



The Role of Social Media in Fostering Mission Work in Evangelical Churches in West Africa

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ABSTRACT

Social media has emerged as a transformative tool in evangelical mission work, particularly in West Africa, where digital connectivity is rapidly expanding. This paper explores the role of social media in fostering mission activities within evangelical churches across the region, highlighting its multifaceted contributions to evangelism, church growth, discipleship, and global networking. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube have redefined traditional mission practices, enabling churches to reach diverse and remote audiences, engage youth, and promote social justice initiatives. Through live-streamed sermons, virtual Bible studies, and interactive online campaigns, churches effectively transcend geographical and cultural barriers, enhancing their evangelistic reach and community engagement. The integration of social media into mission work also presents challenges, including the digital divide, misinformation, shallow spiritual engagement, and ethical dilemmas such as privacy concerns and financial accountability. This paper critically examines these challenges and offers strategies for mitigating their impact, emphasizing the need for ethical practices, transparency, and a balanced approach to digital evangelism. Furthermore, the paper underscores the role of youth as pivotal actors in leveraging social media for innovative and impactful mission initiatives. The analysis draws on secondary sources, contextualizing findings within the broader sociocultural and technological landscape of West Africa. The study concludes by advocating for a strategic and responsible use of social media in mission work, ensuring that it complements rather than replaces traditional discipleship and community-building efforts. By harnessing the potential of social media while addressing its inherent challenges, evangelical churches in West Africa can strengthen their mission efforts, contribute to societal development, and foster a digitally inclusive approach to spreading the Gospel.

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Introduction

Social media has become an indispensable tool in the modern world, influencing various sectors, including business, education, and religion. In West Africa, evangelical churches have increasingly turned to social media platforms to facilitate their mission work. The rise of internet access and smartphone usage across the region has presented new opportunities for evangelism, communication, and community building. This article examines the role of social media in fostering mission work in evangelical churches in West Africa, exploring its potential, challenges, and implications for the future of religious outreach.

The Growth of Evangelical Christianity in West Africa

Evangelical Christianity has experienced significant growth in West Africa over the past few decades, driven by both indigenous efforts and external missionary support (Pew Research Center, 2015). Countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone have seen a surge in the number of evangelical churches, often characterized by their emphasis on personal conversion, biblical authority, and evangelistic outreach (Anderson, 2014). Traditionally, evangelical mission work in the region involved face-to-face evangelism, church planting, and discipleship programs. However, as the digital age has progressed, churches have increasingly adopted new technologies to extend their reach (Kalu, 2008).

Social media has grown rapidly across West Africa, with platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube becoming increasingly popular (Internet World Stats, 2022). According to Statista (2023), over 40% of the population in West Africa now has internet access, with much of this connectivity happening through mobile phones. Social media offers an accessible and cost-effective means for communication, making it an ideal platform for mission work. As the region continues to expand its digital infrastructure, evangelical churches are leveraging social media to reach new audiences, both within and outside of their local communities (Ekoh & George, 2019).

Social Media as a Tool for Evangelism

One of the most significant roles of social media in evangelical churches is its use as a tool for evangelism. Social media platforms provide churches with the ability to broadcast sermons, share religious content, and engage with followers in real-time (Chiluwa & Adegoke, 2013). Live-streaming services and virtual worship events allow churches to reach individuals who may not be able to attend physical services due to geographic or social barriers. For

example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many evangelical churches in West Africa shifted their activities online, conducting virtual services and prayer meetings (Ogunnaike et al., 2021). Social media also enables the dissemination of the Gospel beyond traditional boundaries. Churches can now reach people in distant or unreached areas who have access to the internet, providing opportunities for evangelism that were previously unavailable (Owusu-Ansah & Ohene-Marfo, 2020). Through platforms like Facebook and Instagram, churches can share testimonies, Bible verses, and evangelistic messages that can be easily reshared and spread across multiple networks, enhancing the impact of their mission work.

Enhancing Church Growth and Discipleship

In addition to evangelism, social media plays a crucial role in enhancing church growth and discipleship. Churches in West Africa use social media to build and maintain relationships with both new and existing members. WhatsApp groups, for example, have become popular tools for church leaders to communicate with members, share announcements, and provide spiritual guidance (Ilo, 2019). These groups foster a sense of community and accountability, helping believers stay connected to their church family even when they are unable to attend physical services.

Moreover, social media provides a platform for discipleship programs and Bible study sessions. Churches can share devotional materials, host online Bible studies, and encourage members to engage with scripture through digital content (Mensah, 2021). These activities enhance the spiritual growth of members by making religious resources more accessible and providing a space for interactive learning.

Building a Global Mission Network

One of the most remarkable impacts of social media on evangelical mission work in West Africa is its ability to build global networks. Social media connects local churches with missionaries, donors, and partner organizations from around the world, facilitating collaboration on mission projects (Smith, 2016). Churches can use platforms like Twitter and LinkedIn to share updates on mission activities, attract funding, and recruit volunteers from international communities. Furthermore, social media allows West African churches to learn from and collaborate with churches in other regions. Through online conferences, webinars, and virtual mission forums, church leaders can exchange ideas and best practices for effective mission work (Effah et al., 2019). This global connectivity strengthens the impact of local mission efforts by pooling resources, knowledge, and expertise from a diverse range of sources.

Challenges in the Use of Social Media for Mission Work

Despite its many advantages, the use of social media in fostering mission work in evangelical churches in West Africa is not without challenges. One of the primary obstacles is the digital divide that still exists in many parts of the region (Chukwuere & Chukwuere, 2017). While urban areas often have relatively good access to the internet, rural communities may have limited connectivity or lack the necessary devices to engage with social media platforms. This limits the reach of online evangelism efforts, particularly in areas that are most in need of mission work.

Another challenge is the potential for misinformation and misrepresentation. Social media is an open platform where anyone can post content, and this includes the dissemination of false or misleading religious information. Some individuals may use social media to promote distorted interpretations of the Bible or to exploit vulnerable populations for financial gain (Omotayo&Folorunso, 2020). Churches must therefore be vigilant in ensuring that the content they share is accurate and aligned with biblical teachings. Additionally, the fast-paced and often distracting nature of social media can pose a challenge to deep spiritual engagement. While social media can be an effective tool for evangelism, it can also encourage shallow interactions and a consumerist approach to religion, where individuals passively consume religious content without true spiritual growth (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015). Churches must find ways to balance the use of social media with the need for meaningful, face-to-face discipleship and community building.

Social Media and Youth Engagement in Mission Work

One of the most notable demographic groups that has been impacted by the rise of social media in mission work is the youth. In West Africa, young people are the most active users of social media, and they represent a critical demographic for evangelical churches (Adeboye et al., 2021). Churches have increasingly recognized the importance of engaging with young people on platforms where they are already active. Social media provides a space where churches can communicate with youth in a way that is relevant to their cultural context and interests.

Churches have used social media to launch youth-targeted evangelistic campaigns, encourage participation in church events, and create content that resonates with younger audiences (Owusu-Ansah&Ohene-Marfo, 2020). By doing so, they are fostering a new generation of believers who are digitally savvy and passionate about their faith. Social media also provides an opportunity for young people to take

leadership roles in mission work, as they are often the ones most familiar with the technology and how to effectively use it for evangelistic purposes (Mensah, 2021).

Promoting Social Justice and Humanitarian Efforts

Social media has also played a role in promoting social justice and humanitarian efforts among evangelical churches in West Africa. Many churches in the region are involved in addressing social issues such as poverty, education, and healthcare, and social media has become a key tool in raising awareness and mobilizing support for these causes (Eze, 2018). Churches use platforms like Facebook and Twitter to highlight the needs of vulnerable communities, organize charitable initiatives, and solicit donations.

For example, during the Ebola crisis in West Africa, churches used social media to share health information, provide updates on relief efforts, and encourage prayers for affected communities (Ekoh& George, 2019). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media was used to promote public health guidelines and distribute resources to those in need (Ogunnaiké et al., 2021). These efforts demonstrate the potential of social media to not only support spiritual outreach but also address practical needs in society.

Ethical Considerations in the Use of Social Media for Mission Work

The rise of social media as a tool for mission work in evangelical churches across West Africa presents both exciting opportunities and significant ethical challenges. As churches and religious organizations increasingly turn to platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram to spread their message, they face a range of moral and ethical dilemmas that require careful consideration. In this context, understanding the ethical implications of social media usage is critical for ensuring that these platforms are used in ways that align with the core values of transparency, privacy, and respect for human dignity.

One of the most significant ethical concerns surrounding social media in mission work is the potential for exploitation. Some churches may use these platforms to solicit donations from vulnerable individuals, particularly within the framework of the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel, which promotes the idea that financial success and physical well-being are signs of God's favor, has gained popularity in parts of West Africa (Gifford, 2015). However, critics argue that this form of preaching can exploit individuals who are already struggling with poverty and other socioeconomic challenges. In this context, social media can become a powerful tool for amplifying messages that encourage people to donate

large sums of money, often with the promise of future rewards. This raises ethical concerns about the responsible use of social media for fundraising and the need for churches to ensure transparency and accountability in their financial practices.

In addition to the issue of exploitation, social media use in mission work also raises important questions about privacy and consent. Churches must be mindful of how they handle personal information shared online, particularly when it comes to sensitive matters such as testimonies, photographs, or videos that feature individuals. In an era where data breaches and privacy violations are becoming increasingly common, it is essential for churches to develop clear policies on data protection and ensure that individuals give their consent before their personal information is shared publicly. As Chukwuere and Chukwuere (2017) note, privacy is a fundamental right, and churches must take steps to protect the personal information of their congregants and followers.

Another ethical issue that arises in the context of social media and mission work is the potential for the spread of misinformation and fake news. Social media platforms are notorious for their role in disseminating false information, and this can have serious consequences for religious communities. In some cases, religious misinformation can lead to confusion, fear, and even violence. For example, Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) discuss how fake news and religious misinformation have circulated widely on social media platforms in Nigeria, with potentially harmful effects. Churches have a responsibility to ensure that the information they share on social media is accurate, truthful, and in line with ethical standards. This requires a commitment to fact-checking and a cautious approach to sharing content that could be misleading or inflammatory.

The Ethical Use of Social Media for Fundraising

One of the most ethically complex aspects of using social media for mission work is fundraising. Many churches rely on donations to fund their activities, including evangelism, community outreach, and humanitarian efforts. Social media platforms offer an easy and efficient way for churches to reach large audiences and solicit donations. However, this raises important ethical questions about how fundraising should be conducted in an online environment.

In particular, the issue of transparency is critical when it comes to fundraising. Churches must be clear about how the donations they receive will be used and ensure that the funds are allocated in a way that aligns with the donors' intentions. Unfortunately, there have been instances where churches have used social media to solicit donations for vague or questionable purposes. In some cases, funds that were raised for charitable causes have been diverted to other activities, raising concerns about accountability.

To address these issues, churches should establish clear guidelines for how donations will be used and make this information readily available to potential donors. They should also provide regular updates on how the funds are being spent and be open to questions from the public. This level of transparency is essential for building trust and ensuring that social media fundraising is conducted ethically.

The rise of the prosperity gospel presents an additional challenge in this context. The prosperity gospel, which promises material wealth and physical health in exchange for faith and donations, has gained a significant following in parts of West Africa. However, critics argue that this message can be exploitative, particularly when it targets vulnerable individuals who are already struggling financially. In some cases, churches that promote the prosperity gospel have used social media to solicit large donations from individuals with the promise that they will receive financial blessings in return. This raises serious ethical concerns about the responsible use of social media for fundraising and the potential for exploitation.

Churches that engage in fundraising on social media should be mindful of the messages they are sending and avoid making promises that cannot be fulfilled. They should also ensure that they are not taking advantage of vulnerable individuals and should focus on promoting transparency and accountability in their financial practices.

Privacy and Consent in Social Media Mission Work

The issue of privacy and consent is another critical ethical consideration in the use of social media for mission work. As churches expand their online presence, they must be mindful of how they handle the personal information of their congregants and followers. This is particularly important when it comes to sharing photos, videos, or testimonies that feature individuals.

In many cases, churches use social media to share stories of personal transformation, often featuring individuals who have overcome significant challenges through their faith. While these stories can be powerful tools for evangelism and outreach, they also raise important questions about privacy and consent. Churches must ensure that they have the explicit consent of individuals before sharing their stories or personal information online. This is particularly important in cases where the individual may be vulnerable or where the information being shared is sensitive in nature.

In addition to obtaining consent, churches should also develop clear policies on data protection and ensure that they are in compliance with relevant privacy laws. This may involve implementing security measures to protect personal information from unauthorized access and ensuring that individuals have the right to request the removal of their data from social media platforms.

The ethical handling of personal information is particularly important in an era where data breaches and privacy violations are becoming increasingly common. As Chukwuere and Chukwuere (2017) note, privacy is a fundamental right, and churches have a responsibility to protect the personal information of their congregants and followers. This requires a commitment to transparency, accountability, and the ethical use of social media.

The Role of Misinformation and Fake News

Social media platforms have become notorious for their role in the spread of misinformation and fake news, and this can have serious consequences for mission work. In some cases, religious misinformation can lead to confusion, fear, and even violence. For example, Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) discuss how fake news and religious misinformation have circulated widely on social media platforms in Nigeria, with potentially harmful effects.

Churches that engage in mission work on social media have a responsibility to ensure that the information they share is accurate and truthful. This requires a commitment to fact-checking and a cautious approach to sharing content that could be misleading or inflammatory. In some cases, misinformation may be shared unintentionally, but churches must take steps to minimize the risk of spreading false information.

One way to address this issue is by providing clear guidelines for how content should be shared on social media. Churches can encourage their members and followers to verify the accuracy of information before sharing it and to avoid spreading content that has not been fact-checked. Additionally, churches can take an active role in debunking misinformation and providing accurate information to their communities.

The Digital Divide and Access to Technology

Another important ethical consideration in the use of social media for mission work is the digital divide. While social media platforms offer a powerful tool for outreach and evangelism, not everyone has access to the internet or the necessary technology to engage with these platforms. In many parts of West Africa, access to the internet is still limited, particularly in rural areas (Internet World Stats, 2022). This raises important questions about the inclusivity of social media-based mission work and the potential for certain communities to be left behind. Churches that rely heavily on social media for mission work must be mindful of the digital divide and take steps to ensure that their outreach efforts are accessible to all. This may involve finding alternative ways to reach individuals who do not have access to the internet, such as through radio broadcasts, printed materials, or in-person visits. Additionally, churches can work to promote digital

literacy and provide resources to help individuals gain access to the internet and social media platforms.

Shallow Engagement and the Need for Authentic Connection

One of the potential downsides of using social media for mission work is the risk of shallow engagement. While social media platforms offer a convenient way to reach large audiences, they may not always facilitate deep, meaningful connections. In some cases, individuals may engage with religious content on social media in a superficial way, without fully internalizing the message or building lasting relationships with the church community.

Churches that engage in mission work on social media must be mindful of the potential for shallow engagement and take steps to promote more authentic connections with their followers. This may involve encouraging in-person interactions, organizing small group discussions, or providing opportunities for individuals to engage with the church community on a deeper level. As Effah et al. (2019) note, churches must strike a balance between online and offline ministry, ensuring that social media enhances rather than replaces face-to-face interactions.

The Future of Social Media in Mission Work

Looking ahead, the role of social media in mission work is likely to continue evolving as technology advances and internet access expands across West Africa. As churches adapt to new trends and technologies, they will have even greater opportunities to use social media for evangelism, discipleship, and community outreach. However, they must also remain vigilant in addressing the ethical challenges that come with increased digital engagement.

One of the key challenges for churches moving forward will be finding ways to balance online and offline ministry. While social media offers a powerful tool for outreach, it is important that it does not replace the importance of face-to-face interactions. Churches must find ways to integrate social media into their broader mission work, using it as a tool to enhance rather than replace traditional forms of ministry.

Additionally, as social media platforms continue to evolve, churches will need to stay up-to-date with new trends and technologies to remain relevant in their outreach efforts. This may involve exploring newer platforms like TikTok or using artificial intelligence to engage with followers in more personalized ways. However, as churches embrace these new technologies, they must remain mindful of the ethical considerations that come with them, particularly when it comes to privacy, consent, and transparency.

Conclusion

Social media has become a powerful tool for fostering mission work in evangelical churches in West Africa. It provides opportunities for evangelism, discipleship, community building, and global networking, while also promoting social justice and humanitarian efforts. However, the use of social media in mission work also presents challenges, including the digital divide, ethical concerns, and the potential for shallow engagement. As churches continue to navigate the digital landscape, they must remain mindful of these challenges and work to ensure that social media enhances their mission work in meaningful and impactful ways. Ethical considerations around transparency, privacy, consent, and the spread of misinformation must be addressed to ensure that social media is used responsibly in the service of mission work.

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