

Master's Thesis

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# Exploring the effectiveness of content marketing in the Christian church

– Case Christian Assembly Mexico



Master's Thesis | Abstract

Turku University of Applied Sciences

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# Exploring the effectiveness of content marketing in the Christian church

Case Christian Assembly Mexico

Content marketing and storytelling have become vital for organizations including Christian churches that want to reach a targeted audience, increase engagement, and build loyalty. This study explores the experiences the members of Christian Assembly church in Mexico have with content marketing to evaluate how well content serves their needs. Additionally, this study aims to identify patterns in member's content use and suggest best content channels for maximizing the benefits of content marketing to the church organization.

The research data was gathered using semi-structured interviews and an online survey with church members. Discussions with church members revealed that members use content to support their goals of spiritual growth and engagement with the church. Members who are more committed to the organization were found to benefit more from content, while others expressed a need for personal guidance. A wide variety of channels were shown to be used by the members based on the type of content desired. The findings show that content marketing is an effective tool that church members use and benefit from but that requires planning to achieve its goals without adding to the workload of the organization.

Keywords:

content marketing strategy, content plan, religious content marketing, storytelling, Christian church

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## Exploring the effectiveness of content marketing in the Christian church

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Sisältömarkkinoinnista on tullut elintärkeää organisaatioille, kuten kristillisille kirkkoille, jotka haluavat tavoittaa yleisönsä sekä lisätä sitoutumista ja lojaaliutta. Tämä tutkimus selvitti kirkon jäsenten kokemuksia sisältömarkkinoinnista, pyrkimyksenä arvioida sisältöjen kykyä vastata seurakuntalaisten tarpeisiin. Tapaustudkimusryhmänä käytettiin Meksikossa sijaitsevaa seurakuntaryhmää. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli myös ehdottaa kirkolle tehokkaimpia kanavia, joiden avulla maksimoida sisältömarkkinoinnista organisaatiolle koituvat hyödyt.

Tutkimusdata kerättiin puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilla ja jäsenille suunnatulla verkkokyselyllä. Keskustelut seurakuntalaisten kanssa paljastivat, että nämä käyttävät sisältöjä hengellisen kasvun ja kirkkoon sitoutumisen tavoitteidensa tukena. Sitoutuneimpien jäsenten todettiin hyötyvän sisällöistä enemmän, kun taas muut jäsenet ilmaisivat tarvitsevansa henkilökohtaista ohjausta. Jäsenet käyttävät erilaisia sisältökanavia sen mukaan, minkä tyyppistä sisältöä he haluavat. Tulokset osoittavat, että sisältömarkkinointi on tehokas väline, jota kirkon jäsenet käyttävät ja josta he hyötyvät, mutta joka vaatii suunnittelua saavuttaakseen tavoitteensa lisäämättä organisaation työtaakkaa.

Asiasanat:

sisältömarkkinointistrategia, sisältösuunnitelma, uskonnollinen sisältömarkkinointi, tarinankerronta, kristillinen kirkko, kristillinen kirkko

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## List of abbreviations

CM	Content Marketing
CMS	Content Marketing Strategy
RCM	Religious Content Marketing

# 1 Introduction

“Content is king in the digital age and stories are the key to content” (Aaker, 2018, p.19). Content marketing (CM) covers many types of platforms, channels, and forms of media. As new content platforms arise, social media strategist Karra (2023) argues, so trends and techniques are changing the way businesses – and Christian churches – reach customers.

In a world where most of the population owns a mobile device (Statista, 2023), it is nearly impossible for consumers to not receive any form of media shouting out for their attention, as McLachlan (2022), cited in Statista (2022), claims. However, consumers who are constantly overwhelmed with push messaging have increased the use of ad-blockers to avoid it, as business and technology editor and researcher Wise (2023) points out. On the other hand, as Lieb and Szymanski (2017, p. 1), authors of *Content, the Atomic Particle of Marketing*, affirm, interactive media allows consumers to control the conversation and consent to only the content they want and need as they prefer. According to research (Content Marketing Institute, 2011), to be more effective at creating valuable content, successful marketers document their content marketing strategy and follow it. Alongside content marketing, brand storytelling allows audiences to connect emotionally, forming long-lasting bonds for the way brands are instantly recognized and remembered, as Herskovitz and Crystal (2023), authors of *The Essential Brand Persona*, describe. In today’s age, customers expect superior and consistent content from their favorite brands, where consistency is one of the factors determining business growth and success, according to Riserbato (2021), an expert in content creation and writer at the HubSpot website.

## Background

The Christian Assembly is a church based in Mexico City that faced a digital transition during the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many other organizations, the

Christian Assembly was affected by the restrictions on public gatherings. During this period, new digital communication channels to reach out to its members were enabled. At first, the Christian Assembly mainly focused on streaming live videos to continue delivering their sermons. Later, other mobile and social media channels increased in activity, mostly to share news and information and to provide personal support. This was a way to continue the regular program and address members' needs. However, there was no Content Marketing Strategy (CMS) to guide these efforts, and the workload for pastors increased. A lack of a CMS can result in a missed opportunity to build loyalty, educate, and nurture the audience efficiently (Content Marketing Institute and Marketing Profs, 2021), thus achieving the church mission. After the gathering restrictions were lifted, only some of the channels remained active, while others largely reduced their activity. The Christian Assembly leaders are not sure how CM benefits its members and are hesitant to implement it because of concerns that the idea might not be sufficiently popular, leading to a greater workload. Addressing this problem will have practical advantages for the Christian Assembly.

The main research question is: 'How effective is CM at addressing Christian Assembly church members' needs and what potential communication channels and formats can be used to maximize its benefits?' The research aims to assess the effectiveness of CM in providing solutions for Christian Assembly members' needs after their interaction and make recommendations for maximizing its benefits. The purpose of this case study is to discover the experiences that Christian Assembly members at different levels of commitment have had with CM as a source for personal and spiritual support and identify patterns indicating potential communication channels for maximizing the benefits of CM.

Through this study, the author will contribute to the Christian Assembly's mission by opening an opportunity to engage and delight its members with relevant content that answers their everyday challenges and promotes spiritual growth. As a product of this work, the author will familiarize herself with the



process of planning, developing, and implementing a content marketing strategy as a way of distributing authentic and engaging content. This thesis will support the author's skills in brand storytelling to successfully communicate the value of organizations in an authentic and engaging way.

To answer the suggested research questions, the primary theoretical background for this research is content marketing and content marketing strategy by Lieb and Szymanski (2017) and Investis Digital (n.d.). Brand storytelling by Aaker (2018) and Rodriguez, M. (2020) Religious content marketing by Luna (2021), Dukić, Dukić and Ružić (2014), and Hutchings (2010) Other key online sources for the development of this thesis include survey reports, journals, the HubSpot website, and The Content Marketing Institute website, both authorities in the field of content marketing and storytelling. The theory part will provide relevant information on CM best practices, insights into the value CM brings to organizations, and the power of stories to communicate a strategic message.

## **Research and Development Methodology**

To achieve the given purpose of this study, a mixed method embedded case study methodology will be employed to gain insights on the Christian Assembly members. This research will collect both qualitative and quantitative data, which will be analyzed individually residing side by side providing an overall composite assessment of the problem. The mixing of the data in this embedded mixed method study will occur in the final discussion at the interpretation stage of the research process. A semi-structured, individual online interview will provide the author with understanding of the experiences of the participants with CM. Subsequently, a self-completed online questionnaire will be undertaken to identify patterns indicating potential communication channels for maximizing the benefits of CM. The questionnaire is particularly useful in providing information on shared opinions of the targeted audience regarding preferred digital channels. Desk research from published sources forms an integral part of this

research to capture the essence of the related topics. The research data collected will be reviewed and analyzed to form a knowledge base of written material to make rational choices and define boundaries.

The structure of this research is as follows: After introduction, in chapter two, a literature analysis is completed to provide a description of content marketing and related terms. Next, an account of the importance of documenting a content marketing strategy is presented, followed by a framework of its basic components. The last section explores relevant literature on religious content marketing and reviews how it is employed today by Christian churches. Chapter three presents a literature review to examine the nature of storytelling and offers a summary of its effects on consumers. The next section reviews the value of defining the story structure and finding the purpose for doing so, followed by a brief overview of the components of good storytelling for content marketing. Chapter four includes the research design, data collection, and sampling. Chapter five presents the findings of the research thematically and statistically. In Chapter six the results are discussed, followed by practical recommendations and suggestions for further research. Chapter seven presents the conclusions and a brief overview of the author's learning process.

## 2 Content marketing as a strategic approach

Content marketing (CM) has become a key strategy for business [Christian churches], to reach a targeted audience and increase brand awareness, sales, engagement, and loyalty, as Baker (2022) claims. This chapter provides a description of content marketing and related terms, followed by an overview of the importance of documenting a strategy and a framework with its basic components. The last section explores Religious Content Marketing (RCM) and reviews how it is employed today by Christian churches.

### 2.1 Content marketing and related terms

CM is vital because it answers audience questions, helps brands build trust, develop relationships, improve conversions, and generate leads, as Riserbato (2021) states. CM provides relevant and useful content to prospects and customers to help them solve issues in their work or personal lives, as Content Marketing Institute (2023) states. The Content Marketing Institute (2021) defines CM as a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing **valuable**, **relevant**, and **consistent** content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience with the objective of driving profitable customer action. This definition (Figure 1) highlights three important aspects to consider.

#### Content Marketing as a Strategic Approach

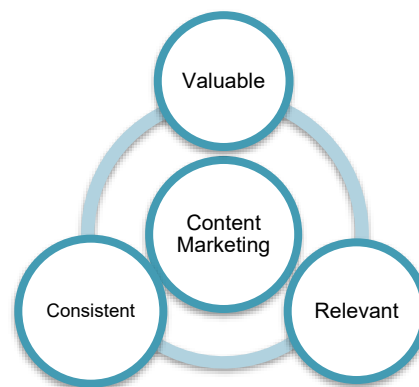


Figure 1. Content Marketing as a Strategic Approach.

1. CM provides tangible **value**, CM is most successful when providing for substantially unfulfilled needs, as Harris (2018), director of content strategy at Content Marketing Institute, describes. Additionally, Baker (2022), marketing manager at HubSpot, asserts that CM should provide solutions and enable customers to do their tasks more efficiently.
2. **Relevant**, CM communicates with the target audience in their own language in an appealing way, as Harris (2018) suggests. Neuwirth (2016), client-focused marketing leader at Content Marketing Institute, proposes three types of topics to create relevant content: 1) based on what the audience wants to hear about and helps them achieve their goals; 2) credible and within the organization's wheelhouse to become a serious source of value; and 3) innovative, providing new thinking to help create growth.
3. **Consistent**, for content to find viral success, as Harris (2018) states, it should be produced continuously, delivered on a reliable schedule, and with the best quality, value and purpose expected by the audience. Baker (2022) suggests that the audience should be able to recognize the brand immediately as they consume the content.

The increased use of CM has led to a confusion of related terms in practice; however, they do not mean the same (Figure 2). While CMS answers why a brand is creating content and who the brand is helping in a way no one else can, CS guides the marketing efforts across the organization, and CP executes the strategy. It is important to note that a CMS needs to be developed before building a CP (Content Marketing Institute, 2011).

## Content Marketing Strategy, Content Strategy, and Content Plan

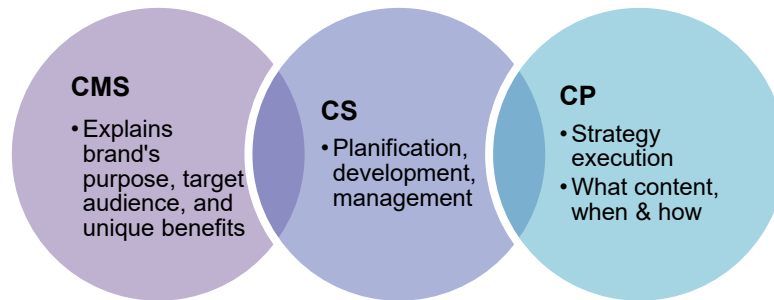


Figure 2. Content Marketing Strategy, Content Strategy, and Content Plan.

- **Content Marketing Strategy**, as defined by the Content Marketing Institute (2011), is an actionable plan that outlines how content will help brands achieve larger business goals. CMS answers questions to 'why' a brand is creating content, 'who' the brand is helping, and 'how' it will help them in a way no one else can.
- **Content Strategy**, according to Lieb and Szymanski (2017), is the planification, development, and management of informational content. CS encompasses creation, repeatability, delivery, governance, and business goal achievement, guiding all organizational efforts, including marketing efforts.
- A **Content Plan**, as described by the Content Marketing Institute (2011), is a tactical document that outlines strategy execution and team responsibilities for each task, defining key topics, content creation, sharing methods, and specific calls to action for a content marketing strategy. Having defined CM and related terms, the following section offers an overview of the importance of documenting the CMS.

### 2.2 Importance of creating and documenting a strategy

According to the Content Marketing Institute and Marketing Profs's (2022, pp. 4 – 13) annual research, while 83% of marketers use CM, only 40% have a documented CMS. The report reveals that to efficiently implement content

marketing, it is important to create a strategy and have the resources to support it. The study highlights that documenting the strategy lessens the risk of being pulled in many directions with content. Investis Digital (n.d.), a leading provider of digital communications and marketing services, suggests that documenting the CMS allows people, processes, and priorities to be aligned around common goals, increasing the efforts made. Moreover, marketers can justify higher spending percentages in their CM budget. Additionally, it makes it easier for marketers to prove the value of the program to executives and helps brands achieve CM goals more effectively.

A content marketing strategy helps the organization achieve specific goals, define clear success metrics, and create processes for specific improvement (Content Marketing Institute, 2011). Various frameworks have been suggested (Investis Digital, n.d.; Content Marketing Institute, 2011) attempting to answer 'why,' 'who' and 'how' content should be used to address customer needs. This research presents an adapted version with the basic components of the Content Marketing Institute and Investis Digital frameworks. This framework serves as a unique actionable plan that outlines how content will contribute to differentiating from other brands and nurturing audiences.

## **Content marketing strategy framework**

### **1. Plan**

**A) Business Case for Innovation:** Describes the reasons [why] for creating content, the risks involved, and the vision of what success represents for the organization. It is composed of the following elements:

- **Problem:** What opportunity or problem is the company trying to solve?
- **Business/Content Marketing Objective:** Profitable action.  
Engagement, loyalty, awareness, sales, lead generation, customer evangelism, creating brand advocates, lead nurturing, upsells cross-sell.

- **Business Goals:** What the company wants to accomplish. 'Why' is the company doing CM? What is the need? It drives the overall content strategy.
- **Vision:** What does success represent for the company?
- **Risks:** What happens in the event of failure?

**B) Business Plan for Content Marketing:** Describes the goals the company has for the content program. What the content needs to do for the company to achieve its business goals? Including the unique value, it looks to offer through the content program.

- **Content Marketing Goals:** What the company wants the content to do.
- **Risks:** In the content itself. Inconsistency, irrelevancy, production, etc.

**2. Audience Personas:** Who will the content speak to?

- **Content categories and Topics:** Describe what people in each group segment would be interested in that is related to the company's content marketing objective.

**3. Brand Story:** It is essential to identify the ideas and messages the company wants to communicate.

**4. Competition:** What are other brands doing online, and where can a competitive advantage be found?

**5. Content Formats:** What are the formats that can be realistically created?

**6. Distribution:** Where will the content live and how will it be shared? How often will content be published? It includes platforms used to tell the story, along with the criteria, processes, and objectives for each one.

**7. Implementation:** What is the budget the company has for content? Who will produce, publish, and promote the content?

**8. Measurement:** How will the company measure success?

However, it is necessary to highlight that a CMS is unique to the business that creates it. By creating a solid content strategy base, investing throughout the customer journey, realigning the marketing mix, and building the right team, digital marketers can accomplish demonstrable results that reach over click-through rates and brand awareness (Lieb and Szymanski, 2017). So far, this paper has focused on CM and documenting a strategy. The following section will discuss CM in the religious context.

### 2.3 Religious content marketing

The Christian church shares the mission to proclaim the Good News, make disciples of all nations, and encourage love and care of believers and unbelievers as King James Version (1769, Mark 16:15). The original principle of faith, in its origins, was passed down by word of mouth, and later evangelists started the written tradition. The written tradition, as a new means of communication, had a significant impact on bringing the Good News and nurturing followers in the past. Similarly, content marketing may support the Christian church's overall mission in the present and in the future.

Over two decades ago, an online article on Christianity Today's website was published under the title, "The next Billy Graham may be a robot" (Hertz, 2002), forecasting the present trend. Christian churches have been using the internet for a long time to spread their message and build communities. The use of the internet [Religious Content Marketing], as proposed by Campbell (2005, cited in Hutchings 2010), can be seen as a 'spiritual network' for religious experiences, a 'worship space,' a 'missionary tool,' and a way to assist believers in upholding a 'religious identity'. Hutchings (2010, p. 14) cites Haden and Cowan (2007), emphasizing the opportunity that the internet [Religious Content Marketing] brings for different ways of participation, information delivery, and engaging in Christian activities. This is a similar concept of CM, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, which primary task is to reach out and meet customers' needs. Therefore, believers and unbelievers represent the consumers of religious organizations, as Dukić, Dukić and Ružić's (2014) research point out.



The way in which businesses use CM to build relationships, communities, and help audiences solve their challenges is like that of what Christian churches aim at. It is important to explain here that Religious Marketing is not marketing alone. There are important differences between traditional marketing and Religious Marketing that Carlos Luna (2021) points out (Figure 3). Carlos Luna is the author of *Fundamentals of Religious Marketing* and a researcher, consultant, and educator of religious marketing as a discipline in the church. Currently, Luna is a postgraduate professor at ESIC University, the University of Cantabria.

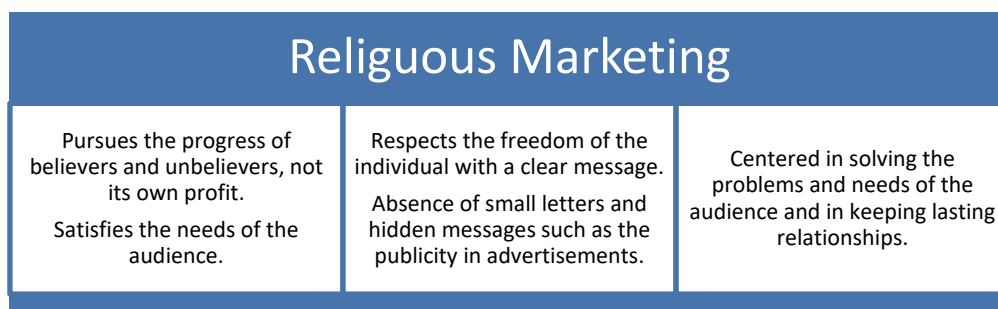


Figure 3. Religious Marketing.

Religious Marketing does not refer to publicity, yet it needs techniques and disciplines that can feed the challenge of sharing the Good News and nurture the audience, as Carlos Luna (2021) declares. It is important to clarify that, for the purpose of this research, the aforementioned concept of Religious Marketing is here used to describe Religious Content Marketing.

For the development of this research, it is important to clarify what is meant by Spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is challenging to define. The verse found in the King James Version (1769) is employed in this study, together with the author's own interpretation of the text to describe what is meant by it in this paper.

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." – Phil. 1:3 – 6

Growing spiritually entails becoming more familiar with and reliant upon God. As a Christian, everyone is a beginner at first. Some might have a deeper familiarity with God's word at the beginning of their journey, while others might be entirely unfamiliar with the idea of salvation. Spiritual growth involves learning more about and leaning into God. Spiritual growth can be reflected in a shift in thoughts and actions toward others. It is a desire to learn more about God and to rely on him for help. Some ways to promote spiritual growth include:

- Connecting with other Christians
- Studying the Bible
- Forming prayer habits
- Showing love for others
- Obeying the Word of God

### 2.3.1 Content marketing in the Christian church

What follows is a brief description of how Life.Church, an evangelical megachurch in the United States, uses CM. The church has been noted for its innovative use of RCM to evangelize, communicate with its members, and share resources with other churches. This church has a very clean website look; their pages are easy to navigate; and the design is appealing to a younger audience. It provides information about their mission, contact details, and locations. On Life.Church's website, the user can find links to different free resources, community channels, apps, and an open network. The website offers live online sermons and different media ranging from video message series, worship, and stories to podcasts on leadership topics to videos for children from birth to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. It has a section with free training courses for churches and a variety of apps to support an online church, including metrics and sermon resources, to mention a few. Life.Church's site also offers online giving apps as an option to support the church. This shows how this church uses different types of content to meet customer needs at different stages of their journey.

## 3 Nature of storytelling in content marketing

For businesses [churches] as Costa (2019) describes, storytelling has become the most authentic and relevant way to communicate who they are and what they offer. The next chapter presents a brief on the nature of storytelling and an outline of its effects on humans. It reviews the value of defining the story structure and finding the purpose, followed by a description of the components of good storytelling for content marketing.

### 3.1 The nature of storytelling

Since the beginning of time, storytelling has brought people from all cultures together to communicate, entertain, connect, and inform. In recent years, storytelling has increased in popularity, with different uses ranging from classrooms to business presentations to marketing. For brands [churches] that want to engage with their customers, storytelling, as Rodriguez (2020) suggests, must attune to an emotive connection with the customers' personal values, experiences, and aspirations. To define storytelling and its characteristics in this study, a combination of the definitions laid out by Aaker (2018) and the National Storytelling Network (n.d.) is used.

Storytelling is the **interactive** art of using words to describe experiences that impact human emotions and encourage the listener's **imagination**. It includes a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is an **intriguing, authentic** narrative that supports a **strategic message** enhancing the brand's vision, customer relationships, and organizational values. This definition highlights several aspects that are analyzed to understand the nature of storytelling (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The Nature of Storytelling.

- **Interactive (involving):** It consists of two-way communication between a narrator and an audience. Involving stories creates a connection and a relationship.
- **Encourages the imagination:** The story takes place in the mind of the listener, who becomes a co-creator of the story as experienced. Since stories can bring about memories, people might see themselves represented in story characters.
- **Intriguing:** For the story to resonate with the audience and grab their attention, it needs to attract the mind and be thought-provoking.
- **Authentic:** A story ought to include verisimilitude to support and confirm the message. A business story should not be perceived as deceptive, false, or as a plain selling effort.
- **Strategic Message:** Stories contain relevant information for the audience and clarify the following: The brand vision and its value proposition; the customer relationship as a shared interest with customers; the organization and its values, reflecting commitment and validating its mission.

Aaker affirms (2018, p.19) that brand stories need to reflect meaningful problems the audience faces. Kirk (2022) emphasizes the importance of brands telling compelling stories to their audience to foster human connections.

### 3.1.1 Effects of storytelling

In marketing, it is known that 70% of consumers make emotional decisions when they buy, and only after that rationalize them with logic (Gallup Inc., 2022). According to research (Stephens, Silbert and Hasson, 2010), when humans are exposed to stories, the brain releases dopamine, making them easier to remember with greater accuracy. This is why stories are far more memorable than any other type of information. Another interesting effect of stories is how they help to keep attention. Stephens, Silbert and Hasson (2010) research shows that the brain also releases cortisol, endorphins, and oxytocin, creating physical tension and thus making the audience remain attentive. This is the reason why the quality of connections that result from storytelling is deeper, more lasting, and more resonant, as denoted by McFalls (2021).

Considering how storytelling can impact human emotions, the benefits it has for brands' [churches] marketing efforts are immense. Stories can influence and transfer values, as Rodriguez (2020, p. 8) explains, and lead people to accept original ideas or encourage them to act, according to Decker (2020). Moreover, as Costa (2019) affirms, good storytelling is essential to maximizing any business's visibility, profit, and impact. So far, this section has reviewed distinguishing attributes that stories have in common (Figure 6) that support the reason why storytelling is the right way for businesses and Christian churches to share information.

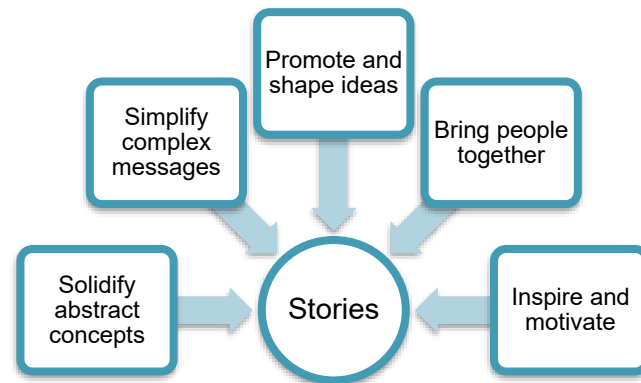


Figure 5. Common Attributes in Stories.

### 3.1.2 Defining the story structure and finding the purpose.

A survey by Edelman (2018) revealed that 63% of consumers remembered a brand story when making a purchase decision. However, to accomplish this, Fryer (2014) asserts that it is essential to understand the company's past and project the future. Conversely, it is not possible to write an authentic, appealing, and successful business story without a story structure and a purpose. For Rodriguez (2020, p. 9), the brand mission serves to manifest the purpose, or 'why' the brand exists, and a logical starting point for the brand story. To identify their purpose and answer 'why,' organizations and marketers commonly employ a theory developed by Sinek (2009). Sinek affirms that "to tell great branding stories, it is vital for brands to understand why they are doing what they are doing." The main weakness of Sinek's model is the failure to consider placing the "who" first as the core reason for creating the story. Therefore, it is vital to listen to the audience to understand and answer their needs and wants to find the 'who' the story is for when creating brand stories. Having discussed the nature of storytelling and the importance of defining the story structure and finding the purpose, it is necessary to expound on the components that make brand stories good for content marketing.

### 3.2 Components of a good story for content marketing

It has never been easy to explain new ideas; nonetheless, one of the biggest strengths of storytelling, as Decker (2023) suggests, is relating non-tangible concepts to concrete ideas. The types of stories a business tells send a distinctive and strategic message to its customers, as discussed earlier. Decker (2023) highlights the use of specific components (Figure 5) to provide the teller and the reader with a great experience.

Entertaining	• Engaged and immersed in what is next
Believable	• Convince on its version of reality making it easy to trust
Educational	• Spark curiosity adding knowledge
Relatable	• Reminds of people and places known
Universal	• Related to anyone who reads using known emotions and experiences
Organized	• Makes it easier for the readers to absorb it
Memorable	• Stick in the mind regardless the type.
Trendy	• Relate to current events that people are engaged with

Figure 6. Components of a Good Story.

A story needs to be easy to follow and pleasant to read as readers journey along. Disorganized stories often make readers disinterested. However, to make a story captivating, brands need to keep the reader engaged so they will continue reading and spend time on the site.

## 4 Research design

This chapter presents the research design and methodology employed in the process of this study. It has relied on the research problem to guide the methodological choice. More specifically, it explains why an evaluative case study is considered appropriate for this research. Additionally, this chapter sets out the procedures to collect, analyze, and report the data.

### 4.1 Methodology

Research design is the blueprint for research that tells what questions to ask, what data to collect, and how to analyze, interpret, and report data in research studies (Creswell and Creswell, 2009, p. 22). In this research, a case study strategy was employed. A case study is an in-depth inquiry into a topic or phenomenon within its real-life settings (Yin, p. 330, 2018). According to Yin (2014), a case study answers the “how” and “why” aspects of the fundamental research question. The aim of this case study was to discover the experiences of church members with content marketing in Christian Assembly north and south located in Mexico. This research used a case study strategy because it places emphasis on a full contextual analysis of the perspectives of participants. The case study strategy involves an approach that is rigorously defined and highly structured before the research begins, so that it will proceed linearly. The researcher has connection to and access to the Christian Assembly and knows its members in person its members, which is essential in case study research.

The research objective was to be evaluative, as it intended to discover how successful is content marketing at addressing church members' needs. Evaluative design assesses the effectiveness of an organizational or business strategy, policy, programme, initiative, or process (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 188). Evaluative research answers ‘what’ and ‘how’ research questions and provides answers to ‘which,’ ‘when,’ ‘who,’ or ‘where’ questions during data collection to make comparisons (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill,



2019, p. 188). The purpose of this research was to identify patterns indicating the effectiveness of CMS in addressing church members' needs and present suggestions for potential digital communication channels to maximize its benefits. Through an inductive approach the researcher's focus was on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation (Creswell and Creswell, 2009, p.26). When applying an inductive approach, meanings emerge from data collection to identify patterns and relationships to build a theory (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 52). However, the researcher familiarized herself with theory on the chosen subject and focused on verifying and interpreting the results. Therefore, this study also applied deductive reasoning as the study was based on existing theories.

The current study adopted an embedded mix method approach. Mixed methods research is the branch of multiple methods research that integrates the use of quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques and analytical procedures in the same research project (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 181). The purpose is to collect a richer and stronger array of evidence that can be accomplished by any single method alone (Yin, p. 100, 2018). This embedding means that the secondary method assesses a different research question than the primary method (Creswell and Creswell, 2009, p. 197). The qualitative approach is aimed at exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell and Creswell, 2009, p. 22). The quantitative approach is aimed at providing a supporting role in the study by embedding a secondary form of data (Creswell and Creswell, 2009, p. 192). Following an interpretative philosophy, the researcher tried to make sense of the subjective meanings expressed about the phenomenon studied (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 148).

#### 4.2 Qualitative research data collection

Qualitative research seeks to understand the context of the participants by gathering the information personally and interpreting the findings (Creswell and Creswell, 2009, p. 26). In this study, the primary data were collected through

interviews to find out the experiences of church members with RCM, explore ways it addresses needs and supports spiritual growth, and determine which content is most effective at present. Interviewing was the primary chosen method for its ability to allow the participant to talk openly about a topic (Creswell and Creswell, 2009, p. 32) and its flexibility to detour into a conversational format (Hanington and Martin, 2019, p. 132). In this study, semi-structured questions were designed because they allow the study to benefit from both structural and unstructured approaches. The structured nature offers key questions to obtain specific information and, hence, to ensure comparability between cases. The unstructured type offers specific information to confirm a fact or opinion that can be used to reveal facts (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, pp. 458 – 459).

Individual online interviews were previously planned to prevent poor performance (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, p. 451, 2019). The interviewer followed the interview protocol proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2009, p. 170) for asking questions and recording answers. The interviews were originally performed in Spanish and later translated into English. The unstructured interview guide was reviewed after every interview in the case of a data saturation point. Data saturation is reached when the additional data collected provides little, if any, new information or suggests new themes (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 315). This interview technique was particularly advantageous for collecting data from different Christian Assembly locations in Mexico and incorporating diverse opinions from the Christian Assembly members. This strategy provided the possibility to explore the research question in a natural way, case by case.

Reliability, validity, and creditability are achieved by carefully conducting and using well-clarifying questions, probing meanings, and exploring responses from a variety of angles or perspectives (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, pp. 449 – 451). All the interviews were recorded, and the researcher took notes on her computer to avoid information loss. All interviews were transcribed and

cleaned by correcting any possible errors to avoid inaccuracy (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 645).

#### 4.2.1 Qualitative sampling

Although more members could have been contacted, the participants were selected using purposive sample. Judgement was used to select cases that are particularly informative and that will best answer the research question (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 321). A heterogeneous strategy was employed to select cases with sufficiently diverse characteristics to provide the maximum variation possible in the data collected. (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 321).

There were two interviews representing two different Assemblies and different levels of commitment, according to Warren's (2016) Circles of Commitment: one representing Christian Assembly North, a Committed member that participates in church activities, and one representing Christian Assembly South, a Core member that serves others through a ministry. The Committed member was selected because of her high level of participation in the Christian Assembly, and for her well-established habits and disciplines as a disciple. She can provide information from the perspective of a spiritually growing individual and can offer useful information on specific challenges members face. The Core member was selected because of her extensive experience serving others through the ministries of the church; she was able to say where the Christian Assembly has been and where it wishes to go. Therefore, by collecting interview data from the two groups of participants, it is likely to provide a comprehensive picture of how church members benefit from content marketing.

#### 4.2.2 Qualitative data analysis

After the primary data collected was transcribed, it was analyzed. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed by first categorizing them into themes. 1.

Challenges and needs faced by believers 2. Perceived benefits of RCM today 3. CM and spiritual growth 4. Effective CM today. 5. Potential CM (types, formats, and channels). Categorizing is a process of labeling and linking units of data that summarize the extract's meaning and refer to the same aspect (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 653). Then, each category was summarized, which means compressing the meaning of key points in long statements into fewer words (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 653).

#### 4.3 Quantitative research data collection

Quantitative research is aimed at examining the relationship among variables that can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures (Creswell and Creswell, 2009). The aim was to collect complementary data (Yin p. 100) and validate, enhance, and confirm the findings (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 505) obtained in the qualitative phase. The secondary data were collected in a specific-focused, self-completed online questionnaire. Questionnaires allow the collection of standardized data from a large number of respondents [...] and adds simplicity with regard to administration (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 193). The questionnaire aimed to identify potential digital communication channels that will reach the target audience, offer valuable content, and support spiritual growth. The questionnaire in this research included a total of 21 questions, of which 13 were closed-ended and 8 were open-ended. The questionnaire originally collected data in Spanish and was later translated into English. The open-ended questions allow respondents to give answers in their own way, while closed-ended questions are easier to compare and possess higher evaluation objectivity (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 519).

The choice of this method was particularly advantageous because it collected data from 5 different Christian Assembly locations in Mexico while incorporating diverse opinions from the church members. The design was cross-sectional, with the data collected at one point in time. Another reason this technique was

applied is due to the economy of the design and the convenience it offers for data gathering (Creswell and Creswell, 2009).

#### 4.3.1 Quantitative sampling

The research population consisted of Christian church members located in the different Christian Assemblies in Mexico. The size of the population, however, was not able to be determined. The sample was drawn from the population of the five different Christian Assemblies in Mexico through non-probability sampling. The purposive sampling technique was used to select particularly informative cases (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 321) to answer the research question. For this research, the sample was composed of 37 respondents from the five different assemblies in Mexico. The respondents were selected based on their level of commitment in church according to Warren's (2016) Circles of Commitment, as follows: Committed members and Core members. Rick Warren, the founder of the so-called 'megachurches' in the US originally devised the Circles of Commitment framework in his book 'The Purpose Driven Church.'

The instrument employed in this research was an internet questionnaire. The questionnaire was pilot tested (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 540) by distributing the questionnaire to three Christian Assembly senior pastors prior to the collection of data. The researcher verified if the questions and topic were understood by the respondents and the validity and reliability of the data provided. The questionnaire was created by the author using the survey software Google Forms. The respondents were individually invited to take part in the research. A covering letter was attached explaining the purpose of the research and the instructions on how to fill out the instrument (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 537). On June 15th a Web link to the questionnaire was sent to the respondents and remained available until July 6th when the data was collected.

#### 4.3.2 Quantitative data analysis

After the data was collected, entered, and checked for errors, the researcher performed the Exploratory Data Analysis approach (EDA). The EDA approach emphasizes the use of graphs to explore and understand data (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 581). Since the data was already calculated and diagrams were drawn from the survey software used in this research, the analysis was performed straightforwardly (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 566). The sample size in this research was 37 respondents, out of which 37 responses were obtained, returning in a 100% response rate. Due to the scope of this research, the author selected the questions from the survey, aiming to answer the research question as follows: 'What types of content and digital channels can be employed to maximize benefits for church members?'

## **5 Addressing church members' needs through preferred communication channels**

This chapter presents the findings drawn from the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data. However, the data is not compared but resides side by side as two different pictures that provide an overall composite assessment of the problem (Creswell and Creswell, 2009, p. 197). The main research question in this thesis was, 'How effective is CM at addressing church members' needs and what channels can be employed to maximize its benefits?' A case of a Christian Assembly church located in Mexico. Qualitative data findings will have been presented thematically. Quantitative findings will have been presented statistically.

### **5.1 Qualitative findings**

The first two questions aimed at understanding challenges and needs faced by committed believers and identifying ways in which CM has assisted in finding solutions.

#### **1. Challenges and needs faced by believers**

All cases indicated having faced feelings of uncertainty, dealing with personal relationships, and time management issues. Both participants mentioned that church activities require a lot of time and effort. The Core participant commented that an overload of church activities can lead to physical and emotional exhaustion; she said, 'It is not only on meeting days, but even the whole week!' It was revealed that feelings of discouragement arise and even the desire to give up.

It is widely known that personal relationships are complex, but when talking about this topic, one participant mentioned that serving includes much interaction with other people, which can produce misunderstandings and

negative feelings. Another participant indicated that her highest concern is to keep the family united and expressed her desire for personal counseling. She revealed that not having support elsewhere has made her dependent on the church to solve her challenges. She said, 'I don't know anyone with a solid marriage who can give me advice.' When talking about personal guidance, one interviewee commented about the great need for clarification on the biblical text. One participant mentioned her struggle to understand Bible topics; she said, 'When I have a doubt on specific things, like the root of a Hebrew word, I ask the pastor.' Additionally, she expressed her desire to get background information and suggested personal support to clear out specific doubts.

## **2. Benefits of religious content marketing today**

The next set of questions aimed to identify the overall benefits of all types of digital RCM as perceived by the participants. A common answer in the interviews was that content marketing is a familiar place to return for encouragement and faith nourishment. All cases agreed that CM offers a space that can be constantly accessed to find support, whether it refers to their secular life or ministry-related issues. One participant indicated that the CM channel that she follows posts every Monday on Instagram in a section called "Focus on Monday," which has become a place to go back to during the week when she is going through difficulties. 'It keeps me going,' she said.

During the conversation, it was mentioned that for believers, it is important to be in contact with the Word of God – The Bible –, which is the source of their faith. A common perception among the participants was that CM is an advantageous tool for continued exposure to the word of God. As one participant put it: 'I read more of my Bible now!' In all cases, it was emphasized that CM has been helpful for building the habit of setting time apart to access the word of God, one participant said, 'it brings me closer to God!' The participants agreed in the way that cm supports this need by providing easy access anytime from anywhere. On this topic, one of the participants stated, 'It helps me learn new things about the Word.' In one case, it was discussed that having access to informational content on biblical topics makes it more convenient to study at home and fulfill the church's



mission more effectively on her own schedule. Other responses to this question included that CM makes it easier to share the gospel, identify, and connect with other Christians. One participant mentioned that it motivates her to share her story – testimony – with others; she said, 'I even get creative and bold enough to publish my own content.'

### **3. Content marketing and spiritual growth.**

When discussing how CM has assisted in finding solutions, participants were unanimous in their view that CM is a helpful resource for keeping faith strong, overcoming every day's issues, and motivating spiritual growth. One participant indicated that CM has helped her to stay focused on the Word of God; she said, 'For me, it's like recharging the battery and regaining my strength; it helps me a lot in many aspects of my life.' It was discussed about the access CM offers to other people's life stories – testimonies – which are distinctly valuable for increasing faith. One of the participants stated, 'I am not alone; I identify myself with others who are undergoing difficult times or rejoicing.' This is particularly important for believers, who feel motivated to continue in their spiritual journeys when they know about others overcoming difficulties.

Talking about the motivation gained by a piece of content, the Core participant mentioned the inspiration she feels to see the joy of those who present a given content; she said, 'When I hear it, it brings me back to life again. Because it's like I'm going to enjoy myself!' The participant declared that CM has helped her to stay strong and not stumble and fall. When discussing how CM supports faith, one participant commented that there is always a piece of content that helps when undergoing difficulties. Whether it is an image with a verse or a portion of a sermon, the participant argued that CM has been enough to get her focus back. Another participant attributed CM as her source for spiritual food; she said, 'I don't need to wait for the next church gathering; I can watch, read, or listen to a sermon every day.'

Commenting on the way CM solves life's challenges, one participant revealed that CM has helped her overcome feelings of uncertainty and sadness. She

claimed that after seeing a piece of content, something changed in her life. She said, 'God talked to me, and I saw the answer to my problems.' However, opinions differed as to whether CM provides solid support, as one of the cases felt that CM has not fully satisfied her needs. The participant indicated that she tried CM but that it was not sufficient for her; she said, 'I did read some, but they weren't clear enough, so I left them aside.' The participant denoted her desire for personal explanation on complex topics; she said, 'What I see in CM is not enough; I need to ask the pastor!'

#### **4. Effective content marketing today**

The last set of questions was aimed at identifying the best CM today. When participants were asked about specific examples of helpful content, one participant argued that the environment perceived in the content is key. The participant described his preferred content as an enjoyable and relaxed moment; she stated, 'I perceive an incredible peace when I watch the content.' It was emphasized that the content was like a personal and intimate conversation; she expressed, 'it is about me; it makes me part of it.' It is important to note that both cases indicated that familiarity with the host or content creator is a key aspect. Knowing those presenting the content and the roadblocks they have overcome makes the believer feel connected and increases their faith. As one participant put it, 'I know their story, where they come from, the challenges they have faced, and how God has helped them.'

One participant expressed her preference for short videos that include a small portion of a Bible verse and a brief and clear explanation ending with a concise prayer. Another participant mentioned the importance of consistency; she said, 'to receive a piece of content every day first thing in the morning is like a nice cup of coffee!' Other aspects revealed were that the content creates expectations for the next publication.

## 5. Potential religious content marketing

When discussing potential types, formats, and content channels for RCM, there were differences of opinion. One case expressed that websites are more informative; she said, 'Websites are the epicenter of all other channels.' One participant mentioned that on Instagram, an image with a Bible verse and music background works well for memorizing Bible verses. One participant attributed Instagram to being a good option because much can be included in a short video. It was suggested that a small portion of a big sermon with a caption on Instagram and a link to a YouTube channel containing the whole sermon is most effective. When discussing Facebook, one participant commented that this platform works better for more extensive content. The participant indicated that longer videos with whole sermons go on Facebook, while shorter ones work better on Instagram and TikTok. Another participant suggested that e-libraries containing Bible studies on different topics, discipleship, and recoded preachings both in audio and video are good sources to study and prepare sermons. Lastly, it emphasized the desire to find suitable material for children.

### 5.2 Quantitative findings

#### 1. Digital communication methods

The respondents were asked to select their preferred communication channels to receive church-related information, regardless of how it is currently delivered. The question offered the respondents a selection of digital and non-digital options. Figure 7 shows the rates of all the respondents by the preferred communication channel.

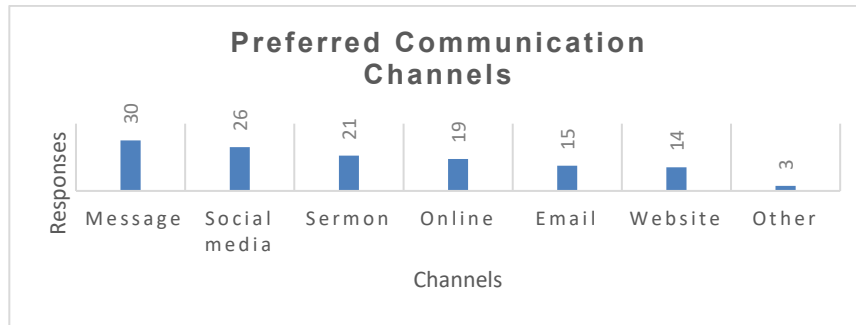


Figure 7. Church Members' Preferred Communication Channels.

As was shown in Figure 7, most respondents prefer to receive information as a direct message on their mobile phones, followed by social media channels with 30 and 26 responses, respectively. Receiving information on site during the sermon and as a rebroadcast online, were both chosen by about half of the surveyed with 21 and 19 responses, correspondingly. Last, information delivered by email and available on the website was less popular with 15 and 14 responses, respectively.

## 2. Social media channels usage

The respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they visit social media channels. The question aimed at identifying potential digital communication channels based on the respondents' actual social media usage habits. The study findings were as presented in Figure 8.

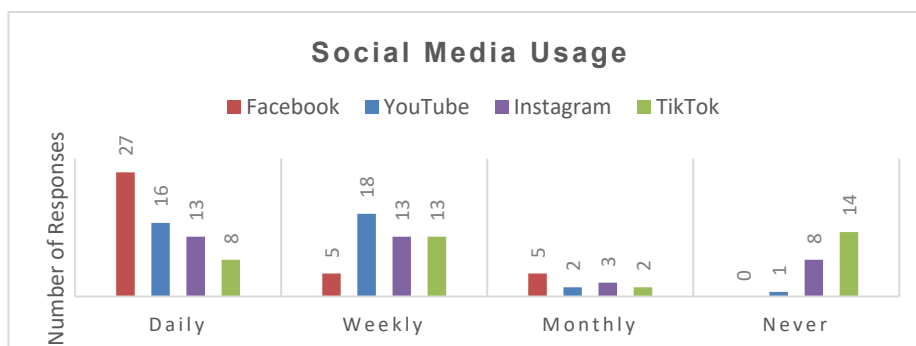


Figure 8. Social Media Usage.

As shown in Figure 8, most of the surveyed visited Facebook and YouTube daily with 27 answers equally, followed by Instagram with 13 answers. On the other end, Tik Tok was reported to not be visited at all by the respondents, with 14 responses.

### 3. Internet-based activities

The respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they perform internet-based activities. The third question is aimed at informing possible types of content. The study findings were as displayed in Figure 9.

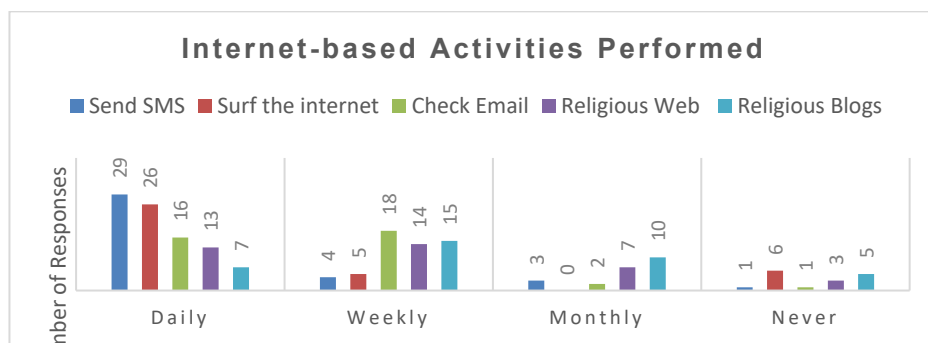


Figure 9. Internet-based Activities Performed.

As shown in Figure 9, most of the surveyed send text messages and surf the internet daily, with 29 and 26 answers, respectively. Less than half check their email, visit religious websites, or read blogs as a weekly task. On the other end, 6 respondents indicated not surfing the web at all and 5 not reading religious blogs.

Overall, these findings indicate that the church members' preferred communication channels to receive church-related information are as follows: Instant messaging to their personal cell phone comes first. On-site during the sermon and rebroadcasting online was the second option. Social media channels Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok came in third place in that order. Lastly, information delivered by email and/or available on websites and blogs is less favoured.

## 6 Discussion of interview and survey results

This chapter aims to summarize the empirical results in light of the research questions and the findings from the embedded mixed research approach. It also discusses the practical recommendations of the main research findings, highlights the contribution of the study, outlines the limitations of this thesis, and offers suggestions for future research.

The present study sought to explore the effectiveness of RCM in addressing church members' needs and assess the role of RCM in supporting spiritual growth. Additionally, the study aimed to make suggestions on how to maximize its benefits for church members. The weight of this mixed-methods study was assigned to qualitative data collection and analysis, and the notation for this study would be QUAL/quan. The author presented results in two phases, with the first, the qualitative results, presented in terms of themes. Then, the questionnaire results were presented, displaying, and discussing statistical relationships. The mixing of the qualitative results and quantitative findings occurred in the final discussion at the interpretation stage of the research process. Therefore, the qualitative and quantitative components of this research investigated the central research question: 'How effective is CM at addressing church members' needs and what potential communication channels and formats can be used to maximize its benefits?'

### 6.1 The embedding of qualitative and quantitative approaches

The methodology and research design section shows how the qualitative and quantitative approaches reside side by side, providing an overall composite assessment of the problem. This section discusses how the findings from the quantitative study support and enrich the findings from the qualitative study in terms of CM effectiveness in addressing church members' needs and potential digital communication channels.

The results of this study show that CM has been effective in addressing church members' needs including encouragement, faith nourishment, and spiritual growth. The input from the qualitative study showed that finding support regularly in CM creates expectations in the audience for the next post. This result points out that when church members find support for their secular lives and ministry-related issues regularly through quality content, it becomes an essential part of their lives, generating expectations. The result corroborates that for content to find viral success, it should be produced continuously, delivered on a reliable schedule, and with the best quality, value, and purpose expected by the audience (Harris, 2018). However, the study revealed a limitation in effectiveness when personal intervention is required to solve more specific and personal needs. A possible explanation for this might be that those members who are at the first levels of commitment rely on members at higher levels to resolve their questions in a more personal and spiritual environment, leaving CM aside. The survey conducted in this study did not yield statistically significant results; rather, it led the researcher to a sample from which to draw conclusions. Future studies are suggested that take a quantitative approach to the question.

Another important finding from the qualitative study is that CM proved to be an advantageous tool for continued exposure to the Bible. CM provides easy access to Bible studying and teaching at any time. Additionally, the qualitative study showed that even a Bible quote that can always be found in the same channel brings great help when needed. These results are consistent with the claim that CM seeks to deliver valuable (Harris, 2018; Baker, 2022), relevant (Harris, 2018; Neuwirth, 2016), and consistent (Harris, 2018; Baker, 2022) content throughout the customer journey (Content Marketing Institute, 2021). This finding might be explained by the fact that for members that are in the committed and at higher levels of commitment, studying the Bible is a regular activity; therefore, having continuous access from anywhere is a great advantage to progressing in their studies. Another possible explanation is that these participants are familiar with the CM presenters and are therefore influenced to follow them. However, further exploration of these findings applied

to church members at the lower part of the commitment levels is required to ensure variables like specific needs and others can be considered. This remains out of the scope of this study.

Another finding of this study is that CM makes it easy for believers to share the gospel on social media. CM motivates individuals to share their stories and publish their own content. This enables believers to connect with other Christians and to relate to others who are overcoming similar challenges. According to the author's interpretation, this inspires and motivates believers to continue their spiritual journeys, which is crucial for boosting faith and commitment. This finding corroborates that when the stories used in CM send distinctive and strategic messages to customers (Aaker, 2018, p. 19), it fosters human connections (Kirk, 2022), inspires, and motivates (Decker, 2020). A possible explanation for this might be that these participants benefited from social media channels due to their desire to find support for their needs from believers outside their own church and their yearning for spiritual development.

Regarding the preferred communication channels, the quantitative study found that direct text messaging and onsite face-to-face are the best ways to provide information. As a second option, rebroadcasting online and social media channels was chosen, leaving email, websites, and blogs as the last option. This result was supported by findings from the interview, which revealed that websites are considered more informative, while Instagram and Tik Tok are preferred for short sermons. Facebook is preferred for extensive content, while Instagram and TikTok are preferred for shorter ones. E-libraries containing diverse topics for Bible studies, discipleship, and recoded preachings are sought as a source for sermon preparation. Overall, the choice of channel depends on the specific needs and preferences of the audience.

The results from the quantitative and qualitative studies confirm that brands that have clearly identified 'why,' 'who,' and 'how' content should be used address the different audiences' needs and expectations more effectively (Content Marketing Institute, 2011; Investis Digital, n.d.). There are several possible explanations for this result. It seems possible that since instant messaging



stores the information, it has become in some way like a notepad, allowing users to turn to any conversation at any time, making it easier to check it later. Additionally, it might be that the generational differences of these participants have influenced the results. This, however, requires more investigation that takes a quantitative approach to specific variants such as demographics, channel formats, and types of content. This remains outside the scope of this study.

## 6.2 Recommendations

The previous section discussed key findings of the study in relation to supporting needs and spiritual growth. These findings have several recommendations and suggestions for the Christian Assembly leaders.

Findings from both qualitative and quantitative studies suggest the design of a unique actionable plan (Chapter 2.1.1) – Content Marketing Strategy Framework – that outlines how content will contribute to the Christian Assembly’s mission of assisting church members in solving their needs and fostering spiritual growth. As part of this process, it is necessary to identify and analyze in depth ‘who’ the target audience is according to their level of commitment. Next, it is essential for the Christian Assembly to find the purpose, or ‘why’ to create content. Once the purpose is defined, the Christian Assembly needs to clarify ‘how’ the content to be created will help church members in a way that no one else can. Lastly, it is fundamental for the Christian Assembly to create compelling stories that resonate with its audience and send a strategic message. To create these stories, the Christian Assembly must review its mission and understand its past with the objective of projecting its future.

Based on the qualitative and quantitative approach findings, the study suggests potential types of content and digital communication channels the Christian Assembly will most benefit from. The use of websites and blogs is an important tool to facilitate accessible records of useful information such as location and history and to attract new followers. Blogs can reach geographically scattered

individuals and church leaders, sharing ideas and experiences and opening the opportunity to build relationships. Blogs also provide members with easy access to study material on specific topics according to their needs. On the other hand, social media allows churches to develop a close connection with members and other believers. It opens a space to connect participants who share a common identity and creates a sense of belonging while fostering long-term relationships. Creating videos, on the other hand, is an affordable and great method to get discovered by people around the world. Video is the best option for livestreaming, recording bible studies, broadcasting ministry events, and uploading full sermons, to name a few uses. Longer videos work better on Facebook and YouTube, while shorter ones are more appreciated on Instagram and TikTok. On the other hand, podcasts are a significant method to reach out to people with diverse topics and discussions and as a depository for sermons.

### 6.3 Future research

There are several gaps in our knowledge of RCM that follow from our findings and would benefit from further research.

1. In-depth exploration of church members' needs at each of the different commitment levels. Further research might explore what CP would be best for each of them, including the identification of each group segment.
2. It would be helpful to add a quantitative examination of the satisfaction reported by church members with the fulfillment of their spiritual needs as opposed to those who rely on personal intervention.
3. A final but important question would be: What are the costs associated with implementing CM?

## 7 Planning content marketing for spiritual growth

This study sought to explore the effectiveness of CM in addressing church members' needs and assess the role of CM in supporting spiritual growth. Additionally, the study aimed to make suggestions about potential communication channels to maximize the benefits for church members.

Evidence from previous studies indicates that when CM and storytelling are skillfully employed, audiences and brands connect emotionally, forming deeper, longer lasting, and more resonant bonds. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that for CM to be effective, it must be intentionally planned to successfully reach and connect with the target church members, support their individual needs, and thus foster spiritual growth. The second major finding was that CMS provides the church with the opportunity to identify their own mission and envision their future regarding the why, how, and for whom to create content.

The results of the study provide novel insight into how CMS can be used to guide the church's efforts to reach and delight church members at their different levels of commitment. This study has contributed to the literature by introducing an integrated framework to answer 'why,' 'who,' and 'how' content should be used to address church members' needs and help organizations achieve specific goals. This thesis has provided a deeper insight into RCM and its effectiveness in offering support for believers' secular and spiritual needs. The major limitation of this study is that spirituality cannot be measured or assessed by any research methods. Notwithstanding this limitation, the study suggests that CM is an advantageous tool to fulfill part of the church's mission of supporting believers in their secular and spiritual lives. There is abundant room for further progress in determining the right content plan for each member segment of the church according to their level of commitment.

This thesis began as an idea to explore content marketing in the Christian church context. It was my personal desire to support the cooperating church, Christian Assembly, with this research and its findings and to develop my

knowledge of CM and storytelling methodology. This thesis has given me an understanding of the intense research needed to best identify a target audience to capture their insights, experiences, wishes, and desires when planning marketing actions.

Conducting this study expanded my comprehension of what makes up effective CM practice and has expanded my notion of its relationship with other related fields. The research process has taught me the importance for the brand of deeply understanding the reasons to create content and its alignment to the target audience's needs. In a broader sense, I have developed my understanding of CM in non-commercial contexts and CM theory. In addition to this, the research has given me more insight into storytelling as a powerful tool for emotional influence. I have understood how CM aims and directs content while storytelling creates the desired response. Finally, this thesis has given me the tools and skills needed to continue with the work of creating a content marketing strategy for the cooperating church, the Christian Assembly, and has motivated me to continue to learn more about best practices in storytelling and CM.

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