via the World Wide Web. For example, in March 2014, Mozilla appointed Brandon Eich as CEO (Powers, 2015). On that very day, gay rights supporters waged a social media war against Mozilla due to a donation Eich had made six years prior to a campaign to ban same sex marriage. This resulted in name calling and demanding that Eich denounce his beliefs. Within a week, Eich had to step down from his new position. This event is an example of what is risked through leadership transparency.

Transparency for the Christian leader is a necessity as well. A Grammy award winning Gospel singer and praise and worship leader recently had to engage transparency regarding the ending of his marriage. The leader was very repentant and acknowledged his shortcomings and stated "as this has become a public matter I want to apologize to the many who have supported my ministry through the years. I'm sorry for the many who will be hurt to learn of my personal failure" (Justice, 2016, p. 1). Apparently, individuals close to the leader were aware of the situation but as it became a public matter (Justice, 2016) the leader engaged transparency to acknowledge the mistakes made, apologize to the followers, and take ownership of what was done through the use of social media.

Despite the risks, transparency is required as “in this world of constant feedback, one element of some corporate cultures definitely going away. Strategies based on deception are doomed to failure” (Li & Bernoff, 2011, p. 279). Transparency is key because leaders that work to hide or behave disingenuously can more easily be exposed quickly through technology. If a leader is going to engage digital technology, then consistent transparency will be required as any discrepancies will be exposed through that same technology. The digital pastor should work to be real and transparent with the understanding that a key risk for the online church leader is the receipt of unfavorable feedback issued directly through social media means that may be shared globally.

Digital Communication

When implementing digital leadership, the digital leader must understand that communication or information sharing is of exceptional importance (Li, 2010; Sheninger, 2014). “All types of communication and interaction between the virtual team members take place through the information and communication technology” (Sahay & Baul, 2016, p. 54). The leaders must “share constantly to build trust” (Li, 2010, p. 14). Digital leaders understand that “digital leadership is about engaging all stakeholders in two-way communication” (Sheninger, 2014, p. 2). “When leaders share, they engage and attract followers” (Li, 2015, p. 16), which could potentially increase the outreach of the online church. Based on Li (2010) and Sheninger’s (2014) research, it appears that the digital pastor must be willing to share through technology with the online church followers in an effort to engage the followers. When discussing faith and learning online, Norris (2015) instructed that “building a learning community is encouraged by including structured and

collaborative activities in the design of the course and opportunities for intentional, supportive, and persistent interaction...” (p. 94). Norris recommended exchanges by the leader such as positive emails, immediate feedback, and the modeling of the behaviors desired by the leader from the students or followers.

Autonomous Followers – The Power Shift

With the advent of the Internet and the ability to give real time public feedback on any organization, “the relationship between the leader and follower is as fragile and complex as ever in the digital age...” (Li, 2015, pp. 8-9). The customer, or in ministry’s case, followers are more in control as “...there has been a fundamental shift in power, one in which individuals have the ability to broadcast their views to the world” (Li, 2010, p. 5). O’Connor (2016) advised that “we give up a certain amount of control over how people relate to the church when we take the church online” (p. 31).

Miller and Athan (2007) indicated two key pedagogical processes in teaching spiritual awareness were “authorizing the student” (p. 21) and “creating a space of allowance” (p. 21) further empowering the student or follower. Despite the lack of research supporting this shift for religious organizations, it can be assumed that the shift is applicable as the same resources that allow followers autonomy in the commercial environment are available to the religious followers.

Cloaked Followers and Other Disadvantages of Digital Leadership

A key and necessary attribute of the digital pastor is to understand that “...the digital pastor has a firm grasp on the abilities, possibilities and dangers of technology in communication” (Wise, 2009). One of the dangers that the pastor must be aware of is the

anonymity the online environment provides followers. There will be online followers who will cowardly hide behind false online identifiers yet boldly interrupt the smooth flow of the conversation or organizational activity. “Online power is manifested by technically controlling or disrupting the communications of other users” (O’Neil, 2009, p. 80). Smith (2016) stated the difficulty within this aspect of digital pastorship.

The internet holds specific challenges, in particular people who join a site to play destructive games for their own entertainment. It is part of my role as pastor to guard the community from being harmed by malicious ‘wolves’ who seek to demolish the community. Conflict among Christians about church controversies can be very fierce online since people often feel freed up by the relative anonymity of the internet to be more outspoken and angrier than they are in church meetings. (p. 13)

O’Neil (2009) gave key instruction in addressing these types of individuals. “By all accounts, the most effective way of dealing with provocateurs is shunning them, rather than confronting them, which only makes them happy, or banning them, as they will invariably return” (p. 80). Leaders and followers also will need to be able to discern an actual interruption as well. One of these issues is flaming. O’Neil (2009) defined flaming as messages that “may appear insulting to an outside observer may in fact be a message which both sender and receiver understand as sarcastic and humorous” (p. 78). Many online churches stream live services that simultaneously allow followers to make comments on social media apps such as Twitter or Facebook real time. These comments are usually viewed publicly. If these online comments are perceived as inflammatory,

this may be distracting to the followers and harmful to the intent of the online church's purpose and goals.

The engagement of autonomous and cloaked followers is a significant change for the online church. Within the past year, the researcher of the current study designed the rules for one local mega church in regard to followers that come into the online Sunday worship services with the intent of being disruptive and disrespectful. The information technology staff had to be prepared to eject any individual that posted adverse information on the church service post board immediately. The difficulty within this scenario is that this same person can create another anonymous user id and re-enter the service.

The importance of discussing the technological modes used to deliver church online is that it should be paramount for any church leader to engage the followers and build community in as many ways as possible. Media methods are excellent options for the building of community and the sharing of services, announcements, upcoming events, and other resources. Technology can provide a variety of methods to still provide koinönia, traditional church services such as prayer, worship, and spiritual development.

Communicating the Gospel through Technology

Sound theology must still be delivered regardless of the means of delivery. Dixon (1997) stated "scripture tells us that the word of the Lord falls on the earth like rain from the sky and never returns without accomplishing its purpose (Isaiah 55:10-11). The internet is just another way of broadcasting that word" (p. 153). "Technology is swiftly changing our environment and our culture. However, God remains the same" (Stapleton,

2013, p. 70). Stetzer (2014) encouraged learning to use the Internet “for God’s glory” (p. 1). Gresham (2006) also indicated the need for structured theological pedagogy to be provided through online means of religious services as well.

The increased usage of and more prominent forms of the technology utilized by online churches are discussed within the next section. Virtual tools allow two-way communication between the leaders and followers. These tools can be used by traditional churches as well, but these are discussed within the current study in the context of the online church. The virtual tools are the vehicles, or human voice, used to allow the digital leaders to share and inform in an effort to engage and increase followership.

The Increase in Pastoral Technology Usage

Although being a digital pastor is more than just opening social media accounts (Wise, 2009), there is significant growth in pastors that are engaging the technology to promote spiritual development in the cyber world.

...there has been a significant leap in the number of pastors and churches engaging social media. More than one in five American pastors (21%) say their churches use Twitter, up from only 14% in 2011. Facebook usage in churches has likewise jumped from just over half (57%) to a full seven in 10. Pastors themselves are also engaged in online communication, with nearly one-quarter (23%) who use Twitter, well over six in 10 (66%) who are on Facebook, and over one in five (22%) who have a personal blog. (Barna Group, 2013, p. 1)

Barna Group (2013) further indicated that these statistics were a significant increase in technology usage by pastors from the 2011 statistics (p. 1).

Fenimore (2001), who also served as a pastor, conducted a study assessing the impact of technology on ministry. The findings were in alignment with digital leadership topics previously discussed in the current study. The first conclusion by Fenimore was to open the leadership. There was a need to involve more of the laity to complete the church's technological missions. The second conclusion was the importance of communication. This would be key in engaging the openness of digital leadership that was previously discussed within the current study. The conclusion was to seek feedback. Feedback is readily available through technological means (Tapscott & Williams, 2010, p. 350). Based upon the research, the successful digital pastor will engage the technology and the concepts of digital leadership.

Social Media

Gould (2013) defined social media as “web based tools for interaction that, in addition to conversation, allow users to share content such as photos, videos, and links to resources” (p. 3). Social media can be seen as the broader term for mass communication which facilitates collaboration and participation through creating and sharing (Cianca, 2016, p. 2). Lawrence (2015) shared “Evangelical online churches, which harness public preaching to spread the word of the Christian gospel, have quickly adapted to online social media as their most effective form of mass communication” (p. 38). Lawrence (2015) supposed that the reason for this was that “bringing in members from around the world together in a single democratic space on the web...these churches seemingly promote free interaction between their members in an effort to cultivate the community that is fundamental to all church groups” (p. 38).

Applications. There are many different social media apps such as Pinterest, Instagram Snapchat, Periscope; however, the most prominent apps are Facebook and Twitter (Barna Group, 2013). “Members of these sites maintain profiles, connect with each other, and interact” (Li & Bernoff, 2008, p. 22). Li and Bernoff (2008) explained that “in addition to updating profiles, one major activity on social networking sites is friending, a mechanism by which people acknowledge relationships with and keep up with their friends or acquaintances” (Li & Bernoff, 2008, p. 22).

Facebook is a site that was launched in 2004 (“Facebook”, 2016) on which members set up pages that are called walls on which updates, pictures, videos, links, and other resources and entertainment can be shared. O’Connor (2016) stated “Facebook allows us to reach the largest number of people across generations” (p. 56). “Twitter is a real-time social media tool for finding and sharing interesting content as well as participating in conversations” (Gould, 2013, p. 74). Gould provided excellent support for the use of social media in sharing the gospel.

When used wisely and well, social media can help the church:

- Build Christian community within and beyond church-the-building
- Celebrate the sacraments
- Deliver time-sensitive news and information
- Educate newcomers about your church
- Enhance the website’s functionality as a local, regional, or national presence
- Gather feedback from congregants
- Minister to the homebound and those unable to attend

- Organize, publicize, and invite people to events
- Preach the Gospel
- Model Gospel values and Christian love
- Provide a safe, secure place to gather for online fellowship
- Share stories to deepen faith and inspire action. (Gould, 2013, p. 37)

In addition to the benefits of social media, Li (2015) and Gould (2013) recommended that each digital leader put controls in place when it comes to the use of social media for the organization. These controls determine how much and what the organization shares through social media. Gould (2013) provided the following guidelines:

Thou shalt not...

For the love of all that is holy, do not post anything that:

- You want to keep private
- Puts you at risk for hostile ridicule
- Forces you to take action you cannot take
- Jeopardizes your ministry; or
- Will make Jesus weep. (p. 75)

Social media and other technologies are useful and easy platforms for leaders to establish and recruit for a cause. Technologies "... reduce the cost of sending information long distances (or to many people) can reduce organizational costs, increase noticeability, and make ineffective communicative networks effective" (Lupia & Sin, 2003, p. 329).

Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing is an online method for raising funds through collective action. Li and Bernoff (2008) claimed, “crowdsourcing is all the rage right now” (p. 190) as major companies, grassroots organizations, and individuals utilize this tool. Basically, the organization or person in need of funds creates a page on a crowdsource site such as Gofundme.com and can utilize other social media and word of mouth to attract patrons that can donate online via credit or debit card or PayPal. These sites typically will have a fee assessed for the service. It is not clear if many churches use this tool, however it is available for the organization that does not have an online payment or fundraising method.

Live Video Streaming

Video stream apps are growing in use with the rising popularity of apps such as Periscope and Snapchat. These types of apps permit the user to stream from a smartphone sharing events or conversation in real or delayed time with followers (Lim, 2015). These videos are only supposed to be available for a certain length of time. These can be used by online church leaders to deliver quick messages to followers and permit the leader to share activities that may make the leader more relatable to the followers.

Websites

In Webster’s online Dictionary website is defined as “a group of World Wide Web pages usually containing hyperlinks to each other and made available online by an individual, company, educational institution, government, or organization” (Websites, 2017). “With rosters dwindling, many faith communities have designed evangelism-

oriented websites” (Lytle, 2013, p. 75) to reach those that no longer attend church. Digital leaders can connect followers with other social media tools through websites along with providing links, information, and other resources in one location for digital followers.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed the components of spiritual development. The discussion of intimacy in relationship with God and how he has shown this in the past and desires this with us was supported by multiple instances within the Bible. The traditional church hierarchy and leadership patterns may diminish in use with the engagement of digital leadership, which lacks the hierarchy or closed nature of traditional leadership. The research gave excellent definitions and guidance to current or future digital leaders and pastors.

Despite some dissent for online religion, there are key benefits such as cost and convenience that will cater to the more mature generations that may be immobile and to the younger generations that simply do not like to come to church. The leaders of the online church must be prepared to engage and understand digital leadership, particularly the social media tools that will permit digital communication and consider the liabilities that develop when operating in the digital world.

Finally, the research clearly indicated an increase in the usage of social media by pastors and there was discussion on the various applications that will permit the digital pastor to engage the followers.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the current study was to assess whether there is a difference between the spiritual development of traditional church attendees and online church attendees. Due to the advent of technology and a decrease in church attendance (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007; Paloutzian & Park, 2013), online church has become a common vehicle to replace traditional church attendance (Cho, 2001; Keene, 1999; Smith, 2016). The current study examined whether online church attendance was comparable to traditional church attendance in developing spiritual awareness and a quality relationship with God for church attendees. Spiritual development was comprised of two dimensions, these were the awareness of God and the quality relationship with God (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 234).

Introduction

Chapter three explains the research methodology used to acquire the information to address the stated research questions and hypotheses. The topics discussed are the research design, population sample, the setting in which the research was conducted, data collection, and ethical considerations. The validity and reliability of the testing instrument are also discussed. The two research questions were:

Research Question 1 (RQ1) Is there a difference between the quality of relationship with God in online church attendees and traditional church attendees as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

Research Question 2 (RQ2) Is there a difference in the awareness of God between traditional church attendees and online church attendees as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

Research Design

The quantitative research design (Clark & Creswell, 2010) was utilized for the current study. The reason for this design choice was that the data gathering methodology used was to administer a survey to a small group of participants, a sample, and then the results generalized to a larger group of individuals, which was the population (Clark & Creswell, 2010). The current study explored the results of two sample groups, online church attendees and traditional church attendees, to assess if there is a difference in spiritual development between the two as measured by an online survey. The instrument utilized a five-point Likert scale made available online for both sample groups.

Target Population and Sample

The target population was adults that attended one of the participant churches either by going to a brick and mortar location a minimum of three out of four Sundays per month or by watching a streaming online service a minimum of three out of four Sundays per month. An additional qualifier was the participant's age. The current study was for individuals that would be at least 18 years of age on the day the survey was completed. Appendix G details the verbiage at the beginning of the survey that advised

each participant of the minimum age requirement, and that survey completion was voluntary. Each participant indicated if he/she attended services online or at a traditional church location at least three Sundays per month. The response to this question determined if that participant's results would be included, as the minimum age requirement was 18 years of age, and if the participant should be included in either the online or the traditional church sample group. When providing consent, the participant also confirmed that he/she was 18 or older. If the participant did not agree to take the survey voluntarily and confirm he/she is 18 years of age, the survey terminated with a brief message of gratitude.

Five evangelical churches were identified as having online or traditional congregations. These churches were then approached to obtain permission to gain access to their congregations. Through initial verbal contact with the decision makers, these churches indicated the intent to participate. In each case the process entailed the researcher meeting with the decision makers, such as pastors, online campus pastors, church staff, and so on, of each of the churches identified for the current study. These meetings served the purpose of requesting participation. Each church was asked to provide a link to the survey on the organization's website and/or email it to their congregants. As a benefit, the participating churches that have online congregations or were considering developing online churches could be provided access to the collective results of the survey to glean information regarding the online church and spiritual development. Each of the participating churches will be provided the participant's overall subscale scores from the surveys from all the churches collectively. These results will be

distributed to the churches at a later date. No identifying information about the participants or which church the participant attended will be provided, just the results.

The survey was made available to all attendees that have Internet access. The sample selection process utilized was purposeful sampling (Clark & Creswell, 2010) as the sample sites were intentionally selected. Self-selection (“Self Selection Sampling,” 2012) was used as well as the participants chose whether to participate or not.

Sample Size

As sample sizes must be sufficient to ensure adequate power (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2000, p. 280), the recommendation by Cohen (1992) was used. Cohen indicated to detect a medium difference between two independent sample means with an alpha significance value of .05 there must be a minimum of 64 participants in each sample group (p. 158). The minimum number of 64 responses from each independent sample group was required to reach the power of .80. The criteria to be met by the prospective participant churches was for them each to be an evangelical church that had an online, traditional, or both types of congregations. As stated in the data collection section of the current study, a letter describing the current study and requesting a meeting was provided to the decision makers of the churches identified to participate in the current study. The purpose of the meeting petitioned in this letter was to obtain permission for the survey to be provided to the church’s participants.

The responses to the survey provided a number greater than the minimum required by Cohen (1992). This made the survey results stronger, had better effect size, and engaged more power, which is the “probability that effects that actually exist have a

chance of producing statistical significance...” (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2000, p. 11). The current study did acquire the amount of participants necessary as discussed in chapter four.

Initially, five churches were approached to develop the initial sample. In the event of insufficient participant responses, five additional churches would have been approached, and had these churches agreed they would have then been provided the link according to the procedure described above, so additional responses could have been obtained. There was only one additional church approached as one of the original five later rescinded their commitment to participate.

Setting

The setting for the current study was online, as the surveys were administered through digital means and survey availability was solely online. The churches selected to participate were evangelical churches that had an online and/or traditional location church membership. There were no denominational restrictions for the participating churches.

Instrumentation and Measures

The instrument used for the current study was the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI), located in Appendix A. “The SAI measures spiritual maturity by measuring the relational and psychological aspects of personality” (McKenzie, 2014, p. 52). The SAI consisted of 58 questions and utilized a 5-point Likert scale designed to measure, through six subscales, the participant’s awareness of God and the quality of the relationship the participant had with God. Below are examples of the questions from each subscale. The

first subscale is awareness, which had 19 questions. A few examples of the questions for the awareness subscale are listed below.

1. I have a sense of how God is working in my life
2. God's presence feels very real to me
3. Listening to God is an essential part of my life

The next subscale is realistic acceptance which consists of seven questions, a few of which are:

1. When this happens, I still want our relationship to continue
2. When I feel this way, I still desire to put effort into our relationship
3. When I feel this way, I am able to come to some sense of resolution in our relationship

The disappointment subscale has seven questions, such as:

1. There are times when I feel disappointed with God
2. There are times when I feel frustrated with God
3. There are times when I feel irritated at God

The grandiosity subscale has seven questions as well, some of which are:

1. I seem to have a unique ability to influence God through my prayers
2. God recognizes that I am more spiritual than most people
3. God understands that my needs are more important than most people's

The instability scale consists of nine questions. Several of these are:

1. I am afraid that God will give up on me
2. My emotional connection with God is unstable

3. There are times when I feel that God is punishing me

Finally, the impression management scale consists of nine questions. Some examples are:

1. I am always in a worshipful mood when I go to church
2. I always seek God’s guidance for every decision I make
3. I am always as kind at home as I am at church

Dimension infrastructure. Grandiosity, realistic acceptance, disappointment and instability subscales were the relationship levels and dependent variables used to derive the quality of relationship dimension data. The awareness of god was the dependent variable used to provide the awareness of god dimension data (Hall & Edwards, 1996). Table 2 defines the variables. Appendices B and C disclosed the permission granted for the use of the instrument. The dependent variables are also the subscales that

Table 3

SAI Subscale Definitions

Variable	Definition
Instability (in relationship to God)	“I am very afraid that God will give up on me” (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 239).
Grandiosity (Excessive self-importance)	“God recognizes that I am more spiritual than most people” (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 239).
Realistic Acceptance (of God)	“There are times when I feel angry at God, but when this happens, I still have the sense that God will always be with me” (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 239).
Awareness (of God)	“I am frequently aware of God prompting me to do something” (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 239).
Disappointment (with God)	“...statement of negative emotion toward or disappointment with God” (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 239).

were calculated by taking the average of each participant's raw scores and then collectively averaging the overall subscale score.

To test the construct of the SAI the developers, Hall and Edwards (2002), initially tested the instrument twice in a correlational study with the Bell Object Relations Inventory (BORI) as the SAI was designed to assess the levels of relationship with God from an object relations perspective (Hall & Edwards, 2002). The initial correlation study of the SAI with the BORI supported the construct of the SAI; however, the second study indicated the need for minor adjustments to the grandiosity and realistic acceptance subscales. "The grandiosity scale did not correlate significantly with any of the BORI scales and its coefficient alpha was low (0.52)" (Hall & Edwards, 2002, p. 342). It was also perceived that some of the wording in the realistic acceptance subscale was deemed confusing by the participants, which may have caused issue with the subscale (Hall & Edwards, 2002, p. 342).

Hall and Edwards (2002) later conducted two more correlation studies on the SAI. The first study was to "examine the psychometric properties of a revised SAI item pool" (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 342). The second study was to "investigate the psychometric properties of the new Impression Management scale" (Hall & Edwards, 2002, p. 342). This scale was a newly created scale derived from the empirical results of the first of these two studies designed to assess the participant's test-taking approaches and illusory spiritual health (Hall & Edwards, 1996). Hall and Edwards (2002) stated, "the impression management subscale, designed and tested in Study 2, appears to be a better measure of test-taking attitude" (p. 353). As this subscale was not germane to spiritual development,

the questions that comprise the impression management scale were not provided to the participants. Appendix C provides the permission received from the developer of the instrument to exclude the questions for this subscale. Moreover, the exclusion of the impression management subscale was suggested to Lee (2015) by Hall and Edwards as well since the interpretation and implication of the subscale “had never turned out well” (p. 170). Therefore, although the SAI contains 58 questions, only 49 were used for the current study. Appendix D provides the instrument with each question’s subscale denoted.

Hall and Edwards (2002) used correlational tests for the latter two studies on the SAI. The instruments used for comparison were the BORI, Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS), Intrinsic/Extrinsic Revised, Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), and the Defense Style Questionnaire-40 (DQ-40) (Hall & Edwards, 2002). The results of each of these correlation comparisons indicated good construct validity for the SAI (Hall & Edwards, 2002).

The final reliability results for the subscales were: awareness, 0.95; disappointment, 0.90; realistic acceptance, 0.83; grandiosity, 0.73; and instability, 0.84. All of these values exceeded the Cronbach’s alpha significance value of .05, which indicated that these subscales had good reliability (Hall & Edwards, 2002). The significance value is the critical value or number used to gauge whether the null or research hypothesis is most likely correct (Salkind, 2012, p. 164).

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to ensure that the processes for data collection and analyses would yield proper results. The sample that was used for this pilot study was a select group of test participants that did not attend any of the target locations recruited through social media. This group consisted of eight females, five males, and four participants that did not respond to the gender question. These participants were provided a link to the questionnaire and independent samples *t* tests were performed to assess the results. The process did appear to yield proper results. The key learning from this pilot study was the significant difficulty in getting men to take the survey. The Institution Review Board approvals for both the pilot study and actual study were issued on November 15, 2016.

Data Collection

The 49-question survey was entered into an online format using SurveyMonkey. Survey completion should have taken no more than 15-20 minutes and was available for completion to the sample groups for two weeks. A letter, provided in Appendix E, followed up by a phone call was provided to the potential participant churches to request a meeting to present the current study. The goal was to meet with the key decision maker(s) such as pastors, online church pastors, staff, or any other stakeholders that would be involved in the decision of whether to participate. The purpose of the meeting was so that the scope of the current study could be discussed and commitment obtained for participation in the study. Once commitment was obtained, the church was asked to provide the attendees' email addresses, email the attendees themselves, or that they place

the link to the survey that was provided to the church on the church's website. The church's representatives were asked to commit to advising the attendees that the survey was available to be taken at the attendee's convenience. During the second week of data collection, a reminder email was sent to the sample group for whom email addresses were provided. A copy of the reminder email is available in Appendix F.

The survey had to be completed in one sitting and there was no time limit. If the participant could not finish in one sitting he/she could have returned to the link, while it was still available, and start from the beginning with the intent of finishing that time. Unfinished surveys were excluded from the data used for the research. After the survey results were acquired, the file was uploaded into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 22, to test the hypotheses.

To collect additional supporting information there were some basic demographic questions at the end of the survey. These questions included age range, gender, and participation in other church activities. This data was collected for demographic purposes and possible post-hoc analysis. These were additional questions that did not count towards the data for the study. If the attendee completed all of the actual survey instrument questions, but did not complete the additional demographic questions at the end, the survey was still included within the study data.

Procedures and Data Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed using independent samples *t* tests. The data was entered appropriately into SPSS and the *t* tests were conducted, as the goal of the current study was to assess the difference in the means

between two independent groups (Yockey, 2011). The dependent variables were the five factors or subscales of the SAI, which are awareness, realistic acceptance, disappointment, grandiosity, and instability. The independent variable was mode of church attendance. The significance level used was an alpha of .05. As an example, all participants' instability scores were collectively averaged to give the overall instability score.

Research Questions. Following are the research questions and hypotheses the current study sought to address.

Research Question 1 (RQ1) Is there a difference in the quality of relationship between online church attendees and traditional church attendees as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

H1₀: There is no difference in the grandiosity of church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H1: There is a difference in the grandiosity of church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H2₀: There is no difference in the realistic acceptance of God for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H2: There is a difference in the realistic acceptance of God for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H3₀: There is no difference in instability in relationship to God for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H3: There is a difference in instability in relationship to God for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H4₀: There is no difference in disappointment with God for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H4: There is a difference in disappointment with God for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

Research Question 2 (RQ2) Is there a difference in the awareness of God between traditional church attendees and online church attendees as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

H5₀: There is no difference in awareness of God for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H5: There is a difference in awareness of God for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

Ethical Considerations

There were no concerns with confidentiality or other ethical considerations for the current study. The attendees that comprised the sample did not give any specific identifying information on the questionnaire. There was no place to enter a name or contact information. The data obtained was secure, as only the researcher of the current study and the dissertation committee had access to the data on a secured personal computer on a private network.

The nature of the current study was such that the risk to participants was minimal. The completion of the survey was voluntary and there were no adverse consequences for

those who chose not to participate. Permission was granted by Dallas Baptist University's Committee for the Protection of Human Participants to conduct the research as proposed. The risk associated with the current study in regard to the validity of the data is that when self-selection is the sample method, there may be a risk of self-selection bias where participants may want to complete the survey with the intent of using the survey as an opportunity to address other issues or biases. This could have led to skewed findings or the sample not being representative of the population (Self-selection sampling | Lærd Dissertation, 2012).

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

The current study engaged the use of the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI) to determine if there was a difference in the spiritual development of online versus traditional church attendees. This chapter describes the sample, discloses the findings, reviews the post hoc data, and summarizes the information. The figures in this chapter depict the alternative activities in which both online and traditional church attendees indicated participation on their surveys.

Description of the Sample

The SAI was placed online for the attendees to complete within the designated two-week span. There was a total of 449 attendees that started the survey with 339 fully completing the survey. A total of five churches participated. Table 3 details the memberships and locations of the participant churches, ranging in size from 200 – 12,000. The current study included three churches from Texas, one from California, and one from Arkansas.

Even though there were demographic questions at the end of the survey, the participants were only required to answer all of the actual survey questions for their data to be included. Since the demographic questions at the end of the survey were not required, the number of participants from which demographic data was acquired differs from the number of participants that completed the survey. The demographic information will be discussed later within this chapter.

A total of 71 online and 268 traditional church attendees completed the survey. The recorded gender make-up of the sample consisted of 65 males and 273 females. One participant opted not to provide any of the optional demographic data. Based on the

Table 4

Participant Church Membership Statistics

Church	Zip Code	Online Membership	Local Membership
Church 1 (TX)	75232	12000	3000
Church 3 (AR)	71730	0	300
Church 4 (CA)	91355	206	1000
Church 5 (TX)	75237		9000
		This church does not differentiate between online and local attendees in their membership demographics.	
Church 2 (TX)	75237		7500
		This church does not differentiate between online and local attendees in their membership demographics.	

issues with obtaining male participation within the pilot study, the lack of male participation for the actual study was to be expected. Reaching the required quota of male participants took an additional two weeks after obtaining the necessary number of female survey participants. The age ranges of the participants are delineated within Table 4. Almost a third, 32%, of the participants were in the age group of 30 – 39 which is a combination of the millenials and Generation X age groups (Fry, 2015). Additionally,

there were only four traditional church attendees over the age of 70 that took the survey and no participation from online church attendees over the age of 70.

Table 5

Participant Age Ranges

Age Range	Total No. of Participants	Online Church Participants	Traditional Church Participants
18-29	26 (8%)	8 (11%)	18 (7%)
30-39	106 (31%)	19 (27%)	87 (33%)
40-49	94 (28%)	22 (31%)	72 (27%)
50-59	82 (24%)	17 (24%)	65 (24%)
60-69	26 (8%)	5 (7%)	21 (8%)
70-79	4 (1%)	0 (0%)	4 (1%)
80+	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Totals	338	71	267

Findings

The current study examined two research questions and five corresponding hypotheses evaluated at the .05 significance level. The two research questions addressed the two dimensions of spiritual development: (1) awareness of God, and (2) quality of relationship with God. The hypotheses addressed each of the subscales. The subscales instability, grandiosity, realistic acceptance, and disappointment comprise the quality of relationship dimension. The awareness subscale makes up the awareness dimension.

Research Question 1 (RQ1) Is there a difference in the quality of relationship with God between online church attendees and traditional church attendees as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

H1₀: There is no difference in the grandiosity scores of church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H1: There is a difference in the grandiosity scores of church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

The grandiosity subscale measures if the participant has a grandiose level of relationship with God where they feel that their spirituality is higher than most (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 239). The results were as follows: online church attendees ($M = 1.953$, $SD = .696$) had significantly lower grandiosity scores than traditional church attendees ($M = 2.27$, $SD = .791$), $t(337) = -3.056$, $p = .002$, $d = -0.408$. With the p-value of .002, the null hypothesis was rejected indicating there is a significant difference in the Grandiosity subscale scores between online and traditional church attendees. Based on Cohen's (1992) guidelines, the effect size of 0.408 is rather small in practice and indicates that the online church participants had grandiosity scores 0.408 standard deviations lower than the traditional church.

H2₀: There is no difference in the realistic acceptance of God scores for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H2: There is a difference in the realistic acceptance of God scores for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

There was not a significant difference in the scores for the realistic acceptance subscale between online attendees ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .765$), and traditional attendees ($M = 4.30$, $SD = .848$), $t(337) = -.207$, $p = .836$, $d = -.028$. The null hypothesis was not rejected. This indicated that online and traditional church attendees have the same "capacity to work through difficult subjective spiritual experiences in a healthy manner" (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 242).

H3₀: There is no difference in instability in relationship to God scores for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H3: There is a difference in instability in relationship to God scores for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

Participants who score higher on the Instability subscale demonstrate an inability to trust God consistently and do not see God as loving (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 237). There was not a significant difference in the results for this subscale between the online church attendees ($M = 1.948$, $SD = .889$) and the traditional church attendees ($M = 1.77$, $SD = .729$), $t(337) = 1.768$, $p = .078$, $d = .0236$. The null hypothesis was not rejected. Online and traditional church attendees equally voiced that “problems trusting God and viewing Him as loving” (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 237) was only slightly true of them.

H4₀: There is no difference in disappointment with God scores for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H4: There is a difference in disappointment with God scores for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

The disappointment subscale measures the level of disappointment with God by the participants (Hall & Edwards, 1996). For this subscale, there was not a significant difference between online church attendees ($M = 1.932$, $SD = .932$) and traditional church attendees ($M = 1.734$, $SD = .800$), $t(337) = 1.79$, $p = .074$, $d = .239$. The null hypothesis was not rejected. Online and traditional church attendees reflected an equal level of disappointment and frustration with God.

RQ1. Research question one addressed the first dimension of spiritual development which is quality of relationship with God. This dimension consisted of four subscales which are instability, grandiosity, realistic acceptance, and disappointment. Of these four subscales, there was only a significant difference in grandiosity. Realistic acceptance, instability, and disappointment showed no significant difference between the mean scores of traditional and online church attendees.

Research Question 2 (RQ2) Is there a difference in the awareness of God between traditional church attendees and online church attendees as measured by the SAI?

H5₀: There is no difference in awareness of God scores for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

H5: There is a difference in awareness of God scores for church attendees based on their mode of attendance.

There was a significant difference in the awareness of God scores of online church attendees ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .819$) and traditional church attendees ($M = 4.40$, $SD = .621$), $t(92.394) = -3.122$, $p = .002$, $d = -.417$. The null hypothesis was rejected. The effect size of $-.417$ is small and indicates that the online church attendees had awareness of God scores that were $-.417$ standard deviations lower than the traditional church attendees. Traditional church attendees were significantly more aware of “God’s communication and presence” in their lives (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 239).

RQ2. Research Question 2 examined if there was a difference in the awareness of God scores between traditional and online church attendees. There was a significant

difference in the awareness scores between traditional and online church attendees with traditional attendees registering significantly higher scores than online church attendees.

Ancillary Post Hoc Data

This section of the current study discloses the results from analyses derived from the additional data provided by the participants outside of the Spiritual Assessment Inventory. The participants had the option of providing age, gender, and alternative activities information. All but one of the study participants provided this data. The following sections of the current study will disclose the results of the various tests on this data regarding gender and age differences.

Relationship Between the Five Spiritual Assessment Inventory Subscales Scores

Pearson Correlation Coefficient tests were performed to examine if there was a relationship between the 5 subscales of the SAI for all of the church attendees that participated in the current study.

Research Question 3 (RQ3) Are there significant relationships among the five Spiritual Assessment Inventory subscales: grandiosity, instability, realistic acceptance, disappointment with God, and awareness of God?

The research for RQ3 required a total of 10 correlations as shown in Table 5. Out of these 10 hypotheses only five had a correlational relationship. Only hypotheses that showed a correlating relationship will be discussed within the current study. The significance level used was an alpha of .05

The results indicated that there is a significant positive relationship between the disappointment with God and instability level quality of relationship with God,

Table 6

SAI Subscales Pearson Correlation Coefficients

	Instability	Disappointment	Grandiosity	Realistic Acceptance	Awareness
Instability Pearson Correlation	1	.505**	.030	-.092	-.404**
Disappointment Pearson Correlation	.505**	1	-.097	-.038	-.366**
Grandiosity Pearson Correlation	.030	-.097	1	.119*	.457
Realistic Acceptance Pearson Correlation	-.092	-.038	.119*	1	.230**

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

$r(337) = .50, p < .05$. Hall and Edwards (1996) did indicate that these two subscales “are theoretically linked to more severe forms of psychological maladjustment” (p. 351). The awareness of God subscale and instability subscale had a negative relationship, $r(337) = -.40, p < .05$. As did the awareness of God subscale and disappointment with God subscales, $r(337) = -.37, p < .05$. The grandiosity subscale had a positive relationship with the realistic acceptance subscale, $r(337) = .12, p < .05$. Finally, the awareness subscale has a positive relationship with realistic acceptance $r(337) = .23, p < .05$.

Gender Differences in the Spiritual Assessment Inventory Subscales

Independent samples *t* tests were performed to examine if there were differences in the subscales scores for spiritual development between men and women. The

following are the research questions, hypotheses, and results. The significance level used was an alpha of .05.

Research Question 4 (RQ4) Is there a difference in the Grandiosity scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

H7₀: There is no difference in the grandiosity scores between men and women as measured by the SAI.

H7: There is a difference in the grandiosity scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory.

There was not a significant difference between the grandiosity scores of men ($M=2.28$, $SD = .78$) and women ($M = 2.19$, $SD = .78$), $t(336) = -.888$, $p = .375$, $d = -.119$. The null hypothesis failed to be rejected.

Research Question 5 (RQ5) Is there a difference in the Instability scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

H8₀: There is no difference in the Instability scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory.

H8: There is a difference in the Instability scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory.

There was no significant difference in the Instability scores between men ($M = 1.90$, $SD = .82$) and women ($M = 1.79$, $SD = .75$), $t(336) = -1.029$, $p = .304$, $d = -.137$. The null hypothesis failed to be rejected.

Research Question 6 (RQ6) Is there a difference in the realistic acceptance scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

H9₀: There is no difference in the realistic acceptance scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory.

H9: There is a difference in the realistic acceptance scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

There was not a significant difference between the realistic acceptance scores of men ($M = 4.2$, $SD = .93$) and women ($M = 4.32$, $SD = .81$), $t(336) = 1.024$, $p = .306$, $d = .137$.

The null hypothesis failed to be rejected.

Research Question 7 (RQ7) Is there a difference in the awareness scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

H10₀: There is no difference in the awareness scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory.

H10: There is a difference in the awareness scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory.

There was not a significant difference in the awareness scores between men ($M = 4.33$, $SD = .71$) and women ($M = 4.33$, $SD = .67$), $t(336) = .042$, $p = .966$, $d = .006$. The null hypothesis failed to be rejected.

Research Question 8 (RQ8) Is there a difference in the Disappointment scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

H11₀: There is no difference in the disappointment scores between men and women as measured by the SAI.

H11: There is a difference in the disappointment scores between men and women as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory.

There was also not a significant difference in the disappointment scores between men ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 1.04$) and women ($M = 1.75$, $SD = .78$), $t(81.771) = -.874$, $p = .385$, $d = -.117$. The null hypothesis failed to be rejected.

A total of five independent samples t tests were performed to examine if there was a difference between spiritual development based on the SAI between males and females. The results indicated that there were no significant differences in the spiritual development between men and women within the five subscales of the SAI.

Age Differences in Spiritual Development Based on the Spiritual Assessment

Inventory

To examine if age does play a role in spiritual development, this section of the current study will examine the differences in the SAI subscale scores based upon the ages of participants in the current study who provided their age data. There are two divisions of age groups used within this section of the current study. An independent samples t test and a one way Anova were used for analyses. The following are the results for each test performed. Only the tests that showed a significant difference are discussed.

Differences between participants under and over age 49. An independent samples t test was performed to examine if there was a significant difference in the five SAI subscales between participants 49 years of age and under and participants 50 years of age and older. This required five hypotheses. Of the 5 hypotheses, there was only a significant difference in the Instability scores of participants 49 years of age and younger and participants 50 years of age and older. The significant difference was between the Instability scores for participants 49 years of age and under ($M = 1.90$, $SD = .81$) and

participants 50 years of age and older ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 1.61$), $t(336) = .058$, $p = .001$, $d = .008$. The null hypothesis was rejected. The small effect size of .008 indicates that the participants that were 49 years of age and under had .008 higher standard deviations than the participants that were age 50 and above. There were no significant differences in the grandiosity, realistic acceptance, disappointment, and awareness subscales between these two age groups.

Further differences between subscale scores based on age. This section delves further into the differences in SAI subscale scores based on the participants' ages. A one way Anova test was performed with ages divided into three different age groups. These age groups were categorized into participants that are between the ages of 18 – 39, 40-49, and 50 – 80. This required five hypotheses. Only the results that indicated a significant difference will be discussed. There were significant differences between these age groups' scores for the awareness of God, instability, and disappointment with God subscales.

The awareness of God subscale scores had a significant difference between the age groups, $F(2, 335) = 6.23$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .036$, Tukey's post hoc procedure indicated that those participants in the age group from 18 – 39 ($M = 4.18$, $SD = .78$) had significantly lower Awareness of God scores than those in the age groups of 40 – 49 ($M = 4.44$, $SD = .52$) and 50–80 ($M = 4.44$, $SD = .64$). There was not a significant difference between the age groups 40-49 and 50–80.

The instability subscale had a significant difference between the age groups as well, $F(2, 335) = 6.85$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .039$, Tukey's post hoc procedure indicated that

those participants in the age group of 18-39 ($M = 1.97$, $SD = .85$) had significantly higher Instability scores than those in the age groups of 40 – 49 ($M = 1.81$, $SD = .74$) and 50 – 80 ($M = 1.61$, $SD = .63$). There was no significant difference between those in the age groups of 40 – 49 or 50 – 80.

Finally, there was a significant difference in the disappointment scores in these age groups, $F(2, 335) = 3.66$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, Tukey's post hoc procedure indicated that those participants in the age group of 18-39 ($M = 1.90$, $SD = .92$) had significantly higher Disappointment scores than those in the age groups of 40 – 49 ($M = 1.6$, $SD = .66$) and 50 – 80 ($M = 1.78$, $SD = .83$). There was not a significant difference between the age groups of 40-49 and 50-80. There were no significant differences in the grandiosity or realistic acceptance scores of the participants within the current study in the age groups of 18-39, 40-49, or 50-80.

Alternative Activity Data

Other demographic information was gathered within the current study, specifically the participant's age range, gender, and participation in other activities outside of traditional Sunday morning worship. Forty-six online attendees and 221 traditional church attendees answered the question regarding other activities. Figures 2, 3, and 4 detail participant responses to the other religious activities portion of the survey. Figure 2 depicts the responses from all participants who took the survey and Figures 3 and 4 categorize the results based on mode of church attendance. Figure 2 indicated that ministry and volunteerism seemed to be important to all participants as these activities had the highest percentages of participation along with other unidentified activities.

Figures 3 and 4 delineate the responses by mode of church attendance. Figure 3 shows that online attendees indicated substantial participation in prayer groups and ministry while Figure 4 denotes that traditional church attendees seemed to prefer

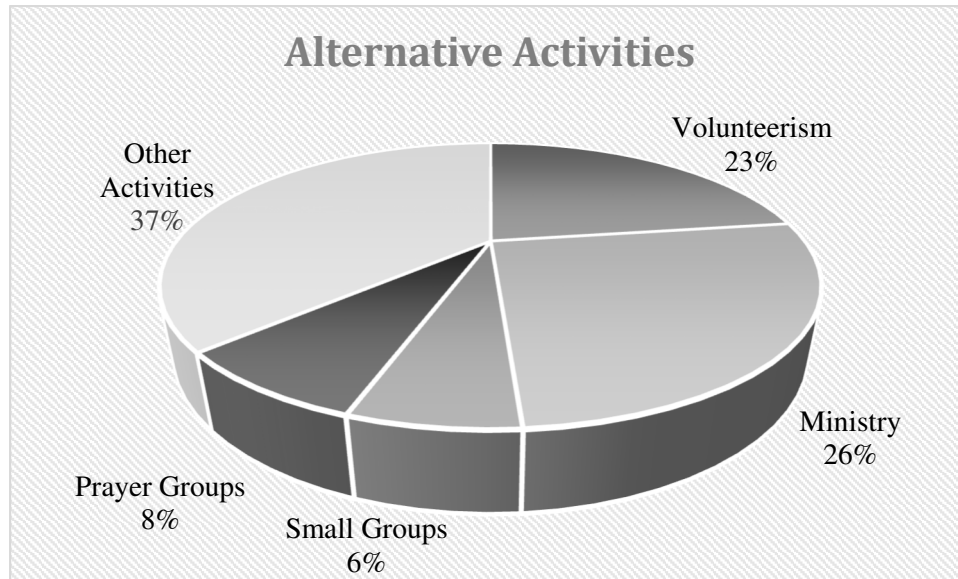


Figure 1. Activities Outside of Worship Completed by Participants

volunteerism and small group participation. It is notable that none of the online participants indicated participation in any kind of volunteerism. Table 5 displays the alternate activity participation response based on age.

The categories listed for alternative activities were prayer groups, volunteerism, small groups, ministry and other. The choice of other was meant to express participation in an activity that was not already listed. For both sample groups the choice of other for alternate activities participation outside of traditional worship had the largest percentage of participation. Thirty-two % of the traditional attendees and 65% of the online attendees indicated other activities as being the top activity for participation. Thirty-seven % of both sample groups collectively indicated participation in other activities as their

preferred alternative activity. The data was not provided as to what the other activities were. Both sample groups participated in ministry at 26% followed by volunteerism at 23%.

Table 7

Additional Activities of Study Participants by Age

Age Group	Small Groups	Volunteerism	Ministry	Prayer Groups	Other Activities
18-29	3	7	1		7
30-39	20	21	5	4	22
40-49	19	13	6	9	33
50-59	14	21	2	8	24
60-69	5	7	2	0	9
70-79	0	0	1	0	3
80+	0	0	0	0	0

Summary

The purpose of the current study was to examine the spiritual development of traditional versus online church attendees as measured by the SAI. An independent samples *t* test was used to evaluate the responses to the SAI survey administered online based on mode of attendance. There was a total of five churches that participated with all but one offering the opportunity for online membership. A total of 339 participants completed the survey. There were 71 online church participants and 268 local church participants that completed the survey.

RQ1 questioned the quality of the participant’s relationship with God. RQ2 examined the level of awareness of God between online and traditional church attendees.

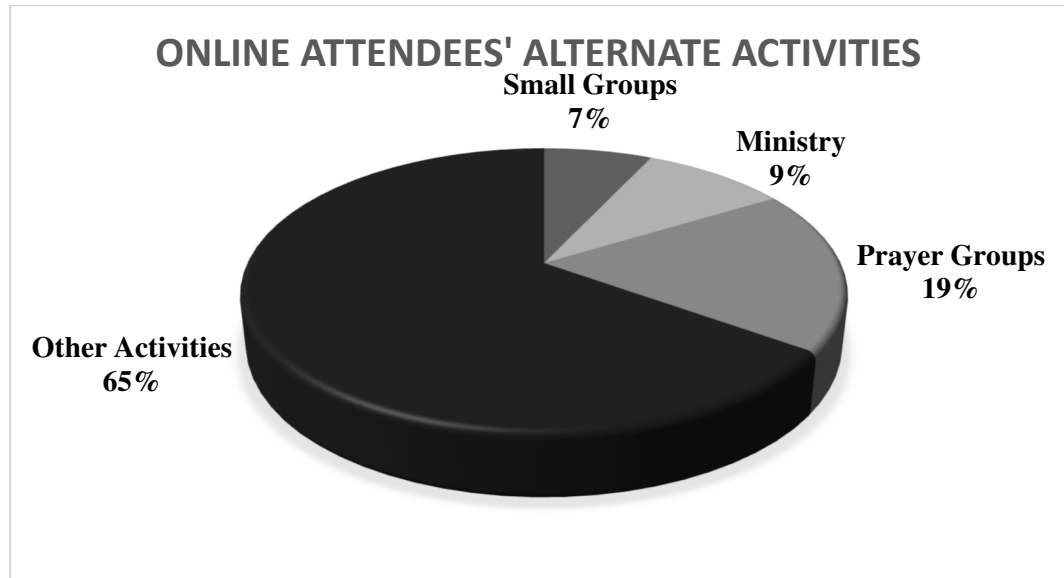


Figure 2. Activities Outside of Worship Completed by Online Church Attendees

The subscales disappointment, realistic acceptance, and instability, had no significant differences between traditional and online church attendees, therefore all of these had null hypotheses that failed to be rejected. There were significant differences in the grandiosity and awareness subscales. The traditional church attendees had higher mean scores for both of these subscales.

Post hoc analyses. There were other ad hoc analyses performed utilizing the participant's SAI scores based on age and gender. A Pearson's Correlation revealed six relationships between the five SAI subscales. There were positive relationships between the disappointment and instability subscales, the grandiosity and realistic acceptance subscales, the grandiosity and awareness subscales, and the awareness and realistic acceptance subscales. There were negative relationships between the awareness of God and disappointment subscales and the awareness of God and instability subscales.

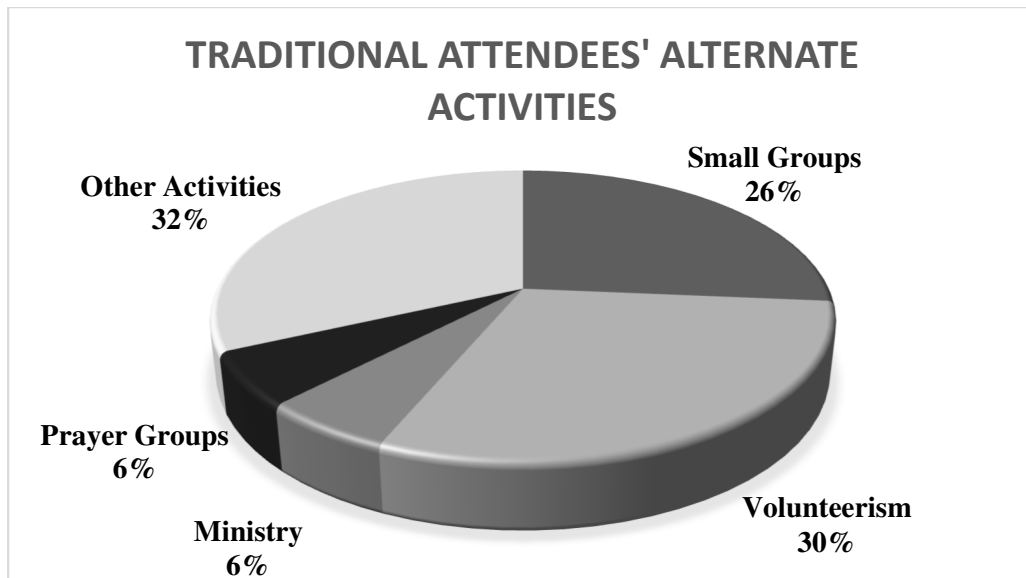


Figure 3. Activities Outside of Worship Completed by Traditional Church Attendees

Age and gender. Independent samples *t* tests conducted based on all participants' gender indicated there were no significant differences within the five subscales of the SAI. An additional independent samples *t* test was performed to examine if there were significant differences within the subscale scores of participants that were 49 years of age and below and 50 years of age and above. Of the five hypotheses required for this analysis which addressed the five subscales of the SAI, there was only a difference in the instability subscale scores with the participants that were 49 years of age and below having the higher instability scores. Finally, a one way Anova was performed to determine if there were differences in the subscale scores for participants in the age groups of 18-39, 40-49, and 50-80. Within the awareness of God, instability, and disappointment with God subscales there were differences among the age groups. The

age group of 18–39 had significant differences from both the age groups of 40-49 and 50-80 in each of these subscales.

Other Activities. There was also data collected regarding participation in other religious activity by the participants of the current study. Forty-six online attendees and 220 traditional church attendees answered the question regarding other activities. Other undefined activities had the most participation of each sample group individually and collectively. Volunteerism was the second largest percentage of participation for traditional church attendees while prayer group involvement was the second largest percentage of participation for online attendees. It is notable that none of the online participants indicated participation in any kind of volunteerism.

Chapter 5 will provide a final summary of the study, discuss the results, and propose recommendations for further study. The key implications and interpretation of the results from the current study will be disclosed as well.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

Traditional church attendance has declined (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007; Paloutzian & Park, 2013) while online church has steadily increased (Cho, 2001; Keene, 1999). Traditional church attendance decline has been attributed to various reasons such as baby boomers becoming less mobile and more Internet savvy (Paloutzian & Park, 2013), millennials becoming disenchanted with traditional church (Barna Group, 2012), and Benke and Benke (2001) went as far as to postulate that the decline in traditional church attendance was due to ineffective ministry. While this decline is occurring there has been growth in the attendance of online church, or church that is delivered through technological means such as online streaming.

Introduction

The current study sought to explore if there were differences in the spiritual development of online and traditional church attendees. With the advent of social media and other technology, online church attendance has increased (Cho, 2001; Keene, 1999). Taking into consideration that spiritual development still needs to occur, the current study sought to assess how the spiritual development scores on the Spiritual Assessment Inventory of online church attendees compared to traditional church attendees. The rest of this chapter will summarize the study, the findings and interpretations, limitations, and implications, and end with the conclusion.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to examine if spiritual development of online church attendees was comparable to the spiritual development of traditional church attendees. The significance of the current study is the evaluation of the spiritual development of traditional versus online church attendees. In essence, this study seeks to assess if online church is producing a comparable level of spiritual development as does traditional church.

The literature reviewed within the current study discussed methods of spiritual development, the dimensions of spiritual development, and foundational theorists. The traditional church was examined in regards to leadership, community, attendance decline, and traditional methods of spiritual development. Then the online church was discussed in regards to the benefits of online church, online methods of spiritual development, and the dissenting opinions and difficulties of church online.

Although it was not measured, the literature review explored digital leadership, which is the type of leadership used in an online organization (Li, 2015). The removal of the traditional church hierarchy, the level of openness and two way communication required by the digital leader, along with the risks of digital leadership were also discussed within the literature review.

The methodology engaged for the current study was the use of independent samples *t* tests performed with data collected through an online survey. The instrument used was the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI). The SAI was placed online through SurveyMonkey, and five churches provided the survey to their congregants.

Summary of Findings and Interpretation of Results

The current study sought to examine if there is a difference in the spiritual development of online church attendees versus traditional church attendees. There were two research questions and each required five hypotheses. This section of the current study will discuss the research questions and the results of the hypotheses.

Research Question One

Research Question 1 (RQ1) Is there a difference in the quality of relationship with God between online church attendees and traditional church attendees as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

Quality of relationship is measured by four subscales: grandiosity, realistic acceptance, instability, and disappointment. For grandiosity, the results indicated that there is a difference in the Grandiosity level of relationship between online ($M = 1.953$, $SD = .696$) and traditional church attendees ($M = 2.27$, $SD = .791$). Grandiosity is defined as “the degree to which individuals view their relationship with God as unique or special” (Hall, Reise, & Haviland, 2007, p. 158). Participants with this type of quality of relationship with God feel they are more spiritual than others (Hall & Edwards, 1996). As traditional church attendees had the higher mean score, the results suggest that traditional church attendees have a tendency to think they are more spiritual than others. A potential supposition based on this result is whether the traditional church attendees feel this way because they have access to their peers and are in a position to actually view their peers and attempt to compare levels of spirituality while online attendees cannot see their peers

and are not in a position to make this comparison. Perhaps if the online attendees did have personal exchange with other members, there would have been a different result.

The realistic acceptance subscale score provides an assessment of “how well people reconcile their relationship with God following disappointment” (Hall, et al., 2007, p. 158). Lee (2015) stated that this level of quality of relationship with God was distinguished by the level of maturity of the person at this stage. The results for the realistic acceptance subscale indicated that there was no significant difference between online ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .765$) and traditional ($M = 4.30$, $SD = .848$) church attendees.

The instability level of quality of relationship with God (I) subscale is a level of quality of relationship earmarked by the “individuals’ concerns about the stability of their relationships with God” (Hall, et al., 2007, p. 158). The disappointment with God subscale measures the participant’s disappointment with his/her relationship with God. It is interesting that Hall and Edwards (2002) stated that the instability level of quality of relationship and disappointment with God are “the two SAI quality scales that are theoretically linked to more severe forms of psychological maladjustment” (p. 351). These subscales yielded the same result with no significant difference between online and traditional church attendees.

Research Question Two

Research Question 2 (RQ2) Is there a difference in the awareness of God between traditional church attendees and online church attendees as measured by the Spiritual Assessment Inventory?

The awareness of God dimension “assesses the level of one’s awareness of God’s presence and communication with God in daily lives” (Lee, 2015, p. 178). This dimension consisted of one subscale, awareness of God. There was a significant difference between the mean scores for the awareness of God subscale between online (M = 4.08, SD = .819) and traditional (M = 4.40, SD = .621) church attendees. The traditional church had the higher mean score which would indicate that traditional church attendees have a higher awareness of or more communication with God.

Post Hoc Analyses Discussion

This section of the current study will discuss the results of the analyses done on the additional information the study participants provided outside of the actual SAI results. These analyses will examine the differences in the participant’s scores on the SAI based on age and gender.

Relationship Between SAI Scales

When discussing the relationships between the SAI subscales, it is important to understand the subscales. Spiritual development within the SAI consists of two dimensions, awareness of God and quality of relationship with God. The awareness of God dimension consists of one subscale of the same name. Hall and Edwards (1996) stated: “the awareness dimension of spiritual maturity involves developing an awareness of God conjointly communicating to us and through us, as well as communicating to us through our own thoughts and feelings and through others” (p. 237).

Quality of relationship with God. According to Hall and Edwards (1996) there are four levels of quality of relationship with God. These levels are instability,

grandiosity, realistic acceptance, and disappointment. Hall and Edwards described persons at the Instability level as:

Persons are typically at this stage of maturity as a young child. Adults who experience trauma in their early relationships tend to have chaotic and unstable relationships with others and are prone to feelings of abandonment. We hypothesize that these tendencies will be manifest in their relationship with God as well. Such persons are most at ease when things are easily identifiable as right or wrong, good or bad. They have difficulty with ambiguity in their spiritual lives. Personal failures or disappointments based on God not fulfilling their expectations can lead to intense feelings of guilt or anger. Such people tend to have problems trusting God and viewing him as loving. (p. 237)

Essentially, persons at the instability level of the quality of relationship with God are typically younger or adults that have experienced trauma that have not moved past the trauma to develop healthy consistent relationships with God.

Persons at the grandiosity level of quality of relationship with God are described as being in the age group “the middle years of childhood and early adolescence” (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 238). Hall and Edwards further explained that “adults who have not developed an internal capacity for self-acceptance may reflect this style of relating to God. Pride and self-esteem are major issues in their relationships with God” (p. 238). It is also noteworthy that “such people tend to be preoccupied with their own welfare and with issues of power and influence. They tend to be primarily concerned with God’s personal protection and provision for their needs (Hall & Edwards, 1996, pp. 237-238).

Individuals at this level appear to shield themselves with pride and self-esteem to cloak any perceived self-deficiencies.

The next level of quality of relationship with God is realistic acceptance. This is a more mature stage of quality of relationship. Hall and Edwards stated the age for this stage. “People typically reach this stage of spiritual maturity in late adolescence or adult years.” (p. 238). The researches went on to state that “those who have reached this level of personality organization are more able to experience and tolerate mixed feelings and ambivalence in their relationships with God, and thus come to some sense of resolution by dealing with these emotions” (p. 238). Persons in this stage can accept difficulties in relationship with God, move past these difficulties or disappointments and maintain relationship with God. (Hall & Edwards, 1996)

There is also the Disappointment with God subscale which Hall et al. (2007) indicated by the use of the letters, DIS. Hall et al. (2007) stated “...DIS taps an individual’s level of anger, frustration, and disappointment with God (p. 158).

Spiritual Assessment Inventory Developmental Corollary. It is interesting to note that in the first version of the SAI, the disappointment with God scale was not introduced (Hall, 1996). Initially the realistic acceptance subscale questions were compound questions that consisted of two parts, the first part asked questions that detailed a negative relationship or perception of God and the second part of the question detailed a positive relationship or experience with God. Hall and Edwards discerned that the results from questions were too ambiguous and if the participant always answered the first part of the question, which is the negative part of the question, with a 1 on the Likert

scale, which is not at all true, then this could be a sign of defensiveness or giving what is perceived to be socially acceptable answers. When choosing to answer with a 1, the participant is in essence stating that they are never disappointed with God. Exline, Grubbs, and Homolka (2015) posited that "...it is possible that negative thoughts and feelings involving God are underreported" (p. 38). In an earlier work, Exline, Kaplan, and Grubbs (2012) indicated that people may view these types of thoughts and feelings as morally wrong and in a third article Exline and Grubbs (2011) further stated that persons may fear that admitting these types of feelings out of concern that doing so could bring punishment from God or harsh judgments by others.

Within the current version of the instrument, each of the disappointment with God questions in the SAI are followed by a realistic awareness question. Per the scoring instructions from the authors of the SAI, if a participant scores a 1 on the disappointment questions, then their realistic acceptance score is not to be included in the computing of the results. Hall and Edwards (1996) indicated that the defensiveness scales consists "...of items that identify a negative experience of God which provide a context for assessing the person's ability to achieve a positive, relationship-maintaining resolution through what we have termed Realistic Acceptance" (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 244).

It can be assumed that the logic behind this is that if a participant does not experience disappointment with God then there is no question as to the stability of the relationship or that as Exline et al. (2015) have indicated that negative feelings with God are underreported. Question number 2 was the first disappointment with God subscale question and within the current study 159 participants chose one yet still answered the

following realistic acceptance question. When discussing the correlational relationships between the subscales further within this section of the current study, this information can provide additional insight.

Subscale correlations. There were five significant correlations between the subscales of the SAI disclosed within the current study. The first to be discussed is the positive correlation between the instability and disappointment subscales. Hall and Edwards (2002) stated that the disappointment and instability subscales “...are theoretically linked to more severe forms of psychological maladjustment, have low correlations with awareness” (p. 351). This appears to be true as in addition to disappointment and instability having a positive correlational relationship, both of these subscales had negative correlational relationship with the awareness of God subscale.

It would follow that the instability and disappointment subscales would have a positive correlation as Hall and Edwards (1996) indicated that persons that have unstable relationships with God have a negative perception of God and the disappointment scale probes the participants’ negative feelings of anger and frustration with God (Hall, et al., 2007).

In examining the negative correlation between the awareness of God subscale and the disappointment and instability of God subscales an understanding of the development of awareness of God is important.

Awareness is a capacity that needs to be developed, rather than being an automatic part of the Christian life. Capacity for spiritual awareness is distinct from but related to the manner in which people relate to others. Relating to

another human being in a mature manner is related to awareness of God in that it involves developing an awareness of one's internal experiences. (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 237)

Awareness is represented by how people relate to others. The current study previously discussed the positive correlation between the instability level of quality of relationship with God and disappointment with God subscales. It was inferred that these subscales had a positive relationship due to both being defined by negative feelings towards God. Persons in the instability level of quality of relationship typically "have chaotic and unstable relationships with others and are prone to feelings of abandonment" (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 237). Individuals that are disappointed with God feel let down by God. It is reasonable that participants that have high scores on the Instability level of quality of relationship with God and disappointment with God subscales do not have the capacity to relate well to others and would have the chaotic and unstable relationships, which is adverse to having the awareness of God subscale traits, or the ability to relate maturely as the individuals that have higher awareness subscale scores are perceived to be more mature and more stable (Hall & Edwards, 1996). These individuals would most likely have more positive feelings towards God.

The awareness subscale had positive correlations with the realistic acceptance subscale. People that display an awareness of God are characterized by being mature in relationships (Hall & Edwards, 1996). Awareness is also defined as communication with God and some relationship articles do discuss the importance of communication in maintaining a healthy, mature relationship (James, 2017; Luna, 2015; Watson, 2014).

Realistic Acceptance is characterized by a level of Quality of Relationship where "...God is valued in his own right and not just for maintaining one's self-esteem. This allows more for working through mixed feelings and engaging in a mutual relationship with God in which one both gives and receives" (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 238). Realistic acceptance is also the most mature level of quality of relationship with God as "people typically reach this stage of spiritual maturity in late adolescence or adult years" (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 238). Based on these similarities in characteristics a positive correlation between awareness of God and realistic acceptance is understandable.

Unique Relationship. Finally, grandiosity and realistic acceptance subscales had a positive relationship. The relationship between these two subscales is unusual in that grandiosity is a level of quality of relationship connotated by negative traits and realistic acceptance is the most stable and mature of the levels of quality of relationship (Hall & Edwards, 1996). Yet, Hall and Edwards (1996) did indicate that persons that experience the realistic acceptance level of quality of relationship can have some negative qualities as well.

Such individuals can be dysfunctional, although in a qualitatively different way from those with predominantly grandiose and unstable relationships. Instead of seeing others as only good or bad, idealized or devalued, they can acknowledge both positive and negative emotions in the context of an ongoing valued relationship. (p. 238)

Perhaps it is this unique dysfunctionality that permits the positive relationship between these two seemingly different levels of Quality of Relationship.

Gender and Spiritual Development

The analyses performed to examine if there was a difference in the spiritual development between males and females yielded no significant results for any of the five subscales of the SAI. Yet, there is research that indicated that there is a difference. Agha, Maqbool, and Javed (2016) and Shukla, Sharma, Sharma, and Pragyendu (2016) are two examples of studies that examined spirituality differences based on gender. Both of these studies measured the spirituality with instruments other than the SAI and thus their results were outside of the scope of the current study. Additionally, each of these studies defined spirituality or spiritual development differently than the SAI.

Agha et al. (2016) discussed spirituality as connecting to a higher power in their study entitled “Gender Differences in Spirituality Among College Students”. They acknowledged that “the relationship between gender and spirituality is one of great interest” (p. 450) and that “many academics grasp to apprehend this interaction” (p. 450). The instrument Agha et al. used was the Expressions of Spirituality Inventory (ESI) which, like the SAI, is comprised of dimensions. The ESI had five dimensions, these are:

Cognitive Orientation toward Spirituality (COS), a measure of spiritual beliefs, attitudes and perceptions pertaining to everyday life experiences; Experiential /Phenomenological Dimension of Spirituality (EPD), a measure of spiritual experiences; Existential Well-Being (EWB), a measure of spirituality reflected in the sense of meaning and purpose in life and the ability to cope with life's uncertainties; Paranormal Beliefs (PAR), a measure of the expressions of spirituality related to the possibility of paranormal phenomena; and, lastly,

Religiousness (REL), a measure [sic] of religious attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and practices. (p. 451)

Agha et al. (2016) stated their study indicated that men and women have different sets of traits. Men have logic, rationality, mechanical skills, and aggressiveness. Whereas women have the traits emotionalism, empathy, intuition, and submission. The conclusions derived from Agha et al.'s study were that "...women are generally seen as people-people and men as things-people. Or to put it another way, women are feelers and men are thinkers" (p. 452). Agha et al. posited that men and women take on the roles that society designs and that the "essence of the spiritual journey" (p. 452) consists of individuals returning to whom they were prior to society defining them. Despite a list of differences based on gender derived from their study, Agha et al. also did admit "common consensus is that spirituality does not depend on the gender of the person" (p. 452).

In their study entitled "Gender, Education and Spiritual Health: An Exploratory Analysis", Shukla et al. (2016) defined spirituality as "the dimension of life concerning its meaning" (p. 91) that enables conscious question of why we are here, what we should do while we are here, and what really matters (p. 91). Within their study, the instrument used was the Spiritual Health Scale which was described as having domains similar to the SAI's dimensions. These domains were self evolution, self actualization, and transcendence. The results of this study indicated that women had higher mean scores for all three of these domains. The previous two studies discussed could be viewed as giving

indication that when spirituality is defined differently or a different type of instrument is used that the spirituality gender differences become evident.

Spiritual Development and Age

Two analyses were conducted within the current study to assess if there were significant differences in the participants' SAI subscale scores based on age. The first analysis compared two age groups, participants 49 years of age and below and 50 years of age and above. There was a significant difference in the participants' scores for the Instability subscale. The younger of the two age groups, 40-49, had the higher instability scores. Hall and Edwards (1996) did indicate that the Instability level of quality of relationship was prevalent in younger individuals, but their indication is that this level of relationship was primarily in children or adults that have experienced trauma.

The second analysis categorized the participants into three age groups, 18–39, 40–49, and 50–80. There were significant differences for three of the five subscales, awareness of God, instability, and disappointment. In each of the subscales that had significant differences, participants within the age group of 18–39 had significantly different scores than the other two age groups of 40-49 and 50-80. There were no significant differences between the age groups of 40-49 and 50-80.

There seems to be a pattern when examining spirituality and age with the younger age groups differing from the more seasoned groups. In the first analysis discussed between the two age groups of 49 years and below and 50 years of age and above, the younger group had the higher Instability scores. This indicates that the younger group had the more unstable relationship with God and had difficulty seeing God as loving (Hall &

Edwards, 1996). Then in the second analyses among the three age groups of 18-39, 40-49, and 50-80, again, the youngest group, 18-39, had significant differences in scores for awareness of God, instability, and disappointment subscales. The fact that there was a difference in the disappointment and instability scores of the 18-39 years of age participants could be seen as supportive of the Pearson's Correlation which revealed that there was a positive correlational relationship between instability and disappointment. Moreover, in addition to Hall et al. (2007) stating that the components of the quality of relationship dimension "assess the developmental maturity of one's patterns of relationship" (p. 158), two of the theorists discussed in the literature review, Kohlberg and Fowler, both postulated theories that spirituality and moral growth are developmental processes that are defined by patterns of stages as well. Perhaps participants in the younger age groups were rather early in this process and had not developed the maturity to have stability in relationship with God or process disappointment with God. Therefore, that may be why these groups had significantly different scores on these subscales. It appears that the younger age groups had higher disappointment and instability subscale scores and lower awareness subscale scores. Keeping in mind that Instability depicts immaturity (Hall & Edwards, 1996) and awareness is "...the first dimension of spiritual maturity..." (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 236), Braganza and Piedmont's (2015) research indicated that as people aged that spirituality became more important. Yet in Braganza and Piedmont's own study regarding spirituality, age did not seem to have an impact on spiritual development. In contrast, within the current study age does seem to play a role.

Other Activities

Data on participation in other church activities such as prayer, ministry, and volunteerism was gathered as well. Table 6 details the additional activities participation by percentage. The activities that had the highest percentages suggests which activities may obtain the most participation from the online or traditional church attendees. Both sample groups listed other as the top participant activity, but other was not defined. Outside of other activities, online church attendees listed prayer groups as a top alternative activity and traditional church attendees listed volunteerism. This information is worthwhile in that the digital pastor could perhaps in addition to just streaming online services, assemble a team of ministers to hold online or teleconference prayer vigils based on the participation in that activity indicated by the participants of the current study. The traditional church leader may see the large volunteerism participation as an opportunity to extend the church's outreach and benefit from the membership that likes to volunteer.

Spiritual Development Activities

The methods that are engaged to promote spiritual development should be reviewed for both sample groups. The literature review discussed online spiritual development efforts such as the development of e-coaches to help followers follow the Bible online (Thomas, 2014) and the building of online community. Some of the activities discussed for traditional church were prayer, meditation, journaling, and music. The activities that were options on the survey for the current study were small group participation, ministry, prayer, and volunteerism. As "the SAI can provide a starting point

Table 8

Additional Participation of Study Participants by Percentage

Mode	Activity Participation of Study Participants by Percentage.
Online	Prayer Groups – 19% Ministry – 9%
Traditional	Volunteerism – 30% Small Groups – 26%

for pastoral counselors and clinicians to assess counselees’ spiritual strengths and weaknesses” (Hall & Edwards, 1996, p. 245), these results can be seen to expose weaknesses and strengths within the spiritual development of the sample groups.

Perhaps the church leadership can engage additional spiritual development activities based on the participants that have the realistic acceptance level of quality of relationship and duplicate and or customize these activities for those that have an unstable level of relationship. As an example, the church could administer the SAI to the congregants and cross reference the results of the SAI with the congregants’ church participation activities. Then complete an examination of the activities participated in by those that have a realistic acceptance level of quality of relationship with God and create a program that will encourage those congregants with the instability level of quality of relationship to participate in the activities that seem to work for those that have the realistic acceptance level of quality of relationship.

One would think that the online attendees would be more inclined to take an online survey, yet as stated, there was overwhelming participation for the online survey

by traditional church attendees. Additionally, it is rather surprising that no online church attendees indicated that they participated in volunteerism. With the advent of online church there has been a growth in the development and engagement of virtual volunteers. “Virtual volunteering can be defined as a type of civic engagement where the volunteers perform their tasks using the Internet either from their home or other offsite locations” (Mukherjee, 2011, p. 253). Virtual volunteers can be used to make the welcome calls to the new members of the church, Tweet with the online congregants during service, and make calls to members or send emails to members about upcoming events. Perhaps online churches are hesitant to use individuals that they have not personally met as a church’s volunteers are operating in a position as an ambassador of the church if they are working with the congregation. This could be a way for the online church to mitigate the risk of a volunteer that they have not met, but will be held accountable for, from jeopardizing the credibility of the organization.

One of the areas discussed in the current study’s literature review was digital leadership and the removal of traditional church hierarchy. When the researcher of the current study was working to approach one of the larger churches in Texas, the effort was made to go through the proper channels by emailing and asking for an appointment with the pastor and contacting staff. This process would have taken about two to three weeks. The researcher of the current study saw that the pastor of this church was tweeting on Twitter and contacted him through Twitter to ask to meet to request his church’s participation and met with him that next week. Social media removed the need to go through traditional hierarchy and yielded more timely results.

Implications

The implications of the current study are unique in that when the current study was proposed, there was a plethora of studies that examined specific theories of technology, online church, and learning in exclusivity. Additionally, “psychotherapists and pastors/pastoral counselors rarely formally assess their clients’ spiritual development even though it is important and often the focus of pastors’ work” (Hall & Edwards, 2002, p. 353). None was found that completed a direct comparison that would truly attempt to evaluate the impact or effectiveness of online church versus traditional church like the current study.

Cho (2001) stated that some theologians indicated that online church does not meet the user’s spiritual needs. This could be perceived to be true when considering the significant difference disclosed within the current study for the awareness of God subscale scores. As this subscale is characterized by the awareness of and communication with God (Hall & Edwards, 1996; Hall et al., 2007), it is rather important. There was a significant difference within this subscale scores between online church attendees and traditional church attendees with traditional church attendees having the higher mean score. If the online church is not improving awareness of or communication with God, this is an area that needs to be further addressed. As awareness was defined as communication with God, (Hall & Edwards, 1996) for the online church, promoting commune with God by engaging prayer through technological means, small groups, or conference calls may increase awareness.

The spiritual development results and age differences give an implication that spiritual development does progress with age. Therefore it may be of benefit to allow the more seasoned church attendees to mentor the younger age groups.

Finally, the current study can be used to provide guidance to church leadership in regards to the importance of and suggest potential activities for spiritual development. The differences in the participation of other activities, outside of traditional worship, will provide some of the framework for understanding what activities will get the online or traditional church congregations connected.

Limitations

There were key limitations to the current study. The most prominent was the imbalance in the sample groups and gender participation. There were almost four times as many traditional church attendees that took the survey than online church attendees. Additionally, there were four times as many women than men who took the survey. When it came to the question “Do you participate in any of the following church activities regularly?” in the demographics portion of the survey, there was a large participation in the other category yet there was no indication given of what the other activities were. The lack of the collection of this information leaves a question as to what these other activities were as the most common activities such as prayer, volunteerism, ministry, and small groups were already listed.

Intricate details such as devices used to connect to online service and other more technological or hardware associated questions were not addressed as the goal was to

measure spiritual development and technology or hardware really should not determine this outcome.

Recommendations for Further Study

There are various recommendations for further study. A key question is how many online church attendees started out at a traditional location and what was the impact on their spiritual development after making this change? The study that determines which methods of spiritual development outside of traditional service online or locally which obtain the best results for spiritual development would be helpful as well. Understanding this is critical for the online church and for those attendees who have the unstable level of quality of relationship or a lack of awareness of God. A study that examines the attendees' reasoning for their choice of church mode would be helpful as well as a study that works to clearly define what is an online church. As stated in the literature review of the current study online church is defined differently by many and a study that would streamline to a consistent common definition would provide a foundational definition.

Further research into the impact of age on spirituality or what would be the earliest age that spirituality truly starts to develop would be helpful. A key study would be to examine if socioeconomic status plays into the choice of church attendance mode. As some of the research on the cost to establish an online church was rather conflicting, a study that examines this would possibly clarify previous research.

Conclusions

The current study used the SAI as an online survey instrument to gather data for independent samples t tests to assess whether there was a difference in the spiritual development of online versus traditional church attendees. Spiritual development was defined as the quality of relationship with God and the awareness of God. The quality of relationship consisted of four levels of relationship or subscales and those were grandiosity, realistic acceptance, disappointment, and instability. The awareness of God variable consisted of measuring the participants' awareness of God.

The current study lays the groundwork for future research regarding the online church and spiritual development. Even though the cyber church has its own challenges, it has, however, enabled many churches to connect, interact, and share the gospel with their members and other people (White et al., 2016). The reality is that the online church is not going away due to the decline in traditional church attendance, millennials and baby boomers choosing to attend online, and online being the only mode available in countries where Christianity is persecuted.

A key benefit of the current study to the participants was in taking the SAI. Hall and Edwards (2002) stated that "...our experience suggests that individuals find it helpful to reflect on the items" (p. 353) on this instrument. A few of the participants did leave notes on the survey indicating appreciation for how the subject matter of the survey promoted self-reflection. The current study hopefully will be viewed as a tool to enhance the kingdom of God online and traditionally.

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Appendix A

Spiritual Assessment Inventory

Todd W. Hall, Ph.D.
Keith J. Edwards, Ph.D.

Instructions:

1. Please respond to each statement below by writing the number that best represents your experience in the empty box to the right of the statement.
2. It is best to answer according to what really reflects your experience rather than what you think your experience should be.
3. Give the answer that comes to mind first. Don't spend too much time thinking about an item.
4. Give the best possible response to each statement even if it does not provide all the information you would like.
5. Try your best to respond to all statements. Your answers will be completely confidential.
6. Some of the statements consist of two parts as shown here:

2.1	There are times when I feel disappointed with God.	
2.2	When this happens, I still want our relationship to continue.	

Your response to the second statement (2.2) tells how true this second statement (2.2) is for you when you have the experience (e.g. feeling disappointed with God) described in the first statement (2.1).

1	2	3	4	5
Not At	Slightly	Moderately	Substantially	Very
All True	True	True	True	True

1	I have a sense of how God is working in my life.	13	God recognizes that I am more spiritual than most people.
2.1	There are times when I feel disappointed with God.	14	I always seek God's guidance for every decision I make.
2.2	When this happens, I still want our relationship to continue.	15	I am aware of God's presence in my interactions with other people.
3	God's presence feels very real to me.	16	There are times when I feel that God is punishing me.
4	I am afraid that God will give up on me.	17	I am aware of God responding to me in a variety of ways.
5	I seem to have a unique ability to influence God through my prayers.	18.1	There are times when I feel angry at God.
6	Listening to God is an essential part of my life.	18.2	When this happens, I still have the sense that God will always be with me.
7	I am always in a worshipful mood when I go to church.	19	I am aware of God attending to me in times of need.
8.1	There are times when I feel frustrated with God.	20	God understands that my needs are more important than most people's.
8.2	When I feel this way, I still desire to put effort into our relationship.	21	I am aware of God telling me to do something.
9	I am aware of God prompting me to do things.	22	I worry that I will be left out of God's plans.
10	My emotional connection with God is unstable.	23	My experiences of God's presence impact me greatly.
11	My experiences of God's responses to me impact me greatly.	24	I am always as kind at home as I am at church.
12.1	There are times when I feel irritated at God.	25	I have a sense of the direction in which God is guiding me.
12.2	When I feel this way, I am able to come to some sense of resolution in our relationship.	26	My relationship with God is an extraordinary one that most people would not understand.

1	2	3	4	5
Not At All True	Slightly True	Moderately True	Substantially True	Very True
27.1	There are times when I feel betrayed by God.	37	I find my prayers to God are more effective than other people's.	
27.2	When I feel this way, I put effort into restoring our relationship.	38	I am always in the mood to pray.	
28	I am aware of God communicating to me in a variety of ways.	39	I feel I have to please God or he might reject me.	
29	Manipulating God seems to be the best way to get what I want.	40	I have a strong impression of God's presence.	
30	I am aware of God's presence in times of need.	41	There are times when I feel that God is angry at me.	
31	From day to day, I sense God being with me.	42	I am aware of God being very near to me.	
32	I pray for all my friends and relatives every day.	43	When I sin, I am afraid of what God will do to me.	
33.1	There are times when I feel frustrated by God for not responding to my prayers.	44	When I consult God about decisions in my life, I am aware of God's direction and help.	
33.2	When I feel this way, I am able to talk it through with God.	45	I seem to be more gifted than most people in discerning God's will.	
34	I have a sense of God communicating guidance to me.	46	When I feel God is not protecting me, I tend to feel worthless.	
35	When I sin, I tend to withdraw from God.	47.1	There are times when I feel like God has let me down.	
36	I experience an awareness of God speaking to me personally.	47.2	When this happens, my trust in God is not completely broken.	

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Appendix B

Permission to Use Instrument

from: **Todd W. Hall** <todd@drtodddhall.com>

to: pamela.grayson@gmail.com

date: Sat, Oct 25, 2014 at 6:25 PM

subject SAI

Hi Pamela,

Sure thing; you may have permission to use the SAI in your research for free. The SAI is a free research instrument available for use.

The dropbox link below has 2 articles on the SAI and a word version of the assessment.

Best of luck in your project.

Take care,

Todd

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/qyllqneswcmxgb8/LCpQXPseVZ>

Todd W. Hall, Ph.D.

drtodddhall.com

Twitter: @drtoddwhall

Facebook Page: [facebook.com/drtoddwhall](https://www.facebook.com/drtoddwhall)

Appendix C

Permission to Use Instrument without Impression Management Variable

Pamela Grayson <pamela.grayson@gmail.com>

Feb
9

to Todd

Dr. Hall,

May I have your permission to use the SAI without using the Impression Management Scale as this scale is experimental and not directly related to the spiritual awareness results?

Please and thank you!

Todd W. Hall

Feb 9 (

to me

Hi Pamela,

Sure thing, that is fine.

Take care,
Todd

Sent from my iPhone

Appendix D

SPIRITUAL ASSESSMENT INVENTORY
(With Scale Key)

Copyright Todd W. Hall, Ph.D. & Keith J. Edwards, Ph.D.

Instructions

1. Please respond to each statement below by writing the number that best represents your experience in the box to the right of the statement.
2. It is best to answer according to what really reflects your experience rather than what you think your experience should be.
3. Give the answer that comes to mind first. Don't spend too much time thinking about an item.
4. Give the best possible response to each statement even if it does not provide all the information you would like.
5. Try your best to respond to all statements. Your answers will be completely confidential.
6. Some of the statements consist of two parts as shown here:
 - 2.1 There are times when I feel disappointed with God.
 - 2.2 When this happens, I still want our relationship to continue.

Your response to 2.2 tells how true statement 2.2 is for you when you have the experience of feeling disappointed with God described in statement 2.1.

		1	2	3	4	5
		Not At All True	Slightly True	Moderately True	Substantially True	Very True
1	I have a sense of how God is working in my life	A		13	God recognizes that I am more spiritual than most people	G
2.1	There are times when I feel disappointed with God	D				
2.2	When this happens, I still want our relationship to continue	RA		15	I am aware of God's presence in my interactions with other people	A
3	God's presence feels very real to me	A		16	There are times when I feel that God is punishing me	I

4	I am afraid that God will give up on me	I	17	I am aware of God responding to me in a variety of ways	A
5	I seem to have a unique ability to influence God through my prayers	G	18.1	There are times when I feel angry at God	D
6	Listening to God is an essential part of my life	A	18.2	When this happens, I still have the sense that God will always be with me	RA
			19	I am aware of God attending to me in times of need	A
8.1	There are times when I feel frustrated with God	D	20	God understands that my needs are more important than most people's	G
8.2	When I feel this way, I still desire to put effort into our relationship	RA	21	I am aware of God telling me to do something	A
9	I am aware of God prompting me to do things	A	22	I worry that I will be left out of God's plans	I
10	My emotional connection with God is unstable	I	23	My experiences of God's presence impacts me greatly	A
11	My experiences of God's responses to me impact me greatly	A			
12.1	There are times when I feel irritated at God	D	25	I have a sense of the direction in which God is guiding me	A
12.2	When I feel this way, I am able to come to some sense of resolution in our relationship	RA	26	My relationship with God is an extraordinary one that most people would not understand.	G

	1 Not At All True	2 Slightly True	3 Moderately True	4 Substantially True	5 Very True	
27.1	There are times when I feel betrayed by God		D	37	I find my prayers to God are more effective than other people's	G
27.2	When I feel this way, I put effort into restoring our relationship		RA			
28	I am aware of God communicating to me in a variety of ways		A	39	I feel I have to please God or he might reject me	I
29	Manipulating God seems to be the best way to get what I want		G	40	I have a strong impression of God's presence	A
30	I am aware of God's presence in times of need		A	41	There are times when I feel that God is angry at me	I
31	From day to day, I sense God being with me		A	42	I am aware of God being very near to me	A
				43	When I sin, I am afraid of what God will do to me	I
33.1	There are times when I feel frustrated by God for not responding to my prayers		D	44	When I consult God about decisions in my life, I am aware of His direction and help	A
33.2	When I feel this way, I am able to talk it through with God		RA	45	I seem to be more gifted than most people in discerning God's will	G
34	I have a sense of God communicating guidance to me		A	46	When I feel God is not protecting me, I tend to feel worthless	I
35	When I sin, I tend to withdraw from God		I	47.1	There are times when I feel like God has let me down	D
36	I experience an awareness of God speaking to me personally		A	47.2	When this happens, my trust in God is not completely broken	RA

Scales:

A	=	Awareness	
RA	=	Realistic Acceptance	(Formerly = Healthy Ambivalence)
D	=	Disappointment	(Formerly = Defensiveness)
G	=	Grandiosity	(Formerly = Narcissism)
I	=	Instability	(Formerly = Splitting)
IM	=	Impression Management	(New Scale, experimental)

Scoring Instructions: The score for each scale is the average of answered items. If the respondent omits more than half the items for a given scale, the scale cannot be scored.

Scoring of the RA scale items (designated by xx.2 item numbers) depends on the respondent's answer to the corresponding disappointment item (designated by xx.1 item numbers). If the respondent answers "not at all true" (1) on the xx.1 item, then the corresponding xx.2 item is NOT included in the RA scale average score. For example, if he/she rates item 2.1 as a "1", then item 2.2 is not included in calculating the RA scale score average.

Appendix E

Participant Church Introduction

Date:

Name of Church

Address

City, State zip

Re: Humble Request to Meet Regarding Beneficial Research

My name is Pamela Grayson. I am a doctoral student at Dallas Baptist University. I am requesting your church's support in the study I am conducting entitled "A Comparative Study of the Spiritual Development of Attendees of Online Church Versus Traditional Church."

As your organization has an online congregation or a local congregation, this study may be of interest to discern the effectiveness of the online church experience towards spiritual development compared to the traditional local church experience. The study will compare the spiritual development between online and local church members. Spiritual development is defined as the quality of relationship with God and the spiritual awareness of God,

There are a three simple ways to assist in completing this groundbreaking research. The first option is that you may email the survey to your attendees. The second easy option is to provide email addresses for your attendees and allow me to email a link to the survey. Finally, you can just place a link to the survey on your website and share the survey availability in your announcements. The link to the survey that will be provided is through SurveyMonkey.

The survey will contain an introduction and a description of online and local church attendance so that the attendee can identify the category to which they belong. This should only take participants about 15-20 minutes at the most to complete. No identifying information will be collected and the participant's confidentiality will be maintained. All data will be used for the purposes of this study only. An option to consent or decline to participate will be included at the beginning of the survey within the link provided. Congregants may choose to take part in the study and complete it with the option to discontinue at any time. Congregants must be at least 18 years of age. The survey will be available online for 2 weeks.

I am requesting that the first notification to go out to participants at the beginning of the first week and your organization or I will email or provide some type of a reminder at the beginning of the second week.

I hope that you will agree to participate in establishing this vital information for the progression of the kingdom of God. If so, please provide confirmation via email at pamela.grayson@gmail.com or via telephone at 469-396-4611. Thank you so much for your support with my significant educational endeavor.

Warm Regards,

Pamela Grayson, Doctoral Student
Dallas Baptist University
3333 Mountain Creek Parkway
Dallas, TX 75211

Committee Chair, Dr. Margaret Lawson, Ph. D.
Dallas Baptist University
3333 Mountain Creek Parkway
Dallas, TX 75211

Dr. Suzanne Kavli
Professor of Research and Leadership
Dallas Baptist University
3000 Mountain Creek Parkway
Dallas, TX 75211

Appendix F

Participant Church Email Reminder

Dear Participant,

This is a friendly reminder to participate in the study entitled “A Comparative Study of the Spiritual Development of Attendees of Online Church Versus Traditional Church”.

My name is Pamela Grayson and I am a doctoral student at Dallas Baptist University. The study will compare the spiritual development between online and local church members. No identifying information will be collected and your confidentiality will be maintained. All data will be used for the purposes of this study only. An online consent to participate is included prior to the beginning of the survey in the link provided. You may choose to take part in the study and you may complete it or discontinue at any time. You must be at least 18 years of age.

Please take a few moments of your time to answer the survey soon. Your response may help develop key information for online spiritual development. Your contribution is very important.

Your time and consideration are greatly appreciated.

Regards,

Pamela Grayson, Doctoral Student
Dallas Baptist University
3333 Mountain Creek Parkway
Dallas, TX 75211

Committee Chair, Dr. Margaret Lawson, Ph. D.
Dallas Baptist University
3333 Mountain Creek Parkway
Dallas, TX 75211

Appendix G

Preliminary Consent and Information for Participants

The purpose of this research project is to assess the spiritual development of online and local church attendees. This is a research project being conducted by Pamela Grayson at Dallas Baptist University. You are invited to participate in this research project because you are an attendee of one of the churches whose leadership has committed to allow attendees to participate.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in this research survey, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you withdraw from participating at any time, you will not be penalized.

The procedure involves completing an online survey that will take approximately 15-20 minutes. Your responses will be confidential and no identifying information such as your name, email address or IP address will be collected. All data will be stored in a password protected electronic format. To help protect your confidentiality, the surveys will not contain information that will personally identify you.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact Pamela Grayson via email at pamela.grayson@gmail.com. This research has been reviewed according to Dallas Baptist University IRB procedures for research involving human participants.

ELECTRONIC CONSENT: Please select your choice below.

Clicking on the "agree" button below indicates that:

- you have read the above information
- you voluntarily agree to participate
- you are at least 18 years of age

If you do not wish to participate in the research study, please decline participation by clicking on the "disagree" button.

- agree
- disagree

Do you regularly attend church online or at a local church?

- Regularly is defined as 3-4 times per month.
- If you attend church online 3-4 times per month, then you would be considered an online church attendee.
- If you attend a local church 3-4 times per month, then you are a local church attendee.

Please select your mode of church attendance below.

- Online
- Local

Appendix H
Demographic Questions

Age:

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 18-29 | <input type="checkbox"/> 50-59 | <input type="checkbox"/> 80+ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 30-39 | <input type="checkbox"/> 60-69 | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 40-49 | <input type="checkbox"/> 70-79 | |

Gender:

- Male
- Female

Do you participate in any of the following additional church activities regularly?

- Volunteerism Small Groups Prayer Groups via conference call or in person,
- Ministry Other Activities _____

Appendix I

Initial Participant Church Email Request

Dear Participant,

This is a friendly request for your participation in the study entitled “A Comparative Study of the Spiritual Development of Attendees of Online Church Versus Traditional Church”.

My name is Pamela Grayson and I am a doctoral student at Dallas Baptist University. The study will compare the spiritual development between online and local church members. No identifying information will be collected and your confidentiality will be maintained. All data will be used for the purposes of this study only. An online consent to participate is included prior to the beginning of the survey in the link provided. You may choose to take part in the study and you may complete it or discontinue at any time. You must be at least 18 years of age.

Please take a few moments of your time to answer the survey soon. Your response may help develop key information for online spiritual development. Your contribution is very important.

Your time and consideration are greatly appreciated.

Regards,

Pamela Grayson, Doctoral Student
Dallas Baptist University
3333 Mountain Creek Parkway
Dallas, TX 75211

Committee Chair, Dr. Margaret Lawson, Ph. D.
Dallas Baptist University
333 Mountain Creek Parkway
Dallas, TX 75211