

Fostering koinonia: A critical evaluation of the value of digital social networks in urban congregations

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To God, whose work echoes in the enigma of entangled particles and entangled lives; in the mystery of dark matter and the metre of poetry. "For now we see in a mirror, dimly..."

ABSTRACT

The opening decade of the 21st century has seen a marked expansion in the influence of digital technology on virtually all fields of human endeavour. Nowhere else is the vitality of this new digital world more apparent than in its influence on human communication and social interaction – a reality lucidly reflected in the rise of so-called digital social networks over the last decade. Known to many in the form of popular Internet based services like the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter, these social networks typically allow individuals to construct a public profile, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and then interact with those connections.

Since the internet has always been a natural place for those of faith to take their questions and practices, it comes as no surprise that social media is increasingly being adopted as a ministry tool in churches all over the world. The primary objective of these social media initiatives is simple: advancing the case of the local church by promoting a sense of community between believers – in other words, to foster *koinonia*. The term *koinonia*, denoting the ideas of communion, participation, fellowship and sharing, is a rich concept used to describe the deep sense of community encountered in the New Testament church. Yet, while fostering *koinonia* is a primary goal of social media use in congregational settings, it is still unclear whether the theoretical expectations we have of this brand new communicational tool will be met in practice over the long term. This leaves a central question: Can the use of digital social networks in a church context help foster true *koinonia* – especially in urban congregations, where the impact of lifestyle pressures on relationships is often more pronounced?

Answering this question requires, firstly, a biblically correct picture of the characteristics of true *koinonia*, which must be understood against the backdrop of the Trinitarian nature of God, while also drawing from related references in the Old Testament, as well as Lukan, Johannine, Pauline, and other sources. These sources reveal *koinonia* as a concept with a deep relational focus, revolving around elements of unity, sharing, caring, and witnessing. Secondly, it is necessary to properly define the idea of a social network, and to demonstrate how these networks have been used in practice in the urban congregational environment.

With this understanding of *koinonia* and a robust definition of social media as a foundation, a basic qualitative study is undertaken on three campuses of Hillsong Church, in Cape Town, New York, and Sydney, respectively. Semi-structured interviews reveal a high degree of interconnection between congregants across the campuses, and indicate that church members communicate with each other frequently through social media channels. Despite an awareness of the limitations inherent in computer-based interaction, congregants indicate that social media use has a positive impact on their relationships, contributing to a greater sense of unity. Moreover, church members reveal that they use social media as a platform for encouragement and witness, and indicate that online participation helps them overcome practical relational challenges associated with city life. Nevertheless, few participants consider the exclusion of those without Internet access, or the impact of constant connectivity on their lives.

Based on this information, it is possible to develop a new praxis that is more closely aligned to the biblical ideal of *koinonia*. The effective management of computer-mediated relationships is paramount, while practical aspects related to dealing with addictive online behaviour also need to be considered. Connections between individuals and the larger communities around them are also of import, including the way that church members express their care for one another by sharing encouraging content online. The practice of using social media platforms to witness to others also comes to the fore, and strategies for dealing with the so-called digital divide are considered. In summary, digital social networks appear to provide the church with a unique opportunity to foster true *koinonia*, despite the limitations of computer-mediated communication.

OPSOMMING

Die eerste dekade van die 21ste eeu is gekenmerk deur 'n merkbare uitbreiding in die invloed van digitale tegnologie op bykans elke veld van menslike aktiwiteit. Die lewenskragtigheid van dié nuwe digitale werklikheid is nêrens duideliker nie as in die invloed wat dit uitoefen op menslike kommunikasie en sosiale interaksie – en dié realiteit is duidelik te sien in die ontluiking van sogenaamde digitale sosiale netwerke oor die laaste dekade. Dié sosiale netwerke, wat aan baie bekend is in die vorm van gewilde internet-gebaseerde dienste soos die sosiale-media-platforms Facebook en Twitter, laat individue tipies toe om 'n publieke profiel te skep, 'n lys van ander gebruikers saam te stel waarmee hulle 'n verbintenis het, en om dan met daardie groep individue te kommunikeer.

Aangesien die internet nog altyd 'n natuurlike plek was waar gelowiges hul vrae en praktyke bedink het, kom dit as geen verrassing nie dat sosiale netwerke toenemend as 'n bedieningshulpmiddel ingespan word in kerke oor die wêreld heen. Die hoofdoelwit van dié sosiale-media-inisiatiewe is eenvoudig: om die saak van die plaaslike kerk te rugsteun deur 'n sin van gemeenskap onder gelowiges te bevorder – met ander woorde, om *koinonia* te bewerkstellig. Die term *koinonia*, wat dui op begrippe soos samesyn, deelname, samehorigheid, en mededeelsaamheid, is 'n ryk konsep wat gebruik word om die diep gewaarwording van gemeenskap te beskryf wat die Nuwe Testamentiese kerk kenmerk. Hoewel die bevordering van 'n sin van *koinonia* 'n primêre doelwit van sosiale-media-gebruik in die gemeentelike verband is, is dit egter onduidelik of dié nuwe kommunikasiehulpmiddel oor die lang termyn, en in die praktyk, sal voldoen aan die teoretiese verwagtinge wat daaraan gestel word. Dit lei tot 'n sentrale vraag: Kan die gebruik van sosiale netwerke help om werklike *koinonia* te bevorder – en dít veral in stedelike gemeentes, waar die impak van leefstyl-druk op verhoudinge gewoonlik meer merkbaar is?

'n Antwoord op dié vraag vereis eerstens 'n bybels-korrekte begrip van die eienskappe van ware *koinonia*, wat verstaan moet word teen die agtergrond van die drie-enigheid van God, en ook moet steun op verwante verwysings in die Ou Testament, sowel as in die skrywe van Lukas, Johannes, Paulus, en ander bronne. Dié bronne dui op *koinonia* as 'n begrip met 'n ryk verhoudings-fokus, wat wentel om elemente soos eenheid, mededeelsaamheid, sorg, en getuienis. Tweedens is dit nodig om ook 'n behoorlike definisie van 'n sosiale netwerk te

formuleer, en word daar besin oor hoe hierdie netwerke in die praktyk gebruik word in stedelike gemeentes.

Met dié begrip van *koinonia* en 'n behoorlike definisie van sosiale media as fondasie, is 'n basiese kwalitatiewe studie onderneem op drie kampusse van die Hillsong-kerk, in onderskeidelik Kaapstad, New York, en Sydney. Semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude het 'n hoë mate van interpersoonlike verbintenis tussen gemeentelede van die onderskeie kampusse ontbloom, en dui daarop dat lede gereeld met mekaar kommunikeer deur sosiale-media-kanale. Ten spyte van 'n bewustheid van die beperkinge van rekenaar-gebaseerde kommunikasie, is gemeentelede dit eens dat sosiale media 'n positiewe impak op hul verhoudings het, en bydra tot 'n sin van eenheid. Gemeentelede gebruik ook sosiale netwerke as 'n platform vir aanmoediging en getuieis, en voel dat aanlyn-deelname help om van die praktiese verhoudingsprobleme wat gewoonlik met die stedelike lewe verbind word, die hoof te bied. Ten spyte van dié positiewe aspekte besin min gemeentelede oor die uitsluiting van diegene wat nie internettoegang het nie, en die impak van konstante konnektiwiteit word ook nie noodwendig deurdink nie.

Gebaseer op dié inligting, is dit moontlik om 'n nuwe praktyk-model te ontwikkel wat meer gelykvormig is aan die Bybelse ideal van *koinonia*. Die doeltreffende bestuur van rekenaar-gebaseerde verhoudings is van kardinale belang, terwyl praktiese aspekte wat verband hou met die beheer van internetverslawing ook oorweeg moet word. Verbintnisse tussen individue en die groter gemeenskappe om hulle is ook belangrik, insluitend die manier waarop gemeentelede na mekaar omsien deur byvoorbeeld inspirerende inhoud aanlyn met mekaar te deel. Die gebruik van sosiale netwerke om te getuig is 'n belangrike aspek, asook die formulering van strategieë om die sogenaamde digitale skeidslyn te oorkom. Ter opsomming is dit duidelik dat digitale sosiale netwerke die kerk 'n unieke geleentheid bied om ware *koinonia* te bevorder, ten spyte van die beperkings van rekenaar-gebaseerde kommunikasie.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Title and Keywords

Fostering koinonia: A critical evaluation of the value of digital social networks in urban congregations

Keywords: Koinonia; community; digital social networks; social media; Internet.

Sleuteltermen: Koinonia; gemeenskap; digitale sociale netwerke; sociale media; internet.

1.2 Overview

This chapter will cover introductory matters, including a description of the background, problem statement, aim, and objectives of the study, as well as an introduction of key terminology and major aspects to be investigated. The central theoretical argument underlying the study will then be identified, followed by a description of the research methodology to be employed, and an overview of the basic structure of the study.

1.3 Background and Problem Statement

In order to develop a coherent and robust argument, this chapter commences with an outline of the background to the study, culminating in the formulation of a problem statement.

1.3.1 Background

There can be no doubt that the opening decade of the 21st century has seen a marked expansion in the influence of digital technology and the computer on virtually all fields of human endeavour (Schuurman, 2004:19; Vogt, 2011:17). Whether it is within the confines of the science laboratory or through the global network that constitutes the world wide web, digital technology has come to organize and control an ever increasing number of functions of the modern urbanite's world – a trend that has given rise to a whole new set of societal realities with far-reaching implications of interest not only to the sociologist and the

anthropologist, but also to the practical theologian, who above all needs to be conscious of the dynamics shaping the world within which he fulfils his role.

Nowhere else is the forceful vitality of this new digital world more apparent than in its influence on human communication and social interaction – a reality lucidly reflected in the meteoric rise of so-called digital social networks over the last decade. Known to many in the form of popular internet based services like the social media platforms Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>) and Twitter (<http://twitter.com>), these social networks typically allow individuals to construct a public profile, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and then interact with those connections (Boyd & Ellison, 2008:211).

With more than one billion active users on Facebook alone (Kiss, 2012) and half a billion Twitter messages posted every single day (Terdiman, 2012), the significant popular appeal of these platforms is self-evident. Moreover, these social networks have given rise to a number of auxiliary digital services and platforms that offer additional opportunities to engage in online social interaction. These include popular photo sharing services like Instagram, now serving around 200 million active users (Lunden, 2014), who share images from their daily activities with a user-defined group of friends and acquaintances, and comment on material shared by others. With more than 1 000 comments per second on content posted by users (Desmarais, 2013), it is clear that social interaction forms an integral part of this service. Niche platforms of a similar nature abound in the online environment, all of them serving vibrant user communities.

The myriad opportunities for social interaction offered by these digital networks have given rise to what has been termed the Network Society, a designation popularized by sociologist Manuel Castells in his tome *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996). Although part of a broader concept with economic and political implications, the Network Society in a sociological sense refers to the degree to which the modern world has become a body of interconnected communities, where telecommunications technology and the internet enable individuals to increasingly cluster in collectives to exchange information and interact socially. In this society, argues Van Dijk (2012:172-174, 189), communication and social interaction are not hampered

by traditional limitations like geography, while cultural and socio-economic boundaries become increasingly irrelevant.

Not surprisingly, the comprehensive societal, relational and technological impact of these social media services has become the subject of intense academic interest, with countless studies (e.g. Lenhart *et al.*, 2010; Castells, 2009; Hampton, Lee & Err, 2011; Breones *et al.*, 2011) devoted to understanding the role and implications of social media in a variety of contexts. In recent years, the subject has drawn interest from scholars active in the fields of sociology, psychology, media studies, and information technology – to name but a few disciplines – with new research opportunities identified on a continuing basis. In a sense, argues Campbell (2005:25), the rise of social media draws a similar degree of interest from the academic fraternity as the emergence of the telephone and television did, largely due to its perceived impact on relationships and sociability.

The significance of these developments hasn't gone unnoticed in the world of practical theology either, with an ever increasing number of academics, including Campbell (2005), Drescher (2011), De George (2009), and Vogt (2011) addressing the topic from various theological angles. Often, these scholars highlight the potential practical applications of these networks within a congregational setting, exploring how it could, in theory, either aid or hamper communication within faith communities. If, as Clasen argues (2008:39), communication lies at the heart of practical theology, it is to be expected that theologians in this sphere should see in these social networks a tool of great potential significance.

In support of this notion, it is worth pointing out that the internet has always been a natural place for those of faith to take their questions and practices. Larsen (2004:43), for example, cites a personal and congregational survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates that reveals that one in four adult internet users in the United States have sought religious material on the world-wide web at one stage or another. This figure represents a relatively even spread along the lines of race, sex, age and socio-economic stance. A similar study by Campbell (2009) explains that the internet became a platform for spiritual pursuits as soon as it became recognized as a place of connection and social interaction. Helland (2005:12) concurs, adding

that Christian internet users increasingly see participation in online religious communities as a natural extension of their offline faith practice.

In the light of the above, it comes as no surprise that social media is increasingly being adopted as a ministry tool in churches all over the world. Indeed, Christian congregations of all backgrounds and sizes have taken up residence in this new digital world (Cole-Turner, 2000:108; Vogt, 2011:19), eager to capitalise on the opportunity to build closer and more meaningful relationships with both long-time believers and potential members, establishing welcoming online communities that are expanding daily. Because individuals have come to know the internet as a medium that can facilitate and sustain relationships (Campbell, 2005:25), particularly through the continual connection and conversation that characterises digital social networks (Vogt, 2011:17), the church's efforts in this realm has largely been met with enthusiasm.

Even a cursory look at the involvement of churches in social network activity paints a clear picture of its wide appeal: A study of American Protestant congregations conducted by LifeWay Research, for example, concluded that 47% of congregations already actively use the social networking service Facebook to interact with church members (Roach, 2011). Likewise, Drescher (2011:xv) points to a large number of ministry leaders who are currently actively engaging in social media communities as a means of extending and enriching their service to the church, while Meerman Scott (2010:268) marvels at new job titles like "digital pastor" and "media pastor", assigned to individuals engaged in full-time social media roles within some larger Western churches. Indeed, so prevalent has the use of social media as a ministry tool become, that Drescher (2011:xv) enthuses that it is "changing practices of communication, community, and leadership". To believe, says Barnard (2010:74), "is to connect to Christian networks".

Yet, it should be noted even at this early stage that enthusiastic participation does not necessarily equal positive outcomes, and it would appear that churches participate in social networks with varying degrees of success. Burns (2012), for example, points to the fact that many congregations judge the success of their efforts purely on the basis of the number of connections, or followers, they have on these social networks. Rice (2009:45) alludes to the

same issue when he warns that the quality of these online connections isn't necessarily sufficient to break congregants "out of isolation and contraction" and draw them into a vibrant and living Christian community. Looking at these and other studies, it becomes clear that the parameters for what exactly constitutes a "successful" social media campaign in a congregational setting have yet to be properly defined.

Nevertheless, the opportunities for deeper engagement and relationship building presented by the social networking revolution have proven attractive – especially to urban congregations. In the city environment, where fast-paced lifestyles and demanding work schedules have been known to impede relationship building and involvement outside the traditional Sunday services (Ferguson, 2004:286), digital social networks are perceived as a boon to congregations eager to strengthen relationship ties and engage with members in their daily lives, instead of just on Sundays. On a practical level, social networks have helped kindle and strengthen new friendships between church members – a vital ingredient to healthy congregations, and a process which can be particularly challenging in the urban context (Holland Unruh, Olson & Sider, 2002:115). Indeed, Boyd and Ellison go so far as to say that these digital networks have resulted in connections between individuals that would not otherwise exist (2008:211). Overall, urban churches have seen in the rise of social media a unique opportunity to overcome some of the constraints and challenges resulting from the sense of isolation and disconnection that so often plague the modern urbanite.

Throughout all this, the primary, if unstated objective of these social media initiatives is simple: advancing the case of the local church and increasing the effectiveness of its service to the world by promoting a sense of community and by building deeper and more meaningful relationships between believers – in short, to foster *koinonia*. It is this very idea of *koinonia* that can help us better understand the motivation behind much of what the church hopes to achieve through the use of social media. Whilst a full treatment will follow in the second chapter, a brief look at this pivotal biblical concept is warranted in the context of this introduction:

The term *koinonia* (from the Greek κοινωvία), denoting the ideas of "communion, participation, fellowship and sharing" (Kearsley, 2008:16), is a rich concept used to describe

the deep sense of community encountered in the New Testament church. The opening chapters of the Book of Acts offers us the clearest expression of this sense of togetherness when it speaks of a church “one in heart and mind” (Ac. 4:32), devoted to one another. The term *koinonia* thus depicts an element of face to face community (Kearsley, 2008:13; Kärkkäinen, 2007:1), expressed in terms of close social relations in congregations as well as united action in service to the world within which these congregations exist. It encompasses the idea of a community that lives in a deep relationship not only with God, but also with each other (Clasen, 2008:39), focusing on the concepts of support and fellowship.

It is precisely this deep sense of community that is the goal behind the church’s use of social networks. Surveying literature on the subject, it soon becomes clear that proponents of the use of social media in the congregational context primarily see it as a tool to strengthen relationships and promote fellowship and participation (e.g. Vogt, 2011:12; Greenlee, 2008:9; Drescher, 2011:111) – in effect, to foster *koinonia*. As such, it has become a seemingly indispensable tool to church leaders, especially those in urban settings hoping to enhance a sense of community and accord.

1.3.2 Problem Statement

Considering the above, it soon becomes clear why so many congregations have already taken to the new frontier of social networking – after all, it appears to present the church with a unique opportunity to engage with congregants in a fruitful way that aims to advance the cause of the community of believers. However, whilst in theory that indeed promises to be the case, the enthusiastic uptake of this phenomenon belies some potential issues that could impact on the true effectiveness of social networking as a ministry tool.

At the root of the issue is the weighty problem of determining whether the theoretical expectations we have of this brand new communicational tool will be met in practice over the long term. For all the hype and academic interest that accompanies it, the social media landscape is still very much in its infancy, with most digital social networks not even a decade old at this stage (Smith, Wollan, & Zhou, 2011:90). Boyd (2011:214) accounts for the relatively recent rise of these online communities by explaining that the ubiquitous and affordable

internet access required to make these networks a reality, only truly became widespread in the recent past. Likewise, it can certainly be argued that the popularity of handheld devices capable of web browsing also played a major role. Either way, it is an accepted fact that social networks are still in their infancy.

It follows that neither the full scope of opportunity nor the potential pitfalls that come with this territory have been explored in depth. As a result, congregations are faced with the question of having to decide whether they are prepared to spend their time, attention and limited resources in a new, unproven social media landscape, while trying to determine whether this phenomenon is merely a passing fad or something with tangible and lasting benefits to the church.

In this sense, the church is at a crossroads in terms of its engagement with digital social networks, with two possible approaches becoming increasingly apparent. At one end of the spectrum are those with a vague realization that the digital revolution has altered the social landscape and rules of engagement in terms of community building. This, in the words of Clasen (2008:45) could very well lead some to “patch up our old churches with electronic gadgets”. In other words, congregations might well be tempted to implement social media strategies and programs simply because it represents the latest in technology and is the newest societal fad, without thinking critically about how and why this is done, and without determining parameters for what constitutes success in this area.

On the other end of the spectrum, one finds an increasing number of scholars and thinkers who are active in this domain because they have a deep conviction that social networks have become more than mere communicative tools. Rice, for example (2009:112), argues that these networks are changing the very nature of our relationships, with real-world interaction and virtual connections becoming increasingly intertwined. Hipps (2005:23) proceeds from the same starting point, but warns that these emerging technologies are more than mere platforms for interaction – instead, they impact culture, have theological and philosophical implications, and shape the way the church engages with the world and functions internally. This kind of approach ultimately informs thinkers like Sweet (2009), who goes on to articulate a “Twitter Theology” in an attempt to provide a more nuanced overview of the theological

significance of participation in this popular social network; and Vogt (2011:190), who concludes that these networks may ultimately change the way faith communities worship.

What is clear from the above is that the relatively undeveloped state of the social media landscape allows for – possibly even *requires* – a process of critical assessment in order to determine possible opportunities and hazards, and in order to fully comprehend its possible influence on the church. Obviously, addressing all these issues falls outside the scope of a single study, but any discourse on the topic should do justice to the complexity of the subject.

In addition to the above, one should be mindful of the concern of some Christian churches and scholars about the effects these networks could potentially have on real-life relationships (Near & Nyland, 2007:4). Indeed, some critics see the rise of the social networking phenomenon as part of an increasing erosion of “real” social engagement (Drescher, 2011:115), where online connections become weak virtual replacements for deep, real-world relationships. In this scenario, relationships that are largely based in online contact are seen as cheap substitutes for face-to-face interpersonal interaction. This is a particularly pressing issue in the urban context, where the quality of relationships is already under pressure due to environmental and lifestyle factors. Hipps (2010:76-77) makes an especially forceful case in this regard, warning that technologies like Facebook and Twitter might actually damage real-world relationships because the superficial pleasantries of social media connections increasingly substitute the long-term dedication and effort it takes to build real friendships.

Seemingly congruent with these voices of apprehension, a recent study commissioned by the social network Badoo highlighted a number of related concerns. This survey of more than 6 000 people in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany revealed that, for example, 39% of American participants spent more time socializing online than they did with friends in the real world (Badoo, 2012). Similar figures were reported for participants in other countries. Moreover, the data pointed to a tendency to shy away from face-to-face conversation, with 19% of American and 16% of British participants preferring text messages or online contact to real-life conversation (Badoo, 2012). Even allowing for some of the more positive conclusions of the study – a total of about 23% of American participants reported increased self-confidence and 26% believed their involvement in social media helped facilitate

new friendships (Marketwire, 2012) – one cannot deny that there is reason to be apprehensive about at least some of the characteristics of a world where relationships play themselves out on a digital stage. While the true societal impact of social networks is clearly still being assessed, one cannot help but notice a growing shift amongst scholars and observers from unreserved enthusiasm to pragmatism and even caution.

Flowing from the above, it seems reasonable to begin to think critically about the potential effect that increasing immersion in social media activity could have on the structure of the Christian community as well. What happens, for example, when the nature of the Christian community, traditionally grounded in location and liturgy (Campbell, 2005:32) undergoes a fundamental shift because digital media communities aren't bound by geographical constraints anymore (Greenlee, 2008:5)? How does it impact on the local church when Christian ritual is performed across worldwide networks and in independent groups and churches by anyone who chooses to do so – as social media increasingly seems to allow? What happens when members of a local Christian community are more invested and involved in online, non-geographical Christian groups than they are in their local congregation? Clearly, the traditional parameters within which Christian communities were framed could soon change beyond recognition, and these changes could have a significant impact on the way the church functions.

Kane (2012:1), for example, makes a sobering point when he explains that the church's organizational structure predates that of modern organizations; he argues that churches typically invest more power in individuals to bring the mission of the church to fruition (when compared to, for example, the highly controlled environment in modern corporations where individual agents don't necessarily have the authority to act). Where individuals have more authority to act, however, new technologies, especially those that govern communication, have greater potential to be disruptive, since participation is encouraged and individuals are free to explore new technologies and methods, as well as the opportunities they represent. This, in turn, could well amplify the positive or negative effects of social media in a congregational setting. Understanding the potential implications of such a scenario is key to understanding the real effect of social networks on Christian communities.

Summarising the disparate issues raised above, a single, overarching concern emerges: Not enough has been done to determine whether social media as a ministry tool is taking us further from, or closer to, the biblical ideal for Christian community as encapsulated in the concept of *koinonia*. It would appear that no critical analysis has been done to explore how closely the communities emerging from our social media endeavours are aligned to the biblical picture of what true fellowship and community should look like. As a result, the practical value of digital social networks in promoting Christian community remains essentially unknown and unexplored.

1.3.3 Recent Research and Unanswered Questions

One of the basic motivations behind this study is the awareness that not much research has been done to evaluate the use of social media as it relates to the concept of *koinonia*, and upon closer inspection that indeed appears to be the case.

Of course, a substantial body of general research on the topic of social media exists – but these studies tend to be of limited use in a theological context, as they typically focus on commercial or sociological considerations (Near & Nyland, 2007:6). While they do provide valuable basic information that could potentially form part of the foundation for a study with a theological aim, it soon becomes clear that these documents rarely address matters of direct import to the Christian academic.

A broad overview of the general literature and research available on the topic reveals two basic categories of enquiry: The first category focuses on investigating user behaviour and demographics with a view to commercial exploitation of the social media phenomenon. These studies include research on using social media in marketing contexts to reach potential buyers (e.g. Meerman Scott, 2010), as well as detailed investigations into user interface design and a variety of information technology issues, ultimately aimed at understanding how to attract and retain more users for these networks (e.g. Brandtzaeg & Heim, 2009; Hargittai & Hsieh, 2011). The second category of enquiry focuses on ethical and relational issues, including the effects of social media use on different sectors of society (e.g. Lenhart, Purcell, & Smith, 2010; Nie, & Erbring, 2000); the positive and negative cultural impact of these networks (e.g. Smith,

Wollan, & Zhou, 2011; Norris, 2004); and questions around user identity and psychology that come into play in online environments (e.g. Barak & Suler, 2008; Martínez & Wartman, 2009). Of course, data from some of the above studies can be re-interpreted within a theological framework, but they do not typically lend themselves to this.

From a theological point of view it should be noted that there does appear to be a growing interest in the subject of social networks, but studies tend to be limited in scope and ambition. Boyd and Ellison (2008:219) remind us that Christian scholars have largely focused on the extent to which faith communities engage in social networking activities, whilst steering clear of delving into the actual meaning and implications of this social media engagement. Thus, most studies tend to focus on user numbers, demographics and usage patterns, while remaining silent on the actual impact these activities have on the church locally and globally.

The Lifeway Research project (Roach, 2011) is a typical example of this approach, where social media activity within the context of a larger church community is studied from a statistical perspective without ever asking deeper questions to gauge the actual impact of this activity on the communities it is used in. While it is useful to gather statistical information about the number of social network users in specific church groups and their usage habits, this does not answer any questions about the true impact of social media on relationships within congregations on a grass-roots level. Neither does it provide any clarity on whether digital social networks help or hinder us as we aim to fulfil our mission as the Body of Christ. Of course these studies have their place, but it remains disappointing that so few scholars have recognized the potential pastoral and practical implications of the statistics and figures they so eagerly aggregate.

Lytle (2013) goes a long way to providing a more nuanced view of social media use in a Christian context in her tome on the digital media universe, which offers a fascinating look at the influence of web based communications technologies on the way urbanites interact with their social circles. However, while she excels at locating the social media phenomenon within the wider matrix of technologies and developments that have shaped the digital world as we know it, the part of her work that deals exclusively with social media largely treats it as a vehicle for outward-focused evangelization efforts. Instead of recognising that social networks

increasingly provide a framework within which relationships grow, Lytle primarily approaches social media as yet another marketing medium for the church's message. While this point of view does have some merit, and social media can and does play a significant role in the communication strategies of a growing number of congregations, relegating it to just another marketing channel does not do justice to the growing influence it has as a platform for building relationships within organisations.

Hipps (2005) perhaps comes closest to providing an overview of the possible implications of a social media world on the faith community on a local and global scale. He emphasises, for example (2005:112), that virtual communities are slowly becoming the preferred means of relating, even within a congregational context. At the same time, he expresses concern that true intimacy cannot be attained through these digital channels, and he argues that real acceptance and support – as one would find in an authentic community – can only be experienced within the context of deep, face-to-face relationships (Hipps, 2005:111). However, he does not really present a clear and well-developed definition of what he considers to be a biblical picture of a community, thus providing no yardstick against which to measure his observations. Neither does he offer hard data or research material to prove that his assertions about the realities of online relationships are more than subjective contentions.

For the most part, the approaches employed by Roach, Lytle and Hipps, as highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, typify the main lines of enquiry followed whenever the subject of online social networks is raised within a congregational context. This is of limited use to the theologian who wishes to gauge the practical impact of social media on congregations, because it represents two ultimately unsatisfactory methodologies: in one instance, a lot of emphasis is placed on usage patterns and statistics, without really asking questions about what that data might mean for the Christian community in practice. The other approach does investigate the possible implications of digital social networks, but it does not do so against the backdrop of what a Christian community should look like from a biblical point of view (instead, these abstract studies often use metaphors and concepts gleaned from the corporate world).

Taking into account the biblical imperative for deep Christian community, as well as the ever-increasing use of social media in the congregational context, it is clear that an exploratory study from a practical theology perspective is sorely lacking. Such a study would need to include both a thorough overview of what a Christian community should look like from a biblical perspective, as well as research about the practical use of digital social networks within such a setting. Only then would it be possible to determine whether these technologies are drawing us closer to, or pushing us further from, the scriptural ideal. It is exactly this goal that the author aims to accomplish with this study.

A Nexus search and queries on academic databases revealed no projects with a similar focus or scope. While a number of general studies related to social media exist, the proposed research represents a unique perspective that has not been considered in much depth in the theological sphere before. Thus, the study aims to make an original contribution to the field of practical theology.

1.4 Research Question

In the light of the information presented above, this study will attempt to answer one pressing question: Can the use of digital social networks in a church context help us to foster true *koinonia*, especially in urban congregations?

This overarching research question can be sub-divided into the following specific research questions in order to cast more light on the issue:

- i. What exactly does the biblical view of *koinonia* look like – in other words, what are the ideal characteristics of Christian community? Drawing on a single, overarching concept like *koinonia* in order to develop a biblical model for community will assist in identifying a simple, well-defined set of concrete parameters against which the data gathered through the course of the study can be measured. The ultimate aim of using the model of *koinonia* as a yardstick in this way is to ensure that the information gathered is interpreted within a biblical framework, instead of merely offering an array of random observations and insights that roughly pertain to the subject matter. In

doing so, we stay true to the ideal envisioned by Hastings (2007:46) when he argues that both church traditions and new practices should always be “in a dynamic interpretive dialogue with scripture”. Approaching the study from this angle should result in a systematic, thorough analysis of all the information gathered, which should culminate in recommendations that ultimately serve to bring the church closer to the biblical ideal.

- ii. How do we define the concept of social media? While defining the concept of social media seems like a simple undertaking, formulating a comprehensive definition will likely prove to be complex because, as Picard (2009:10) reminds us, digital social networks are still in their infancy. As a result, the world of social media is in a continuous state of flux, with systems and practices falling in and out of favour, often within months (Lovett, 2011:22). However, a number of key strands can be identified that encapsulate the social media phenomenon, and these will form the basis of the study going forward. Formulating a robust definition is also an essential element in delimiting the scope of the study, as it would be easy to cast the net too wide and try to address too many disparate issues related to the subject. In this regard, it would be wise to keep in mind Helland’s warning (2005:4-5) that the world of online social interaction is vast and complex – especially where it intersects with religious practice.
- iii. How has social media been used in Christian communities in the past? Despite it being a relatively new phenomenon, it has already been mentioned that a number of Christian congregations and leaders have taken to the world of social networking. However, it is quite apparent from a number of preliminary studies (e.g. Roach, 2011; Drecher, 2011; Meerman Scott, 2010; Barnard, 2010) that the methodology behind the social media efforts of these organisations, and the quality of engagement resulting from it, differ significantly. Thus, it would be valuable to look at some of the ways congregations and their leaders have typically approached their social media activities in the past. The aim of this exercise would be to evaluate the effectiveness of these endeavours, while drawing parallels to current approaches and practices.

- iv. How do Christian communities, particularly urban congregations, currently approach their social media activities, especially within the context of their attempts to foster *koinonia*? The aim of this line of enquiry would be to learn from the practical experiences of Christian congregations that currently use social networks as a ministry tool, and to critically evaluate the role that social networking plays in moving these groups closer to or farther from the ideals of Christian community. This will be done by assessing how social media is used on a day to day basis by those who belong to these congregations. Particular attention will be paid to the challenges unique to communities in the urban environment that seem to be addressed – or aggravated – by the use of social media. Answering this question will not merely entail discussing certain broad characteristics or general trends pertaining to the church’s social media use in a conceptual fashion, as has been done elsewhere (e.g. Rice, 2009; Vogt, 2011). Rather, the focus will be on asking pointed questions and analysing specific behaviours and outcomes that flow from the use of digital social networks within the communities selected for study. A detailed description of how this is to be achieved follows in the research methodology overview later in this chapter.

- v. How should the church approach its social media endeavours in order to maximise its positive impact on our faith communities, while steering clear of potential problems? Answering this question involves the formulation of a number of practical recommendations and guidelines for social media use that can be implemented in urban congregations. These recommendations should be based on the insights gained from the study of social media use in real-world ministry situations, and are ultimately aimed at helping the church to “change and learn from experience” (Elkington, 2011:2). The goal here is to frame guidelines for a new praxis that can move us in a direction that more closely corresponds to the biblical model of what a thriving, healthy Christian community should look like.

1.5 Aim and Objectives

Having identified a number of concerns in the background outlined above, this is an opportune point at which to articulate a clear aim and specific objectives for this study. This

will guide us in finding pertinent answers to the research question and related issues identified in the preceding sections.

1.5.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to ascertain to what degree digital social networks can help the urban church to achieve the objectives of true Christian community as expressed in the concept of *koinonia*.

1.5.2 Objectives

The study will aim to achieve the following specific objectives:

- i. To formulate a biblically correct picture of the characteristics of true Christian community by referring to the New Testament concept of *koinonia*.
- ii. To formulate a robust definition of the concept of social media, and to provide a basic outline of its key components.
- iii. To provide an overview of how social media has been used to date as a ministry tool by Christian congregations in their attempts to promote *koinonia* in their midst.
- iv. To evaluate the current use of social media in an urban congregational environment and to critically explore how and to what degree these practices have assisted in achieving the ideal characteristics of Christian community as expressed in the concept of *koinonia*.
- v. To propose guidelines for best practice to maximise the positive impact of social media use in ministry, and to clearly point to possible pitfalls.

1.6 Central Theoretical Argument

The central theoretical argument of this study is that digital social networks can be a powerful and effective ministry tool with the potential to promote community and deepen fellowship in Christian congregations. It is hypothesized that social network use can be of particular benefit in the urban context.

1.7 Research Methodology

In deciding on the methodological approach to be employed in this study, the highly regarded model by Zeffass (1974), which offers a clear procedural method for moving from an existing praxis to a new praxis based on theological and situational analysis, was considered. This model, which requires the formulation of a basis-theory (description of an unsatisfactory praxis), a meta-theory (examining the basis theory using a series of instruments from the social sciences) and a praxis-theory (devising a new praxis), represents a classic approach used with great fruit in practical theology (cf. De Wet, 2006:57-58, 79).

However, whilst Zeffass' model is most certainly adequate, it is the belief of the researcher that the model developed by Osmer (2008) will provide a more nuanced view of this study's particular field of enquiry, whilst still achieving the objectives envisaged by Zeffass. Osmer's model revolves around four descriptive tasks, each of which will be used to address a specific stage of the proposed study.

1.7.1 Normative Task

The study will commence with a process of constructing theological and ethical norms which will be used to assess, guide, and potentially reform the specific field of praxis under investigation (Osmer, 2008:4). In the context of this particular study, the normative stage will include a literature review, which will be employed to introduce key aspects to be investigated in the study. A critical overview of scholarly work and biblical sources will be undertaken to introduce the concept of *koinonia*, demonstrating how it relates to Christian community and fellowship, while a basic outline of the history of social media and its use in Christian

congregations will also be constructed. This will include a critical analysis of issues particularly pertaining to urban congregations.

Throughout this portion of the study, the researcher will aim to remain true to the goals of a literature review as set out by Creswell (2003:29-30), namely to present information relevant to the topic of discussion; to demonstrate how this information relates to the larger ongoing dialogue in scholarly literature about the chosen topic; to provide a framework for establishing the importance of the topic studied; and, crucially, to set a benchmark for comparing the results of this review with later findings.

1.7.2 Descriptive-empirical Task

This task focuses on the actual state of the form of Christian praxis under investigation, and aims to gather information through empirical investigation to help discern dynamics and patterns in the specific field examined (Creswell, 2003:11). In the context of the proposed study, this will entail a thorough examination of the use of social media in urban congregations and the ways that these practices align (or fail to align) with the norms identified and described in the first stage of the study.

This section of the study will take on the form of a qualitative empirical study undertaken on three campuses of Hillsong Church, a Pentecostal church headquartered in Sydney, with local campuses in several international cities.

Affiliated with the Australian Christian Churches, the Australian branch of the Assemblies of God, Hillsong Church has its origins in 1983 in Baulkham Hills, Sydney (Clark, 2004:1). Currently, it is a multi-site church with campuses across Australia, including multiple campuses in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne, as well as in other countries across the world, amongst others South Africa, the USA, Sweden, London, Ukraine, and Russia (Garcia, 2010:1). A single campus in Sydney, Cape Town and New York, respectively, will participate in this particular study.

Apart from the researcher's involvement with these churches and his access to the global leadership network and congregants of this church, and their willingness to participate, this particular church family was chosen with the descriptive-empirical task in mind, because of a number of specific factors:

- i. Many Pentecostal churches, and the Hillsong family of churches in particular, have been advocating the use of social media in the congregational environment for years. That this is a priority to the leadership of Hillsong, can be seen clearly in a number of communications published by the church throughout recent years. In an article on Hillsong Collected, an online network aimed at Hillsong's staff and congregants, Schraeder (2012), for example, exhorts members to "extend what happens in our churches into all the world through social media". Leggott (2012a) echoes this sentiment in an article on the same network, intimating that the church is working on "a digital mission statement," and reminding members to see their participation on social networks as missional activity. This seems to support the observation by Robins (2010:130) that Christians in the Pentecostal tradition are especially comfortable with engaging with their fellow believers and the world through channels like digital social networks (Robins argues that this is a result of the Pentecostal and Charismatic world's long history of involvement in media enterprises, for example through televangelism and publishing).
- ii. All the campuses included in the study have an urban setting. One of the objectives of the proposed study is to investigate how social media can potentially promote community in particularly urban congregations. The Sydney, Cape Town and New York campuses selected for this study are all situated in urban areas, and they serve a membership that live and work virtually exclusively in the city environment.
- iii. Campuses included are located in first and third world countries, and represent wildly differing social environments. This choice is intentional, as the availability of internet access and the technologies driving social media engagement – for example, the prevalence of smart phones and relatively inexpensive computers – differ from one environment to the next, which could uncover interesting and varying perspectives

from one campus to the next. Poynter (2010:252-267) identifies a number of other considerations to take into account when comparing social media use in different settings, including cultural and economic differences, differences in internet penetration, and differences in the way social networks are used from country to country – all of which could add new perspectives to a study of this nature.

- iv. Campuses selected run the gamut from well-established campuses (the Sydney campus was established in 1983) to brand new church plants (the New York campus was established in 2011). This will enable the researcher to compare the effect of social media use in well-established Christian communities, where congregants have built real-life relationships over many years well before using digital social networks, to the situation in new church plants, where members have only recently come together.
- v. The approach to social media use across the selected campuses are fairly uniform, which will enable the researcher to compare the effect of social media campaigns in one location to the other, without having to factor in differing approaches to the same activities. This is possible because Hillsong Church has implemented a number of measures to ensure that its organizational identity is uniform across all campuses. For example, much work has been done to ensure that Hillsong's presence in the digital sphere – including its websites and social media channels, look and feel homogeneous (Leggott, 2012b). This standardization allows for a single and coherent approach to the social media activities at the different campuses.

The proposed empirical study will be undertaken primarily by means of semi-structured one-on-one interviews. These interviews will be conducted with a representative sample of congregation members at the various campuses, until a saturation point is reached and no new information comes to light in further interviews. Adhering to the basic principles for interviews proposed by Strydom (2005:59) and Creswell (2003:89), all interview sessions will be recorded with the written permission of participants, and great care will be taken to respect the privacy, background and views of interviewees. Additionally, the following principles outlined by the Ethics Committee of North-West University regarding qualitative research (NWU, 2010:48-49) will be strictly adhered to:

- i. Participation will be completely voluntary, and participants are free to withdraw from the process at any time;
- ii. All information will be handled as confidential, and the identity of the participants will not be revealed without their written consent;
- iii. Written consent will be obtained from all participants before their responses will be used in the thesis;
- iv. The researcher will explain the nature of the participant's contribution to the specific field of study, and will explain that there is no financial gain for either the researcher or participants.

Responses will be typed and transcripts will be handed over to an independent coder for coding.

1.7.3 Interpretive Task

At this stage, the data obtained through empirical research must be interpreted by placing it in a more comprehensive framework in order to explain perceived patterns of behaviour and other trends (Osmer, 2005:xv). Osmer (2012:338) proposes a process not unlike biblical exegesis, where a researcher engages in extracting information from the data gathered, by evaluating it against the background of factors like a congregation's socio-cultural context and organizational values. The goal here is to come to a richer understanding of why certain behaviours and patterns emerge.

A process of open, axial and selective coding (Boeije, 2010:94-95) will be employed to determine which tendencies or themes can be identified or isolated in the material. These themes will then be critically discussed in relation to the normative statements made in the initial stages of the study. In order to achieve the objectives stated earlier in this document,

themes pertaining to the concept of *koinonia* will be analyzed, while particular attention will be paid to trends that are especially relevant in the urban setting.

1.7.4 Pragmatic Task

Having identified and analyzed the major trends uncovered in the empirical research, the final part of the study will explore how the area of Christian praxis investigated can be shaped to more fully embody the normative elements identified in the initial stages of the study. In this concluding section, the researcher will aim to develop what Osmer (2005:xvi) refers to as “action-guiding models” – practical guidelines aimed at developing a new praxis that is more closely aligned to the biblical norms identified in the first stage of the dissertation. At this stage, a number of practical recommendations will be formulated that will enable urban congregations to devise social media strategies aimed at fostering true, biblical *koinonia* to a greater degree than the current praxis allows.

The idea behind these recommendations will not be to implement them blindly and rigidly, but to adapt them to the situation that each of these communities find themselves in, keeping in mind that they all exist in different social environments and serve dissimilar groups. Latini (2011:10) refers to a “creative implementation”, where the situation of each individual community is carefully considered as part of the pragmatic process. This approach will ensure that any changes that are implemented have an optimal and lasting effect.

1.8 Classification of Chapters

Following this introductory chapter, chapter 2 will include a critical overview of scholarly work and biblical sources pertaining to the concept of *koinonia*, as well as a basic outline of the history of social media and its use in Christian congregations. Issues particularly pertaining to urban congregations will also be highlighted and explored.

Chapter 3 will be devoted to the descriptive-empirical task, which will be presented in the form of a qualitative empirical study undertaken on three campuses of Hillsong Church, primarily through the use of semi-structured personal interviews.

Chapter 4 will focus on the interpretive task. In this chapter, the researcher will delve into the data obtained through the qualitative empirical study in order to expound on perceived trends. These themes will be critically discussed in relation to the normative statements made in the initial stages of the study.

Chapter 5 will be used to propose practical guidelines aimed at developing a new praxis that is more closely aligned to the biblical norms identified in the first stage of the thesis. At this stage, the implications of the study will be considered and a number of practical recommendations will be formulated that will enable urban congregations to devise and implement social media strategies aimed at fostering true, biblical *koinonia* to a greater degree than the current praxis allows.

Chapter 6 will conclude the research by providing a final synopsis of the study. At this stage, recommendations for potential future research will also be made.

1.9 Summary

This chapter included a description of the background, problem statement, aim and objectives of the study. It introduced key terminology and major aspects to be investigated, and provided a description of the research methodology to be employed, as well as an overview of the structure of the study.

CHAPTER 2: KOINONIA AND THE CONNECTED CHURCH

2.1 Overview

This chapter will commence with an exploration of the concept of *koinonia* as a descriptive framework for the sense of community within the New Testament church and beyond. This will be done by tracing the idea through the biblical text and in various literary sources. Having done so, the attention will turn to an analysis of the social media sphere, which will include an outline of the development of digital social networks, an overview of the various online platforms associated with it, and a basic history of its use in Christian congregations, particularly as a tool with which to foster a sense of *koinonia* – and with a particular focus on urban milieus. This chapter will function as the normative phase of this study, based on Osmer’s normative task, as explicated earlier (2008:129-174).

2.2 *Koinonia* and the Christian Community

When it comes to conveying a sense of the rich depth of community enjoyed by the early Christian church, few concepts carry the weight of the powerful biblical idea of *koinonia*. Indeed, it comes as no surprise when scholars like Kariatlis (2011:4-5) and Fuchs (2008:xxxii) point out that an increasing number of systematic studies give pride of place to the notion of *koinonia* as a key to understanding the nature of the unity within the early church. Likewise, it does not seem far-fetched at all when Kearsley (2008:18) argues that the concept of *koinonia* can shed light on the very mission of the church as a whole.

Of course, the term *koinonia* (κοινωνία) has long been used to describe the vibrancy and vitality of the community of believers and their deep relationship with each other and God (Clasen, 2008:39). Usually, when this concept is highlighted, social aspects such as equality, openness, and reciprocity come to mind, and these are usually discussed within the context of interpersonal interaction within the community of the faithful. In this sense, as Snyder (2004:75-76) reminds us, we deal with a church that is, first of all, understood as a group of people, or organism, and not as an organization; as a community, and not an institution.

Before we proceed with our investigation, however, a word of caution is warranted: While the idea of *koinonia* serves a useful vehicle for our ruminations on interpersonal relationships within the context of the community of believers, it is important to realize that we are dealing here with more than just a one-dimensional descriptor primarily focused on group dynamics. What we encounter in the New Testament is not a group of people who live together in direct, personal relationship merely on the basis of mutual solidarity. When we discuss *koinonia*, we are doing more than just trying to investigate the socio-cultural dimension in which interpersonal relationships take place. We dare not settle for what Kearsley (2008:22) describes as mere sociological reductionism. *Koinonia*, Davis argues (2007:53), actually describes an inter-relatedness wherein partners participate in something far greater than just interpersonal connectedness – they participate in nothing less than the coming of the kingdom of God through the revelation of Christ in his Body, the church. In other words, we are not merely concerned with horizontal relationships between believers, but with the full scope and depth of the vertical relationship between Christ and his church, and the way that that is made manifest in communal life.

Thus, familiarizing ourselves with the greater biblical framework behind the idea of *koinonia* is imperative if we are to understand the full implications of this notion. A failure to do so would likely result in a sorely lacking approach that examines *koinonia* from nothing more than a socio-cultural or psychological perspective. This is evident, for example, in the work of De Mare, Piper, and Thompson (2011:xxxiii), who sees in the New Testament idea of *koinonia* nothing more than an “atmosphere of impersonal fellowship,” and a “form of togetherness and amity that brings a pooling of resources”. While this may be adequate in the context of a psychological study, it does not come close to describing the full reality of the biblical concept.

It is also worth noting in these preliminary remarks that the idea of *koinonia* often comes up in contemporary ecumenical discussions centred on the development of a fellowship between different church bodies. In this sense, *koinonia* is seen as the ordering principle behind all ecumenical endeavour and other global dimensions to the church as the wider body of Christ. While the biblical witness clearly affirms this perspective, the scope of this study dictates that such broad-strokes themes of *koinonia* be translated from an ecumenical context into a congregational setting of face to face community. In other words, this study will look at

koinonia as it finds its expression at the grassroots, congregational level, instead of the universal level. Doing so, as Kearsley (2008:17) argues, does not constitute a denial of the broad unity between different Christian denominations and church groups – it merely presupposes that our aspirations for *koinonia* within an ecumenical context flows from life in church communities as they really function on the ground.

Having taken note of the above, we now proceed to delve deeper into the notion of *koinonia* as it is expressed in the Bible. Of course, one is tempted to proceed straight to the rich and compelling model for unity in the early church as it is portrayed in the second chapter of Acts, which has traditionally been presented as the epitome of everything true Christian community represents. However, further investigation soon reveals that the idea of *koinonia* can be traced in the wider biblical narrative, and indeed is rooted in the very nature of the triune God. In this sense, as Kariatlis (2011:xi) argues, an understanding of the church is closely connected to an understanding of God himself. Before we trace this idea in the biblical text, though, we must attempt to understand its etymological roots.

2.2.1 Etymological roots

Fuchs (2008:6) identifies the Greek adjectival root *koinos* (κοινός) as the etymon upon which a number of derivatives of the word are built. Generally translated as “(in) common,” or “communal,” this root forms the basis for what most scholars classify as so-called *koinōn-* (κοινων) words, which collectively express the deep sense of unity that characterised the New Testament church.

This group of words includes the noun *koinonia* (κοινωνία), which forms the focal point of this study, and which generally conveys the overarching meanings of “association,” “communion,” “fellowship,” or even “close relationship” (Gresham, 2012:32). While some translations interpret this noun in terms of “partnership,” “sharing,” or even “stewardship” (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2007:29), Fuchs (2008:10) also highlights renditions like “commonality,” “mutuality,” “partaking,” “reciprocity,” “solidarity,” “togetherness,” and “unity”. Kärkkäinen (2007:4) offers a summary, and says *koinonia* denotes sharing, participation, and community, with an overarching focus on communion at the spiritual, social, and even material level.

We also encounter the word's verbal form, *koinoneo* (κοινωνέω), in the New Testament text, where it usually means "to participate," "to give or contribute a share," or "to put together". (Fuchs, 2008:7). Horton (2007:185) connects this form of the word very strongly to the forming of a partnership, and the idea of collaborative effort. Other, related terms include the adjective *koinonos* (κοινωνός), which denotes a companion, fellow or participant (Allen & Ross, 2012:115); and the adjective *koinonikos* (κοινωνικός), which we encounter in 1 Timothy 6:18, where it is used to refer to generosity (Mbaya, 2012:2) and a willingness to share (Daniels, 2007:211).

Taking into account the larger spectrum of possible interpretations of these *koinōn*- terms, it soon becomes clear why Van Deusen Hunsinger (2006:2) contends that these single words simply do not quite capture the richness or range of the concept's meaning. It also demonstrates why Fuchs (2008:7) insists that it is important to approach the entire New Testament witness with an innate understanding that the idea of *koinonia* is present even in the absence of the word or its derivatives. For Fuchs and others (Snyder, 2004; Kearsley, 2008) *koinonia* imagery is implicit in the New Testament's focus on themes like unity, participation, sharing, and covenant. This is also accentuated when the New Testament writers employ imagery that refer to Jesus as the vine and the church as the branches (John 15:1-6); and to believers corporately as God's temple (1 Cor. 3:16), the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-14), and the Bride of Christ (John 3:29; Rev. 19:7).

Within the context of an etymological discussion, it is worth noting that the word *koinonia* is neither religious nor Christian by definition. It has its roots in secular Greek thought where, although not common (Fuchs, 2008:7), it was sometimes used to refer to a business partnership (Witherington, 2011:57), a marital relationship (Horrell, 2004:79) or other situations where more than one party held a common interest. However, it comes into its own in the New Testament, where, according to the *Concordance to the Novum Testamentum Graece* (1987:1046-1047), the noun *koinonia* appears nineteen times. This count increases to sixty-four when other *koinōn*- words and closely related terminology are taken into account (Fuchs, 2008:9). These references are sprinkled across the Pauline corpus, the Johanne letters, Hebrews, the Acts of the Apostles, and even some gospels – specifically the gospels of

Matthew and Luke. Throughout, it is generally used to describe qualitative characteristics of the horizontal relationship between fellow followers of Christ.

Although there is no direct Hebrew equivalent to the Greek *koinonia*, many scholars have attempted to draw parallels with themes originally encountered in Judaism – and some have done so with marked success. Snyder, for example, connects *koinonia* with the Old Testament notion of peoplehood (2004:75), which centres on the idea of Israel as a nation chosen by God to be a vehicle for his purpose and glory. In this view, there is a high degree of consonance between Exodus 19:5-6, where God originally selects Israel as his “treasured possession,” describing them as “a kingdom of priests”; and the language used when the fledgling New Testament church in 1 Peter 2:9 is described as a “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God”. This “peoplehood,” encountered in Old and New Testament alike, not only underlines the continuity of God's plan from Old to New Testament, but is an expression of the unique and dynamic nature of the living community – first Israel, then the church – within which God’s purpose and glory is revealed. This line of thinking culminates in the compelling declaration of Ephesians 2:19, where we are reminded that those who are in Christ are “no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household...”.

Another thematic connection between *koinonia* language and Judaism is highlighted in the abovementioned passage in Ephesians, when the author uses temple imagery as a metaphor for unity in the community of the faithful. God’s people are said to be members of a household “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,” (Eph. 2:20) with Jesus as cornerstone. This building is said to be “joined together,” and “rises to become a holy temple in the Lord” (v. 21). The author concludes by asserting that the church is being “built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (v. 22), a clear allusion to the Old Testament temple. The same thread is mirrored strongly in 1 Peter 2, where the writer exhorts God’s people to live exemplary lives since they are “living stones” being “built into a spiritual house” (v. 5). Kearsley (2008:15), Hietamäki (2010:74) and others (e.g. Fuchs, 2008:7) treat these references as clear indications that the concept of *koinonia* is deeply rooted in Jewish thought, and draw a parallel between God’s people as his “temple” or “spiritual house,” and the Old Testament temple as the locus of God’s presence on earth.

Considering the above, it is clear that the etymological roots of the concept of *koinonia* hint at the kind of depth and complexity that allows for a nuanced description of unity, solidarity and reciprocity within the body of Christ. As a result, few would disagree with Kariatlis when he argues (2011:5) that this oft-used term has become the dominant framework for reflecting upon the nature of Christian community. To understand the full weight of the concept though, a thorough and systematic look at its use in a biblical context is needed, and we now turn to this task.

2.2.2 Biblical Basis

As a prelude to the scriptural overview offered below, it should be emphasised that themes pertaining to community and unity feature prominently throughout the arc of the biblical narrative. Thus, even when the bible does not specifically use *koinonia* language, a strong emphasis on the communal life of God's people can often be detected in the subtext, and the full meaning and consequence of many themes and events are only fully understood within a corporate or collective context. Whether it is through the history of Israel or the story of the New Testament church, God's intent for the individual is often portrayed against the background of God's intent for his people as a whole, even when this is not explicitly stated. It is with this reality in mind that Crawley (2006:17) argues for a reading of the Bible that understands God's redemptive plan on a collective, and not just an individual level.

It goes without saying that this communal or collective dimension is especially noticeable in the New Testament. Horrell (2004:80), for example, claims that the New Testament more often deals with the horizontal relationship between believers than it does with their vertical relationship with God. This is particularly noticeable in the Pauline letters, with their pastoral slant and focus on practical, communal issues; as well as the Lukan accounts, with their vivid depiction of the early church as a unified whole. In these books and in others, one is often left with a sense that the individual's relationship with God is mirrored (at least in part) in healthy horizontal relationships with others in the local church.

With the above in mind, it becomes apparent that presenting a biblical overview of an idea like *koinonia* involves more than merely handpicking isolated passages that include specific

keywords. While much can be gleaned from a systematic study of biblical *koinonia* references, such a study should always be set against the backdrop of the larger biblical story of community amongst God's people.

Of course it is worth noting that this emphasis on community and unity in the Bible can be said to be reflective of the very nature of God, who reveals himself throughout scripture as triune. It is for this reason that any attempt to understand *koinonia* must begin with the ultimate model for Christian community, namely the Trinity – and indeed this is where our biblical analysis will begin. This will be followed by an outline of *koinonia* imagery in Lukan sources, a look at Johanne thinking on the concept, its treatment in Pauline letters, and an overview of other key biblical references pertaining to the subject.

2.2.2.1 *Koinonia* as Reflection of God's Trinitarian Nature

Any attempt to come to terms with the concept of *koinonia* should begin with the understanding that God is not solitary but uniquely relational. This relational dimension is first hinted at in the introductory stages of the biblical narrative, when God refers to himself in the plural during the creation account of Genesis 1 and sets out to make man "in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). Similar plurals are employed in Genesis 3:22 and 11:7, while in Isaiah 6:8 God refers to himself in both singular and plural form. It is also worth noting that one of the most common forms of the word "God" in the Hebrew scriptures, *elohim*, has the form of a plural, even though it governs a singular verb.

The use of these plural pronouns, especially within the context of the creation account, is illuminated in the first chapter of John, where the pre-existent Word, that would become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is portrayed as present and involved in the process of creation (John 1:1-3, 14-18). When considered in conjunction with other passages that also highlight the role of the Spirit during the creation process (e.g. Gen. 1:2, Ps. 33:6), what emerges from this Johannine parallel of the Genesis creation account is a picture of God's unique relational identity – an identity that is revealed in terms of three persons from the outset: God the Father; the Son, or Word; and the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Godhead, all existing in community and functioning in unity.

Obviously the doctrine of the Trinity hinges on much more than these creation references – one could, for example, look to passages where Jesus speaks of the relationship between himself and the Father (John 17:10-11, 21), to moments where Jesus is addressed as God (e.g. John 20:28, Phil. 2:10-11, Titus 2:13, 2 Pet. 1:1, Rev. 4:11), or to references where the Spirit is equated with God (Acts 5:3-4, 2 Cor. 3:17-18, Rom. 8:1-27). All of these could be employed to elucidate the unique, dynamic relationship of accord, equality and unanimity that exists between the members of the Godhead.

However, while an exhaustive study on the Trinity falls outside the ambit of this study, the creation references mentioned initially offer a particularly compelling glimpse of the triune God who exists from eternity, not as an isolated entity, but within a perfect community of love and reciprocity, where, as Jesus describes the relationship between Father and Son, “all I have is yours, and all you have is mine” (John 17:10). It is against the backdrop of this primal social relationship that human beings are created “in his own image” (Gen. 1:27). Thus, the relational mutuality that characterizes the Holy Trinity becomes a template for the creation that follows – man is created, first and foremost, as a social being; a being that exists to be in relationship.

This relational dimension of the *Imago Dei* (that is, man as created in the image of God) is affirmed by Barth (1960:195-6), who argues that God’s likeness in humanity does not primarily vest in man’s rational or intellectual capacity, but in the fact that man was created to be in relationship with God and one another. This is why male and female, even though they are irreducibly different, recognize one another as true counterparts, who are dependent upon one another (Gen. 2:23-24). This view, famously associated with Barth, is upheld in a particularly strong form by Van Deusen Hunsinger (2006:5), who argues that man’s true identity as a creation in the image of God can only be found in relationship with God and others. Man was created as a social being, and as such should exist in community.

In this way the relationship between God the Father, Son and Spirit becomes a model upon which our relationships with each other are patterned. This divine triune communion, Kärkkäinen (2007:6) argues, becomes the “highest expression of unity for Christians” – a model of what true *koinonia* should be and the archetype of the unity within the church. This

model is realised when we, through the redemptive work of the Son, are united with Christ (Phil. 2:1) and become members of His body, the church (1 Cor. 12:27). The church, then, becomes the visible manifestation on earth of *koinonia* as it exists in the relationship between the Father, Son and Spirit (Fuchs, 2008:13), and in this way the body of Christ can be said to share in the life of the trinitarian God. Indeed, 1 John 1:3 states that the fellowship of believers with each other flows from their "...fellowship (κοινωνία)... with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ".

Thus, the sense of *koinonia* between Christians is rooted in the communal life of the triune God, and mirrors this unique relationship. For this reason *koinonia* does not merely denote a superficial social relationship between believers, but refers to a deep and abiding connection that is reflective of the nature of God himself, and the church's relationship with God through Christ. With this in mind Van Deusen Hunsinger (2006:2) explains that *koinonia* thus draws together our vertical relationship with God, and horizontal relationships with each other, by means of our common life in Christ.

It is with this reality in mind that Kariatlis (2011:xii) argues that the church is a "community of memory" – it is a community that looks back to the original self-revelation of God as a being that exists in relationship. This unique relationship serves as the blueprint and reason for the existence of all others, and becomes the framework for and true meaning of *koinonia* within the body of Christ. *Koinonia* is nothing less than a reflection of the deep community of love that exists within the Godhead, and this relationship should be the starting point for all subsequent reflection on the subject.

Having established the primacy of the divine triune communion, the opportunity presents itself to investigate a number of other biblical *koinonia* references with a renewed sense of clarity and purpose. We turn at first to the compelling account of *koinonia* within the first-century church encountered in the writings of Luke.

2.2.2.2 *Koinonia* in Lukan Sources

Nowhere is the sense of unity and accord within the early church portrayed in as striking and captivating a way as it is in the New Testament books attributed to Luke. While the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles do not set out to offer a systematically constructed ecclesiological framework, what we do encounter is an organic account of ecclesiastical origins that starts with the calling of the very first followers of Jesus in Luke, and culminates in a vivid portrayal of the dynamic and vigorous character of the fledgling church as Acts reaches its conclusion. As this story unfolds, we are presented with a unique vision of a church united in Christ through the Spirit – a unity that manifests itself in the vibrant communal life of the body of believers.

We get a first glimpse of the meaning of the concept of *koinonia* – perhaps foreshadowing its importance in the life of the soon-to-be-established church – in the fifth chapter of Luke’s gospel. Luke 5:1-11 documents the calling of the first disciples; the initial group of Christ-followers whose experience and witness would in due course become the foundation for the New Testament church. Following a night which the fishermen Simon Peter, James, and John had spent in vain on the Lake of Gennesaret, Jesus instructs them to lower their nets, leading to a miraculous catch. In the aftermath of this event Jesus extends an invitation to Simon Peter and his co-workers to become his followers. It is in Luke 5:10 that we first encounter a *koinos* derivative: James and John are said to be *koinonoi* (κοινωνοί), or partners, of Simon.

While the word clearly has no deeper theological meaning at this stage, and is likely used purely in a technical sense, the special quality of this term becomes apparent when one considers that these three men, whose communal relationship would be so significant that they would later go on to be known as “pillars” of the church (Gal. 2:9), enjoyed a *koinos*-type connection even at the start of Jesus’ public ministry. Although the term *koinonoi* is translated rather unsatisfactorily in English with “partners,” and serves only to denote James and John as associates of Simon in the fishing trade, the fact that they stand in a special relationship – the idea that they form a “commune” aimed at working towards a common goal – is particularly interesting. This is the case because we deal here with the original sense of the word, used in a way that sheds light on its later theological meaning: *koinonia*, even in this early guise, points

to joint labour, shared values, and pooled resources. Fuchs (2008:109) elaborates on the idea by explaining that parties to such a relationship shared a common interest, participating as one to further their cause. It is not hard to see how this simple partnership, based on common interest, foreshadows a much deeper, more significant sense of community that would later emerge from the labours of these first followers of Christ.

What follows in the rest of the Gospel of Luke is an account of the ministry of Jesus that culminates in his climactic resurrection and ascension. These events are the catalyst for the gathering of the disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem, which serves as the setting for the first chapters of Acts. Significantly, the disciples are said to be “joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14), congregating “in one place” (v. 2:1), and it is in this atmosphere of unity and solidarity that the Holy Spirit is finally poured out (vv. 2:3-4), and the first believers are added to the fold (v. 2:41).

It is at this point that we encounter one of the most striking descriptions of the common life shared by the early Christian believers in Jerusalem, and it is the first time in the New Testament that the term *koinonia* is used in its full theological sense. Acts 2:42-47 describes how the believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship (κοινωνία), to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (v. 42). Furthermore, this group of believers “were together and had everything in common (είχον πάντα κοινά)” (v. 44). The rest of the passage portrays what this life of *koinonia* looked like in practice: the community of the faithful “sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (v. 45), and continued to “meet together” in the temple courts (v. 46). These meetings also took place in their homes, where they “ate together with glad and sincere hearts,” and praised God together (vv. 46-47). The fact that this sense of unity and agreement soon became a central feature of Christian witness is alluded to in the observation that “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (v. 47).

It is on the strength of passages like these that Kärkkäinen (2007:4) argues that the language of Luke is, at its heart, “communion language”. Likewise, Bacatan (2008:18) sees in this passage what he refers to as “the essence” of *koinonia*, namely the natural proclivity of the body of believers to come together in love, mutual support, and encouragement. It is

important to note, however, that this unity does not merely constitute a vague “sense of belonging” – Fuchs (2008:19) argues that the living nature of the group’s union is based on a spiritual foundation; after all, Luke clearly states that the believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). It is through this daily, common practice that the believers are reminded of their unity in Christ, and it is this spiritual dimension that gives substance to their union, and finds its expression in practical acts of love and kindness.

Both Lawrenz (2009:65) and Fuchs (2008:13) also highlight the sense of inclusivity conveyed in this passage – all observers are free to join in this communion, and none are excluded. Lawrenz makes a particularly forceful argument in this regard when he states that this offer of a “shared life” was a central part of the church’s proclamation to the world. He does so by linking this passage to 1 John 1:3, where the body of Christ is said to “proclaim” what it has seen and heard, “so that you also may have fellowship (κοινωνία) with us”. In other words, the communal life witnessed in this passage does not, primarily, reflect an inward focus – true *koinonia* reaches outwards and draws all others in to a life of love and unity. This is also apparent in the words of Peter in Acts 2:17-21 during the events of Pentecost, where he asserts that the Spirit of God is about to be poured out on all people. May Ling (2007:33) points out that the language he uses to call non-believers to this new community – he calls on men, women, and even servants – subverts socially inscribed boundaries of race, class, and gender.

Luke expounds on the nature of this community in Acts 4:32-35, where he yet again presents a powerful picture of the fellowship of the faithful. The believers, despite social and economic distinctions in the world around them, are said to have been “one in heart and mind” (v. 32). This is shown to reflect in practice to the degree that no one claimed any of their possessions as their own – everything they had was held in common (εἶχον ἅπαντα κοινά), to the point where there were “no needy persons among them” (v. 34). The chapter concludes with a moving account of the willingness of believers to sell their own property, the proceeds of which they put “...at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need” (v. 35).

What emerges from this second passage in Acts is a realization that *koinonia* does not merely denote an abstract sense of solidarity or social cohesion; this sense of accord translates in practice to real acts of altruism and kindness. Therefore, Gutierrez & Towns (2012:305) are careful to note that *koinonia* should not only be seen as a synonym for fellowship – it should be understood as a way in which this fellowship is lived out in practice, through sharing, generosity, and the pooling of resources. Heywood (2011:121) also points out that this practical example of support of fellow believers in need serves as a model when Paul later collects contributions from the Gentile churches for the relief of the church in Jerusalem in Romans 15:26 and 2 Corinthians 8:4. In both these instances, *koinonia* terminology is used to describe the act of giving. Thus true *koinonia*, in Acts and elsewhere, is not merely a conceptual framework used to describe an intangible quality of Christian social relationships – it describes an element of Christian life that finds concrete expression in several practical ways.

It is not surprising that theological overviews of the concept of *koinonia* often rely heavily on Luke's depictions of fellowship within the early church. Luke's writings, especially the book of Acts, succeed in conveying much of the weight of the idea, while demonstrating how a sense of unity and accord in the earliest Christian community served as a powerful cohesive factor and an effective vehicle for witness to the world. However, *koinonia* imagery is by no means exclusive to the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles, and our attention now turns to references in Johannine works.

2.2.2.3 *Koinonia* in Johannine Works

If Lukan reflection on *koinonia* is primarily about portraying a vibrant, loving, and unified Christian community, Johannine thought on the subject largely focuses on presenting this fellowship as a function of a church abiding in Christ, enjoying a unity modelled on the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit. As a result, *koinonia* references in the Gospel and Epistles of John, although not prevalent, mostly revolve around the notion that believers are called together by God to be in communion with each other based on their new life in Jesus Christ. While narratives of friendship, communion and sharing are still present in the Johannine corpus, many (e.g. Blackaby & Blackaby, 2007:31; Van Deusen Hunsinger, 2006:2;

Callahan, 2005:20) agree that the primary view is that of *koinonia* as fellowship grounded upon the relationship between both Christ and the church, and Christ and the Father, through the Spirit.

One first gets a sense of this dimension in John 15, where, although no specific *koinonia* terminology appears, rich imagery is used to portray the unity believers enjoy with one another in Christ. Jesus, who is speaking, uses the metaphor of a vine and branches, identifying himself as “the vine,” and the Father as “the gardener” (v. 1). Believers are called to abide in Christ, “as I also remain in you” (v. 4). The metaphor is then expanded, with the followers of Christ identified as “the branches” (v. 5), and called to “bear much fruit” (v. 8). The figure of speech reaches its climax when Jesus shifts from a vertical to a horizontal relational perspective, calling on his followers to love “...each other as I have loved you” (v. 13). He then names laying down one's life as the epitome of love between friends. It is this multidimensional relationship – a vertical relationship with the Father through Christ, the vine, and a horizontal relationship of self-sacrificial love with other believers – that is the centrepiece of Johannine thought on the concept of *koinonia*.

It is interesting to note that Jesus presents himself in this passage as, what Stevick (2011:188) calls, a “collective reality”. That is, the vine is known to consist of many organically united parts, while Jesus puts himself forward as the entity in which all these parts are held together. This expression is closely related to the Hebrew concept of “corporate personality” (Marttila, 2006:10-13), where entire communities are viewed as so unified that they are described as individual persons. The subtext thus portrays a community so closely knit that it finds its identity in Christ alone. On the strength of this, Stevick (2011:188) argues that the image of the vine can be seen as both ecclesial and christological, in that it points to both the identity of the church in Christ, and the position of Christ as the one who holds it all together.

This passage also implies something about the origin of true *koinonia*. The directive to love one another is not merely give in isolation – it follows from a specific kind of relationship with Christ. To begin with, the church must “remain” in Christ (vv. 4-10) – and it is this relationship which then leads to a practice of self-sacrificial love among his followers (vv. 12-13, 17). These acts of love do not originate merely from the benevolence of members of the Christian

community – it flows naturally as a response of the church to the love of Christ. This, once again, is a reflection of Johannine thought on *koinonia* – only in Christ are we positioned to enjoy true community. Therefore, Blackaby and Blackaby contend (2007:29), we only experience the fullness of God's love for His people in this relationship grounded in Christ.

A similar line of thinking is encountered in the so-called “unity passage” of John 17:11-26, part of a prayer of Christ. Contemplating his self-revelation to his disciples, Jesus appeals to the Father to “...protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one” (v. 11). Once again, both Fuchs (2008:23) and Stevick (2011:359) point to the continuation of the theme of unity as a function of the church’s relationship to the Father in Christ. As in John 15, the relationship of believers with one another is shown to be modelled on the relationship between Father and Son (v. 21). While the directive to love each other is aimed at believers, and presupposes a responsibility on their part, that love’s origin ultimately lies with God (Kariatlis, 2011:104-105).

This theme is carried through to the *prooemium* (opening statement) of the first epistle of John, where we encounter what Fuchs (2008:24) refers to as the heart of Johannine *koinonia* in a reference that includes the first explicit use of *koinonia* terminology in Johannine writings. Referring to eternal life in the Father through Christ, the author of 1 John 1:3 professes to write “...so that you also may have fellowship (κοινωνία) with us”. This is followed by a clarifying statement: “And our fellowship (κοινωνία) is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ”. This clarifying statement is developed further in 1 John 1:6-7, where the author states that those who claim to “...have fellowship (κοινωνία) with him and yet walk in the darkness,” are not included in this community. Those “who walk in the light, as he is in the light,” on the other hand, enjoy “fellowship (κοινωνία) with one another,” through the purifying blood of Jesus.

Van der Merwe (2007:172) identifies the call to fellowship with God and fellow believers in the *prooemium* as one of only two major themes in the epistle (the other, according to him, being "salvation"), and points out that the four *koinonia* references identified above appear in a chiasmic pattern, where the first reference in v. 3 and that in v. 7 point to the fellowship among believers; and the second reference in v. 3 and that in v. 6 point to the fellowship of

believers corporately with the Father and the Son. This A-B-B-A structure serves to emphasise the interrelated nature of the fellowship among believers and their collective fellowship with God the Father. This is in agreement with the view of Straube (2010:171-172), who argues that for true *koinonia* to exist among believers, fellowship must first exist between these believers and God, through the Son. Fuchs (2008:24) latches on to this idea of fellowship rooted in a relationship with God to portray *koinonia* in this passage as a practical dimension of a spiritual reality – it becomes the “translation of inner life to outer witness”. Indeed, in the Johannine view, the new inner life through Christ manifests itself outwardly in the vibrant, selfless and generous fellowship of believers.

It is this eminently practical dimension of *koinonia* that comes across clearly in 1 John 3:16-18, in a passage that reminds strongly of the description of the first community of believers in Acts 4:32-35. In parallel with John 15:13, true love is here equated with the selfless act of Christ laying down his life for the world (1 Jn. 3:16) – but this statement is followed by the declaration that we also “ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters”. Moreover, this love should prompt those with material possessions to take pity on “a brother or sister in need” (v. 17). An exhortation then follows to love not only with words, “but with actions and in truth” (v 18.) In doing so, the author establishes a link between the conceptual basis of *koinonia*, as rooted in the new life of believers through Christ in the Father, and its practical outworking in a life of love and service to the community of the faithful.

Thus, in Johannine works, we encounter a well-rounded theology of fellowship that begins with the believer’s new life in God through his Son, and manifests itself in practical acts of kindness and selfless service to other believers. However, this focus on an interplay between spiritual reality and practical outcome is also characteristic of Pauline thought on the subject, to which we turn next.

2.2.2.4 *Koinonia* in the Pauline Corpus

Corresponding to Johannine and Lukan thought to a great degree, Pauline reflection on *koinonia* constantly returns to the triune God as the source and model for true fellowship. Yet, while the Pauline corpus reveals no radical departures from the Johannine and Lukan line of

thinking, the pastoral slant of this selection of books occasionally allows for a more nuanced exploration of the practical dimension of *koinonia*. This practical focus, along with Paul's distinctive understanding of the role of the Spirit in the life of the community of the faithful, is what sets his views apart from other New testament voices, and no overview of the concept of *koinonia* would be complete without paying due consideration to these elements.

In order to grasp the crux of Paul's thinking on *koinonia*, one must begin with his understanding of the church as the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27), a metaphor employed with great effect to depict both the church's relationship to Christ and the nature of the fellowship between believers. With Christ as the head (Col. 1:18), Paul presents a picture of the church as a "differentiated unity" (Van Deusen Hunsinger, 2006:5), in which each individual part plays an essential role ultimately contributing to the vitality and health of the whole. Fuchs (2008:54) concurs, and adds that the strength of this model lies in the idea that unity does not stem from uniformity, but from the diversity of many parts. Considering passages like 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, where Paul uses inclusive language aimed at both Jews and Gentiles to describe a body "...not made up of one part but of many" (v. 14), it is clear that this idea of unity amidst diversity is deeply entrenched in Pauline thinking. This diversity, although acknowledged, is never presented as an impediment to unity, but rather as a core characteristic of a vibrant Christian community. This comes across particularly forcefully in Galatians 3:28, where Jew and Gentile, both slave and free, both male and female, are presented as "one in Christ Jesus".

This interplay between unity and diversity is reinforced in figures of speech encountered in other parts of the Pauline corpus as well. In Ephesians, for example, an assortment of *koinos* derivatives is used to describe the communion among Christians from a variety of backgrounds. Israel and the Gentiles are described as "heirs together" (συκληρονόμοι), "members together of one body" (σύσωμα) and "sharers" (σύμμετοχοι) in Ephesians 3:6; likewise, Ephesians 2:19 refers to "fellow citizens" (συμπολίται), mirroring language similar to that found in Romans 8:17. It is in the preceding passage in Ephesians that we encounter a similarly striking metaphor for the community of the faithful: that of a building or temple, of which Christ himself is the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). This building, a "holy temple," is said to be "joined together" in Christ (v. 21). Moreover, this is a dwelling God inhabits by his Spirit (v.

22). Considering that this entire passage is directed at a Gentile audience, who are invited to share in the fellowship of the faithful, what emerges from even a cursory reading is a picture of a body of diverse constituents, drawn together in new-found communion with God and each other. This communion is not based merely on a sense of social cordiality, but is held together in Christ, through the Spirit. It is only within this context that diversity becomes a driver towards cohesion, instead of a root of discord.

A careful reading of the abovementioned passage in Ephesians also reveals another distinctive characteristic of the Pauline use of *koinonia*, namely the prominence the Spirit enjoys in Paul's exploration of the concept. This element is underscored by Van Deusen Hunsinger (2006:2) and Fuchs (2008:17) who, along with many others (e.g. Satyavrata, 2009:142-143; Witherington, 2011:57), agree that Paul's position is characterised by a noticeable emphasis on *koinonia* as fellowship in and through the third person of the Trinity. Indeed, Kearsley (2008:17) goes so far as to describe this focus on the role of the Spirit as a "distinctive Pauline emphasis".

The above is evident in the way that Paul repeatedly dwells on the role of the Spirit as agent in the relationship between Christ and his body, and as facilitator of the fellowship amongst believers. The epistles to the Corinthians, for example, contain several strong references in this regard. In one of his best-known benedictions, Paul prays that the grace of Christ, the love of the Father and "the fellowship (*κοινωνία*) of the Spirit" would sustain the church (2 Cor. 13:14). This follows in the wake of the assertion in 1 Corinthians 6:17 that all who are united with Christ is "one with him in spirit". Likewise, 1 Corinthians 12:13 describes how all believers have been "baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body," and that they have all been given "the one Spirit to drink". Even the gifts of the Spirit are given for "the common good" of all believers (1 Corinthians 12:7), once again casting the third person in the Trinity in the role of the one who moves the community of the faithful towards unity and cohesion. This theme is equally prominent in the epistle to the Philippians, who are said to enjoy a "common sharing in the Spirit" (Phil. 2:1). It is on account of this reality that Paul exhorts his readers to be "one in spirit and one of mind" (Phil. 2:2). Thus, in the Pauline view, the practical sense of unity and accord in the body of Christ flows naturally from a common bond in the Spirit.

There is more to Paul's understanding of Christian fellowship than just this conceptual theological framework, however, and it is in his vivid depiction of the practical dimension of *koinonia* that its true weight and significance comes to the fore. Indeed the Pauline corpus, more than any other body of work, presents the reader with a view of what *koinonia* looks like in real terms. With his theological premise for true fellowship as a foundation, Paul takes the leap from the conceptual to the concrete by painting a compelling picture of the mutuality and reciprocity that should characterise the community of the faithful when they enjoy true fellowship with Christ and each other through his Spirit. This is achieved by using language of participation and togetherness (Fuchs, 2008:16) to demonstrate how believers should co-exist in "profoundly connected relationship" (Augsberger, 2006:69). What emerges is a narrative of authentic unity, where those who are in Christ are drawn together and share in each other's suffering and joy – not just in a spiritual sense, but in practical and tangible ways.

The epistle to the Philippians presents this in a captivating way. Having reminded believers of the common bond they share in the Spirit (Phil. 2:1), Paul proceeds to list his expectations with regards to the conduct of those who belong to the community of the faithful: Those who share in this bond, he explains, should do nothing out of selfish ambition, but value others above themselves (v. 3), while continually taking their fellow believers' interests into account (v. 4). He then points to the example of Christ, who "made himself nothing" (v. 6) by becoming a servant, as a model for Christian relationships.

The preceding appeal is mirrored in other Pauline writings, notably in Ephesians 4, where Paul calls on the faithful to live a life "worthy of the calling" they have received (v. 1) through a commitment to selfless acts of accommodation. Attributes like humility, gentleness, and patience are highlighted, whilst believers are also asked to "bear with one another in love" (v. 2). Against this backdrop, Paul exhorts believers to make every effort to "maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (v.3).

Fowl (2012:132) emphasises the choice of the word "maintain" in the abovementioned passage in Ephesians, noting that it indicates a pre-existing unity. This unity, he argues, flows from a union with Christ through the Spirit, and does not find its ultimate source in the members of the community themselves. With regards to the expression the "bond of peace"

used here, it is also worth noting that peace is presented elsewhere in Pauline letters as a gift of the Spirit (*cf.* Gal. 5:22, Rom. 8:6, 14:17, 15:13). MacDonald (2008:287) points out that the idea of a “bond” as unifying agent is often encountered in philosophical writings of the day; the Pythagoreans, for example, regarded friendship as the bond of all virtues. In this instance, peace, gifted by the Spirit, acts as the bond holding the community together. Thus, the unity described here rests on a foundation upheld by the Spirit – and any practical manifestation of *koinonia* flows from this reality. In other words, the selfless acts Paul calls for aren’t to be seen as superficial attempts at building a sense of cohesion – they flow naturally from the pre-existing, deep bond of unity that exists among believers in the Spirit. They are a result of *koinonia*, and not the primary means by which it is achieved.

In line with Ephesians, the first epistle to the Corinthians also highlights concrete characteristics of true community as it is revealed in the everyday life of the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:9, believers are reminded that God has called them into fellowship (κοινωνία) with his Son, which is followed by an “appeal” in v. 10 to “agree with one another” and to guard against any divisions within the community. Oster (2005:51) notes that Paul’s specific use of the term “appeal” (παρακαλέω) in v. 10 is significant, as this term was often used in Greek documents to underscore the seriousness of a request. This urgent petition to live in accord with one another culminates in an admonition to be “perfectly united in mind and thought” (v. 10; *cf.* 2 Cor. 13:11). Paul himself provides the context to this appeal in v. 11-17, when he claims to have received word of factions and quarrels within the church. When seen against this background, it becomes clear that being “perfectly united” does not primarily entail full theological agreement on doctrinal minutiae; rather, what is sought here is a sense of like-mindedness, or, as Van Wyk (2009:54) describes it, a body “one in spirit and purpose”. Thus, the primary focus of this passage appears to be on the promotion of harmonious relationships between believers, grounded in their fellowship with Christ. In the Pauline view, this like-mindedness acts as a safeguard against division.

Another practical dimension of *koinonia* is revealed in the book of Romans, where generosity and reciprocity are portrayed as a natural outcome of true communion. This aspect is highlighted in Romans 15:26, where Paul identifies the monetary contribution from believers in Macedonia and Achaia to the church in Jerusalem as a “fellowship” (κοινωνίαν). Kariatlis

(2011:41) describes the essence of this aspect of *koinonia* as "participatory unity", where reciprocity through sharing meets the needs of not only local communities, but of the body of Christ as a whole. This is also encountered in other Pauline letters, where the word *koinonia* introduced by the preposition *eis* has the meaning of contribution, or almsgiving (2 Cor. 8:3-4; 9:13; Phil. 1:6). On the strength of these passages, Witherington (2011:57) and others (e.g. Fuchs, 2008:17; Heywood, 2011:121-122) argue that the sharing of material goods and financial gifts, especially by remembering the needy, is integral to true *koinonia*. When one considers the accounts in Romans and 2 Corinthians of the collections among believers in Asia for the church in Jerusalem – keeping in mind that these activities were a key part of Paul's missionary efforts – it becomes apparent that this lifestyle of generosity through the sharing of material wealth was a central characteristic of community in the early church.

Finally, due attention should also be paid to the way Paul connects *koinonia* with the sense of partnership in mission that prevailed in the New Testament church. Here, "partnership in mission" refers to the idea that members of the community of the faithful should share a sense of solidarity and common purpose – a notion that is often implicit in Pauline passages where *koinonia* terminology is encountered. This sense of solidarity, Heywood argues (2011:122), could either be shared joyfully (for example the "partnership," or *koinonia*, between Paul and the Philippian church in Phil. 1:5,7) or forged with difficulty (for example the right hand of "fellowship" – another *koinonia* reference – extended to Paul and Barnabas by the apostles in Jerusalem in Galatians 2:6-10). Whether naturally or with effort, the general sense that prevails in the Pauline letters is that those who share in communion with Christ should share a sense of common purpose, even though they may be separated in terms of geographical location (like Paul and the churches he was responsible for), or in terms of religious and cultural background (as was the case with the Jews and the Gentiles he wrote to). It is this drive towards partnership in mission that serves as one of the main motivations behind the council of Jerusalem (Gal. 2; cf. Acts 15); and it is this ideal that is arguably one of the primary objectives behind Paul's pastoral epistles.

From the above, it is clear that Paul's theology aligns with that of John and Luke in the sense that he portrays *koinonia* as grounded in the relationship between Christ and the church (1 Cor. 1:9; Eph. 4:13). However, Paul's focus on the role of the Holy Spirit in this fellowship, as

well as his compelling depiction of what *koinonia* looks like in concrete terms in the life of the church, illuminates the matter in a distinctive way. Clearly, no theology of *koinonia* would be complete without taking the Pauline stance into account; yet, at the same time, it is evident that Paul's position should not be considered in isolation, as it is woven into a rich tapestry of New Testament thought on the subject. Paul's voice illuminates, and is illuminated by, the voices of John, Luke, and other New Testament writers.

2.2.2.5 Other *Koinonia* References

While the *koinonia* references discussed in the preceding sections represent the main thrust of the New Testament's message in this regard, the concept is explicitly mentioned in a limited number of passages elsewhere – although the meaning in these instances is in line with its use in Pauline, Johannine and Lukan sources. These direct mentions include Heb. 13:16, where the word is once again used in reference to material or financial contributions in support of the preaching of the gospel (*cf.* Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13); and 2 Peter 1:4, where the communal life of the triune God is referenced once more by describing believers as partakers (κοινωνοί) in the divine nature. In both instances, these *koinonia* derivatives clearly carry the same meaning as they do in John, Luke, and Paul's writings.

In order to develop a nuanced understanding of the concept, however, it is also necessary to consider passages where *koinonia* terminology is not explicitly used, but where the focus clearly falls on relational matters and the characteristics of true Christian community. Horrell (2004:80), for example, contends that New Testament writers often imply that an individual's relationship with God is somehow reflected in his or her horizontal relationships with others. This is evident in the sheer volume of passages that outline expectations for the believer's conduct within the body of Christ as a direct consequence of his newfound life in Christ. Indeed, one is hard pressed to find a passage where the believer's position in Christ does not have at least some kind of practical implication for the way he is to behave within the community of the faithful.

The most constructive way to provide an overview of the above is to consider what Milburn (2007:77) refers to as "one another passages" – a selection of passages in the New Testament

where the text revolves around the way Christians are expected to treat each other in order to build healthy communal ties and foster true *koinonia*. In these passages, encountered throughout most of the New Testament, believers are exhorted, among many other things, to love one another (e.g. John 13:34; 15:12,17; Rom. 12:10; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 Pet. 4:8), live in harmony with one another (Rom. 12:16; 1 Pet. 3:8), encourage one another (1 Thess. 4:18; Heb. 3:13), bear with one another (Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:13), and accept one another (Rom. 15:7). Likewise, in 1 Thess. 5, believers are urged to live in peace with each other (v. 13), and to “encourage the disheartened” and “help the weak,” while being patient with each other (v. 14). It goes without saying that all these directives and exhortations are aimed at building healthy Christian communities. In every one of these instances, this behaviour is presented as a natural and necessary consequence of the believer’s position in Christ.

Clearly, seen in the light of passages like these, the idea of *koinonia* amounts to more than merely a novel concept brought up on occasion. Where it is explicitly mentioned, one is confronted with a compelling picture of what true community within the body of Christ is supposed to look like; on the other hand, even when the term is not expressly used, it is clear that the larger New Testament corpus promotes an ideal of true, deep, and meaningful fellowship and an abiding sense of unity and solidarity between those who have been united in Christ.

All things considered, it can’t be denied that the biblical perspective on *koinonia* is rich and multi-faceted, and the Lukan, Johannine, and Pauline books certainly take the lead in illuminating the theology behind this idea. Yet, it should be emphasised that we are not just dealing with a purely theoretical construct, but with a concept that ultimately finds a practical expression in the communal life of the local church. As a result our focus now shifts to an exploration of this practical dimension based on the scriptural insights uncovered in the preceding section.

2.2.3 *Koinonia* in Practice

While a keen understanding of the biblical perspective on true fellowship is crucial, this study also requires an insight into what *koinonia* looks like in real terms in a functioning community

of believers. In the light of the biblical overview above, the question thus follows: What are the key characteristics of a community where true *koinonia* is experienced? This question can be answered by identifying a number of common themes and patterns emerging from the biblical overview offered in the preceding pages.

The following themes are particularly prominent in the biblical overview provided above, and represent the key concepts that repeatedly arise from the text. As such, they also represent the themes that the theological scholarly community generally engage with when the topic of *koinonia* is under discussion:

2.2.3.1 Unity

If there is one element common to all biblical allusions to *koinonia*, it is the notion of unity within the body of Christ. Of course Fuchs (2008:442) reminds us that any theology of the church is a theology of unity, but it is within the context of *koinonia* that the idea truly comes into its own. Whether it is as a central feature of the narrative in definitive *koinonia* passages like Acts 4:32-35 and John 17:11-26, or as implicit premise in instances like Paul's description of the church as the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-5, 1 Cor. 12:12-27), unity emerges as a defining characteristic of true *koinonia*.

The reason for this deep sense of unity, as Kariatlis (2011:5) points out, is that it is not merely based on sociological or even political alignment between individuals, but modelled on the divine triune communion between God the Father, Son and Spirit – a relationship that serves as the archetype of the unity within the church. Believers partake in this unity when they are united with Christ through the redemptive work of the Son (Phil. 2:1), and become members of His body, the church (1 Cor. 12:27). Christ Himself alludes to this model of unity in John 17 when he asks the Father to grant that those who believe in Him would be one, “just as you are in me and I am in you” (v. 21). Thus, unity within the body of Christ does not rest on a fragile foundation of “tolerance” merely for the sake of social cohesion. Nor is this a unity where members of a community simply live together amicably for their own advancement. This unity is rooted in none other than Christ.

Since this unity constitutes an expression of a divine reality, it can be expected to transcend the divisions of secular society – and indeed it does so, uniting groups from different social strata and cultural backgrounds, making nonsense of ruling social conventions and divisions. Those of different levels of wealth and status are united as brothers and sisters, functioning as one in God’s household (1 Tm. 3:15). This subversion of social divides continues to the degree where there is “neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female,” since all are one in Christ (Gal. 3:28). In the same vein, Heywood (2011:121) emphasises the way Paul approaches the situation with the slave Onesimus in his letter to Philemon. Counter to the prevailing social norm of the time, Paul expresses the hope that Philemon would actively share (κοινωνία) his faith by receiving Onesimus not as a slave, but as “a dear brother” (Phil. 1:16). Clearly, pre-existing social conventions are cast by the wayside in the name of unity where true *koinonia* is experienced.

2.2.3.2 Relational Focus

At the root of human existence, says Rice (2009:28), is our great need for intimate connection not only with God, but also with one another – and it is hard to think of any other context where this deep desire for relationship is met in such a meaningful way. Both the etymological overview and the biblical study presented earlier in this chapter clearly demonstrate that communities where true *koinonia* is experienced, will be characterised by vibrant interpersonal relationships and a deep and abiding bond of solidarity and intimacy between believers. Thus, whenever *koinonia* is under discussion, the focus falls on ideas like meaningful fellowship (e.g. Kim, 2009:144), communal living (e.g. Snyder, 2004:75-76), and even friendship (e.g. Kearsley, 2008:14-15). These aspects represent what Fuchs (2008:13) refers to as the “relational core” of *koinonia*.

The quality of these relationships should also be considered, however, as true *koinonia* presupposes a specific kind of relationship not encountered in other milieus. In this regard Heywood (2011:121) explains that *koinonia* does not simply entail shallow interpersonal interaction, but true fellowship rooted in common participation in the life of the risen Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Kearsley (2008:14) argues, these relationships should reflect authentic love and a remarkable degree of like-mindedness. Augsberger

(2006:72) agrees, and emphasises that this kind of relationship develops over time due to a believer's desire to join together with others in the household of God to pursue a common purpose. It also entails a "stubborn loyalty" to fellow believers despite differences (Augsberger, 2006:69), as well as a sense of "reciprocal responsibility" towards one another (Kim, 2009:144).

With this relational character of *koinonia* in mind, it is also important to consider the extent to which this concept stands as the antithesis to notions of individualism and independence. Augsberger (2006:69), for example, argues that a life lived in relationship requires the surrender of the individual self. Fuchs (2008:33) concurs, contrasting notions like "corporate identity" and "corporate mission" with the selfish individualism so characteristic of the modern Western malady. Likewise, Kariatlis (2011:22) sees *koinonia* as the force that saves us from "the impasse of isolationism and alienation". In the opinion of these and other scholars, a community where true *koinonia* is experienced, always moves towards meaningful fellowship, inclusivity, communality, interdependence, and attachment; and away from selfish gain, exclusivity, individualism, independence, and isolation.

In closing, the relational character of *koinonia* also has an impact on the language we use to describe the church. Kärkkäinen (2007:4) singles out the Pentecostal movement in particular, noting that congregations in this grouping often choose to refer to themselves as "fellowships". This is a clear indication of the relational character envisioned for these communities, and reflects the relational core of *koinonia*. Regardless of denominational bent, though, it is clearly more appropriate to think about congregations in familial, rather than institutional terms.

2.2.3.3 Sharing

In addition to unity and a clear focus on relationship, one would expect a community where *koinonia* is experienced to also emphasise the sharing of material benefits. This sharing, which could entail anything from almsgiving to the poor and needy, to support for relief projects or missionary activity, is especially prominent in the Lukan and Pauline view of community. One only needs to consider the accounts in Romans 15 and 2 Corinthians 8 of the collections

among believers in Asia for the church in Jerusalem, or the vivid account of generosity conveyed in Acts 2, to come to the conclusion that sharing is a key feature of true biblical fellowship.

The goal of this sharing, according to Fuchs (2008:17), is to meet the needs of the whole community, while Heywood (2011:121) also sees it as an expression of affection and partnership between fellow believers working towards the same objective. It is Kearsley (2008:22), however, who makes the most striking observation by recognising that this focus on sharing is, at its most fundamental level, a reflection of the basic orientation of a *koinonia* community: it is not self-serving, but has an outward focus. Wherever true *koinonia* exists, this selfless outward focus is made manifest in real acts of generosity and kindness to the benefit of those in need.

2.2.3.4 Caring

Where believers live in *koinonia*, there exists a web of loving relationships that allows for ongoing care and support for all members of the community. This hallmark of authentic *koinonia*, which Augsberger describes as a kind of “responsive fellowship” (2006:69) – with believers selflessly and spontaneously responding to the needs of others on an ongoing basis – grows out of a genuine concern for the wellbeing of all members of the community. This kind of selfless love in service of the interest of others (Phil. 2:4) is a distinct characteristic of the faith communities described in passages like Acts 2:42-47 and 3:32-36, and finds its expression in practical acts of care that could include, amongst other things, personal encouragement (Rom. 12:8, 2 Cor. 13:11), hospitality (Rom. 12:13), acts of compassion (Eph. 4:32, Col. 3:12), and even admonishment (Col. 3:16) or the extension of forgiveness (Eph. 4:32, Col. 3:13).

In this context, Augsberger (2006:75) also highlights the significance of the community as the natural setting for healing – and specifically as a setting for pastoral care. Indeed, Van Deusen Hunsinger (2006:3) argues that *koinonia* is the fellowship that makes pastoral care possible in the first place, as it creates an environment where members are accepted, sustained, and guided, but where they can also be confronted and corrected. In this view, pastoral care is the work of the whole community, and not simply that of ordained staff (Van Deusen Hunsinger,

2006:4). The entire community, argues Kearsley (2008:99), should be involved in this ongoing process of care and support, while Kim (2009:144) portrays it as an opportunity that allows every individual believer to model the love of God in their actions toward others.

The value of these acts of care and support should not be underestimated either. In her study on the praxis of pastoral care, Van Deusen Hunsinger (2006:25), for example, argues that corporate acts of care by a congregation as a whole, and by various subgroups in it, are generally considered to be far more meaningful by those experiencing a personal crisis than anything an ordained pastor could do as an individual. It could well be said that the care of the community communicates the grace and love of God in a tangible sense. Latini (2011:125) confirms this view, claiming that these acts of communal care build an environment of trust and encouragement, where the needs of every individual member are met.

2.2.3.5 Witnessing

Koinonia also teaches us that the church as a fellowship is not a communion that exists for its own sake. It is, as Kärkkäinen (2007:9) describes it, “open to the world”. Likewise, Kearsley (2008:21) is careful to highlight the idea that *koinonia* does not point to a “communal comfort zone” isolated from the world around it, but that Christian communities should have an outward focus. Indeed, any Christian congregation that does not share this orientation, can hardly be considered authentic (Kearsly, 2008:22). Thus, while Christian fellowship is aimed at fostering unity and solidarity, Fuchs (2008:19) rightly contends that its effect should extend beyond the borders of the faith community itself to the whole human community.

With this in mind, Snyder (2004: 117) argues forcefully that the evangelistic mandate on the church does not rest on individual believers, but that it should be a function of the church as a community. Therefore, in the concept of *koinonia*, Kearsley (2008:22) and others (e.g. Augsburg, 2006:71; Kärkkäinen, 2007:9) see an opportunity to bear witness to the work of Christ in a way that will impact a wider network of people. Each person is called to give his or her unique witness (Van Deusen Hunsinger, 2006:19) within the context of a community that ultimately reaches out far beyond its own internal life. The appeal to the church in 1 Peter 2:12 comes to mind, where the body of Christ is reminded to live in such a way that others

would “see your good deeds and glorify God” (cf. Phil. 2:15). It is hard to imagine a more effective witness to the transformational power of the gospel than that of a vibrant community where true *koinonia* is experienced, and where the love of Christ finds a practical expression on an everyday basis in the actions of believers.

In support of this theme of *koinonia* as witness, Snyder (2004: 117) refers to two phrases often employed in Acts when the communal life of the body of Christ is under discussion: the idea of “bearing witness” (μαρτυρεῖν) and “proclaiming” the gospel (εὐαγγελίζεσθαι). These ideas occur in one form or another more than twenty times in the book of Acts (e.g. Acts 5:42; 8:4,12,25; 14:7; 26:5) alone, demonstrating that bearing witness to the good news of Christ and the resurrection was a primary concern and essential dynamic in the life of the early church. This supports Kärkkäinen’s vision (2007:9) of the church as close-knit *koinonia* community serving as a “sign to the world,” and ties in with the prayer of Jesus that the church would be one “so that the world may believe” (cf. John 17:21).

Clearly, the concept of *koinonia* represents a unique platform for witness to the world, and should be seen as an opportunity to extend the reach of the church far beyond the boundaries of the local congregation. While one must agree with Blackaby and Blackaby (2007:29) when they argue that true *koinonia*, in its fullest expression, can only be found in the local church, it should not be forgotten that this unity should ultimately result in consistent and powerful witness to the world.

In summary, the concept of *koinonia* has proven to be a dynamic and multi-faceted construct that elucidates the church’s place in the world in a unique way. From its roots in the ultimate model for Christian community, the Trinity, to its rich relational character and practical manifestation in acts of kindness, generosity, and witness to the world, *koinonia* represents a fertile framework for our thought on Christian fellowship. As such, it offers a compelling vision of what the body of Christ can and should be.

It is with this dynamic biblical ideal for community as a backdrop that we now turn our attention to a relatively recent, yet undeniably important development that could, according to indications in the work of some (e.g. Lytle, 2013; Rice, 2009; Vogt, 2011), have a profound

impact on our understanding of what it means to live in fellowship with others. This 21st-century phenomenon represents a seismic shift in the landscape of relationships and communication and could, in the estimation of many, profoundly alter the dynamics governing social interaction in all kinds of group settings – including within Christian congregations. We refer, of course, to the rise of online communities and the social media sphere, which in recent years has raised a number of questions about the possible implications of this phenomenon for human relationships and true Christian fellowship.

2.3 Social Media and the Christian Community

The preceding overview of the concept of *koinonia* unpacked an optimistic and stirring vision of the potential depth and vibrancy of authentic Christian fellowship. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a more positive and empowering context within which to pursue corporate life. Yet, Ward (2009:24) cautions that no discussion of communal life – even against the backdrop of an idea as fertile and multidimensional as *koinonia* – is complete if it does not take into account the wider framework within which that community exists. It is important to keep in mind that the church, as the body of Christ, pursues its vision and mission within a broader context of ideas, ideologies, cultures, and influences, and any meaningful statement about the nature of the church's existence as a community should take these realities into account.

One of these realities – and certainly a recurring theme in an increasing number of theological studies that deal with Christian communities and relationships (e.g. Brock, 2010; Campbell, 2005, 2009; Rice, 2009) – is the ever-increasing influence of digital technology and the computer on virtually all fields of human endeavour. From the personal computer revolution of the 1980s, to the rise of the global digital information network we refer to as the Internet in the 1990s, to the current transition to powerful, yet small cellular devices in what has been dubbed the “mobile revolution” (Bengi, Lee, & Park, 2011), one would be hard pressed to identify a single sphere of modern life that is not somehow influenced by this phenomenon. To say that digital technology has transformed the world within which communities function seems almost axiomatic.

Not surprisingly, the influence of this digital revolution is also evident in the spheres of human communication and social interaction – and nowhere is this more apparent than in the rapid rise and continued popularity of so-called digital social networks. These networks, known to computer and mobile phone users across the world in many guises – whether in the form of popular Internet based social media platforms like Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>) and Twitter (<http://twitter.com>), or as niche online communities like Pinterest (<http://www.pinterest.com>) and LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>) – have gained a truly global audience (Pérez-Latre, 2013:46), becoming a virtual meeting place for hundreds of millions of users, and facilitating interpersonal interaction on a grand scale. Indeed, for many users, these networks now constitute the very framework within which the majority of their social interactions take place.

The next stage of this study will be devoted to an overview of the rise and significance of these digital social networks, and their role in Christian communities, particularly within urban contexts. In order to do so in a meaningful manner, this overview will commence by outlining a number of foundational concepts that will systematically and progressively reveal the nature and scope of the social media sphere, after which its significance in terms of Christian communal life can be more fruitfully considered. With this in mind, we now proceed with an introduction to one of the basic conceptual constructs underlying the notion of an online social community – an idea commonly referred to as the so-called Network Society.

2.3.1 Understanding the Network Society

Any attempt to understand the social media sphere requires, first and foremost, familiarity with an intriguing concept popularized by sociologist Manuel Castells in his seminal work *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996). This concept, now widely referred to as the Network Society, presents a view of the world as a body of interconnected communities where individuals, largely due to the influence of telecommunications technology and the Internet, increasingly cluster in collectives, or networks, to exchange information and interact socially. In this view, the world consists of a conglomeration of interconnections and interdependencies, where individuals are increasingly connected to each other due to the ever-extending reach of information technology. In practice, this translates to a highly

decentralized network of relationships in which resources and information are shared spontaneously and mutually around the world like never before (Zscheile, 2008:152). It is clear that the idea of a network serves as a particularly powerful metaphor through which this reality can be articulated.

From the outset, it is important to note that Cavanagh (2007:38) and others (e.g. El Gamal, 2010; Garson, 2006) express a commitment to understanding these networks as constituting a genuinely new form of social order, and not merely as a new framework within which to reinterpret a pre-existing social order. The Network Society is not merely a way to reimagine a matrix of interpersonal relationships as they have always existed – it points to a new state of affairs that has arisen around new, powerful, and flexible information and telecommunications technologies like the Internet. These technologies allow for instant communication and messaging on a global scale, and a level of interactivity and ease of communication that is unparalleled in history (Birzescu & Gajjala, 2010:78). All of this contributes to a new reality where ideas, information, and even cultural views can be transferred across national boundaries to a much greater degree than ever before (Vrasidas & Zembylas, 2005:67).

As a result, Van Dijk (2012:172-174) points out that communication and social interaction in the Network Society are not hampered by traditional spatial limitations like geography. In fact, the physical location of a participant in a network often has no bearing whatsoever on his level of involvement or ability to interact with other members of that network. This leads to networks or communities that are much more diffuse than they were in the past (Van Dijk, 2012:45), since individuals aren't restricted to participation only in local networks, and can be active in networks they would not previously have been able to participate in due to their physical location. In fact, it is no longer unusual for individuals to have multiple connections on a global scale (Barnard, 2010:73). This leads Garson (2006:7-8, 108) to portray the Network Society as the modern embodiment of the oft-pictured "global village," an idea first popularised by McLuhan (1962), who envisioned a society where individuals could connect and communicate with others across the world in a virtually frictionless manner. Indeed, the similarities between these two metaphors are striking, since both allude to a world where

physical location is no longer a deciding factor in one's ability to engage with others on a sustained basis.

In this scenario, cultural and socio-economic dividing lines are also blurred, since individuals are exposed to a plethora of different cultural ideas and worldviews that, in times past, would have existed outside of their immediate frame of reference. Barnard (2010:73) points to a "constant circulation of values and ideas" based on the fact that individuals are continuously exposed to the views, traditions, and cultures of other members within their networks. A particularly striking example of this phenomenon can be seen in the so-called Arab Spring, a recent series of political uprisings among the Arab nations, which according to Howard (2012) grew out of dissatisfaction with systemic societal inequalities that, in large part, were highlighted in the public consciousness due to the Arab world's increased exposure to external influences and dissenting views through mediums like social media. This discontent was not, as is typical in history, confined to a particular socio-economic group, but circled out across social strata and even national borders thanks to what Tredinnick refers to as the "interconnectedness of digital discourse" (2008:133) – in other words, the remarkable degree to which different groups within the Network Society freely take part in common conversations. That this is a practical reality, and not merely theoretical conjecture, can be seen in the free interaction between those involved in the uprisings, and communities in Western countries, which often played an active role in encouraging and mobilising dissenters thanks to digital communication channels like social networks (Bussmann, 2011:11, 26-30). Even though, for example, there exists a gulf of difference between the socio-economic and cultural reality of young Westerners in the United States of America and their Egyptian counterparts, research shows that young Americans played a more significant and active role than any other group in mobilising Egyptians during the period of the Arab Spring (Bussmann, 2011:29). Thus, the idea that cultural and socio-economic dividing lines tend to become blurred in a Network Society is firmly rooted in praxis.

Yet, there is nuance to this narrative of an interconnected society, since a counter-trend of increased fragmentation is also discernible. Van Dijk (2012:31), for example, contends that fixed group and organisational structures tend to be "loosened" in the Network Society, since individuals are free to organise into multiple virtual communities. As a result traditional local

collectives, such as communities, church groups, and even extended families, tend to hold less sway since their members are free to partake in numerous other networks. This, argues Van Dijk, ultimately leads to the formation of different kinds of communities: While previously, bureaucratic and vertically organised modes of organisation prevailed, in the Network Society there is a marked shift to communities that consist of people who on the one hand continue to live and work within the context of their own neighbourhoods, families, and organisations, but on the other hand are active in large-scale social networks that are much more diffuse than traditional ones (Van Dijk, 2012:45). In other words, it is clear that interconnectedness should not be confused with consolidation – communities are more connected to each other than ever before, but in many ways they are also more open and more loosely defined. Whereas in the past an individual's identity would be tied to a great extent to the local communities within which he functioned, that same individual may now have multiple ties to many communities or networks across the globe.

Of course it should be noted in closing that the concept of a Network Society is a multi-faceted idea with far-reaching economic, political and societal implications that transcend the scope of what is being addressed in this study. However, in the context of this document it represents a useful framework for our thinking on the nature of the world within which communities now function.

2.3.2 Understanding Online Communities

Although the idea of online groups as "communities" can be traced back to the very founding documents of the network we know today as the Internet (e.g. Licklider & Taylor, 1968), it was American writer Howard Rheingold who, in 1993, perfectly captured the communal nature of participation in the emerging world wide web with his tome entitled *Virtual Communities: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Setting the tone for future discussion about online activity, this book firmly established the idea of a "community" as the dominant metaphor for interaction and participation in the online sphere. In fact, Parks (2011:105) explains how this metaphor soon displaced all other figures of speech used to frame discussion about the Internet, with other early ideas like that of an "information superhighway" soon falling by the wayside.

Rheingold described these early Internet communities as “social aggregations” that emerged when public discussions carried on for long enough to form “webs of personal relationships” (1993:5), and it soon became clear that these communal activities would become the backbone of the world wide web itself. Indeed, collective participation became the driving force behind a number of key online activities – from the early User Groups of the 1980s, that allowed users to share their knowledge on specific topics and hobbies in basic, text-only online information bulletins, and in mailing lists and offline meetings (Hansen, Schneiderman, & Smith, 2011:129); to the online discussion forums with their threaded conversations that today still serve as the main platform for conversation in many online communities (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2010:173); and the so-called Listserv groups, especially popular in the 1990s, that allowed interest groups to create their own community email lists to distribute information about chosen topics (Shankar, 2010:533). Each of these early scenarios hinted at the suitability of the Internet as a natural setting for the formation of communities – even if these communities initially had to be defined in somewhat unconventional terms, and Hansen, Schneiderman, and Smith (2011:129) rightly point out that surprisingly meaningful relationships – with active, personally invested participants who established their own group cultures and customs – developed around many of these early online services.

In the wake of these early developments, interest in the online sphere as a setting for the formation of communities blossomed, and a succession of academic studies attempted to define what the notion of a community could mean in this new context. Questions mainly revolved – and still do – around the extent to which these online settings allow for authentic social interaction, meaningful conversation, and genuine connection to others (Parks, 2011:106). As expected, the nature of these enquiries has also evolved through the course of time.

Campbell (2010, 236-243) identifies three waves of research around the topic, the first of which, beginning with Rheingold’s seminal work (1993), focused on attempts to define online communities through highly descriptive ethnographic studies. These studies, undertaken as the Internet began to emerge as a more prominent vehicle for communication and self-expression, largely centred on the characteristics of these communities and their participants.

Among these was Lohead's (1997) study of online Christian discussion groups, who, according to the author, began to form "a sense of identity as a community that existed independently of whatever service they chose for their electronic communication" (Lohead, 1997:53). This tendency emerged as a defining characteristic of communities in the online milieu. Throughout this initial period, conclusions about the nature of these online communities were either strongly dystopian, painting a gloomy picture of inauthentic social ties that would ultimately lead to isolation and the breakdown of meaningful relationships (e.g. Kraut *et al.*, 1998); or purely utopian, positing an attractive future with a strong communal focus thanks to the intrinsically social nature of online activities (e.g. Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

The second wave of research, starting around the turn of the century, moved from a focus on definitions, to reflection on the different roles and structures within online communities (Campbell, 2010:239), in order to gain a more rounded understanding of the behaviour of participants within these groups. Behavioural patterns and the flow of communication in online environments were compared to those in conventional offline communities (e.g. Young, 2004), while the focus also shifted to the ways involvement in online communities shaped the behaviour of members in the offline world. The varying levels of attachment of members to these online communities were also considered (e.g. Blanchard & Markus, 2004).

The third wave – over the course of the last decade – has revolved around the mapping of dominant trends within these communities, and is marked by a shift towards a more interpretive focus (Campbell, 2010:240), since the growing body of knowledge on the subject now enables researchers to make more substantive claims and predictions about life online. These third-wave studies aim to build on previous work by developing a more nuanced understanding of the social functions of online community, and tend to avoid the purely utopian or dystopian conclusions of earlier studies – a trend that is mirrored in research about online religious communities. Rice, for example (2009:110, 147), is careful to acknowledge that a lack of face-to-face interaction in the online context could be detrimental to relationships within Internet-based Christian groups, even though his central thesis is that these online communities bring believers closer together. This more nuanced approach is also evident in the work of Drescher (2011), Vogt (2011) and others.

Throughout this ever-evolving discussion, however, the single most prominent recurring theme has been the quest to determine whether these online groups should be considered “real” communities – that is to say, whether they possess any or all of the qualities generally attributed to communities in the conventional sense. As with all other issues in this line of enquiry, this question has been answered in both positive and negative terms, although Karyda and Kokolakis (2008:255) rightly acknowledge that many of the initial misgivings about virtual communities have faded away as questions around the nature of these communities have been redefined with the passing of time.

Those who choose to err on the side of caution have been quick to point to the lack of face-to-face interaction in the online sphere, where members of “communities” may never actually meet each other in person, and all communication is mediated by computer (Pfeil, 2011:126). This, in Pfeil’s thinking, masks differences between people that might be obvious – and problematic – in offline conversations. Pfeil (2011:126, 130) also argues that online communication offers fewer cues for the perception of others, and thus, by extension, for the construction of a social context; while the anonymity usually associated with virtual settings opens up the possibility of misrepresentation of a participant’s character or background. The quality of interpersonal interaction in these communities has also been questioned – Hipps (2005:111), for example, refers to a kind of “intimate anonymity,” where interaction involves very little real risk, and demands very little of participants, since they can sever ties with an online community at will without real-world consequences. Norris (2004:33) concurs, explaining that commitment to a particular online group can often be shallow when another group is a mere mouse click away. It is against this background that some, especially in the early days of the Internet, have questioned whether online communities can be considered “real” communities.

Optimists, on the other hand, claim that these virtual communities offer a unique and unprecedented opportunity to gather groups of people from many different backgrounds around social, cultural, or civic purposes (e.g. Boyd, 2011:39). These communities are seen to connect individuals with a world beyond their close friends and family, drawing them into groups that may previously not have been accessible to them (Gould, 2013:53). Some also claim that these virtual networks serve an important role in reinforcing and strengthening

existing relationships (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Pérez-Latre, 2013:48), while also functioning as a platform for the development of new connections and a place where users can participate in meaningful and lively conversations (Stromer-Galley & Wischowski, 2010:170). The general narrative of these highly optimistic studies is that of a society where people from disparate backgrounds and circumstances are persistently unified in a web of vibrant online relationships across geographical and social borders.

Increasingly, however, as of late the extremes of uncritical optimism and unwarranted negativity are being avoided in academic reflection on the topic of online community, and the perceived dichotomy between online and offline worlds is making way for a more balanced and considered view. Unlike in early studies, the Internet is no longer portrayed as a reality separate from the "real world," but as an extension of it, with the result that online communities are now depicted as "new" kinds of communities that aren't governed by conventional social rules. De George (2009:34), for example, acknowledges that online groups should probably not be defined as communities in the conventional sense of the word, but goes on to argue that they can still serve as a platform where real social needs are met, and where people gather together for personal enrichment and a sense of belonging. Estes (2009:74) is also mindful of the limitations of Internet-based groups, citing examples of churches that use their online presence to disseminate information without actually engaging with members; yet, he is fundamentally optimistic about online community and explores the idea of "virtual churches" that serve as gathering places for congregants when they aren't physically present at a church location (2009:76). This seems to be in line with the thinking of Cowan and Dawson (2004:6), who describe the Internet as "both mirror and... shadow" of the offline world. Collectively, these views represent a new tendency to think critically about the shortcomings of the online space as a platform for community, while also acknowledging the positive role it could play. Instead of contrasting the online and offline worlds with each other, the focus now falls on how they could complement each other, by showing how the functions of online communities can be ancillary to that of conventional communities.

While an extended overview of research related to the Internet as a platform for communal life does not fall within the ambit of this study, it should be clear from the above that this has been a recurrent area of interest, and an issue that has been investigated from many different

angles. In the relatively short period of time that the Internet has grown into a public commons, the notion of online community has progressed from that of a novel oddity to a widely discussed and even nuanced concept, and few today would deny that at least some semblance of community is possible in this setting.

Of course, there is a clear connection between the kind of communities that have always existed online, and the social media sphere of today – indeed Parks (2011:106) describes social networks as “direct heirs” to the community metaphor popularised by Rheingold (1993) and others more than two decades ago. The parallels are obvious: Like many of their online predecessors, social networks revolve around interpersonal connections, and the communal language used to define the building blocks of these services – terminology like “friends,” “groups,” “followers,” and “conversations” – is indicative of the intrinsically social setting envisioned for these networks. Often, the internal rhetoric and stated goals of these networks also valorise notions of community and relationship. The social media giant Facebook, for example, is open about its vision to build tools that enable users to “share and connect with people in their lives” (Zuckerberg, 2011) – a vision it has in common with virtually every other social network in existence (Frydenberg & Shelly, 2010:169-171). Thus, argues Parks (2011:106), it is likely that the idea of “community,” and all it entails, will continue to frame our understanding of these networks.

Having taken cognisance of the communal dimension of the Internet, we can now proceed with an outline of the development of the social media sphere through the last few decades, to its current state. A sufficiently cogent overview of this kind would require, first and foremost, a robust definition of what exactly we mean when we refer to the concept of a social network, since this definition will have a bearing on the scope and nature of the outline that follows. We turn to this definition first.

2.3.3 Towards a Definition of Social Media

Any effort to construct an outline of the development of the social media sphere must begin with the formulation of a clear definition of the terms “social network” or “social media,” and an understanding of what these pertain to in the context of this study. This is imperative since

these are very broad terms and, as Poynter (2010:160) rightly argues, no two commentators seem to define these ideas in exactly the same way. A clear definition is also crucial since it will set helpful boundaries around the areas that need to be addressed in the overview that follows.

Often used interchangeably (e.g. Lovett, 2011:3), the terms “social network” or “social media” have been applied to a broad range of websites, mobile applications and technologies aimed at facilitating and furthering social interaction and connections between Internet users on personal computers or mobile phones. Strictly speaking, a social network (sometimes referred to as a digital social network to emphasise its online nature), refers to the network of individuals connected in this way as a whole, or to the website, service, or application that facilitates these connections (Campbell, 2013:65; Near & Nyland, 2007:3-4). The website Facebook, for example, is often described as a social network, while Facebook users collectively are also referred to as a social network. While the term social media, on the other hand, also refers to the tools and applications that facilitate this interpersonal interaction, it could additionally denote the content – text conversations, photos, videos, and links to resources – that are created and shared by participants (Smith *et al.*, 2011:xi). In this sense, it operates as an overarching term for all the users, content, and technologies within this sphere. Generally speaking, however, these two terms are used interchangeably – as they are in this study.

When it comes to a formal definition of a social network, few writers are as often cited as Boyd and Ellison (2008). In their estimation, a social network can be defined as an Internet-based service that allows individuals to construct a public or semi-public “profile,” articulate a list of other users or “friends” with whom they share a connection of some kind, and then view and interact with content generated by those users (2008:211). Hansen, Schneiderman, and Smith (2011:12) offer a somewhat simplified but equally meaningful version of this definition, describing a social network merely as a collection of tools that supports social interaction between users. Perhaps the definition most modern social media users would be familiar with is offered by Hargittai and Hsieh (2011:147), who describe a social network simply as an online service where users create a profile by listing personal information and interests, through which they can then link up with other users to share updates about their

thoughts and activities. In all these definitions, the focus clearly falls on two aspects: first, the matrix of users connected in the system; and second, the tools that enable these users to interact.

Of course the exact elements and tools that participants on these networks can use to interact and share information differ from one social network to the next. Typically, a social network site provides the ability to share thoughts or messages in text format, display photographs, and to describe certain personal preferences – such as music taste, films that the user enjoyed, and books the user have read (Ellison, *et al.*, 2011:138). In some instances, users can receive personalised product recommendations based on prior online purchases by other people in their circle of friends, identify and share popular news stories, and collaboratively author documents (Hansen *et al.*, 2011:12). Some social network sites also allow participants to share their physical location with friends, while other services revolve around the sharing of music tracks or video presentations.

The basic architecture of these sites – and by extension the opportunities for self-expression and engagement that they offer – also differ significantly from one social network to the next. The website Facebook, for example (<http://www.facebook.com>), offers its users the ability to construct detailed personal profile pages, with granular information about their personal likes and dislikes, and multiple opportunities to share thoughts, activities, and comments. Conversely, the popular online platform Twitter (<http://www.twitter.com>) only displays a short biography of each user, and participants are expected to share their thoughts or messages in short bursts of 140 characters or less. Other social networks, like the website Ning (<http://www.ning.com>), organise their users into interest groups where they can share information or collaborate on projects, while content-based social networks like SoundCloud (<http://soundcloud.com>) allow users to connect based on their common interest in specific types of musical tracks or artists.

Despite all these differences, the basic structure of most of these services remains the same, and a number of common elements are encountered across all social media sites. These common elements include the concept of a personal profile, the articulation of a list of

“friends”, and the tools used to communicate and share content – all of which have come to define the experience of engaging in social media. These elements merit a closer look:

2.3.3.1 Personal Profiles

While the concept of a personal online profile is not unique to social networks, they are a central feature of almost every one of these services. In the context of a social network, a profile presents the participant with an opportunity to construct a page that will both represent the individual, and serve as a locus of interaction with other users. Such a profile page can be public or semi-public – in other words, it can be made visible to all users of the website or application, or only shown in full to a subset of users – for example those who have requested to share a connection with the individual (Parks, 2011:110). This profile page could contain only basic information like the user’s name, date of birth, and place of residence; or, it could be a detailed overview of rich data about the user accumulated over time, including contact details, political and religious affiliation, information about previous purchases, media consumption patterns, images, and a virtually unlimited amount of other information. Usually, this is also the page where users share content like “status updates” (text updates detailing the user’s thoughts or activities), photos, videos, and links to news and other articles that he’d like to share with his network of personal contacts.

Since the information displayed on such a profile page is usually controlled by the user, Boyd (2011:43) emphasises that these profiles are often actively and consciously crafted by participants to project an idealised – and potentially skewed – representation of themselves. It should be noted that content generated and shared on these profile pages is usually persistent and searchable (Boyd, 2011:49) – in other words, a participant could browse through another user’s profile to view and interact with content shared over the lifetime of the individual’s presence on the social network. As a result, participants often carefully consider how they present themselves online (Rice, 2009:96-97) – since information and content shared in this way will likely be available well into the future.

2.3.3.2 Friends

Virtually all social networks allow participants to select a number of people that they wish to connect with, and confirm ties to those who wish to connect with them in a similar manner. On the social network Facebook and a number of other networks, these connections are known as “friends;” but the terms “followers” (popularised by the social network Twitter), “subscribers,” “fans,” or “contacts” are also often employed. Typically, these friends or followers are allowed access to content shared by a social media user they have a connection with. Most social network sites require these connections to be mutually confirmed before they take effect (Ellison *et al.*, 2011:124). Once a tie between two individuals is confirmed, these users have access to each other’s online profiles, and can interact with each other through any of the tools or services made available by that specific social network.

Although there are differences in the way social media users approach these online “friendships,” it should be noted that the majority of connections are based on pre-existing relationships (Boyd & Ellison, 2008:221). While some participants actively limit the number of friends they connect with, and others aim to make their network as large as possible, Boyd (2011:44) argues that the majority of participants simply include individuals who they consider a part of their social world. These connections might include family members, current and former friends and acquaintances, colleagues, and other peripheral ties. Although connections between individuals who are not acquainted with each other are certainly possible (Parks, 2011:110), these are not as prevalent as connections between users who are familiar with each other offline. In this context, Ellison *et al.* (2011:138) also point to the success of social networks in transforming potentially ephemeral connections to persistent ones by enabling users to reconnect with acquaintances on a continual basis. This is particularly valuable where these connections may have ceased to exist due to geographical separation or other practical limitations.

2.3.3.3 Communication Tools

Beyond profiles and friends lists, most social networks provide users with a suite of tools enabling them to communicate directly with others they have articulated a connection with.

These communication tools vary greatly in terms of features and user base, and can facilitate public, semi-public, or private interactions, depending on the user's preference. These tools are integral to the social media experience, since most participants use them to communicate with others in their network on a more regular basis than they actually update their own profile pages (Goulet *et al.*, 2011:16).

Communication tools vary from one network to the other depending on the specific social network's core functionality, and could be feature-rich or very basic. On Facebook, where there is a heavy emphasis on the user's profile page as the focal point of interaction, a feature known as the "wall" – essentially a subsection of the user's profile page – allows participants to leave messages for that specific person. These messages, that could be in a short or long format in the form of text, video, or audio, are visible to the recipient and, depending on the user's privacy settings, to those he shares a connection with (Vogt, 2011:211). Instant text messages between two individuals can also be sent with a dedicated messaging application available on the website and on mobile devices (Ellison, *et al.*, 2011:125). In both instances, instant notifications alert users to the fact that they have received a message. The social network Twitter, on the other hand, offers the ability to send short, private text messages of no more than 140 characters, known as Direct Messages (Kelsey, 2010:230). This service is in line with its core functionality, which revolves around short text updates shared by users. Even on niche networks, like the employment portal LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>), or the music sharing network Soundcloud (<http://www.soundcloud.com>), provision is made for basic text messaging tools that function in a similar way to e-mail.

While these communication tools are usually provided as part of the basic architecture of a social network, some of the most interesting examples of interaction arise in cases where users devise their own, unique ways to communicate by using features that weren't intended for this purpose. A good example of this phenomenon is the practice of directing text updates on the social network Twitter at specific users by adding the commercial at symbol (@) in front of a username. For example, when a user posts an update containing the username "@John_Doe" in any part of the text, it will appear in that specific user's feed of messages. This functionality was added as a feature when Twitter users spontaneously began engaging in this practice in the early days of the network, and it now enables participants to have online

conversations (Van Dijck, 2013:71-72). Likewise, on the social network YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com>), where users subscribe to each other's profiles based on their shared interest in specific kinds of video content, members started using the website's standard video uploading tool to create "response videos" – a specific kind of video in which a user responds to a contribution shared by another user (Burgess, 2011:320). These response videos usually elicit further responses, eventually becoming video conversations with hundreds or even thousands of participants.

Clearly, whether it is in the form of functionality provided by a social network itself, or by means of spontaneously devised user behaviour, tools that enable communication between members are a key driver of participation and engagement on social networks. As such, they highlight the conversational dynamic and interactive nature of the social media sphere in general.

2.3.3.4 Feedback Tools

Virtually all social networks present participants with tools and opportunities to provide feedback on content shared by other users that they have a connection with. In fact, research shows that providing feedback in one way or another on the contributions of others is the primary activity most social media users engage in (Goulet *et al.*, 2011:14). Despite their central role in the social media world, though, these tools also differ significantly in form and functionality from one network to the next, and some are unique to the specific social networks they appear on.

Arguably the most ubiquitous feedback mechanism on social networks is the ability to comment on the content or activities of others. These comments, usually displayed along with the content it pertains to – whether that be a status update shared by the user, a photo or video uploaded to the site, or some other content item – are typically visible to anyone who has access to a user's profile (Boyd, 2011:45). Comments usually take the form of plain text; however, recently some platforms (notably Facebook) have enabled users to also post pictures, videos, and website links in lieu of text comments. Some social networks have also set themselves apart through their innovative approach to comments: The music sharing

network Soundcloud, for example, have implemented a “timed comments” system that allows users to post their comments at a specific point on a graphical wave form representing the song currently played by the user. In this way, users can comment on specific parts of a song, and other participants can converse with them about their observations (Van Buskirk, 2009). Regardless of the network, commenting on content is one of the most popular activities on social networks, with a recent study by the Pew Research Center indicating that 22% of Facebook users comment on posts by others on an average day (Goulet *et al.*, 2011:14).

Another popular feedback mechanism now commonly encountered on social media websites is the so-called “like” function, once again introduced by Facebook. Facebook users select this option, usually presented in the form of an icon of the universally known “thumbs-up” sign, to indicate that they agree with, or enjoy, a specific content item. For example, a church youth group member may “like” a photo of a recent youth group activity uploaded to his church’s youth ministry page. Usually, the number of individuals who selected the “like” option is also displayed, making it a useful way to gauge the popularity of content (Lovett, 2011:204). Following its introduction on Facebook, this feedback mechanism has been replicated on many other social networks, with slight variations. Twitter, for example, provides a “favourite” button that performs a similar function, while users of the social photo sharing application Instagram select a heart-shaped icon to indicate that they find a specific photo appealing.

Apart from these fairly universal features, a number of social networks offer feedback mechanisms that are specific to their platforms, and that are usually closely linked to their core functionality. The location-sharing application Foursquare (<http://www.foursquare.com>), that enables participants to share their physical location with each other, allows users to post text reviews or tips pertaining to specific locations (Lovett, 2011:336). For example, a user could post a review about a restaurant listed on the application, and also provide a rating for the establishment. In a similar manner, users of the social network Goodreads (<http://www.goodreads.com>), a website that allows participants to connect based on their reading habits, are able to rate the books they have read, and recommend books to other users. Feedback mechanisms also play a significant role on the social network Behance (<https://www.behance.net>), aimed at creative industry professionals like designers and

illustrators, allowing users to critique each other's designs, discuss projects, and even explore potential employment opportunities.

These feedback tools, together with the basic elements listed above – personal profiles, friend lists, and communication tools – have become synonymous with the social media experience, and can be considered the basic building blocks of most social media services. Along with the basic definitions for the terms “social media” and “social network” offered above, they serve as a useful starting point to frame our understanding of the social media world.

With these definitive elements as a backdrop, it is possible to proceed with an overview of the development of the social media landscape and a look at the emergence of the most prominent social networks today.

2.3.4 An Abridged History of Social Media

The overview that follows serves two basic functions: to provide a broad-strokes outline of the rapid development of the social media sphere over the last couple of decades; and, in doing so, to shed light on the current state of affairs by paying particular attention to the emergence of the most prominent social networks known today. It should be noted that this is not an attempt to offer an exhaustive overview of the history of social media. In the past decades, countless social media websites and services have come and gone (Van Dijck, 2013:8), and it would be well beyond the scope of this study to attempt to provide an in-depth look at this history. Rather, in accordance with the goals stated above, the focus will fall on providing an overview of key moments in the history of social media, and to track the emergence of the most prominent social networks that have arisen in this time – especially those that are currently widely known.

2.3.4.1 Early Social Networks

Based on the criteria for social media defined in the preceding section, most observers (e.g. Boyd & Ellison, 2008:214; Copeland, 2010:8) agree that the first recognisable social network was the website SixDegrees.com (<http://www.sixdegrees.com>), launched in 1997. This website

allowed users to create personal profile pages and compile friends lists, and was primarily promoted as a tool to help internet users connect with and send messages to others (O'Brien, 2013:xv). The service attracted significant attention at the height of its popularity, but was ultimately discontinued in 2000. Crumlish (2006:214) attributes this failure to a lack of a critical mass of users, and argues that the website was literally ahead of its time, since there were simply not enough people willing to engage in this way in an online environment at that stage.

From 1997 to 2001, a number of other early social networks were established – some of which are still operational today. The websites AsianAvenue (<http://www.asianave.com>), BlackPlanet (<http://www.blackplanet.com>), and MiGente (<http://www.migente.com>), all aimed at specific ethnic communities, allowed users to create personal and professional profiles, and included many of the standard features now found on social networks – including friends lists and the ability to connect and communicate with others (Boyd & Ellison, 2008:214). All three of these websites still exist, although they do not enjoy the mass popularity of mainstream social networks today, attracting less than 20 million users in total (Hopkins, 2008). In 1999, another notable early network, LiveJournal (<http://www.livejournal.com>), was launched. LiveJournal, also still operational, allows users to publish online diaries or journals, and to connect with other users to follow their activity (Crumlish, 2006:244). Boyd and Ellison (2008:215) identify both LiveJournal and the website Ryze.com – established in 2001 as a social network for business professionals – as significant forerunners to the social networks of today.

2.3.4.2 Mainstream Popularity

A period of unprecedented growth in the social media sphere started in 2002 with the launch of the social network Friendster (<http://www.friendster.com>). Friendster implemented many of the features originally popularised by predecessors like SixDegrees.com, but improved on these by displaying connections between users in a graphical format to easily show how a user was connected to others in the form of a visual “circle of friends” (O'Brien, 2013:xvi). This increased user engagement, and the number of participants grew rapidly, rising to about three million users in only three months (Vogt, 2011:18). However, technical difficulties due to the growing number of users impacted on the popularity of the platform, and the website had to

begin restricting the activities of some of its most passionate users (Boyd & Ellison, 2008:215). Ultimately, the network's user community crumbled, and while it is still used in some parts of the world (Boyd & Ellison, 2008:216), it is not as popular as it once was.

Few analysts took notice when a new competitor with the name MySpace (<http://www.myspace.com>) was launched in 2003 in Santa Monica, California – but this new website would become one of the great success stories of this period. Launched in a bid to attract estranged Friendster users, MySpace drew a large, young audience (Van Dijck, 2013:73), and soon became the most popular social network on the Internet – a position it would retain until it was displaced in 2008 by Facebook (O'Brien, 2013:xvi). It achieved this level of popularity by regularly implementing features demanded by users – most notably the ability to freely customise profile pages (Boyd & Ellison, 2008:214). It was also particularly popular among music groups, who could create profile pages and interact with their listeners. However, users ultimately began abandoning the service in favour of Facebook, a social network that offered participants a greater level of control over their online connections (Poynter, 2010:384). Although MySpace is still operational, it has lost a significant percentage of its users to other, newer networks (Van Dijck, 2013:8).

This period also saw the launch of a number of social networks that remain prominent today. The professional networking website LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com>), aimed at business users wishing to connect with each other, was launched in 2003 (Boyd & Ellison, 2008:214). This service, currently used by 18% of all social media participants (Goulet *et al.*, 2011:13), encourages professionals to build their networks by establishing connections with present and former business contacts and associates. It draws an older and more educated audience than most other social media websites (Goulet *et al.*, 2011:40), and currently serves more than 300 million users worldwide (Wagner, 2014). The video-sharing network YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com>) also emerged in this period, allowing users to share video content with others in their social circles. Officially launched in 2005, YouTube soon began displaying the characteristics of a typical social network, linking like-minded individuals to each other based on the video content they shared, and allowing users to comment on each other's contributions (O'Brien, 2013:xvii). Today, it is home to a user community of more than one billion people (O'Brien, 2013:xviii). In the same vein the social network Flickr

(<http://www.flickr.com>), launched in 2004, turned photo sharing into a communal experience, becoming one of the 50 most visited websites on the Internet (Van Dijck, 2013:191).

This period of unprecedented growth ultimately saw the rise of the social network that would surpass all others in terms of influence and popularity. In early 2004, Facebook was launched as a social network for students of Harvard University only (Boyd & Ellison, 2008:215). Membership soon opened to students of other educational institutions, and by the end of 2005, anyone over the age of twelve could join (Rice, 2009:72). The network grew rapidly and exponentially, gaining 200 million users by the year 2009 (Van Dijck, 2013:61), and as of 2014 serves over a billion users worldwide (O'Brien, 2013:xviii). In this time, it has introduced many of the features now routinely associated with social networks – including the now-ubiquitous “Like” button and so-called status updates (text updates of a user’s thoughts or activities). Used by up to 92% of all social media participants in some countries (Goulet *et al.*, 2011:3), and boasting unprecedented levels of user interaction – for example, more than 300 million photos are uploaded to the network every day (Kiss, 2012) – it is widely regarded as the leading social network.

Significantly, Facebook’s user base is also known as one of the most diverse within the social media sphere. While one would expect it to be popular with a young, technologically conscious audience – and indeed it is, attracting a particularly vibrant student community (Martínez Alemán & Wartman, 2009:8) – it is interesting to note that Facebook’s audience has grown more diverse with the passing of time. For example, Rice (2009:73) notes that the fastest growing user group on Facebook in late 2008 was 55-year-old women. Currently, the age of the average Facebook user is 38, but a full 25% of users are now over 50 years of age, with six percent of users aged 65 and above (Goulet *et al.*, 2011:10-11). Unlike many other social networks, its audience is not primarily American either – South Africa and Australia are included among the countries where it became particularly popular early on (Martínez Alemán & Wartman, 2009:8), and currently approximately 70% of members exist outside the borders of the United States (Rice, 2009:72). Attracting an ever more diverse audience, it comes as no surprise that Facebook is becoming the primary digital destination that a growing cross section of Internet users turn to when they share the most significant moments and milestones in their lives with their friends and families.

Another noteworthy social network to emerge in this era, occupying just as prominent a place in the public conscience as Facebook does today, is the network Twitter. Launched in mid 2006 (Java, 2008:96), Twitter allows users to post short messages known as “tweets,” limited to 140 characters each, that are broadcast to all their “followers” – users who are connected to them (Poynter, 2010:165). These messages could contain short descriptions of a user’s feelings or activities, and often also contain links to websites, videos, and other content on the Internet. With more than 500 million tweets shared every day (Terdiman, 2012), Twitter is considered just as prominent as Facebook in many markets, and has played a significant role as a mechanism for mobilisation and communication in a number of social movements, including the uprisings in the Arab world that started in December 2010 (Howard, 2012).

2.3.4.3 Continued Growth

Following this period of initial mainstream success in the first decade of the 21st century, some social networks – most notably Facebook and Twitter – have cemented their place as leaders through continued growth. However, countless new social media websites and applications have followed in their wake, and while these new networks mostly serve niche communities, the social media landscape continues to shift and develop on a continual basis.

One of the most significant among the new breed of social networks is the photo sharing service Instagram, which originated in 2010 as a mobile phone application (Instagram Press Center, 2014). This application allows users to upload and share pictures taken on mobile phones. Pictures can be enhanced with special filters provided by Instagram (Desmarais, 2013). As on most other social networks, users can follow each other, and “like” or comment on each other’s contributions. With 200 million monthly active users (Lunden, 2014) and an average of 60 million photos uploaded to the network every day (Instagram Press Center, 2014) Instagram clearly has an enormous support base. This is even more significant in the light of its recent acquisition by Facebook (Van Dijck, 2013:90), which has paved the way for seamless integration between these two networks, and, as a result, even more user interaction. For example, a user can now easily display all his Instagram photos on Facebook, inviting more comments from friends.

It is also worth noting the growing influence and increasing reach of some niche social networks that have arisen since 2010. These include the website Pinterest (<http://www.pinterest.com>), launched in March 2010, which now attracts up to 15% of Internet users across the world (Almeida, *et al.*, 2013:457). This network, where participants share images and other content with their followers by “pinning” items on a digital board, has drawn a predominantly female audience (Gould, 2013:70), and continues to grow in popularity. Yet another new social network, Google+ (<https://plus.google.com>), introduced in 2011 by the technology company Google, has seen its footprint increase dramatically in the last few years. Although it is hard to define exactly how popular this network is since its functionality is so closely integrated with Google’s existing online search services, the company claims that it attracts up to 540 million active users worldwide who, amongst other things, upload approximately 1.5 billion photos to the service every week (Yeung, 2013). Along with a steady stream of other newcomers, these popular social media destinations hint at the continued innovation and growth that keeps driving the social networking world forward.

While it is clear that interest in social networks has reached an unprecedented level, most scholars foresee even more growth in this sphere in future (*cf.* Campbell, 2013; Boyd, 2011; O’Brien, 2013), especially considering the significant number of new users gaining access to these services via mobile devices for the first time (Bengi, Lee, & Park, 2011). Judging by the vibrancy of the current breed of online communities, it does indeed seem inevitable that the social media landscape will continue to expand and diversify in the foreseeable future.

Considering the many unique opportunities for interpersonal interaction offered by these networks, one would expect church communities to be particularly interested in its potential as a tool for communication and connection – and indeed, this has been the case since the emergence of the very first social networks. Thus, against the backdrop of rapid expansion and growth set out in the preceding section, we now turn to an overview of the church’s involvement in the world of social media.

2.3.5 Social Media Use in the Church

With its ideals for community and focus on communal life, especially as encapsulated in the concept of *koinonia*, it comes as no surprise that the developments outlined above have not escaped the attention of the Christian church. Indeed, the church's engagement with the world of social media has been both extensive and enduring, pointing to a clear desire to utilise these technologies to further the ideals of true fellowship and unity.

The following overview of the church's involvement in this area is structured in two parts: To begin with, the focus will fall on the way the Christian church as a whole has engaged with the world of social media. In this section, attention will be paid to the church's general involvement in various areas of the social media sphere over time, while demonstrating how the approach to these activities has evolved as social media platforms have matured. Thereafter, the focus will shift to the activities of Hillsong Church, the specific church community that will be investigated in the descriptive-empirical phase of this study. The goal will be to demonstrate how Hillsong, just like the church as a whole, has engaged the social media world through its activities on a variety of social networks. This will set the scene for the in-depth investigation that follows in the third chapter.

2.3.5.1 A General Overview of Social Media Use in the Church

Cowan and Dawson rightly assert that the Internet and its associated technologies has been embraced by a remarkable diversity of people in a very short period of time (2004:5); yet it is not as often recognised that the Christian church's adoption of online social media tools is a particularly compelling case in point. Indeed, as Larsen (2004:43) argues, the Internet has always been a natural place for people of faith to take their practices and questions, and Christians seem to be especially interested in using the Internet to connect and communicate with others who share their views (Larsen, 2004:18). Thus, it is not surprising that the Internet has always served as a fruitful platform for interpersonal communication between believers – and the growing import of the social media sphere has certainly made this even more apparent.

Campbell (2010:232) traces the genesis of the Christian church's use of online media to the formation of email-based religious discussion groups in the early 1990s, well before the era of social media. Vogt (2011:17) also affirms that the church was quick to adopt online tools, and explains how the earliest Christian websites – launched as online destinations that believers could visit to gather information and share their thoughts – were operational as early as 1995. The mid-1990s also saw the emergence of some rudimentary “virtual churches,” where people of faith could gather to read religious material and send messages to each other (Campbell, 2010:232). Helland (2005:1-16) details the establishment of a number of religious websites during this period, and notes that a significant amount of time, money, and effort were invested in these online endeavours, which were mostly undertaken by larger churches intent on understanding this new medium (Helland, 2005:4). Nevertheless, these pages were relatively static in nature, and they did not offer much in terms of interaction or continued conversation between users.

Despite this lack of interactivity, early studies showed that the Internet was already emerging as a promising potential point of interaction for the faithful. Larsen (2004:43), for example, explains that one in four adult Internet users in the United States had sought religious material online during these early days. Even more significantly, these users could be found in all segments of society – they were fairly evenly spread out among age, race, and socio-economic groups. Moreover, the Internet appeared to be a particularly popular platform for individuals who faced discrimination in their own communities due to their beliefs (Larsen, 2004:18), and the anonymity of discourse online was seen as especially helpful in drawing in individuals from different places, cultures, and ages (Cowan & Dawson, 2004:8). Collectively, these users found a refuge in such settings as chat rooms and online discussion forums (DiMaggio *et al.*, 2004:46), where they could freely discuss matters of faith. Yet, despite all these developments, it should be noted that online activities played a negligible role in the overall communal life of the church and the world of the average Christian at this stage – only about 15% of early users who participated in online faith communities and websites reported that these resources had contributed to their spiritual wellbeing (Larsen, 2004:52).

The dawn of the social media age towards the end of the 1990s marked a significant shift in this regard, with the locus of Christian online activity now moving from a wide variety of

relatively static, individual websites run by religious institutions, to a handful of early social networks specifically geared to interaction and community formation. Considering earlier online activity by the Christian church, it comes as no surprise that the faithful soon found a home on these networks. The social network MySpace was the first to attract significant attention from a Christian audience, and Hewitt (2010:87-88) lists a whole range of Christian-themed groups – with names like Fellowship of Christian MySpacers and Pentecostal Christian Youth – that soon formed on this network, each attracting thousands or even hundreds of thousands of members. Some users even wrote applications that allowed participants to share Bible verses with each other via their profile pages (Hewitt, 2010:86).

Church members flocked to Facebook in a similar manner when this network was opened to the public in late 2005. Von Buseck (2010:74) explains the popularity of this social network among the Christian community by pointing out that it was (and still is) free and fast, with a plethora of tools and applications for connecting with fellow believers. The rapid growth in Facebook's faith community can also be attributed to its unique architecture, which makes it very simple to build a network of connections rooted in existing friendships – it is, for example, quite simple for a user to connect with friends in his or her existing church community (Rice, 2009:99). As on MySpace, Christian affinity groups soon began appearing (Drescher, 2011:91), with pages like Jesus Daily (<http://www.facebook.com/JesusDaily>) GodVine (<http://www.facebook.com/GodVine>), and Jesus Loves You (<http://www.facebook.com/jesuslovesyou>) featuring regular Christian-themed updates and attracting anything from hundreds of thousands to tens of millions of followers.

The Christian audience's attraction to social media was replicated on other social networks as well, even in this early stage. YouTube, cementing its place in the public conscience at around the same time that Facebook opened to a wider audience, soon attracted a plethora of Christian contributors. As early as 2006, Cooke (2006:19-20) encourages Christian media producers to invest in creating video content for YouTube that will speak to its growing audience. Apart from sermons and other recordings by churches and individuals, this network also became a platform for a wide variety of Christian musicians and singers, which in turn drew an even bigger Christian audience wanting to view and interact with this material, its creators, and each other (Bennett, 2008:210). Likewise, Twitter attracted much attention from

clergy, Christian artists, and the wider church from early on. Vogt (2011:120) explains that the simple nature of Twitter was one of the driving forces behind its early adoption by churches, who viewed it as a free and very effective tool to communicate with their members. Christian academics, too, recognised great promise in this network: Less than three years after its launch, theologian Leonard Sweet formulates and publishes five statements explaining why he deems Twitter a valuable platform for ministry and fellowship. Listing among other reasons its brevity, its positioning as a kind of global commons, and the way in which it facilitates vibrant and frequent interaction (Sweet, 2009), he offers a glowing recommendation of the network that further establishes its popularity among believers.

Cowan and Dawson (2004:5) summarise this initial period of growth by explaining that these new social networks appeared appealing from the outset because they helped the Christian church to be more effective at what it had always done: that is, to reach out to others in even more ways, to a greater extent than was ever possible. Campbell (2005:32-33) also points to a general perception that these new platforms were helpful in facilitating support and fellowship within congregations. While acceptance of this new technology was of course not universal (Vogt, 2011:120), it is clear that it made a sudden and noticeable impression on the church as a whole.

Significantly, this early interest in social media activity in the church did not fade in the years after this initial growth period. To the contrary, sustained and even accelerated growth throughout the course of the last decade has seen social media emerge as an important part of daily life for a significant cross-section of the Christian church. In fact, the church's adoption of social media and the behaviours associated with this sphere is so comprehensive and far-reaching that Drescher (2011:1) posits a "digital reformation" – a reformation driven not so much by theologies and dogmas, but by the "digitally enhanced spiritual practices" of Christians connected to each other (Drescher, 2011:2). While the term "reformation" may arguably be too strong a word, the degree to which social media has found a captive audience among believers is evident in the deep engagement of the church in this sphere in recent times – particularly on the networks Facebook (along with its child network Instagram), Twitter, and YouTube.

This high degree of engagement is particularly evident in the case of Twitter, an area of focus for an ever increasing number of pastors and churches. According to a study by the Barna Group, roughly one quarter of American pastors are now using Twitter to connect with their flock, with two in five pastors aged 29-47 (39%) active on the network; and nearly half (44%) of congregations with more than 250 members now using this social network in one way or another (Barna Group, 2013). This trend is evident in other parts of the world as well, including in many African countries, where church leaders increasingly turn to Twitter to extend their reach to a wider audience (Nzwili, 2010).

The unique value and popularity of Twitter as a tool for church communication becomes especially apparent when one considers the practical ways it is now used the world over. Apart from the obvious updates communicating church activities, and its use to interact with members, in recent years it has also been utilised in a number of other resourceful ways. This can be seen, for example, in the way church members in Egypt currently use Twitter to highlight the persecution of Christians in this part of the world. Here, Christians share details of specific incidents of violence against believers in order to raise global awareness of these struggles, and to foster connections with the worldwide church (Lev, 2013). Likewise, Garrison (2010:41-44) cites the example of a ministry in the United Kingdom that uses Twitter to connect with a network of churches, ministries and individuals across the world for support. Another compelling user case involves the use of hashtags – a way to group related content or topics on Twitter by prefixing a specific word with a pound sign (#), rendering the word searchable and accessible by all Twitter users. In recent years, popular hashtags like #ministry and #missions have been increasingly used for vibrant conversations about these topics (Shaffer, 2011). These and other examples prompt Drescher (2011:xii) to include Twitter in a list of technologies she sees as key drivers in a global move towards a more connected church, and indeed it is becoming harder and harder to ignore the role that tools like Twitter play in this context.

In a similar way, Facebook use by churches and clergy has increased significantly in a short period of time. Once again, pastors in the United States lead the charge, with over six in 10 (66%) now active on Facebook (Barna Group, 2013). On a congregational level, American Protestant churches are equally active on this network. While a LifeWay Research study

indicates that 47% of congregations actively use Facebook, it is an even more telling fact that this number rises to 81% for churches with 500 members or more (Roach, 2011). This level of engagement is seen elsewhere in the world as well, with churches both big and small, from virtually every country in the world, represented on the network; this includes a significant number of congregations from all major denominations across the globe (Drescher, 2011:87, 89-91).

Often, the Facebook pages of these congregations serve as a vibrant connection point for members – for example, the Facebook page of the Jakarta Praise Community Church in Indonesia attracts 10 000 members (<http://facebook.com/jpcchurch>), many of whom regularly participate by leaving comments and thoughts on the page. In South Africa, about 4 000 members are connected to the Rhema Bible Church's Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/rhemabiblechurch.north>), while the page of the United Methodist Church (<http://www.facebook.com/unitedmethodistchurch>) has more than 220 000 followers. Apart from these groups, there are also countless Christian-themed pages with no particular link to specific denominations or congregations. The Jesus Daily page, for example, which offers daily updates in the form of scripture or inspirational sayings, boasts more than 26 million followers (<http://www.facebook.com/JesusDaily>). In a South African context, one should also take note of the Facebook presence of the so-called e-kerk (<http://www.ekerk.co.za>), established in 2004 by former University of Pretoria New Testament scholar Stephan Joubert. This "virtual church," known for its twice weekly devotional with more than 35 500 subscribers (Lombaard, 2007:206), has a Facebook audience of almost 4 000 members (<https://www.facebook.com/ekerk.org>).

Following its recent acquisition by Facebook, the photo sharing service Instagram has also continued to grow in popularity as a social network destination for churches across the globe. Because of the integration between these two networks, which now allows Instagram users to display their photos and videos on Facebook, users who have previously been excluded from the Instagram ecosystem (if they did not have the mobile phone application installed on their phones) have access to content shared on this network via Facebook. Gould (2013:71) argues that Instagram is particularly suited to a ministry context because the comments section below every image lends itself well to conversations between users. While this is likely to be a

contributing factor, it should also be noted that the ability to participate in the Instagram world via a Facebook profile exposes content shared on this network to a wider audience, which has arguably contributed to its popularity and reach.

Regardless of the reason for its success, Instagram has seen significant interest from a wide variety of ministries and congregations, who use it to share anything from images with inspirational quotes and highlights from sermons, to details about upcoming church events and photos or videos of church activities. Some of these ministries enjoy a significant reach on the network – North Carolina’s Elevation Church, for example, reaches about 28 000 members through its Instagram profile (<http://instagram.com/elevationchurch>), while Mars Hill Church in Seattle has more than 7 000 followers (<http://instagram.com/marshillchurch>), and more than 4 000 people follow Singapore’s New Creation Church (<http://instagram.com/nccsg>). The Evangelical humanitarian organisation World Vision is one of many Christian non-profit groups to also utilise this network. Its Australian chapter, for example, has an audience of more than 3 000 followers (<http://instagram.com/worldvisionaus>) and it uses its Instagram profile to highlight current and past humanitarian projects. These ministries and churches are among countless others who have recently awoken to the potential power of a presence on this network.

Building on its early success as a veritable public commons, the video sharing service YouTube has also managed to cling to its position as a popular social media platform for Christian churches and ministries. As such, it hosts an abundance of Christian video material of all kinds – from sermons by ministers and recordings of church events, to public talks and lectures of leading scholars in theology (Drescher, 2011:6, 85). In addition, recently a number of ministries have emerged with a specific focus on producing Christian content for YouTube; Vogt (2011:32) cites the example of the ministry Word on Fire, whose videos have been viewed more than 1,4 million times.

More importantly, YouTube also serves as a platform for lively conversations about this content – even though Laytham (2012:51) rightly points out that these conversations, unlike on most other social networks, are often between strangers, instead of friends. The result of this dynamic is often vigorous debate between users about videos and the content thereof –

to the point where Drescher (2011:85) cautions Christian YouTube users that they should increasingly act as “listeners” and partners, rather than “preachers” when they engage other contributors on this network. Despite these challenges, it is clear that a significant number of Christian content producers – whether individual believers, congregations, or other ministries – have found a home and a platform for engagement on YouTube. A simple search for the keyword “church” in YouTube’s channel listing, for example, returns results for 861 097 individual channels (YouTube, 2014). With 46 hours of video uploaded to YouTube as a whole every single minute (Laytham, 2012:53), its stature as an important engagement point between the church and the prevailing culture is likely to increase for the foreseeable future.

Of course the services, websites, and applications above do not represent an exhaustive list of social media platforms with church involvement. Niche platforms emerge and fade into obscurity on a continual basis, most of them attracting at least some kind of attention from the Christian community, which makes an all-encompassing overview virtually impossible. However, the social networks highlighted above are representative of where the majority of the online world – and, by extension, the church – spends its time and effort.

A common thread throughout the above narrative of the church’s adoption of social media tools, and seemingly the primary motivation behind its use, is its perceived value as a tool with which to strengthen Christian communities and foster *koinonia*. In fact, the idea of using online platforms in this way predates the social media era. As long ago as the early 1990s – well before the era of mainstream social networks – Rheingold (1993:62) portrays the popularity of online communities as a response to the hunger for community in the wake of the disintegration of traditional communal structures (due to factors like urbanization). Thus, it is not unexpected that the contemporary church would view it in this way as well.

Campbell (2005), in her tome *Exploring Religious Community Online*, is one of the first to recognise and explore the potential suitability of online networks as community building tools specifically for Christian congregations. Consistent research in this field that touches on subjects like the nature of online communities (Campbell, 2005; 2009; 2010) finally culminates in the volume *Digital Religion* (2013), in which she places particular emphasis on digital social networks as channels through which Christians can connect and communicate with each other

in order to build stronger communities. With this idea as foundation, she proceeds to challenge the traditional view of what constitutes a community, and argues that fellowship can exist among a network of connected individuals (connected, in this case, by the Internet), rather than just among those who share geographical or familial ties (Campbell, 2013:57).

This kind of enthusiasm is also evident elsewhere. Estes (2009), while cautious of unrealistic and utopian views of the potential of social networks, sees clear parallels between the constantly connected church of the digital era, and the communal life of the New Testament church in the second book of Acts. This is because the organism he refers to as the “virtual church” (Estes, 2009:12) – that is, the ever-growing network of Christians in active online communities – exists in a state of perpetual interconnectedness via the Internet, enabling individuals to share in the trials and triumphs of others with whom they may not have had daily contact with otherwise. In a similar manner, Friesen (2009:36, 47) makes the case that the nature of social networks force individuals to see their world in more relational terms. Proceeding from this premise, he argues that social media platforms can play a role in strengthening relationships between individuals, which in turn ultimately leads to a stronger sense of community and fellowship within a Christian group as a whole.

Drescher (2011) presents an even stronger argument for the use of social media as a tool in fostering *koinonia*. Referring to a so-called “digital reformation,” she portrays the Internet and digital social networks as platforms where fellow believers can be engaged with a view to cultivating closer and more meaningful relationships (Drescher, 2011:14). She also highlights the way that social media tools can be employed to reach out to those outside the church in order to draw them into conversation and, ultimately, into *koinonia*. Moreover, she makes the bold claim that digital social networks may well invite the kind of continuous engagement that was very much part of the life of the church prior to the modern era (Drescher, 2011:15).

At this stage, the idea of social media as a tool for fostering *koinonia* begins to receive widespread recognition. Vogt (2011) highlights a number of practical examples of the ways some churches use social networks to foster fellowship, including the roll-out of well-planned and carefully executed social media campaigns to engage both church members and non-members in specific communities (Vogt, 2011:123). Likewise, Gould (2013) pens a glowing

treatise on the subject with the telling title *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways*. The central thesis of this book is the way in which social media offers, according to Gould, new ways of “being in and belonging to a community” (Gould, 2013:27). Gould (2013:27-30) is also quite clear on her position that the boundaries between online and offline communities can sometimes be permeable, and hard to define. In this sense she argues quite strongly for what she views as a false dichotomy between the “real” and “virtual” world, and presents a convincing argument that social media can help to shorten the time period that it usually takes for functioning communities to coalesce.

Despite this general sense of optimism, however, it is important to understand that the reaction to the perceived role of social media in the church has not always been uniformly positive. In some instances, participation in social media has been cast as a hazardous undertaking with potentially negative repercussions for Christian communities. Concern has mostly revolved around the nature of online relationships and the validity of online communities as “real” communities, amidst fears that these digital connections will somehow replace real-world interaction.

Hipps (2010) is foremost among Christian thinkers who warn that an increase in activity on social networks might be detrimental to conventional, or offline, relationships. This flows from his view that the long-term dedication that it takes to build conventional relationships is simply not a factor in the online world (Hipps, 2010:76-77), where individuals are free to pursue or cut off contact with others at will. Hipps (2005:111) coins the phrase “intimate anonymity” to describe this idea, and argues that virtual relationships require very little real risk, and demand little of the parties involved on a personal level. On this basis, he rejects the validity of online communities.

On a similar note De George (2009:27), although more positive about the potential of social networks as connection points for faith communities, also acknowledges that it could be seen as problematic when virtual communities are treated as “real” communities, since conventional relationships are said to require greater commitment. Moreover, she makes note of the apprehension expressed by some churches at the idea that online communities could

become a substitute for face-to-face interaction (De George, 2009:26). At issue, once again, is the perceived dichotomy between “real” and “virtual” expressions of community.

However, the arguments put forward by both Hipps and De George are characteristic of the objections that are usually raised in this context: Potential issues are acknowledged, but these never seem to be drawn out or interrogated, resulting at most in an uneasy feeling about possible negative implications of social media use in a church context. Since these objections are usually presented in theoretical form, and hardly ever tied to specific research that could show it to be valid or invalid, there is no real clarity about these claims. Providing some clarity with regards to these issues is an important part of the motivation behind this study.

Considering the information shared in this section, it should be clear that there is a desire on the part of the church as a whole to actively participate in the world of social media, specifically with a view to fostering a sense of *koinonia* among members. It cannot be denied that the church recognises the potential of social networks and is eager to be involved in this area. Still, this participation does not come without some risks, and often these risks are not well defined or clearly understood.

2.3.5.2 Social Media Use in Hillsong Church

As the subject of the descriptive-empirical phase of the study in the following chapter it is, at this point, necessary to consider the scope and nature of the social media activity of Hillsong Church in particular. As already stated, Hillsong is a Pentecostal church headquartered in Sydney, and is affiliated with the Australian Christian Churches, the Australian branch of the Assemblies of God denomination. The church has campuses in several countries across the world, including South Africa, Sweden, the USA, London, Ukraine, and Russia (Garcia, 2010:1). Since the stated intent of this study is to focus on a single campus in Sydney, Cape Town, and New York, respectively, this section will deal with the social media activity of these three congregations in particular. However, in order to set the stage for this overview, the position of Hillsong church as a whole with regards to its involvement in the world of social media will first be considered in brief.

Any overview of Hillsong’s social media involvement must begin with its explicitly stated interest in harnessing the power of the Internet to further the cause of the Gospel. Leggott (2012a) – writing from the perspective of a Hillsong Church staff member – makes this focus abundantly clear in an online essay focusing on the evangelism strategy of Hillsong church as a whole, by pointing out that an increased emphasis on digital media has resulted in a shift in the mission field that should convince the church to “go digital and engage people where they are”. This point of view seems to be reinforced in a separate essay by Leggott (2012b) in which he details the extensive planning involved in establishing the church’s online presence. Schraeder (2012), in a blog post on Hillsong Collected, an online network aimed at Hillsong’s staff and congregants, offers a similar view, and claims that social media presents the church with a unique opportunity not just to present its message to the outside world, but to invite non-believers into open conversations. In a similar blog post by Houston (2013), senior pastor of Hillsong, church members are encouraged to take to Twitter and other social networks to share “inspiring, God-centered, biblical truths”.

Taking the above into account, it comes as no surprise that the three Hillsong campuses under consideration have a significant footprint across some of the most prominent social networks. The focus at these three campuses mainly revolves around three specific social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The following three tables (Table 2-A, 2-B, and 2-C) provide an overview of the nature and reach of the social media footprint of the Hillsong Cape Town, Sydney, and New York campuses individually. Each entry in each of the tables specify the network used; the official name of the particular social media profile; the web address of the profile in question; the specific ministry within the congregation that the profile is used by; and the number of followers connected to the profile.

Table 2-A: Hillsong Cape Town Social Media Profiles

Network	Profile name	Web address	Ministry	Follower count
Twitter	@hillsongsafrica	https://twitter.com/hillsongsafrica	Main church profile	47 300
Twitter	@HillsongCreativ	https://twitter.com/HillsongCreativ	Creative team	485
Twitter	@HillsongCTYouth	https://twitter.com/HillsongCTYouth	Main youth profile	4 993

Twitter	@PowerhouseCT	https://twitter.com/PowerhouseCT	Powerhouse young adults	1 712
Twitter	@frontline_sa	https://twitter.com/frontline_sa	Frontline young adults	972
Twitter	@ctevecollege	https://twitter.com/ctevecollege	Evening college	320
Twitter	@PhillDooley	https://twitter.com/PhillDooley	Pastor	35 100
Twitter	@lucindadooley	https://twitter.com/lucindadooley	Pastor	9 740
Facebook	Hillsong Cape Town	https://www.facebook.com/hillsongcape town	Main church profile	239 000
Facebook	Hillsong Cape Town Evening College	https://www.facebook.com/hillsongcape towneveningcollege	Evening College	1 093
Facebook	Hillsong Frontline South Africa	https://www.facebook.com/HillsongFrontline SouthAfrica	Frontline young adults	943
Facebook	Hillsong Powerhouse Cape Town	https://www.facebook.com/PowerhouseCT	Powerhouse young adults	1 643
Facebook	HillsongCT Wildlife Youth	https://www.facebook.com/pages/HillsongCT -Wildlife-Youth/143527812409772	Wildlife youth group	981
Instagram	hillsongsafrika	http://instagram.com/hillsongsafrika	Main church profile	9 114
Instagram	hillsongctyouth	http://instagram.com/hillsongctyouth	Main youth profile	687
Instagram	powerhousect	http://instagram.com/powerhousect	Powerhouse young adults	417
Instagram	Frontline_sa	http://instagram.com/frontline_sa	Frontline young adults	227
Instagram	hillsongsacreative	http://instagram.com/hillsongsacreative	Creative team	547
Instagram	philldooley	http://instagram.com/philldooley	Pastor	13 748
Instagram	lucindadooley	http://instagram.com/lucindadooley	Pastor	3 987

Table 2-B: Hillsong New York City Social Media Profiles

Network	Profile name	Web address	Ministry	Follower count
Twitter	@hillsongNYC	https://twitter.com/hillsongNYC	Main church profile	106 000
Twitter	@HillsongYouthNY	https://twitter.com/HillsongYouthNY	Main youth profile	1 082

Twitter	@hillsongnfl	https://twitter.com/hillsongnfl	Friday Night Live ministry	49
Twitter	@carllentzNYC	https://twitter.com/carllentzNYC	Pastor	101 000
Twitter	@lauralentz	https://twitter.com/lauralentz	Pastor	14 700
Facebook	Hillsong Church NYC	https://www.facebook.com/HillsongNYC	Main church profile	222 468
Facebook	Hillsong NYC Youth	https://www.facebook.com/HillsongYouthNYC	Main youth profile	4 223
Facebook	Hillsong Fnl	https://www.facebook.com/hillsongnfl	Friday Night Live ministry	695
Instagram	hillsongnyc	http://instagram.com/hillsongnyc	Main church profile	56 256
Instagram	hillsongnycyouth	http://instagram.com/hillsongnycyouth	Main youth profile	7 378
Instagram	hillsongnfl	http://instagram.com/hillsongnfl	Friday Night Live ministry	1 305
Instagram	carllentz	http://instagram.com/carllentz	Pastor	109 949
Instagram	lauralentz	http://instagram.com/lauralentz	Pastor	29 754

Table 2-C: Hillsong Sydney Social Media Profiles

Network	Profile name	Web address	Ministry	Follower count
Twitter	@hillsongnyc	https://twitter.com/hillsongnyc	Main church profile	504 000
Twitter	@hillsonghills	twitter.com/hillsonghills	Hills Campus	6 350
Twitter	@hillsongnycyouth	https://twitter.com/hillsongnycyouth	Main youth profile	7 760
Twitter	@HillsWildlife	https://twitter.com/HillsWildlife	Wildlife youth group	5 587
Twitter	@FrontlineHills	https://twitter.com/FrontlineHills	Frontline young adults	1 593
Twitter	@powerhousehills	https://twitter.com/powerhousehills	Powerhouse young adults	162
Twitter	@Hillsongtv	https://twitter.com/Hillsongtv	Television ministry	38 800
Twitter	@BrianCHouston	https://twitter.com/BrianCHouston	Pastor	356 000
Twitter	@bobbiehouston	https://twitter.com/bobbiehouston	Pastor	99 600

Facebook	Hillsong Church	https://www.facebook.com/hillsongchurch	Main church profile	573 537
Facebook	Hillsong Hills Campus Sydney	https://www.facebook.com/HillsongHills	Hills Campus	3 210
Facebook	Hillsong Evening College	https://www.facebook.com/pages/Hillsong-Evening-College/110800898979991	Evening College	296
Facebook	Hillsong Television	https://www.facebook.com/Hillsongtv	Television ministry	7 585
Facebook	Hillsong Choir - Hills	https://www.facebook.com/pages/Hillsong-Choir-Hills/248917775195986	Choir	196
Facebook	Hillsong Hills Fuel	https://www.facebook.com/hillsonghillsfuel	Fuel youth group	2 045
Facebook	Hillsong Wildlife	https://www.facebook.com/hillsongwildlife	Wildlife youth group	4 577
Facebook	Frontline Hills	https://www.facebook.com/frontline.hills	Frontline young adults	2 154
Facebook	Powerhouse Hills	https://www.facebook.com/PowerhouseHills	Powerhouse young adults	2 066
Facebook	Brian & Bobbie Houston	facebook.com/brianandbobbie	Pastors	151 000
Instagram	hillsong	http://instagram.com/hillsong	Main church profile	185 399
Instagram	hillsonghills	http://instagram.com/hillsonghills	Hills Campus	8 784
Instagram	hillsongyouth	http://instagram.com/hillsongyouth	Main youth profile	30 267
Instagram	frontlinehills	http://instagram.com/frontlinehills	Frontline young adults	1 654
Instagram	fuelhills	http://instagram.com/fuelhills	Fuel youth group	1 425
Instagram	powerhousehills	http://instagram.com/powerhousehills	Powerhouse young adults	1 818
Instagram	briancharleshouston	http://instagram.com/briancharleshouston	Pastor	81 578
Instagram	rlhouston	http://instagram.com/rlhouston	Pastor	45 467

Table 2-A details the social media activities of the Hillsong Church Cape Town congregation. This congregation, established in 2008 as an off-shoot of Hillsong Church in Sydney, maintains a social media presence on the networks Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The

congregation's largest social media audience is on Facebook, where 239 000 people follow its activities. As a relatively new church plant that was established during a growth period in the social media world, a significant number of the congregation's ministries and departments have established an online presence. Thus, social media profiles exist for the church's creative team (a team including musicians, graphic designers, writers, and volunteers in a number of other creative areas); a number of age-based youth groups (the so-called Powerhouse, Frontline, and Wildlife groups); and the congregation's evening college. Its senior pastors also have a significant number of followers on Twitter and Instagram.

Table 2-B provides an overview of the social media activities of the Hillsong Church New York City congregation, established in 2011 (Garcia, 2010:1). As the youngest of the three campuses that form part of this study, the social media footprint of the New York campus is the smallest; however, its reach in this area is already significant. More than 220 000 people have connected with the congregation on Facebook, and its Twitter following has also surpassed the 100 000 mark. Notably, the congregation's senior pastors have a substantial following on the networks Twitter and Instagram. The congregation's main Instagram profile has also attracted a large number of followers, with more than 56 000 people connected in this way.

Table 2-C provides an overview of the social media activities of the Hillsong Church Sydney congregation. Information in the table pertains specifically to Hillsong's so-called Hills campus – the original campus established in 1983 in the Baulkham Hills suburb of Sydney, and the main hub of activity for Hillsong Church (Riches, 2010:9). As the mother campus, this congregation's social media presence is the best developed of all Hillsong campuses. Thus, both the main Twitter and Facebook profiles have more than 500 000 followers, while the Instagram audience is also the largest of any Hillsong congregation, at more than 185 000 followers. Almost every area of the congregation's ministry is represented in its social media presence, with social network profiles for age-specific youth groups; the congregation's evening college; its television ministry; and the Sunday choir. The senior pastors are also highly active on Twitter and Instagram, and share a joint profile on Facebook.

It is clear from the information presented above that Hillsong as a whole, and its campuses individually, invest much effort in maintaining an active social media presence. The number of

followers in each instance also points to the fact that its online audience does not only consist of church members – non-members also connect with the church in this way. Yet, while its significant reach in this sphere is obvious, the true nature of its activity on social networks only becomes clear when one considers the various ways in which social media is used to engage these significant audiences in practical ways.

In order to demonstrate how these three Hillsong campuses use their social media profiles to engage their respective audiences, and in order to understand how church members use and experience these platforms as a virtual meeting place, a number of practical examples of social media posts commonly shared by these congregations will be considered in the section that follows. The intent is to demonstrate how the church uses these posts to connect with members, and to explain how church members communicate with the church and each other through these channels. Below, a number of common post types will be identified, with grouped examples of each. Each group of examples will be followed by an explanation of how this specific post type is used in practise. These examples are taken from all three social networks that these congregations are active on.

Figure 2-A



Figure 2-B

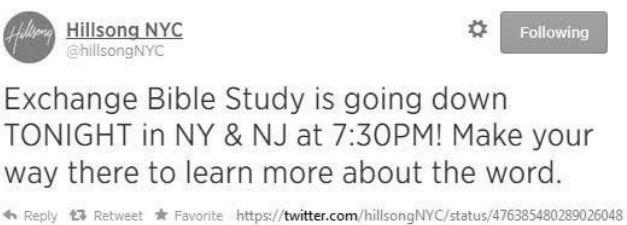


Figure 2-C



Figure 2-D



Figure 2-A, 2-B, 2-C, and 2-D are examples of informational posts. These posts, likely the most common type of post shared by these congregations, are aimed at providing practical information about church ministries, services, and other meetings to congregation members. These posts are often used to remind members of the time and location of specific events, like services, bible studies, youth group meetings, and special events; or to mobilise members to participate in a specific project. Often, these posts lead to enquiries by members, which can be directly answered on the social network in question.

Figure 2-E



Figure 2-F



Figure 2-G



Figure 2-E, 2-F, and 2-G are examples of feedback posts. These posts are usually shared with the intent to give feedback about significant ministry moments and successes, and generally highlight a specific area of church ministry. Usually uplifting in nature, these posts provide members with an opportunity to reflect on specific events and ministries, and to share these moments with other members of their social networks.

Figure 2-H



Figure 2-I



Figure 2-J



Figure 2-K



Figure 2-L



Figure 2-H, 2-I, 2-J, 2-K, and 2-L are examples of pastoral posts. Since the senior pastors of all three campuses discussed in this study have a significant presence on social networks, they often employ these channels as an opportunity to share pastoral messages of encouragement, exhortation, and counsel. Due to the considerable size of their audiences on social media, these posts often elicit a significant response from congregation members, who use this as an opportunity to either affirm the pastor’s message, to share it with others, or to engage with the pastor directly.

Figure 2-M



Figure 2-N



Figure 2-M and 2-N are examples of support posts. These posts aim to directly encourage and strengthen congregation members by sharing scripture, highlighting the contributions of specific individuals or groups, or by sharing information that could strengthen the communal life of the congregation in one way or another. Posts of this nature are often used to highlight a specific theme that the congregation is dwelling on; it could also be used to identify and thank volunteers who contribute to various areas of ministry.

Figure 2-O



Figure 2-P



Figure 2-Q



Figure 2-R



Figure 2-S



Figure 2-O, 2-P, 2-Q, 2-R, and 2-S are examples of conversational posts. Generally, these posts are authored by congregation members or visitors who follow Hillsong church on one or more

social networks, and involve interaction with the congregation via social media channels. For example, an individual could thank the congregation for a positive experience at a church service (e.g. Figure 2-O, 2-P, and 2-S), or personally address one of the church's pastors (e.g. Figure 2-O). This interaction can even take place between two congregations – for example when one congregation congratulates another on a significant milestone (e.g. Figure 2-Q). Posts can also become conversational when a congregation's social media channels are used to respond to mentions by others, or to answer specific questions (e.g. Figure 2-R). These posts highlight the conversational and interactive nature of the social media sphere, and represent a unique and potentially highly effective way of communicating with church members, visitors, and other followers.

The basic post types identified above represent the bulk of the activity of Hillsong's Sydney, New York, and Cape Town campuses on all three the major social networks they are active on. It should be noted that the different post types identified above are not rigidly defined, since a single post could meet the criteria for more than one post type (Figure 2-L, for example, could be representative of a pastoral, support, or feedback post). However, grouping posts in this manner offers a simple and effective way to highlight the diverse opportunities for interaction these social media channels offer.

Having gained an understanding of the various ways in which the church uses social media as a vehicle for connection and communication, the final remaining task in this normative phase of the study is to identify and consider issues and challenges unique to congregations that operate in an urban milieu. This is particularly pertinent since all three campuses of Hillsong Church selected for this study are set in major cities. The section that follows will serve as a point of reference in subsequent discussions about the potential value of social media use particularly as it pertains to the communal life of an urban congregation.

2.3.5.3 The Connected Church in the Urban Milieu

Given that all three campuses of Hillsong Church selected for this study operate in an urban context, it follows that particular attention must be paid to the issues that affect church communities in this milieu. This is especially salient since the topic of *koinonia* by its very

nature deals with the dynamics of communal life, which, Horrell (2004:80) argues, is influenced greatly by the realities of life in the city. In the light of Stone and Wolfteich's assertion (2008:2) that models of the church and of pastoral ministry often reflect a rural and agrarian past – consider, for example, the popular image of a shepherd and his flock – it is even more apparent that the implications of urbanization need to be considered whenever a pastoral study of this nature is undertaken. For this reason, the research question formulated in the introductory chapter of this thesis specifically demands awareness of the challenges unique to the urban environment that need to be considered as this study unfolds. Here, the aim is not to present an exhaustive overview of issues related to urban ministry; rather, it is simply an opportunity to highlight a limited number of challenges that could potentially be of interest in the context of this study.

The first of these challenges, and one of the primary concerns raised in virtually all literature on the subject, is the issue of time constraints caused by a city lifestyle. Virtually every discussion of urban Christian communities begins with the assertion that city dwellers struggle to meet the demands on their time due to work, family, and social commitments in a fast-paced city environment (e.g. Ferguson, 2004:286; Bolger & Gibbs, 2005:218). In fact, Paas (2012:161) points to this time pressure as the main obstacle that keeps people from becoming active in diaconal ministries in the church.

It is not hard to see how these time constraints could prevent people from active participation in true *koinonia* communities, since the weight of existing commitments may make them hesitant to take up the additional responsibility of functioning as active members of their local congregation. As a result, immersion in a living community may be replaced by participation in what Augsburg (2006:72) calls "lifestyle enclaves" – that is, loose social groupings that form when individuals happen to be involved in a specific activity incidental to their lifestyle – for example a sports club or interest group. However, since true *koinonia* is unique to authentic Christian communities, these enclaves tend to offer, at most, a shallow sense of belonging within a loosely defined group that breaks up as soon as the schedules or interest of those involved, change.

Another major area of concern is the quality of social ties in an urban environment, which in the estimation of Parks (2011:107) can often be characterised as “transitory, disconnected, and impersonal”. The strength of this position is bolstered by Bolger and Gibbs (2005:97) when they argue that the deeper, permanent relationships prevalent in traditional, close-knit communities are often replaced by short-lived, casual relationships in the urban context. This, in turn, causes a sense of isolation and disconnection – leading to Horrell’s disconcerting argument (2004:79) that the church is now faced with a generation of city-dwellers who have a very limited capacity for meaningful relationship. It is with this in mind that Paas (2012:161) rightly argues that one of the main functions of the church should be to “turn city people to one another”.

Finally, an element often considered when urban congregations come to mind is the issue of diversity. Stone and Wolfeich (2008:17), for example, single out this factor as one of the most important ministry challenges city pastors deal with. While diversity can obviously be a positive element – especially when one is cognisant of the inclusive nature of true *koinonia* communities – it does present some challenges. To begin with, the issue of diversity can present itself in many forms – from differences in age and gender, to various racial and cultural issues (e.g. Allen & Ross, 2012:199, 38; Bolger & Gibbs, 2005:18-22). This holds a number of practical and potentially highly complex implications for city dwellers, which could entail anything from the need to deal with language barriers; to the overcoming of obstacles arising from cultural differences; to understanding the often subtle differences between the ministry approaches of various age groups. Of course offering solutions to the various problematic manifestations of diversity fall well outside the ambit of this study; however, it is imperative that the diverse nature of urban Christian communities be taken into account in a study of this nature. Ultimately, the goal would be to determine if any of these practical challenges can be addressed through the use of social media.

In summary, it is clear that Stone and Wolfeich (2008:2, 4) are justified in their argument that the phenomenon of urbanization forces the church to deal with forms of relationship and interconnection quite unlike those found in smaller communities. This statement is drawn into even sharper focus when one considers the unique challenges associated with diversity as listed in the section above. Whether the use of digital social networks can contribute to

overcoming some of these obstacles will only become clear in the descriptive-empirical phase of the study.

Thus, with a clear understanding of the concept of *koinonia*, and a solid grasp of the history of social media and the church's involvement in this sphere, we now turn to the descriptive-empirical task.

2.4 Summary

This chapter explored the concept of *koinonia* as a guiding principle in thinking about the nature of true community within the New Testament church and beyond. This was done by following the development of the idea through the biblical text and in various literary sources. This was followed by an outline of the emergence of the social media sphere, along with an overview of the church's involvement in this area. Finally, a number of challenges unique to urban congregations were highlighted.

CHAPTER 3: A DESCRIPTIVE-EMPIRICAL EXPLORATION OF KOINONIA IN THE CONNECTED CHURCH

3.1 Overview

This chapter will focus on the descriptive-empirical task, which will be presented in the form of a qualitative empirical study undertaken on three campuses of Hillsong Church. The chapter will commence with an overview of issues pertaining to research design, explaining the qualitative framework chosen for this study against the background of the purpose and strategy behind the research. This will lead into the articulation of a research plan and a discussion of the many practical elements included in this process, including considerations about sampling; data collection; data analysis; ethical issues; credibility strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, and other elements. An opportunity will also be created for reflection on assumptions that could influence the way this study is approached. In the second half of the chapter, the focus will shift to the results of the study. The research results will be presented and analysed, and a number of themes emerging from the study will be identified and discussed.

3.2 Research Design

As the vast body of literature on the subject clearly attests to (e.g. Boeije, 2010; Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2009), a well-developed understanding of research design and its many intricacies is one of the fundamental building blocks of a successful empirical study. With this in mind, the first part of this chapter will aim to develop a systematic outline of the various aspects that need to be considered as part of this process. The aim will be to construct a robust and coherent research design that will serve as the foundation for a rigorous research process and, ultimately, a productive and meaningful study.

In order to do so effectively, however, it is first necessary to position this chapter within the framework of the descriptive-empirical task envisioned by Osmer (2008:31-78). This is an essential prerequisite since a full grasp of this task's function and importance will ensure that the researcher stays true to the aim and purpose of the study as a whole.

As stated in the introductory chapter, the descriptive-empirical task focuses on the actual state of the form of Christian praxis under investigation. This is done by gathering information through empirical investigation to help discern dynamics and patterns in the specific field examined (Osmer, 2008:11). Latini (2011:9) opts for a simplified and eminently functional version of this definition by posing it in the form of a single question that needs to be answered: “What is happening in this situation or context?” Thus, the descriptive-empirical task aims to apprehend the subject of study within its original context in order to construct a rich and accurate description of what this specific form of Christian praxis looks like in the real world.

The distinctly empirical nature of this task should also be considered. Van der Ven (2005:102) defines an empirical project as one that investigates phenomena with a view to gleaning knowledge that is exact, causally explanatory, predictive and teachable. This, Osmer argues (2004:154), means that empirical methodology provides practical theology with the techniques needed to order, analyse, and interpret specific forms of Christian praxis. Of course, it should be noted that the use of an empirical process does not imply regression into a kind of scientism where an emphasis on data precludes any statements about meaning and purpose. In fact, Van der Ven (101-136) rightly goes to great lengths to emphasise that the use of empirical methodology within the field of practical theology always leads to interpretation of, and reflection on, the data that has been collected. This aligns with Osmer’s view (2008:10-11, 227) that the descriptive-empirical task can never be separated from the normative, interpretive, and pragmatic tasks of practical theology, as it should always lead to new insights and reflection.

It is within the context of this descriptive-empirical paradigm that we turn our attention to the matter of research design. In the interest of a systematic approach, this section will be presented against the backdrop of four overarching elements of research design identified by Osmer (2008:47-57). These elements include reflection on the purpose of the project; identifying a suitable strategy of inquiry; formulating a specific research plan; and engaging in a reflexive stage where the meta-theoretical assumptions informing the project are considered.

3.2.1 Purpose

Whenever research design is considered, Osmer (2008:47-57) and others (e.g. Creswell, 2012:129, 134; Maxwell, 2013:140; Merriam, 2009:59, 64) deem it imperative that clarity about the purpose of the project – that is, the specific reasons for carrying out the research – should be of primary concern. In this view, all decisions about a research strategy should flow from clarity about the purpose behind a given project. Babbie (2011:94-96) affirms this, adding that the purpose of a study has a direct bearing on the kind of research engaged in.

A number of models or paradigms guiding thought about research purpose have emerged over time, all of which relate to the different possible outcomes that could result from a study. These paradigms are varied and not necessarily mutually exclusive, leading Babbie (2011:18) to point out that most studies draw on more than one of these models. With this in mind, a number of these models and the specific ways in which they relate to the planned empirical study will be discussed below.

3.2.1.1 Applied Research

Often, discussions about research purpose begin by drawing a distinction between basic and applied research – and even though Durrheim (2007:46) cautions against the temptation to envision too clear-cut a dichotomy between these two areas, an awareness of the differences between them will be useful within the context of this particular study. In fact, an adequate understanding of these two approaches at this early stage is essential, as it will have a bearing on subsequent discussions about other areas of research purpose as well. Since this distinction relates directly to the kind of outcomes envisioned for the study as a whole, it is necessary to understand why one approach is better suited to this particular project than the other.

The difference between basic and applied research can best be understood by explaining it in terms of the contribution the study aims to make within its field of research. Basic research, also referred to as “fundamental” research (Boeije, 2010:31), is motivated primarily by intellectual interest in a phenomenon, and is aimed purely at contributing to the fundamental knowledge about a specific situation or practice (Osmer, 2008:49). This kind of research

activity is rooted in theory, and has as its goal simply the extension of knowledge about a specific subject (Merriam, 2009:3). The end result, therefore, is an expanded or richer body of theoretical knowledge about a specific field or question.

Applied research, on the other hand, has a practical outcome in mind. Maxwell (2013:78) argues that applied research is aimed at understanding and improving a particular program, situation, or practice. In other words, the aim is to generate knowledge that facilitates change. For example, Boeije (2010:31) points out that applied research could be used to resolve an unwanted situation or improve an existing situation or practice. Durrheim (2007:46) mirrors this view, arguing that applied research contributes towards decision making and problem solving. Thus, unlike basic research, where the focus falls on theoretical constructs, applied research is concerned with praxis.

Since this thesis does not only aim to satisfy the requirement of conducting original research that represents a distinct contribution to the knowledge of a specific subject (NWU, 2009:32), but will also culminate in the formulation of practical guidelines aimed at developing a new praxis that is more closely aligned to the biblical norms identified in the first stage of this thesis, it is clearly aligned with the applied research approach. As such, it will draw on the methods and practices usually associated with this approach.

3.2.1.2 Toward a Summative Evaluation

Situated within the sphere of applied research, and of particular interest within the context of this study, an approach known as evaluation research should also be considered in relation to the purpose of the study. Babbie (2011:374) provides one of the most accessible definitions for evaluation research, explaining that its aim is simply to determine whether a specific program has produced the intended result. In other words, this kind of research is geared towards the systematic assessment of a program, trend, or intervention, in order to determine to what degree the outcomes of the program align with what was envisioned in the first place. Thus, evaluation research centres on various techniques to probe and understand the consequences or effectiveness of specific programs or activities.

One of the types of evaluation possible within this framework, and the type relevant to this study, is known as a summative evaluation. Osmer (2008:49) describes a summative evaluation as an exercise specifically aimed at determining the effectiveness of a program, while Shinkfield and Stufflebeam (2007:25) highlight how a summative evaluation can be used to make an overall judgement about the value of a program or project. Preskill and Russ-Eft (2009:17) present a similar view, adding that a summative evaluation can be used to decide whether an evaluated program should or should not be continued in its current form. Latini (2011:213-217), for example, opts for a summative evaluation in her attempt to ascertain whether the contemporary small group or “cell church” model delivers on its promises in terms of fostering community, and draws on this evaluative approach to assess the benefits and consequences of concentrating on small groups as a model of ministry.

Since this study represents an opportunity to reflect on the value and efficacy of social media in fostering *koinonia*, drawing on the elements of a summative evaluation could be instrumental in unlocking valuable insights. Therefore, the study will function as a summative evaluation in the sense that it will attempt to assess the value and usefulness of digital social networking tools in a congregational setting, culminating in some kind of overall judgement about the value of these practices.

3.2.1.3 Exploratory Elements

Another constructive way in which to reflect on the purpose of the proposed research is to illuminate the exploratory nature thereof. Research is typically categorised as exploratory when information about the topic under investigation is not yet widely available, or when the subject of study itself is relatively new or even unknown (Durrheim, 2007:44). Babbie (2011:95) sheds further light on the subject by explaining that the exploratory approach usually applies to situations where a researcher is breaking new ground, and needs to gain new insight into a topic that has not yet been explored or properly defined in literature or by the academic community. The exploratory approach is usually contrasted with the descriptive approach, which aims to provide detailed and accurate accounts of phenomena (Kotler, Shawchuck, & Wrenn, 2010:114), and the explanatory approach, which seeks to identify causality (Blaikie, 2010:71).

Less concerned with statistical accuracy than with probing questions and analysis (Durrheim, 2007:49), exploratory studies typically employ an open and flexible approach aimed at uncovering new insights into the practices under investigation. Therefore, questions used to gather data through this approach tend to be more open-ended and less structured (Merriam, 2009:89), with an emphasis on uncovering insights that could help the researcher understand the subject in progressively clearer terms. The focus is on making a series of observations that, collectively, can be used to generate a more complete and accurate picture of the phenomenon in question (Durrheim, 2007:44), while at the same time dispelling misconceptions and steering the researcher clear of unproductive detours (Babbie, 2011:17).

The exploratory framework is not limited to a specific subset of data gathering methods, with structured and semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a wide range of other approaches often employed in the process (Bowers-Brown & Smith, 2010:119-122). Pilot studies – small scale preliminary studies to evaluate and refine the research approach (Maxwell, 2013:66-67) – can also contribute to exploratory efforts. Nevertheless, Kotler *et al.* (2010:114) explain that these approaches are all aimed at developing and refining thinking about a specific topic in order to get a clearer understanding of an area of enquiry. Therefore, although there are numerous possible ways to approach an exploratory study, the aim of such an effort is simple and clear-cut: to gain clarity about a research topic.

As much as exploratory research represents a distinct endeavour, it should be noted that the wider literature on research methodology suggests there is also a sense in which the exploratory approach is an essential element of virtually every research venture. Blaikie (2010:70-71), for example, goes so far as to argue that every research project should include at least some degree of exploratory activity, since it moves the researcher to a clearer understanding of the problem being investigated. Durrheim (2007:45) agrees, noting that the open-ended nature of many studies render them exploratory by definition, even though they may not be primarily envisioned as such. Of course, this also implies that a research project is not necessarily exclusively exploratory in nature. In other words, a study with an exploratory dimension could also involve descriptive or explanatory elements.

Significantly, Blaikie (2010:70) points out that an exploratory approach is not only used when a research area is unknown, but also when a specific phenomenon or practice is encountered in a new context. Therefore, even though the social media sphere has been the subject of a number of general studies as of late (e.g. Castells, 2009; Breones *et al.*, 2011; Lenhart *et al.*, 2010), the fact that the practical implications of these developments are still not well understood within a Christian congregational context dictates that this study will be exploratory to a certain extent.

3.2.1.4 Descriptive Elements

In addition to the exploratory element highlighted above, the descriptive approach needs to be considered insofar as it has a bearing on the purpose of the proposed research. Considering Babbie's warnings (2011:158) that this approach involves possible pitfalls – like the tendency to ignore the distinction between descriptive and explanatory activity, and the potential role of subjective or ambiguous observations by a researcher – it is worth reflecting on the nature and value of this approach.

Merriam (2009:5) provides a succinct definition of the descriptive approach by explaining that it simply involves a systematic description of the facts and characteristics related to a specific practice or phenomenon. This definition is in line with that of Dahlberg and McCaig (2010:20), who place additional emphasis on the fact that descriptions should be sufficiently rich – that is, they should contain a high degree of detail about the specific phenomenon or practice that the researcher is investigating. Smith and Tredoux (2007:167), in turn, stress the importance of accuracy when recording these descriptions, and argue that the validity and veracity of these accounts should be a primary consideration, since these factors will ultimately determine the results of the study as a whole. This view is shared by Durrheim (2007:45), who argues that accurate observations are the cornerstone of descriptive studies. Collectively, these views point to the central role that reliable, detailed data plays in the descriptive approach.

The way that these descriptions are presented is also of import. Blaikie (2010:71) explains that data can be presented in the form of words or numbers by systematically arranging the

gathered information or descriptions in specific ways. Durrheim (2007:44) identifies three practical ways in which this is generally done: Firstly, descriptions can be presented in the form of narrative-type accounts – for example in the form of interviews. Secondly, the researcher may opt to make use of some form of classification in order to add structure to descriptions – for example, descriptions may be arranged in categories or according to specified types. Finally, relationships between different variables may also be described – for example in the way that Latini (2011:45) sets out to describe how a church member’s involvement in a small group relates to his or her involvement within the wider faith community.

As stated earlier, the researcher should also be aware of certain challenges related to the descriptive approach. These issues mostly revolve around the distinction between the descriptive and explanatory approaches. For example, Babbie (2011:158) states that it is much harder to make descriptive statements about some concepts than it is to make explanatory ones. He does so by referring to the example of describing someone as “religious”. In this instance, the meaning of the term is not necessarily clear, since much relies on the researcher’s definition of the word. Understanding this description will require a degree of interpretation, which could steer the study in an explanatory direction and have an impact on its results. Therefore, the researcher should be careful not to use language that introduces ambiguity. For this reason Babbie (2013:136) argues that the formulation of proper definitions for key terms is crucial when embarking on descriptive work. Merriam (2009:130), on the other hand, emphasises the importance of descriptions that contain sufficient detail, and explains that a failure to provide rich descriptions could have a negative impact on the study as well. In both the above instances, the veracity of the descriptions provided by the researcher represents a possible challenge.

Of course, with Osmer’s descriptive-empirical task (2008:31-78) as the overarching framework for the current chapter, it follows that the descriptive approach will play a central role in the research presented below. This descriptive activity, coupled with the exploratory dimension highlighted earlier, should cast a revealing light on the subject matter being investigated. With these essential elements related to the study’s purpose as a foundation, the attention now turns to an overview of the strategy guiding the research.

3.2.2 Strategy

Like many other scholars (*cf.* Boeije, 2010:10-11; Maxwell, 2013:viii; Durrheim, 2007:44), Osmer (2008:49) distinguishes between two basic strategies of inquiry when it comes to research, namely qualitative and quantitative research. These broad categories are representative of two distinct ways in which to interact with a given situation, and have a bearing on virtually every facet of the research, including such practical aspects as the way data will be collected and analysed. For this reason, it is necessary to make a considered and informed decision about the most appropriate strategy of inquiry to be employed in this study. This can only be done on the basis of a well-developed understanding of the difference between these two approaches.

3.2.2.1 Qualitative versus Quantitative Approach

At the most basic level, Durrheim argues (2007:47), the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research lies in the fact that their conclusions are based on different kinds of information. Whereas the realm of quantitative research focuses on the collection of numerical data and the analysis of these figures, qualitative studies require data in the form of spoken or written language. It is the seemingly dissimilar nature of these two kinds of data that provides a starting point for understanding the difference between qualitative and quantitative research.

On the one hand, quantitative research revolves around generating statistically reliable estimates of the characteristics associated with a specific group of people, practice, or phenomenon (Kotler *et al.*, 2010:126), and is therefore primarily concerned with gathering accurate numerical data. For this reason, Babbie (2013:387) cautions that even a rudimentary quantitative study requires statistical skills of at least a basic level. Despite this specific requirement, however, Blaikie (2010:215) explains that numerical data offers advantages like predictability and security, and is therefore particularly suitable in instances where uncertainty and ambiguity needs to be eliminated to as great a degree as possible. At the same time cognisance should also be taken of some of the disadvantages associated with plain numeric data, including a possible loss in richness of meaning (Babbie, 2013:25). Nevertheless, the

large sample sizes typically required when gathering numeric information (Kotler *et al.*, 2010:126) allow for representative data sets, which in turn enable researchers to generalise findings based on the conclusions of a study.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, deals with richly descriptive accounts of phenomena, usually gathered in the form of spoken or written language (Blaikie, 2010:162, 204). This data can be gathered through a variety of means, including different kinds of interviews, focus groups, and documentary analysis (Bowers-Brown & Smith, 2010:111). A clear advantage of this kind of data is that it can be richer and more descriptive than quantitative data (Babbie, 2013:25), as the researcher is free to probe for deeper and more detailed explanations throughout the course of the study. Yet, this kind of data also introduces the possibility of ambiguity and the potential for incorrect interpretation (Babbie, 2013:25), since the meaning ascribed to specific words may differ from one person or situation to the next. This introduces a level of complexity, but also represents an opportunity to extract meaning from descriptions.

With this core distinction as a basis, Osmer (2008:49) explains that qualitative research is best suited to scenarios where the focus is on understanding the practices in which groups and individuals engage, and the meaning they ascribe to these experiences. Bowers-Brown and Smith (2010:112) offer a similar view, and point out that qualitative research essentially sheds light on the nature of people's lives, situations, and circumstances. Latini (2011:210) concurs, adding that qualitative research permits the kind of open, richly descriptive input that enables a researcher to construct a meaningful picture of the real-world experience of individuals or groups. It is Boeije (2010:11), however, who ties these elements together in the most compelling way by highlighting three key aspects of the qualitative approach: First, he explains that every qualitative study is focused on a search for meaning – that is, there is a desire to illuminate the meaning that individuals ascribe to specific experiences and phenomena. Secondly, he associates the qualitative approach with the use of flexible research methods that are suited to unlocking this meaning. Finally, he explains that every qualitative study culminates in the formulation of meaningful findings – which is achieved by reducing, selecting, and interpreting gathered information.

This can be contrasted with the quantitative approach, which revolves around the statistical analysis of numerical data with a view to making generalizable and broad comparisons (Durrheim, 2007:47). Using numerical data, researchers can also explore the relationships between variables (Osmer, 2008:49); for example, a researcher could explore the relationship between a person's socio-economic standing and his or her likelihood to contribute to church fundraising efforts. Since these variables are expressed in the form of statistical data, they are typically perceived as objective in nature (Durrheim, 2007:52); yet, Babbie (2013:438) recognises that this does not mean that quantitative data is not susceptible to bias and subjective interpretation. Indeed, Merriam (2009:154) insists that even seemingly objective documents and data sets could contain hidden biases that could influence a study's findings. Despite these challenges, the quantitative approach enables researchers to gather valuable information about groups and practices, and to come to meaningful, generalizable, and verifiable conclusions about key theories and variables.

Since these approaches deal with different kinds of data, one should also allow for different methods when it comes to data analysis. In the qualitative sphere, for example, observations recorded in written format are typically analysed by categorising data according to themes that are identified as the information is gathered (Durrheim, 2007:47). In this sense, the qualitative framework represents an inductive approach, which means a picture of a specific phenomenon is gradually built up by means of flexible research methods in a bottom-up fashion that could culminate in the generation of a theory or theories (Dahlberg & McCaig, 2010:20). Merriam (2009:16) describes this process as "emergent and flexible".

Conversely, data analysis in the quantitative sphere begins with a predefined theory that can be tested against the gathered data (Boeije, 2010:5). This involves a top-down, deductive process that starts with the formulation of a hypothesis, followed by the collection of data according to explicit, unambiguous, and well-defined categories (Maxwell, 2013:107). This data is ultimately analysed to determine whether it supports or refutes the theory formulated at the commencement of the study.

Osmer (2008:50) illuminates the difference between qualitative and quantitative studies even further by explaining it in terms of the contrasting nature of extensive and intensive research.

Intensive research applies to studies where the field being investigated is very narrow, yet studied in depth. This approach, which relies on smaller sample sizes that are studied in greater detail (Davis, 2010:128), represents the qualitative perspective. On the other end of the spectrum lies extensive research, in which the field of study is very broad, but where every respondent cannot be questioned in great depth. These studies typically rely on quantitative strategies like statistical analysis and surveys.

Considering the above, it is clear that the qualitative approach provides the most suitable framework for the envisioned study. Since the issue of social media use and how it relates to the biblical ideal for community has not been explored in depth before, and since it represents a relatively unknown and undefined area of practice, the inductive, emergent nature of a qualitative study would be the most productive and effective way to explore the subject. Moreover, since the proposed study revolves around the experiences of congregation members and the meaning they ascribe to their participation in this new form of online interaction, it clearly falls within the ambit of the qualitative approach as outlined above.

As stated in the introductory chapter (1.2.3), the limited number of studies on the subject of social media use in a church context that have been undertaken to date, have largely focused on aspects like user numbers and demographics. In other words, these have been studies with a quantitative slant. At the same time, little has been learnt about the actual meaning and implications of this social media engagement. Therefore, it is necessary to begin exploring qualitative aspects like the value and meaning of online communities, instead of simply focusing on quantitative data that does not provide insight into the significance of this phenomenon.

3.2.2.2 Basic Qualitative Study

As a complex and mature approach that has developed steadily over the course of the last two decades (Merriam, 2009:vii), qualitative research encompasses a large number of research methods, all of which represent different opportunities to gather meaningful data. However, a general survey of available literature soon reveals that there seems to be no consensus as to how to classify the many approaches. Merriam (2009:6), for example, refers to as many as

sixteen "theoretical traditions" within the field of qualitative research, ranging from established and well-known approaches such as ethnography and grounded theory, to less common methods such as chaos theory and semiotics. Other scholars prefer to focus on only a few categories; Creswell, for example, highlights only five (Creswell, 2012:69-110). Of course the exact number of approaches is not of primary import; however, since some of these methods are more applicable to specific types of research problems than others (Bowers-Brown & Smith, 2010:111), it is necessary to carefully consider which one would be suitable within the context of the proposed study.

In the light of the subject matter and goals of this research, an approach classified by Merriam (2009:22-25) as a "basic qualitative study" appears to align best with the outcomes envisioned for this study. Merriam argues that the basic approach is the most common type of qualitative study undertaken, and explains that it is suited to situations where the researcher wishes to understand the meaning people attach to certain experiences and practices (Merriam, 2009:23). Of course this definition characterises qualitative research in general; however, the basic qualitative study does not focus on the additional elements associated with some other approaches. For example, an ethnographic study places much emphasis on an individual's interaction with the culture around him (Creswell, 2012:90), which does not necessarily apply in this case. A basic qualitative study, therefore, will allow for a singular focus in vision that will contribute to a successful and meaningful study.

Merriam (2009:23) explains that data for basic qualitative studies is gathered through interviews and observations – a flexible process common to most studies of this nature. Information gathered in this way is usually highly descriptive, and presents the researcher with ample opportunity to construct a detailed view of the subject under investigation; while data analysis involves identifying recurring patterns in responses from participants. This is usually achieved through coding, which entails the organisation of data into various categories that form a framework for reflecting on the meaning of the gathered information (Blaikie, 2010:25). It is this reflection on the meaning of a practice or phenomenon that represents the ultimate goal of a basic qualitative study.

3.2.3 Research Plan

With an understanding of the strategy of inquiry as foundation, a carefully crafted research plan now needs to be defined. According to Osmer, (2008:53), a robust research plan includes decisions regarding the people, setting, or program that will be investigated; the role of the researcher; the specific methods that will be used to gather and analyse data; and the steps that need to be followed to carry out the project. This outline will be adhered to in the section that follows.

3.2.3.1 People, Setting, and Program

As indicated in preceding chapters, the proposed study will be undertaken among congregation members at Hillsong Church campuses in Sydney, Cape Town and New York. While no official figures have been released with details of the demographic make-up of the specific congregations in the Hillsong network where this research will be conducted, a number of interesting published statistics point to the diverse membership base of this group. This diversity is of interest, since it is important to guard against presenting the views of too narrow a sub-set of members as representative of the entire group. Doing so could skew the data gathered and, ultimately, the findings of the study. Thus, care should be taken to consider this diversity during the sampling and data analysis process.

The diversity mentioned above is reflected in terms of age, race, and gender. For example, an annual report on church events reveals that a wide variety of age groups are actively involved in the church's programs, with an average of 2 112 young people from Grades 7-12 attending youth meetings on a weekly basis in Sydney alone (Hillsong Church, 2012:17). Active social media pages for the Cape Town and New York youth groups (e.g. <https://www.facebook.com/HillsongYouthNYC>; <https://twitter.com/HillsongCTYouth>) demonstrate that young people also play an active part in these faith communities. At the same time, the report emphasises a number of initiatives aimed at married couples, families, and individuals with special needs (Hillsong Church, 2012:12). Overall, congregational life at all three campuses appear to be geared to people of all ages, and in various stages of life.

This same report hints at other areas of diversity. For example, it reveals that a total of 60 270 women attended the church's women's conferences in Sydney, Cape Town, and London in 2012, while gatherings aimed at men specifically also drew thousands (Hillsong Church, 2012:11, 19). A high degree of racial diversity is also reflected in the congregations in general. The Cape Town congregation, for example, is highly active in the township Gugulethu, and is in the final stages of planning to establish a satellite congregation at this location (Dooley & Dooley, 2014). This kind of diversity is also evident in the Sydney, where multiple "extension services" are offered to members that prefer to worship in languages like Mandarin, Cantonese, and Spanish (Stetzer, 2014). While full statistics for every Hillsong congregation is not released on a regular basis, the above figures do give a sense of the diverse nature of the Hillsong Church membership base – a reality that needs to be considered in this study.

With regards to setting, it should be noted that all three campuses that form part of the proposed study are located in urban areas. Since one of the stated objectives of the study is to reflect on the value of social media use specifically in urban congregations, these locations have been identified with this goal in mind. However, while these locations are all set against a typical urban backdrop, they differ in various respects – most significantly with regards to the bigger socio-economic landscapes they are situated in.

Hillsong's New York City campus has officially been active in the city since 2011, although smaller gatherings started as early as 2010 (Garcia, 2010). New York, a global metropolis, has a population of roughly 8,4 million people, with as many as 19 million inhabitants in the greater metropolitan area (Benton-Short & Lewis, 2012:71). Generally regarded as the financial capital of the United States, the city is a world leader in terms of commerce and industry, and despite issues with crime and practical matters of governance, it remains an economic powerhouse (Benton-Short & Lewis, 2012:72), with all the benefits in terms of lifestyle and affluence that such a position entails. It is within this context that the new campus of Hillsong Church was launched, generating so much interest that multiple Sunday services had to be added almost immediately in order to accommodate more attendees (Garcia, 2010).

Not too far removed from this reality, although far removed geographically, is Sydney, Australia, the city that Hillsong Church originated in. With a population of about 4,5 million,

the city also functions as an international financial hub, and carries all the hallmarks of a world powerhouse, including urban-based affluence arising from a service-based economy, and well-developed infrastructure (Dowling & McGuirk, 2012:539). With both sprawling suburban areas and high-density inner-city developments, Sydney's population has grown steadily since the early 1990s, and continues to attract a significant percentage of highly skilled – and highly paid – workers (Dowling & McGuirk, 2012:541). Like New York, Sydney's socio-economic landscape reflects a first-world reality that is built on relative prosperity and continued development. The city remains the home base for Hillsong Church, with more than 25 000 members attending services in the city every weekend – the biggest attendance at any Hillsong congregation (Hillsong Church, 2012:12).

The Cape Town congregation, on the other hand, represents Hillsong's first permanent African venture. A city of extremes, both great wealth and abject poverty are on display – one often within close proximity of the other. For example, the affluence of well-known neighbourhoods like Clifton and Constantia contrasts sharply with the squalor of townships like Khayelitsha, with a population set to soon exceed one million, where many live in a densely packed and poverty-stricken environment (Myers, Owusu, & Subulwa, 2012:333). The city's population, currently approximately 3,4 million strong (Myers, Owusu, & Subulwa, 2012:364), includes some of the richest and poorest inhabitants on the continent – a reality that is also reflected in the current membership of the congregation. This means that members of the Cape Town congregation are faced with many of the challenges prevalent in developing nations, like dealing with poverty and income disparity. In this sense, the Cape Town congregation is unique.

It is against the backdrop of these urban settings that the phenomenon of social media use in a congregational context will be discussed. As is clear from the above, this discussion will need to reflect an awareness of the disparate realities as well as the similarities linking the three campuses that will be involved in the study. At the same time, the diversity of the membership base of the various congregations also needs to be considered. These aspects will then have to be woven into a coherent and comprehensible whole in order to construct an accurate and helpful account that can shed light on the value of social media use in fostering *koinonia* in urban congregations.

3.2.3.2 Research Methods

While the qualitative approach lends itself to a number of possible research methods, a basic qualitative study as envisioned by Merriam (2009:22-25) usually relies on interviews as the primary means of data gathering. This is the approach that will be taken in this study as well, since it allows for an adequate degree of flexibility, and the ability to elucidate a subject by means of pointed and probing questions.

Osmer (2008:61) provides a basic definition of an interview by describing it simply as a conversation between two participants, where one person seeks information from the other with a particular purpose in mind. This simple definition, however, should be seen against the backdrop of potential complexity inherent in any interview process. For example, the kind of basic one-on-one interview described by Bowers-Brown and Smith (2010:119) differs significantly from the focus group interviews favoured by Latini (2011:60, 64), since the number of people involved in the interview is likely to have an effect on the conversational dynamic and, thus, the way the interview is approached by the researcher. Merriam also mentions situations where telephone or video interviews may be appropriate (2009:267), adding credence to the idea that different situations may require different interview approaches. For this reason, Creswell (2012:164) explains that the researcher needs to make an informed decision about the type of interview to be used.

As stated in the introductory chapter, the study will make use of one-on-one interviews. Boeije (2010:62) accounts for the popularity of this approach by explaining that such interviews present the researcher with an opportunity to learn more about the experiences of individuals in their own language, and from their own perspective. This is particularly useful in a study that includes exploratory and descriptive elements, as interviews are also often in-depth and open-ended, allowing the researcher to pursue possible leads as they are mentioned (Babbie, 2013:317). Moreover, Merriam (2009:85) points out that an interview allows the researcher to present qualitative data in the form of direct quotations by participants, providing insight into the "experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge" of interviewees. Since subjects can be explored in detail, this data is usually richly descriptive and highly detailed.

Marshall and Rossman (2006:101-102) emphasise various other advantages associated with the use of one-on-one interviews, including the fact that they make it possible to ask participants to clarify their responses immediately if necessary, which in turn allows a researcher to obtain a more accurate picture of the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences. Additionally, Babbie (2013:321) argues that such interviews give the researcher a greater degree of control over the flow of the conversation than, for example, focus group sessions. These aspects, coupled with the general flexibility of one-on-one interviews, enable the researcher to construct an accurate and detailed description of the experiences and views of interviewees.

Of course one-on-one interviews also present a number of potential problems. For Marshall and Rossman (2006:102), these challenges mostly revolve around the need for personal interaction required by the interview process. Thus, they argue, an unwilling interviewee, or one who is not comfortable sharing specific information pertaining to a question, could have an adverse effect on the accuracy of the data. Babbie (2011:293), for example, shares the hypothetical case of a respondent who is reluctant to make controversial statements or express deviant attitudes. In this instance, the withheld data detracts from the study. Conversely, the sheer amount of data typically uncovered by even a modest number of interviews may also be challenging to process (Bowers-Brown & Smith, 2010:118). Another consideration relates to the potential cost of interviews, not merely in terms of travel expense, but more often in terms of the cost in personal time to the researcher (Blaikie, 2010:29), since one-on-one interviews and the work associated with it – for example, transcribing responses – can be time-consuming. Nevertheless, none of these problems are insurmountable given proper planning and a rigorous approach – a fact that the popularity of the one-on-one interview among qualitative researchers (Merriam, 2009:86, 103) attests to.

Apart from the type of interview, Osmer (2008:62) also suggests that a decision should be made about the degree of structure in an interview, since this has a direct impact on the type of questions that can be used as well as the order they can be asked in. This is an important consideration, since interviews can range in structure from a rigid list of pre-defined questions to an open and highly unstructured conversation (Merriam, 2009:x). Generally, highly structured interviews ask closed-ended questions – where the interviewee has a set of

responses to choose from – in a very specific order defined before the interview commences (Blaikie, 2010:246; Osmer, 2008:61). Unstructured interviews, on the other end of the spectrum, focuses on open, free-flowing conversations aimed at tapping into feelings and experiences (Kelly, 2007:298).

In the case of this specific study, semi-structured interviews will be used. Osmer (2008:63) describes semi-structured interviews as conversations that allow for both open-ended and closed-ended questions. These questions are usually asked in a pre-defined sequence, but the sequence is flexible, and may be adapted through the course of the interview. This semi-structured approach allows for a great degree of flexibility, since the researcher can change the order and wording of the questions; however, Bowers-Brown and Smith (2010:119) rightly argue that this requires a certain level of skill, since the interviewer must recognise moments in the interview where it is appropriate to probe for further information, and should immediately be able to formulate questions in order to do so. Osmer (2008:62) also notes that the open-ended nature of questions in semi-structured interviews encourage participants to construct their own responses in their own language.

In light of the above, it should be clear that the flexible, open-ended and richly descriptive nature of semi-structured one-on-one interviews will allow for the collection of rich and meaningful data, which in turn will enable the researcher to reflect on the research problem in a fruitful and productive manner.

3.2.3.3 Role of the Researcher

As part of his larger framework for the formulation of a research plan, Osmer (2008:55) also highlights the importance of the role of the researcher in any qualitative study. Durrheim (2007:57) shares this concern, and states that the influence of the researcher, and the degree of control he or she exercises in every stage of the research, has a very real impact on the outcome of the study in its entirety. Boeije (2010:61) affirms this by referring to the qualitative researcher as the “main instrument” for data gathering – particularly when interviews are used. Latini (2011:210) also places the researcher in the role of active contributor, especially since the research process requires the researcher to be physically and mentally immersed in

the world of the observed. Overall, these scholars share a view of the researcher as an involved, even emotionally invested constituent that is highly instrumental in the success of a research project. As a consequence, Maxwell (2013:125) states the belief that it is impossible to eliminate the actual influence of the researcher. Rather, he argues, the goal is to understand this influence and harness it in a controlled and productive way.

With this in mind, it is important to clarify what Bowers-Brown and Smith (2010:113) refer to as the “positionality” of the researcher – that is, recognising and acknowledging the researcher’s personal stance on, and relation to, the issue under investigation. Indeed, since the selection of a specific research problem may flow from a researcher's own experiences and values, it is important to consider his or her moral, ethical, or emotional position on the topic, and any possible ideological commitments her or she may have in this regard (Blaikie, 2010:54).

To some, it may be alarming that the researcher, with all his or her bias and prejudices, is the primary instrument for data collection. However, this speaks to one of the fundamental distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research: In contrast with quantitative research, where the boundaries between researcher and participant are relatively clear, Klenke (2008:11) argues that in qualitative research, the participant and researcher act as “co-creators of the research process”. In fact, Merriam (2009:127) points out that a degree of subjectivity and interaction is assumed in the qualitative realm. Thus, instead of treating the researcher as a completely neutral instrument, the qualitative researcher's personal standpoint and motives as a researcher are seen as an integral element (Maxwell, 2013:26).

For this reason, Klenke (2008:42) explains that qualitative researchers need to be able to “bracket” personal values in a process she refers to as “self-exposure” – that is, they need to be able to identify the positions from which they speak, and should be aware of, and honest about, the prior knowledge informing their thinking. Merriam (2009:270) presents a similar argument, stating that a researcher needs to be aware of any bias before embarking on a study. Likewise, Bowers-Brown and Smith (2010:113) argue that it is particularly important to be honest about the reasons for pursuing a specific research question in the first place, since failure to do so will result in the tendency to overlook important information. With this strong

call for an open-minded self-awareness and honesty in mind, one understands Klenke's argument (2008:42) that qualitative research attaches tremendous importance to transparency about a researcher's values, assumptions, and history.

Of course, having stated this commitment to honesty and self-awareness, Bowers-Brown and Smith (2010:113) caution that it is still equally necessary to conduct research without attempting to pursue a desired outcome. Therefore, the researcher should refrain from posing leading questions that may reveal an assumption or bias (Merriam, 2009:99). At the same time, Durrheim (2007:53) argues, the researcher should guard against giving subtle clues about the way he or she expects a participant to respond to a specific question or situation. In fact, as Osmer (2008:76) explains, qualitative researchers should be so open to the perspectives of their research subjects that their preconceived notions may even be altered by what they encounter in the field.

Moreover, the particular skills and professional background of the researcher, as well as the bearing these elements could have on the research, should also be considered – especially since Osmer (2008:55) explains that these areas could represent potential obstacles or practical advantages during the course of the study. It has already been stated that the researcher is involved in the work of Hillsong Church, and has ties with the global leadership network and congregants of this movement. As a member of the Hillsong Cape Town congregation since its launch in the city, and an active volunteer in the church, the researcher has served in a number of leadership areas in the church, most notably as part of the theology lecturing team and steering committee at the church's evening college, as well as in a number of creative roles. Thus, the researcher is highly familiar with the church's ministry philosophy, as well as its systems and processes.

In addition to the above, the researcher has a professional interest in the world of digital media. As a digital strategist at 24.com, a subsidiary of the media company Media24, the researcher has been involved in the management of some of the country's most active social media profiles, including those of some of the most prominent newspaper titles in South Africa. During this time, the researcher also spear-headed a number of initiatives aimed at building online communities around the social media profiles of these media brands.

Moreover, apart from his theological background, the researcher possesses a media management qualification, and has been involved in the world of digital media for a significant part of his professional career.

Based on this background, it does not come unexpected that the researcher has an understanding of, and appreciation for, the potential of digital social media as a platform for the formation of vibrant online communities. This, coupled with his theological background, seems to point to the positive potential of social networks in drawing together Christian communities in an online milieu. However, this inclination is tempered by an acute awareness of the unrealistic expectations that some people have of online communities, and the role they may play in group coherence. Thus, the researcher's background acts as both a guiding and cautionary force in the pursuit of an answer to the research problem.

Overall, it should be clear that the elements discussed above point to an active role for the researcher as main instrument for data collection. However, an ongoing commitment to transparency, honesty, and self-awareness should play a significant role in ensuring that the researcher steers the research process in a productive direction, thereby acting as active participant instead of obstacle.

3.2.3.4 Research Steps

Having taken note of the potential role of the researcher, the attention now turns to a number of practical aspects related to the various steps in the research process. This includes a discussion of issues pertaining to sampling, data collection and analysis, the trustworthiness of data, and ethical considerations, amongst others.

i. Sampling

In order to collect data through interviews, a decision first needs to be made about whom to select as participants in a study. This selection process is known as sampling, and is necessary even in the most limited of studies, since it is never possible to investigate every single aspect of a research question in every conceivable scenario (Maxwell, 2013:96). Thus, it is always

necessary to limit the parameters of a study in a way that does not detract from the value and integrity of the research.

This sampling process requires, first and foremost, an understanding of the distinction between what is known as a target population, and an accessible population. The target population is described as the entire set of individuals who meet a specific set of criteria, known as the sampling criteria (Blaikie, 2010:172). Of course, the target population in its entirety cannot be included in the study, as time and resources do not allow for such a broad sample size. The result is that an accessible population – that portion of the population that the researcher has access to (Fritz & Morgan, 2010:1303) – needs to be identified.

Merriam (2009:77) distinguishes between two basic types of sampling approaches that can be used to define a sample, namely probability and nonprobability sampling. In probability sampling, all members of the population have an equal chance of being chosen (Maxwell, 2013:96), and random selection is often a key element (Babbie, 2011:235). In this approach, for example, a sample may be generated by a computer randomly selecting from a database of possible participants. Probability sampling is also generally seen as an effective way to select large, representative samples, and these samples are generally well suited to use in statistical analysis (Fritz & Morgan, 2010:1304). On the other hand, Kotler *et al.* (2010:114) caution that probability samples are costly, to the point where the expense may be hard to justify.

Conversely, nonprobability sampling denotes any sampling technique where the selection of the sample doesn't rely solely on chance, but is influenced or determined in one way or another by the researcher (Babbie, 2013:555). Thus, in nonprobability sampling, the researcher makes a conscious decision about the selection of participants – either because the selected participants may contribute to an emergent theory that the researcher is attempting to construct, or because they may provide insights that fill theoretical categories or provide examples of extremes (Klenke, 2008:64). For instance, the goal may be the selection of a sample that is highly homogeneous (Creswell, 2012:154) in order to investigate a phenomenon that applies to a very specific group of people; or the researcher may opt for

quota sampling, where a specific number of participants are selected from a pre-defined list of mutually exclusive sub-groups (Blaikie, 2010:177-178).

This process of deliberate sampling is also often referred to as purposive sampling, or purposeful selection (Boeije, 2010:35) – although it should be noted that some scholars treat the process of purposive selection as one of a number of sampling techniques under the umbrella of nonprobability sampling (*cf.* Blaikie, 2010:178). Nevertheless, Creswell (2012:299) identifies purposeful sampling as the primary strategy used for sampling in qualitative research. This is in agreement with the view of Merriam (2009:16), who explains that sampling in qualitative research is usually not only purposeful, but that sample sizes are also generally smaller than the larger, more random samples encountered in quantitative research. Bowers-Brown and Smith (2010:114) concur, accounting for the smaller sample sizes by arguing that this enables the researcher to concentrate on in-depth data that is a true representation of the lived experiences and thoughts of participants.

In a sense, it should already be evident that the proposed study will lend itself well to the purposive sampling approach explained above. Of course it has already been made clear that the setting for the study has been purposefully selected, since Hillsong Church, and the three selected campuses in particular, offer a unique opportunity to reflect on the use of social media – particularly because of the church’s stated emphasis on social media activity. Moreover, it has been explained that these campuses have been selected because they have specific characteristics: Not only are they situated in urban locales, but they represent diverse socio-economic environments and a diverse membership base. They are also in different stages of their life-cycle as congregations, since some of these congregations are new church plants, while one of them was established decades ago. All these factors provide fertile ground for reflection on the research question from multiple perspectives.

This focus on approaching the subject from multiple viewpoints aligns with a purposive sampling technique known as maximum variation sampling, which will consequently be used in selecting participants for interviews. Kelly (2007:290) explains that maximum variation sampling is an approach aimed at obtaining a broad range of perspectives on a particular subject by purposefully selecting participants who may have different viewpoints and varying

experiences with regards to a specific research question. Therefore, the researcher will ensure that a diverse range of individuals from each of these three campuses are included in the interview phase, since they may offer different perspectives on the matter depending on their background and the congregation they are active in. By ensuring that all three campuses are well represented in the sample, the potential to uncover new and unique perspectives will be increased.

Apart from the aspects mentioned above, participants will have to satisfy the following selection criteria if they are to be considered for inclusion in the sample: Firstly, participants obviously need to be social media users in one form or another. They should also be members of Hillsong Church, active in either one of the Cape Town, Sydney, or New York campuses. Furthermore, they must be willing to give consent to a recorded interview, and agree to the use of the transcript in the envisioned research. The sample should also ideally be heterogeneous with regards to race, age, and gender – even though these parameters will not be used as variables to be considered in the study itself – since this would reflect the diverse membership base of Hillsong Church. Finally, participants should be able to express themselves in English or Afrikaans.

In addition to these matters, the question of sample size – in other words, the number of people that need to be interviewed – should also be considered. Contrary to the initial assumption of most researchers, a large sample size is not a prerequisite for accurate results, especially if a credible sampling process is in place (Kotler *et al.*, 2010:114). In fact, most scholars suggest that the size of the sample generally depends on the point at which data saturation is reached (Davies, 2010:127; Creswell, 2012:90, 352). Saturation refers to the point in a study at which no new information or insights come to light in interviews – in other words, when patterns and themes begin to repeat themselves (Merriam, 2009:183). Thus, the interviewer will sample and interview until this point is reached.

Finally, it should be emphasised that the sampling process constitutes more than merely one more preparative step preceding the process of data collection. Fritz and Morgan (2010:1303) rightly argue that sampling ultimately has a direct bearing on the validity of any conclusions drawn from the data, since it is a key way of ensuring that the data gathered adequately

reflects the experiences and realities of the population being investigated. Boeije (2010:180) puts forward a similar view, and argues that sampling is of “crucial importance,” since an inadequate understanding of the process and its potential impact on the quality of gathered data could undermine the integrity of the study as a whole. As such, this process needs to be approached with a degree of care and rigour that attests to its critical role in any well-conceived research design.

ii. Data Collection

Data collection will proceed in two stages. The first stage will involve conducting a pilot interview to gauge the effectiveness of the interview guide, and to identify any problematic areas before the bulk of the research is undertaken. The interview guide (refer to Table 3-A), a tool often used in semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2012:164), comprises an overarching or primary research question, followed by a related list of pre-defined questions that may be used to guide a conversation around the main research question. Merriam (2009:95) emphasises the importance of this pilot phase, and argues that it is a crucial step in ascertaining whether the identified question or questions are appropriate. Kotler *et al.* (2010:114) also point to the effectiveness of a pilot interview in weeding out inappropriate or vague questions, and in assessing whether the question or questions actually generate the desired information.

The interview, which will consist of an opening, body, and closing phase, will be initiated by posing five informal, introductory questions aimed at creating a relaxed atmosphere – since a relaxed approach is integral to a productive and fruitful interview (Merriam, 2009:102). These questions, while informal, are also aimed at unlocking valuable initial information about every participant. The following questions will be asked in the opening phase:

- How long have you been a member of this congregation?
- How often do you spend time on social networks?
- Which social networks do you enjoy using most?
- What do you typically do when you use these networks?
- Do you ever interact with other people via social media?

Following these introductory questions, participants will be asked to answer the main interview question, which is formulated as follows: “What role, if any, has social media played in your experience as a member of this congregation and a part of its people?”

This question can be followed by some or all of the following exploratory, ancillary questions aimed at unlocking further insights relating to the main interview question. These supplementary questions, used to achieve the natural and spontaneous conversational flow typical of semi-structured interviews (Osmer, 2008:63), are asked to ensure that the main research question is answered in adequate detail. Depending on the level of detail in the initial response of the interviewee, some or all of these questions may be drawn on:

- To what extent are you connected to other members of the congregation, or its leaders, via your social media profiles?
- What is the nature of your online interaction with other congregation members or church leaders?
- Has social media ever helped you to build a relationship with a congregation member that you didn’t know before?
- Do you ever share social media content related to your congregation with other people in any way?
- What pressures do you associate with being part of a city-based congregation, and has social media had any positive or negative impact in this regard?

Further prompts and probes will also be used during the conversation between the researcher and the interviewee, as and when needed (Babbie, 2011:284; Klenke, 2008:129). These probes are especially useful when a participant’s statements are vague, incomplete, or even nonsensical, since they elicit greater detail, deepening the response and increasing the depth of the conversation. Osmer (2008:63) identifies a number of common probes used by interviewers that are relevant to a qualitative study of this nature. These include requests for clarification, where the researcher indicates that the statement is not clear enough and needs to be expanded upon; and justification, where the researcher asks the participant to justify his or her stance on a subject. The researcher can also probe about a statement’s relevance to a question; or ask a participant to provide examples of a specific case or issue.

Once the pilot interview has been conducted and assessed, the interview guide may be adapted if necessary. This could include refining the main interview question, or formulating additional supplementary questions that could be used to guide the interview. Any other changes to the interview guide that may be necessary can also be made at this stage. If the pilot interview uncovered an adequate amount of data of sufficient quality, this step will not be necessary.

This will be followed by the second stage of data collection. During this stage, interviews will be conducted with the selected sample population. These interviews will adhere to the basic principles proposed by Strydom (2005:59) and Creswell (2003:89), as stipulated in Chapter One, and will be recorded with the written permission of participants. Great care will be taken to respect the privacy, views, and background of interviewees, while the ethical guidelines outlined by the Ethics Committee of North-West University (NWU, 2010:48-49), as set out in Chapter One, will be strictly adhered to by the researcher. This includes supplying information with regards to voluntary participation, the confidentiality of responses, and obtaining consent from participants – all of which will be explained before the commencement of every interview.

Additionally, the researcher will adhere to Berg's (2004:110-111) widely cited guidelines for effective interviewing. Berg emphasises that an interview should never begin without some form of introduction, but should proceed only after a period of relaxed interaction between the two parties involved. To this end, he also suggests presenting "a natural front" – that is, asking questions as if they had just occurred based on the flow of conversation. Furthermore, in agreement with Osmer (2008, 61), Berg affirms the role of the interviewer as active listener who should provide the necessary verbal and non-verbal cues in order to stimulate natural interaction. In the same vein, he cautions against allowing monosyllabic answers, and suggests keeping the participant on track by continually steering the conversation in a direction that will help achieve the purpose of the interview. Furthermore, Berg suggests attending to details like dressing appropriately, interviewing in a comfortable place, and being cordial and respectful. Finally, Berg shares Klenke's view (2008:130) that a degree of skill is necessary to conduct an effective interview, and consequently suggests a period of preparation and practice.

Table 3-A: Interview Guide

STAGE	PURPOSE	DETAILS
I. Opening	A. Establish rapport	Researcher introduces himself to the participant, establishing rapport through informal conversation.
	B. Communicate purpose	Researcher explains the purpose of the interview, and the envisioned contribution thereof to the field of study.
	C. Ethical considerations	Researcher informs participant of ethical considerations, including details about voluntary participation; confidentiality of information; the fact that the interview is recorded, and that written consent will be required. The nature of the participant's contribution and any other pertinent ethical issues are also discussed.
	D. Familiarisation	The researcher asks questions aimed at creating a relaxed atmosphere, while unlocking valuable preliminary information through informal enquiries: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long have you been a member of this congregation? • How often do you spend time on social networks? • Which social networks do you enjoy using most? • What do you typically do when you use these networks? • Do you ever interact with other people via social media?
II. Body	A. Main interview question	Researcher asks main interview question: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What role, if any, has social media played in your experience as a member of this congregation and a part of its people?
	B. Exploratory questions	Researcher may choose to ask some or all of the following ancillary questions to explore the participant's answer in greater depth and detail: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are you connected to other members of the congregation, or its leaders, via your social media profiles? • What is the nature of your online interaction with other congregation members or church leaders? • Has social media ever helped you to build a relationship with a congregation member that you didn't know before? • Do you ever share social media content related to your congregation with other people in any way? • What pressures do you associate with being part of a city-based congregation, and has social media had any positive or

		negative impact in this regard?
	D. Prompts and probes	<p>Researcher may choose to use some of the following common probes to draw out more detail:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarification: Request to clarify statement • Justification: Request to justify stance • Relevance: Question about relevance of answer to an issue. • Examples: Request for examples of a specific case or phenomenon.
III. Closing	A. Summary	Researcher concludes conversation, and ensures participant does not have any other remarks to share.
	A. Maintain rapport	Researcher thanks participant for contribution, and ascertains whether any future communication with regards to the research is necessary or desired.

iii. Data Analysis

Following the interview process, recorded interviews will be transcribed verbatim in preparation for data analysis. Babbie (2011:283) explains that the verbatim approach involves transcribing responses exactly as they are given. This means that responses are typed out word for word; they are not paraphrased or summarised, and bad grammar or poor word choice is not corrected. While this exact process may be time-consuming and tedious (Blaikie, 2010:25), Merriam (2009:110) makes a strong case for verbatim transcription as a process that provides the best database for analysis. Since the aim of the interview process is the gathering of richly descriptive data, the verbatim approach will be used in this instance as well, as a high degree of detail can be captured from the responses of participants in this way, without losing any data whatsoever.

Although some researchers prefer to outsource this part of the process to a professional transcriber (Bowers-Brown & Smith, 2010:118), or to capture it with an automatic transcription tool (Maxwell, 2013:193), the researcher will undertake this part of the study as well, since the listening and re-listening involved in the painstaking construction of a transcript serves to familiarise the researcher with the material, and as such becomes a valuable part of the process (Klenke, 2008:137). In doing so, Creswell (2012:259) argues, the researcher ensures that the transcript is accurate, and that it conveys the meaning and character of the

actual oral interview, thereby eliminating any potential for a skewed representation of what transpired during the conversation. Thus, it should be clear that there is much value in involving the researcher in this part of the process.

Once interviews have been transcribed, transcripts will be handed over to an independent coder for coding. Babbie (2011:504) describes coding in very simple terms as the process through which raw data is transformed into a form suitable for analysis. Creswell (2012:184) clarifies this by explaining that the process essentially involves aggregating text or other data into meaningful categories of information, and then assigning labels to those categories. These categories can then be organised and compared (Osmer, 2008:56). The end result of the coding process is the identification of a number of patterns or themes that emerge from the descriptive data, which can ultimately be used in the process of interpretation (Boeije, 2010:94). In other words, data is segmented and reassembled in a way that enables the researcher to discover themes that, collectively, point to the real significance and meaning of the data.

The themes that emerge from the data through coding will then be used as the foundation for an interpretive process that is aimed at bringing meaning and coherence to the identified patterns and categories (Creswell, 2012:44, 101). As indicated in the introductory chapter, the fourth chapter in its entirety will be devoted to this interpretive process, which will be approached against the background of the interpretive task envisioned by Osmer (2008, 79-128). Here, the researcher will delve into the coded data in order to expound on perceived patterns and themes that can cast a light on the meaning participants ascribe to the phenomena under investigation (Boeije, 2010:11). At this stage, the process moves beyond description to making meaningful statements about the significance of the data and possible ways to understand it (Merriam, 2009:24, 70).

iv. Trustworthiness of Data

To a great extent, the value of a qualitative study such as the one envisioned in this thesis hinges on the ability of the researcher to establish and protect the reliability and validity of the research data and findings. The heart of the problem, Klenke explains (2008:139), is dealing

with the paradox of developing an “objective, interpretive science of subjective human experience”. Thus, the research design should allow for a process that focuses on the validity, or accuracy, of data, as well as reliable observations (Durrheim, 2007:45). In order to achieve this, a number of credibility strategies – that is, strategies aimed at establishing and preserving the trustworthiness of the data – can be followed. However, it is worth keeping in mind Klenke’s (2008:139) warning that a formulaic approach is not sufficient in this regard. What is needed, rather, is an understanding of the underlying issues challenging validity and reliability, and a healthy respect for the influence these factors could have on a study.

While credibility strategies aimed at preserving the trustworthiness of qualitative data abound, an approach first proposed by Guba (1981, 75-91) more than three decades ago has gained great influence among qualitative researchers in particular, and is still drawn on by a significant number of contemporary scholars (e.g. Creswell, 2012:246; Maxwell, 2013:125; Merriam, 2009:211). This method is based on the basic premise that the subjective, relativistic human world demands a different approach than the conventional, scientific approach used to apprehend the natural and physical world (Klenke, 2008:21). Guba’s approach, which will act as the scaffolding for the credibility strategy behind this study, is based on four pillars, namely credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability.

A key consideration often addressed by researchers in the pursuit of trustworthiness is a concept referred to as internal validity, which revolves around ensuring that a study actually measures what it was intended to measure, and as such produces research findings that are reliable (Blaikie, 2010:168). The equivalent concept in Guba’s approach, credibility, is summarised in a simplified and compelling form by Merriam (2009:213) in a single question: Do the findings actually capture what is really there? Thus, in Guba’s framework, credibility focuses on ensuring that the findings are congruent with reality.

Four strategies commonly used to ensure credibility in the sense that Guba uses it, will be employed in this particular study. Shenton (2004:64) argues that one of the primary ways to ensure credibility is the use of well-established research methods. Here, he refers specifically to the line of questioning used during the process of data gathering, arguing that it should align well with the research problem under investigation, and should compare favourably to

questions used in similar studies. With this goal in mind, a well-defined interview guide has been formulated (Table 3-A) that will be used throughout the course of the study to ensure that the data gathered is of a sufficient standard.

Shenton (2004:68) also mentions the potential importance of the researcher's background, qualifications, and experience in ensuring credibility. In this instance, the researcher's professional background in the media industry, and specifically in the world of social media, in addition to his theological background, will likely add value and contribute to the credibility of the study. Klenke (2008:12) and Creswell (2012:235), on the other hand, highlight the importance of using thick description – that is, descriptions containing a high degree of detail and context – as a credibility strategy in order to construct an accurate picture of the subject under investigation in a way that is truly representative of reality. In this view, the likelihood of obtaining an accurate picture of reality rises with the degree of detail used to describe the subject under investigation. Finally, Shenton (2004:66) also highlights a strategy called site triangulation, where informants within several institutions, or from different sites, take part in a single study. This approach contributes to credibility by reducing the effect of local factors peculiar to one location. To this end, three Hillsong congregations will take part in the study.

In the traditional, often quantitative world of scientific research, it is usually important to demonstrate that the results of a study can be applied to a wider population. This concept is known as external validity (Merriam, 2009:234). However, since qualitative research often applies to a small number of particular environments and individuals, Shenton (2004:69) argues that it may be a more complex undertaking to determine the extent to which a qualitative study may be applied to other situations. It is this idea that is encapsulated in Guba's equivalent to external validity, which he refers to as transferability (1981:80). In practice, Shenton (2004:69) argues, transferability is determined by the degree to which external observers believe their situations to be similar to those described in a particular body of research. As a result, it is the responsibility of the researcher to provide sufficient contextual information to enable external observers to decide on transferability (Creswell, 2012:252).

In this sense, the use of thick descriptions is once again of paramount importance, and is therefore seen by many (e.g. Merriam, 2009:225; Blaikie, 2010:193; Shenton, 2004:69-70) as the primary way of ensuring transferability. Thus, the researcher should endeavour to provide such a wealth of rich, descriptive, contextual information that observers should be able to come to their own conclusions about the extent to which specific studies apply to their own situations. With this goal in mind, Shenton (2004:70) suggests supplying ample information about, for example, the organisations taking part in the study; the number of participants involved; the data collection methods that were used; and any other potentially relevant data.

The third pillar that Guba's framework rests on is referred to as the principle of dependability, presented as an equivalent to the traditional idea of reliability (Klenke, 2008:40). Traditionally, researchers employ techniques to demonstrate that, if a study were to be repeated using the same methods and within the same context, similar results would be obtained – in which case a study would be considered reliable. However, it goes without saying that the inherently fluid and changing situations and phenomena investigated in qualitative research pose a challenge in this sense (Merriam, 2009:221). Dependability, therefore, addresses this problem within a qualitative context by describing the degree to which research results are repeatable (Klenke, 2008:38). In other words, dependability is a measure of the degree to which an observer can be confident that the same results will be obtained if a similar study were to be undertaken in the same circumstances.

The most effective way to increase the dependability of data, Shenton (2004:71) argues, is to report in detail on the processes within the study. Thus, an in-depth description of the research design as presented in this chapter is crucial, since it presents the reader or observer with an opportunity to determine whether proper processes were followed. This does not only serve as a foundation for academic rigour, but is also of value in a situation where results need to be replicated in order to evaluate and validate previous research (Klenke, 2008:41). Thus, a thorough account of the research design, processes, and any other information that could be pertinent to an independent party that was not involved in the original study, could be extremely valuable in ensuring that dependability is a key feature of the research.

Finally, Shenton (2004:72) introduces the fourth pillar of Guba's proposed framework for trustworthiness by explaining that qualitative researchers have a responsibility to ensure that their research findings are a reflection of the experiences and opinions of participants, and not merely the preferences and thinking of the researcher. This concept, equivalent to the traditional ideal of objectivity, is known as confirmability. While acknowledging that most studies are not undertaken in a neutral and objective vacuum (Osmer, 2008:22), confirmability revolves around the continued awareness of the potential biases and influence of the researcher. Thus, the principle of confirmability requires the researcher to be mindful of his or her own predispositions, to the point where a similar study undertaken by a different researcher would likely yield similar results (Klenke, 2008:38).

With this in mind, Shenton (2004:72) points to the practical value of the practice of triangulation in reducing investigator bias. In this context, reference is specifically made to analyst triangulation (Kekale, 2005:83) or, as it is more often called, peer debriefing, which involves regular contact with individuals who are not involved in the research (Boeije, 2010:178) in order to guide and steer the researcher towards a greater degree of neutrality. The role of these individuals is not only to discuss working hypotheses with the researcher, but also to suggest improvements and point out possible blind spots (Klenke, 2008:43). This helps the researcher in a practical way to sharpen his or her arguments, and to steer clear of potential bias. In the context of this project, the researcher's study leaders and independent coder will provide these ongoing feedback loops, helping the researcher to become more aware of his own predispositions and possible prejudice.

Having taken note of these credibility strategies, it should be emphasised yet again that none of these approaches, seen in isolation, are sufficient to establish and preserve the trustworthiness of a study of this nature. Rather, it is an understanding of the different issues they address, the potential role each of these strategies, and how they all fit together, that will ultimately ensure that the ideals of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are achieved.

v. Ethical considerations

While adherence to a list of standard ethical guidelines adopted by North-West University has already been mentioned, it is also important to consider a number of overarching ethical considerations that will guide the planned research. Considering Latini's assertion (2011:211) that a researcher should always strive to uphold and promote the humanity of participants, it should be clear that the ethical element of a research project represents more than a mere afterthought. While a staggering array of ethical concerns present themselves in the qualitative sphere, where people and their experiences are often involved, this section will explore a select number of issues that specifically pertain to this study. These issues include the matter of informed consent; questions about privacy; issues regarding confidentiality and anonymity; gaining respect and earning trust; and the honest representation of research results.

Regarded as a basic ethical requirement in most studies, informed consent involves ensuring that prospective participants agree to participate based on a clear understanding of the nature of the study (Davies, 2010:134). Creswell also emphasises the importance of disclosing the purpose of the study to potential participants (Creswell, 2012:57). This understanding is often formalised by means of an informed consent form, on which a prospective participant indicates his willingness to contribute to the study (Merriam, 2009:162). Boeije (2010:45) argues that the presentation of an informed consent form also poses an opportunity to inform the participant that he or she is free to withdraw from the research at any stage. With this in mind, informed consent will be obtained from every participant in the envisioned study in the form of a signed document.

Another ethical aspect that carries great weight regardless of the nature of the study is the matter of privacy. Indeed, scholars are virtually unanimous (e.g. Babbie, 2011:70; Klenke, 2008:52; Boeije, 2010:46) in emphasising the right to privacy of every participant in a study. Babbie (2013:70) underlines the importance of privacy by explaining that the unintended revelation of personal data, and the resultant loss of privacy, could result in embarrassing situations and, in extreme situations, even job loss or other negative consequences. Thus, it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the privacy of the participant is protected at

all times by not allowing access to the participant in any way that would not have been possible outside of the context of the study.

Closely related to the issue of privacy, and another foundational concept in research ethics, is the matter of confidentiality and, by extension, anonymity. Blaikie (2010:31) argues that a guarantee of the confidentiality of specific information is one of the most practical ways to protect the interests of research participants. Likewise, Boeije (2010:46) provides more detail on the exact nature of this aspect by explaining that confidentiality relates to data – in other words, the researcher has a responsibility to handle interview recordings, transcripts, field notes, and any other documentation, with great care, only using in his research what he has been given permission to by the participant.

Research may also be undertaken on the basis of complete anonymity, in which case the researcher undertakes not to make known the identity of a respondent who supplied specific data. In fact, where anonymity is guaranteed, personal particulars are often not recorded at any stage of the research – which means that neither the reader nor the researcher is able to associate a specific response with a specific individual (Babbie, 2013:549). This approach will be taken in this specific study as well, even though a limited amount of meta-data (for example the respondent's nationality, approximate age, and specific church campus) will be collected.

While the concept of respect may seem unduly abstract and hard to define at first glance, it is often identified as a crucial building block in a researcher's ethical foundation. As a basic starting point Kotler *et al.* (2010:107) argue that respect for the rights of participants should always guide research practice. This respect is made manifest in some of the practical measures discussed above – for example in concentrating on the right to privacy and confidentiality. In ensuring that these measures are in place to protect the participant, the researcher demonstrates his appreciation for the dignity of the individual, and avoids treating the interviewee as an “object,” as is sometimes the case in research projects (Osmer, 2008:131)

Judging by the views of most scholars in qualitative research, however, the principle of respect plays its most important role during the interview phase, where it could contribute directly to the quality of the data the researcher obtains. Klenke (2008:122), for example, lays the groundwork by listing respect as a key factor in maintaining rapport with participants during the interview process, while Boeije (2010:63) argues that the interviewer should always show respect for the interviewee's views. Babbie (2011:76) states that this respect may even be demonstrated in a researcher's understanding that some respondents may choose not to answer certain questions. Should that be the case, it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the matter is not pursued further.

In treating participants with due respect, the researcher places himself in a position to earn the trust of the individual. This mutual trust, Klenke argues (2008:122), is built not only on emphatic listening, but also on an egalitarian relationship between researcher and participant, where the views and experiences of both carry equal weight. Earning trust also requires planning and patience. Bowers-Brown and Smith (2010:117), for example, argue that time spent asking preliminary questions may result in a higher degree of trust on the part of an interviewee, since the researcher thereby expresses an active interest in the experiences of the participant. In addition to these elements, Maxwell's (2013:92) view that trust is continually renegotiated should also be considered, since it emphasises the idea that building trust is an ongoing process, and that trust can be lost due to unethical practice. Clearly, seen against this backdrop, earning trust and approaching participants with respect should feature as prominent ethical considerations in all qualitative studies.

The final area of ethical concern highlighted with regards to this study revolves around the manner in which the researcher reports on, and presents, his research activity. Creswell (2012:60) places a great deal of emphasis on the responsibility of the researcher to be honest about the evidence presented in research reports, the authorship of documents and research material that are used. This concern is shared by Babbie (2013:356), who argues for honesty in the observation, analysis, and reporting phases of a study. Smith (2010:51), likewise, draws direct parallels between professional integrity and the ultimate quality of a study, and argues that adherence to stringent ethical standards will contribute to research with less errors. In practice, this also involves actively avoiding research misconduct – for example, Creswell

(2012:66) warns against plagiarising the work of others, and presenting information that could have a negative effect on participants.

It is the above commitment to a thorough, rigorous approach to research practice, along with full cognisance of the ethical challenges inherent in such work, that should ultimately contribute to a productive, accurate, and trustworthy study.

vi. Research Report

The final research step will entail reporting on the research process by not only presenting the findings, but also providing enough details to explain how these findings were arrived at. As one of the main purposes of a qualitative study, and the culmination of a combination of field work and literature survey (Boeije, 2010:199), the goal of this stage of the study is to communicate the results of the research to others (Babbie, 2013:388) in a way that moves and motivates them to take action based on the information that has been shared (Osmer, 2008:57).

A research report in the qualitative tradition usually begins with data that is emic in nature – that is, the researcher reports the views of the participants, often verbatim (Creswell, 2012:92, 292). This emic, or insider’s perspective (Merriam, 2009:294), is usually richly descriptive, and captures the multiple perspectives and voices of those immersed in a specific world (Klenke, 2008:12). This emic view may then be filtered and compared to the etic perspective of the researcher (Babbie, 2011:310) who, as an outsider, may also dictate certain criteria for judging the significance or value of emic views. Ultimately, Merriam (2009:255) argues, a research report should contain sufficient description to enable the reader to understand the basis for the interpretations being made, while also incorporating enough interpretation to help the reader make sense of the descriptions offered. In this way, the report provides an account not only of the findings, but also of the data upon which these findings are based.

3.2.4 Reflexivity

The sole remaining element included in Osmer's (2008:47-57) four overarching elements of research design, used as a framework for this chapter, concerns the issue of reflexivity. In the sense that Osmer uses it, however, it does not merely denote self-awareness on the part of the researcher about assumptions or prejudices colouring his or her personal perspective, as discussed earlier in this chapter (*cf.* Blaikie, 2010:54). Rather, reflexivity in this context involves reflection on the meta-theoretical assumptions and philosophical perspectives informing a research project as a whole, which could include sweeping assumptions about the nature of reality, morality, and knowledge itself. An awareness of these issues is critical, since it influences a researcher's ability to interact critically with literature and research data (Osmer, 2008:58).

Since the work of Guba (1981) was drawn on extensively in the preceding section on data trustworthiness, the first meta-theoretical assumption that needs to be considered is the idea of postpositivism, which is likely to play a role in the research, as it follows a qualitative strategy. This will be followed by an overview of the closely related concept of constructivism. While these are by no means the only meta-theoretical assumptions underlying this study, they do represent two contextually relevant modes of enquiry that need to be considered more closely.

Contrary to the world of positivism, where the only valid knowledge is scientific knowledge based on empirical observations of the natural world (Blaikie, 2010:97; Osmer, 2008:77), postpositivism holds that all knowledge and theories cannot be "proved" or validated in this way – especially when human actions or metaphysical realities are the focal point of the research (Klenke, 2008:14). Thus, where positivism deals with an assumed degree of objectivity and generalizability, postpositivism – while holding on to some of the methods and values of positivism – proceeds with caution in this regard, and rejects strong claims to complete objectivity (Osmer, 2008:78). Therefore, it is in the nature of the postpositivist tradition to describe knowledge as relative rather than absolute (Merriam, 2009:8), while at the same time affirming that this kind of relative knowledge is still accessible through

empirical methods – as in the case of the “empirical-descriptive” task undertaken in this chapter of the study.

The closely related concept of constructivism, strongly associated with the views of Guba (1981), flows from this postpositivist tradition, but has a slightly different focus. Klenke (2008:21) explains that constructivism begins with the assumption that the human world is different in nature from the natural world, and as such should be studied differently. In essence, to the constructivist, an individual’s view of the world is based on his or her perceptions of it. Moreover, since these perceptions and observations are fallible, these constructions are not perfect (Creswell, 2012:36), and cannot be approached in the same way as one would, for example, approach naturalistic scientific data.

It follows, Maxwell (2013:43) argues, that since an individual’s understanding of the world is based on a mere construction, and not a purely objective perception of reality, no such construction can be considered absolute truth. In other words, constructivism places great emphasis on the meaning that individuals attach to their social realities, while rejecting the idea of absolute objectivity and truth. For this reason, “facts” have no real meaning except in a value framework of some kind; and phenomena can only truly be understood within the context that they appear (Klenke, 2008:21). Thus, it should be immediately apparent that the constructivist approach aligns to a certain degree with the subjective world of human experience often studied by qualitative researchers.

In conclusion, then, it is important to realise that the ideas of postpositivism and constructionism carry a degree of weight in the sphere of qualitative research. Cognisance of this reality should enable the researcher to think critically about these elements where they may apply to a specific area of the research.

3.2.5 Preliminary Conclusions

In the preceding section, a broad range of issues related to the study’s research design were discussed against the backdrop of four overarching elements of research design identified by Osmer (2008:47-57). The purpose of the project; strategy of inquiry; specific elements of a research plan; and meta-theoretical assumptions informing the project were considered.

Within this basic framework, the study was identified as an example of applied research that could serve the purpose of a summative evaluation. The exploratory and descriptive aspects of this part of the study were also highlighted.

Overall, the study was situated in the qualitative realm, more specifically, as a basic qualitative study. Against this background, the people, setting, and program to be studied were considered, while the intricacies of the personal interview as a research method and the role of the researcher were discussed. Finally, practical research considerations were taken into account. The issue of sampling was addressed, with a particular focus on nonprobability sampling and purposeful selection. A research guide was formulated, and the process of data collection and analysis, as well as the trustworthiness of data and the role of ethical considerations were reviewed. The section was concluded with a reflection on the meta-theoretical assumptions informing the study, focusing on the concepts of postpositivism and constructivism.

In the next part of the chapter, the focus will shift to a systematic and detailed overview of the results of the study.

3.3 Research Results

In this, the second half of the chapter, the attention turns to a presentation of the results of the qualitative empirical study undertaken by the researcher. A number of themes emerging from the study will be identified and discussed.

3.3.1 Introduction

As the culmination of a rigorous academic process of preparation and rumination, it would be nigh impossible to overstate the importance of the presentation of the research results. It is at this stage of the study, after all, that readers and researchers are finally presented with the opportunity to begin to interact with the data, and to attach new and insightful meaning to specific findings (Boeije, 2010:182, 188). With a view to this goal, the purpose of this section of the chapter is to present an accurate and rich description of the experiences of participants in

a way that will bring the main themes and insights that were uncovered during the fieldwork stage to life.

While the theoretical underpinnings of the researcher's approach to sampling and the interviewing process have been discussed elsewhere in this chapter, this section will commence with a cursory overview of the practical implementation of these aspects, after which the major themes emerging from the study will be listed and discussed.

3.3.2 Results of Pilot Study

As stated earlier in the current chapter, a decision was made to conduct a pilot interview prior to the commencement of the actual interviewing phase. This was done to gauge the effectiveness of the interview guide, and to identify any problems that may arise before the bulk of the research is undertaken. The intent with this pilot study was primarily to identify inappropriate or vague questions, and to assess whether the questions would actually generate the desired information. This also presented an opportunity to identify any other practical issues or challenges.

The pilot interview was conducted with a member of Hillsong Cape Town that fulfilled the selection criteria as stipulated in an earlier section of the current chapter. This interview was recorded by the researcher, and transcribed verbatim. The data generated from this interview was presented to an independent coder, as well as to the promoter and co-promoter of the study.

An analysis of this data rendered positive results overall. The independent coder, as well as the promoter and co-promoter, agreed that the data generated by the interview was richly descriptive, containing a sufficient degree of detail. All parties likewise agreed that the questions formulated in the interview guide were generally conducive to an interview process that would shed sufficient light on the subject under investigation (Appendix B).

However, in order to avoid overly simplistic "yes" or "no" answers by participants, a decision was taken to make a slight adjustment to three of the questions formulated in the interview

guide. One of the introductory questions, “Do you ever interact with other people via social media?” was restated as follows: “How often do you interact with other people via social media?” Two of the ancillary questions were also modified for the same reason. The question, “Has social media ever helped you to build a relationship with a congregation member that you didn’t know before?” was changed to the following: “To what extent has social media helped you to build relationships with congregation members that you didn’t know before?” The question, “Do you ever share social media content related to your congregation with other people in any way?” was also changed to a more open-ended form: “To what extent have you thought about sharing social media content related to your congregation with other people?”

No other practical issues or potential challenges were uncovered by the pilot study; hence, the adjusted interview guide was used with great success during the interview process. The data generated through this initial pilot interview was usable and, as such, was included in the total data set.

3.3.3 Discussion of Sample

Whenever research results are presented, Boeije (2010:39) argues, readers should have a clear idea of what the ultimate sample looked like, and how this sample actually came about. While the theoretical considerations with regards to sampling that were discussed elsewhere in this chapter provided sufficient background, it is necessary to demonstrate how these notions were applied in concrete terms in the field.

In line with the purposive sampling process expounded upon in a preceding section, the researcher used maximum variation sampling to select a group of diverse participants for the study. As explained, this technique is aimed at obtaining a broad range of perspectives on a subject by purposefully selecting participants who may have different viewpoints and varying experiences with regards to a specific research question. With this objective in mind, the researcher selected a diverse range of individuals from Hillsong campuses in Cape Town, Sydney and New York. The sample was also heterogeneous with regards to race, gender,

nationality, and age. Participants were selected based on their participation on the social networks of these three campuses.

The selected participants all satisfied the selection criteria defined earlier, in that they are active social media users who are currently members of Hillsong Church at one of the three specified campuses. Moreover, they were willing to give consent to a recorded interview, and agreed to the use of the transcript for the purposes of the research. All participants were able to express themselves in English or Afrikaans.

The sample size was dictated by the point at which data saturation was reached – that is, the point at which no new information came to light in interviews, and when patterns and themes began to repeat themselves (Merriam, 2009:183). A total of 16 interviews were conducted with participants across the three campuses. Nine of these interviews were conducted with participants from Hillsong in Cape Town, three were from the New York campus, and four participants hailed from Hillsong Sydney.

The following information about the participants provides a general overview of the diversity represented by this overall sample:

- The age of participants varied from 21 to 50 years.
- Altogether 10 of the participants were female, and six were male.
- Twelve participants were English, while four were Afrikaans speaking.
- A number of different race groups were represented. Ten participants were Caucasian, one was coloured, two were black, and three were Asian.
- A number of different nationalities were represented. Nine participants were South African, two were American, one was Colombian, two were Australian, one from New Zealand, and one Zimbabwean.
- Several different occupations were represented in the sample group. One was a designer, one an auditor, one was a home executive, and one was a digital editor. The group also consisted of two computer programmers, an insurance consultant, two casual workers, a salesman, a financial advisor, and an events coordinator. Two participants were students, one was an administrative worker, and one was in ministry.

The diversity inherent in this sample group can be seen as a reflection of the diverse nature of the membership base of Hillsong Church as a whole. As such, it serves a pool from which accurate and reliable information can be drawn that is representative of the viewpoints and varying experiences of different individuals belonging to this community.

3.3.4 Analysis of Interviews

The researcher was solely responsible for the collection of data throughout the course of the interview phase. All interviews were recorded on a portable digital audio recorder once the permission of the participants was obtained. This approach was chosen in order to capture the full content of every interview in all its detail in a consistent manner. This also enabled the researcher to archive a full version of every interview should the need arise to refer back to the original conversation at a later stage.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. These transcripts thus contain the full direct quotes from participants about their experiences, feelings and opinions about the role of social media use in Christian communities. Following the transcription process, these documents were handed over for coding by an independent, expert coder. This coder holds a doctorate degree in the discipline of pastoral theology, and often acts in the capacity of promoter to postgraduate students. The coder is a specialist in qualitative research in the humanities.

The data from these transcripts were grouped into a number of themes and sub-themes. Altogether 10 themes and 26 sub-themes were identified by the coder, and the data was arranged according to these categories. Based on this process of coding, the researcher, in collaboration with the coder, determined that a total of 16 interviews sufficiently captured the degree of richly descriptive detail required to isolate and illustrate the main themes emerging from the study. These themes and sub-themes are listed in Table 3-B below, and will be discussed in detail in the next section of the chapter.

Table 3-B: Synopsis of Themes and Sub-themes

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Degree of interconnection	Interconnection with other congregation members
	Interconnection with church leaders
	Interconnection with other Hillsong campuses
Frequency of use	Frequency of connection to others in social networks
	Frequency of interaction with church community via social media
Role as communication platform	Daily communication with congregation members
	Sharing of prayer requests and challenges
	Apprehension to share due to privacy concerns
Positive role of online interaction in real-life relationships	Ongoing communication contributing to health of relationships
	Starting point for new relationships
Limitations of online relationships	Awareness of limitations of online platforms for relationship building
	Awareness of possible negative effects on real-life relationships
Sense of Unity	Awareness of wider church community
	Uniting congregation members from different backgrounds
Role as a platform for encouragement	Exhortation of congregation members via social media
	Sharing of inspirational content with others
Witnessing through social media	A platform for intentional witness
	Consciously crafting an appealing image of church
Role in overcoming challenges of city life	Role in overcoming geographical separation
	Maintaining connection with congregation despite busy lifestyle
	Improving vitality of social ties
	Uniting diverse groups
Issues not mentioned	Exclusion of those without access to Internet and devices
	Impact of time devoted to social networking
	Disadvantages of constant state of connection
	Use of social media to mobilise for social initiatives

3.3.5 Description of Results

The results to be discussed in the section that follows are based on the contents of in-depth interviews with the defined sample group. These results will be discussed according to the themes and sub-themes identified in the coding process, as set out in Table 3-A. Verbatim quotes from participants will be included to support and elucidate these categories. Quotes from transcripts will be italicised, while the privacy and anonymity of participants will be maintained. The focus now shifts to an exploration of these themes.

3.3.5.1 Theme 1: Degree of Interconnection

Interviews revealed the pervasive and intensive use of social media by participants to connect to other members of their congregations, as well as to their pastors, and even to other Hillsong congregations. The majority of participants used their social media channels to follow and engage with other congregation members; while online interaction with their congregation's leadership and other church campuses was also high on the list of priorities of the typical interviewee.

i. Interconnection with Other Congregation Members

Participants revealed that their online social networks consisted of a significant percentage of other congregation members. A notable total of 94% of interviewees indicated that the majority of their online "friends" were members of their congregation. This was the case at all campuses, with participants at both a well-established campus like Sydney, and a relatively new campus like New York (as well as in Cape Town) pointing to a high degree of interconnection with other church members.

- Some participants indicated that up to 95% of their online friends were from Hillsong Church. Most interviewees said their online networks consisted "*predominantly*" of church friends, and those who attempted to estimate generally indicated that 60% to 80% of their social media connections were to other congregation members. Only one participant provided a lower figure of roughly 20%.

- A participant in Cape Town gave a typical response: *“But most of the people on Instagram now, are my church family or related people. Those are mostly the people that like things and comment on things because it really is way better – a shared vision, a community of people, rather than my random friends in the world who don’t have this platform... I find that the interaction now is... my traction is mostly from my church friends.”*
- Some participants explained that they were particularly well connected to other church members who served with them in specific areas of ministry in church. A member of the worship team, for example, gave the following response: *“I mean, the majority of my friends, whether it is on Facebook or Instagram, are church friends... are in the worship team, are involved in the creative team, uhm, are good friends – people that can lift you up and encourage.”*

ii. Interconnection with Church Leaders

A total of 63% of participants indicated that they followed the pastoral team and other leaders of their congregation online. Congregation members at all three campuses revealed that they were connected to Hillsong Church’s senior pastors, their local campus pastors, and other leaders within specific church ministries via social media.

- Some participants indicated that they followed these leaders to receive *“inspirational messages,”* while for others the emphasis was on gaining insight into the thoughts of church leaders on events within their congregations, *“...to see, you know, what they’re saying about what’s happening.”*
- Mostly, interviewees said they followed their church leaders online because they were interested in their ministry activities. In the words of one participant, *“...it’s awesome to know where... what Brian and Bobbie (senior pastors of Hillsong Sydney) are doing...”*. Interviewees also viewed online interconnection with their leaders as a form of support for their message, since *“...we should be leaning in to them.”*
- One participant confided that she followed the senior pastors of the Cape Town congregation to gain information about them and the church after she had made a decision to move to South Africa from Sydney to get involved in ministry. She

explained: *“People like Phil and Lucinda (senior pastors of Hillsong Cape Town), before I came to South Africa I didn’t really know them. And then obviously I wanted to know what was happening here so it was a great way to kind of learn more about them.”*

iii. Interconnection with Other Hillsong Campuses

A significant percentage of participants indicated that they followed the activities of other Hillsong campuses online in order to stay connected to happenings in the global church. Altogether 69% of interviewees indicated that they were connected to the social media profiles of other Hillsong campuses on one or more social networks. This response was also uniform across all campuses, as participants at the Sydney, New York, and Cape Town campuses all indicated that they followed the social media accounts of multiple congregations. While some participants simply enjoyed receiving regular updates about happenings at other campuses, most interviewees revealed that they followed these congregations because it provided them with a sense of belonging and the knowledge that they’re part of a bigger movement.

- The sense of group identity implicit in this kind of interconnection comes through clearly in the words of one interviewee, who explains that she follows other congregations on social networks because she wants to see *“what the greater family are doing”*. Another participant expresses it as follows: *“It’s more like... kind of actually seeing, globally, what’s going on and what we’re doing here locally, and... seeing all of that come together, and seeing all of that... and realising that we’re all actually a part of something together.”* This sense of a common group identity, verbalised through the use of words like *“family”* and *“together”* is clear in many of the responses in this category.
- Some respondents indicated that being connected to other campuses online made them aware of the church’s ministry on a world-wide scale: One participant explained: *“Sometimes you get to hear about our church, which is a global church, doing some awesome stuff on a global scale that you wouldn’t otherwise hear in church – and social media is a great tool to communicate some of the new initiatives we are part of, or new churches and church plants...”*

3.3.5.2 Theme 2: Frequency of Use

Participants made it clear that they spent a significant amount of time on activities related to social media. Indeed, some were so aware of the time spent checking social networks that they admitted that they needed to limit their participation in this sphere to some degree in future. Users not only checked their social media feeds for activity by others, but also frequently communicated with friends via these channels.

i. Frequency of connection to others in social networks

Participants revealed that they spent a significant amount of time checking activity on their digital social networks. For many interviewees, this took place on a daily or even hourly basis, wherever the participant happened to be – whether at home or at work.

- Many interviewees were active on social networks frequently throughout the day. For some, this meant *“at least once every two hours,”* while others admitted to checking their social networks *“more than ten times a day”*. One participant stated plainly: *“I’d say I’m a very heavy social media user.”* Another freely admitted: *“I’m so obsessed sometimes with that.”*
- For most participants, social media use was not confined to a particular time during the day. A participant from New York gave a typical response in this regard: *“Let’s say... morning, and night at least... for sure. And before I go to sleep, which is really bad, and... in the morning before I wake up... and then, maybe in lunch breaks.”*
- The use of mobile phones for this kind of activity and the fact that it allows users to check their social media feeds wherever they are, and at any time they wish, was also acknowledged: *“If it’s on my phone and it’s, it’s right here in my hand, I would say I use it... a lot!”*
- One participant seemed to be vaguely aware that she was engaged in this kind of activity too frequently, and said she checked her social networks *“too often”*. However, most interviewees who admitted to using social media very frequently did not seem to share this awareness or see it as problematic.

ii. Frequency of Interaction with Church Community via Social Media

Participants did not merely check their social networks for activity – they also actively participated and interacted with other congregation members on a regular basis. Interviewees indicated that a significant percentage of their time online was spent interacting with others.

- Participants often sent messages to each other via social media applications on their smart phones or on other devices. In the words of one participant: *“So for us that’s sort of a daily way of life, to communicate via Facebook.”*
- Many emphasised that this interaction via social media happened on a daily basis: *“And through social media, I mean, we talk every day.”* This kind of response was given by numerous participants across all three campuses.
- A significant number of participants indicated that they interacted with church friends by regularly commenting on content or status updates shared via social media.

3.3.5.3 Theme 3: Role as a Communication Platform

Interviews revealed that social networks served as a platform for communication between congregants. Participants did not only use these networks to share information with others, but also to share prayer requests and to communicate support for each other.

i. Daily Communication with Congregation Members

The role of social networks as a platform for daily communication in various forms featured strongly. Participants indicated that they communicated with each other through these channels in various situations.

- For some participants, social media was the preferred platform through which they shared basic information about church events: *“Uhm, like, I run a connect group, or what other churches would call a cell, and, uhm, we have this... group where every, every week I let the people know where it’s going to be and at what time...”* The same

participant explains: *“And I think if it wasn’t for that I would have had to phone everyone... Now it’s like a push of a button away.”*

- Others communicated with their church friends by sharing content – for example articles from websites – that may be relevant to their situation. One interviewee explained: *“If there’s something interesting that I see I want to share, say like an interesting article, I would share it with that someone.”*
- Some participants felt that certain actions unique to the social media sphere also constituted communication. One participant explained: *“I message, or comment on their, uhm, status updates, liking their photos...”* It became clear that these forms of interaction were viewed as acts of communication in their own right in this context.

ii. Sharing of Prayer Requests and Challenges

A total of 63% of participants indicated that congregation members used social media platforms to communicate prayer requests, and to make others aware of challenges they faced. These social networks also served as a platform on which friends kept each other up to date as these events and situations unfolded.

- A typical example of this practice was shared by a participant from Cape Town: *“Yes, when things are really tough, I’ve seen a lot of people request prayer, and then we do get involved, you know – we do comment, encourage them, pray for them. I’ve seen it quite a bit – but only when real things are hitting them, you know, when it’s tough, tough times... And then people rally, you know, they help and they... you can see there’s ongoing community, and interaction, and help.”*
- An interviewee from Sydney noticed that congregation members often directed these kinds of requests at the church’s official social media accounts, and that church employees or volunteers used this as an opportunity to reach out to them: *“And pastoral care can, if they know them, can jump on... and say, ‘Hey, message me,’ or, ‘I recognise that person, I’m going to give them a call,’ you know, that sort of thing.”*
- One participant shared an example where the direct messaging functionality of Facebook (which gives users the ability to send private messages to each other) was used to share a more personal request: *“I mean I had an, interestingly enough, a*

couple of weeks ago I had a good friend of mine drop me a message on Facebook... that he basically just said, 'Please, pray for me' – he's struggling in his faith. And it's a very personal thing he shared which he sent through a direct message, not through a post. And, uh, so he was very open and honest and vulnerable."

iii. Apprehension to Share due to Privacy Concerns

Despite the aforementioned tendency to share prayer requests and details about personal challenges on these networks, some participants expressed apprehension about the idea of sharing personal issues on public platforms due to privacy concerns.

- Some participants felt that it may not be appropriate to be that open about one's problems in front of a wider audience. In the words of one interviewee: *"There's quite a few people who do share. Sometimes I feel perhaps an over-share.... There's certain needs which you're like, 'Okay... that's fair enough, it's a good request'. Like, 'Please pray for me, I'm in hospital'. Uhm, and then there's certain things which feel borderline personal."*
- One interviewee indicated that some social networks may be better suited to this kind of activity than others. The "open" nature of Twitter was seen as an impediment to sharing private matters: *"Obviously on Facebook, which is a little bit more personal, you'd find that, where someone says, 'Hey, pray for me, girls, just kind of cover me'. Uhm, where I think on, on Twitter and that, people, I don't think they would kind of do that because you have the whole world looking at you and obviously you're exposing yourself to their criticism, possibly."*

3.3.5.4 Theme 4: Positive Role of Online Interaction in Real-life Relationships

Notwithstanding these concerns, participants often portrayed their activity on social networks in positive terms. In fact, some felt that the advantages of social media use extended to the offline world, in that it had a perceived positive impact on their real-life relationships. Some congregation members felt activity on social networks contributed to the overall health of

their real-life relationships, while others pointed out that it often represented a starting point for new relationships.

i. Ongoing Communication Contributing to Health of Relationships

Some participants felt that communication on social networks contributed to the health and depth of their relationships with others. They indicated that it was particularly helpful in maintaining and improving existing relationships.

- One participant explained that involvement on social media platforms helped her to maintain and even grow long-standing friendships because these activities gave other people an opportunity to *“get to know you a bit better”* over the course of time. She mentioned the consistent connection to friends as helpful in this regard. Another participant agreed that relationships could grow in this context because it acted as a platform for sustained engagement: *“Church community, close community – it’s like a self-fulfilling thing – we continually post, and like, and encourage.”*
- Participants were pragmatic about the significance and role of online interaction in the strengthening of relationships, and typically described it as a contributing factor, instead of a main ingredient, in healthy relationships. One interviewee explained it in this way: *“But I think... that virtual contact establishes some kind of connection – even if it’s just a little bit and it must be worked on. But, definitely, it can help.”*

ii. Starting Point for New Relationships

Some interviewees indicated that social media made it easier to pursue new relationships with congregation members that they didn’t know before. Almost two thirds of participants shared examples of how their initial interaction with someone on a social media platform culminated in an offline relationship at a later stage.

- A participant in Cape Town shared a non-specific example of how these kinds of relationships typically developed: *“I have friends who... well, I saw them at church but didn’t know them, and then, uhm, you friend them on Facebook or they friend you, just*

because you know they're in church... and then through their status updates, you know, you kind of get to know them and you start talking at church... So I would say in that regard, social media helps a lot, you know, to get to know the person. It's... when you then have a conversation with them it's less awkward, if I can say it that way."

- Another telling example expanded on this kind of scenario: *"Personally I think you kind of see into a person's soul in the kind of photos they take and the kind of things they do with their kids and then you, you've already formed a bond with that person... and then it just hits off when you see them in real life, where you can solidify and deepen that relationship."*
- A participant in Sydney shared the example of a leader in the church's creative ministry who would often introduce people to each other online because she knew both, and knew that they shared similar interests. She would do this by way of a comment on one of the individuals' social media posts.
- Some also explained that referring to another person's social media updates served as a valuable conversation starter. One explained: *"It's a great way of creating conversation – going, 'Hey, how was the holiday in wherever?'"*

3.3.5.5 Theme 5: Limitations of Online Relationships

Despite their overall enthusiastic engagement with the social media sphere, a significant number of participants revealed that they were well aware of the limitations associated with relationships and communication in an online context. While they appreciated the positive aspects of their involvement on social networks, they expressed concern about its drawbacks.

i. Awareness of Limitations of Online Platforms for Relationship Building

Half of participants articulated an awareness that the kind of interaction social media allows placed limitations on the degree to which a relationship was actualised. They seemed to be deeply aware of the limitations of social media as a platform for relationship building. Many of these participants were particularly adamant that social media could never replace actual human interaction and real-life conversations.

- This awareness of the limitations of online relationships was articulated in a particularly compelling form by a participant in Cape Town: *“Social media, as much as it helps you engage, it’s not on that deep a level, so for me personally, it helps you stay up to date, and yes, it helps you form a connection, but for me, there’s a point where that connection has to go offline for it to be, you know, uhm, meaningful.”*
- One participant warned that social network use alone could not form the basis for a relationship. She explained it in the following way: *“Like, it’s, it’s almost like a false sense of connection if you never had any real connection in the first place, or if you don’t make the effort to... pick up the phone... you know, personally message someone or, like, meet up with a person.”*
- The limitations of a platform like the Internet in communicating the larger context behind a person’s words were also mentioned. One participant explained it in terms of language, where the tone of voice plays a significant role in communication. She explained that the lack of these kinds of cues on an online platform could be problematic: *“You don’t understand the context. So what you read could be interpreted in... a multitude of ways.”*
- A few interviewees raised concerns that there was an increasing emphasis on online relationships at the cost of real-world interaction over time. One participant said the following: *“So I think as time goes on, that element of face-to-face interaction feels like it’s getting eliminated, and people might become little cocoons and spend their time on these networks rather than seeing each other, and feel like they’ve done enough...”*
- It is interesting to note that these concerns were voiced uniformly across all campuses. There was no indication that participants in for example New York, where social media has been a part of the online landscape for longer, had a different view on the matter than participants in a place like Cape Town, where it was a newer phenomenon.

ii. Awareness of Possible Negative Effects on Real-life Relationships

A few participants were concerned that online interaction could actually have a negative effect on their real-life relationships. These interviewees were not only concerned about the limitations of online interaction, but felt that this kind of interaction could conceivably have

negative effects on their offline relationships as well. A total of 31% of participants addressed this aspect.

- One congregation member pointed out that excessive social media use could have a negative effect on his family life: *“I do find as well, a side comment, that, maybe we’re too hooked on that – at home with family and things like that. Even for me, I’m so obsessed sometimes with that, but you need to separate that from your real life with your family as well. Perhaps, I think, there’s a big danger in that. And I’ve experienced it personally, you know, where my wife is like, ‘Get that thing out of the room!’”*
- Another aspect raised in this regard was the possibility of damaging relationships through unwise or hurtful comments made on social media platforms. One interviewee explained: *“So, so it can also be damaging and hurtful, and, you know, like, you have to realise that it’s an open platform, and that to a large degree you can invite criticism. So it’s not to be taken lightly.”*

3.3.5.6 Theme 6: Sense of Unity

Many participants pointed to the role of social media in generating a sense of unity among congregation members in their specific campuses, and amongst members of Hillsong Church globally. These participants explained that following social media updates about the church’s activities on many fronts helped them to feel part of a united, global community of believers.

i. Awareness of Wider Church Community

A total of 81% of participants indicated that they used social media as a way to connect to the wider faith community beyond their immediate congregation, and to follow events in other Hillsong congregations. They explained that this made them aware that they were part of a larger whole, and that they were pursuing the same goals as other campuses.

- Many interviewees stated that following social media updates by other Hillsong campuses and their pastors gave them the sense that they were part of a single body

with a single strategy. One articulates this feeling as follows: *“It’s like, you know, we’re actually building something bigger and more cohesive and more united.”*

- Familial language also comes across in this regard. One participant explained how following happenings at other Hillsong congregations presented her with an opportunity to *“watch the family”*. Another, reflecting on how social media updates by Hillsong campuses in several countries presented a view of a unified church, used similar terms: *“So in a way... it’s, it’s a bigger family, a broader family.”*
- A congregation member from Cape Town indicated that she tended to look to the social media activity of pastors at the main Hillsong campus in Sydney for direction in terms of the vision of the church. She indicated that these leaders tended to set the agenda, and played a significant role in uniting the various Hillsong campuses behind their vision.

ii. Uniting Congregation Members from Different Backgrounds

Some participants indicated that social media served to cultivate a sense of unity among congregation members who came from different backgrounds. Interviews revealed that social networks could play a role in uniting these disparate groups.

- One interviewee explored the idea that the church could, through the picture it portrays of itself on social networks, contribute to the sense of unity experienced between different groups in the church by portraying every group as equally important. Reflecting on this, she said the following: *“But one of the, one of the things that I see... coming through really strongly in Hillsong Church is that fight for unity and the, the, almost that lack of complication and divisiveness and stuff like that.”*
- Another participant said the fact that he was connected to members of his connect group (church small group) on social networks helped him to feel kinship with different kinds of people he wouldn’t have felt a connection with otherwise.

3.3.5.7 Theme 7: Role as a Platform for Encouragement

Interviews revealed that congregation members often used social media channels to encourage their church friends, and that they sometimes shared content or updates from the church's social media feeds, or posted content themselves, that served an inspirational purpose.

i. Exhortation of Congregation Members via Social Media

Altogether 69% of participants indicated that they used social media as a platform for exhortation and a way to directly encourage other congregation members. Many participants also pointed out that they followed the church's official social media profiles for this reason: *"It's about encouragement, it's about spiritual growth,"* said one participant.

- The responses of most interviewees aligned with this explanation provided by a participant in Cape Town: *"And we often encourage one another on social media. Like, I will, for instance, if I see someone is having a bad day, send a bible verse or a message, uhm, to let them know I'm thinking of them, keeping them in my prayer".*
- Some participants indicated that they followed their congregation's leaders and official social media accounts to receive regular encouragement and inspiration. In the words of one interviewee: *"You know, they always have these inspirational messages..."*
- One participant provided an insight into the practical value of these positive messages shared online: *"I think sometimes if I, if I'm going through something personally and I see someone is going through a tough time themselves and they're positive about it, then it changes my perspective on my own situation."*

ii. Sharing of Inspirational Content with Others

A number of participants indicated that they used social media as a platform to share specific pieces of content that may lift the spirits of their church friends. This included sharing articles found online, or sharing positive status updates posted on friends' or the church's social media accounts.

- An interviewee explained that this was a way to pass on information others may find helpful: *“So if I have... if I read something very inspirational or motivational, I’ll repost it.”*
- One participant referred to this as a regular practice, and explained that this kind of behaviour formed a part of how he interacted with online content: *“I will comment on something and copy someone else in, to show them okay, this is something really good, have a look at it, you know.”*

3.3.5.8 Theme 8: Witnessing Through Social Media

Another clear theme to emerge from the gathered data was the way that many participants viewed their social media use as an opportunity to share their faith with others in their sphere of influence. Despite the high degree of engagement with their church friends, participants seemed to also have an outward focus, and were in some instances very intentional about the way they portrayed their faith online.

i. A Platform for Intentional Witness

A total of 63% of participants indicated that they viewed their activity on digital social networks as an opportunity to witness to others outside their immediate circle of church friends. They did this by sharing social media updates from official church profiles, or by sharing articles and other faith-based content they encountered online. They also shared their faith in personal posts on their various social media profiles.

- Participants seemed to be aware that the content they shared online were consumed by both their church friends and non-believers, and used this opportunity to make others aware of their faith. An interviewee from Sydney explained: *“I’m pretty open about my Christianity ... I don’t quote the quote of the day, you know, but I’ll talk about... we had baptisms, or, we had the best message at church today. And I’m not like, I don’t edit it to who’s going to see it – I’m pretty open about it.”* In a similar vein, one participant told how she would constantly share posts from her congregation’s

social media accounts online. In time, one of her non-believing colleagues started liking and commenting on her posts, which resulted in a conversation about faith.

- Many participants viewed church missions or outreach activities as a particularly compelling opportunity to share this kind of content. One interviewee from Cape Town shared an example: *“I remember when we went into Mitchells Plain (to plant a church), I was very proud to be able to share... so people could see that the church is interested in going into areas like this, that traditionally other churches would shy away from... Yes, as a, as a way of, uhm, maybe, maybe opening people’s eyes to what’s going on.”*
- One of the participants explained the reasoning behind this kind of activity on her social networks: *“If it is a way of us reaching people that we might not traditionally reach, to help them... come one step closer, two steps closer to accepting Christ and coming to... church, then we’ll use it to the best of our ability.”*
- Congregants also shared their appreciation for the way the various campuses used their social media profiles to share the gospel. One interviewee said the following: *“That’s why the church has grown so much – because it said, I don’t care what the world uses social media for, I’m going to grab it and I’m going to use it for the kingdom to shine a light.”*

ii. Consciously Crafting an Appealing Image of Church

An interesting sub-theme emerging from the coding process was the way in which a few participants used social media to intentionally craft an image of church that their friends outside of the faith community would find appealing.

- One participant in New York, for example, indicated that she wanted her friends to understand that church was not unappealing and boring, but engaging and fun. With this in mind, she tended to share content that portrayed this. She explained it as follows: *“I think if they can see a photo, or they can see a snapshot of something, then they go, ‘Oh... your church that I thought was scary, is actually a lot of fun’.”*
- Another participant, deeply aware that she was connected to online followers who were not Christians, deliberately chose to share content that *“...dispels the common*

notion of what people think church is". She explained that she wanted to portray an image of the church that shows *"what people would not imagine church to be"*.

3.3.5.9 Theme 9: Role in Overcoming Challenges of City Life

Participants indicated that social media played a role in helping them overcome some of the challenges normally associated with living in an urban environment. This included overcoming geographical separation between friends, maintaining contact with others despite their busy lifestyles, improving the vitality of their social ties, and uniting the diverse groups often encountered in city environments.

i. Role in Overcoming Geographical Separation

Participants indicated that social media activity helped them communicate with congregation members who live in other parts of the city or even further afield, and who they would not otherwise communicate with regularly.

- A good example of this kind of response is the story of a participant who explained that her best friend, a member of the congregation, lives on the other side of the city – a drive of about 40 minutes away. She explained that they communicated with each other every day through social media by sending messages, commenting on posts, and sharing content with each other. She then pointed out that they would sometimes attend different weekend church services, thus not seeing necessarily seeing each other on a Sunday either. *"If it wasn't for us chatting on Facebook, or me sending her an article about this or that, or, you know, praying when she needs prayer, and she... you know, her doing the same for me, then I would have seen her, like... four weeks ago."* She added: *"I would say social media keeps me in touch with my church friends, everyday, who I otherwise would only see on Sundays."*
- Four participants also said social media played a role in maintaining connections with friends further afield, particularly when it came to *"...speaking to friends that are in different countries."*

ii. Maintaining connection with congregation despite busy lifestyle

A notable total of 94% of participants indicated that social media offered a simple way for them to stay connected and up to date with events and challenges in the lives of other congregation members, despite their busy lifestyles. The general consensus was that social networks *“...makes it a lot easier to keep in touch,”* despite the time constraints associated with urban living.

- A typical response in this category was provided by one of the participants from Sydney: *“It does kind of bridge the gap, like, if, for instance, life gets busy, church gets busy, everything happens at once and you don’t get to see people... at least they know you’re still okay and they can kind of keep up with what’s going on.”* Another participant explained it in this way: *“Because I’m working throughout the week, and sometimes you don’t really see people that much. So to see what’s happening when they post pictures, or comments and everything, in a way, it kind of makes you feel like, okay, now at least I know what’s happening in their lives.”*
- Social networks also provided a place to keep up to date with happenings in the lives of others that one may not have known of otherwise, and would not generally have had time to get involved with. In the words of one participant: *“So you can kind of catch that and then you can be involved and, or if somebody has had something like a break-in in their house in the northern suburbs, then at least, like, we know, okay, ‘Do you need anything?’.*
- This aspect also played a role in the way busy and pressured congregation members stayed abreast of events and developments at church, and helped them to be more aware of mid-week happenings. One participant in Hillsong New York explained it this way: *“You know, like, I started finding out that they... it’s just not a Sunday thing – it’s an all week. And I started finding out about connect groups, and, you know, Welcome to Church nights, and, you know, they have so many activities going on...”*

iii. Improving vitality of social ties

Five interviewees pointed out that the quality of their friendships and social ties were improved by this regular interaction with others. They disclosed that this interaction helped them to overcome the disconnected and impersonal nature of social ties that they often dealt with in the urban context, where relationships can sometimes be superficial and transitory.

- One participant stated outright: *"...It's not just about talking more. The friendship has grown."* She attributed this growth to regular interaction via social media.
- Another explained that he interacted more with his church friends online than with other friends, due to the nature of their offline relationship. This, he explained, resulted in an even closer friendship: *"And, so I feel way closer to my church friends based on this than I do to my other friends."*

iv. Uniting diverse groups

As indicated in the previous chapter, urban environments are often characterised by a great degree of diversity, as these areas provide a home to people from different groups and backgrounds. It is therefore worth noting that a small number of participants voiced the opinion that social media was valuable in uniting congregation members from different backgrounds.

- Five participants referred to this aspect, mostly pointing to the way that social media exposed users to a wider variety of people than they would encounter in their daily lives. One interviewee noted that these networks helped to broaden the perspectives of participants because social media played a role in *"...bringing people into your life"*.
- Another participant had a global perspective on this issue, and explained that social media helped to unite the different cultures and practices encountered at the various Hillsong campuses under one umbrella: *"And, like, as much as we're all in different locations we all kind of have the same life and spirit."*

3.3.5.10 Theme 10: Issues Not Mentioned

A number of potentially significant subjects not mentioned by participants should also be considered as they could prove of great importance. This includes the fact that virtually no interviewees made mention of groups that were excluded from social networks because they did not have access to the Internet or the digital devices needed to partake in this sphere. The impact of the amount of time devoted to activities of this nature was also not really mentioned, and interviewees did not seem to consider the disadvantages of constantly being connected to others via these networks. Surprisingly, participants also did not mention the role that social media often plays in mobilising groups of people to take part in social initiatives.

i. Exclusion of Those without Access to Internet and Devices

With the exception of one, participants did not seem to consider the fact that a part of their church community was excluded from online relationships because they had no access to the Internet or digital devices. A single interviewee seemed to be aware that this could be a problem, and remarked: *“To the... to the people in, who, you know, don’t have Internet, who don’t have those opportunities... it wouldn’t help for the less fortunate who is looking to buy bread, you know ... It’s okay for the everyday guy who has a phone, you know – which means, it’s your middle class and up...”* Significantly, this was a participant from Cape Town, where one would expect the problem to be greater due to poverty and lower incomes. Participants in New York and Sydney did not seem to consider this issue at all.

ii. Impact of Time Devoted to Social Networking

While many participants readily admitted that they spent a large amount of time interacting on social networks, they did not seem to consider that there may be negative consequences to the amount of time they allocated to this activity. Two participants made off-hand remarks that they were trying to limit their social media use, but they did not express any strong opinions as to why this was necessary, and didn’t appear to put much thought into these

statements. One other interviewee, speaking about her social media habits, said “...*you can definitely do it too much,*” but did not express any resolve to limit her participation in future.

iii. Disadvantages of Constant State of Connection

Participants were unanimous in their appreciation of social media as a tool to connect them to other congregation members; yet, they did not consider the possible disadvantages of being connected and available online all day, every day. This is surprising, as this has been a topic of discussion in the popular media for some time. It follows that it needs to be considered in this context as well.

iv. Use of Social Media to Mobilise for Social Initiatives

Virtually no participants mentioned the suitability of social media as a tool to mobilise groups of people to take part in short-term social initiatives. This is unexpected, as social media has been used on many occasions by a great number of institutions to reach out to their members to participate in projects like disaster relief programs, social justice initiatives and similar actions. It is particularly unexpected as Hillsong Church is known for its involvement in many such short-term programs, where it would be very useful to be able to mobilise its members to take action in a very short period of time.

A single interviewee alluded to the possible use of social media in this way: “*If there’s something happening tonight and there’s a disaster somewhere, you need people right now. You don’t need people... you can’t... there’s no time to send out a mail, it’s literally like... how many words... 20 words to say ‘Hey, we need help, come, we’re going to be there, we’re going to make sandwiches.’*” However, this was only a hypothetical situation, and did not reflect her experience at Hillsong Church. Therefore, it seems to represent an opportunity for action that none of the Hillsong campuses have made much use of.

Having presented all the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the coding of interviews, a cursory note on the comparison of data between the different campuses that were included in the study is in order. Thereafter, preliminary conclusions and a chapter summary will follow.

3.3.6 Comparison of Campuses

As noted in the introductory chapter, the three campuses of Hillsong Church included in this empirical study – Hillsong Cape Town, Sydney, and New York – were purposefully chosen on account of both their similarities and dissimilarities. While the approach to social media across these campuses is virtually similar, they differ in that they are located in both first and third world countries, representing wildly differing social environments. They also run the gamut from well-established campuses (like the Sydney campus) to new church plants (like the New York congregation). There was an expectation that these dissimilarities could translate to varying perspectives on the topic of social media from one campus to the next.

It is thus interesting to note that the opinions and experiences of participants across the different campuses were largely uniform with regards to the subject under discussion. For the most part, interviewees at all three campuses – that is to say, participants at both long-established and new campuses; and participants in both developed and developing countries – had similar views on the subject, and shared the same concerns. Despite the different settings, participants seemed to share the same experiences from one campus to the next, and expressed remarkably similar feelings about the main topics. None of the campuses held to a noticeably different view on the subject than any of the others.

One important difference did reveal itself, however, in that the subject of the exclusion of those without access to the Internet and digital devices only came to the fore in the South African context – where it was raised only once by a participant in Cape Town. This is significant, since Cape Town, as the only campus in a developing country, would have a much larger number of individuals who are excluded from the social media world due to their social circumstances. The implications of this reality will be considered as part of the following chapter.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of participants from all three campuses revealed that the issues associated with social media use in a congregational setting are universal in nature, applying to different groups in varying contexts.

3.3.7 Preliminary Conclusions

This study, conducted using a qualitative strategy of inquiry, involved personal interviews by the researcher with participants from three campuses of Hillsong Church. The raw data was analysed by an independent coder, and grouped into 10 themes and 26 sub-themes emerging from the interview transcripts. The following preliminary conclusions can be drawn based on these themes:

- There is a remarkable degree of interconnection and interaction between congregation members and their church friends, their leaders, and other Hillsong campuses on social networks. Congregants are highly connected and highly engaged with each other.
- Members of the church view these networks as a place to communicate with each other, stay up to date with events, and share their challenges – despite the apprehension of some to share personal matters on public platforms.
- The general perception among congregants is that the sustained communication that these networks makes possible, contributes to the health of their relationships. Many also see it as a starting point for new relationships.
- Despite these positive aspects, congregants are deeply aware of the limitations of online platforms for relationship building, and some even feel these activities could ultimately have negative effects on their real-life relationships.
- These networks seem to contribute to unity in the church, most notably by cultivating an awareness of the wider church community, but also by bringing together congregation members from different backgrounds.
- Members of Hillsong Church turn to these social media channels as a source of exhortation and encouragement, and use it to do the same for others.
- Social networks serve as a platform for intentional witness to others outside of the church community.
- Social networks play a significant role in helping congregation members overcome challenges associated with life in an urban environment. They use these networks to maintain a connection with friends they would have lost contact with due to geographical separation or because of their busy lifestyles, and some feel that the

quality of their relationships has improved as a result. These networks also connect them to a wider variety of diverse people and groups.

- There seems to be a very limited awareness that people without access to the Internet and digital devices are effectively excluded from this kind of community. Virtually no members of the church seem to consider this reality.
- Likewise, congregants do not seem to consider the possible implications of the amount of time they devote to social networking, or the disadvantages of a constant state of connection.
- Surprisingly, Hillsong church and its members are seemingly unaware of the possibility of using social media to actively mobilise groups to get involved in social initiatives when needed.

With the richly descriptive data above as a foundation, the attention now shifts to the interpretive task envisioned by Osmer (2005:xv; 2008:79-128), which presents the researcher with an opportunity to interpret the themes and patterns identified during the empirical study in order to understand their significance.

3.4 Summary

This chapter focused on the descriptive-empirical task, and was presented in the form of a qualitative empirical study undertaken on three campuses of Hillsong Church. It provided an overview of issues pertaining to research design, and explained the qualitative framework against the background of the purpose and strategy behind the research. A detailed research plan was articulated, and practical elements of the process were discussed, including issues such as sampling; data collection; data analysis; ethical considerations; credibility strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, and other elements. The meta-theoretical assumptions underlying the approach to the study were also considered. The results of the empirical study were then presented and analysed according to 10 themes and 26 sub-themes that were identified during coding. Finally, a number of preliminary conclusions were formulated.

CHAPTER 4: TOWARD INSIGHTFUL INTERPRETATION

4.1 Overview

Chapter 4 will focus on the interpretive task as outlined by Osmer (2005:xv; 2008:79-128). In this chapter, the researcher will delve into the data obtained through the qualitative empirical study in order to articulate an insightful interpretation of the themes and patterns that were identified. These themes will be critically discussed in relation to the normative statements made in the initial stages of the study by drawing on theories and literature from the arts and sciences in a process that balances thoughtful insight with thorough theoretical interpretation. With this aim in mind, the major themes will be presented in a logically coherent and systematic way by using the five practical expressions of *koinonia* identified in the normative phase of the study as an overarching structural framework. Thus, themes will be discussed within the broader context of *koinonia's* focus on relational aspects, unity, sharing, caring, and witnessing.

4.2 Understanding the Interpretive Task

Before this process commences, it is necessary to understand the role and significance of the interpretive task and how it relates to the study as a whole. Osmer (2008:4) begins by framing the interpretive task in the form of a simple, yet meaningful question that researchers need to ask once they have surveyed the data they have gathered in their descriptive-empirical inquiries: "Why is this going on?" Thus, the interpretive task is aimed at understanding the reason behind the occurrence of certain patterns and behaviours within a specific context. Therefore, as Cahalan and Nieman (2008:82) argue, the interpretive moment presents the researcher with the opportunity to clarify and understand the practice or behaviour that has been uncovered.

This process, Latini (2011:9) explains, involves drawing on theories from, amongst others, the theological, psychological, and sociological spheres in an effort to understand the forms of societal or ecclesial practice the researcher has encountered. This reminds strongly of Kaster's portrayal (2012:16) of the interpretive impulse of practical theology as a means of "engaged

reflection” – that is to say, practical theology actively engages with a broad spectrum of fields and theories in order to come to meaningful interpretations of perceived patterns and behaviours. For this reason, Cahalan and Nieman explain (2008:82-83), it is not unexpected for practical theology to draw on fields as far removed as anthropology and even economics, and also from related theological fields, such as systematic theology and biblical studies.

It is with this in mind that Osmer (2008:94) argues that the interpretive task is made possible by an attitude of “openness to the world”. This means that the process of interpretation requires a willingness to engage with the intellectual resources of the contemporary world in an effort to gain a more rounded understanding of a particular practice. However, despite this openness, it is worth pointing out that Hastings (2007:46-47) – who affirms the importance of the interpretive task – still presents the centrality and normative authority of the Bible as foundational to the process of practical theology. However, he explains that this interpretive process of engagement with a wider thought framework brings the church into a form of tension with prevailing cultural and social views, moving it toward a deeper understanding of its role and place within the world.

It is also interesting to note that Osmer (2008:82) frames the interpretive task in terms of what he refers to as “sagely wisdom”. This approach encompasses three aspects – thoughtfulness, theoretical interpretation, and wise judgment – which he presents along the lines of a continuum. One end of the continuum deals with pure theoretical interpretation, which Osmer (2008:83) describes as the researcher’s ability to draw on theories from the arts and sciences in a practical way. This is done not just by learning from these fields, but also by criticising them. However, this process does not represent the full ambit of the interpretive task, since thoughtfulness – that is, the researcher’s insight into the particular circumstances and context he is faced with (Osmer, 2008:83) – is also required. This implies that the researcher cannot simply apply theories and models gleaned from the arts and sciences without sensitivity for the context within which they will be interpreted, since every situation is different. It is this sensitivity to context, Osmer argues (2008:84), that requires wise judgment on the part of the researcher.

Thus, the interpretive task is revealed as a balanced, well-considered process of engagement with the relevant bodies of knowledge available to the researcher, rooted in a deep awareness of, and sensitivity to, the broader context within which a particular ecclesial or societal practice is located. As such, it presents the researcher with an opportunity to gain a well-rounded understanding of a particular issue by expanding his or her frame of reference in a thoughtful and responsible way.

4.3 Delineating a Systematic Approach

Since the interpretive task requires reflection on theories and models from a variety of fields and traditions, the way in which the findings of this chapter are presented warrants careful consideration. In order to guard against random vacillation between the broad range of issues that could potentially be raised in a chapter of this nature, it is imperative that a systematic approach is followed that allows the researcher to present his main arguments in a logical and coherent manner.

With this aim in mind, the major themes uncovered during the descriptive-empirical phase of the study will be discussed within the context of the five practical expressions of *koinonia* identified in the normative phase of the study. These five aspects – namely *koinonia*'s relational focus, its emphasis on unity, and its relation to sharing, caring, and witnessing – will act as an overarching structural framework for the chapter. Thus, each of the themes identified during the previous chapter will be connected to one of these five elements.

A structure of this nature serves a two-fold purpose: Firstly, it ties the concepts reflected on during the normative stage of the study to the practical themes uncovered in the descriptive-empirical stage. In doing so, it shows how these aspects relate to each other in an effortless and striking manner. This clearly acts as a starting point for a critical discussion of the relationship between the normative view of the subject of *koinonia*, and its practical expression in the life and experience of the church and its members. The simplicity of these five elements lends itself well to a simple and cogent presentation of the major aspects that need to be considered.

A structure of this kind also serves to demonstrate the interconnection between the various tasks of practical theology guiding the research. In this sense, Osmer (2008:12) argues that the process of practical theological interpretation should be regarded more as a spiral than a circle, since it constantly circles back to tasks that have been explored before. Latini (2011:209) presents a similar view, and argues that the four tasks “interpenetrate” each other, representing a circular movement, rather than a linear, stage-to-stage progression. Osmer (2005:62) refers to this idea in his work *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations* as well, where he argues that the normative, empirical, and interpretive dimensions interact throughout the course of a typical study. Structuring the findings of the current chapter in this way will make the kind of interaction envisioned by Osmer eminently possible.

With this approach in mind, the major themes identified in the descriptive-empirical phase of the study are presented in tabular form in Table 4-A, where they are ordered in relation to the five normative elements that characterise the practical expression of *koinonia*. Each of the main themes is connected to one of the five normative elements. While all sub-themes are listed in the table as well, this is merely to demonstrate how they relate to the main categories. The intent is not to discuss each and every one of these sub-themes in isolation. Rather, they may be grouped and discussed together, or investigated on their own, depending on their relation to the broader discussion. For example, a single sub-theme (“Exclusion of those without access to Internet and devices”) is treated separately at the end of the chapter, since it has an overarching significance that can only be discussed once the rest of the issues have been dealt with.

While most of the themes identified in the empirical study relate to one of the five normative aspects in their entirety, two of the main categories identified in the empirical study (“Role in overcoming challenges of city life” and “Issues not mentioned”) contain sub-themes that pertain to a range of different normative elements. For this reason, these sub-themes were separated and linked to the main categories that they naturally relate to. The advantage of this approach is that these two important aspects won’t be ring-fenced and discussed in isolation from other subjects; rather, they will be encountered and discussed at various stages of the chapter, where and when they relate to the topic under discussion. The categorisation of the sub-themes in question is also indicated in the table presented below.

Table 4-A: Overview of Topic Relationships

NORMATIVE ASPECT	THEME	SUB-THEME
Relational Focus	Degree of interconnection	Interconnection with other congregation members
		Interconnection with church leaders
		Interconnection with other Hillsong campuses
	Frequency of use	Frequency of connection to others in social networks
		Frequency of interaction with church community via social media
		Impact of time devoted to social networking **
		Disadvantages of constant state of connection **
	Role as communication platform	Daily communication with congregation members
		Sharing of prayer requests and challenges
		Apprehension to share due to privacy concerns
		Role in overcoming geographical separation *
		Maintaining connection with congregation despite busy lifestyle *
	Positive role of online interaction in real-life relationships	Ongoing communication contributing to health of relationships
		Improving vitality of social ties *
		Starting point for new relationships
	Limitations of online relationships	Awareness of limitations of online platforms for relationship building
Awareness of possible negative effects on real-life relationships		
Unity	Sense of Unity	Awareness of wider church community
		Uniting congregation members from different backgrounds
		Uniting diverse groups *
Caring	Role as a platform for encouragement	Exhortation of congregation members via social media
		Sharing of inspirational content with others
Sharing	n/a	Use of social media to mobilise for social initiatives **
Witnessing	Witnessing through social media	A platform for intentional witness
		Consciously crafting an appealing image of church
		Exclusion of those without access to Internet and devices **

* Sub-theme from category “Role in overcoming challenges of city life”

** Sub-theme from category “Issues not mentioned”

Finally, the researcher is confident that structuring the chapter in this way will contribute to achieving the ultimate aim of the study, which is to determine whether the use of social media is moving the church further from, or closer to, the biblical ideal for Christian community as encapsulated in the concept of *koinonia*. Since the structure above allows for a clear connection to be made between the major elements of *koinonia* that were identified earlier, and the aspects of ecclesial practice they relate to that were uncovered in the empirical study, it will enable the researcher to adhere to a line of thought that will shed light on this central question. Moreover, it will provide a solid foundation for the pragmatic task in the next chapter, which involves the formulation of practical guidelines for a new praxis that is more closely aligned to biblical norms.

Having delineated the envisioned approach to this chapter, the attention now turns to the interpretive task itself. Following the structure set out above, the focus will shift first of all to the relational aspects of social media use, and how this may or may not conform to relationships in the context of a *koinonia* community. The bulk of the matters to be considered fall under this heading. Thereafter, issues related to unity, sharing, caring, and witnessing will be discussed in a similar manner. In closing, the exclusion of those without access to the Internet will be considered.

4.4 Issues Pertaining to Relational Focus

As would have been clear from the empirical study, much of the rhetoric related to the world of social media revolves around the notion of interpersonal relationship. Indeed, literature on the topic of social networks is replete with relationship language, with words like “friends,” “conversation,” “connection,” “interaction,” and “community” frequently used to describe the experience and actions of participants in this sphere. Moreover, the creators of social networks themselves have adopted this language to describe what they offer: Users are invited to articulate lists of “friends” and “converse” within “communities”.

This focus on relationship is evident in the scholarly work of those who investigate the social networking phenomenon from the point of view of computer science as well. Social media scholar and youth researcher Danah Boyd, for example, who is known for a number of

overviews of the development and significance of social media, positions social networks as a place where “friends and acquaintances” flock to “socialise” (Boyd, 2011:1); moreover, online “friends” are said to “gather to converse and share” (Boyd, 2011:4). While her focus is on the nature of digital networks and not on relational aspects, it is interesting to note that a relational element is presupposed and forms an integral part of the language used to describe these networks. Likewise, Hargittai and Hsieh, (2011:150), presenting a typology of social network site usage, refer to these networks as “communities”, and propose that at least some of these networks lend themselves to relationships between users. This same relationship language comes to the fore in the work of Pérez-Latre (2013:51), who asserts that social media use may even be helpful in cultivating “closer” relationships.

Not surprisingly, these affirmations of the relational dimension of social networks are encountered in other fields as well. O'Brien (2013:xi-xii), who approaches the topic from a pedagogical perspective with a view to its use in academic settings, describes personal interaction and human interconnection as key elements of the social media world, and also affirms a community element. Likewise, Cavanagh (2007:102-119), whose interest lies in the sociological sphere, accepts that these kinds of networks have a clear relational focus, and portrays them as suitable platforms for social interaction and bonding. In a similar manner Barak and Suler (2008:4), in an overview of psychological and social science issues related to the online world, explain that the role of the Internet as a platform for interpersonal relationships is one of the reasons why this subject came to the attention of the social sciences in the first place. Even from a theological perspective, where the topic of social media has generated interest as of late, the relational dimension of social media is frequently referred to and affirmed (e.g. Copeland, 2010:5-6; De George, 2009:33-34; Drescher, 2011:109-110). Indeed, social networks are referred to in these terms in virtually every context that it is discussed in.

However, this frequent (and often uncritical) use of relationship language to describe the nature of social networks belies an undeniable unease in some circles about the degree to which these online connections approximate real-world relationships in the first place. In fact, some doubt has been cast on the idea that the kind of digitally mediated engagement that typify interaction on social networks can be cast in relational terms at all. Drescher, for

example (2011:xiii), refers to a “restructuring” or redefining of the meaning of true relationship in the online context to the point where the deep interpersonal, communal, and spiritual intimacy characteristic of true Christian fellowship may be undermined. Even Tredinnick (2008:28), who does not have a theological interest in the matter, questions the extent to which these digital connections are representative of “true relationships”.

With these concerns in mind, it appears that a natural starting point for an interpretive discussion would be an overview of scholarly thought on the subject of interpersonal relationship. Drawing on the social sciences and theology, this would present an opportunity to reflect on what constitutes a vital and vibrant relationship. Such a definition of interpersonal relationship will provide a suitable conceptual context within which the relational themes that were uncovered as part of the empirical study (such as the degree of interconnection between social media users; the frequency with which they interact; the positive and negative effect of online interaction on real-life relationships, the limitations of online relationships; and other themes in this category) can be interpreted. An interpretive discussion of this nature will promote a more rounded understanding of relationship not just in conventional terms, but also within an online context. This, in turn, will shed light on the degree to which relationships in the online sense approximate the kind of deep relationship that characterises true *koinonia*.

4.4.1 Considering Relationship Types

Any survey of social science disciplines such as anthropology, communications, sociology, and various areas of psychology soon reveals that drawing rigid bounds around a concept such as “interpersonal relationship” is not only virtually impossible, but also inherently counterproductive. The reason for this, quite simply, is that relationships are diverse in nature, forming against a variety of different backgrounds, and carrying with them a wide array of expectations. Every unique type of relationship has a distinct function and position in the relational matrix that constitutes the intricate social web around an individual.

Since they mostly operate within a narrow field of the social sciences, scholars often attempt to describe and understand interpersonal relationship in terms of type. As a result, a

bewildering array of “relationship types” has been proposed by different scholars based on the various fields that they are active in. Some distinguish between relationship types based on roles: Regan (2011:10-11), for example, refers to basic relationship types such as mating, family, and friendship relationships, and expands on the nature of these. In a similar vein, Duck (2007:194) mentions such types as mother-child, husband-wife, and work relationships.

Clark and Mills (1979:684-691), on the other hand, are well known for their classic distinction between so-called exchange relationships and communal relationships, which is not founded on role, but on expectation. They explain that exchange relationships involve a repayment of benefits from one party to the other whenever a contribution is made to the relationship. Conversely, in communal relationships, partners respond to each other's needs without expecting a benefit in return.

Enfield (2013:7-8), in a quest to simplify thinking around relationship types, proposes that essentially only two types exist – externally grounded relationships, and reciprocally grounded relationships. Externally grounded relationships, he explains, are defined by how two parties stand in relation to some external reference point. For example, if two people are part of the same congregation, the congregation forms the external reference point that becomes the basis for an externally grounded relationship between them. Reciprocally grounded relationships, on the other hand, occur when the rights and duties associated with a relationship are mutually defined between the two parties regardless of external influences. "The status of one is defined in terms of the other," Enfield explains (2013:8). An example of such a relationship would be the relationship between a father and a son – the status of one party only has meaning in terms of how it relates to the other.

However, while the above-mentioned relationship types provide a valuable insight into the dynamics of relationships in very specific contexts (for example between a mother and child), they also present a problem in that they do not really unlock the kind of information one would need to reflect on the nature of interpersonal relationships in a broad sense. Put simply, these relationship types may shed light on the form or function of specific relationships, especially in terms of how they are encountered in the various social sciences,

but they do not convey much about the underlying attributes of a healthy interpersonal relationship.

Thus, while these relationship types are acknowledged and will be drawn on to a limited extent, the net must be cast wider, and the actual characteristics or attributes typically associated with interpersonal relationships need to be identified and considered. This focus on character instead of type will result in a more comprehensive understanding of the subject that is not too narrow. In focusing on the general attributes or characteristics of an interpersonal relationship as they are understood across the various disciplines, the discussion will be moved beyond the confines of the language and models of a single field, to a set of views and ideas that they all hold in common.

4.4.2. Characteristics of Interpersonal Relationships

At the most basic level, interpersonal relationships are generally defined simply as social associations or connections between two or more people (Flaum, 2007:234; Arundale, 2010:138; Enfield, 2013:8-9), with varying levels of intimacy or “closeness” (Sias, 2009:2; Regan, 2011:11), often centred around a shared interest or common ground between parties (Jacobson, 2008:220; Bratanova, Kashima, & Peters, 2012:127). Regan (2011:4) expands on this definition by adding that these “connections” involve parties who establish mutual influence or interdependence. She also notes that these connections are “ongoing” – which could refer to connection over either an extended or a limited period of time. Moreover, Duck (2007:x) along with many others (*cf.* Arundale, 2010:146-147; Sias, 2009:2), points to the idea that interpersonal relationships are usually “networked experiences” – in other words, they are not defined merely in terms of emotional events between two isolated partners, but almost always form part of a wider network of connections.

As scholars across the disciplines engage with, and expand on, the ideas mentioned above, a number of common elements typically emerge in their discussions on the subject. While academics from different spheres tend to focus on different aspects, it would be useful to collate these elements below in order to present a single, integrated view of the building blocks, or basic characteristics, of interpersonal relationships as presented across the

disciplines. With this aim in mind, the following pages will focus on four major elements that frequently form part of discussions about the nature of interpersonal relationships – namely interaction; communication; self-disclosure; and feedback.

It is important to note that these characteristics or attributes are not necessarily conceptually discrete or distinct units; rather, they represent a number of overlapping, interrelated concepts that flow out of and into each other, gradually shedding light on different aspects of the subject. Together, however, these four elements represent the basic characteristics or attributes of interpersonal relationships as encountered across fields, thus serving as a useful foundation from which to reflect on the themes uncovered in the empirical study.

In the interest of clarity the concepts of interaction and communication will be discussed individually, while self-disclosure and feedback will be discussed together since they are interlinked concepts. However, the attention now turns to the first of these elements, namely interaction.

4.4.2.1 Interaction

As Regan (2011:4) strongly affirms, a majority of scholars (e.g. Enfield, 2013:8; Schneider, 2010:253; Sellnow, Verderber, & Verderber, 2010:141) believe that the most basic building block of an interpersonal relationship is interaction. Indeed, as Wood (2008:7) argues, relationships can be described as "a co-creation of interaction partners". Interaction, according to Schneider (2010:253-254), refers to any moment of meaningful contact between two individuals, and could be in either verbal or visual form. Schneider (2010:253) argues that verbal interaction could include both face-to-face contact as well as conversations via interactive, phone-based media; while visual interaction, on the other hand, could take the form of a visible act directed at an individual – for example holding the door for someone without saying a word.

While it may be considered self-evident, it is important to emphasise first of all that some kind of platform or shared context is needed for an interaction to occur – the different parties to the relationship need to be brought together. In other words, as Wood (2008:20) argues,

interaction presupposes some form of interconnection between two or more individuals. Wiberg (2005:147) explains that two people need to be “within one another’s perceptual fields” so that they are able to “signal their responsiveness” to one another. Thus, there needs to be a shared context or experience that serves as a platform on which this interaction can take place. Fitzpatrick (2008:193), for example, argues that a physical location such as a neighbourhood could serve as a platform for interaction, while Sias (2009:2) points to the workplace as another example of such a platform. Harris (2014:26), on the other hand, argues that the Internet serves as such a platform of interaction for an ever-increasing number of people. This view is echoed by scholars including Boyd (2011:1) and Campbell (2005:25).

A relationship also requires a particular kind of interaction – to be exact, in the words of Sias (2009:2), a relationship requires “repeated, patterned interaction” over time. Thus, any meaningful relationship requires, at its most fundamental level, interaction that occurs regularly through the course of time, as opposed to single, isolated interaction events. Holmes (2008:31) affirms this notion, stating that a pattern of regular interaction is crucial to any interpersonal attachment. Likewise, Regan (2011:5) explains this regular connection as a set of “interaction episodes,” or an “oscillating rhythm of mutual influence” that needs to be ongoing for a relationship to continue to exist. Enfield (2013:8) presents a similar argument, stating that a single interaction does not constitute a relationship, and that a “history” of such interaction is necessary before a relationship can be said to exist. Thus, it is understood that a relationship requires a certain level of regular, ongoing interaction – in other words, a certain frequency of interaction is necessary. Significantly, Friedman (2008:37) argues that there may well be a connection between the frequency of interaction and the quality of a relationship, with relationships where more frequent interaction occur situated on the healthier end of the spectrum.

If indeed meaningful interaction requires frequent contact between interconnected individuals who are brought together on shared platforms, this is an opportune moment to consider some of the initial themes uncovered during the empirical study, since they relate directly to these elements. Two themes, namely the degree of interconnection and frequency of use, come to mind in this context.

i. Interconnection and Networked Publics

Interviews during the empirical study revealed a high degree of online interconnection between congregation members themselves; between congregants and their leaders; and between congregants and other Hillsong congregations. Social networks were clearly seen as a platform for interconnection from where members could interact with each other, as well as other stakeholders in their church communities. As a result, the high degree of interconnection between congregants was listed as the first major theme emerging from the study. In order to understand the weight and significance of this theme, however, it needs to be discussed with reference to the emerging notion of social networks as “networked publics”.

Networked publics, according to Boyd (2011:1), are “public spaces” constructed through networked technologies like the Internet (as opposed to traditional publics like town squares or workplaces), where people connect with each other in order to interact. These networked publics, Boyd argues, serve many of the same functions as conventional types of publics – in other words, they serve as a platform where people gather for social, civic, and cultural purposes, connecting with one another around shared goals and interests. Put simply, these networked publics serve as platforms for interconnection in much the same way as conventional publics would. For this reason, social media websites are often referred to as prime examples of networked publics (Boyd and Ellison, 2008:221; Fuchs, 2014:187). As such, they remind strongly of Wiberg’s (2005:147) earlier reference to platforms where people enter “one another’s perceptual fields” with a view to interaction.

It is interesting to note that these networked publics have taken an increasingly prominent position as of late in literature dealing with interpersonal interaction. Where in the past they have been treated as novelties confined to the margins of human relational experience, these networked publics now take centre stage in discussions about human interconnection, and they are increasingly seen as equal in importance to their traditional analogues. In fact, they are now widely considered to be an integral aspect of everyday, interpersonal relationships. Gasser and Palfrey (2008:77), for example, portray networked publics as the platform on which an entire new generation pursue and conduct personal relationships. Chambers (2013:61) concurs, pointing out how networked publics like social media sites “mediate

interaction” between a new generation of users who grew up with these networks and consider them a normal and indispensable part of their social lives. Friedberg and Varnelis (2008:15) conclude that contemporary life is “dominated by the pervasiveness” of these networks as platforms for interconnection between individuals.

Not surprisingly, this focus on networked publics as a setting for interconnection between individuals has influenced thought about relationships and interaction. Most significantly, in a world where individuals can be interconnected over vast distances, face-to-face encounters are now increasingly seen as only one form of human interaction, since other possibilities for interaction exist in a networked context (Friedberg & Varnelis, 2008:20). Indeed, interactions in an online context are sometimes portrayed as richer and more varied. Consider, for example, Boyd’s argument (2011:47) about the “persistence” of text-based conversations in networked publics, which makes them ideal for asynchronous interactions: Since text-based conversations on social networks can be halted and continued at any time – text messages are “persistent” in that they do not disappear – she argues that conversations are not limited to when two parties in a relationship find themselves together in the same place at the same time. Thus, interactions can be initiated and continued at any time. Moreover, interconnection can be demonstrated in a variety of other ways – for example, the act of “liking” a photo or sharing a post with a particular person is regarded as an expression of interconnection between individuals (Fuchs, 2014:36; Van Dijck, 2013:49).

Therefore, if the first prerequisite for interaction is a platform of some kind that brings people together in a shared context, social networks can certainly be shown to fulfil this initial requirement. As networked publics, these social media sites clearly facilitate interconnection between individuals to begin with – in the words of Boyd and Ellison (2008:221), social networks simply “allow people to connect with each other”. Thus, in this limited sense at least, these online networks seem to satisfy a basic criterion for interaction.

ii. Frequency of Social Media Interaction

Another clear theme to emerge from the empirical study revolved around the frequency of interaction between social media users, as the gathered data indicated that participants used

these networks to interact with each other on a frequent and ongoing basis. Since one of the prerequisites for meaningful interaction as discussed above is frequent interaction between interconnected individuals, the relevance and importance of this aspect from a relational perspective clearly needs to be considered. Related sub-themes, such as the possible social or relational impact of this frequent social media use, as well as the possible challenges and disadvantages associated with the constant state of connection that it implies, should also be discussed in subsequent sections.

To begin with, it should be noted that participants in the study are by no means unique in terms of the frequency with which they interact with each other on social networks. In fact, most studies that focus on these aspects reveal a similar trend. For example, a Pew Research Center study shows that as much as 31% of Facebook users use the site several times a day to interact with others (Goulet *et al.*, 2011:14). Seargeant and Tagg (2014:169-171) paint a similar picture of daily engagement – often more than once a day – between users on social networks. This clearly correlates with the results of the current study, in which some users indicated that they were active on their social networks as often as ten times per day.

This frequent interaction, even if it is only online, clearly has significance in the context of a discussion around relationship, since most scholars draw a parallel between frequency of interaction and relationship quality. Houghton (2012:8), for example, explains how the frequency of interaction between individuals in any kind of relationship contributes to the level of intimacy between them. He explains this in terms of the life-cycle of a relationship, and says that the frequency of interaction in the early stages of a relationship is often higher than when the relationship has matured. This happens because individuals initially increase the frequency with which they share information to allow an individual with whom they share an interconnection to gain insight into their character. Houghton goes on to explain that this frequent interaction also reduces uncertainty and allows a relationship to develop.

Sias (2009:30), who discusses frequency of interaction within the context of a mentor-mentee relationship, agrees that the value that individuals attach to relationships, and the personal value they derive from relationships, depends on regular interaction. She argues for a positive relationship between frequency of interaction and the psychosocial benefits derived from a

relationship. The basic implication is that parties that interact frequently, in whatever way, gain the most from their relationships. Enfield (2009:11) holds to a similar view, pointing out that frequent interaction provides an opportunity to “increment common ground” – that is, to explore shared interests or mutual bonds, and to cement the foundation on which the relationship was grounded in the first place. Similarly, Holmes (2008:31) argues that a strong sense of belonging within a relational or communal context is dependent on regular, consistent interaction.

Of course the ideal of regular interaction as a prerequisite for meaningful relationship, especially within a communal context, is also a theological concern traceable in the biblical text and theological sources. Hebrews 10:25, which instructs the faithful not to “give up meeting together,” can be seen as a direct admonishment to frequent, consistent fellowship. Less direct, but equally pertinent references include Acts 2:42, which presents a picture of the community of the faithful “continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship”; as well as 1 John 1:3, where readers are invited into fellowship with others. Other scripture references presuppose constant interaction in their call for unity and love, even though they do not make specific mention of this aspect (*cf.* 1 Cor. 1:10; 1 Pet. 3:8; Eph. 4:3). It goes without saying that the deep communal connection implicit in these passages are of a different nature than the online interaction currently under discussion, but it remains pertinent that a form of regular interaction is presupposed in these references.

In line with the biblical vision, Sanders (2013:146) locates the strength of relationships among Christians in frequent interaction with others with similar values. In his estimation, this is a distinguishing characteristic of Christian communities. Likewise Kärkkäinen (2007:5), who portrays the church as “a fellowship of persons,” points to the individual responsibility of every member of a Christian community to contribute to congregational life by consistently and frequently reaching out to others. In a similar manner, Augsberger (2006:79) identifies constant interaction, in whatever form possible, as a basic foundation for authentic relationships. He describes this as a kind of “intense involvement” in the world of others, where an individual constantly invests time and energy in the lives of those he or she shares a connection with.

In other words, both from the point of view of the social sciences and from a theological perspective, a relationship requires interaction on a regular and ongoing basis. While the desired quality of this interaction is not yet under the spotlight at this stage, it is clear that this ongoing interaction is a basic building block of authentic relationship. Therefore, the fact that social networks provide participants with an opportunity to reach out to each other on such a consistent basis, is noteworthy. However, exactly what the value of this kind of frequent interaction represents in an online context, remains a matter of debate, and needs to be considered.

Turkle (2011:17) articulates the reservations of some when she questions the value of “digitized” interactions that are “played out with emoticon emotions”. She describes these interactions as disembodied and superficial moments of contact that require lowered relational expectations since they do not measure up to face-to-face interactions. This stands in contrast with the view of scholars like Parks (2011:108), who lists frequent, patterned interaction on social networks as a way to draw participants into community; and Copeland, (2010:7) who enthuses that these networks enable participants to interact constantly in a way “not available to previous generations.” To Turkle (2011:17), however, these frequent interactions are overwhelming in volume and velocity – they generate too much noise in the lives of participants, and pass by too quickly to be of real meaning. Hipps (2005:112) argues along the same lines, and cautions that the frequent, immediate, and fleeting interactions typical of the digital sphere may lead to confusion rather than clarity.

It is worth noting, however, that a more balanced, pragmatic interpretation of the frequency of interaction in a digital context has emerged over time. This view takes cognisance of the potential drawbacks of this kind of constant connection, while also acknowledging its utility. Chambers (2013:17), for example, acknowledges concerns about the value of digital interaction, but argues that this increased interaction at the very least sustains existing relationships between individuals. Thus, she sees online interactions as helpful where relationship already exists.

Takahashi (2014:204) takes a different but equally pragmatic approach, pointing out that persistent interaction over time on social networks results in the gradual formation of

emotional bonds between individuals. To Takashi, whether these interactions are online or not is not the main consideration – rather, he sees value in the persistence and constancy of these interactions over time. In other words, where individuals interact consistently over time, relational bonds improve. This perspective aligns with the results of a study by Houghton (2012:195), in which he concludes that increased frequency of interaction on social networks results in a greater degree of intimacy between social media users. Houghton, while admitting that online interaction is not on par with interaction in person, nevertheless maintains that frequent contact on these online platforms contributes to the perceived degree of intimacy between participants.

Thus, while Lockley and Yates (2008:94) are likely justified in arguing that the almost perpetual interaction that social networks allows does not necessarily represent a return to the intimate relationships of old-world, rural communities, it would also be uncalled for to entirely dismiss the value of this frequent interaction on online platforms. Few scholars today would argue that online interaction can replace face-to-face interaction; yet, there is an undeniable appreciation for the frequency and persistence of interaction that these social networks make possible. Clearly, persistent online interaction has relational value, and any definition of relationship in the modern context needs to embrace its role in bringing people together on a regular basis.

iii. Impact of Frequent Social Media Use

Despite acknowledging their constant interaction on social networks, it is interesting to note that almost no participants in the empirical study indicated that they were aware of any potential negative effects of sustained social media involvement. Despite admitting that they devoted a significant amount of time to this activity, and describing themselves as heavy social media users, they were seemingly unaware of the negative aspects sometimes associated with frequent social media use. This clearly needs to be considered in an interpretive context.

The idea that excessive immersion in the online environment may have negative consequences has a history almost as old as the World Wide Web. Kraut *et al.* (1998: 1017-1031) were among the first to complete a study of this kind, and concluded that Internet users

became more socially isolated and depressed the more time they spent online. Long before the rise of social media, a study by Nie and Erbring (2000:275) also indicated that Internet users lost contact with their social environments, spending more time in isolation at home, the more they used the Internet. This effect was reported with as little as 2-5 hours per week of immersion in the online sphere – arguably much less than modern urbanites spend browsing social networks on their home computers and mobile digital devices.

While some of these early studies were soon criticised on methodological grounds for, amongst other issues, atypical sample selection and leading questions (Baym, 2006:48), an unease about the impact of excessive online immersion still comes to the fore in literature on the subject. Today, these concerns are generally raised in terms of excessive participation in social media activities, particularly in a world where users have uninterrupted access to these networks from their mobile devices. De Abreu & Góes (2011:156), for example, include the obsessive use of social network sites such as Facebook in a list of recognised Internet addictions, explaining that activities related to these sites can take on a “pathological” dimension. In a similar way Harris (2014:26) points to the distraction that constant access to these social networks via mobile devices can cause, describing it as a “vital concern” in the age of the Internet. As a result, Chambers (2013:108) argues that there is legitimate concern about the vast amounts of time that especially younger people spend on social networks, since obsessive behaviour in this regard may impact on the amount of time available for face-to-face interaction, and could also lead to an unhealthy withdrawal from realities that these individuals may not want to face in the offline world (Chambers, 2013:48, 152).

Demetrovics, Griffiths, and Kuss (2014:121) affirm that frequent social media use sometimes results in addictive behaviour. They argue that users who devote an inordinate amount of time to these activities fulfil the six criteria generally regarded as classic indicators of addictive habits:

- **Salience:** The criterion for salience is met when social networking becomes the single most important activity in a participant's life. In these instances, the user will often think about these activities even when they are not engaged in them. Here, normal social interaction is often negatively affected.

- Mood modification: Some users rely on frequent social media interaction to alter their frame of mind. This becomes a coping strategy, and is often described in terms of a "high" or a numbing feeling, in much the same way as those who are dependent on substances.
- Tolerance: In these cases, more and more time on social networks is needed in order to achieve the same mood-altering effect as before. In these cases, the amount of time spent in online interaction increases over time, to the point where it consumes the user's time.
- Withdrawal symptoms: In some cases, social media users may become irritable or moody if access to these networks is restricted. Time away from these activities then becomes a catalyst for anxiety and negative behaviour.
- Conflicts: Some users may become engaged in conflicts arising from their frequent use of social networks. This may manifest in the form of interpersonal conflict with others who recognise their behaviour; or conflict with other activities, such as hobbies and their social life.
- Relapse: As with any other addiction, individuals who engage in obsessive social media use tend to revert to earlier negative behavioural patterns on occasion.

With these realities in mind, De Abreu and Góes (2011:163) argue that preventing or overcoming excessive or even addictive behaviour in terms of social media use can never be achieved by an outright withdrawal from social media sites. Social media use, they point out, is so embedded in the daily lives of users that this would be an unrealistic expectation. Rather, they propose the implementation of an "adaptive routine of controlled healthy use". Demetrovics *et al.* (2014:121) propose a similar approach centred on "controlled" social media use that does not remove the user from social networks, but helps him or her manage their use of these networks in a healthier way.

De Abreu and Góes (2011:163) explain that such a process should not begin with a focus on negative aspects of the excessive use – rather, the positive outcomes of social media use should be emphasised to the user (such as its value in connecting individuals and its utility as a tool to keep in touch). Once these outcomes have been highlighted, the focus should shift to the ways in which the user's current behaviour ultimately detracts from these positive

outcomes. Goals also need to be set for behaviour modification (for example, setting out times during which no social media activity will be engaged in), and practical tools such as alarm clocks (that limit time on specific online activities), may be incorporated (De Abreu and Góes, 2011:161). Roberts (2010:116) also emphasises the importance of ongoing support from friends and family, who may also act as accountability partners during a process of behaviour modification; as well as the need to invest time in productive pursuits such as hobbies or other activities that could take up some of the time devoted to social networking activities before.

Of course, it should be noted that frequent social media use is not always negative, and does not necessarily lead to addictive behaviour. This view is affirmed by Demetrovics *et al.* (2014:121-122), who explain that frequent use does not automatically equal unhealthy use. In fact, Baym (2006:48) points out that people who communicate heavily in one modality (such as social media) tend to communicate heavily in others as well. Thus, she argues, heavier users of social media could well be more likely to reach out to others by means of face-to-face conversations or other means. Therefore, frequent social media activity could have positive consequences as well.

Yet, it remains unsettling that none of the possible negative consequences in frequent social media interaction were raised by any participants in the empirical study – especially when one considers that it is often raised in literature, and even in the popular media. In this sense one is reminded of Roberts' (2010:116) assertion that a problem cannot be addressed until it is recognised.

iv. Disadvantages of Constant State of Connection

Another aspect related to the frequency of interaction on social networks that was not addressed by any participants in the empirical study is the possible negative effects of the constant state of connection typically experienced by those who use these networks often. Here, the issue is not the persistent impulse to interact, but the inability to disconnect from social networks. While interconnection is usually portrayed as a positive aspect of social media use, it should be noted that a number of scholars have raised concerns about the persistent

state of connection and unbroken contact between individuals on these networks, where participants are always available, and never out of reach of others.

Rice (2009:141) recognises that social media users are constantly moving “toward a more tethered state,” entangling themselves in an ever-growing web of online connections that consume an increasing amount of their energy. Turkle (2011:xii) ties this reality to the popularity and ubiquity of mobile devices. Since users are no longer tethered to an Internet network by cables, she argues, the network is now “with us, on us, all the time”. While this may be true, there is a considerable risk when, as Boyd (2012:71-72) portrays it, it is generally assumed that individuals are always available, wherever and whenever they are needed.

Rice (2009:101) goes on to warn that this constant interconnection results in a “deluge of relational connectedness” that overwhelms the relational capacities of those who participate in these social networks. In other words, these “always on relationships” (Lockley & Yates, 2008:94; Harris, 2014:24) develop into inescapable attachments that follow users everywhere, becoming ever-present in even their most private moments, and overloading their finite mental capacity. This results in an unhealthy state of constant connection, where the natural rhythm of interaction and solitude that previously allowed individuals to retreat from contact with others from time to time, is no longer a reality. For Rheingold (2002:xxi), this represents a disturbing loss of privacy, since individuals broadcast a never-ending stream of information about their activities and whereabouts, which means that they are instantly available to others. Every moment is prone to interruption. This also affects the quality of our attention – Rice (2009:103) refers to a state of “continuous partial attention,” where social media users divide their attention between a physical activity and the online world.

There are signs, however, that a new generation of social media users are beginning to understand the consequences of this perpetual state of connection, and are developing ways to navigate this reality. Consider, for example, Boyd’s distinction (2012:71) between being “always-on” and “always-accessible”. While someone may be “always-on” in the sense that they are constantly connected to others, Boyd argues that it is the responsibility of the individual to not be “always-accessible” – in other words, the social context within which a person finds him or herself should determine whether or not they react to interruptions from

digital mobile devices. Thus, a face-to-face conversation is cited as an example of a scenario where interruption is not appropriate; whereas someone waiting in line at a supermarket check-out point may well benefit from using the time to connect in this way. Boyd (2012:76) goes on to argue that social media learn to recognise appropriate opportunities for such connection, and states that it is possible to strike a healthy balance between connection and disconnection.

Likewise, Turkle (2011:164) describes a growing tendency to leave mobile devices behind in certain scenarios – so, for example, an individual may decide to leave a digital device at home during a weekend away. Wise (2014:149) also points to the popularity of movements like the National Day for Unplugging, an initiative encouraging Internet users to disconnect from the online world for a full 24-hour period; as well as the recent emergence of the practice of “digital fasting,” where individuals choose to deliberately disconnect from social media for a set period of time. These practices, along with the mere fact that the issue is now being discussed in literature, point to an increasing awareness that social media users need to cultivate healthy habits in this regard.

It is therefore clear that the kind of constant connection offered by digital social networks comes along with possible relational implications. The fact that this aspect was not raised by participants in the study is an indication that more emphasis needs to be placed on the possible consequences of a constant state of connection.

In summary, the first characteristic or building block of relationship was identified as interaction. Themes pertaining to this aspect included the degree of interconnection on social networks; the frequency of interaction on these networks; the impact of frequent social media use; and the disadvantages of a constant state of connection. The concept of interaction served as a platform from which these themes were considered.

However, interaction alone does not constitute a relationship. Regan (2011:6) explains that while interaction is a necessary condition for the existence of relationship, it is not a sufficient condition. In other words, relationship does not merely require interaction – it requires interaction of a specific quality, or with specific content. It is at this point that the attention

turns to another basic building block, or characteristic, of relationship, namely the concept of communication.

4.4.2.2 Communication

Communication entails more than mere interaction – it speaks about the way in which that interaction happens, and as such unlocks a deeper level of relational interconnection. Since the concept of communication is encountered in numerous contexts across many different fields and disciplines, however, Fortner (2007:15) rightly warns that it is virtually impossible to articulate a clear-cut definition of the concept that applies in all situations. For this reason it is important not to settle on a single description that is meant to be an all-encompassing definition, but to bring together the various nuances and facets of the concept as encountered in several literary sources that deals with communication in a relational context.

In the light of this complexity it is tempting to present a simple definition with little nuance; Wiberg (2005:3), for example, simply describes communication as the exchange of information between two people. While this definition is certainly not incorrect, it cannot account for the full complexity of the concept. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to refer to a definition by Duck (2007:13), who sees communication not merely as the exchange of messages between two or more parties, but as the entire processes by which meaning and identity are managed. Thus, he argues, communication encompasses expressing emotion, handling conflict, and displaying affection, while also sharing something about a person's identity (Duck, 2007:12). Fortner (2007:18) describes this as a dynamic and symbolic process of dialogue between people using both language and non-word-based signs and symbols to convey meaning.

Turner and West (2008:10) focus on a number of elements of communication by describing it as a process of “message transaction between people” through which they “create and sustain shared meaning”. They identify three critical components of communication, namely process, message exchange, and shared meaning. In identifying communication as a process, they affirm the view of Sellnow *et al.* (2010:11), who portray communication as a continuous string of explicit and implicit signals between people who share a connection – a process that

persists even when there is no conscious effort to communicate something specific (thus, they argue, even silence could communicate something). The idea of a message exchange, on the other hand, points to an information transaction between the two parties in verbal or non-verbal form. These messages are portrayed as the “vehicles” for interaction. Finally, shared meaning denotes the idea that the meaning of a specific message is determined not merely by the content of the message, but also by the meaning that the two communication partners ascribe to it together based on their shared context. For example, the relational history between two people may influence the way a message is perceived, or the context or setting within which the communication is shared may determine how a certain message is interpreted (Turner & West, 2008:10).

Sellnow *et al.* (2010:11) place specific emphasis on the various modes of communication, explaining that it could entail verbal, as well as non-verbal and visual messages. This acknowledgement of the non-verbal aspects of communication is significant, since a singular focus on the verbal side of communication fails to take account of the meaning conveyed by non-verbal messages. However, a comprehensive view of the nature of communication in a relational context requires cognisance of the multiple possible modes of communication between individuals – including body language, other subtle signals, and even silence.

With this in mind, Duck (2007:13) dwells on the significance of nonverbal communication, and identifies a number of standard types of nonverbal messages conveyed in everyday communication. These are generally categorised as proxemics, kinesics, chronemics, haptics, and eye contact:

- Proxemics: These are nonverbal messages conveyed by being close or distant from a communication partner, and through the general use of space. Duck (2007:15) points out that space influences communication, as it conveys messages about the relationship between two individuals. For example, closeness may indicate intimacy, while distance implies the opposite.
- Kinesics: This is a reference to the messages conveyed through the way in which someone moves around; or the postures adopted during communication. It could

include hand gestures, or any other use of the body to add meaning to a message. (Sellnow *et al.*, 2010:68).

- Chronemics: Meaning can also be conveyed through the use of time. Duck (2007:13) refers to the example of hesitancy in speech, or of an individual arriving late for a meeting.
- Haptics: This denotes the use of touch to communicate a particular message. A reassuring pat on the back, or an embrace could add an entirely new level of meaning to a conversation between two people.
- Eye contact: Duck (2007:13) explains that looking someone else in the eye could communicate elements like trust and affinity. Conversely, Regan (2011:70) argues that avoiding eye contact usually points to a lack of interest in establishing a connection.

While these nonverbal aspects communicate much about the nature of a particular message, it should be noted that even verbal communication can carry more than one level of meaning. For this reason Sellnow *et al.* (2010:71, 73) also refer to the importance of so-called paralanguage – that is, the part of a verbal message conveyed through vocal characteristics such as pitch, volume, rate, and intonation. Since these characteristics can drastically alter the meaning of an act of communication, Duck (2007:26) is clearly justified in his argument that the ways in which words are used, can be just as important as the words themselves. For instance, a sarcastic tone of voice could completely alter the normal meaning of a phrase; while words that are shouted may elicit a wholly different response from words that are whispered.

It is against the background of this idea of communication as a complex process with multiple levels of meaning, that we encounter the idea of communication in an online context. To begin with, it is particularly important to recognise those aspects of communication mentioned above that fall beyond the scope of normal verbal conversation, since they represent a number of challenges and opportunities for the kind of computer-mediated communication used to engage on social networks. Since verbal communication is generally not possible on these networks, and since interaction typically involves disembodied, text-based conversations, non-verbal modes of communication carry much more of the weight of engagement on these platforms. Thus, Baym (2010:50) rightly expresses concern about the

ways in which the limited social cues possible in these scenarios may impact on communication. Indeed, one might legitimately ask whether a platform that seemingly does not allow for aspects such as paralanguage, haptics, and kinetics – basic cues like tone of voice or facial expression – is conducive to meaningful communication.

With these issues in mind, the discussion now turns to a number of themes specifically related to communication that emerged in the empirical study. The interpretive focus will fall on social media's role as a platform for communication, taking into account sub-themes that relate to this area as well. Two themes that relate to urban milieus specifically – namely the role of social media in overcoming geographical separation, and its use by urbanites to communicate with others despite their busy lifestyles – will also be delved into.

i. Social Media as a Communication Platform

Considering that social media is often portrayed primarily as a platform for communication (Houghton, 2012:3, 7-8; Fuchs, 2014:5; Chambers, 2013:27-28), it is no surprise that this theme emerged as one of the major themes of the empirical study. Participants clearly indicated that they viewed social networks as a platform for daily communication in various forms, and used it to “converse” with other congregation members, to share information, and to keep others up to date of challenges and issues they were facing. Moreover, in the second chapter, it was clear that Hillsong Church itself also used its social media presence as a platform for communication with its members.

However, based on the various elements of communication set out above, it should be clear that communication in this online context involves a number of challenges, considerations, and possibly even caveats. Communicating in this context, where verbal interaction and many of the non-verbal cues associated with communication are not generally possible, requires careful consideration and a clear understanding of the limitations and opportunities associated with online communication. For this reason, these issues have received significant scholarly attention as of late under the umbrella-term “computer-mediated communication”.

Fishkind, Gallego, and Goldenberg (2011:4) describe computer-mediated communication simply as a term that defines how people communicate with each other via the Internet. This may include various forms of online communication platforms, including so-called chat rooms, instant messaging services, and social media websites. Significantly, Fuchs (2014:35) identifies social media interaction as one of the primary forms of computer-mediated communication today. Dindia and Kim (2011:156) argue that these computer-mediated environments, and social networks in particular, present numerous opportunities to initiate and develop interpersonal relationships – but, they also emphasise that these environments are unique in the communication opportunities that they offer. Thus, thought on computer-mediated communication attempts to account for the complexities and opportunities associated with communication in an online environment.

Herring (2003:612) points out that most computer-mediated communication is text-based – in other words, a message is typed on a computer keyboard or on a mobile phone, and read as text on a screen of some kind. It is this text-based nature of computer-mediated communication that represents the primary problem scholars contend with when they consider communication via social media. Since messages are mainly conveyed in textual form by participants who are not typically co-located, this means that many of the cues included in normal verbal communication are not present (Pérez-Latre, 2013:51). For this reason, Baym (2010:54) describes this kind of computer-mediated communication as "lean," explaining that many social cues are filtered out – which could impede the ability of communication partners to make the most of their communication.

Thus, while the behaviour of communication partners in a face-to-face conversation is often determined by implicit norms made apparent because of the social context they find themselves in (for example, one would not recount a comical story during a funeral), communication in mediated environments like digital social networks usually does not allow for this kind of awareness (Baym, 2010:55). It is therefore possible to make inappropriate statements without knowing it. In the absence of communicative cues like proxemics, kinesics, chronemics, haptics, and eye contact, communication partners may well miss important details in a conversation. It is this lack of context and cues that, according to Jacobson (2008:219), could severely impact the efficacy of communication.

In the same sense, George (2006:60) argues, it could be difficult to express emotion on social networks. Since emotion is primarily conveyed by paralanguage and body language, it may be particularly challenging to express feelings of this nature. Campbell (2005:117) admits that the seeming lack of ability to adequately express emotion may be frustrating to some social media users. Furthermore, Baym (2010:103) argues that the lack of nonverbal cues may be especially problematic during the development phase of a new relationship. Smiling, making eye contact, and standing closer to a communication partner are common nonverbal ways of progressing through the various stages of a relationship. Communication via social media clearly does not allow for these communicative aspects, which raises questions about the state of a relationship where this is not possible.

However, despite the abovementioned challenges, the assumption that mediated communication is somehow inferior to face-to-face communication due to its "lean" nature, has been widely challenged as of late. While Chambers (2013:23) admits that it was once thought that the lack of certain cues in computer-mediated communication would magnify tensions and disagreements, contemporary thought on the subject seems to reflect an understanding of this kind of communication as "different," instead of "inferior". Jacobson (2008:219) argues that social media users have learnt over time how to use these communication channels to communicate effectively – indeed, they have learnt to read and write these kinds of messages in unique ways, often devising their own signals that represent certain real-world cues. Schroeder (2011:199) presents a similar argument, and explains that participants have developed their own multimodal, rich forms of communication. In fact, such use has developed to the point where High and Solomon (2011:119) even argue that computer-mediated communication may, in some instances, be the preferred option of delivering a message.

One of the simplest but most noticeable examples of how social media users have learnt to adapt to the limitations of these channels is the use of special characters used to express emotion. Emoticons – that is, pictorial representations of human emotions – have become so commonplace that they have been standardised on digital devices across the world (Chambers, 2013:23), and they are commonly used on social networks. Campbell (2005:116) explains that these emoticons serve as textual cues that represent certain facial expressions

and human gestures. These cues then serve to qualify and add symbolic content or meaning to a message. In order to understand the significance and efficacy of this practice, one needs to refer back to Turner and West's (2008:10) definition of communication, which describes it in terms of a message with a "shared meaning". This refers to the idea that communication is only meaningful insofar as both parties attach shared meaning to certain cues or signals. The fact that these simple icons have come to be associated with specific expressions or gestures by users across the world clearly shows that there is a degree to which they take on a shared meaning between communication partners in this context.

In a similar manner Herring (2003:616) points out that social media users routinely devise their own shorthand to mimic certain features of spoken language, or to express ideas they want to communicate in creative ways. Baym (2010:103) explains how punctuation and capitalisation can be used to insert feeling (for instance capitalising a word is regarded as shouting), while words spelled out phonetically are used to set a conversational tone. Houghton (2012:6) also points to how the options for expression on social media channels have diversified over time. Thus, many social networks now also offer communication via pictures, audio, video, and even animations. Considering all these options, and the clear need and desire of social media users to express themselves in creative ways, Schroeder's (2011:199) assertion that online communication partners "put more of themselves" into their communication seems apt.

In other words, scholars have awoken to the fact that social media channels offer unique opportunities for communication in a sense that may not conform to the conventional mechanics of communication, but that nevertheless satisfy a great deal of the criteria of what is regarded as meaningful communication. For this reason Jacobson (2008:220-221) points to the value of this kind of communication in developing affinity between communication partners, particularly where specially devised words, gestures, and phrases carry unique meanings to the participants that use them. It is with this in mind that Baym (2010:103) argues that socio-emotional communication may be easier face to face – but that it is now common (and even successful) in digital media as well. Thus, if true *koinonia* requires meaningful communication, social networks are certainly increasingly seen to play a role as a platform that facilitates this communication.

ii. Online Communication and Privacy Concerns

At this stage it is also necessary to take pause to consider a specific sub-theme that emerged within this context of social media communication, namely the concern of some participants around the privacy implications of online communication. In the empirical study, this revealed itself in terms of an interesting dissonance between two contradictory ideas: Firstly, participants indicated that they were quite happy to share a great deal of information about themselves in their online communication – they reported sharing prayer requests and details about personal challenges with their friends on social media. On the other hand, they expressed concerns around the possible privacy implications of these practices, with some participants feeling that it may not be appropriate to be open about one's problems in front of a wider audience.

To begin with, it should be noted that these concerns are by no means unique to the social media sphere, and as such mirror considerations in conventional, offline communication: Duck (2007:211) explains that interpersonal relationships always involve a tension between "closedness" and "openness" (or privacy and publicity) regardless of the context in which they occur. Sellnow *et al.* (2010:164) go on to explain that the trade-off between these two dimensions is usually negotiated in terms of a relationship between benefit and risk:

- The benefits of maintaining privacy include control and independence. Chambers (2013:75) equates this control with power: Where a person is able to maintain privacy, or withhold personal information from others, that person retains the power to keep others at a distance. Conversely, revealing private information or concerns to others places an individual in a position of vulnerability, and opens the possibility of being embarrassed. Of course the public nature of social networks adds further weight to this consideration.
- The risks of maintaining privacy mainly revolves around social isolation. Since the development of a relationship requires a degree of openness (Duck, 2007:211), hesitation to relinquish privacy can be a stifling and even detrimental factor, isolating an individual from those around him. For this reason, Sellnow *et al.* (2010:181) argue that an individual's ability to manage the competing needs for privacy and openness

has a direct bearing on relationship quality and satisfaction. Where there exists an undue emphasis on withholding information from others, an individual may become increasingly isolated. Sellnow *et al.* (2010:117) also point out that this impulse is particularly prevalent in the individualistic cultures of the West, where traditionally there is an even greater emphasis on privacy than in collectivist cultures.

However, negotiating these benefits and risks in the social media sphere presents a unique challenge: Whereas privacy levels in conventional communication differs from relationship to relationship (depending on the degree of intimacy between individuals), Houghton (2012:67) points out that on social media platforms, decisions about privacy become binary – an individual has to choose between communicating with all members of his or her network, or with none at all. What happens in these instances is that social media users often opt to disclose less rather than more, since they do not want to risk being vulnerable in front of those members of their social media audience with whom they have less intimacy (Houghton, 2012:109).

As a result, the willingness of social media users to be open with each other on these networks often depends in large part on the nature of their offline relationships with the same set of individuals: Where a significant percentage of a social media user’s audience consists of close friends or family with whom they have a good relationships offline, they are more likely to openly communicate on these platforms (Houghton, 2012:109). This is in line with the view of Rice (2009:165), who argues that in terms of relationships the “real” and the “virtual” are often intertwined – in other words, the degree of privacy that a social media user maintains with a group of people depends on his or her offline relationships with that group.

This makes the high degree of interconnection between Hillsong congregation members, as uncovered in the empirical study, vitally important: Since a significant percentage of participants’ connections on social media platforms consist of close church friends, there is a greater inclination to be open in communication. This is proven true by the willingness of many participants to openly share prayer requests and challenges with their social media audience. Clearly, the fact that participants in the study have surrounded themselves with

online communities that consist in large part of close friends who share their values, contributes to an air of openness.

Thus, while privacy remains a real and valid concern that may be particularly hard to navigate in an online context, a high degree of interconnection – such as that between participants in the study – may well contribute to the kind of online communities where users are more willing to share details about their lives with each other. In this sense, there is a definite move in the direction of the kind of openness and honesty that true *koinonia* requires.

iii. Overcoming Geographical Separation

A unique characteristic of communication on social media channels that comes across strongly in literature on the subject is the ability of geographically distant individuals to connect with each other despite the spatial separation between them. This element also emerged as a theme in the empirical study, and it was specifically mentioned as one of the affordances of social media that helped participants overcome challenges associated with life in a city, where people are often separated from each other geographically over sprawling urban areas and may not have the time or resources to visit each other on a regular basis. Many participants indicated that social networks enabled them to communicate with friends and acquaintances that lived far from them – often even in other parts of the world.

To many scholars who deal with computer-mediated communication, this aspect represents a unique element of communication via social media that simply cannot be replicated in the offline world. Indeed to Jacobson (2008:219), contact with geographically distant connections is one of the primary features of computer-mediated communication. George (2006:87) portrays this use of social media as an opportunity to “transcend the distances between people,” enabling them to maintain vibrant connections despite the fact that they are not together in person. While Luke (2006:) maintains that physical proximity or “co-presence” is still an important aspect of communication, it is by no means the only framework for effective communication – increasingly, he argues, “electronic proximity” is enabling communication partners to have real-time conversations without deferring their interaction to a later stage when they may be physically co-present. Takashi (2014:204) agrees, and explains that

frequent communication with what he calls “distant others” results in a situation where people who would have been inaccessible due to geographical separation are now “gradually embedded” into the everyday life of social media users who communicate in this way.

Of course this aspect is also highly significant in the context of pastoral care – not just in terms of communication between congregation members, but also because of the opportunity it presents to churches, who can now communicate with members on an ongoing basis throughout the week, even if they are only physically present at church during one or two services on a Sunday. Therefore, Gould (2013:ix) proposes that communication via social media can function as an extension of a pastor’s personal presence, enhancing his or her ability to regularly keep in touch with congregation members. Vogt (2011:61) also recognises the possibilities of such communication from a church to its members, and argues that it presents an opportunity not just to engage with members on an ongoing basis, but also to play a continual role in their spiritual welfare. Likewise, Copeland (2010:6) refers to the “connected presence” of a pastor who is able to engage with his church members via social media even though he may be out of town; or who may be able to comment on an event in the life of a congregant even though he is not able to travel to the person in question to physically share in this event.

Thus, even where a pastor or the leadership of a congregation is not able to physically visit members on a regular basis, or be co-present during key events in their lives, the social media sphere and computer-mediated communication presents an opportunity for leaders to connect with their geographically separated flock.

It should also be recognised that this ability to connect and communicate beyond geographical boundaries holds possible implications for the nature and structure of Christian communities – particularly for congregations that form part of larger denominations or groups. While Campbell (2005:32) argues that the identity of Christian communities have traditionally been grounded in location and liturgy (that is, Christian communities form where a group of people gather together in a specific location, to worship in a specific way), this may change in future. Since digital media communities aren’t bound by geographical constraints (Greenlee, 2008:5),

one could expect Christian groups who are active online to increasingly reflect the influence of the larger online communities that they identify with.

Consider, for example, the fact that 81% of participants in the empirical study indicated that they used social media to connect to a wider faith community beyond their immediate congregation. These participants framed their identity as a faith community in terms of the wider Hillsong family world-wide, and indicated that they used social media to look to this wider community for direction and inspiration. For instance in the previous chapter, some congregants indicated that they looked to the social media activity of pastors at the main Hillsong campus in Sydney for direction in terms of the vision of the church. In other words, where in the past congregational identity was constructed on a local level, it is now open to influence from a wider community of believers.

Thus, the ability to communicate across geographical borders via social networks represents a unique opportunity for church members and leaders alike. While congregation members are now able to communicate with others even though they aren't co-present, pastoral teams can also use it to extend their ministry and service to the church. Moreover, Christian communities the world over will likely share an increasing degree of interconnection, opening these communities up to influence from the wider body of Christ.

iv. Communicating Despite Busy Lifestyle

One of the challenges associated with urban living highlighted in the second chapter is the influence of a busy lifestyle and associated time constraints on the relationships of urbanites. It was pointed out that these pressures could potentially prevent people from pursuing meaningful relationships and, hence, active participation in true *koinonia* communities, since they were simply too busy to reach out to others on a consistent and ongoing basis. Therefore, it is interesting to note that one of the themes arising from the empirical study was the way in which social media allowed participants to communicate and maintain their social connections on a continual basis despite their busy lifestyles. This represents a significant departure from the position of Nie and Erbring (2000:19), who at the turn of the century portrayed the

Internet as “the ultimate isolating technology”. If indeed social media plays a role in helping individuals connect with their social circles more often, this view is untenable.

In an effort to elucidate the view of social networks as a platform for ongoing communication, Takashi (2014:204) refers to the notion of a kind of “mutual communication time-space”. He uses this phrase to denote a state of constant connection between individuals that can be acted upon whenever and wherever they choose to do so. Understanding the mechanics of this interaction requires familiarity with the two kinds of communication that is possible in computer-mediated environments:

- Synchronous communication refers to real-time communication, where individuals interact with each other in an immediate fashion (High & Solomon, 2011:122). This kind of communication is characterised by direct feedback and impromptu interactions (Wiberg, 2005:182). There is no waiting period between interactions, and participants expect each other to be responsive.
- Asynchronous communication refers to communication where there may be a delay between sending, receiving, and responding to messages (Sellnow *et al.*, 2010:4). Here, participants typically do not get immediate feedback, and have to wait for a reply to their communication. There is no expectation of immediacy or instantaneous feedback among participants.

It is the combination of these two kinds of communication via social networks that makes them ideal in an urban context. While synchronous communication allows connected individuals to engage in real-time interaction through the course of the day, it is the added affordance of asynchronicity that allows participants to engage with others and respond to interactions even if they are not in a position to do so immediately (Baym, 2010:10). Moreover, asynchronous communication has the added advantage of allowing an individual to carefully construct a response to whatever message they have received (Houghton, 2012:96).

In other words, the combination of these two kinds of communication on social networks means participants are free to engage and disengage from these connections as and when their schedules and activities allow. Communications missed while they are otherwise

engaged are not lost either – the asynchronicity of these networks allow users to catch up with this activity at a later stage, and to follow up on messages where needed (Boyd, 2011:47). In this way, participants maintain a connection regardless of the immediate demands of their lifestyles. For instance, a busy executive may respond in real time to an update by a friend on Twitter, while choosing to wait to respond at length to a message by someone else on Facebook later that day. That same executive may stay up to date in a passive way with events in the lives of a number of other individuals by simply reading content they share online.

In this way, Ellison *et al.* (2011:138) argue, social media contributes to making ephemeral connections persistent. In other words, these networks act as a platform on which relationships can be maintained in cases where social or logistical barriers would otherwise have made ongoing connections impractical or even impossible. Clearly, using social networks in this way opens up the possibility of maintaining connections with more people than would otherwise have been the case. If one of the problems associated with city life is the “transitory” nature of connections between urbanites (Parks, 2011:107) social networks certainly have a role to play in improving the quality of relationships in this way.

In summary, the second characteristic or building block of relationship was identified as communication. Within the framework of a working definition of communication, the attention turned to the role of social media as a communication platform, and the privacy concerns sometimes raised in this regard. Two aspects specifically related to communication in urban environments were also discussed, namely the role of social media in overcoming geographical separation, and the suitability of digital social networks for constant communication despite the busy lifestyles of urbanites. Reflecting on the issues that were considered as a part of the above discussion, it is clear that digital social networks can be considered a valuable and effective platform for communication in a relational context.

In order to come to an integrated understanding of the characteristics of a functioning relationship, however, the interlinked concepts of self-disclosure and feedback also need to be considered. These elements will shed further light on the conditions that is necessary for a relationship to exist.

4.4.2.3 Self-Disclosure and Feedback

It has already been established that a functional relationship is characterised by regular interaction, which in turn rests on effective communication. Yet, in order to satisfy the criteria for a viable relationship, this communication needs to be grounded in a balance between two interrelated dimensions that is commonly referred to as self-disclosure and feedback (Sellnow *et al.*, 2010:141; Dalton, Hoyle, & Watts, 2010:41-42; Van Deusen Hunsinger, 2006:57-58).

Sellnow *et al.* (2010:141) define self-disclosure in relationships as the sharing of personal data, ideas, or feelings that would previously have been unknown to a communication partner. This refers to a process during which an individual discloses personal information in an effort to deepen a relationship. Wood (2012:57) offers a similar definition, adding that this requires revealing information that the other party in the relationship would not have discovered on their own. In short, Baym (2010:109) says, self-disclosure is the process through which strangers are turned into relational partners, while Chambers (2013) describes it as the “engine that drives new relationships”. For this reason both Duck (2007:82) and Regan (2011:82) argue that real self-disclosure is indicative of growing intimacy in a relationship.

Conversely, feedback is described as the information given to a person to evaluate his or her actions, thereby increasing self-awareness (Dalton *et al.*, 2010:41-42). Sellnow *et al.* (2010:141) frames it simply as the responses to people and their messages within the confines of a relationship. In other words, whereas self-disclosure involves revealing information about oneself, feedback can be described as the information received in response to that self-disclosure. According to Wood (2012:57), these responses – which may be in either positive or negative form – offer the person who receives it new insights into his or her own character or motivations. Together, self-disclosure and feedback constitute a cycle of relational interaction in which the parties to a relationship progressively reveal more about themselves, and respond to revelations made by each other.

In the online sphere, however, this process of self-disclosure and feedback can be more complex than in conventional communication. Dindia and Kim (2011:156) hint at the complexity of self-disclosure in the online context when they argue that this process is open to

manipulation, since social media users have a great degree of control over how they represent themselves on these channels (more so than would be the case in face-to-face communication, where it is much harder to misrepresent reality). This manipulation is achieved by means of selective sharing to control how they are perceived by others – in other words, social media users make conscious decisions about the content (such as photos) that they upload and the updates they share on their networks in order to present a “preferred” – and possibly false – image of themselves.

In this sense, almost every activity on social networks can be seen as an act of self-disclosure, since these usually involve sharing personal updates, thoughts, images, and videos that represent an individual’s identity in one way or the other (Houghton, 2012:15). Indeed, as Chambers (2013:52) points out, social media users continually – and often consciously – construct their own “narrative of self” in both honest and dishonest ways by presenting themselves in specific ways online. Moreover, Dindia and Kim (2011:158) point out that the potential for deception and misconceptions in the online milieu is increased by reduced nonverbal cues, potential anonymity, and asynchronicity (real-time responses often aren’t required, which means participants can put a great deal of thought into their interactions).

These challenges are also present in the feedback phase of relational interaction. Caplan and High (2011:44) discuss what they refer to as a “positive feedback loop” in online settings. This refers to a situation that begins when one communication partner resorts to selective self-disclosure, and the recipient does not notice it as deceitful or less-than-truthful. The recipient gives positive feedback, setting the tone for future interactions. Ultimately, this could lead to a loop of positive feedback between the two parties, even though the initial self-disclosure was false. Thus, it is possible that selective representation in computer-mediated communication may lead communication partners to hold to unduly favourable impressions that could have negative effects on a relationship when the truth later comes to light.

In the face of these problems flowing from dishonesty and deceit, reference is often made to the ethics of communication – that is, the moral principles that should guide communication in any given context (Sellnow *et al.*, 2010:14). To begin with, Wood argues that ethical communication is rooted in acknowledging the value of others as human beings (Wood,

2012:35). Yet, while this may be the case, in a theological sense communication ethics carries an even greater weight than that. To the theologian, communication is driven by an ethical imperative to treat all people as sacred since they carry the image of God (Fortner, 2009:129). It is from this perspective that a view of communication ethics must proceed. While this subject is covered across a wide range of sources, Sellnow *et al.* (2010:14-15) offer a useful synthesis of the most salient principles that need to be considered when communication partners engage each other in this cycle of self-disclosure and feedback:

- Truthfulness and honesty: Effective communication demands truthful self-disclosure grounded in total honesty. This implies refraining from lying and cheating, and a commitment to an accurate representation of self during the process of self-disclosure (Dindia and Kim, 2011:156). Of course from a theological perspective, there is also a biblical imperative for honesty in this regard: Romans 12:3 warns believers not to “think of yourself more highly than you ought,” but to reflect on the self “with sober judgment”. Indeed, perhaps the most potent argument for truthfulness is the strong terms in which dishonesty is reprovved in scripture: Psalm 101:7 rebukes those who “practice deceit,” while Jeremiah 9:5 specifically condemns the person who “deceives his neighbour”.
- Integrity: Proverbs 11:3 refers to the “integrity of the upright,” and warns that the unfaithful are “destroyed by their duplicity”. This focus on integrity is a central feature of Proverbs, with numerous other passages making reference to this principle as well (e.g. Prov. 10:9; 19:1; 20:7; 28:6). Moreover, scripture as a whole depicts integrity as a guiding principle in the life and relationships of believers (e.g. 1 Kin. 9:4; Ps. 25:21; Titus 2:7). Not surprisingly, this concept also features prominently in general literature on the ethics of communication. Sellnow *et al.* (2010:14) describe integrity in terms of consistency of belief and action, adding that a person with integrity is someone who holds firmly to his or her moral principles without compromising. In a similar vein, Dalton *et al.* (2010:308) explain that integrity demands “doing the right thing even when nobody else is watching”.
- Fairness: To Sellnow *et al.* (2010:14) fairness implies impartiality or a lack of bias, and the willingness to pursue the right balance of interests without showing favour. Dalton *et al.* (2010:212) use the same kind of language, linking fairness to objectivity and a

movement away from self-interest and prejudice. Once again, there is also a clear biblical directive in terms of honesty, with passages such as Deuteronomy 16:19-20 and Isaiah 33:15 linking honest behaviour to concepts such as justice and righteousness. At the same time, Deuteronomy 25:13-16 and Luke 16:10-12 present a lack of honesty in a highly negative light.

- **Respect:** Regan (2011:115) describes mutual respect as a core component of a viable relationship. This kind of respect implies showing regard for others and their ideas (Sellnow *et al.*, 2010:14), regardless of their social or financial status, or the stage of life they are currently in (Allen & Ross, 2012:172). Flaum (2007:235) also points to respect as a vital element in constructive conflict resolution in relationships. From a biblical perspective, a respectful attitude is often linked with humility and love for others: Romans 12:10, for example, challenges believers to “outdo one another in showing honour” – a desire that is said to be rooted in “brotherly affection”. Likewise, 1 Peter 2:17 instructs believers to “honour everyone”. Respect in the context of role-based relationships is also mentioned, with the oft-quoted instruction to “honour your father and your mother” in Exodus 20:12 as the most prominent example (*cf.* Ephesians 6:1-3). In the same vein, 1 Peter 3:7 calls for respect between husbands and wives.
- **Responsibility:** Finally, meaningful self-disclosure also requires accountability on the part of the communicator for what he or she has said (Sellnow *et al.*, 2010:14). This responsibility is rooted in an acute awareness that communication has the power to build up or tear down a relationship. Enfield (2013:9) explains that this sense of responsibility should be based on an awareness that any action in a relational context carries weight and is of real consequence. From a biblical perspective, one is reminded of the words of Matthew 12:37, which states that people may ultimately be justified or condemned based on their words.

Thus, the final hallmark of a viable relationship can be described as the cycle of self-disclosure and feedback during which communication partners reveal something about themselves, and give feedback on the self-revelation of others. This process should be rooted in the ethical principles of honesty, integrity, fairness, respect, and responsibility.

Armed with this understanding of the final building blocks of relationship, the remainder of the themes pertaining to the relational focus of a *koinonia* community can be considered. Therefore, the attention now turns to an interpretive discussion of the effects of social networks on real-life relationships, as well as the limitations of relational interaction in an online environment.

i. Positive Role of Online Interaction in Real-life Relationships

The results of the empirical study indicated that some participants felt that the relational advantages of social media use extended to the offline world: Some interviewees felt activity on social networks contributed to the overall health of their real-life relationships, while others pointed out that it often functioned as a starting point for new relationships. Indeed, the constant cycle of self-disclosure and feedback made possible through endless communication on these networks clearly played a role in the development of relational bonds beyond the confines of the virtual world. In order to understand the nature and significance of this theme, it is necessary to consider some of the more recent scholarship on the relationship between online and offline relationships.

To begin with, it is important to understand that the notion of a dichotomy or separation between online and offline relationships is becoming increasingly irrelevant. This stands in sharp contrast to the traditional view of relationships in the online sphere: Gasser and Palfrey (2008:103) mention how an “imaginary line” was often drawn between the “real world” and the “online world” in the early days of research on the subject. The online world was usually portrayed as a second-rate version of “real life”, and relationships in this sphere were understood to be a pale reflection of “real” relationships (Baker, 2008:165). Consider the oft-cited study by Kraut *et al.* (1998), which argues that Internet use may well lead to social withdrawal and “disengagement from real life”. This view seemed particularly salient in the pre-mobile era, when participation in computer-mediated communication required the intrinsically anti-social activity of spending time alone, desk-bound, behind a computer.

To the contrary, in an era of always-on mobile communication and almost ubiquitous Internet access, computers and mobile phones are often portrayed as devices that primarily facilitate

interpersonal communication (Arnold & Hjorth, 2013:l; Pérez-Latre, 2013:51), and the relational aspect of this activity through channels such as social media is seen as an integral aspect of the everyday life of people all over the world. In the words of Drescher (2011:5), this “virtual reality” is “...embedded in physical reality to an ever-growing extent”. Online life, says Pérez-Latre (2013:51), is “as real as life itself”. In other words, the dichotomy between these two worlds is no longer valid or necessary – it is becoming harder to imagine one without the other. Gould (2013:27) opts for a similar argument, explaining that online communities are now considered just as “real” as conventional ones, since these two worlds have become increasingly intertwined. In short, life online is considered to be in continuity with what is typically called “real life” (Cowan & Dawson, 2004:1).

As a result, what has emerged in recent years is a view of social media that begins with the existing offline connections between individuals, and proceeds from there to show how activity on social networks supplements communication in these existing relationships by allowing new opportunities for interaction, improving relational bonds between those who are already connected offline as a result (Ellison *et al.*, 2011:130). This view is supported by data from recent research as well. A study by Mayer and Puller (2008) indicated that as little as 1% of friendships on social networks exist purely online, while Ellison *et al.* (2011:132) showed how undergraduate Facebook users were more likely to be connecting to people with whom they shared an existing connection. Thus, instead of concentrating on the shortcomings of social networks as a standalone medium for standalone relationships, the emphasis has shifted to the opportunities that social media represents in terms of extending the relational ties between those in existing, offline relationships. While the challenges associated with online communication through social media (such as the lack of non-verbal cues and other issues) are still very much recognised, the elimination of the dichotomy between the two worlds has highlighted the supportive role of social media in existing relationships, instead of focusing on the deficiencies of the online milieu as a standalone platform.

Barak and Suler (2008:6-7) provide further support for this integrated view of web-based and real-life relationships in their discussion of the similarities between online and offline forms of self-disclosure. They argue that important dimensions of self-disclosure in the online and offline environments are very similar: people are more open about their lives and self-disclose

to a greater degree to those they feel they can personally relate to; while group norms have a direct bearing on the level of self-disclosure in both kinds of environments as well – individuals will be more open about their lives based on how open the rest of the group is. So, yet again, the emphasis falls on the similarities between the online and offline worlds; instead of treating the two worlds as two separate and non-related platforms. These online activities then become an opportunity to improve and expand relational ties between those who already share a connection. Instead of trying to show how social media activity has supplanted "real world" relationships, or how they represent a second-rate version of "real" communication, there is now an interest in showing how relational activities on these networks augment existing relationships (Harris, 2014:33).

With the dichotomy between the online and offline worlds crumbling, it comes as no surprise that a growing number of scholars are beginning to express an understanding of the positive contribution this kind of online interaction may make to existing, real-life relationships. According to Chambers (2013:152), regular Internet users have been shown to be more connected to their offline networks than individuals who are not engaged online. She attributes this phenomenon to the fact that Internet users have better information about neighbours, and, as a result, more meaningful and regular interaction with them. Pérez-Latre (2013:51) also links social media use to "intensified" relationships with close friends, once again citing regular online interaction as a catalyst for more frequent offline communication.

Similarly, in a study on social media use, Wilson (2008:132-133) concludes that social network participants use these platforms primarily to enhance face-to-face, offline relationships. She particularly singles out young adults, who she argues is the most adept at using online interaction as a tool to develop and intensify their relationships with those they share an offline connection with. Drescher (2011:146-147), who focuses specifically on the use of social media in Christian communities, explains that every single participant in her study referred to the ways in which having a platform for regular engagement with others extended and enriched their relationships in the real world. To Drescher, the practical mechanism that drives this phenomenon is the way in which online interaction sparks offline conversation. This is in line with the experiences of participants in the empirical study, who indicated that social

media made a positive impact on their real-life relationships primarily because it offered a platform for sustained engagement.

It is also important to consider the significance of this theme specifically from the perspective of urban communities. If indeed urban communities and the congregations that serve them have to contend with a reality where people are "cash rich and time poor" (Chambers, 2013:141), resulting in relationships of a superficial and transitory in nature, the idea that social media could be of use in strengthening these relationships is noteworthy. If one of the main functions of the church in this context is to "turn city people to one another" (Paas, 2012:161), social networks clearly represent a unique opportunity to do so. It becomes even more important when one considers data shared by Baym (2010:19) that demonstrates how people living in urban communities are 10% to 12% more likely to engage in online activities than their rural counterparts.

In this regards, Drescher (2011:109-110) cites the example of Christian urban and suburban groups in Arizona in the United States who use Facebook profiles as a ministry tool with a view to enriching the offline relationships of congregation members. In engaging each other online, Drescher argues (2011:110) that the status updates, videos, and photos shared on these pages function as kind of "conduit" for deeper relationship among congregation members by inviting them into a continual process of active spiritual engagement with each other. Since these congregation members already share an offline connection, this represents an additional opportunity to gather and share in community, hence contributing to relationship health.

In the same way, Hinton and Hjorth (2013:39-40) argue that the relationship between two individuals who may live hours away from each other in the modern city can continue to develop and flourish thanks to the shared experiences they engage in online. Likewise, in their overview of social media use in churches, Canady and Chandler (2013:8) point out that one of the primary motivations behind the use of social media in a ministry context is its perceived potential as a tool to improve existing relationships between congregation members. Significantly, they point out that it is mostly larger urban and suburban churches that use social media in this way.

From the above, it is clear that the social networking phenomenon cannot be considered from an online perspective alone – one needs to look beyond the digital sphere and recognise that activity on these networks has implications for real-life relationships as well. With the old idea of a dichotomy between the online and offline worlds falling by the wayside, it is clear that the perceived impact of online interaction on offline relationships needs to be given due consideration. Doing so reveals how participation on social networks positively impacts real-life relationships. It is also encouraging to note that this advantage of social media has not escaped the attention of the urban church.

ii. Social Networks as a Starting Point for New Relationships

While it is not a primary function of social networks, many participants in the empirical study reported that social networks functioned as a platform where new relationships form. Almost two thirds of participants indicated that interactions on social media platforms sometimes culminate in offline relationships. To understand this process through which relationships progress from an online to an offline form requires familiarity with the so-called interpersonal ties theory developed by Granovetter (1973). Sociologists who draw on this theory recognise two kinds of relational ties, namely “strong” and “weak” ties.

- Granovetter (1973:1361) defines the strength of an interpersonal tie in terms of a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy, and reciprocal interaction which characterise that tie. For this reason, strong ties are generally considered to consist of family and close friends (Ballard-Reisch *et al.*, 2011:65). These strong relationships tend to be highly supportive and meaningful.
- Weak ties are ephemeral or loose connections between acquaintances, limited in terms of the feelings or activities shared between the two communication partners (Baym, 2010:125). They do not require much of a time investment, and can be formed quickly and in large numbers (Ballard-Reisch *et al.*, 2011:65).

Of primary interest in this context is the way in which social networks enable users to transform latent ties – that is, ties that are “technically possible but not yet activated socially” (Ellison, *et al.*, 2011:130) into active friendships of either the weak or strong variety. On social

media platforms, this is achieved through the ongoing cycle of self-disclosure and feedback through which participants progressively reveal more and more about themselves to others. This progression of a relationship by means of reciprocal self-disclosure and feedback is usually explained in terms of the classic social penetration theory as proposed by Altman and Taylor (1973).

The social penetration theory accounts for the gradual development of intimacy in relationships. Altman and Taylor (1973:61) argue that new acquaintances typically begin by discussing shallower topics that require less intimacy. What follows is a process of gradual self-disclosure and feedback between the two parties that results in the kind of progress that allows participants to begin asking increasingly intimate questions. In this way, communication in the relationship progresses from a discussion of peripheral matters, to conversations about deeper, more consequential issues. This progression is usually depicted in the form of a number of concentric circles or an onion-like schema, with the superficial dimension on the outer rim, and a deeper core component (intimacy) in the centre (Houghton, 2012:41).

The social penetration theory is important in this sense because of the role that digital social networks play in the process: As a stage for continued self-disclosure and feedback between individuals, social media provides a platform where this process of social penetration can occur. Moreover, social networks are particularly suitable for this process since they form part of the common daily practice of so many people (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2011:147), thus drawing them into ongoing interaction with others that could become progressively meaningful over time. For this reason, Dindia and Kim (2011:156) are justified in their enthusiasm about social media websites as a platform for self-disclosure, since these networks clearly extend the stage on which self-disclosure can occur, moving it from face-to-face settings alone to the wider online world. In this way opportunities for self-disclosure, along with the social penetration process and growing intimacy it results in, are increased. Thus, more opportunities exist for “latent” ties to be transformed to weak ties, and for weak ties to be transformed to strong ties.

iii. Limitations of Online Relationships

Along with this enthusiasm for the role of social media in the development of relationships comes an acute awareness of the limitations of relationships in the online context. While the limited communicational cues available in the online sphere (e.g. the absence of non-verbal cues like body language), as well as the possible negative effects of frequent social media use were discussed along with other issues related to interpersonal communication at an earlier stage in this chapter, one other inherent limitation of relationships in the online context needs to be considered. This pertains to the natural limitation in terms of the number of meaningful relationships that humans can be involved in.

As would have been evident in preceding sections, one of the oft-cited advantages of social networks is the high degree of connection it allows between a seemingly unlimited number of individuals; however, this feature of the online world is also one of its biggest limitations: While digital social networks clearly allow for multiple interpersonal connections and an ongoing cycle of self-disclosure and feedback that should lead to greater intimacy, one of the primary limitations one has to deal with in this regards is the natural limit of meaningful relationships that the average person is able to sustain. Enfield (2013:9) provides the background to this notion by explaining that this constraint primarily stems from time limitations – in other words, an individual has a finite amount of time available in which to pursue interpersonal relationships. What results from this is a limitation based on the inverse relationship between the time spent interacting with any particular individual, and the number of people in total one can interact with. Thus, if one spends a lot of time interacting with a single person, there is limited capacity for time with other people. On the other hand, spending less time with each individual results in less scope for deep, meaningful communication.

Of course the idea of an inherent limitation on the number of relationships that a single person can be involved in, is not a new one. Understanding this notion requires familiarity with the so-called Dunbar number, proposed by British anthropologist Robert Dunbar in the early 1990s. According to this theory, the average person is only capable of sustaining meaningful personal relationships with about 150 individuals (Dunbar, 1993). When this limit

is exceeded, there is said to be a decrease in relationship quality and communication efficiency. This Dunbar number has been widely cited by scholars across disciplines, and has become a staple of scholarly literature on the subject of computer-mediated communication and social networking (Van Dijk, 2012:186; Chambers, 2013:13), even featuring in discussions on relationship dynamics in a church context (Browning, 2010:80-81; Drescher, 2011:164).

Therefore, the Dunbar number has become a useful guard against overly utopian interpretations of the relational potential of digital social networks. While it is reasonable to see potential in social media for expanding connections between people and even improving relationships, it is necessary to keep in mind the upper limits of human capacity for meaningful relationship. The advantages offered by social media in this regards does not scale to an unlimited degree – cognitively and practically, human beings are only able to support a limited number of meaningful interactions with others. While social media users are free to add many more “friends” to their online profiles, and certainly do (Van Dijk, 2012:186), at best this only increases the number of weak ties in their network.

In summary, the final characteristics or building blocks of relationship highlighted in this context centred on the ideas of self-disclosure and feedback. With these final building blocks in place, the attention turned to the positive role that online interaction plays in real-life relationships, along with the role of the cycle of self-disclosure and feedback in establishing and strengthening offline relationships. In conclusion, the limited human capacity for meaningful relationship was considered.

4.4.3 Summary of Relational Considerations

As part of the normative task in the second chapter, a focus on strong, vibrant relationships was identified as one of the primary characteristics of a *koinonia* community. For this reason, a number of relational aspects that arose as part of the empirical study were discussed during the interpretive phase. At the heart of this interpretive process was the quest to understand whether social media platforms allow for the kind of relationship dynamics that one would expect to encounter in such a community. In an effort to answer this question, themes from the empirical study were discussed against the background of the four major elements that

usually form part of discussions about the nature of interpersonal relationships – namely interaction; communication; self-disclosure; and feedback.

Taking into account the full scope of relational aspects discussed during this process, it is clear that neither an overly utopian nor an exclusively dystopian view of the matter is appropriate. To begin with, it is evident that interaction on social networks satisfy a number of the criteria for healthy, functioning relationships: there is a high degree of interconnection and frequent interaction between participants; there are opportunities for daily communication and a tendency to be open about problems; and there is a clear perception that these activities contribute to the overall health of relationships, both online and offline. Additionally, social networks allow participants to navigate the relational difficulties associated with urban environments, like maintaining relationships with others despite their busy lifestyle, and overcoming geographical separation. These platforms even provide opportunities to establish and pursue new relationships.

At the same time, there are clear challenges associated with pursuing relationships in computer-mediated environments: a lack of non-verbal cues and the absence of paralanguage complicate communication, and limited opportunities to express emotion detract from the efficacy of online interaction. Additionally, one needs to consider matters such as the possible addictive nature of over-exposure to social media activities; concerns about the privacy of users; and the limited capacity of human beings to pursue multiple relationships in a meaningful way.

Thus, it is clear that an integrated view of relationships in an online environment needs to acknowledge the numerous opportunities that these digital platforms present, while taking full cognisance of the possible drawbacks associated with pursuing relationships in an online context. Such a view would be in line with the development of scholarly thought about this subject over the course of time. In other words, one needs to steer clear of the purely utopian or dystopian views characteristic of early scholarship on the subject (*cf.* Nie & Erbring, 2000; Kraut *et al.*, 1998), and focus on the more pragmatic, measured, and realistic interpretations emerging from more recent scholarship (*cf.* Boyd, 2012; Campbell, 2013; Drescher, 2011; Lytle, 2013).

Having considered the relational issues pertaining to social media use from an interpretive perspective, the focus now shifts to some of the issues related to unity within a *koinonia* community.

4.5 Issues Pertaining to Unity

During the normative phase of the study, the notion of unity in the body of Christ emerged as one of the distinguishing characteristics of a *koinonia* community. It was identified as a central feature of the narrative in definitive *koinonia* passages like Acts 4:32-35 and John 17:11-26, and was also implicit in passages such as Paul's description of the church as the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27) and elsewhere. Considerations about unity also came across in some of the themes identified in the empirical study, and therefore need to be considered as part of this interpretive chapter.

The interpretive discussion about unity in the following section will draw from the sub-themes related to unity that were identified during analysis of the research data: Participants pointed out that social media made them more aware of their wider church community, thereby drawing them into unity with others; and they indicated that these platforms united congregation members from different backgrounds. The matter of unity among groups from different backgrounds also came up in discussions about the challenges typically associated with urban life, and will be considered as part of this discussion.

4.5.1 Awareness of Wider Church Community

One of the themes that emerged from the empirical study was the way in which participants looked to social media as a way to connect to the wider faith community beyond their immediate congregation. Indeed, a total of 81% of participants indicated that they used social media in this way, explaining that this cultivated a sense of unity by making them aware that they were part of a larger whole. Interviewees said that following social media updates by other Hillsong campuses and their leaders resulted in the sense that they were part of a bigger body of believers pursuing a single goal.

It should be noted that this theme is not worth considering merely because it speaks of the general sense of affinity that arises between different groups of social media participants. Rather, it is rooted in a particularly Pauline way of promoting unity by pointing faith communities beyond their immediate reality to the needs and realities of other groups of believers. For example, in Romans 15:23-29, Paul focuses the attention of the church on the trials of the body of Christ in Jerusalem, and also mentions the church in Macedonia and Achaia. By making reference to these groups of believers, Paul locates his readers within a bigger body of believers, and makes them aware that they form part of a larger whole.

Similarly in 2 Corinthians 8, in an extended reference to the collection for the church in Jerusalem, Paul focuses his attention on the plight of the church in that part of the world. Once again, the underlying implication is that believers should realise that they are one with the rest of the body of Christ. This imagery finds its ultimate expression in Paul's portrayal of the church as a building or temple, of which Christ himself is the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). This building, a "holy temple," is "joined together" in Christ (v. 21). Thus, understanding one's own position in relation to other parts of the body of believers across the world ultimately points to the unity of the church as a whole in Christ.

With this understanding as a starting point, it is interesting to note that it is generally accepted that social media platforms are particularly well suited to cultivating this kind of awareness of larger communities. Takashi (2014:204), for example, points out that social media involves a constant connection to, and awareness of, other communities – even beyond one's own cultural context. Augsberger (2006:72), who discusses social media use from a ministry perspective, portrays this aspect as a kind of counterforce to the self-centred nature of some social media activities, and argues that it helps participants to form a vision of goals above and beyond their own narcissism. Boyd (2011:39) also highlights this aspect, explaining that social networks help people connect with a world beyond their close family and friends.

As a result, Drescher (2011:15) argues that social networks play an important role in "extending spiritual relatedness" beyond the confines of the local congregation. In doing so, she invalidates some of the concerns of Glover (2004:81-82; 135-167) and Norris (2004:33), who see a threat to the unity and vitality of the church in faith expressed online. Norris, for

example, raises the concern that commitments to any particular online group will be shallow and transient when another group is but a mouse click away; yet, the experience of participants in the study seem to contradict this argument. Indeed, it is the strong offline relationships in their local church that forms the basis for a feeling of unity in the online sphere, and it is this local connection that provides the impulse to connect to the wider body of Christ. Participants connect to the wider body of Christ to enhance their experience of the local church, not to disengage from it. Thus, Glover's concerns (2004:81-82; 135-167) about unity within Christian communities who are active online, are unfounded.

4.5.2 Uniting Diverse Groups

During the fieldwork phase, some participants indicated that social media served to cultivate a sense of unity among congregation members who came from different backgrounds. This element is also obviously of great import in urban environments, as these areas are often characterised by a great degree of cultural and racial diversity. Since cities tend to serve as a home to people from many different groups and backgrounds, the role of social media in this context could contribute significantly towards unity in a local congregational context.

Understanding the importance of this theme must begin with a brief reflection from a theological perspective, based on Paul's understanding of the church as the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27). Paul, who places emphasis on Christ as the head of the body (Col. 1:18), presents a picture of the church as a "differentiated unity" (Van Deusen Hunsinger, 2006:5), in which each individual part plays a unique and indispensable role. This can be seen quite clearly in 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, where Paul presents a picture of a body "...not made up of one part but of many" (v. 14). In other words, Paul promotes an idea of unity that does not stem from uniformity, but from the diversity of many parts. This position is summarised succinctly in Galatians 3:28, where Jew and Gentile, both slave and free, both male and female, are said to be "one in Christ Jesus".

It is therefore significant that scholars are in agreement that social media platforms often serve as a mechanism through which people from different backgrounds and contexts can be brought together. Wood (2012:xiv) argues that digital social networks have shrunk the

distance between people from different cultures, making it easy to interact with others from vastly different social, material, and personal backgrounds. In a similar way, Norris (2004:33) acknowledges that social networks have the ability to connect people from various age groups, cutting across generational lines. Brandtzaeg and Heim (2009:145) argue that this unity among diverse groups is founded on a sense of shared identity that arises when participants with common interests, experiences, and needs begin to interact online. Campbell (2005:33) concurs, pointing to the emphasis on corporate participation on these platforms as the main reason why social media users from so many different backgrounds tend to enjoy a sense of unity.

When it comes to unity in an online context, however, it is necessary to differentiate between two kinds of unifying impulses – Norris (2004:31) refers to "bridging" and "bonding" groups: Bridging groups refer to social networks that truly bring people of disparate backgrounds together as one; while bonding groups merely reinforce existing close relationships among individuals who share similar backgrounds and beliefs. Norris (2004:32) goes on to argue that these two groups result in two very different kinds of scenarios. Bridging groups are said to generate interpersonal trust and build community ties; while homogeneous bonding groups typically exacerbate and widen existing social divisions, especially in societies marked by great diversity. Thus, it is the responsibility of the church to utilise social networks in a way that fulfils a bridging function, which leads to diverse, yet unified communities; instead of utilising a bonding approach, which causes the development of social cliques that exclude people who are "different".

Here, it is once again important to point to the link between online and offline realities: If indeed life online is in continuity with "real" life (Cowan & Dawson, 2004:1), it can be argued that churches who value diversity offline, will ultimately produce online communities that also reflect these norms, thus fulfilling a bridging function. From the data gathered in the empirical study, there are encouraging indications that participants are in fact using their social media activity in a bridging fashion, connecting with individuals from groups they would not necessarily interact with otherwise, and broadening their relational horizons (refer to 3.3.5.6., ii). However, this is only likely to remain so if the church continues to value diversity in its everyday practice. For example, one of the participants indicated that social media connected

him to the diverse members of his church small group (refer to 3.3.5.6., ii), fostering a sense of unity between them. This would not have been possible if this small group did not include members from diverse backgrounds to begin with.

4.5.3 Summary of Issues Related to Unity

The church's activity on social media clearly presents an opportunity to foster unity amidst diversity. This is particularly pertinent in the urban context, where churches typically consist of people from a wider range of cultural and racial backgrounds. It is encouraging to note that scholars are unanimous in their portrayal of social networks as platforms to foster a sense of unity even between disparate groups. Yet, it is important to remember that these online communities are often reflective of the offline communities they originated from. Thus, there is a need to value unity and diversity in the everyday practice of the church as well.

4.6 Issues Pertaining to Caring

As stated during the normative phase of the study, true *koinonia* communities are characterised by webs of loving relationships that allow for ongoing care and support for all its members. Rooted in a genuine concern for the wellbeing of all members of the community, this impulse to care reveals itself in selfless acts of love in service of the interest of others. Within the context of the empirical study, this element primarily came to the fore in the way that congregation members used their social media activity to encourage one another in their faith. Interviews revealed that participants in the study often used social media channels to encourage their church friends by sharing messages and inspirational content from the church's social media feeds, and similar messages that they authored themselves. A total of 69% of participants indicated that they used social media as a platform for exhortation and a way to directly encourage their church friends.

4.6.1 Encouragement as Care in the Online Context

A biblical and theological basis for caring by means of encouragement has already been delineated in the normative phase of the study. Here, attention was given to passages such as

1 Thessalonians 4:18, Hebrews 3:13, Romans 12:8, and 2 Corinthians 13:11, all of which contain direct references to encouragement and exhortation among fellow believers. Likewise, Van Deusen Hunsinger (2006:4) and Kearsley's view (2008:99) that the entire community should be involved in this ongoing process of care and support was highlighted. In doing so, these moments of encouragement were portrayed as opportunities for every individual believer to model the love of God in their actions towards others – an element highlighted by Kim (2009:144).

Perhaps not unexpectedly, this impulse to support and encourage others has emerged as a feature of online interaction as well. As a result, the sociological concept of “social support,” usually employed in the context of face-to-face relationships (Burleson, Feng, & MacGeorge, 2002:317), is increasingly being referred to in literature on computer-mediated relationships. High and Solomon (2011:119) describe the concept of social support simply as the comfort, assistance, and reassurance that people give or experience in their relationships with others. This kind of support helps people cope with a multitude of physical, social, and mental stressors, and can benefit the recipient psychologically and even physically. High and Solomon (2011:120), who have studied this concept extensively, identify two types of support, or encouragement, given to people on computer-mediated platforms such as social media:

- Emotional support: This kind of encouragement encompasses messages that address an individual's emotional state. Burleson *et al.* (2002:320) describe these messages as openly disclosed messages of affection that speak of genuine feelings of concern and care for the recipient.
- Informational support is primarily aimed at advising distressed people (High & Solomon, 2011:120). Burleson *et al.* (2002:320) describe these interactions as messages of advice and guidance shared with the goal of helping a person navigate a particular problem or overcome a specific difficulty.

These examples of online “social support” remind strongly of the words of Van Deusen Hunsinger (2006:3), who argues that *koinonia* denotes a fellowship of pastoral care where members are accepted, sustained, and guided. It is even more pertinent in the light of

Kearsley's argument (2008:99) that the entire community should be involved in this ongoing process of care and support.

For this reason it is significant that both congregation members and the leadership of Hillsong church clearly see social networks as a platform for this kind of encouragement and support. In posting messages of encouragement and sharing inspirational posts, congregation members are actively involved in reaching out to others (69% of congregation members indicated that they used social media in this way). Moreover, in posting the kind of pastoral and support posts highlighted in the second chapter (refer to 2.3.5.2), and by engaging directly with followers online, the pastoral leadership team of Hillsong church is modelling this behaviour to congregation members, who according to the results of the empirical study, are clearly engaging in similar activities with fellow congregants. Thus, pastoral care becomes the prerogative of the entire community, and members are enabled to reach out to each other on a consistent basis.

4.6.2 Caring and the Limitations of Social Networks

This positive aspect notwithstanding, there is a broader context to the idea of care that needs to be considered: Of all the elements of a *koinonia* community highlighted in the normative phase of the study, the practice of caring presents the most problematic element from an online perspective. While many of the other aspects can be replicated online (for example, many relational elements were shown to be present in an online setting), a number of practical aspects of caring can simply not be practiced online in any meaningful way. While personal encouragement is clearly possible on these networks, when it comes to caring the normative task also included references to the biblical imperative for hospitality (Rom. 12:13), acts of compassion (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:12), admonishment (Col. 3:16), and even the extension of forgiveness (Eph. 4:32, Col. 3:13). All of these are considered elements of a community where true *koinonia* is experienced.

It goes without saying that these elements are, for the most part, not practically replicable in an online environment. The practice of hospitality, for example, requires practical action in the real world, and while it would be possible to invite someone to your home via social media,

the meaningful dimension of an act of hospitality is rooted in the practical action of sharing one's home or provisions with others. This is not something that can be done online. In the same way, acts of compassion should preferably not even be shared with others (Matt. 6:3), which by definition excludes the option of sharing them on public platforms like social networks. The extension of forgiveness, while possibly sometimes shared in a public forum, is primarily a personal matter of the heart, and is only meaningful insofar as it is internalised by the person who decides to forgive.

Thus, while there is a limited scope for caring in the online context, this element of *koinonia* is not fully replicable on social networks. For this reason it is necessary to maintain realistic expectations in terms of what can be achieved in this sense in the online environment.

4.6.3 Summary of Issues Related to Caring

While the matter of caring in a *koinonia* community presents compelling opportunities to engage with others in an online context, it is also demonstrative of some of the biggest limitations of the social media sphere. The constant posting of messages of encouragement and the sharing of inspirational material via these channels offers a unique opportunity to the wider congregation to begin to invest in the wellbeing and spiritual health of other congregants; yet, it is also evident that some aspects of caring, such as acts of hospitality, compassion, and forgiveness, are not replicable in this context. For this reason, once again, it is necessary to temper the enthusiasm for what can be achieved in terms of *koinonia* on these online platforms with a pragmatic realism that takes cognisance of the limitations that are involved in any form of computer-mediated interaction.

4.7 Issues Pertaining to Sharing

A key component of the concept of *koinonia* identified as part of the normative task was the idea that it involves the sharing of material benefits. This impulse to share was said to entail a range of activities, from almsgiving to the poor, to support for relief projects or missionary activity. According to Kearsley (2008:22), such a desire to share is a reflection of the basic orientation of a *koinonia* community: it has a selfless, outward focus. For this reason, it was

surprising that this element did not feature at all in the responses of participants in the empirical study. Despite Hillsong church's history of outreach and generosity – it is involved in numerous social justice and poverty alleviation programs across the world (Stetzer, 2014) – it appears that social media is not being used to drive any of these initiatives. This represents a significant lost opportunity, especially considering the church's enormous and engaged audience on social networks. When one considers the way in which social media is used elsewhere to mobilise groups and resources to drive outreach projects, it becomes perplexing indeed that this is not a prominent feature of Hillsong's social media involvement. Clearly, using social media to launch social justice initiatives, or to call on church members to assemble and participate in ad hoc, short-term aid projects, would serve as powerful opportunities to call on the community of the faithful to serve the world.

4.7.1 Understanding Smart Mobs

Reaching out in service to the world requires, first and foremost, mobilising the body of Christ – and it is in this area that social media platforms may well prove invaluable. However, understanding the dynamics involved in such a process requires familiarity with the idea of so-called “smart mobs” – a vision of the collective power of fast-organising online groups proposed by famed sociologist Howard Rheingold (2002:xii) even before the current golden age of social media. It is this initial idea that finds its expression in the grassroots movements that so often form on social networks on an ad hoc basis.

The concept of “smart mobs” was developed by Rheingold (2002:xii) to refer to the ability of groups of people to coordinate their actions and cooperate with each to achieve shared goals by communicating through digital devices. Rheingold predicted that this would be made possible through the ubiquity of mobile devices, that according to him would connect groups of people through instant communication (Rheingold, 2002:xii). In this way, vast social groups would be able to gather and coordinate. He also predicted that these groups would have the power to effect real social change due to their numbers and organising capability, referring to this phenomenon as “the power of the mobile many” (Rheingold, 2002:157).

In a sense the idea of a smart mob is echoed in the contemporary notion of “collective intelligence” proposed by Miller (2011:85). He describes this collective intelligence, made possible by the mobilising and coordinating effect of networking technology such as mobile phones, as a new form of problem solving in which individuals pool their collective resources or knowledge in order to effect the kind of change that would not have been possible on an individual level. In both Rheingold and Miller’s version, the contributions of individual agents take on new meaning through their participation in some collective act or project.

4.7.2 Mobilising Social Media Communities

Of course these conceptual notions point to very real and practical trends in the social media sphere that is made possible by online communities that gather around specific causes or organisations, including churches. Indeed, Campbell (2005:6) points out that the Internet has always been used as a platform to mobilise people for cooperation with a view to achieving common goals. This is the case because the Internet and related technologies – such as social media and the smart phones people use to participate on these networks – are unique among media in making it easy to assemble at a distance, and to communicate with many others at the same time (DiMaggio *et al.*, 2004:46).

To demonstrate this reality, Turow (2011:578) explains how many institutions have used social media platforms like Twitter to mobilise their members or supporters to lend a helping hand where needed. Here, Turow refers specifically to the example of responses to a devastating earthquake in 2010 in Haiti. In this instance, social media channels were used to solicit donations for aid operations in the country, and tens of millions of dollars were raised. In a similar manner, Bussmann (2011:9-62) documents the use of social networks to mobilise massive numbers of people to effect political change during the so-called Arab Spring uprisings of 2011-2012. Likewise, Lovett (2011:340-341) details a campaign named “charity: water,” during which thousands of social media users were mobilised to donate money to a charity supplying potable water in African villages. All these instances clearly demonstrate the power of social media to mobilise people and unite them in support of a specific cause in a very real and effective way.

With this kind of approach in mind, it appears that synchronous platforms like Twitter in particular are ideal for swift grassroots organising (Baym, 2010:97). This is especially true for organisations that have large follower numbers on these platforms. Browning (2010:93), for example, argues that larger churches in particular are usually highly effective in mobilising significant resources for projects. Therefore, the fact that Hillsong Church has a considerable number of followers across multiple social media platforms should enable the church to effectively call together members to take part in specific aid or social justice projects in a very short period of time. This is an opportunity that should not be missed, as it would add a powerful, practical expression of the kind of outward focus that is evident in communities where true *koinonia* is experienced.

In conclusion, the so-called “feedback posts” mentioned in the second chapter (refer to 2.3.5.2) also need to be mentioned in this context. Since these posts are usually shared on the church’s social media channels with the purpose of providing feedback about significant ministry moments, they provide a unique opportunity to rally congregants around specific projects, or to build expectation with a view to future projects. Frequent feedback about such projects via social media channels is crucial, since they stimulate interest in these initiatives, and keep congregants informed about their progress.

4.7.3 Summary of Issues Related to Sharing

While participants in the empirical study did not indicate that they frequently used social media in such a way, mobilising the body of Christ in order to reach out to the world in service is a fascinating possibility in the social networking era. Of course the idea of using the Internet in such a way is by no means a new one, as the “smart mobs” theory by Rheingold (2002:xii) suggests; however, the affordances of social media add a unique dimension to initiatives of this nature, and present a church like Hillsong with compelling opportunities to reach out to the world. If indeed Hillsong Church is intent on functioning as a community characterised by true *koinonia*, this opportunity should not be missed any longer.

4.8 Issues Pertaining to Witnessing

Another distinct theme to emerge from the data gathered during the empirical research phase was the way that many participants used social media platforms to share their faith with others in one manner or another. Thus, social media is clearly used to evangelise. A total of 63% of participants indicated that they used social networks with this purpose in mind, and indeed some participants seemed to be very intentional about the way they portrayed their faith online. These acts of witness consisted of sharing articles and other faith-based content encountered on the Internet; and some also reported sharing their faith in personal posts.

While these acts of witness clearly confirm Copeland's assertion (2010:6) that social media enables ministry beyond the walls of the church, it is necessary to engage with the concept of evangelism in order to determine whether these practices align with established views on the subject, particularly when it comes to witness as a key feature of *koinonia* communities.

4.8.1 Evangelism and Online Witness

When it comes to delineating the scope and nature of evangelism, reference is often made to the three classic types of Christian witness proposed by Wagner (1998:55-57), namely presence, proclamation, and persuasion evangelism. While the purpose at this stage is not to identify the "most suitable" model, each of these types includes valuable pointers to the kind of witness one should encounter in a *koinonia* community, whether online or offline:

- Presence evangelism: According to Wagner (1998:55), presence evangelism denotes a kind of lifestyle ministry in which the main goal is not to "convert" or "win souls," but to live a life that invites the whole world into the redemptive plan of God for creation. The goal of presence evangelism is to live as a consistent witness to the transformational power of Christ, to the point where others will want to know more about the gospel and desire redemption (Brown, 2008:9). In other words, the goal is not single acts of witness directed at specific individuals, but an intentional, ongoing modelling of biblical truth in every action. Of course, this reminds strongly of the consistent "online presence" of individuals through social media, and implies that

every public, online act invites others to, or drives them away from, redemption in Christ. In this sense, every post, every comment, and every online interaction could potentially be seen as an active act of witness pointing others to Christ.

- Proclamation evangelism: While presence is a prerequisite for evangelism, most evangelicals believe that an added dimension is necessary to fulfil the biblical directive to share the message of Christ. This is the sphere of proclamation evangelism, which focuses on the need to “announce the good news” (1998:56). Here, the emphasis is not on the reaction to this message, but on the act of proclamation itself. The main responsibility of the believer is to share the good news of Christ directly, whether that results in a response from non-believers or not. It should be noted that the online activity of many participants in the study falls into this category – for the most part, participants indicated that they felt the responsibility to share their faith, without too much of an emphasis on how it will be received. Of course this also points to the reality that the audience for any given act of witness online is not always known – the number of people who see a particular post or interaction may differ significantly depending on privacy settings, type of content, or the specific platform on which it appears (Houghton, 2012:329); thus, participants may not have any concrete expectations around the likely reaction to their proclamation.
- Persuasion evangelism: This kind of evangelism involves both proclaiming the gospel, and persuading the unsaved to respond to this message (Brown, 2008:10). This view of evangelism holds that Christian witness can only be considered complete once a disciple has been made. Thus, it is necessary to know whether a conversion has resulted from an act of evangelism (1998:56). Of course this approach is problematic in the online context, since social media platforms do not typically allow for the kind of intimate interaction that would accompany the conversion experience. As a result, most participants did not really seem to focus on this dimension as part of their online witness.

Based on the above, it should be evident that online witness mainly involves the kind of interaction that is associated with presence and proclamation evangelism. Most users see their online activity as an ongoing and continuous act of witness designed to draw others to Christ through consistent and intentional witness. Sometimes these acts involve direct

attempts to share the gospel – the sharing of specific evangelistic posts or content from the congregation’s social media feed, for example – but mostly online engagement involves presence evangelism, where participants simply endeavour to bear a constant witness to the power of Christ in their lives. This is achieved through direct references to their faith, but also through their general demeanour and behaviour towards others online.

This dual nature of online witness as presence and proclamation evangelism also ties in with the two phrases for Christian witness generally employed in Acts when the communal life of the body of Christ is under discussion: the first is the idea of “bearing witness” (μαρτυρεῖν) and the other refers to “proclaiming” the gospel (εὐαγγελίζεσθαι). These ideas, often referred to in the book of Acts (e.g. Acts 5:42; 8:4,12,25; 14:7; 26:5), describe the dual nature of the early church’s orientation towards unbelievers. The resemblance to the kind of online presence and proclamation evangelism discussed above is clear.

4.8.2 Summary of Issues Related to Witnessing

It is clear from the results of the empirical study that participants view their activity on social networks as an extension of their offline witness, and feel the need to share their faith with their friends in this sphere as well. Moreover, it is evident from the above that social networks provide the kind of environment where believers are able to engage in specifically presence and proclamation evangelism. While they are not often in a position to receive concrete feedback on their witness (with a view to persuasion evangelism) because their exact audience often remains undefined, they do have the ability to share their faith in an ongoing, consistent way through their interactions online and through the content they choose to share with others.

4.9 Exclusion and Awareness of the Digital Divide

As this chapter draws to a close, it is necessary to consider one final theme that went unnoticed by all but one of the participants in the empirical study. This theme can be articulated in the form of a single, pressing question: What about those excluded from the social media sphere because they do not have access to the Internet or digital devices?

This concern is often raised in literature on the subject, even in the popular media, making it significant that it was not mentioned by participants. This is particularly troubling when one considers the relational and communal overtones of the subject under discussion, along with the thought that so many people may potentially be excluded from what has clearly become an all-pervasive and important practice in a congregational context. Surely, if an argument is to be made for the value of social networks in fostering *koinonia*, it should be concerning for both the church and its members that a group of people is excluded by default from this platform for community. For this reason, this theme was not discussed under any sub-heading in the preceding pages, but treated separately due to its overarching significance.

This state of exclusion is often described in terms of the concept of a "digital divide" – an idea that arose in the 1990s (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006:25) as digital technology established itself as a force to be reckoned with. Defined in terms of the disparities in access to the Internet and related technologies (such as social media) based on gender, income, race, and location (Haythornthwaite & Rice, 2006:93), the concept of a digital divide rests on the fact that access to technology is not uniform across different areas and groups. In other words, even though ubiquity may be assumed by those with access to these technologies, the idea of a digital divide places emphasis on those who do not have access, and demands that those who do use these technologies acknowledge and consider the implications of this uneven distribution.

Another important factor related to the digital divide highlighted by Haythornthwaite and Rice (2006:95) is the notion that those who use these technologies may also have to deal with certain "embedded distinctions," in that these new technologies often reflect the social-cultural characteristics of their makers – that is, predominantly male, English-speaking, well-educated professionals. As such, they reflect the worldview, values, concerns, and ideals of a rich, Western group that may not be consistent with the views of the communities they are used in all over the world.

4.9.1 Causes of the Digital Divide

The primary causes underlying the existence of the digital divide is simply a socio-economic one. The cost of acquiring and maintaining computer equipment or mobile digital devices such as smart phones, along with the cost of Internet access, clearly restricts access for those who do not have the monetary means to participate (Gould, 2013:50). This divide may be reflected in wider realities, such as the disparities in Internet access between different countries with different economic circumstances (Barak & Suler, 2008:1-2), but it may also be made manifest in local communities between those who have the financial resources to purchase such equipment, and those who don't (Alzouma, 2013:300).

Baym (2010:20) also refers to a so-called "second-level digital divide" caused by the differences in skill levels between different internet users. For example, some may be intimately familiar with internet terminology and technology, while others with similar access may find it much harder to use. A primary example of this divide can be seen in what is sometimes called the generational digital divide (Herring, 2008:71), referring to the divide that has developed in some instances between older users of digital technology, who have only recently taken to online interaction, and younger users, who grew up with this technology. In this case, the root cause of the divide lies not in circumstances external to the user, but is a reality that can be controlled and managed.

4.9.2 Mobile Devices and the Future of the Digital Divide

Despite these realities, it is encouraging to note that most contemporary overviews of the digital divide end on a hopeful note. The reason for this lies primarily in the swift ascendancy of relatively affordable and easy to use mobile technology – that is, smart phones, tablet computers, and the applications that drive them – which is decreasing the cost of access to the world of the Internet and social media considerably (Gould, 2013:51). Alzouma (2013:297) also refers to ubiquitous, cheap, and innovative mobile phone technology as a major factor in the elimination of the digital divide, particularly in Africa, where this divide has been especially pronounced due to socio-economic factors. Interestingly, Nzwili (2010) also describes how the church is seizing this opportunity to spread its message, using the flood of mobile phones in

countries like Kenya to engage people on social networks like Facebook and Twitter, and to reach out to congregants via text messages and mobile websites. In this way, the church is establishing its presence the moment these technologies reach previously cut-off areas.

There are also clear indications that the so-called generational digital divide is shrinking steadily. Rice (2009:73) points to the rapid growth of user numbers in older demographics on social media websites such as Facebook, claiming that it's a clear sign that older users are becoming more interested and adept at navigating digital technologies. In a similar manner, Goulet *et al.* (2011:8-9) report that the number of adult social media users in the United States nearly doubled between 2008 and 2010, rising from 26% to 59%. During this time, the average age of social media users rose from 33 to 38. Wilson (2008:21-22) duly points out that older adults have become the fastest growing segment of new computer users, and that this group's use of computers is expected to increase even more in coming years. These factors, together with the ageing of a younger generation of digitally skilled users over time, paint a positive picture of a steadily shrinking gap in online activity between younger and older groups.

4.9.3 Summary of Issues Related to Digital Divide

Despite the fact that the digital divide was not mentioned during the empirical phase of the study, it is necessary to take cognisance of the fact that some people will, by default, be left out of any form of online community. This is a sobering reality that the church needs to be aware of, even though its significance and impact is clearly shrinking. While the growing ubiquity of mobile phones and Internet access across the world point to a more positive future in this regards, and while the gap between the online skills of different age groups is shrinking, some suggestions as to how the church could deal with this issue in the interim need to be formulated as part of the pragmatic task in the following chapter.

4.10 Preliminary Conclusions

Drawing together the many strands of information presented above, it is worth asking a simple question in conclusion: Can the kind of online reality described above be said to approximate notions of community, or *koinonia*, in any way? In an effort to begin to answer

this question, the themes discussed above were presented against the background of the five practical expressions of *koinonia* identified during the normative task. They are considered below:

- Relationship: A community where *koinonia* is experienced, is characterised by vibrant interpersonal relationships and a deep and abiding bond of solidarity and intimacy between believers. With this in mind, the typical characteristics of computer-mediated relationships, as found on social networks, were considered. These relationships were shown to conform in a number of striking ways to conventional relationships, in that they involved frequent interaction between highly interconnected people; provided a platform for meaningful communication between individuals; and allowed opportunities for the cycle of self-disclosure and feedback that is needed to develop intimacy and sustain a relationship. At the same time, some limitations were identified, including the lack of nonverbal cues and the absence of paralanguage during communication in the online context.
- Unity: The aspect of unity is common to all biblical descriptions of *koinonia*. In this context, it was demonstrated that online interaction on social networks contributed to an awareness of the wider church community among participants, and served to unite diverse groups of believers. This was shown to be of particular importance in the urban context, where participants found themselves in an environment of great diversity.
- Caring: True *koinonia* requires a web of loving relationships that allows for ongoing care and support for all members of the community. The empirical study revealed that participants spent a great deal of effort sending messages of encouragement and support to each other. However, other aspects of caring identified in the normative phase, such as hospitality, acts of compassion, admonishment, and the extension of forgiveness, were lacking in the social networking environment.
- Sharing: A community where *koinonia* is experienced usually emphasises the sharing of material benefits, which is seen in practice in such actions as almsgiving to the needy, or support for relief projects or missionary activity. Despite the history of such efforts in the church that formed part of the study, this was not incorporated into the social media activity of participants in any way. Nevertheless, it was demonstrated that there

exists great potential for mobilising members of the community to take part in such action through social media channels.

- Witnessing: True *koinonia* communities have an outward focus, and use every opportunity to witness to the work of Christ. Thus it was interesting to note that ongoing witness was seen as an important part of the social media activity of participants. Every opportunity was used to share content and updates that made statements about the faith of participants.

Based on the above information, it is clear that the praxis uncovered during the empirical study conforms in a number of compelling ways to the expectations one would have of an authentic *koinonia* community. Particularly in terms of its relational focus and emphasis on aspects such as witness, caring, and unity, there are clear parallels between the kind of community encountered on social networks, and the *koinonia* communities described in a biblical context. At the same time, however, there are significant shortcomings in the online sphere, including limited opportunities for the acts of care one usually associates with close communities, and the limitations in terms of nonverbal cues in communication. Coupled with these aspects is the concern about those who may be excluded from these communities due to the digital divide.

Faced with both the positive and negative aspects of online community, the temptation exists to focus on one extreme or the other in order to construct either a utopian or a dystopian view of these communities. However, Van Dijk (2012:3), in a similar overview of the closely related concept of a network society, argues that the amount of information available about these online communities now allow for the construction of a more nuanced, syntopian view, based on facts instead of speculation. Such a syntopian view of the value of social networks in fostering *koinonia* celebrates the positive aspects, while taking account of the inherent limitations of such a setting. As a result, one is left with a realistic view of the possibilities and drawbacks associated with these social media communities.

It is from this perspective that the pragmatic task is approached in the next chapter. Here, in conclusion, the attention will turn to the formulation of practical guidelines aimed at developing a new praxis that is more closely aligned to the biblical norms identified earlier.

4.11 Summary

Chapter 4 focused on the interpretive task. The researcher delved into the data obtained through the qualitative empirical study in an effort to interpret the themes and patterns that were identified in a meaningful way. The major themes were critically discussed by using the five practical expressions of *koinonia* identified in the normative phase of the study as an overarching structural framework. Themes were therefore discussed within the broader context of *koinonia's* focus on relational aspects, unity, caring, sharing, and witnessing. Issues related to the existence of a digital divide were discussed separately, whereafter preliminary conclusions were drawn.

CHAPTER 5: IN SEARCH OF MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY

5.1 Overview

Chapter 5 will centre on the pragmatic task as outlined by Osmer (2005:xvi; 2008:175-218), and will therefore focus on proposing practical guidelines aimed at developing a new praxis that is more closely aligned to the biblical norms identified in the normative stage of the study. With this in mind, a number of practical recommendations will be formulated that will enable urban congregations to devise and implement social media strategies aimed at fostering true, biblical *koinonia* to a greater degree than the current praxis allows. In order to do so, recommendations will be discussed against the background of the five practical expressions of *koinonia* – namely *koinonia*'s focus on relational aspects, unity, caring, sharing, and witnessing. The issue of a digital divide will also be addressed.

5.2 Understanding the Pragmatic Task

In order to understand the envisioned outcome for this chapter, it is necessary to gain insight into the nature of the pragmatic task that forms the focal point of this section of the study. This task operates in interaction with the normative, descriptive-empirical and interpretive tasks employed in previous chapters, drawing from these moments in an effort to define a new roadmap to a preferred future (Latini, 2011:209). Often cited in contemporary theological sources, the work of Osmer (2005; 2008; 2012) is of particular value in this regards, and has set the tone for discussions around models for theological praxis in recent years.

Osmer describes the pragmatic task as a process of formulating and enacting strategies of action that influence events “in ways that are desirable” (Osmer, 2008:176). In this sense, the pragmatic task is essentially about determining how a specific area of praxis may be transformed to more fully embody the normative biblical commitments associated with that specific Christian tradition (Osmer, 2005:xvi). In other words, the pragmatic task offers an opportunity to formulate concrete guidelines that will help the church move in the direction of actualising the biblical expectations for a specific area of Christian practice. This aligns with

Kim's vision of practical theology (2012:83) as a platform for dynamic theological reflection that "guides the church to the life of faith".

Osmer (2005:xvi) also highlights the fact that the pragmatic task happens against the backdrop of a specific context. This means that the guidelines formulated during this process are not meant to be applied in a mechanical or uncritical fashion. There is an expectation that the implementation of these guidelines requires a degree of good judgment and wisdom on the part of those involved in the process. Latini (2011:10) presents a similar view, and argues that strategies need to be adapted to the context of each congregation, since every situation is unique.

This sensitivity to context is of particular interest in the current study, as some of the elements that need to be considered clearly have more salience in some settings than in others. For example, in considering the concept of a digital divide as discussed in the interpretive phase of the study, one needs to be mindful that this issue would be a more prominent and acute matter in the Hillsong congregation in Cape Town, which is situated in the developing world, than in the Sydney congregation, which is situated in a developed country, where the digital divide generally is not such a pressing concern. Thus, a degree of deliberate and measured contextualisation is unavoidable and necessary.

It is this measured approach that lies at the heart of Osmer's pragmatic task, which, in the apt words of Hess (2011:195) is characterised by "a dialectical interaction between critical and utopian thinking". In other words, the pragmatic task seeks to formulate action-guiding principles that take account of both the opportunities and challenges associated with a particular Christian practice. Therefore, what emerges from the pragmatic phase of a study should be a new framework for action aimed at making the most of the potential and possibilities inherent in a situation; but tempered by a realistic understanding of the limitations within which congregational life is encountered and lived. Neither an overly utopian, nor an unduly restrictive framework is adequate – hence the need for dialectical interplay between these two dimensions.

In conclusion, Osmer sees the implementation of these practical guidelines flowing from the pragmatic task as an ongoing process driven by two groups of participants: To begin with, it is the task of congregational leaders, who Osmer (2008:192-193) describes in terms of “servant leaders” – that is, leaders who act as sign and witness to God’s royal rule through his Son, Jesus Christ, who enacted his leadership role by becoming a servant to God’s people. This idea of servant leadership is based on the counter-intuitive notion that attempts to lead change in a congregation are most effective when leaders opt not to form the centre of that process, but to empower those around them to move in a new direction. This opens the door for involvement by the second group of participants in Osmer’s model: the congregation as a collective. Bringing the pragmatic task to fruition requires, according to Osmer (2008:201), mobilising and inspiring the congregational community to begin to take concrete action in order to move in a new direction. Thus, the community itself needs to play an active role in plotting out a new roadmap for the church, and living this plan out in practice.

This dual focus on the role of both leadership and congregation when it comes to the pragmatic task is particularly relevant to the current study, since the form of practice under investigation – the use of social media in a congregational context – currently involves action on the part of both congregational leaders (in the form of activity on the official congregational social media profiles) and the congregation itself (in the form of their interaction with each other on congregational and their own private social media profiles). Any attempt to move in the direction of a new praxis would require involvement from both groups.

Thus, the pragmatic task represents a unique opportunity to formulate principles and guidelines that will empower and inspire both congregational leaders and congregations themselves to establish and enact a new praxis that is more closely aligned to the biblical norms for a given practice.

5.3 Delineating a Systematic Approach

Once again, making the most of this section of the study will require an orderly and systematic approach. In the interest of continuity, and in an effort to address the various issues in a

logically coherent way, the pragmatic framework for action below will follow a similar structure to the previous chapter, in that issues will be discussed against the background of the five practical expressions of *koinonia* identified in the normative phase of the study. These elements – namely *koinonia's* focus on relational aspects, unity, caring, sharing, and witnessing – will once again be used as an overarching structural framework. Therefore, this chapter on the pragmatic task will be presented in the form of five distinct, but interrelated sections that deal with strengthening relationships; cultivating unity; inspiring loving care in a community context; encouraging selfless sharing; and improving effectivity of the congregation's witness to the world. In conclusion, the issue of a digital divide will once again be discussed.

Adhering to this structure will preserve the kind of continuity that allows for a circle-like interaction between the various tasks of practical theology as envisioned by Osmer (2008:12), Latini (2011:53), and Hess (2011:194), who all argue that the four tasks should interpenetrate each other. Following this approach in presenting the pragmatic task will allow the researcher to refer back to interpretive insights gained from the empirical-descriptive phase, and to the normative expectations defined earlier in the study. In recognition of Hess' call (2011:195) to a dialectical interaction between critical and utopian thinking as part of the pragmatic process, the focus will fall both on strategies to maximise and amplify the positive elements associated with certain areas of practice; and on formulating guidelines to mitigate negative aspects, where appropriate.

With a view to this process, the attention now turns to the first section, which deals with strengthening relationships in a community context.

5.4 Strengthening Relationships

It should be evident from preceding chapters that an emphasis on meaningful relationship is the most significant aspect by far to emerge from a study of *koinonia* communities. During the normative phase of the study, mention was made of Rice's assertion (2009:28) that people's greatest need is for intimate connection not only with God, but also with and each other – and this was certainly confirmed by the heavy focus on relational aspects throughout the

discussion on Christian community in preceding chapters. Ideas revolving around deep, meaningful fellowship (Kim, 2009:144), authentic love (Kearsley, 2008:14), communal living (Snyder, 2004:75-76), and friendship (Kearsley, 2008:14-15) all emerged from the normative overview of what relationships in a *koinonia* community is supposed to look like – to the point where Fuchs’ reference (2008:13) to the “relational core” of *koinonia* was invoked. These elements were supported by a strong biblical emphasis on meaningful relationship in Christian communities, from the compelling depiction of *koinonia* in the early Christian church in Acts 2:42-47; to references to the church as the body of Christ in Romans 12:4-5 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

The descriptive-empirical phase of the research focused on the degree to which these relational aspects were actualised in the church’s activities on digital social networks. This was done by placing emphasis on the various building blocks of a viable relationship, and by demonstrating to what extent these were reflected in online relationships. While the online environment clearly offered some unique opportunities to build relationship between individuals, an interpretive overview of the data also showed that practice in all three Hillsong congregations in question fell short of, or deviated from, the normative biblical standards for relationships in a *koinonia* community in two basic respects:

- *Falling short of relational expectations:* In some instances, online communication did not live up to the relational expectations for a true *koinonia* community. This was largely due to the limitations associated with computer-mediated communication, including the inability to communicate via non-verbal cues and other means of interaction that are hard to replicate online. Pragmatic guidelines should point to how these challenges can be overcome or minimised. At the same time, the church needs guidance in terms of how the positive relational elements of online communication can be amplified, and used to maximum effect to build a sense of cohesion and affinity between members.
- *Harmful practice:* In some instances, data pointed to the fact that frequent immersion in activity on social networks could cultivate bad habits and addictive behaviour. If the church is to use social networks as a platform through which *koinonia* can be deepened and strengthened, congregants should know how to overcome these behaviours.

Moreover, congregants should be taught how to establish positive social media habits that build community, instead of detract from it.

Thus, formulating guidelines for a new, enhanced practice in terms of relationship in the online context requires a two-fold approach that focuses on maximising and amplifying its use in relational interaction; and mitigating negative consequences of immersion in the digital lifestyle.

5.4.1 Towards Meaningful Online Relationships

Any attempt to formulate meaningful guidelines for maximising the impact of online relationships must begin with an appropriate understanding of the position and importance of online relationships within the greater scope of human relational life. This is particularly important if the church is intent on making practical suggestions about the way these relationships should be conducted. In any event, one's fundamental view on the importance of these online relationships and where they fit into the bigger picture is bound to have an influence on the way they are expected to be managed – hence the need to begin by considering this aspect.

While Friesen (2009:19) rightly argues that the use of social networking technologies as of late are enlivening imaginations for what it might mean to live in connection with others, thereby elevating the subject into a prominent position in the collective conscience, it is important that the church begins by presenting online relationships in the social media sphere as an extension of offline relational life – and not as the primary platform for relationships. If there is to be any hope that social media relationships can play a positive role in fostering *koinonia* in the real world, one has to understand that these online connections play a supplementary role, and not a foundational role in relational life. This echoes the words of Ellison *et al.* (2011:130), who argue that any thought on relational living should begin with real-life relationships, and only then move on to consider the supportive role of online relationships. In this view, relationships on social networks supplement existing relationships, allowing for additional opportunities to communicate. In the words of DiMaggio *et al.* (2004:49), these online relationships contribute to relationship health “by complementing, not replacing, other

channels of interaction". In a similar way, Gould (2013:ix) argues that social media relationships cannot replace the need for personal pastoral care – but they can extend the personal presence of a congregational leader.

The reason why this position should be the church's starting point is clear when one considers the alternative: Where online relationships are seen as the sum total of an individual's relational life, questions often arise about the validity and authenticity thereof. Sociality viewed from this purely online perspective is often seen as superficial and as a factor in the alienation between people (Cowan & Dawson, 2004:8). However, when these same online relationships are seen as supplementary relationships, grounded in real-life connections, they are seen as a valuable, additional way to enrich communal ties between people, even though this only happens in a virtual context (Norris, 2004:31). This view of online relationships as an extension of real-life connections also ties in with Barak and Suler's assertion (2008:2) that people often experience their computers and cyberspace as an extension of their minds and personalities.

Recognising the ancillary – as opposed to central – role of online interaction in relational life deals a death-blow to what Chambers (2013:3) refers to as a kind of "technological determinism" in which online communication is misrepresented as a determining factor of social change at the very centre of modern society. This is neither a healthy, nor a productive way to think about relationships. However, recognition of the supplementary function of these computer-mediated relationships opens one's eyes to the valuable role they can play in fostering a sense of fellowship and connection between people who already share relational bonds offline.

It is from this foundation that one can begin to formulate meaningful and effective practical suggestions for maximising the value and depth of relationships in an online context. As can be expected, sources for scholarly reflection on the topic are not widely available, since research in this field is still in a relatively underdeveloped state – especially from the perspective of practical theology. However, Baab (2011:96-167), who writes from a theological perspective rooted in practical ministry, proposes a helpful framework for managing online relationships in a way that maximises their value, while minimising the limitations associated with computer-

mediated communication. This framework is presented in the form of six constellations of related actions. Each of these constellations relate to a recommended area of action aimed at maximising the value and depth of relationships in an online context, while overcoming challenges unique to this environment.

These constellations, discussed individually below, are presented as follows:

- Initiating
- Listening, remembering, and praying
- Asking, giving, and thanking
- Sharing, caring, and being together
- Pacing and choosing
- Accepting and forgiving

5.4.1.1 Initiating

Baab (2011:98) describes initiation in the context of an online relationship as the act of reaching out to someone on a regular basis, or “checking in” if you haven’t heard from them in a while. Baab describes this as the habit of "creating opportunities to listen" – that is, initiating conversation with a connected individual with a view to giving the other party an opportunity to respond and possibly share in a meaningful interaction. These acts of initiation are essential in the online context if friends are to have any hope of engaging each other in any way.

Baab (2011:105) refers to the integrated messaging functionality on social media platforms like Facebook as a particularly useful tool for initiation, and explains that an online message can be just as effective in initiating as a phone call or any other form of personal communication. Baker (2008:165) explains that common interests can also provide opportunities for initiation – for example, sharing the details of the release of a new book via a social network with a friend who shares an interest in that particular author, could lead to an online or even an offline conversation. Of course, social networks provide myriad opportunities for the regular initiation of conversations between connected individuals – for

example, participants could tag each other in photos uploaded to these sites, or mention each other in comments on any social media updates by themselves or others.

Participants should be encouraged to be intentional in their use of these affordances of social networks to initiate interactions that could lead to meaningful conversation. It is not enough to be connected – one party needs to reach out to the other on a regular basis if meaningful relational interaction is to occur. As is the case in conventional relationships, one person needs to take a step in the direction of the other.

5.4.1.2 Listening, Remembering, and Praying

Getting the most from relationships in an online context as the body of Christ, Baab (2011:111) argues, also involves the three-fold process of listening, remembering, and praying. In Baab's estimation these three elements are closely related, and have a material impact on the health of a relationship.

Baab (2011:120) begins by explaining that paying attention to a friends' online communication can be a healthy form of listening, since it entails a degree of immersion in the other's story of the joys and sorrows of life. In this sense, every act of engagement in the social media world could, and should, become an opportunity to "listen" to the information shared by others. Every update, photo, and comment can be seen as an act of self-disclosure that the "listener" can, and should, tune in to. This reminds strongly of Duck's concept (2007:82) of "receptive openness," which denotes a person's willingness to listen to information disclosed by the other party. Likewise, Dalton *et al.* (2010:41-42) depict listening as an act of showing genuine interest in the lives of others, which ultimately results in strong, long-lasting relationships.

Unexpectedly, Baab (2011:116) also points out that "listening" in this way could become a negative habit if an introvert takes refuge in this action. Sometimes, especially introverts may allow someone else an extended period of self-disclosure, simply because they want to avoid sharing anything about their own lives or circumstances. In this way, some use their attentiveness to the updates of others on social networks as an excuse never to reveal anything about themselves at all. This behaviour should be guarded against, and others who engage therein should be gently drawn into self-disclosure.

According to Baab (2011:119) one of the results of careful “listening” via social networks is the ability to remember what is going on in the lives of others, thus enabling friends to respond or follow up in an appropriate fashion. In other words, remembering entails more than merely calling to mind certain details that were shared online – it also draws one into active involvement in the lives of others, since remembering often results in the need for a response of some kind. Drescher (2011:147) refers to the example of a pastoral leader who engages with members of his flock on a personal level on a Sunday based on what he remembers about what they have shared on social networks during the week. This becomes a valuable point of connection and an effective conversation starter. For this reason, it is a habit worth developing.

The third element of this constellation is praying, which according to Baab (2011:121) flows naturally from the acts of listening and remembering. More importantly, Baab portrays this in the form of a cycle – members of the community are more likely to actively pray for one another if they engage in “listening” behaviour online in order to bring the challenges their friends are faced with into remembrance. If engaged in enough, this becomes a habitual cycle that draws people out of their own worlds into the worlds of others. Members of the community should also be attentive to those instances where the online medium becomes a platform for direct requests for prayer (Vogt, 2011:109). Often, an intentional effort to “listen” online soon reveals a multitude of opportunities to intercede for others in prayer out of a true concern for their wellbeing.

5.4.1.3 Asking, Giving, and Thanking

Another element in this framework for action in online relationships is the continuum of asking, giving, and thanking. Baab (2011:131) explains that the act of asking someone to give assistance in a situation or to provide in a need provides that person with an opportunity to respond in a real way, thereby investing in the relationship. It is an honest acknowledgement of dependence upon another, ultimately creating bonds between people that emphasise a sense of belonging (Baab, 2011:134). Gould (2013:107) explains how a habit of asking for and providing support via these social media channels can become a powerful way to help both congregation members and pastoral leaders cope with challenges that may come their way.

Since participants in the empirical study pointed out that they already use social media platforms in this way, this kind of behaviour needs to be encouraged and modelled by pastoral leaders – especially since asking for help is exceptionally hard for some (Baab, 2011:127).

It is the action of asking that provides opportunities to give. Baab (2011:86) ties the impulse to give to the fact that humans have been created in the image of God. Therefore, she argues, we have an innate need to give to others out of love and genuine concern for their wellbeing, especially within the context of the body of Christ. Drescher (2011:113) takes great care to point out that giving in the context of a Christian online community is based on much more than the shallow form of “social media activism” sometimes encountered online, where a group of people with weak interpersonal ties coalesce around a cause that they often only have a negligible commitment to. Rather, the impulse to give in the context of a vibrant Christian community entails getting involved in the lives of others with which one shares a real connection in practical ways. This giving may entail providing in an expressed need, or engaging in a helpful action (Baab, 2011:86). Where a community listens, remembers, and prays, they are more likely to engage in this cycle of asking and giving.

The final point on this continuum is thankfulness. Baab (2011:131) portrays thankfulness as an acknowledgement of dependence, and a powerful way to build intimacy between members of a Christian community. Of course this does not only apply to interaction between individuals, but is also important from the perspective of church leadership, who may express thankfulness for the contributions of congregation members. In this way, for example, one could acknowledge the contribution of volunteers at a Sunday service by means of the kind of “support posts” highlighted in the second chapter of this study (refer to 2.3.5.2.; Figure 2-M; 2-N). Using these posts to full effect on the official social media channels of a ministry not only helps to acknowledge the contributions of congregants, but also models thankfulness in an online context in a way that may inspire other members of the community to do the same.

5.4.1.4 Sharing, Caring, and Being Together

Of course literature on the social media phenomenon is replete with references to “sharing,” but in the context of a framework of action aimed at strengthening relationships, sharing

denotes the impulse to disclose information about one's life and challenges that draws others into your world. Baab (2011:63) describes sharing as a process of revealing what is happening in one's own life in a way that invites others to respond, thus strengthening and deepening relationships between those who interact in this way. Also interesting in this sense is Baab's argument (2011:65) that computer-mediated communication lends itself particularly well to sharing of this nature, since one does not have to deal with the distraction of another person's physical presence. Thus, an environment is created where participants have unhindered access to their own thoughts and feelings, and have enough time to express these properly, and at their own pace (Gould, 2013:25).

On the other hand, caring in this context relates to acts of support in response to needs shared by others (Baab, 2011:68). Friesen (2009:83-84) describes this kind of caring in terms of "self-emptying connectivity" – that is, the idea of holding nothing back in service to others, and using online connectivity as an opportunity to reach out to assist those who may need it as often as possible. Baab (2011:138) goes on to explain that these acts of care could be expressed in a wide variety of ways, including gifts, words, touch, and actions that demonstrate our affinity for others. The element of caring also acts as a counter-measure to selfish behaviour online: Congregants should be reminded that they do not engage in online community only in order to share their own challenges, but to make some kind of contribution to others.

This cycle of sharing and caring, built on a foundation of openness between friends who freely share their own problems and reach out in care to others who face the same, invites connected individuals into a situation where they stand shoulder to shoulder, experiencing life together (Baab, 2011:136). In this sense, the practice of sharing and caring draws one into the kind of communal life encountered in Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35, where individuals are actively involved in the lives of those around them in a dynamic web of interpersonal relatedness.

5.4.1.5 Pacing and Choosing

Another constellation in Baab's framework for action involves the related concepts of pacing and choosing. Baab (2011:147) describes pacing as the process of determining the natural rhythm of a relationship – that is, discovering the frequency of interaction necessary to sustain a specific relationship. Maximising the depth and value of a relationship requires developing the ability to discern which relationships will require more frequent interaction than others. In this instance one is reminded of the words of Proverbs 25:17, which warns against setting foot in a neighbour's house too often – “too much of you, and they will hate you,” the passage cautions. In other words, pacing implies the need to develop wisdom about the kind of relationship one is engaging in. This refers back to Granovetter's conception (1973:1361), mentioned in the interpretive chapter, of “weak” and “strong” interpersonal ties: Social media users need to learn to recognise between the weaker acquaintances they need to maintain from time to time, and the close, or “strong” ties they need to invest more time in.

With this in mind, Baab (2011:149) argues that pursuing online relationships involves a constant series of choices about how often to initiate contact and respond to others. It also involves choices around who to pursue more intimate relationships with, and who to treat as mere acquaintances. Of course every situation is unique, and there is no failure-proof plan as to what choices to make in this regards. However, scripture does provide some clear pointers with regards to which kinds of friendships to pursue: 1 Corinthians 15:33 warns that "bad company ruins good morals," while Proverbs 22:24-25 cautions against making friends with "a man given to anger". Likewise, Psalm 141:4 articulates an aversion to being in the company of "men who work iniquity". In contrast, Proverbs 13:20 invites the reader to "walk with the wise," while Proverbs 17:17 claims that a friend “loves at all times”. Faced with an overwhelming number of opportunities to connect with an endless procession of “friends” online, the church would be well advised to constantly refer to these guiding passages.

5.4.1.6 Accepting and Forgiving

Finally, Baab (2011:166) portrays the dual concepts of accepting and forgiving as part of a friendship dialectic that deals with the tension between the ideal and real. Thus, in online

relationships, as in offline ones, participants need to understand that friends will sometimes fail them, or act in ways that do not confirm to the expectations, or ideals, that they envisioned for the relationship. This goes along with an understanding that the online environment creates unique situations where these failings may occur (the lack of nonverbal cues in online communication and the misunderstandings this may cause, comes to mind).

In some instances, this will require forgiveness, when a contract of friendship is broken by one of the parties in a relationship – for example, a friend may disclose information online that was not meant to be shared in public. In these cases, trust will have to be rebuilt over time through constant communication, both offline and online (Baab, 2011:159). In other cases, dealing with the reality of a relationship will require acceptance. For example, there may be a need to accept an age difference between two people (instead of misguided attempts to ignore this to the detriment of the relationship). This is particularly pertinent when one considers the “generational digital divide” discussed in the previous chapter, which points to the fact that younger and older people approach online interaction in fundamentally different ways (Herring, 2008:71).

Committing to this kind of acceptance and forgiveness should flow from obedience to Colossians 3:13, which directs believers to “bear with each other and forgive one another.” Doing so may not be easy, but is an indispensable part of any true relationship – whether in an online or offline context.

In conclusion, the framework for managing online relationships offered above is aimed at maximising the value of relationships in an online context. Since this line of thought is still in an underdeveloped state, these recommendations are bound to be adapted and enhanced over time. Drawing on these principles, though, offers a practical starting point for making the most of relationship in an online world. However, this framework does not address all aspects associated with relationships in an online world in a comprehensive fashion – one also needs to consider how to deal with the harmful behaviour that sometimes follows from pursuing relationships in an online sphere.

5.4.2 Dealing With Addictive Behaviour

While online platforms offer unique opportunities for relational interaction, some participants in the empirical study acknowledged that they sometimes engaged in what could be construed as addictive behaviour when it comes to their social media activity. This was confirmed during the interpretive task, where Demetrovics *et al.* (2014:121) were cited in support of the idea that frequent social media use sometimes resulted in addictive behaviour. This idea was affirmed by De Abreu and Góes (2011:156).

Recognising the potential for this kind of negative behaviour requires action on the part of the church and its congregants, who need to share an awareness of the signs or indicators of addictive behaviour, and an understanding of how to deal with these behaviours when they do surface.

5.4.2.1 Signs of Social Networking Addiction

Young (2012:391) draws on three diagnostic criteria for detecting problematic Internet habits among social media and other Internet users:

- A maladaptive preoccupation with Internet use, indicated by either a preoccupation with Internet use that is perceived as irresistible; or excessive use of online media such as social networks for periods of time longer than planned. Fishkind *et al.* (2011:4) argue that this may be particularly pronounced among users who have access to the Internet via always-on mobile digital devices.
- This preoccupation with Internet use is coupled with noticeable distress, and causes disruption in the congregation member's social, family, or professional life. Roberts (2010:xiii) argues that this may be noticeable in the form of missed appointments; physical discomfort due to extended time spent on digital devices; deteriorating friendships; increased withdrawal from social activities, and many other forms.
- This excessive use begins encroaching on time that previously was not devoted to social media use (for example, a participant constantly checks his or her social media channels during an intimate time of prayer and connection in a church small group

setting). Demetrovics *et al.* (2014:121) argue that this may extend even to the point where the addicted individual constantly thinks about social media use when he or she is not engaged in the activity.

In the social media era, both congregational leaders and members need to be cognisant of these addictive behaviours in much the same way as they would have been aware of warning signs for substance abuse or other possible problematic behaviours. Being aware of these signs is a necessary requirement of communal life in a modern-day *koinonia* community, especially where members profess to care deeply about the well-being of their fellow believers.

5.4.2.2 Dealing with Social Networking Addiction

While the body of literature dealing with overcoming Internet and social media addictions is still exceedingly small and undefined (De Abreu & Góes, 2011:155), Roberts (2010:95-138) proposes a simple, yet practically helpful synthesis of approaches that centres on a three-fold process for overcoming online addictions. This process involves three basic actions: accepting responsibility for the problem, finding support from others, and adapting usage patterns:

- *Accepting responsibility for the problem:* Roberts (2010:95) argues that, like every other addiction, the process of recovery starts when the person suffering from the addiction recognises the severity of the problem, and takes responsibility for doing something about it. The importance of this basic first step is affirmed by Young (2012:392), who argues that individuals who battle these addictions should be gently pushed in a direction that allows them to come to a realisation that their behaviour is destructive and needs to change.
- *Finding support from others:* Roberts (2010:116-117) makes a strong case for finding support from others as a basic step in overcoming addiction. This help, which could be in the form of family members, support groups, or even a mentor (Roberts refers to the concept of a “wise elder” who has gone through a similar experience), is crucial during the challenging process of behaviour modification. Since these addictions typically also involve social ties with other people who behave in a similar way

(Demetrovics *et al.*, 2014:121), it is important that the person struggling against addiction surrounds himself or herself with people who are supportive of this battle, and who can compensate for the social connections the individual may lose as he or she withdraws from their previous lifestyle.

- *Adapting usage patterns:* With these structures in place, the individual is free to begin with a process of behaviour modification. In this regards, Roberts (2010:115) argues that any plan for behavioural change must be specifically adapted to the situation of the individual in question, and may involve a process of trial and error. What works for one person may not work for another. In general, professionals agree that a plan of controlled use is a more practical goal than total abstinence (De Abreu and Góes, 2011:163; Demetrovics *et al.*, 2014:122), especially considering the extent to which social media use is integrated into everyday life. Thus, a practical approach may be a progressively greater limitation on social media use over the course of a pre-defined time period, or time limits on the number of hours or minutes a person is allowed to engage in this kind of activity (De Abreu and Góes, 2011:158). Roberts also proposes identifying a number of alternative pursuits to take up the time that used to be devoted to online activity (Roberts, 2010:116). Ultimately, what emerges from the suggestions of Roberts and others is the notion that overcoming a social media addiction requires a flexible approach that is adapted to the situation of the individual in question – and not a standardised therapeutic program.

5.4.2.3 Healthy Habits and Social Networking Fasts

Of course it is possible to manage social media habits in a way that does lead to addictive behaviour, and it is the responsibility of both church leaders and their congregants to model and practice healthy behaviour in this respect. One of the practices that have become popular as of late, particularly in congregational settings, is the concept of a regular social media fast. This could also take on the form of a more general media fast, and is a practical way in which congregational leaders can inspire their congregants to critically think about the effect of social media habits on their relational lives.

Wise (2014:150) describes a social media fast as a fixed period – either short or extended – during which a congregation abstains from (or severely limits) social media activity, while Vogt (2011:194) prefers the concept of a “digital Sabbath” aimed at disengaging from the noise of the social media world. This is done in an effort to break dependence on this kind of online interaction, and to counter any addictive behaviour that may have taken hold over the course of time. Cooper (2011:23-54) describes three phases of such an activity – the period before, during, and after – and formulates a number of suggestions aimed at maximising the impact of such a media fast:

- *Before:* Cooper (2011:23) emphasises the importance of preparing for a media fast in the days beforehand. For example, he recommends identifying a number of activities to engage in during the time that the type of media that is being abstained from, would have been consumed. He also stresses the importance of communicating the intent to fast to other people, since not doing so could result in practical problems along the way if they are not aware of these plans (2011:24). Moreover, Cooper (2011:26) suggests thinking about which relationships could be enriched during this time of increased focus and decreased distraction – for example, one could endeavour to become more attentive to the needs of a church community or family members.
- *During:* Cooper (2011:27) suggests a period of mindful reflection during the fast, allowing for enough opportunities to consider the advantages and disadvantages of disconnecting in this way. He also suggests communicating with an advisor or trusted friend during this time to maximise the insights gained.
- *After:* The period after a media fast should be used to consider whether any permanent behavioural changes need to be made (Cooper, 2011:37). Following a conscious period of reflection on the advantages and disadvantages of disconnection, the period after a fast presents an opportune moment to consider behaviour modification, especially since the initial challenges of a change in habits have already been navigated as part of the fast.

Approaching a social media fast in such a systematic and mindful way maximises the opportunities for learning and change, and ensures that the individual or congregation members that engage in this practice benefit from their actions to the greatest degree

possible. Engaging in social media fasts of this kind from time to time creates a fruitful opportunity for reflection on the impact of social media use on congregations, and presents leaders with an opportunity to invite the church to reflect critically on its activities in this sphere.

Having formulated a number of practical guidelines pertaining to the impact of social media use on relationships in Christian congregations, the attention now turns to a number of considerations that focus on cultivating a greater sense of unity.

5.5 Cultivating Unity

Data from the empirical study clearly pointed to the value of social media activity in connecting participants to the wider faith community beyond their immediate congregation. Indeed, most participants indicated that their activity in the social media sphere cultivated a sense of unity by making them aware that they were part of a larger whole. Participants specifically indicated that they followed social media updates by other Hillsong campuses and their leaders in order to enhance their sense of connection to the wider church and its mission. Moreover, there were clear indications that social media also played a role in uniting the diverse groups of people within every congregation itself – and this was shown to be particularly helpful in an urban context, where congregants typically come from diverse backgrounds. Thus, the unifying role of social networks was shown to operate on a global level between the different congregations, and a local level, between diverse groups.

As part of the interpretive task, reference was also made to two kinds of unifying impulses, namely "bridging" and "bonding" groups (Norris, 2004:31) – and it is here that the potential for an enhanced praxis can be found. While bridging groups refer to social networks that bring people of disparate backgrounds together as one; bonding groups merely reinforce existing close relationships among individuals who share similar backgrounds. And while social media use in Hillsong congregations was said to mostly fulfil a bridging role, literature suggests that more can be done to enhance this. Thus, devising an enhanced practice for the use of social media in cultivating unity requires a framework that helps social media act more like a

bridging agent (unifying diverse groups), and less like a bonding agent (maintaining the status quo among homogeneous groups).

Friesen, in his seminal work *Thy Kingdom Connected* (2009), which draws heavily on networking terminology, proposes three “connective practices” – or “action-guiding principles” as per the terminology of Latini (2011:305) – aimed at helping the church cultivate a greater degree of unity on a global and local level through the use of online social networks. Friesen’s principles – which he describes as missional linking; thriving in nonequilibrium; and networked spiritual formation – are explicitly aimed at fulfilling a bridging role in the church (Friesen, 2009:85).

5.5.1 Missional Linking

Friesen (2009:134) begins to explain the process of “missional linking” by referring to reconciliation as the missional focus of God’s people. As a part of God’s redemptive plan for creation, the church is actively involved in the inherently relational process of linking together those who have been separated by calling people from all backgrounds into community with Christ and his people (Fucks, 2008:161). This process of reconciliation does not imply complete agreement on all matters, but rather the choice of relationship over separation. It is with this reality in mind that Guder (1998:265) describes the church’s movement to missional connectedness as a centrifugal movement starting amidst diversity in local congregations, and expanding to encompass the global dimensions of the church. In the technology age, this also happens by means of digital connections.

However, the significance of this impulse for missional linking is only understood when its effect on the person making the link becomes apparent. When a person engages in this kind of missional, centrifugal linking, moving beyond their local, affective groups to other groups further afield (for example linking with a person from a different background, or with someone in an entirely different congregation), Friesen argues (2009:136) that this has a very real impact on the being of that individual: since human beings have an inherently social constitution, such a connection contributes to the ongoing “becoming” of the person. In other

words, Friesen argues, in true missional linking individuals are changed through their connections with others.

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:20-23, in which he describes becoming "all things to all people" is quoted in support of this view that the act of linking brings about a fundamental change in a person. Thus, Friesen (2009:137) argues, where individuals engage in "missional linking," they will position themselves in such a way that "their own social construct is open to transformation". Perspectives are broadened, and people are transformed through relational connections. The fact that these connections are fundamentally open to change qualifies them as bridging connections, instead of bonding connections (Norris, 2004:31).

Relating this process to links via digital social networks, Friesen draws on Granovetter's views (1973:1361) about the strength of weak relational ties (refer to 4.4.2.3., ii). Friesen (2009:139) explains that weak links (acquaintanceships) between people via social networks serve as bridging links, facilitating connections to otherwise isolated individuals or groups, and opening these groups up to influence via these new connections. In the context of the global church, these weak links do not merely tie one person to another – they form a formidable and strong web of interconnection in which congregations are opened up to influence and transformation of and through other congregations, and the wider church as a whole.

In other words, in fulfilling its missional role in linking individuals together by calling people from all backgrounds into community, the church opens itself up to transformation, positioning itself as a truly bridging community. Using social media in this way to connect individuals and even entire churches to one other, draws people from diverse backgrounds into a strong web of weak ties that ultimately transforms entire communities through their connection to the wider church on a global scale. The more the church lives out this task of missional linking – also through its use of social media – the more it will position itself as a truly bridging community that cultivates unity amidst diversity, instead of enforcing stifling homogeneity.

5.5.2 Thriving in Nonequilibrium

The second connective practice highlighted by Friesen (2009:148) is described as “thriving in nonequilibrium”. In order to understand this concept, one has to be familiar with Friesen’s portrayal of the community of believers as a living ecosystem. In this view, families, churches, and other communities take on the form of living systems where everyone and everything is interconnected. These living ecosystems also tend to have their own, distinct identities, which are based on an interplay between the ecosystem’s form and function (Friesen, 2009:150). In the case of a congregation, form may consist of denomination and building; while function relates to aspects such as worship, discipleship, and teaching.

It is at this stage that Friesen (2009:154) introduces the idea of nonequilibrium: Since these ecosystems are open to outside influence through connections by means of systems such as social media platforms, they cannot exist in a state of continuous equilibrium, or balance – change and new ideas are constantly introduced. Thus, when these systems encounter influence from the outside, they are thrown into nonequilibrium. This introduces a state of irreversible transformation, until a new and different equilibrium emerges and the process starts all over again. This idea of Friesen reminds strongly of a similar theory by Rice (2009:21), who describes this process in terms of a cycle of unpredictable events, and the resulting synchronisation and adaptation that the community responds with.

Friesen’s main argument, however (2009:155), is that living ecosystems are not only able to maintain their life processes under conditions of nonequilibrium – they actually thrive in this state. He points out that introducing foreign elements into an ecosystem presents an opportunity for the ecosystem to adjust its form and function to the slight change in context, and to reorganise dynamically. Thus, he essentially puts forward a view of Christian communities as “ecosystems in process” (Friesen, 2009:156), defined by an ability to respond and adapt to influence from various sources.

Thus, yet again, the focus falls on the church as a dynamic, bridging entity that is open to the kind of change that comes with connection beyond its own borders. By linking to an ever widening network of individuals and congregations via social media, the church opens itself up

to the kind of foreign influence that causes nonequilibrium and thus transformation. More importantly, it is this very dynamic and ongoing process of transformation that allows congregations to adapt to changing circumstances and contexts. This happens on a global scale, between different congregations and the church as a whole, and on a local scale, between people from diverse groups who live out their faith together. Being open to wide connection and the transformation that results from this, is crucial to the survival and health of the church, and should be a process that congregations are actively involved in on a continuous basis.

5.5.3 Networked Spiritual Formation

In describing the connected church, Friesen (2009:163) uses the metaphor of a tapestry that is woven together by many different threads. This is presented against the background of Ecclesiastes 4:7-12, which is based on the idea that “a triple-braided cord is not easily broken”. Therefore, those who are woven together with others in God’s “connective kingdom” are in a place where they contribute to, and participate in, a great, unified, narrative tapestry that God has been weaving. However, this does not merely denote a passive sense of belonging, but active participation – those who are woven into this tapestry are active agents with a very real influence on the way this tapestry looks and behaves, and on the extent to which it can be regarded as unified. It is the nature of this participation that Friesen (2009:163) refers to as “spiritual formation,” a concept that can only be fully understood against the background of so-called bounded, centred, and networked paradigms for community:

In order to explain these concepts, Friesen draws on the work of missiologist Paul Hiebert (1979:217-227), who holds that a bounded paradigm for spiritual formation (not to be confused with the “bonding” nature of some communities mentioned earlier) is defined by boundaries. This focus on boundaries makes it a very simple matter to classify who or what can be regarded as “in” or “out” – one either meets the criteria, or you don’t. Therefore, bounded communities apply very strict and inflexible rules in terms of who is accepted into a community, and who not. For example, in some congregational communities, these boundaries are expressed as essential characteristics that could be used to define what it means to be a “Christian” – the emphasis could be on baptism, the sinner's prayer, and

adherence to certain moral principles; or, in more fundamentalist communities, it could be teetotalism or a commitment to a certain biblical interpretation (Friesen, 2009:164-165). Failure to meet these criteria would mean certain exclusion from the community. Not surprisingly, in such communities, there are not many opportunities for connection with those outside the established boundaries. This kind of spiritual formation is depicted in Figure 5-A below.

On the other hand, the centred paradigm describes a situation where the community is oriented towards a specific centre (Friesen, 2009:166). In the case of a biblical Christian community, that centre is Christ. Christ is at the centre of a true *koinonia* community (Kärkkäinen, 2007:6-7), and Christians are those moving toward Jesus, rather than away from Him. In a centred paradigm, there is less emphasis on borders, and more on the hub – borders are relatively fluid, there is room for variation, and uniformity is not highly valued (Friesen, 2009:166). The primary question is whether there is a movement to or from the centre – those who move to the centre are included, and those who move away from the centre are not. A centred paradigm, Friesen (2009:167) argues, allows for and even encourages variation among Christians. In the centred paradigm, all members of the community are simply on different places in their Christ-centred journeys, and there are opportunities to connect around a central focal point, despite differences. This kind of spiritual formation is depicted in Figure 5-B below.

FIGURE 5-A

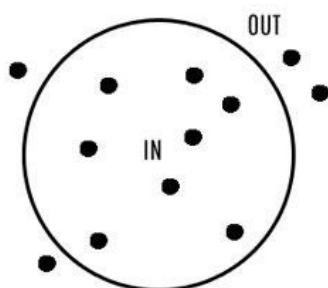
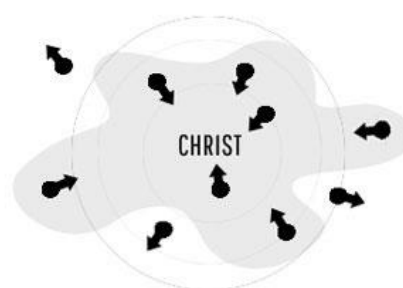


FIGURE 5-B



The networked paradigm, however, makes the most of the strength of the centred model, but ties the idea back to the notion of a tapestry of relationship by placing emphasis on the communal aspect of spiritual formation. In other words, while both the bounded and centred

models place the emphasis on the position of the individual within a certain schema, the networked paradigm of spiritual formation focuses on the whole (the tapestry), and locates the individual within a network (Friesen, 2009:168). This network acts as one (a single tapestry), and is strengthened every time that new members (or threads) are added. When an individual turns to Christ, he or she becomes part of the community. Thus, inclusion does not depend on position inside or outside of a set boundary, but rather an orientation to or away from Christ. Moreover, the networked paradigm recognises the Holy Spirit as the living presence animating all relationships and drawing believers together as one (Friesen, 2009:169).

With the “action-guiding principles” cited above as a foundation, Friesen (2009:172) makes the striking point that although new technologies such as social media platforms are helping us to see the interconnected nature of things, the kingdom of God has always been a networked reality. Therefore, the principles cited above should enable the church to utilise social networks to enhance unity in ways that complements the fundamental networked nature of God’s kingdom:

- The impulse towards *missional linking* should drive congregation members towards establishing transformational online bridging connections with as wide a range of individuals and groups as possible, strengthening the network of weak ties binding the church together.
- Actively connecting with other faith communities in this way, congregations (and individuals) should open themselves up to the possibilities for transformation that follows when states of *nonequilibrium* arise due to influences from other communities.
- Appreciating the potential for *networked spiritual formation*, congregations should use social media tools to establish ties with others who are moving towards Christ, regardless of where they are on their journeys. Thus, enriching connections to people from different backgrounds, and in different stages of their Christian walk, should be actively sought.

Clearly, the fact that the church, by default, involves a networked body of believers, means that digital social networks should be well suited as a tool to enhance this networked, unified

state. However, this requires that the church refrains from drawing rigid boundaries around the communities it attempts to form. Rather, the church should be open to the transformative possibilities of acting as a true bridging network, opening itself up to connection with all kind of people who share its orientation towards Christ. In this way, it will move closer to the compelling picture of unity sketched in biblical passages such as Acts 4:32-35, John 17:11-26, Romans 12:4-5, and 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

5.6 Caring in Community

Since true *koinonia* communities are characterised by webs of loving relationships that focus on ongoing care and support, one would expect the social media activity of congregants involved in the study to also reflect something of this nature. In the research results presented and discussed as part of the descriptive-empirical and interpretive tasks, this element primarily came to the fore in the way that congregation members used their social media activity to encourage one another in their faith. This habit was shown to align with biblical directives to encourage one another, in passages such as 1 Thessalonians 4:18, Hebrews 3:13, Romans 12:8, and 2 Corinthians 13:11. Most participants indicated that they often used social media channels to encourage fellow congregants by sharing both their own messages and inspirational content from the church's social media feeds – in fact, most participants indicated that this was the kind of online content that they most often engaged with or shared with other people.

Since these encouraging and inspirational posts clearly have practical use to congregation members in their everyday interactions with each other, churches that are serious about maximising the impact of their social media engagement will benefit from asking how they might increase the availability of this kind of material on their social media profiles. It has already been established that Hillsong church shares encouraging social media posts from time to time in the form of “support posts” (refer to 2.3.5.2, figure 2-M and 2-N). However, maximising the impact and utility of this kind of content in a way that will draw congregation members into the sort of “fellowship of pastoral care” envisioned by Van Deusen Hunsinger (2006:3) requires careful thought about the kind of content shared on the congregation's social networking platforms.

In order to provide this kind of inspirational and encouraging content to church members on a consistent basis in a manner that will encourage them to share it with other congregants and their social media connections further afield, thereby contributing to fostering community online, will require defining an intentional content strategy, or content plan, that focuses on this specific kind of content. While the current context focuses specifically on devising a content strategy for encouraging and inspirational content, this kind of content strategy can also be replicated for other kinds of social media content that a congregation may choose to focus on from time to time.

Bloomstein (2012:6) defines a content strategy simply as the practice of planning for the creation and delivery of useful online content. In other words, devising a content strategy involves being intentional about the kind of content that is being created by an entity with a social media presence, such as an individual or a ministry. Churches that want to define a focused content strategy are advised to ask the following practical questions when they devise a social media content strategy (Bloomstein, 2012:7):

- *What needs to be accomplished?* In the current context, the church needs to produce and deliver a steady stream of encouraging and inspirational posts on a daily basis in order to directly encourage congregants in their faith, or to give them an opportunity to share this social media content with others.
- *How will the success of the content be measured?* In the online sphere, it is a simple matter to define key metrics and measures according to which the success of a specific social media campaign may be measured. Lovett (2012:173) points out that specific targets may be set for engagement (e.g. measuring the number of times a post is shared, or measuring the number of comments it generates online); impact (e.g. the number of social media followers the church aims to have as a result of a specific campaign); or any other definable goal.
- *What resources are needed?* Will a specific person be responsible for the generation of these posts? Will there be any cost involved in generating the content that is being shared? The answers to these practical questions will have an enormous impact on the execution of the content strategy.

- *What are we trying to communicate?* Specifically in a ministry context, careful thought needs to be put into what exactly a specific social media campaign or approach needs to communicate. The message of the content needs to be consistent with the message of the church in general, and cannot deviate from the core values of the congregation or denomination (Gould, 2013:111). Moreover, there needs to be an understanding that social media platforms represent a unique communication medium, with different practices and expectations (Drescher, 2011:106).
- *What content types best meet the needs of the target audience?* Social media platforms present a number of options for sharing content – from short, pithy, single sentence Twitter posts, to full blog posts shared via platforms like Facebook. In the case of encouraging or inspirational content, a wide range of posts, from Twitter updates to sharing video content, could be effective, as users will engage with the different types of content in different ways and at different times.
- *What contexts are appropriate for the delivery of content?* Here, Bloomstein (2012:7) refers to considerations with regards to different devices, resolutions, and contexts that the content may be consumed in. For example, because of factors like the digital divide, a congregation like Hillsong Cape Town may need to share content that is predominantly suited to mobile devices (e.g. mobile friendly web pages, less video content). In other contexts, like the Sydney congregation, this may not be a primary consideration.
- *How will the content be generated?* Bloomstein (2012:7) suggests considering how content will be sourced. Will it be written by church staff? If inspirational videos are to be shared, will these be produced, purchased, or sourced at no cost? Will the pastoral team contribute to writing content? If the goal is, as in the current example, the production of content that is encouraging and inspirational, this needs to be undertaken by individuals or a team who have an innate understanding of what kind of social media posts or content will serve this purpose.
- *Who will manage the content?* Often, the success of a social media campaign is dependent on the person that takes responsibility for it, as this individual will make material choices about how and when content will be disseminated. For this reason, Gould (2013:111) strongly suggests entrusting this task to an individual or group that is

comfortable with digital technology, and aware of the nuances and challenges of the social media world.

Making these deliberate choices about a content strategy enables a congregation to maximise the effect of its online efforts – especially when it comes to the kinds of online content that congregants engage with on a regular basis. In the example above, namely a content strategy for inspirational content, a successful plan could result in a truly engaging social media experience that draws people into community and meaningful online conversation. Ultimately, this fosters a sense of belonging and fellowship among connected individuals who benefit from this content.

5.7 Mobilising for Selfless Sharing

A surprising aspect of Hillsong church's social media activity uncovered during the empirical study revolved around the fact that none of the congregations – despite their history of outreach and generosity in the form of involvement in poverty alleviation and social justice programs – seemed to draw on their social media audiences for help in driving any of these initiatives. In this sense, praxis fell far short of the biblical requirement for a *koinonia* community, since there was no attempt to draw the online community into projects related to the sharing of material benefits. Considering Kearsley's assertion (2008:22) that a desire to share is one of the basic impulses of a *koinonia* community, this seems like a notable deviation from the biblical standard.

Despite this shortcoming, however, there is reason to hope that this aspect of the church's praxis can be shaped to more fully embody the biblical expectations for a *koinonia* community. Since all three congregations that formed part of the study have significant audiences on multiple social media platforms, a well-defined and practical plan to mobilise these online communities to become involved in sharing initiatives could unlock great potential resources in the church's mission to be a blessing to the world. Moreover, when one considers the information about so-called "smart mobs" shared during the interpretive phase of the study, it should be clear that mobilising a group in this way – especially for short-term aid projects and ad hoc initiatives – is eminently achievable.

Theocharis (2014:180-206) offers a robust model for effectively mobilising real-world audiences via digital social networks, blogs, and websites as a part of his overview of student protests in the United Kingdom in 2010. He argues that attempts to organise groups of people with the help of online channels need to focus on three dimensions, namely informational, interactive, and mobilising features (Theocharis, 2014:198). In all three instances, he presupposes that an engaged online audience already exists, which of course is the case for the three Hillsong congregations that participated in the study as well. Assuming that these audiences are in place, these three dimensions need to be addressed.

5.7.1 Informational Features

Any attempt to mobilise a group of people to take action or coalesce around a specific cause or project requires, first of all, sharing information about the intended project. Theocharis (2014:192) explains that this information could be in any form, from simple, brief statements, to full-length informational articles. This information should include details about the nature of the project, details about times and venues for planned gatherings, action required on the part of participants, and information about potential costs.

Dutta (2011:276) also points out that platforms like social networks are especially well suited to sharing information about projects or initiatives that may not receive mainstream attention. For example, a church that organises a social justice project with a pro-life theme may well find it hard to spread information about the event via traditional media outlets – however, social media offers an excellent platform from which to share information about such initiatives, especially where an engaged social media audience is already present, as is the case with many churches with an online presence.

5.7.2 Interactive Features

Mobilising congregational groups via online platforms tend to work best when an interactive element is included. Theocharis (2014:192) points to the importance of allowing participants to provide feedback – either in the form of comments on social media posts, or via an e-mail

address or other means. Gould (2013:111) also argues that the use of mechanisms like hashtags – a way to group content on most social networks through the use of keywords – can be of value. Regardless of the project, participants tend to be most engaged when they are given an opportunity to make a contribution towards the effort in question. Thus, including avenues for such feedback is an essential element of a successful mobilisation project.

5.7.3 Mobilising Features

Mobilisation via an online platform may include calls to action for both online and offline activity. For example, social media followers may be invited to assemble at a specific venue to engage in a specific activity; or they may be encouraged to give donations via donating functionality on a congregational website. Both Theocharis (2014:197) and Dutta (2011:276) argue that messages for mobilisation should be shared across as broad a range of platforms as possible to be effective. For this reason, they suggest sharing calls to action on all possible platforms, including synchronous services such as Twitter (for immediate, short-term mobilisation), and through asynchronous avenues, such as e-mail (for longer-term projects with longer lead times).

Investing in the informational, interactive, and mobilising dimensions in this way should lead to fruitful and effective calls to action. There is no reason why a church like Hillsong, with a large and engaged social media following, should not employ social media channels to enlist the help of congregation members in impromptu social projects and longer-term initiatives. In doing so, the church will reconfirm its commitment to servanthood in the world, and cement its place as a responsive, effective social actor.

5.8 Towards Effective Witness

The descriptive-empirical and interpretive tasks clearly indicated that congregants viewed their activity on social networks as a unique opportunity to act as witness to the gospel of Christ – lending credence to Vogt's (2011:201) striking vision of a future where “the church's beauty, goodness, and truth will pop up in Facebook feeds, Twitter streams, and YouTube playlists” all over the world. Since social media is clearly used to evangelise, and participants

appear to be highly intentional about the way they portray their faith online, it is worth considering how the church's attempts to share the gospel online may be enhanced to more fully embody the missional, outward focus of a true *koinonia* community.

In an effort to synthesise a number of disparate theologies on the subject of Christian witness, Bosch (2008:9-15) constructs a succinct framework for effective evangelism that focuses on eight basic themes. This framework provides a simple foundation for an enhanced praxis for Christian witness in an online context:

5.8.1 Evangelism as Core Mission

To begin with, Bosch (2008:9) portrays evangelism as the very heart, or core, of the church's mission in the world. As such, witness should be a foundational element of every action the church engages in. Every activity of the church should be related to its mission to proclaim salvation through Christ. This view agrees with that of Conner (2011:11), who sees the missional nature of the church as a central feature of every area of its practice. Thus, it follows that when the church engages the world in the social media sphere, witness should emerge as a central element of this engagement.

5.8.2 Evangelism Calls Others into Community

True witness is aimed at calling others into the visible and living community of believers. Thus, Paas argues (2012:161), Christian witness is not only about bringing people to Christ, but about bringing them into a community of other people – a loving *koinonia* community – that will help them grow in their faith. Social networks are uniquely positioned in this sense by acting as a platform from which others can be drawn into contact with members of the body of Christ over time. For this reason, it is imperative that believers on these networks model Christ-like behaviour at all times, mindful of the fact that their lives are a living witness to the truth of the gospel.

5.8.3 Evangelism is Witnessing to God's Action

Witness is not primarily a proclamation of what the church is bringing about in the world – rather, it speaks about what God himself has done and will do (Bosch, 2008:11). This is a particularly important concept to grasp, as the focus in the social media sphere often falls on the narcissism of the individual or organisation (Augsberger, 2006:72). Evangelism does not involve merely portraying the church in the best light possible – it should do more than that, by pointing to the redemptive work of Christ at all times.

5.8.4 Evangelism is Invitation

In true witness, the act of evangelism is always communicated in the form of an invitation (Bocsh, 2008:12). In other words, this process should not involve coaxing or elements of threat. In the context of social media, this involves paying attention to the tone of conversation on these networks. It is conceivable, given the lack of nonverbal and other communication cues in an online environment, that statements communicating the gospel could be perceived in a negative light. It remains the responsibility of the believer to ensure that he or she is understood correctly.

5.8.5 Evangelism Calls for True Community

Evangelism is only possible when the community of the faithful is a radiant manifestation of the truth it professes (Bosch, 2008:12-13). This means that the characteristics of the first *koinonia* community – compassion, fellowship, sharing, worship, and service – should be clearly visible in the church. This aligns with the view of Augsberger (2006:179), who argues that the communal life of the church “verifies, validates, and authenticates” its message.

5.8.6 Evangelism Involves Risk

Firstly, there is inherent risk in the way the recipient of the message will react to it. Since the gospel convicts of sin and demands transformation, it is not possible to know beforehand what an individual’s reaction to the message will be. In an online environment, where there is often less information about a communication partner than usual, this risk factor is increased. Secondly, the one who proclaims the message risks change as well. In the words of Bocsh

(2008:14), the one who proclaims the gospel takes the risk that “...in the course of his evangelism his understanding of Christ will get corrected.” Thus, in communicating the gospel to others, the proclaimer of the message may yet be impacted by the message in new and unintended ways.

5.8.7 Evangelism Does Not Promise Temporal Happiness

The primary purpose of evangelism is not to promise people temporal happiness in return for following Christ. While ultimate joy and blessing results from giving one’s life to Christ, the gospel should not be presented in the form of a mere psychological panacea (Bosch, 2008:14). This is of particular import in the context of witness via social media, since a number of participants in the study indicated that they intentionally crafted their portrayal of Christ and the church to appear appealing to outsiders. Rice (2009:96-97) likens this practice to an arrangement of canvases that can be manipulated to amplify certain aspects of a message, while hiding others. Thus, the church should guard against purposefully presenting a skewed image of the gospel in order to appeal to outsiders.

5.8.8 Evangelism is not an Offer of Personal Bliss

Evangelism does not simply offer individuals personal bliss, but invites them into a life of discipleship, and enlists them for a mission (Bosch, 2008:15). In this sense, social media users in particular should guard against presenting the gospel in a disembodied and decontextualized form that does not take into account the sacrifice and suffering that this decision entails. It should be evident that the short-form status updates and brief messages typically shared on social networks do not always lend themselves to communicating the larger context of the gospel. Achieving this requires a long-term strategy that focuses on more than just online engagement.

With these principles in mind, the church will be in a position to be an effective witness to the transforming truth of Christ, without sacrificing important elements of the gospel simply because its message is communicated in a computer-mediated context.

5.9 Dealing with the Digital Divide

No proposal for an enhanced praxis in terms of the church's use of social media in a communal context would be complete without giving due consideration to the matter of the so-called digital divide. First mentioned as part of the descriptive-empirical task, the digital divide refers to disparities in access to the Internet and related technologies (such as social media) based on factors such as income, race, and location (Haythornthwaite & Rice, 2006:93). The primary problem associated with this divide stems from an assumption that access to digital devices such as computers and mobile phones is ubiquitous – a false assumption that may well lead to the exclusion of some from a world that has become central to the life of so many.

Addressing this issue on a practical level is not a simple matter: To begin with, the macro-forces that cause the existence of this divide – such as economic and social inequality (Alzouma, 2013:299) – are well beyond the control of the church. For this reason, Gould's suggestions (2013:51) that the church could help "increase access to digital technology" and "improve computer literacy" for congregants seem neither helpful nor realistic. Even if the church were to embark on such projects on a small scale (and there is no reason not to do so where this is possible), the larger social and economic drivers of this reality would still cause problems on a grand scale. For this reason, the church's approach to this matter is largely reactive, focusing on ways to manage the problem in its current state.

An overview of literature on the subject reveals two basic approaches to managing the impact of the digital divide. Both of these can be considered by congregations who serve communities where the digital divide may be a factor:

5.9.1 Sensitivity

Often, sensitivity to the existence of the digital divide represents a valuable starting point for congregations who endeavour to take this problem seriously. Marsden, Small, and Venkatesh (2003:38) present this sensitivity as a response to a macro-level societal problem that ultimately has a moral dimension: it is the duty of the party with access to the online world to consider and care for the one that does not. Bloomstein (2012:7) demonstrates how this

sensitivity could be reflected in a congregation's social media content strategy by generating online content that suits a specific group of users: For example, a congregation may choose not to share a large amount of video material on its online channels because consuming this content requires high-speed Internet access, a sufficiently advanced digital device, and the requisite amount of data or bandwidth – which may not be accessible to many congregation members.

5.9.2 Providing Additional Options

Vogt (2011:64) highlights the importance of providing non-digital options for congregation members without access to digital technology or social media. Thus while Gould's plan (2013:111) to fully integrate social media into all church communication plans may be valuable, sensitivity to the digital divide requires that this not be made the only option for communication and interaction. For example, sharing feedback about a new church project exclusively on a platform like Facebook does not only exclude a large number of people by default who do not have access to this platform, but also sends a strong message about the value the church places on its members. Particularly in congregations that may struggle with a generational digital divide, where there is a large gap between the social media uptake of younger and older congregants (Herring, 2008:71), it is always advisable to provide a number of communication options and never to limit communications activity to a single medium or social network.

Of course the considerations mentioned above do not improve the situation of those with no access to the Internet or digital devices, but they do go a long way towards including those who would have been left out in the cold.

5.10 Conclusions

As part of the pragmatic task, this chapter focused on providing a number of practical guidelines with a view to developing a new praxis that aligns with biblical norms for a Christian *koinonia* community. With an emphasis on meaningful relationship emerging as one of the most significant aspects of the study, the chapter began with the formulation of a number of

guidelines for maximising the impact and depth of online relationships. A framework for managing computer-mediated relationships was presented in the form of six constellations of related actions, including initiating; listening, remembering, and praying; asking, giving, and thanking, sharing, caring, and being together; pacing and choosing; and accepting and forgiving. Collectively, these actions provide a framework for vibrant relationships in an online context.

Dealing with addictive online behaviour is an essential element to consider. With this in mind, signs of social networking addiction were identified, and a three-fold plan was proposed that centred on accepting responsibility for the problem, finding support from others, and adapting Internet usage patterns. The concept of a social network fast was explored, and suggestions were shared for maximising the impact of such a fast before, during, and after the event. Engaging in social media fasts of this kind from time to time creates a fruitful opportunity for reflection on the impact of social media on the personal and relational lives of participants.

Unity is cultivated in the online sphere by making participants aware that they form a part of a larger whole; and this sense of unity can be further entrenched if social media users understand the principles of missional linking; thriving in nonequilibrium; and networked spiritual formation. These elements were discussed with a view to establishing transformational online bridging connections between individuals and larger communities.

Congregation members were shown to express their care for one another on social media platforms primarily by encouraging one another in their faith. Since social media users often shared encouraging and inspirational content posted on official church social media profiles in this way, this element was used as an example of the development of a viable social media content strategy. Devising such a content strategy requires answering questions about what needs to be accomplished; how the success of the content will be measured, what resources will be needed; what the nature of the message is that is being communicated; what content types need to be considered; how the content will be generated and delivered; and who will manage it.

It was revealed in an earlier phase of the study that none of the Hillsong congregations that participated in the study mobilised their social networks to engage in acts of sharing, like short-term social projects. For this reason time was spent investigating how to best mobilise an online audience. Doing so requires engaging a community with communication that has informational, interactive, and mobilising features. Drawing on these elements will assist in mobilising a social media audience to the greatest effect.

To many congregation members, social media platforms obviously represent an opportunity to share their faith. In order to do so effectively, a number of guiding principles were presented that focused on evangelism as core mission of the church; as a call into community; as a witness to God's action in the world; as invitation; as a risky endeavour; and an enterprise that promises neither temporal happiness nor personal bliss.

While not much can be done on a congregational level about the macro-factors causing the digital divide, it is necessary to consider ways to mitigate its impact on communities. With this in mind, an approach of sensitivity to the problem was proposed. It is also necessary to provide additional options (in other words, not just opportunities for digital feedback or interaction) where others do not have access to online networks and digital devices.

5.11 Overview

This chapter focused on the pragmatic task, and revolved around proposing practical guidelines aimed at developing a new praxis that is more closely aligned to the biblical norms identified during the normative task. A number of practical recommendations were formulated to enable urban congregations to devise and implement social media strategies aimed at fostering true, biblical *koinonia* to a greater degree than the current praxis allows. Recommendations along these lines were discussed against the background of the five practical expressions of *koinonia* – namely *koinonia*'s focus on relational aspects, unity, caring, sharing, and witnessing; after which the issue of a digital divide was also addressed.

CHAPTER SIX: SYNOPTIC OVERVIEW, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND THEMES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

6.1 Overview

Chapter 6 will conclude the study by providing a final synopsis of the research. At this stage, recommendations for potential future research will also be made.

6.2 Introduction

The research question investigated in this study was the following: Can the use of digital social networks in a church context help us to foster true *koinonia*, especially in urban congregations?

The following queries arose from the main research question:

- vi. What exactly does the biblical view of *koinonia* look like – in other words, what are the ideal characteristics of Christian community?
- vii. How do we define the concept of social media?
- viii. How has social media been used in Christian communities in the past?
- ix. How do Christian communities, particularly urban congregations, currently approach their social media activities, especially within the context of their attempts to foster *koinonia*?
- x. How should the church approach its social media endeavours in order to maximise its positive impact on our faith communities, while steering clear of potential problems?

The aim of the study was to ascertain to what degree digital social networks can help the urban church to achieve the objectives of true Christian community as expressed in the concept of *koinonia*.

With this aim in mind, the following objectives were defined:

- vi. To formulate a biblically correct picture of the characteristics of true Christian community by referring to the New Testament concept of *koinonia*.
- vii. To formulate a robust definition of the concept of social media, and to provide a basic outline of its key components.
- viii. To provide an overview of how social media has been used to date as a ministry tool by Christian congregations in their attempts to promote *koinonia* in their midst.
- ix. To evaluate the current use of social media in an urban congregational environment and to critically explore how and to what degree these practices have assisted in achieving the ideal characteristics of Christian community as expressed in the concept of *koinonia*.
- x. To propose guidelines for best practice to maximise the positive impact of social media use in ministry, and to clearly point to possible pitfalls.

Osmer's model (2008) for practical theology was used to guide the structure of the study. This model includes four distinct theological tasks, namely the normative task (Chapter 2); the descriptive-empirical task (Chapter 3); the interpretive task (Chapter 4); and the pragmatic task (Chapter 5).

The structure of the study can be summarised as follows:

- i. Chapter 2 provided a critical overview of scholarly work and biblical sources pertaining to the concept of *koinonia*, as well as a basic outline of the history of social media and its use in Christian congregations.
- ii. Chapter 3 was presented in the form of a qualitative empirical study undertaken on three campuses of Hillsong Church.
- iii. Chapter 4 delved into the data obtained through the qualitative empirical study in order to expound on perceived trends. Themes were critically discussed in relation to the normative statements made in the initial stages of the study.
- iv. Chapter 5 proposed practical guidelines aimed at developing a new praxis that is more closely aligned to the biblical norms identified in the first stage of the thesis.
- v. The current chapter (Chapter 6) contains a synopsis of the study, and recommendations for future research.

6.3 Summary of Chapters 2-5

This section will focus on a cursory overview of Chapters 2-5 of the study:

6.3.1 Summary of Chapter 2

Chapter 2 commenced with an exploration of the concept of *koinonia* as a descriptive framework for the sense of community within the New Testament church and beyond. This was done by tracing the idea through the biblical text and in various literary sources.

The etymology of the word *koinonia* was considered first. The Greek adjectival root *koinos* (κοινός) was identified as the etymon upon which a number of derivatives of the word are built. This group of words includes the noun *koinonia* (κοινωνία), which generally conveys the overarching meanings of “association,” “communion,” “fellowship,” or “close relationship”.

A biblical overview of the concept of *koinonia* was then offered. The idea of *koinonia* was depicted as a reflection of God’s Trinitarian, and uniquely relational nature. The divine triune communion was seen as the highest expression of unity – a model of what true *koinonia* should be and the archetype of the unity within the church.

The idea was then traced in Lukan sources, beginning with the calling of the very first followers of Jesus in Luke, and culminating in a vivid portrayal of the dynamic and vigorous character of the fledgling church as Acts reached its conclusion. This was followed by an overview of Johannine thought on the subject, largely focusing on fellowship as a function of a church abiding in Christ, enjoying a unity modelled on the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit. The attention also turned to Pauline reflection on *koinonia*, which was shown to constantly return to the triune God as the source and model for true fellowship. The pastoral slant of Paul’s books also allowed for a more nuanced exploration of the practical dimension of *koinonia*. Other biblical sources for *koinonia* language, such as a direct mention in Hebrews 13:16, and various indirect mentions, were also traced.

Based on this biblical overview, a number of practical expressions of *koinonia* in real terms were identified. This includes ideas such as the relational focus of *koinonia*, as well as its focus on unity, sharing, caring, and witnessing.

The next stage of this study was devoted to an overview of the rise and significance of digital social networks, and their role in Christian communities. The concept of a Network Society, which presents a view of the world as a body of interconnected communities, was discussed, and the idea of an online community was investigated.

The attention then turned to the concept of a social network, which was defined as an Internet-based service that allows individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile, articulate a list of other users or friends with whom they share a connection of some kind, and then view and interact with content generated by those users. Various aspects of these networks were discussed, including concepts such as personal profiles, friends lists, communication tools, and feedback tools. This was followed by an abridged history of digital social networks, with a special emphasis on networks that exist today.

A broad overview of the history of social media use in the church as a whole was given, followed by a more specific look at the way social media is used in Hillsong Church. Details of the various social media profiles run by the church were provided, along with examples of some of the types of posts the church published on its social media profiles.

In conclusion, the focus fell on a number of challenges faced specifically by churches in urban environments. Some of the challenges included time constraints caused by a busy lifestyle, poor quality of social ties, and issues pertaining to the diverse nature of urban populations.

6.3.2 Summary of Chapter 3

Chapter 3 focused on the descriptive-empirical task, which was presented in the form of a qualitative empirical study undertaken on the Cape Town, New York, and Sydney campuses of Hillsong Church.

The chapter began with a discussion of research design and an overview of the research strategy. A qualitative approach was chosen, and the full research plan was discussed. A total of 16 one-on-one interviews with participants from 21-50 years of age were conducted across three campuses of Hillsong Church.

In the second half of the chapter the research results were presented. Altogether 10 themes and 26 sub-themes were identified by the coder:

Theme 1 Degree of interconnection

Sub-themes Interconnection with other congregation members
Interconnection with church leaders
Interconnection with other Hillsong campuses

Theme 2 Frequency of use

Sub-themes Frequency of connection to others in social networks
Frequency of interaction with church community via social media

Theme 3 Role as communication platform

Sub-themes Daily communication with congregation members
Sharing of prayer requests and challenges
Apprehension to share due to privacy concerns

Theme 4 Positive role of online interaction in real-life relationships

Sub-themes Ongoing communication contributing to health of relationships
Starting point for new relationships

Theme 5 Limitations of online relationships

Sub-themes Awareness of limitations of online platforms for relationship building
Awareness of possible negative effects on real-life relationships

Theme 6 Sense of Unity

Sub-themes Awareness of wider church community
Uniting congregation members from different backgrounds

- Theme 7** Role as a platform for encouragement
- Sub-themes** Exhortation of congregation members via social media
Sharing of inspirational content with others
- Theme 8** Witnessing through social media
- Sub-themes** A platform for intentional witness
Consciously crafting an appealing image of church
- Theme 9** Role in overcoming challenges of city life
- Sub-themes** Role in overcoming geographical separation
Maintaining connection with congregation despite busy lifestyle
Improving vitality of social ties
Uniting diverse groups
- Theme 10** Issues not mentioned
- Sub-themes** Exclusion of those without access to Internet and devices
Impact of time devoted to social networking
Disadvantages of constant state of connection
Use of social media to mobilise for social initiatives

Data from the interviews was analysed and discussed based on these themes.

6.3.3 Summary of Chapter 4

Chapter 4 focused on the interpretive task, with the researcher delving into the data obtained through the qualitative empirical study in order to articulate an insightful interpretation of the themes and patterns that were identified. It was decided that the data would be discussed using the five practical expressions of *koinonia* identified in the second chapter as an overarching framework.

Issues related to the relational focus of *koinonia* were discussed first. Different relationship types were considered, after which the basic characteristics or building blocks of relationships were identified as interaction, communication, self-disclosure, and feedback.

As part of the section on interaction, the high degree of online interconnection between congregation members was discussed. The frequency of interaction among participants were discussed, along with the possible impact of their frequent social media use. Here, it was pointed out that the activities of some participants fulfilled the six criteria generally regarded as classic indicators of addictive habits. The disadvantages of this constant state of connection were also considered.

As part of the section on communication, the use and suitability of social networks as communication platforms was discussed. The concern of some participants around the privacy implications of online communication was also considered. The fact that using social media in this way helped some participants to overcome geographical separation from friends was discussed, and the way that participants managed to continuously communicate via these channels despite their busy lifestyles was considered.

As part of the section on self-disclosure and feedback, an overview of communication ethics was presented. The positive role of online interaction in real-life relationships was highlighted, while the idea that social networks often served as a starting point for new relationships was discussed. Following on from this, the natural limitation in terms of the number of meaningful relationships that humans can be involved in, was considered.

Issues related to unity were then discussed. It was shown that participants looked to social media as a way to connect to the wider faith community beyond their immediate congregation, and that these channels served to cultivate a sense of unity among congregation members who came from different backgrounds.

As the attention turned to issues related to caring, it was shown that participants often used social media channels to encourage their church friends by sharing messages and inspirational content from the church's social media feeds, and similar messages that they authored

themselves. However, it was demonstrated that a number of practical aspects of caring – including hospitality and the extension of forgiveness – can not be practiced online in a meaningful way.

During a discussion on issues related to sharing, it was shown that social media was not being used to mobilise participants to take part in any social justice or aid initiatives. In order to show how the church might adapt its practice in this regards in future, the collective power of fast-organising online groups, or “smart mobs,” was discussed.

As part of a discussion of witness in online communities, reference was made to three classic types of Christian witness, namely presence, proclamation, and persuasion evangelism. It was shown that online witness mainly involved the kind of interaction associated with presence and proclamation evangelism.

Finally, the problem of the so-called digital divide, or the disparities in access to the Internet and related technologies (such as social media) based on gender, income, race, and location, was highlighted. It was argued that a sub-group of congregants may be excluded from these online communities because they did not have access to the Internet and digital devices.

6.3.4 Summary of Chapter 5

Chapter 5 centred on the pragmatic task, and therefore focused on proposing practical guidelines aimed at developing a new praxis that is more closely aligned to the biblical norms identified in the normative stage of the study.

Since an emphasis on meaningful relationship was the most significant aspect to emerge from the study, the initial focus fell on the formulation of guidelines for maximising the impact and depth of online relationships. A framework for managing computer-mediated relationships was presented in the form of six constellations of related actions that included the elements of initiating; listening, remembering, and praying; asking, giving, and thanking, sharing, caring, and being together; pacing and choosing; and accepting and forgiving.

A section dealing with addictive online behaviour followed. Signs of social networking addiction were identified, and a three-fold plan for overcoming these addictions was proposed. This included accepting responsibility for the problem, finding support from others, and adapting Internet usage patterns. The concept of a social network fast was also explored.

The subject of unity was discussed against the background of the principles of missional linking; thriving in nonequilibrium; and networked spiritual formation. These concepts were discussed with a view to establishing transformational online bridging connections between individuals and larger communities.

This was followed by a discussion about the way that participants expressed their care for one another by sharing encouraging and inspirational content online. As part of this discussion, the basic elements of a viable social media content strategy were discussed. Thereafter, time was spent investigating how to best mobilise an online audience. Doing so was shown to require engaging a community with communication that has informational, interactive, and mobilising features.

The practice of using social media platforms to witness to others was also discussed. In order to facilitate more effective witness, a number of guiding principles were presented that focused on evangelism as core mission of the church; as a call into community; as a witness to God's action in the world; as invitation; as a risky endeavour; and as an enterprise that promises neither temporal happiness nor personal bliss.

Finally, basic strategies for dealing with the so-called digital divide were proposed. An approach of sensitivity to the problem was suggested, and the necessity to provide non-digital opportunities for interaction and feedback to those who does not have access to the digital world, was highlighted.

6.4 Final Remarks

The aim of this study was to ascertain to what degree digital social networks can help the urban church to achieve the objectives of true Christian community as expressed in the

concept of *koinonia*. Using Osmer's model for practical theology in the form of the normative, descriptive-empirical, interpretive, and pragmatic tasks, it emerged that online social networks did indeed offer compelling opportunities to foster a sense of *koinonia*. While social networks did not function as the perfect platform for relational interaction, and while some challenges and shortcomings were identified, it was clear that the online sphere, as an extension of the existing offline relational world of congregation members, offered unique opportunities to engage in behaviour that fosters a sense of community.

Thus, in conclusion, it can be stated that the aim and objectives of the study were accomplished. Moreover, the central theoretical argument identified in the first chapter – that digital social networks can be a powerful and effective ministry tool with the potential to promote community and deepen fellowship in Christian congregations – is shown to be valid.

6.5 Recommendations and Themes for Further Research

The following recommendations are made based on the research:

- It is suggested that Hillsong Church (and other congregations drawing on this research) embark on campaigns to improve awareness of their social media efforts, in an effort to draw more congregation members into this form of community.
- It is suggested that Hillsong Church (and other congregations drawing from this research) maintain and enhance their activity on social networks, and encourage congregation members to do the same.
- It is suggested that Hillsong Church (and other congregations drawing on this research) present courses from time to time to assist congregation members who may struggle with addictive behaviour in their online activities. Recommendations made in the pragmatic phase of the study can be used as a starting point for these courses.
- It is suggested that Hillsong Church (and congregations drawing on this research) consider opportunities to use social media platforms to mobilise their communities to take part in short-term, ad hoc relief and social justice projects.
- It is suggested that Hillsong Church (and congregations drawing on this research) use this research to refine and guide their social media endeavours going forward.

Much remains to be learned in this relatively new field of study, especially from the perspective of practical theology. For this reason, the following themes for possible future research are suggested:

- There is a clear need for research about effective treatment programs for Internet-related addictions. This needs to be investigated from a practical theological perspective if the church is to make a meaningful contribution in this regard.
- A longitudinal study to observe the effect of social media use on Christian communities over time could identify advantages and challenges that have not yet been discovered.
- A qualitative study to investigate the effect of exclusion from social media communities on the psyche and relational life of those affected by the digital divide could open the eyes of the church to this pressing problem.
- Case studies of situations where the church successfully used social media platforms to mobilise communities to reach out to others can awaken congregations to the possibilities of such initiatives.

Clearly, digital social networks present compelling and interesting opportunities for fostering a sense of *koinonia* within Christian communities. While these networks present some challenges to those who endeavour to use them for relational interaction, they represent an exciting new milieu within which the church can pursue its mission to function as the body of Christ within the world.

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APPENDIX A: Example of Consent Form

FORM FOR INFORMED CONSENT

CONFIDENTIAL! / VERTROUWLIK!

N.B! This document contains confidential information intended exclusively for the applicant(s), the Ethics Committee of the North-West University and the designated evaluators. If this document, or parts thereof, comes into your possession in error, you are requested to return it immediately to the Ethics Committee of the North-West University or destroy it. Unauthorised possession, reading, studying, copying, use or distribution of this material, or any other form of abuse, is illegal and punishable.

Every human participant in any project for the purpose of research or education (and, where applicable, the authorised parent / guardian) must be fully informed about the project and must sign a form for informed consent, before any participation may take place.

General Project Information

Title of Project

Fostering koinonia: A critical evaluation of the value of digital social networks in urban congregations

Institution

North West University

Names & contact details of project staff

(Your first line contact for enquiries, help and complaints related to the project or your participation in the project. If you wish to terminate your participation to the project, you may contact these persons at any time.)

Researcher: Heinz Oldewage

Mobile number: 084 5222 315

Work number: 021 468 8181

E-mail address: heinz.oldewage@24.com

What is the purpose of this project?

The purpose of this project is to determine to what extent digital social media platforms play a role in the experiences of members of urban congregations. The aim is to determine whether use of these networks can contribute to fostering a sense of true community in these congregations. Other elements of this study will be explained verbally.

What will be expected of me as participant?

A request is made that you participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher, that will last 30 minutes to one hour.

What precautions have been taken to protect me as participant?

All information will be handled as confidential, and the identity of the participants will not be revealed unless they specifically agree to this in writing. All data generated from interviews will be stored anonymously and securely.

In signing this document, you confirm that you understand participation in the study is completely voluntary, and that you are free to withdraw from the process at any time. You also confirm that you understand there is no financial remuneration or any other benefit to either you as a participant, or the researcher.

Findings of the research will be made available to all participants who choose to receive it, and will be available in the library of the North West University and other academic sources.

You are invited to take part in the research project as described above. It is important that you also read and understand the following general principles, which are applicable to all participants in our research projects:



Continues below

- Participation in the project is completely voluntary and no pressure, however subtle, may be placed on you to take part.
- It is possible that you may not derive any benefit personally from your participation in the project, although the knowledge that may be gained by means of the project, may benefit other persons or communities. You may not be bribed to participate.
- You are free to withdraw from the project at any time, without stating reasons, and you will in no way be harmed by so doing. You may also request that your data no longer be used. However, you are kindly requested not to withdraw from the project without careful consideration, since it may have a detrimental effect on, inter alia, the statistical reliability of the project.
- By agreeing to take part in the project, you are also giving consent for the data that will be generated to be used by the researchers for scientific purposes as they see fit, with the caveat that it will be confidential and that your name will not be linked to any of the data without your consent.
- The project objectives are always secondary to your well-being and actions taken will always place your interests above those of the project.

CONSENT:

I, the undersigned, have read the preceding premises in connection with the project, and have also heard the oral version thereof and I declare that I understand it.

I was given the opportunity to discuss relevant aspects of the project with the Project Head and I hereby declare that I am taking part in the project voluntarily.


Participant


Researcher

19-08-2014
Date

APPENDIX B: Pilot Study Transcript Sample

Congregation: Cape Town

Key:

R = Researcher

P = Participant

Interview Content:

R: [Researcher explains research project and ethics principles. Obtains consent.]

R: Uhm... So thank you for agreeing to take part in the study. So, as I explained, this is a study about social media and the way that it's used in Christian congregations, and the question I'm trying to answer is... is social media helping us to build better communities... better Christian communities? Uhm, is it helping us to, to, form communities that's built on this idea called koinonia, which is just an idea that, that speaks about, like... a really close-knit community. But it's something special... something... it's not just this idea of, oh, we're close to each other – it's actually something biblical, something spiritual, something profound – it's a very close community. And the question is, is social media helping us to build these kinds of communities, or is it actually hindering us from doing so. So that's the... that's the background idea – that's why we're doing this study. And, of course, then, this will help me to answer that question. I'm doing quite a few interviews like this, trying to figure out how people are experiencing this in the real world in congregations, in Hillsong churches, uhm, here, and in other locations around the world as well. I just need your input; I just need your thoughts, your ideas, and your opinions – just share your experiences – that's all that you need to do in this interview.

P: Yes, okay, that's fine.

R: I don't have to explain more? Okay, that's great. Uhm, okay, I think just before we start, just to, just to kind of get a feel for this subject, maybe I can just ask you, just a few random questions that I want to ask. How long... how long have you been a member of, of Hillsong Church... you're in Cape Town, right, Hillsong Church Cape Town?

P: Yes. I've been a member for six years.

R: Six years. That's from...

P: 2008.

R: Okay, that's more or less since the beginning?

P: Yes, more or less since the beginning.

R: Okay, uhm... how often do you spend time on social networks?

P: Uhm, sho, I spend a lot of time on social networks. I would say... at least once every two hours, I would go on just to, you know...

R: On your phone, or...

P: Yes, on my phone, just to see what's going on – Twitter, Facebook.

R: Okay, so, Twitter, Facebook...

P: Instagram

R: Which one do you... which social network do you enjoy using the most? Which ones do you hang out on a lot?

P: I think, yes, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

R: Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. And do you favour any one of them specifically, or not really?

P: Yes, no, no... not really.

R: Okay. And what, like, what do you typically do when you use these networks? What do you get up to? What do you do? You say you go there quite often – what do you actually do?

P: Uhm, Facebook... I read status updates, just check on my friends, uhm, post some photos, sometimes on Instagram, see what other people, you know, posted. So, all sorts.

R: Okay, okay good. All sorts of things. And, do you ever interact with other people via social media? So you say, you know, you keep up to date with what they do... do you actually...

P: Yes, yes, lots.

R: Do you interact with them?

P: Yes, on a daily basis, on a daily basis, interacting with them.

R: How, how do you interact with them? What do you do?

P: I message, or comment on their, uhm, status updates, liking their photos, messaging.

R: Okay, so, okay, well... having asked you these questions, let me ask you my, my main research question, the main question that I want, uhm, to be answered, and that question, is this: What role, if any, has social media played in your experience as a part of this congregation and its people? Let me just state that again: What role has social media played, if any, in your experience as a part of this congregation and its people?

P: Okay, uhm...

R: How would you answer that, just off the top of your head?

P: I would say social media keeps me in touch with my church friends, everyday, who I otherwise would only see on Sundays, or every Sunday, as we don't always attend the same services. Uhm, I can see, like, via their posts or status updates, how they are, and we often encourage one another on social media. Like, I will, for instance, if I see someone is having a bad day, send a bible verse or a message, uhm, to let them know I'm thinking of them, keeping them in my prayer. It has even happened that a friend was going through a rough time, and she messaged a bunch of girlfriends to ask for prayer, and then, you know, keeps us posted on how she's doing and what's happening in that specific situation. Uhm... yes, keeping up to date with goings-on at church, like, when you've been away, uhm, it's so much easier as well – updates on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram, uhm, so you know what's going on. Uhm, like, I run a connect group, or what other churches would call a cell, and, uhm, we have this WhatsApp group where every, every week I let the people know where it's going to be and at what time...

R: WhatsApp, it's like a social messaging service?

P: Yes, it's like a, yes, like a social messaging service. So, then I would message the group when and where, uhm, we're going to have it. And I think if it wasn't for WhatsApp I would have had to phone everyone, which is kind of a schlep. Now it's like a push of a button away. And then throughout the week we chat, and if someone needs prayer they'll ask for prayer on the group. And if someone had something good happen to them, you know, we all celebrate together, uhm, yes, so...

R: So, you say, you say you're, you're connected to these other people in church by social media - am I understanding that correctly? To what extent? Like, how many... do you have many followers, people who follow

you, and you follow other people... do you have many friends on Facebook from church, how does, how does that work – what does that look like in practice?

P: Sho, I have... I think most of my friends on Facebook are from church. Like, most of the people on there are people that I met at church, and, there's even friends that I made on Facebook, who I didn't know, but saw that they were in church, and you know, you friend them... 'cause you've seen them once or twice but you don't really know them. So you friend them, and then, when you finally meet at church it feels like you've known them forever, because you've been friends on Facebook, and you see what they're doing, and you see their status updates and whatever.

R: Okay, that makes sense. Uhm... Are you... would you say you have contact with any of the leaders in church? Like, to what extent are you connected to them in that way? Do you follow their accounts, or do you...

P: Yes, yes, I, I follow most of the leaders, I even follow some of the leaders of the overseas congregations, to see, you know, what they're saying about what's happening, you know, there, and, yes...

R: Does it make you feel more...

P: Yes, it makes you feel more connected to the overall, like, overall church, you know.

R: Okay. What is... what is your interaction with other people in church like on these social networks, like, in practice, what does that look like? You say you... message each other... is, is that the way that it works? What, what do you... how do you interact with other people in church on, online... you know, on social media.

P: I think it depends on how well I know them, uhm, if it's, if it's a good friend, yes, we'll message each other, sometimes daily, hear how it's going, you know encourage each other. If you see they're having a bad day, you know, I'll send them a verse or whatever.

R: A bible verse?

P: Yes, a bible verse or, you know...

R: Do you ever... do people share their problems and things on, on Facebook, and...

P: All the time... All the time... Yes. Yes, so, like, when someone's having a bad day, there's been instances where people ask for prayer, uhm, and the, you know, we will pray, or I will pray, for them, and then just let them know... and they keep you updated on the situation.

R: Do you tag each other, and @ reply... thing like that, or not really?

P: Yes, if, yes, if there's something interesting that I see I want to share, say like an interesting article, uhm, I would @ someone to share it with them.

R: Okay. Do you think social media has helped you to build a relationship with someone that you may... maybe didn't know that well before? Or is that not the kind of thing you use social media for? Someone in church, where you maybe didn't know that person very well, and it helped you to build a relationship... or does it not work that way?

P: It, sometimes I think it can. I have friends who, like, I knew them... well, I saw them at church but didn't know them, and then, uhm, you friend them on Facebook or they friend you, just because you know they're in church, and, you know, we're part of this big family, uhm, and then through their status updates, you know, you kind of get to know them and you start talking at church and you build a relationship that way. So I would say in that regard, social media helps a lot, you know, to get to know the person. It's not like, when you then have a conversation with them, it's less awkward, if I can say it that way.

R: Do you ever share content on social media that's related to your congregation with other people – church members, or with, maybe even other people?

P: Yes, yes I do, yes.

R: What do you do?

P: Like, we have Sisterhood, uhm, that's for the women of the city. So whenever there's a Sisterhood, uhm, Saturday...

R: Meeting?

P: Yes, meeting, yes, a Sisterhood meeting, I would share what the church shared on Instagram or Facebook or whatever; I would share it on my page.

R: So what pressures do you associate with living in a city... being part of a city church, a city congregation, and has social media helped in any way, or hindered in any way, any of those – you know, has it had a positive or a negative impact in that regard, in any way? What... are there any challenges?

P: I think for me, the positives would be, uhm... I live, we live very far away from each other, like, the friends, you know, your friends. So, say, my best friend lives like forty minutes away, so we don't see each other that often. And through social media, I mean, we talk every day, and I, you know, see the photos that she posts and that is... with a lot of people in church... it's the same, you know.

R: Is that interaction enough for you? Does it...

P: No, it's not enough, but it definitely helps. I mean, it makes it a lot easier to keep in touch.

R: Do you feel your friendship with that person, that person living that far away... has it grown, or is it just a question of... us... being... talking more.

P: No, no, it's definitely, yes, it's not just about talking more. The friendship has grown. I mean, we would see, we maybe see each other once a month, so if it wasn't for us chatting on Facebook, or me sending her an article about this or that, or, you know, praying when she needs prayer, and she... you know, her doing the same for me, then I would have seen her, like... four weeks ago.

R: Okay, I think that is more or less everything that I wanted to ask you. Uhm, yes, I think that's about it for me, thanks so much. I think what I'm going to do is, if there's... if anything comes up, you know, if I need anything else I'll give you a shout and maybe just contact you again, and yes, thank you very, very much – I really appreciate your time and your effort and I appreciate the fact that you shared your views and your opinions about this topic. Was there anything else you wanted to add to what you have said?

P: No, not really.

R: Thanks so much!

P: Thank you.