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**HYBRID NETWORKS OF PRACTICE:
HOW ONLINE SPACES EXTEND FAITH-BASED COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

A Dissertation in
Learning, Design, and Technology

by

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how individuals learn in faith-based learning contexts has been an understudied domain in Learning Sciences research. In this dissertation, I situated the church and online faith spaces as learning environments using Community of Practice frameworks. This study observed 78 Christian faith practitioners through an online group chat, surveyed 21 of those practitioners who all identified as Black/African-American millennial women and interviewed 14 of those participants in focus groups and individual interviews. I analyzed four main data sources for this study: 1) I acted as a participant-researcher observing the lived experiences and interactions of an online/in-person women's Christian ministry group, 2) a 477-page online group chat transcript of that ministry group, 3) eight individual interviews and one focus group comprised of six participants, 4) a 44-question faith-practice survey completed by 21 participants.

Findings illustrated that Black female millennial Christian practitioners are extending traditional Community of Practice theory into learning landscapes that transcend singular communities. I developed *Hybrid Networks of Practice* a framework used to describe how individuals learn and engage in online, in-person, and individual faith practices. Hybrid Networks of Practice (HNoPs) are learning landscapes encompassing both in-person and online communities, tools and resources. While engaged in these hybrid networks, online faith-based engagement was found to work in harmony with in-person practices, and in some instances, online engagement encouraged in-person faith participation.

This study also provides insight into how online spaces expand traditional in-person Communities of Practice by enhancing community, extending domain and supporting faith practices. Furthermore, the study outlines a Flipped Church design framework for in-person faith communities based on Flipped Classroom research. The Flipped Church framework leverages communities of learners by highlighting the social nature of learning. The findings open up future

areas of research exploring how the theoretical implications of other blended learning frameworks may apply to faith-based learning settings.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------|------|
| LIST OF FIGURES..... | vii |
| LIST OF TABLES | viii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | ix |
| Chapter 1 Introduction | 1 |
| Statement of the Problem | 2 |
| Purpose of the Study | 4 |
| Significance of Study | 5 |
| Research Questions | 7 |
| Communities of Practice | 8 |
| Chapter 2 Literature Review | 9 |
| Overview | 9 |
| Informal Learning versus Formal Learning | 10 |
| Situated Learning | 10 |
| Communities of Practice | 12 |
| Domain | 12 |
| Community | 12 |
| Practice | 13 |
| Virtual Communities of Practice..... | 14 |
| Legitimate Peripheral Participation..... | 15 |
| Authentic Community | 18 |
| Learning and Identity | 19 |
| Landscapes of Practice | 20 |
| Affinity Spaces | 22 |
| Religious Faith Formation..... | 28 |
| Religious Online Communities | 32 |
| Black Millennials and Church..... | 34 |
| Social Media Spaces for Online Faith Communities | 36 |
| Chapter 3 Methodology..... | 40 |
| Participants and Social Network | 41 |
| Data Sources and Procedures | 43 |
| Participant Researcher | 43 |
| Online Transcripts of Group Chats..... | 43 |
| Interviews and Focus Groups | 44 |
| Faith-Practice Survey | 44 |
| Analysis Techniques | 45 |
| Positionality..... | 48 |

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Chapter 4 Findings | 49 |
| Participant Overview | 50 |
| Age, Education, Residence | 51 |
| Religious Demographics | 52 |
| In-Person Church Attendance..... | 53 |
| Online Faith Participation and Preferences | 54 |
| Hybrid Networks of Practice in Action: The Cases of Reagan and Veronica | 57 |
| Finding 1: Communities of Practice operate within Hybrid Networks of Practice (HNoP)..... | 61 |
| Finding 2: Online Engagement as Legitimate Peripheral Participation | 64 |
| The Importance of In-Person Fellowship: The Cases of JoJo and Amelia | 67 |
| Finding 3: Local Communities of Practice can encourage hybrid networks..... | 74 |
| Finding 4: In-person fellowship remained cornerstone practice of HNOPs | 76 |
| The Impact of Online Community, Domain and Practice..... | 79 |
| Finding 5: Online spaces enhance faith community..... | 80 |
| Where online community falls short | 86 |
| Finding 6: Online spaces expand faith domain | 89 |
| Where online teaching falls short | 97 |
| Finding 7: Online spaces support faith practices..... | 99 |
| Where online practice falls short..... | 109 |
| Chapter 5 Discussion..... | 113 |
| Summary of Major Findings | 114 |
| Theoretical Implications..... | 116 |
| Why Communities of Practice Fail | 122 |
| Lack of Core Group..... | 122 |
| Low Levels of One-to-One Interaction | 123 |
| Rigidity of Competences | 124 |
| Lack of Identification with the Community of Practice..... | 124 |
| Practice Intangibility | 125 |
| Design Implications..... | 126 |
| Flipped Church Design Framework | 126 |
| Research limitations | 132 |
| Implications for future research | 132 |
| References | 134 |
| Appendix A COVID-19 Engagement Guide | 144 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Figure 1-1: African-American Religious Affiliation by Age. Adapted from 2009 Pew Research Center Report “A Religious Portrait of African-Americans.”..... | 7 |
| Figure 2-1: Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Reprinted from <i>Medical Educators as Curriculum Innovators: Using Communities of Practices as Agents of Change</i> , by Annalisa Manca, July 30, 2014, retrieved from https://www.slideshare.net/annalisama/co-p2014 | 16 |
| Figure 4-1: Participant Race/Ethnicity..... | 50 |
| Figure 4-2: Frequency of Age of the Participants..... | 51 |
| Figure 4-3: Current Residential State of Respondents..... | 52 |
| Figure 4-4: Participant church attendance as youth..... | 52 |
| Figure 4-5: In person church attendance over the last three months..... | 53 |
| Figure 4-6: Participant Church Size..... | 54 |
| Figure 4-7: Online Church Service Participation..... | 55 |
| Figure 4-8: In-person or online preference for faith community engagement..... | 56 |
| Figure 4-9: Reagan’s Hybrid Network of Practice..... | 63 |
| Figure 4-10: Veronica’s Hybrid Network of Practice..... | 66 |
| Figure 4-11: Reasons for In-Person Church Attendance..... | 72 |
| Figure 4-12: JoJo’s Hybrid Network of Practice..... | 75 |
| Figure 4-13: Amelia’s Hybrid Network of Practice..... | 78 |
| Figure 4-14: WW group chat data collection overview..... | 105 |
| Figure 5-1: Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Washington Accessed from: https://www.washington.edu/teaching/topics/engaging-students-in-learning/flipping-the-classroom/ | 126 |
| Figure A-1: COVID-19 Church and ministry engagement guide of free resources..... | 144 |

LIST OF TABLES

Table **3-1**: Research Questions and Data Sources.....45

Table **3-2**: First Cycle Interview and Focus Group Coding.46

Table **3-3**: Second Cycle Interview and Focus Group Coding.47

Table **4-1**: Group Chat Occurrences January 5, 2019 – January 31, 2019..... 106

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Chapter 1

Introduction

As the internet continues to open the doors of access to information around the world, knowledge is being spread in unprecedented ways. Traditional places that were once deemed concentrated spaces of knowledge have been decentralized across the world wide web. Learners are no longer required to enter a physical school to access information from a teacher; or a library to access a librarian. Now, learners have access to networks of experts and resources in the palms of their hand -- anywhere at any time.

How learners use online spaces to learn is continuously being studied. Traditional K-12, higher education and other formal education settings have been the focus of most online learning studies (McKenna, 2017; Smith et al., 2017; Wang, 2005; Zheng et al., 2016). However, several informal spaces have yet to be explored. Religious practices, for example, or the various faith practices that individuals engage in are also being transformed by various forms of new media (Campbell, 2005).

According to a 2017 Gallup study, nearly eight in ten (78.7%) U.S. adults identify with some type of religion and approximately 75% of U.S. adults identify with a Christian faith (Newport, 2017)¹. When asked what were the major reasons for attending church or other places of worship three out of every four respondents identified these two responses as major factors: “sermons or talks that teach you more about scripture” (75%) and “sermons or lectures that help

¹ Results of the Gallup poll were based on telephone interviews conducted in 2017 with a random sample of 126,965 adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. Results included 70% cellphone respondents and 30% landline respondents.

you connect religion to your own life” (76%) (Saad, 2017). These studies revealed that most Americans choose to attend religious worship services to learn about their religion and to apply that knowledge to their own lives (Newport, 2017; Saad, 2017). Approaching this through the lens of the learning sciences: parishioners (learners), enter into a house of worship (learning environment), seeking knowledge about their religious curriculum with a desire to apply these teachings to their daily lives.

My topic of research explored how Black female millennial² women used online spaces to engage in their faith practices. In this study I explored the nature of how online spaces interact with in-person and online Communities of Practice. A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of individuals who have self-organized under a common purpose. Members of the group gather because they find value in learning from one another. As a diverse group of learners, ranging from novice to expert, they share knowledge and inform practices with one another (Wenger, et al., 2002). I believe that faith communities, those that meet in-person and otherwise, can be viewed through the lens of the learning sciences as unique learning communities. As these practitioners of faith join together, I submit that they form Communities of Practice allowing learning to take place through the social interactions of the group.

Statement of the Problem

Beginning in the late 1990s Christian churches in the United States are facing a unique challenge to address weakening membership which has steadily declined over the last 20 years (Gallup, 2019). The ongoing concern within the religious Christian community is that this is due in large part to the millennial generation who is perceived as the least connected to religion and

² Gallup defines millennials as individuals born between 1980 and 2000; Or at the time of this study between 20 and 39 years old (Gallup, 2019).

the church (Puffer, 2017). According to a 2019 Gallup study, only 57% of millennials who identify as Christians belong to a church. This is more than a 10-point decline as compared to the 68% of Generation X Christians who belonged to a church when they were roughly the same age (Gallup, 2019). A lack of millennial participation in the church infers a dying church. Without the younger generation taking a more active role in membership, researchers suggest that U.S. churches may cease to exist in the future (Gallup, 2019).

Researchers who study young adult religious engagement have attributed several factors to this decline including generational disparities, varying religious engagement throughout the life cycle, a national trend towards a lack of religious affiliation and secularization by means of exposure to higher education (Hayward, 2013; Jacobs, 2019; Uecker, 2007; Van Ingen, 2015).

Newport summarizes the religious trends of adults in the United States this way:

Religiosity plummets after age 18, coincident with young people leaving home and heading out into the real world of work or college. Then, religiosity begins to rise again as young people go through their 30s, coincident with marriage, children and more stable involvement in specific communities. Religiosity generally continues to rise with age (Newport, 2019).

Newport suggests that involvement in religious communities follows a pattern. After the age of 18, religious involvement plunges and then revives over time.

According to Gallup, however, the research trends suggest that “the lower rate of church membership among religious millennials appears to be more a product of generational differences than of life-stage effects.” (Gallup, 2019). Among these generational differences include the increased percentage of millennials who do not identify with a religion. An average of 33% of millennials say they have no religious affiliation, which researchers suggest may continue to grow (Gallup, 2019). While these factors may certainly play a role in the decline of church attendance there are several gaps in the literature.

Purpose of the Study

As new technologies have begun to saturate our culture, how we connect and receive information has changed. Technology has impacted how Americans communicate and share information since the 1400s. From the introduction of the printing press, to the radio in the late 1800s, television in the 1920s, and the internet today (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). In the early 1900s, in order to access spiritual teachings, one had to enter a house of worship, attend a bible study, receive printed pamphlets and sermons by mail, or somehow access a spiritual teacher. Now, the church building is no longer the arbiter of what information is accessible. The internet has allowed individuals to access religious content, for better or for worse, from a variety of sources. So, while survey research indicates millennial's physical church attendance has declined, the research failed to take into account how millennials may be using technology to engage in their faith practices.

Similar to how learning science research has studied online spaces extending traditional learning environments beyond the classroom (Taylor & Silvis, 2017), such may be the case with faith learning extending beyond church walls. To suggest that church attendance is the only measure of church membership or faith engagement, as some previous studies have reported (Barna 2014, 2015; Newport 2017, 2019), may be overlooking other avenues individuals use to access religious teachings. The purpose of this study is to explore how individuals utilize online spaces within their faith practices. Using a qualitative research design combined with an ethnographic online approach (Hine, 2017), I will provide rich descriptions of the lived experiences of millennials who engage in online faith spaces. I will also discuss how these interactions relate to learning and Community of Practice theories.

The goal then, of this qualitative study, is to explore how Black/African-American Christian millennial women use online spaces to engage in their faith-based Communities of

Practice. This study will describe in rich detail the experiences of Black millennial women who are members of an online/in-person faith community called Worship Warriors (pseudonym)³.

Worship Warriors (WW) is a faith group comprised of self-identified Black/African-American millennial women who have created their own online/in-person ministry group designed to support Christian faith practices. This group was selected because the demographic of its membership is an underrepresented population in the current corpus of learning science research. Likewise, the Christian faith and religious domains in general are an understated genre from the learning science perspective.

The millennial generation, many of whom are digital natives, have used technology to shift how society engages in almost every sector. Religion is not absolved from this trend. The internet has allowed faith practitioners to engage in their practices in a plethora of new ways. These include but are not limited to: support groups, discussions on theology, connecting with likeminded believers, prayer groups, truth seeking, sermon streaming, worship music, etc. (Campbell, 2005). This study has the opportunity to contribute to larger conversations about how millennials are engaging in religion, technology, community, and learning environments at large.

Significance of Study

There is limited scholarly research from the learning sciences perspective that positions the church as a learning environment. Given that visitors are entering into these worship spaces with the desire and expectation to learn and apply religious teachings (Saad, 2017), it could benefit both the congregation and church leadership to approach this space as a learning

³ The Pennsylvania State University IRB Study ID: 00012184. Pseudonyms were used for the names of participants and the name of the sampled organization throughout this study.

environment. Research from the learning sciences can be applied in these spaces to better equip teachers and learners with tools that lead to knowledge building, learning, retention and effective Communities of Practice within the religious domain.

Further, even fewer of these studies focus specifically on the Black/African-American female perspective. According to a 2009 Pew research study “African-Americans are markedly more religious on a variety of measures than the U.S. population as a whole... with 87% of African-Americans describing themselves as belonging to one religious group or another (Pew, 2009).” African-Americans in the United States stand out as the most religious group compared to other ethnicities. These measures included religious attendance, frequency of prayer, and religion’s importance in life. Further, in terms of gender, research has shown the following:

African-American women also stand out for their high level of religious commitment. More than eight-in-ten Black women (84%) say religion is very important to them, and roughly six-in-ten (59%) say they attend religious services at least once a week. No group of men or women from any other racial or ethnic background exhibits comparably high levels of religious observance. (Pew, 2009).

African-American women specifically are also noted as the most religious group compared to any other. These high levels of religious commitment suggest a uniquely motivated population who could exhibit high levels of interest in learning within religious settings.

These markedly higher measures, however, do not evade similar demographic trends across age. As with the general population, younger African-Americans, ages 18 to 29 report higher percentages of no religious affiliation (19%) compared to their older counterparts, ages 50 to 64 (7%). Figure 1-1 shows religious affiliation by age of African-Americans according to a 2009 Pew research study.

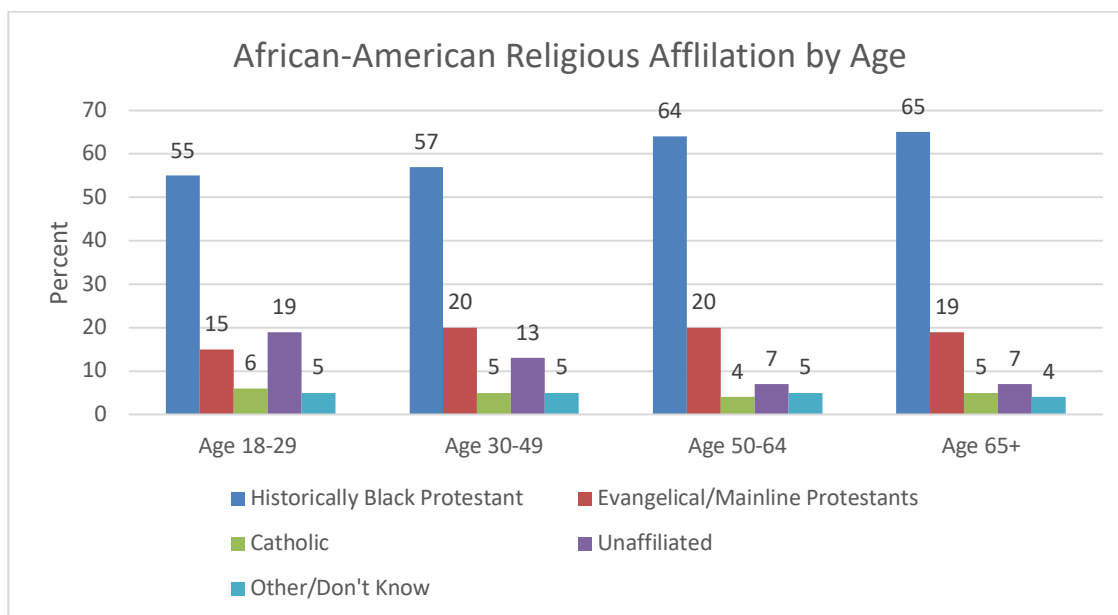


Figure 1-1: African-American Religious Affiliation by Age. Adapted from 2009 Pew Research Center Report “A Religious Portrait of African-Americans.”

While religious affiliation in historically Black denominations, which include African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated, National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated, Progressive National Baptist Convention, and Church of God in Christ (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990) tends to increase with age, the highest percent of African-Americans who identify as religiously unaffiliated are aged 18 to 29.

These cultural, gender, generational and technological distinctions within the sphere of religious engagement offers the faith practices of African-American millennial Christian women as a unique subset to investigate.

Research Questions

In light of the existing quantitative research that describes African-American religious trends, this study seeks to add to the literature from a qualitative perspective. Moreover, from a

learning science perspective, this study seeks to extend theoretical learning frameworks to an underrepresented population and domain. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1) In what ways do online spaces impact traditional in-person faith-based Communities of Practice?
- 2) In what ways do online spaces enhance Community, Domain, and Practice within faith-based Communities of Practice?

Communities of Practice

The theoretical framework of this study rests largely on Communities of Practice (CoP) research. The term “Community of Practice” was initially derived in 1991 by researchers Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. After studying apprenticeship models from an anthropological and learning science perspective, Lave and Wenger defined CoPs as the following:

[groups who] ... typically solve problems, discuss insights, share information, talk about their lives, and ambitions, mentor and coach on each other, make plans for community activities, develop tools and frameworks that become part of the common knowledge of the community. Over time these mutual interactions and relationships build up a shared body of knowledge and a sense of identity.
(Wenger, 1999, p. 4)

CoPs are communities of problem-solvers. More than mere task-forces they exist beyond the solutions of one particular obstacle. Wenger and colleagues expanded on this definition in 2011 adding that a CoP is a “learning partnership among people who find it useful to learn from and with each other about a particular domain. They use each other’s experience of practice as a learning resource (Wenger, et al., 2011).” I position the church and other ministry groups as Communities of Practice. Or, a group of Christian practitioners who come together to share best practices, useful insights, tools, create community events, share a common body of knowledge and act as resources for one another to foster faith learning in communities.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Overview

In the religious context and for the purpose of this study, learning for Christian believers extends beyond memorization of Scripture or religious doctrine. Learning for example, might encompass actions, beliefs and or understandings that are developed, understood or performed over time. These can include what authors Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker outline as personal and corporate spiritual disciplines (2002). These include “individual and group Scripture studying; praying; meditating; journaling; participating in retreats and worship services; probing conversations with spiritual guides and partners; listening to responding to, and creating music; and fasting” (Wimberly and Parker, 2002, p. 3). That is to say, faith formation within the Christian discipline is the active participation in, and/or integration of, several faith practices within a practitioner’s daily life. Therefore, I approach *learning* within the religious context similarly to that of Wimberly; The process of learning is beyond a head-knowing but is also a heart-knowing (2004). These learning moments, she argues, come from both formal Christian Education school experiences as well as through “participation in rituals, symbols, and language” (Streaty Wimberly, 2004, p. 4). These combined faith practices of Christian practitioners will encompass learning in this context.

Informal Learning versus Formal Learning

There are several definitions in the Learning Science literature categorizing formal versus informal learning. While some may limit formal learning environments to in-school, and informal learning environments to outside of school, there are several other characteristics that can define informal learning environments. Informal learning environments are “free choice, include a diverse and non-standardized range of topics, and have flexible structures, socially rich interaction and no externally imposed assessments” (Crowley, Pierroux and Knutson, 2014, p. 466). Or in other words, informal learning environments are free-flowing, highly social, assessment-free environments often allowing learners to choose their own subject-matter. On the other hand, formal learning environments are typically associated with testing, prescribed curriculum and location-dependent. They often discourage interaction between learners and emphasize individual personal knowledge.

The literature points to several opportunities provided by informal learning environments.

- 1) Since learning is student-focused, learners have the freedom to explore diverse learning goals outside of the formal environment;
- 2) Individual interest drives student learning more than curriculum which allows learners to explore subjects more deeply than what formal settings may allow (Kafai & Dede, 2014);
- 3) Informal settings allow knowledge to generate from multiple sources; that is, the teacher is not the only expert; Instead,
- 4) knowledge is distributed across all participants allowing multiple members to share their expertise with others (Kafai & Dede, 2014).

Situated Learning

An additional benefit to informal learning environments derives from critiques that formal environments do not produce the knowledge necessary for a learner to *do* an action even if

they have the knowledge (Brown, Collins, Duguid, 1989). Viewing knowledge as a tool, it is possible to have a tool and not know how to use it. Brown et al. argue that activity, concept and culture are all interdependent; that when learners are outside of the context where the knowledge is applicable, it may be more difficult for the student to access that knowledge in a real-world setting (Brown et al., 1989). These authors contend that knowledge, or tools, “can only be fully understood through use... [And] people who use tools actively rather than just acquire them, by contrast, build an increasingly rich implicit understanding of the world in which they use the tools and of the tools themselves” (Brown et al., 1989 p. 32). The authors contend that learning through activity, in authentic contexts and in collaboration with others is one of the most effective ways to produce real-world knowledge as opposed to classroom tasks. As an example, they highlight language learning by contrasting the method of being taught words from a dictionary as opposed to learning words within the context of ordinary communication. They argue that “learning from dictionaries, like any method that tries to teach abstract concepts independently of authentic situations, overlooks the way understanding is developed through continued, situated use” (Brown et al., 1989, p. 33). Vocabulary is both socially and contextually constructed. The authors contend that separating words from authentic contexts is a disservice to the learner.

As an exemplar, the authors reference the apprenticeship model in which newcomers are exposed to experts in authentic contexts exposing them to how experts think, interact and problem solve in real-world contexts. Because learners are invited into a situated context, the authors highlight this model as an effective learning method. They maintain that participation in authentic activity not only exposes novices to what tools experts use, but they are exposed to where, when and how tools are used in authentic contexts.

Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger outline three main characteristics of CoPs. Originally defined to support K-12 learning environments as mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise (1991), these terms were updated to domain, community and practice in 2002 as the theory shifted towards broader applications within business organizations. Wenger et al. outlined:

A community of practice is a unique combination of three fundamental elements; a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain. (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 27)

Domain

Domain refers to a shared interest or topic of discussion. A community of practice is united because of their desire to gain new or additional knowledge about similar skills or tasks. The domain guides and constrains the boundaries of the community. The common interest among members delineates what information is important or unimportant to share within the group (Wenger et al., 2002). However, the domain should be expansive enough that is it not exhausted after solving one problem like in the case of a task-force. It “consists of key issues or problems that members commonly experience” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 32) which necessitates its recurring assembly.

Community

Community is more than just a meeting group. A community “is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process, develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment” (Wenger et al., 2002, p.34). According to Wenger et al. (2002) respect and trust are key components within communities. Members must be willing to share both best

practices and failed attempts with other practitioners. To be a community, groups must meet on an ongoing basis to discuss issues within their domain. As communities continue to meet, they “build a sense of common history and identity” (Wenger et al. 2002, p. 35). Individuals begin to specialize and take on roles within the community making them valuable to others. Over time, members build reputations and areas of expertise within their community.

Communities also recognize the importance of reciprocity within the community (Wenger et al., 2002). That is, members share knowledge knowing that their contributions are helping others and “trusting that at some point, in some form, they too will benefit” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 37).

Practice

The authors define practice as a community’s “concepts, symbols, and analytic methods... [which] operates as a living curriculum” (Wenger et al. 2002, p.38). The group uses common historical knowledge and builds upon that framework to develop expertise functional in today’s society. Unlike interest groups or clubs, members within CoPs are practitioners. They are actively practicing or engaging in their domain which enables them to constantly add to their groups’ body of knowledge. Wenger et al. (2002) put it this way, “an effective practice evolves with the community as a collective product. It is integrated into people’s work. It organizes knowledge in a way that is especially useful to practitioners because it reflects their perspective” (Wenger et al. 2002, p. 39). The byproducts of a community’s knowledge are not always represented in the form of text. Some communities share knowledge through storytelling, best practices, design blueprints, templates etc. (Wenger et al., 2002). Within the African Diaspora, for example, oral traditions including call and response discourse, storytelling, and the sharing of oral histories have been central methods of transferring knowledge within communities (Collins,

1989). The byproducts of a community's knowledge then, reflects the tools and needs of the collective group.

CoPs are not limited to formal school-based learning environments. In the context of business organizations, Wenger adds that CoPs “interact on an ongoing basis” and find value in learning from each other (Wenger, et al., 2002, p. 4). Communities of practice are not a new phenomenon, “they have been around for as long as humans have learned together” (Wenger, 2011, p. 3). Irrespective of if they are named or invisible, societies have gathered in CoPs to share ideas and information for thousands of years. Their value, in part, is derived from the perceived benefits members experience through participation. This value leads to self-organization which is a key feature that distinguishes Communities of Practice from other teams or units (Sharratt & Usoro, 2003).

Virtual Communities of Practice

Although CoPs have existed since humans have gathered to learn, virtual communities have evolved with technology. Chiu, Hsu, and Wang (2006) define *virtual communities* as “online social networks in which people with common interests, goals, or practices interact to share information and knowledge, and engage in social interactions” (p. 1873). CM Johnson (2001) suggests that traditional communities differ from Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoP) in three main ways: 1) Traditional communities are place-dependent usually forming due to geographic convenience, while virtual communities can be accessed across geographic location or time-zones and are housed in digital *spaces* online; 2) In traditional communities, “group dynamics often override individual expression” (Johnson, 2001, p. 51), whereas in VCoP individual contribution of thought and knowledge are highly encouraged; 3) Lastly, within traditional communities there is a clear distinction between members and non-members whereas

in VCoP there are less formal boundaries of membership. Participants are bound by joint purpose and relationships are formed based on interest (Johnson, 2001).

VCoP however, are more than just group chats. They are hubs where individuals gather to share and learn from one another. Interactions can include storytelling, question and answer forums, participation in live chats, online video conferencing, document, equipment and resource sharing etc. (Barab, 2004; Ardichvilli, 2008).

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Within learning communities, participants recognize the importance of reciprocity within the community (Wenger et al. 2002). That is, members share knowledge knowing that their contributions are helping others and “trusting that at some point, in some form, they too will benefit” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 37).

Lave and Wenger (1991) also highlight the unique reproduction cycles of CoPs. Legitimate peripheral participation refers to the process by which newcomers transition from novices to experts within a community. If community participation was drawn as a circle, newcomers would be at the edge of the circle, observing and learning from old-timers who were situated at the center of the circle. Figure 2-1 shows a visual representation of how legitimate peripheral participation can shift newcomers towards the core of a CoP.

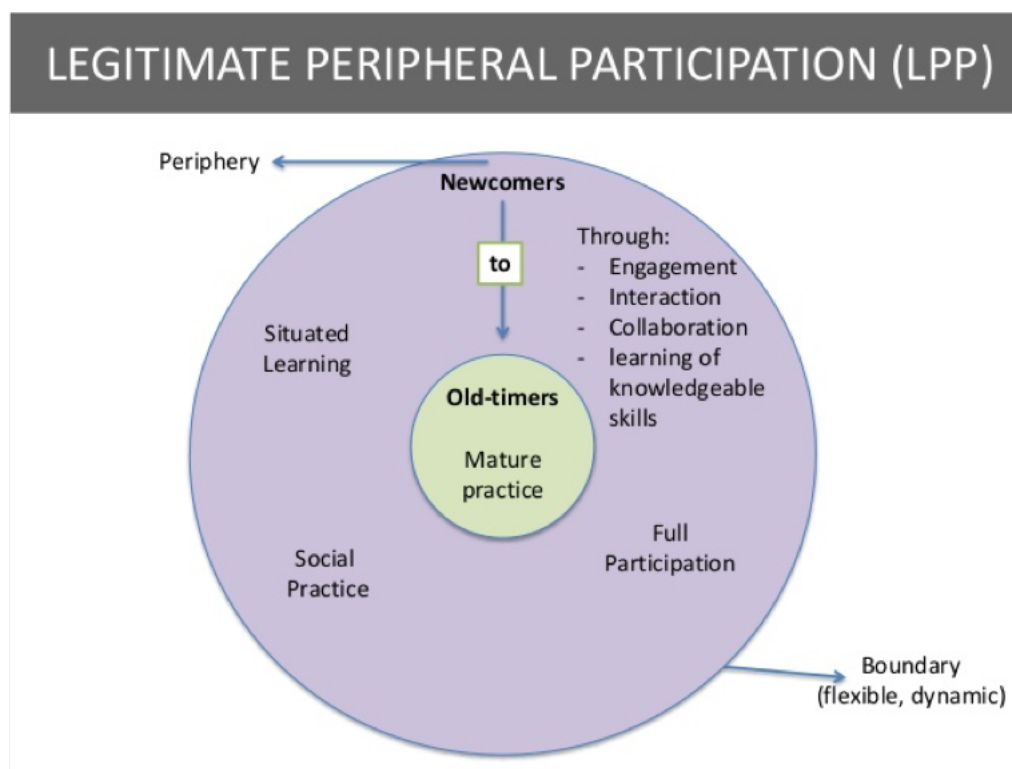


Figure 2-1: Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Reprinted from *Medical Educators as Curriculum Innovators: Using Communities of Practices as Agents of Change*, by Annalisa Manca, July 30, 2014, retrieved from <https://www.slideshare.net/annalisama/co-p2014>.

Newcomers learn through observation, engagement, interaction and have the opportunity to practice authentic tasks with mentorship from community experts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This process benefits the community two-fold. First, it sustains knowledge generation and transfer between experts and novices; and second, as newcomers move from the peripheral of the community towards more central roles, their participation begins to impact their overall identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This shift in identity naturally regenerates and evolves the community as newcomers become old-timers who then take on the role as experts and mentors.

Leadership however, as Wenger and colleagues (2002) explain, is distributed. Members within the community recognize that the combined experiences of its members are more valuable than one single story. Therefore, leaders who do emerge within communities “must have internal legitimacy” amongst group members (Wenger et al. 2002, p. 35).

In an alternative context, several studies have been conducted on how educators can use digital spaces to share classroom knowledge. In a 2016 study focusing on professional development for educators, authors Britt and Paulus describe how educators used Twitter, a social media platform, to gather informally to discuss relevant topics in education. The educator community was connected by a hashtag #EdChat where moderators and educators gathered on Tuesday nights to engage in these discussions.

The researchers were able to identify 2,354 participants who engaged in the online conversation over the course of five weeks. They found that membership was disbursed between a “core” group (Wenger, 2011), active participants, occasional participants, periphery participants, and lurkers who remained unidentified but were likely reading through the conversation yet not contributing (Britt & Paulus, 2016). These membership categories did not negatively impact the ongoing conversation held weekly between passionate educators. Contrary to in-person professional development sessions that are bound by location and time, many of these conversations lasted throughout the week or over the course of several weeks.

The authors also noted the importance of allowing practitioners to select the topics to be discussed. The #EdChat group polled participants on Sundays to identify which topics they wanted to discuss on Tuesdays. This self-selection technique allowed participants to provide input into the content being discussed.

Lastly, the researchers highlighted the speed at which resources and information was shared within the online group. They noted “approximately three to four tweets [were] sent every second during the weekly meeting time” (Britt & Paulus, 2016, p. 56). While this rapid exchange of information was an outlined advantage to the use of the online space, the authors noted limitations. The social media platform Twitter limited users to 140 characters per tweet. This restriction proved to be a confining element in a professional development space. While social

media platforms can be widely accessed and circulated to include thousands of participants, the depth to which participants can engage may be a limitation.

Authentic Community

The concept of a virtual community immediately raises the question if *authentic community* can be achieved online the same way it is in person. Rich Ling (2008) calls this a question of social cohesion. That is, can there be authentic group cohesion online? Ling argues that “cohesion is little more than a belief,” and that “the belief in [the] collective arises from interaction” (2008, p. 46-47). He pulls from Durkheim’s philosophies on ritual and religion to suggest that ritual is a tool used by groups to heighten the “sense of the collective” (Ling, 2008, p. 47). In this instance, ritual, or the act of repetitive action amongst a group, is seen less as a spiritual practice and more as a tool for social cohesion.

Several studies have analyzed community formation in online settings. In a 2018 study an instructor explored how video sharing between students impacted the social cohesion of an online class. The study surveyed 68 students enrolled in an online education course at a Bible Institute. Learners were placed in groups of three to five students and instructed to share peer to peer interpersonal videos throughout the semester. The researcher used survey data and video analysis to measure the impact of integrating these interpersonal videos into the distance education course. The author outlined ten visible practices of Christian community to measure cohesion. They were: “discipleship, gratitude, hospitality, love, prayer, promise-keeping, self-expression, spiritual enthusiasm, truth-telling, and witness” (Jupp, 2018, p. 113). Jupp found that self-expression was the most frequent visible practice displayed by all participants and contended that “revelation of the self is crucial to the development of community. Where the goal is not only to know others but to be known” (p. 148). The author highlighted that isolation in online learning

communities can stifle how participants engage but offered that self-expression played a vital role in connecting students to each other regardless of distance. Jupp's findings, however, were based on student participation within an eight-week online course. More attention in future studies should explore how the length of time within an online learning community may impact perceptions of community formation.

Learning and Identity

Due to the free-flowing and informal nature of CoPs, participants are free to engage openly without formalized stipulations on their roles. However, there are learning benefits when participants begin to engage in the community to the point at which it influences how they see themselves and their identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). "Knowledgeable skill is encompassed in the process of assuming an identity as a practitioner, of becoming a full participant, an oldtimer" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.68). Here Lave and Wenger echo Jupp that self-expression and self-identification can lead not only to community development but towards individual knowledge formation.

One example the authors use to describe this phenomenon is based on the work done by Cain (1991) observing legitimate peripheral perception and identity formation within Alcoholic

Anonymous groups:

The change these men and women have undergone is much more than a change in behavior. It is a transformation of their identities, from drinking non-alcoholics to non-drinking alcoholics, and it affects how they view and act in the world...
By "identity" I mean the way a person understands and views himself, and is viewed by others, a perception of self that is fairly constant. (Cain, 1991, p. 210)

Scholars agree that identity formation can play a principal role in the learning process.

Through communal sharing, learners in a variety of contexts establish their identities as members

within a community leading to meaningful self-discovery and learning perseverance over time (Nasir, Rosebery, Warren & Lee, 2006).

While the sharing of practices between novices and experts can be extremely valuable, the formation of identity within these communities is equally as important. “Developing an identity as a member of a community and becoming knowledgably skillful are part of the same process, with the former motivating, shaping, and giving meaning to the latter...” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 65). As learners mature in their craft and/or expand their knowledge of a topic, social interactions with other participants foster a sense of belonging within the community. As novices spend more time in these communities, their participation and knowledge increases allowing them to become a resource for newcomers thereby establishing a greater sense of membership within the community.

Scholars suggest that within Black communities, especially between African-American women, there are two institutions where these types of learning communities are most prominent: within Black extended families and inside Black churches (Collins, 1989). Echoing sociocultural learning theorists, “for Black women, new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community” (Collins, 1989, p. 763). Communal sharing and dialogue used as knowledge-validation processes, especially between Black women, has a longstanding history within Black communities.

Landscapes of Practice

In 2015, Wenger-Trayner acknowledged that “the notion of a single community of practice misses the complexity of most bodies of knowledge,” offering an update from Communities of Practice to Landscapes of Practice (Wenger-Trayner, Fenton-O’Creevy,

Hutchinson, Kubiak & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.15). *Learning in a Landscape of Practice* acknowledges that learners in professional and non-professional communities are often navigating a landscape of complex communities in combination with one another. Each community has its own unique sets of competencies, histories, and relevant sources of information that practitioners navigate as conflicting or complementary bodies to the others. The authors acknowledge “globalization, travel and new technologies” as forces that are driving these communities to expand into landscapes (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015, p. 15).

The authors name three characteristics to better understand these Landscapes of Practice. Landscapes are often political, flat and diverse.

Landscapes are Political

Landscapes of Practice are often political. Power dynamics are often evident within landscapes due to the social nature of learning. While there may be hundreds of communities within the landscape, there is a governing body or hierarchy that claims ‘knowledge’. Competing viewpoints are sometimes silenced or not considered. “There is no guarantee that a successful claim to competence inside a community will translate into a claim to ‘knowledge’ beyond the community where it is effective” (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015, p.16). Recognition of a claim by a community largely depends on the political position of that community within the landscape.

Landscapes are Flat

Landscapes of Practice are often flat. That is, local community knowledge cannot be engulfed by other practices. While hierarchies may exist in the landscape, no one practice “can have such control over another that it replaces the internal logic and local claim to knowledge of

that other practice” (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015, p.16). Policies can be enforced in some instances but these policies still cannot expunge the local knowledge within a community. Politics may influence if a local community’s knowledge is accepted by the wider landscape, but practices can still “inform and influence each other “(Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015, p.16).

Landscapes are Diverse

Landscapes of Practice are often diverse. While multiple communities exist within a landscape, boundaries are evident between communities. Local communities often have shared histories including perspectives, values, and expertise creating margins between groups. The boundaries between communities are not always amiable but do offer spaces for potential innovation and learning between groups. “The meetings of perspectives [between boundaries] can be rich in new insights, radical innovations, and great progress” (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015, p.17).

The Landscapes of Practice frame expands the Community of Practice theory beyond a standalone group. It conceptualizes individuals as learners who may belong to diverse groups within a landscape. These learners navigate the boundaries between multiple groups while influencing local community knowledge.

Affinity Spaces

While Communities of Practice literature has been widely used to describe rich learning communities within the Learning Sciences, an alternative view has emerged to describe learning spaces that fall outside of the prescribed CoP boundaries. Affinity Spaces, introduced by Gee in 2004, offered an alternative viewpoint to CoPs. Affinity spaces focus less on the *communities* in

CoPs and more on the *spaces* where people gather. Gee contended that unlike CoPs, Affinity Spaces focus more on the location where information is being shared as opposed to classifying a group of people (Gee, 2005). Gee explained further,

The idea of “community” can carry connotations of “belongingness” and close-knit personal ties among people which do not necessarily always fit classrooms, workplaces, or other sites where the notion of a community of practice has been used (Gee, 2005, p. 70).

Gee goes on to explain that “community” can often imply membership which is binary in nature. A person is either a member or is not; they are either in the community or outside of it. This characterization can be troublesome in spaces where membership can hold different meanings. Gee used an example of a science classroom, where within the same community one student may enter with the intention to be better prepared for college while another is simply trying to earn enough classroom points to pass the class. Gee argued that it is erroneous to group participants as *members* within the same community when many enter the space with varying intentions (Gee, 2005).

Due to these implied meanings and the emphasis on the group, as opposed to the place, Gee offered an alternative called Affinity Spaces. Affinity Spaces are often attributed to informal or colloquial leisure activities such as spaces for video gaming, fan-fiction or pop culture. Gee contended, however, that these spaces can be applied in a variety of contexts.

In a later text, Gee pointed to his Catholic upbringing as one of the first “traditional” affinity spaces he engaged in during his upbringing (Gee, 2017). He referred to Catholicism as the “attractor” within the spaces that the families interacted. These spaces included his local parish, his home, other family’s homes, his Catholic schools and various other settings. All of these spaces he umbrellaed under a sole affinity space.

Everyone who entered any part of the affinity space...even if a given [person] was someone I never myself met, our shared affinity ensured that if we did come across each other, we would have shared a good deal cognitively, affectively, and morally (Gee, 2017, p. 28).

Gee contrasted this traditional affinity space to new affinity spaces which he argued, “are becoming prime spaces where people engage in 21st Century teaching, learning, doing, and being” (Gee, 2017, p. 28). These spaces are not confined solely to physical spaces but can blur the lines between physical and virtual worlds. Affinity spaces are designed to help people solve unique problems; problems as unique as the various attractors that connect them.

At their core, Affinity spaces are “places where people can go to share resources and values and flexibly form and re-form in different groups” (Gee, 2013, p. 174). These spaces can be situated in-person, online or within a hybrid format that includes multiple spaces.

Gee defined three criteria for Affinity Spaces: 1) shared content, or something that the group is about; 2) generators, individuals who create or share content; and 3) portals, or one or more ways for individuals to access generators and content. To further illustrate, Gee outlined eleven features that constitute an Affinity Space making note that not all Affinity Spaces will contain each attribute, but the more attributes present, the closer the space is to an Affinity Space (Gee, 2005).

Common Endeavor

Gee acknowledged that within an Affinity Space a common endeavor or interest should bind the group. The shared interest should be more dominant than race, class, gender or ability. While similarities within these other classifications may be present within Affinity Spaces, people relate to each other most because of a goal, common interest or practice (Gee, 2015).

Common Space

Similar to Lave and Wenger's legitimate peripheral participation, Gee highlighted that newbies and masters should all share a common space. Regardless of skill or level of engagement, participants should have access to a common space without exclusion based on level of expertise. It is within these mixed levels of ability that participants are exposed to new resources, knowledge and practical applications (Gee, 2015).

Portals and Generators

Affinity spaces require portals, spaces where users meet and interact, and generators, content that is created by the users. Affinity Spaces can have multiple portals. Using chemistry as an example, a classroom could be one portal, a textbook another, a laboratory, an online website, etc. Portals give access to the content created by generators. Further, participants should have the power or ability to create new meanings or applications outside of the originally designed constraints. In this case, Gee referenced a videogame where players have the ability to create new game boards, artwork, and other content relevant to the game that was not designed by the original creators but can be shared amongst users (Gee, 2015).

Content is Transformed by Interaction

One feature that makes Affinity Spaces unique from Communities of Practice is that content is transformed by interaction. Building off of the video game example, Gee explained that based on player input, video game creators may add or alter content within the game based on user interactions, comments or reviews. As participants interact within an Affinity Space, original content can be adapted based on the interactions of the participants (Gee, 2015). Within the

religious context, this attribute may help differentiate between a ministry being a Community of Practice versus an Affinity Space. Affinity Spaces are designed to allow participants to alter content based on group preferences.

Intensive and Extensive Knowledge

Participants in Affinity Spaces gain access to both intensive and extensive knowledge. Both intensive knowledge, or specialized knowledge, as well as extensive, or broader knowledge are welcome within the space. Thus, Affinity Spaces attract a diverse range of abilities. People can learn very detailed pieces of specific information, or more general peripheral information which allows participants from various backgrounds to feel that they have relevant information to share (Gee, 2015).

Individual and Distributed Knowledge

Affinity Spaces encourage both individual knowledge, knowledge stored by individuals, as well as distributed knowledge, or knowledge stored in tools, resources, or networks. Distributed knowledge can link users to other websites, instructional videos, or spaces. Participants are encouraged to use both people and tools to yield smarter collective knowledge networks as a whole (Gee, 2015).

Dispersed Knowledge Encouraged

Within Affinity Spaces, users are not confined to learning only from the resources within the space. Participants are encouraged to share links, outside readings, resources or other forms of

dispersed knowledge to create a knowledge network that extends outside of the space (Gee, 2015).

Tacit Knowledge

Spaces also encourage and respect that not all knowledge is easily explained through words or text. Affinity Spaces allow individuals to learn through what Gee called “joint action,” or when participants pass knowledge through performance or action instead of words. This allows users to learn through observation (usually novices observing experts). Further, as users identify the tacit knowledge that they do have, Affinity Spaces offer opportunities for participants to practice translating their understandings into words for other users (Gee, 2015).

Many Forms of Participation

Users in Affinity Spaces are not bound to participate in any one manner or for a set amount of time. Participant usage can vary day to day. In some cases, a user may be a central point of information and very active one day, and the next day on the peripheral, not adding additional content to the space at all (Gee, 2015).

Many Routes to Status

Not all participants are interested in gaining status, but for those who are, there are a variety of routes to gain respect within the space. For example, some users may gain status by excelling within a certain knowledge domain, while other users may take pride in organizing forums, connecting users to resources, etc. (Gee, 2015).

Leadership is Fluid

Lastly, within Affinity Spaces, there is no one leader of the group or space. Leaders are viewed as resources more than supervisors creating freer movement and less hierarchy (Gee, 2015).

In an affinity space, leadership and status are flexible. People sometimes lead and mentor; sometimes they follow and are mentored. There are no fixed bosses and teachers, though people acknowledge different paths to mastery and know where people are on them (Gee, 2013, p. 176).

Religious Faith Formation

There are several definitions from a variety of religious, spiritual, and non-religious parties who have attempted to define the process of faith formation.

Stages of Faith

James Fowler author of *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, suggests that faith teachings are found within all of the major religions and evolves in six main stages. They are: 1) Intuitive-Reflective Faith, 2) Mythic-Literal Faith, 3) Synthetic-Conventional Faith, 4) Individuative-Reflective Faith, 5) Conjunctive Faith, and 6) Universalizing Faith (Fowler, 1981).

In the first Intuitive-Reflective stage, individuals are generally between the ages of two and six years old. As young children faith is not understood as a complex set of ideals, but rather viewed as impressions passed from a parent or authority figure. In the second mythic-Literal stage, individuals are generally ages six to twelve years old. At this stage, children are able to re-tell faith stories they've heard but still interpret them in a very literal non-abstract way. Fowler suggests that some adults never move beyond this stage. The third Synthetic-Conventional stage

generally starts around age 13 and extends to age 18, though some stay at this stage their entire lives. In this stage young adults comprehend the larger moral narrative regarding their religious practices and take ownership of their religion as their own. Religious authority is placed in the hands of groups or peers who share religious backgrounds. The shift to the fourth Individuative-Reflective stage can happen at any time but usually begins at late adolescence between ages 19 to 22. At this stage individuals begin to question the validity of their own faith traditions as they are exposed to viewpoints found outside of their homes and communities. Some pieces of inherited religious practice are upheld while others are rejected. The fifth Conjunctive stage usually is not reached until age 30. Individuals accept that faith is complex and some questions cannot be answered with simple solutions. In this stage, individuals seek community to wrestle with complex issues and are more open to other's perspectives. Often at this stage, people return back to the traditions and stories they were taught previously in their religious upbringings. The final stage, Universalizing faith, Fowler suggests is reached by very few people. At this stage, individuals operate within a universal grace that is accepting of people from various faiths traditions at various stages. Individuals at this stage are comfortable with the paradoxes of life and operate with communal interests over individual interest. Fowler's faith stages suggest that a combination of human psychological development and maturity influences faith stage advancement. However, age alone does not determine growth. Fowler emphasizes that adults may remain in lower stages for the duration of their lives. This implies that some aspect of seeking is required to move between stages.

Wisdom-Forming

Authors Wimberly and Parker argue that faith formation within Black Christian communities is a "wisdom-forming journey" which requires: the development of identity as

valued creations of God, appreciation of the gift of life, and a reverence for the lives of others (Wimberly & Parker, 2002). The authors highlight that the wisdom-formation journey is relational, guided by Christian faith exemplars both past and present. Wisdom seekers desire “guidance on how to live in want and in plenty, how to surmount the storms of life, and how to face an unknown future” (Wimberly & Parker, 2002, Location 130). The Black Christian community, in particular, has placed immense value on the shared oral wisdom of grandparents, parents, mentors, leaders and the “village” or intergenerational community for spiritual guidance and direction through daily life. More recently, however a shift towards an individualistic society “has disrupted the Black communal or village functioning” (Wimberly & Parker, 2002, Location 1939).

This shift has not impacted the desire for Christian wisdom. Black Christian females, in particular, place immense value on the importance of conversations between other wisdom seekers. “These conversations draw Black females into each other's company. Whether in formal or informal groups or one-to-one mentoring, the conversations function as opportunities to surface concerns that may not be welcome elsewhere” (Wimberly & Parker, 2002, Location 1976). Black female Christians engage in both structured and unstructured wisdom seeking conversations where guidance is both offered and received mutually between participants. The authors highlighted shared gender and racial inequalities or confrontations shared by Black women that make these conversation spaces uniquely valued amongst Black women compared to others.

The authors engaged in focus group conversations about Black female mentorship and wisdom seeking with a group of male and female participants. Within these discussions participants highlighted the importance of authenticity, trust and safety between Black women. One participant shared,

The way I see it is that our role as mentors passing on wisdom to other women requires us to be transparent. This means we have to be willing to expose ourselves, even the negative parts of our life history, letting another know that we weren't always where we are now and that we had some trials and made mistakes. We've got to get real ourselves so that we can help someone else, and let them know, "I was in this or that situation, and God brought me out; and God can do the same for you." (Wimberly & Handy in Wimberly & Parker, 2002, Location 2090)

Participants stressed that transparency in sharing one's testimony and lived experience could serve as mentorship and wisdom for another. This could only be achieved, they emphasized, in spaces where women felt safe. Disclosing personal information between participants would only be welcomed in spaces where trust was reciprocal and participants would not fear their personal information being used against them.

We need to intentionally carve out spaces where women can speak together, be together, and share together. Creating a safe space is a process, just as attaining wisdom is a process. We have to be continually engaged and intentional in seeking wisdom but also in creating safe spaces, whether through women's Bible study, prayer group, or through some athletic activities (Wimberly & Handy in Wimberly & Parker, 2002, Location 2101)

The creation of formal and informal safe spaces facilitates the free exchange of wisdom sharing between women. The importance of these spaces led researchers to ask if the church was doing enough to create these types of wisdom-forming spaces for Black women. Participants revealed that churches offer a range of mentorship experiences. On one hand, one participant, who revealed that she was the manager of a school's mentoring program, shared that most of the adults who sought to be mentors were Christians who were unable to find mentoring opportunities at their church. On the other hand, a participant revealed that the church she grew up in, assigned every child a mentor at the age of eleven. The mentor helped walk the child through the new membership class but was available for guidance on church and non-church topics. The participant maintained a relationship with her mentor into adulthood. Handy commented,

I think that our churches must also help young people to mentor one another, because a lot of times they can receive correction and advice from their own peers better than they can from an older person. We have to be intentional about that through such things as assigning prayer partners or accountability partners (Wimberly & Handy in Wimberly & Parker, 2002, Location 2211).

Handy acknowledged that peers can offer wisdom sharing between one another as accountability partners. In some instances, these peer interactions can operate more effectively than interactions with older adults.

Religious Online Communities

There is still limited research focused on online religious communities especially from the Learning Science perspective. Most studies to date have approached this space from a religious studies, Christian education, or media studies standpoint. Heidi Campbell, a professor of media studies and author of *Exploring Religious Community Online*, studies how religious communities gather online. Over a four-year period, beginning in the late 1990s, Campbell gathered data on how three faith communities used email lists to gather, connect and communicate. Campbell gathered the data using participant-observation methods, email questionnaires, and in-person interviews. Researchers worked in conjunction with the email list moderators to develop a set time period for data collection which ranged from six to ten weeks. During the outlined time, all email postings and interactions were logged and a research diary was kept to highlight unique interactions. The themes investigated focused on, what unique qualities online communication offered to internet users, how members described and interacted with their online community, and awareness of perceived and actual relationships between online and offline community. A voluntary sample design was used to recruit participants for the email questionnaire. Those who responded were asked general demographic information, history within the community and opinions of the online community as well as general internet usage.

Participants for in-person interviews were then selected based on questionnaire responses and geographic location. All interviews were conducted inside the home of the participant and when possible included interviews with family, observations of internet use, and visits to their local church. Campbell employed a case study approach which highlighted three email list-serve Christian communities and narratives of their participants. It is important to note that in the late 1990s, internet accessibility across all socio-economic status levels was not as broad as it is today. Therefore, the sampling of these online Christian community groups may be slightly skewed towards higher income participants.

Although nestled outside of the realm of the Learning Sciences, Campbell's work and findings continues to inform how scholars' approach online religious communities. Campbell concluded, "internet use is not causing most people to leave their local churches or to shy away from face-to-face community participation" (2005, p. 177). Most participants described their membership in the online community as a supplement as opposed to a substitute for local church involvement. Many shared resources or prayer requests they received online with members in their local church. Members who were not a part of a local church named three main reasons for their lack of involvement; "being unable to locate churches that would accept them; being unable to find a church that could provide the teaching or interaction they wanted; and being unable to overcome previous negative church experiences" (Campbell, 2005, p. 177).

Further, participants expressed that they may have joined the community for information, but they stayed in the community because of relationships. Some members felt like they began to know members in the online community more than those in their local churches. One participant noted, "online community focuses on dialogue at a more profound level than offline parishes... Online community becomes a place people value because they experience friendship, affirmation, and emotional investment there" (Campbell, 2005, p. 179).

Campbell pointed to several reasons why individuals are drawn to online religious communities, noting that her participants often juxtaposed their offline interactions against those experienced online.

Offline church was often criticized for not facilitating times for discussion or opportunities to form intimate relationships. Several members referred to online community as a 24-hour church, offering instant access to other Christians any time of the day or night, filling the gaps between church services and events... Therefore, online communities were perceived as more accessible and open than local churches (2005, p. 180).

Campbell's findings, although more heavily focused on networking, relationships and new media, still helped situate my research within the Learning Sciences. Based on her findings, 1) some individuals seek online community for teachings supplemental to those found within their local churches; 2) Online community highlights discussion in a way that traditionally has not been fostered in local brick and mortar contexts; and 3) online communities are more open and accessible transcending time and geographic location.

Black Millennials and Church

Joshua Mitchell, author of *Black Millennials and the Church* explored the factors surrounding the decline of participation and retention in church ministries amongst Black millennials. Mitchell suggested that “the lack of attendance in the teaching ministries of the church is not an indication of a lack of interest in spiritual formation, but rather reflects challenges in the availability of the content” (Mitchell, 2018, p. 23). Mitchell suggests that interest in religious teaching is not the problem. Rather, the platforms in which churches offer teachings, i.e. in person, once a week at a set time, are not as accessible as teachings that are offered online on platforms that “can be accessed more naturally to [millennials]” (Mitchell, 2018, p. 33). The researcher's survey of over 600 Black millennials revealed that outside of the

church building millennials most preferred to connect with religious teachings in online communities, on social media and at home or in small group settings such as at coffee houses, restaurants or lounges. Mitchell emphasized the importance of church ministries venturing beyond the four walls of the church to meet millennials where they are.

Mitchell highlighted millennials for their uniqueness as the most educated, racially diverse and religiously unaffiliated group as compared to older generations. Further, from a marketing standpoint,

businesses and organizations who have been successful in gaining the attention and investment of Millennials have all given them opportunities to help create and provide directional input in the development of the products and services that they will ultimately consume. From deciding the new flavor of potato chips that a company will release to voting on which artists will perform at popular award shows, it has become normative for Black Millennials to be given a say in what they will consume and participate in (Mitchell, 2018, pp. 118-119).

In a similar manner, Mitchell argued that the church should create mechanisms for millennials to contribute to conversations around curriculum, teachings and the direction of church ministries.

In this manner, millennials become co-laborers in the content created within the church increasing their investment in church ministries (Mitchell, 2018).

Brianna Parker, author of *What Google Can't Give: The Relevancy of the Church for Black Millennials in the Tech Age* explored characteristics of the physical church that transcend resources beyond those that can simply be accessed through an online search (2018). Parker surveyed over 1,000 millennials, conducted four focus groups and four in-depth interviews. Her research concluded that relationship and reach were the two factors that differentiated church beyond the internet. Relationship, with millennials, she argued could be sharpened through pastoral care: building relationships while valuing distinctiveness in personhood beyond agreement. One of the intangible characteristics of the church, beyond an online search engine, was care:

Robots and technology can make people feel like they care because they remember birthdays and have a consistent countenance. However, they do not know when to touch someone's shoulder in solidarity, tear up because another person is emotionally impacted by the pain someone else experiences, or nod to encourage others in a crowd. Google cannot build relationships that are heartfelt, supportive, and encouraging (Parker, 2018, Location 1682).

Human empathy and emotion, Parker summarized, were defining characteristics of engagement in the church that could not be replaced by technology.

Second to relationship, Parker outlined reach or community engagement as a defining characteristic that could not be replicated through online spaces. Outreach online could not substitute for the impact of in-person community service.

GoFundMe accounts, congratulatory posts, and socially mediated activism do not compare to seeing lives, communities, and families changed. Some millennials were concerned with policy; others wanted to see people on the ground in communities; others were concerned with human touch and many with the treatments of outsiders in the church.

The Black church's commitment to serving its local community through service is directly related to the intrinsic values of millennials. To capture millennial investment, monetary and otherwise, Parker argued that the church must realign with the core values of millennials "service, justice and cultural progression" (Parker, 2018, Location 252). These action-based community engagement activities transcend that which can be accessed in online spaces.

Social Media Spaces for Online Faith Communities

The WW group is not entirely unique as an online faith space. In fact, there are several Black women's ministry groups that create online spaces and community for Black Christian women. These include groups like Woman Evolve (Roberts, 2018), the Pinky Promise Movement (Lindsey, 2016), She Who is Called (Watrice, 2019), Saved Girl Secrets, (Cool Saved Chicks Inc., 2016), Pink Robe Chronicles (Sampson, 2020), Girl Plus God (Girl Plus God, n.d.), Saved in

the City (Morton, 2020), Confident Women Co. (Pittman, 2020), Spiritual Girl Inc. (Moore, 2020), and WomenRISE (Eugene, 2019). These groups create online and in-person community spaces for resource sharing, fellowship, mentorship, discussion groups, encouragement and beyond. They use various mediums to connect with their followers and share resources through prayer calls, life groups, phone applications, Facebook pages, Instagram accounts, Twitter accounts, group chats, in-person ministry events, conferences, websites, discussion boards, etc.

Beyond these groups, a simple search on Facebook for “Christian women groups” produced over 100 Facebook groups while a search for “Black women millennial Christian groups” produced 97 results. These types of online Facebook groups are both open and private; accessible by invite only, screened through survey questions, or open to all. These Facebook Groups do not include Facebook Pages which can be curated by churches, individuals, non-profits or other groups that widely share and post Christian information. Unlike groups however, pages do not allow followers to post content.

In 2018, it was estimated that about 84% of Protestant churches owned Facebook pages in order to better connect with their congregations (LifeWay, 2018). This number is likely even higher now as churches have had to shift online to stay connected with their members during the COVID-19 global pandemic. These Facebook pages are useful communication platforms for churches. Information can be posted and distributed at no cost to followers or organizations. Interested individuals can follow these pages for the latest church news, ministry events, information, resources, original content and media. In some cases, these pages may function as Virtual Communities of Practice by allowing followers to comment, share discuss, engage and like posts throughout the week.

Pages can also be created by individuals, groups or organizations that are not associated with a church but offer religious or faith teachings. Pink Robe Chronicles, for example, is a Facebook community which posts weekly spiritual teachings live every Sunday morning by

curator Melva Sampson, Ph.D. Followers are encouraged to tune in, comment, like or share the teachings. Pink Robe Chronicles differentiates itself from other faith spaces by “curating a brave and affirming space” that counters “oppressive structures i.e., racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, etc.” (Sampson, 2019). Although Dr. Sampson’s page is not directly associated with a church, the group was self-defined as a “digital worshipping community.” The Pink Robe Chronicles and other faith spaces like it, use social media outlets like Facebook to broadcast its viewpoints acting as an “alternative pulpit” (Sampson, 2019).

Facebook pages also have the ability to broadcast live videos which can provide opportunities for followers to tune-in to teachings or church services remotely in real-time. Further, during livestreams Facebook also has the capability to support a live chat platform which allows viewers to share, comment or react during video livestreams. This chatroom gives online viewers a space to interact with other viewers who could be watching the same video remotely from around the world.

Social media and other online platforms have made it easier to facilitate these types of online faith groups based on interest, demographic or domain. There are likely several thousand public and private online faith groups that exist within these platforms. Many of which may not be as easily discoverable through a top-level keyword search through Facebook or other search engines. This also does not take into account weekly corporate prayer calls, group texting threads, church group chats, online chat rooms, etc. Many of these virtual platforms offer spaces for conversations around theology, prayer, encouragement, spiritual growth and other faith-based topics.

Aside from Facebook, other social media platforms have also extended the reach of online faith communities. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, YouTube and individual church applications have all been utilized by churches, pastors and other faith practitioners to provide curated faith-based content. These websites, applications

and platforms are accessible through mobile devices such as, phones, tablets and computers. Shared resources include phone background screens, Bible verses, commentary, full-length sermons, sermon clips, devotionals, worship music, interviews, panels, devotionals, Bible studies and beyond.

Other phone applications such as GroupMe (Skype, 2020), WhatsApp Messenger (WhatsApp, 2020), The Bible App (Life Church, 2020), She Who Is Called (Watrice, (2019), SprinkleOfJesus (Sprinkle of Jesus, 2019), Transformation App (Bluebridge, 2020) and other faith-specific phone applications created by individuals, churches and organizations have also evolved to create spaces for online faith communities. These applications, although designed to serve many functions, can be downloaded to a phone's operating software and used to connect Christians to faith-based materials around the world. These applications, similar to social media, can house links to sermons, Bible studies, or simply provide a space for a group to connect and share resources as they please.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach. Creswell outlined qualitative research as an approach that has the ability to uncover data rich in detail within naturalized settings (1998). Hine (2017, p. 316) described traditional ethnography as a research method that immerses a researcher into a natural setting in order to provide detailed insight into that setting:

As applied to the Internet, ethnography has been able to develop an immersive understanding of social formations that emerge within online platforms, documenting their distinctive culture and highlighting the significance of online forms of co-presence in developing shared experience.

Ethnographic approaches in online spaces can highlight co-presence, or how users imagine collective community in online spaces.

How millennials use online spaces to engage in Christian faith learning cannot be rigidly defined across an entire generation. Influences that impact the millennial generation will not be applicable to every young adult's faith formation. This study highlighted how a particular subgroup, Black female millennials, used online spaces within their religious learning experiences. This qualitative ethnography uncovered rich descriptions of lived experiences through participant interviews, focus groups, survey data and participant-researcher observation. Participants from an online/in-person faith-based CoP comprised of Black/African-American millennial Christian women was selected as the unit of analysis.

Participants and Social Network

The Worship Warrior (WW) ministry group (pseudonym) is an online faith-based ministry group. The community formed in February 2018 by two co-creators who identify as Black millennial Christian women. The founders were committed to growing as an online community designed to support millennial Christian women outside of church. The group was not connected to any one church, but was committed to supporting the faith-based practices of women regardless of their church affiliation, denomination, or lack thereof. The group hosted weekly prayer calls on Saturday mornings that joined women together from across the country. They maintained a group messaging thread in the GroupMe phone application as well as Instagram and Twitter social media accounts to connect and recruit prospective members. Membership was generally granted through word-of-mouth referrals or individuals who expressed interest through social media accounts. The group also hosted local in-person retreats and events for women throughout the year in the Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia area to support their community and faith building efforts. They utilized list-serve emails to invite members to participate in volunteer activities and ministry events.

The WW group was chosen for this study for a number of reasons. First, as outlined on the group's website, WW was designed to, among other things, "create a learning environment that will be an invaluable resource to young women." The group's commitment and acknowledgement to creating a faith-based learning environment was in alignment with the learning science positionality of the researcher. Second, the group's main platform of communication was a web-based group messaging application called GroupMe that allowed for members in the virtual group to share text-messages, photos, videos, links, take polls, create calendar invitations etc. As of May 2020, the group consisted of 101 women from around the

United States who held various church affiliations. New participants were recruited into the group by friends and through social media.

This group was also selected due to its population of faith-oriented Christian millennial women and its unique access by the researcher. As a member of the group since its early founding in 2018, I have gained trust and access to the group and its leaders. I acted as a participant-researcher which allowed me unique insight to the innerworkings and culture of the group. Given the current understatement of Black Christian millennial women perspectives in Learning Science research, I felt the perspectives of this group could add diversity to the current corpus of research.

Seventy-eight participants were observed in this study through their participation in the WW group chat. Twenty-one of those participants completed a faith-practice survey. Sampled from within that group, six individuals participated in a focus group and eight women participated in individual interviews. These data sources are described in the next section. Participants were recruited through the WW group chat as well as through the group's email listserv. After the initial invitation to participate, approximately one week later, a follow-up written reminder was sent through the group chat and emailed with the same information. After this initial reminder, no additional notifications were sent in order to maintain the integrity and safe space of the group setting. All members were informed by the group leaders that a participant-researcher was an active member within the group. Participants who elected to be included in the study were all randomly assigned pseudonyms. The same pseudonym was used for each participant across the various data sources.

Data Sources and Procedures

Participant Researcher

As an active member in the WW group chat, I acted as a participant-researcher during the data collection process. I had been a member of the group since it began in 2018 and built relationships with several members in the group including both co-founders. I attended in-person events including an end-of-year retreat in Maryland, participated weekly in the Saturday morning prayer calls as well as contributed to the group conversation within the GroupMe chat on a monthly basis. During data collection, I continued my role as a member of the group and used my access to observe, record and analyze the key interactions and activities of the group.

Online Transcripts of Group Chats

I utilized the ongoing group chat thread as an artifact spanning an eleven-month period from the group's online GroupMe creation in July 2018 (21 members) to June 2019 (91 members). The GroupMe group chat data produced a 477-page text transcript. The eleven-month period was bound by Institutional Research Board approval. According to Bowen, in qualitative ethnographic research documents have the potential to provide "background and context, additional questions to be asked, supplementary data, a means of tracking change and development, and verification of findings" (Bowen, 2009, p. 30). The transcript was further analyzed during a three-week period in January of 2019. During this time the group engaged in a corporate fast which was one of the most active periods of group participation.

An email was sent to all members of the group informing them of the opt-out consent option for their historical data in the GroupMe chat. No members of the group opted out of having their data used in the analysis of the GroupMe chat.

Interviews and Focus Groups

To further understand the participant experience within the virtual community, I conducted eight individual interviews and one focus group consisting of six members of the WW group. Seven interviews were conducted via Zoom, a web-based video conferencing platform which allowed participants to call-in by phone or connect through video at the participant's discretion; one interview was conducted in-person at a group retreat. The focus group took place in-person at the home of a group leader. Given the sensitive nature of the religious context, participants were selected on a volunteer basis. The interviews and focus group were all semi-structured which allowed participants the liberty to speak at length on themes most important to them and the flexibility to explore themes as they emerged (Cohen, 2006). Within these interviews, I asked participants about their experiences and preferences within online and in-person faith communities. The focus group also presented opportunities for member-checking against responses collected during in-person interviews.

Faith-Practice Survey

Additionally, all members in the group chat and list-serve were sent a faith-practice survey regardless if they were able to participate in an interview or focus group. This survey asked participants to share their demographics, religious background, as well as technology, learning and faith preferences in a Likert-scale and open-ended format. Twenty-one participants completed the 44-question survey representing a 26.9% response rate.

Consent occurred when participants reviewed the informed consent form at the beginning of the personal data form and electronically signed the form to indicate that they were willing to participate in the study. As part of the Informed Consent Form, participants were told that they

had the option of not participating or could withdraw at any time without penalty. Table 3-1 displays how the data sources were used to answer the research questions.

Analysis Techniques

I began by familiarizing myself with the written transcription history of the GroupMe online chat. This transcript spanned a total of eleven months from the group's creation in July 2018 to June 2019. The findings from this document helped me to better understand the nature of

Table 3-1: Research Questions and Data Sources.

| Research Question | Data Source |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1) In what ways do online spaces impact traditional in-person faith-based Communities of Practice? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview & Focus Group Responses • Faith-Practice Survey Responses • Researcher Observation |
| 2) In what ways do online spaces enhance Community, Domain and Practice within faith-based Communities of Practice? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview & Focus Group Responses • Faith-Practice Survey Responses • Researcher Observation • Document Analysis |

the group and was used as a triangulation technique to validate other sources of data (Bowen, 2009). Analysis of the group chat also served as a reference point for questions to be explored during the focus group and interviews. Member checking during interviews and focus groups further supported validation of participant responses.

Interviews and focus groups were transcribed then coded using an exploratory approach based on emerging themes (Miles et al., 2014). The first cycle of participant interview coding was done paragraph by paragraph using a holistic coding approach categorizing the data into larger chunks (Miles et al., 2014).

Interview Responses

After gathering results from the faith-practice survey, 14 participants were interviewed. Six participants participated in a focus group. One interview took place in-person at a WW group retreat and seven interviews were conducted online via Zoom. The online Zoom platform allowed participants to connect by video chat or telephone.

Participant interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo software. The data were initially cataloged based on if the participant described 1) an in-person experience, 2) an online experience, or 3) an experience or phenomenon that was not location dependent. Table 3-2 shows the original codes that were used during the first cycle of participant interview and focus group coding.

Table 3-2: First Cycle Interview and Focus Group Coding.

| Location of Described Experience | In-Person or Physical Experience | Online or Virtual Experience | Non-Location Dependent Experiences |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Code | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits of physical spaces • Drawbacks physical spaces • Church responsibility • Church (un)willingness to evolve • Seeking church home • Upbringing in church • Involved in church ministry | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits of virtual spaces • Drawbacks of virtual spaces • Online accessibility • Choice in online content • Seeking online community • Virtual pastors/preachers • Other online communities • Seeking online resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authenticity • Building Relationships • Conversations • Distractions • Feeling valued • Safe spaces • Recruitment – Fishers of Men • Technology used in conjunction with physical spaces • Learning |

Due to the open-ended nature of participant interviews, corpuses of the data spoke more to the general phenomenon of the religious sector as opposed to the prescribed research questions. In order to narrow the focus of the data, for the second cycle of coding I reconsidered the outlined research questions and used patterned coding to re-evaluate the first cycle codes (Miles et al., 2014). Table 3-3 displays the codes names and descriptions that emerged from the second cycle of participant interview and focus group response coding. Coding schemes were crosschecked with a faculty advisor to support the reliability of the interpretations.

Table 3-3: Second Cycle Interview and Focus Group Coding.

| Research Question | Second Cycle Code Name | Description | Instances |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| RQ1: In what ways do online spaces impact traditional in-person faith-based Communities of Practice? | Technology as a Supplement | Participant cited how their participation in online spaces acted as a supplement to their local in-person practices | 30 |
| | Technology as a Bridge | Participant commented on how online interactions acted as a bridge to an in-person encounter | 18 |
| RQ 2: In what ways do online spaces enhance Community, Domain and Practice within faith-based Communities of Practice? | Safe Spaces | Participant expressed the role of safe spaces in participant ability to share/learn in faith-spaces | 39 |
| | Authenticity | Participant shared account of interaction with other practitioners they deemed authentic or inauthentic | 29 |
| | Close-Knit Local Community | Participant recounted advantages or disadvantages of close-knit local community | 22 |
| | Content Choice | Participants cited ability to choose curriculum topic or teacher | 19 |
| | Connect Anywhere/ Anytime | Participants commented on ability to connect to online faith spaces from various locations at various times of day | 18 |

| | | | |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| | Resource Hub | Participants offered resources or recounted resource sharing between practitioners | 17 |
| | Experiences of Practitioners | Participants expressed the value of access to other practitioner experiences | 17 |
| | Virtual Pastors | Participants mentioned an online preacher, pastor or teacher outside of their local community | 10 |
| | Distractions | Participants reflected on a faith-based environment where learning distractions were present | 7 |

Positionality

I identify as a Black female millennial Christian currently detached from a local church. I was raised attending weekly church services at a historically Black Christian Baptist church with my family in a large city in Pennsylvania. Due to my current residence, I do not regularly attend in-person church services but I listen to sermons from various churches throughout the week online. The WW group has provided me a sense of virtual Christian community and a place for fellowship to couple with my individual practices. Due to the personal connection I have made within the group, including with the group leaders, I have gained immeasurable trust, and access from the group's leaders to study and use my findings to inform the community's sustainability and growth.

Chapter 4

Findings

My research explored how Black millennial women used online spaces to engage in their faith practices. The two research questions explored were: 1) In what ways do online spaces impact traditional in-person faith-based Communities of Practice? 2) In what ways do online spaces enhance Community, Domain and Practice within faith-based Communities of Practice?

In response to the first research question, the findings suggested that online spaces worked in harmony with in-person practices and in some cases encouraged in-person participation within local CoPs. Participants created and engaged in what I term Hybrid Networks of Practice (HNoP) within and between various online and in-person communities. These HNoPs allowed participants to create their own faith-based learning landscapes. Within these learning landscapes, participants engaged in both online and in-person communities and faith-based practices.

In response to the second research question, online faith spaces were found to enhance community, extend domain and support practices in multiple ways. While online spaces offered areas of enhancement to community, domain and practice, within each area participants recognized limitations to online practices.

This chapter will report and evaluate findings based on data collected from five sources: eight participant interviews, a focus group of six participants, a 477-page text transcript from the WW group chat comprised of 78 participants, a faith-practice survey completed by 21 participants and participant observations by the researcher.

This chapter is arranged in three parts. First, I provide a participant overview which describes the ethnicity, age, residence and faith backgrounds of the participants. Next, I address the first research question by describing the faith practices of four participants. Last, I address the second research question applying a Community of Practice framework to online faith spaces.

Participant Overview

The participants for this study were recruited from the members within the WW Christian ministry group. According to the GroupMe membership roster from December 2019, there were 99 members in the group chat. Of those members, no participants opted out of having their information included in the GroupMe transcript for analysis. Twenty-one members consented to participate in the study and completed personal data forms. Eight of those women participated in interviews and six participated in a focus group. All of the twenty-one participants identified as women. All respondents identified as Black or African-American: Sixteen of the respondents identified as Black, four identified as African-American, and one identified as African-American and Syrian. Three participants indicated that one or both of their parents were born outside of the United States. Figure 4-1 displays the Race/Ethnicity of the respondents.

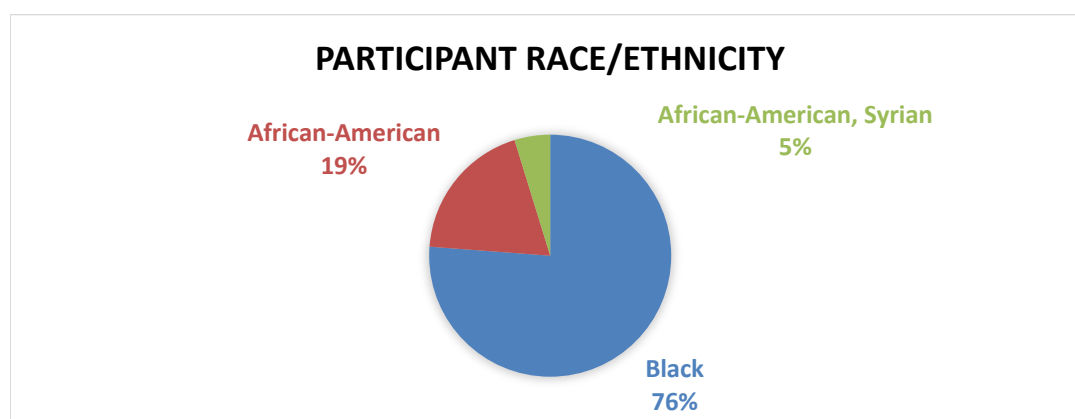


Figure 4-1: Participant Race/Ethnicity

Age, Education, Residence

The participant's ages ranged across a twelve-year span all fitting within the millennial generation. (Gallup defines millennials as individuals born between 1980 and 2000; Or at the time of this study between 20 and 39 years old (Gallup, 2019). The youngest respondent was twenty-three years old, born in 1996, while the oldest was thirty-five years old, born in 1984. The average age of respondents was 28.7. Most participants were 29 years-old. Figure 4-2 shows the age distribution across participants.

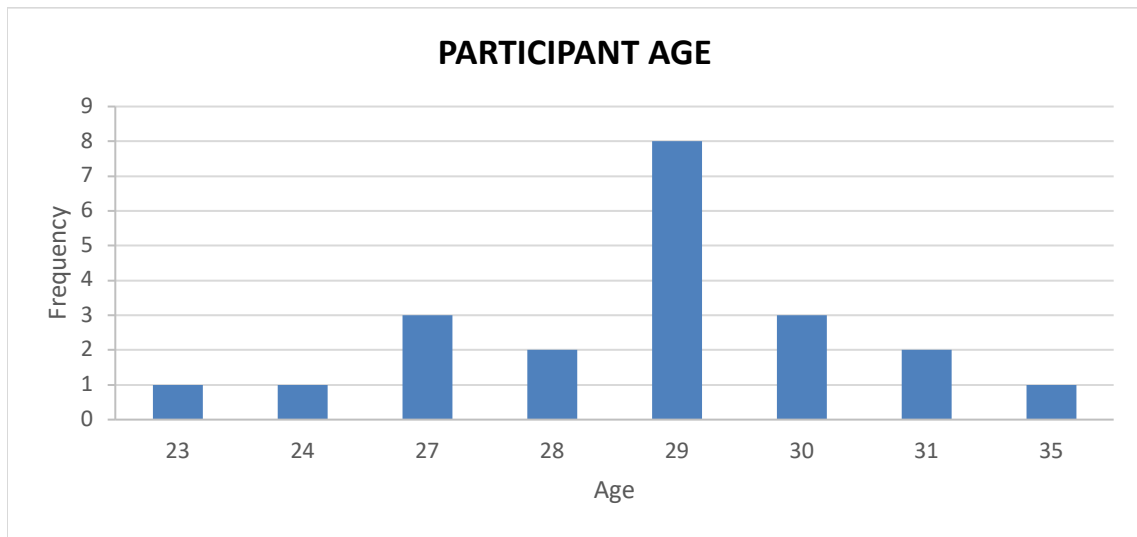


Figure 4-2: Frequency of Age of the Participants

More than fifty percent of respondents lived in Maryland or Washington, D.C. Five respondents resided in the northeastern region of the United States including, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York. One respondent lived in Georgia, one in Texas, and one in Florida. The residences of the respondents by state is shown in Figure 4-3.

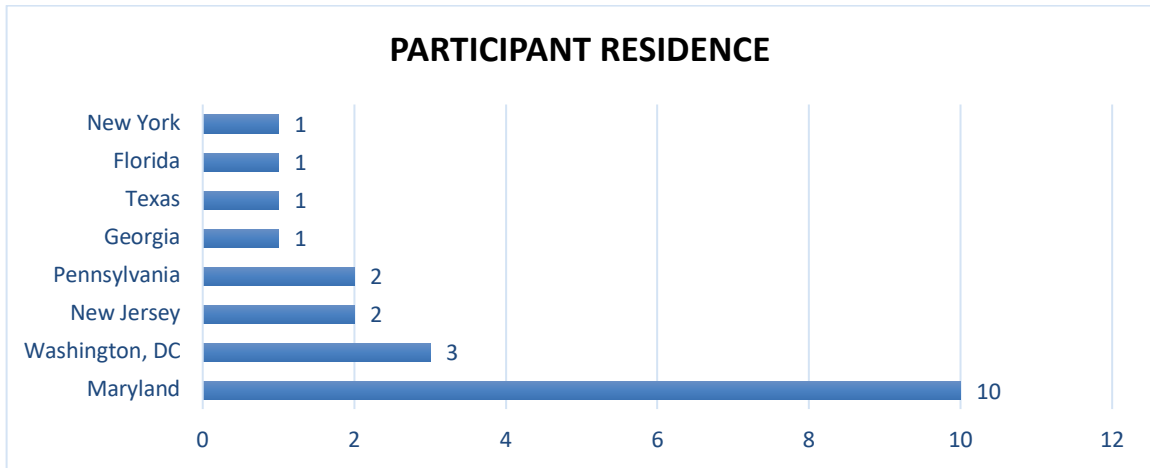


Figure 4-3: Current Residential State of Respondents

Religious Demographics

All of the respondents identified as Christian. Two-thirds of the respondents (66.7%) reported attending church regularly as youths either every week or multiple times per week. Figure 4-4 shows that all respondents reported attending church at some point in their youth.

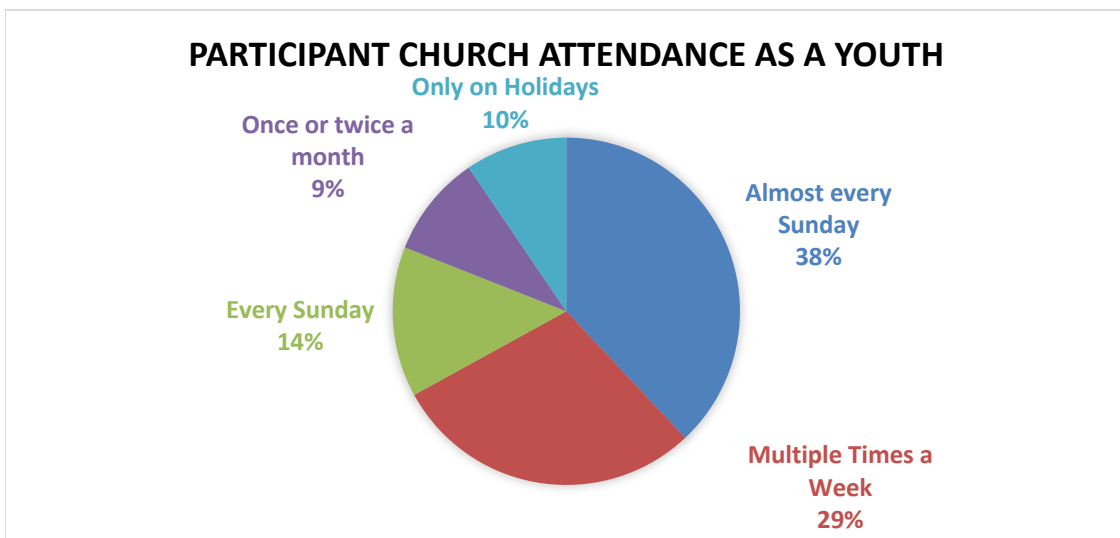


Figure 4-4: Participant church attendance as youth

In-Person Church Attendance

Over half of respondents (62%) identified as active members of a church. In the last three months, 38% of respondents reported physically attending a church service one to three times per week, while just over half (52%) of respondents reported physically attending a church service one to three times per month. Two respondents reported not physically attending a church service within the last three months. Figure 4-5 shows participant church attendance in the last three months.

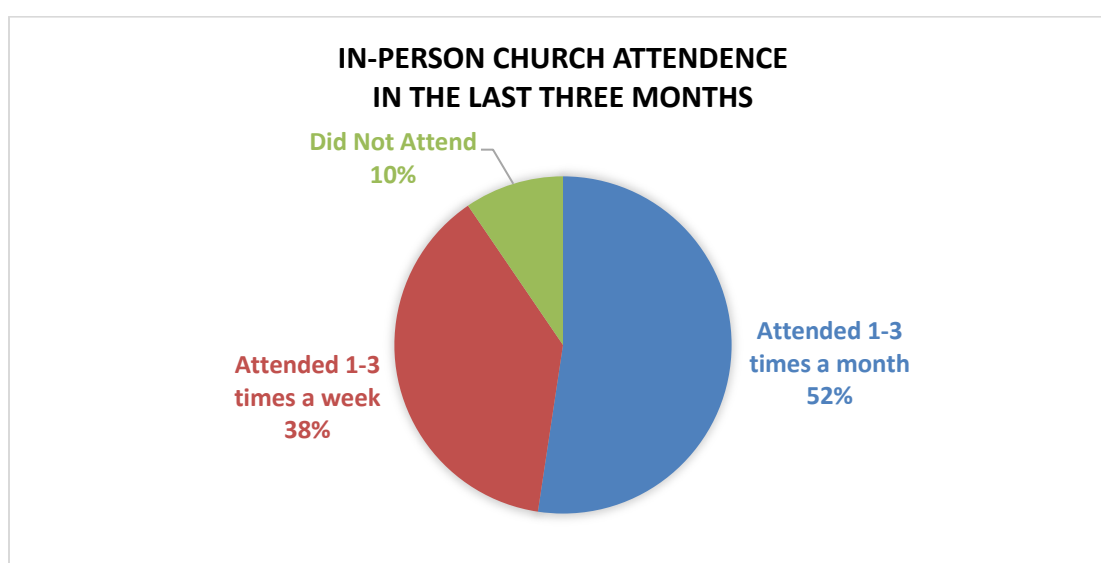


Figure 4-5: In person church attendance over the last three months

When considering the size church that respondents attended most frequently, 38% of respondents reported attending a small church (average weekly attendance of 50 or fewer people), 29% reported attending a medium church (average weekly attendance of 51-300 people), 14% of participants reported attending a large church (average weekly attendance of 301 – 2,000), while 19% reported attending a mega church (average weekly attendance more than 2000) (USACHurches, 2014). Figure 4-6 displays the church sizes of the participants.

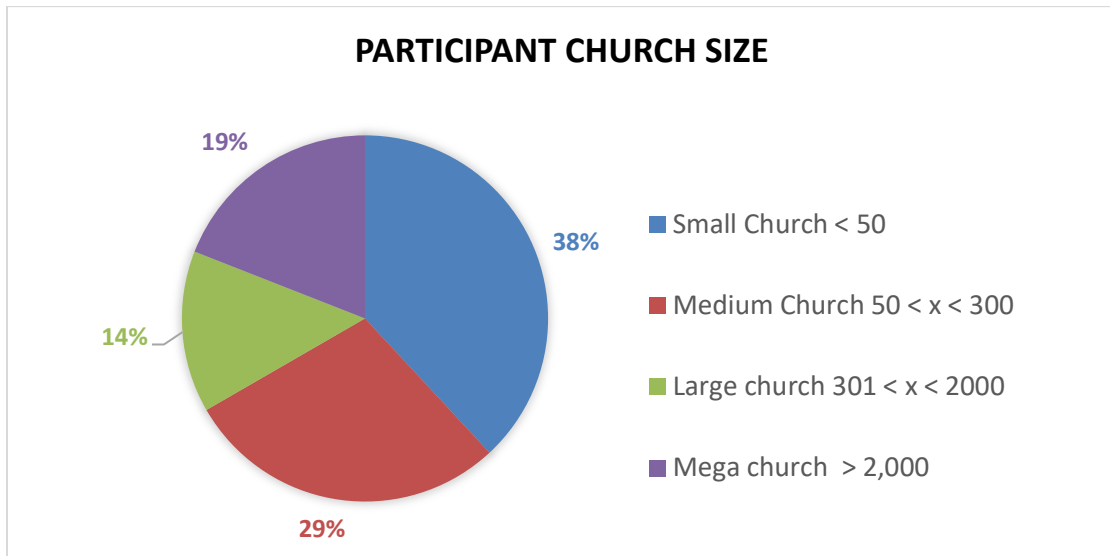


Figure 4-6: Participant Church Size

Online Faith Participation and Preferences

When considering engagement in online faith spaces in the last three months, 33% of respondents watched or listened to a church service on demand one to three times per week, while 19% watched or listened daily or almost daily. One third of respondents (33%) reported not listening or watching a church service on demand at all within the last three months. Aggregated, over half (52%) of participants listened to or watched an online church service at least once a week. Figure 4-7 displays how often participants watched or listened to a church service on demand.

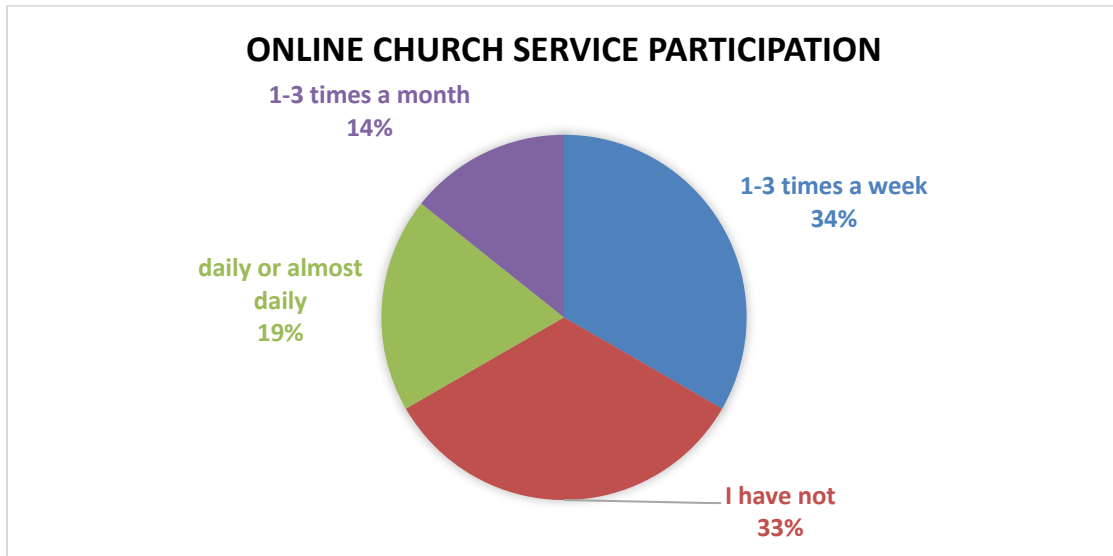


Figure 4-7: Online Church Service Participation

Preferences towards online or in-person faith community engagement was split. Eight participants (38%) reported that they preferred in-person engagement while the same number (38%) preferred virtual communication i.e. text messages, phone calls, video chats, group chats etc. Five participants (24%) reported having no preference. Some of the factors that may shape these preferences include the individual's upbringing and experiences with faith community, geographical location of the individual and access to a faith community, personal communication preferences, work-life-family balance, etc. Figure 4-8 displays participant preferences towards faith community engagement.

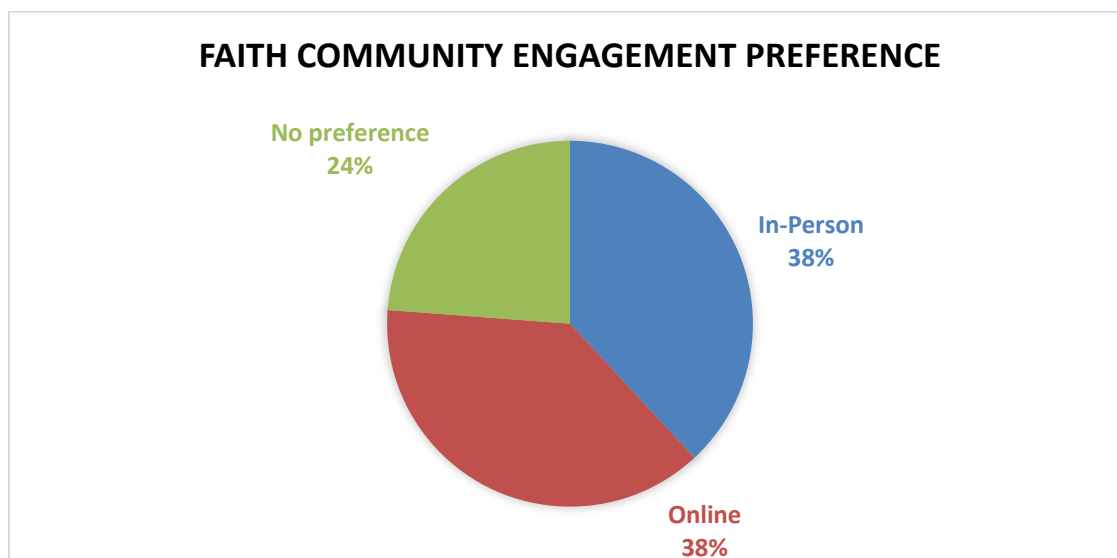


Figure 4-8: In-person or online preference for faith community engagement.

To summarize, all participants identified as Black or African-American Christian women. The average age of respondents was 28.7 years old and participants ranged in age from 23 to 35 years old. Most participants lived in Maryland but others represented seven states and the District of Columbia. All participants reported attending church as a youth and more than half grew up attending a Baptist church. Almost two-thirds of participants (62%) identified themselves as active members of a church and over half (52%) reported attending church at least one to three times per month. Over half of participants (52%) reported watching or listening to a church service online at least once a week. Almost a quarter (24%) of participants reported having no preference in how they engaged with their online community. Thirty-eight percent reported preferring in-person faith community interaction and the same amount (38%) preferred online engagement.

Hybrid Networks of Practice in Action: The Cases of Reagan and Veronica

In the following section, I expand on the findings to address the first research question: In what ways do online spaces impact traditional in-person faith-based Communities of Practice? To explore the influence of online faith spaces on in-person practices, I describe the faith practices of two participants: Reagan and Veronica. Reagan and Veronica's stories offer contrasting viewpoints on their in-person versus online practices. Reagan held strong in-person practices complemented by online experiences, while Veronica relied heavily on online experiences which influenced her decision to begin attending in-person services again.

Reagan attended the same Sabbath-keeping, non-denominational church since she was seven-years-old. She considered herself an active member of her church, preferring to connect with her faith community in-person, and attended service in-person whenever possible. Her church did not stream or post videos of their worship services online, but had recordings available on CD or DVD. When her job relocated her two hours outside of the city where her church was located, she commuted weekly to continue attending her home church. She described her church as medium-sized (average weekly attendance between 50 – 300 people) and that her church community felt like family.

While her preference was in-person engagement, she reported using online tools to create worship playlists in Apple Music, watch sermons on YouTube, and listen to podcasts. A pastor she often listened to online was Pastor Sarah Jakes-Roberts. Pastor Sarah Jakes-Roberts is the co-pastor of two non-denominational churches in Los Angeles, CA, and Denver, CO with her husband. The 31-year-old is the daughter of well-known Bishop T.D. Jakes and was mentioned twelve times by five different participants during participant interviews. Pastor Sarah was mentioned thirteen times by ten different participants in the WW group chat (from July 2018 – June 2019). Pastor Jakes-Roberts was cited by participants more than any other preacher. Her

church's account on YouTube, where sermons are posted twice a week by various pastors had over 360,000 subscribers at the time of this publication. Pastor Sarah's age may play a role in her popularity amongst the group members. As described by Handy (2002), receiving correction or advice from peers may be an effective strategy for accountability within the church (Wimberly & Handy in Wimberly & Parker, 2002). The lived experiences of Jakes as well as being a contemporary of the group likely contribute to her popularity amongst the WW group members.

Reagan recalled when her online familiarity with Pastor Sarah encouraged her to attend an in-person worship experience outside of her church.

So, you know how I've told you I've been listening to Sarah Jakes and everything, like, you know, for the past couple years. So, how about she's coming to [my city] finally, and I get the chance to go. So, I actually, I pay for the tickets, and then I was like, 'wait, I don't know this lady,' you know what I mean? It was kind of weird. And then I was like, 'Okay, I'll still go.' But, it kind of like made me take a step back, because, this is in reverse. I met her via technology, right, and now I'm using what I've learned in technology to form a decision, to spend money, to go see her in person. You know? So, it's kind of like the reverse thing. So, people are changing their physical experience to a technological experience. But I kind of just did it in reverse. I've seen her in technology. And now I'm going to see her in person. And so, I just think of like how it can work in reverse. Like maybe you walk technology for long enough, you will make a decision to go and experience it in person, who knows.

Reagan seemed surprised to find herself wanting to attend an in-person event hosted by a preacher whom she had connected with online; and on top of that, buying a ticket in order to see her. Her familiarity with Pastor Sarah, whom she had watched online several times, acted as a bridge which made her more comfortable to attend an in-person service. Reagan acknowledged that for individuals who do not have a regular in-person faith practice, engaging with online teachings could potentially attract them towards an in-person experience. This was the case for Veronica.

Veronica grew up attending Catholic school and a Baptist church with her family. She shared that her upbringing gave her a special reverence for the physical church setting. She

believed that entering a house of worship was synonymous with entering God's presence. The Baptist church she grew up attending with her family gave her a sense of belonging where she felt a genuine connection with the other members. She described the church as medium-sized (average weekly attendance between 50 – 300 people), serving an older congregation that was established over 100 years ago in the D.C., Maryland, Virginia area. The pastor of the church has served there for over 30 years and has been her only pastor.

She admitted that in her twenties she stopped attending church regularly but more recently was on what she described as a “new journey.” She rededicated herself to her spiritual practices which included morning devotionals, prayer, listening to sermon podcasts, watching sermons online, reading books written by preachers she had listened to online, and attending her home church with her mother regularly.

One of the main reasons she admitted for not regularly attending in-person services in her twenties was because her home church service started at 7:45 in the morning. She attempted visiting other churches but still felt like the church she grew up in was “home.” During this time, when she was not regularly attending in-person services, she listened to online sermons, on demand. She clarified that she rarely streamed her home church services online.

[Online service] pulls me to like want to go back to my church home. I think that if I didn't start listening to Sarah Jakes Roberts or listening to Michael Todd more, I would not be in the church home as much. I think that they pushed me; Pushed me to push myself to have a better relationship with God... They did. They, challenged me like, ‘why am I not in church?’ You know, like I feel the spiritual connection every time I listened to them. So why haven't I gone to church? Like, okay, I could listen to them all the time, that's cool, ‘but why haven't you gone to church?’ Like it reminds you why you went in the first place, even if you were just a little kid. They remind me of why I went in the first place. And then, the simple fact of they're always in the church when they're preaching. So why would you not go to church?

Veronica expressed how her online engagement encouraged her to attend her local church again. She reflected that she felt a genuine connection to the online teachings and that watching

others in church reminded her of the benefits of in-person practice. Her online practice made her question why she was not engaged in in-person practices.

Pastor Michael Todd, who Veronica mentioned, is another popular preacher who has gained an online following. He was mentioned thirteen times by five participants during interviews and eight times by six participants in the WW group chat. The 34-year old and his wife lead a megachurch that meets in the former Spirit Bank Events Center in Tulsa, OK and has 948,000 subscribers on YouTube. Again, the age of Pastor Michael, being a millennial himself, may play a role in his popularity and reception by this peer millennial group (Wimberly & Handy in Wimberly & Parker, 2002).

Veronica continued,

[The online sermons] may be the reason why I might step back into the church home, if I hadn't been, you know, in three weeks. They may be like 'you need to', you know, I'm like dang, 'I need to go back to church.' And, you know, this sermon really touched me enough to say 'I need to go back to my church home.' But my base is my church home. Like that's my base no matter what. Like, [online sermons] they're my supplements but I can never feel fulfilled just having them.

Veronica explained that watching church online encouraged her to get "back to church." To her, the online sermons acted as supplements or additional practices that complemented her local in-person practice. She reflected that there was an aspect of fulfillment that online sermons were not able to satisfy in the same way in-person experiences could.

Reagan and Veronica both shared accounts of how their online faith practices encouraged in-person attendance. For Reagan, although she engaged in regular in-person church attendance, she continued to listen to other online services throughout the week. These online interactions encouraged her to attend an in-person experience with a pastor whom she became familiar with online. Veronica on the other hand, did not engage in regular in-person church services. Her online interactions with pastors outside of her home church encouraged her to attend her local church services again.

Finding 1: Communities of Practice operate within Hybrid Networks of Practice (HNoP)

Instead of comparing these interactions as online Communities of Practice versus in-person Communities of Practice, Veronica and Reagan's reports suggest that they are engaged in what I am referring to as Hybrid Networks of Practice (HNoP). Encompassing both the traditional Community of Practice theory and Virtual Community of Practice definitions, a Hybrid Network of Practice (HNoP) is a network composed of mixed parts of online and in-person practices, people, tools and resources navigated by an individual practicing and learning within and between multiple Communities of Practice.

Whereas CoPs focus on place-dependent *practitioners* and Affinity Spaces focus on *where* groups interact, these data suggest that HNoPs place their emphasis on the shared domain of practitioners. The findings show that, in HNoPs, individuals are engaged in multiple communities located across various online and in-person spaces. Instead of placing the *community* at the center of the network, HNoPs place the *domain* as the focus. Gee argued that Lave and Wenger's CoP theory is overly focused on membership within a community. Gee argued that "the idea of 'community' can carry connotations of 'belongingness' and close-knit personal ties among people which do not necessarily always fit (Gee, 2005, p. 70)."

In the online faith context, Veronica and Reagan's accounts would support Gee's stance. While both Veronica and Reagan watched sermons online, neither suggested that they felt like the online service made them feel as though they were in a community. At the same time, even when Veronica was not actively engaged in her local church, she still felt as though she was a member of that local community. Therefore, determining strict community membership within the online space may be problematic.

The data suggests that both Veronica and Reagan consider their local churches Communities of Practice. The close-knit ties they described as genuine and family-like between

members in their local church suggested that there were meaningful relationships between practitioners that offered a sense of community. Their churches assembled under a connected purpose, within collaborative relationships in an effort to become more effective practitioners, a classic CoP.

The online space, however, has greatly broadened the boundaries of their practices beyond their local CoPs. Reagan, for example, was actively engaged in her local church but still utilized tools, resources, and practitioners in online settings. The diversity of Reagan's faith practices would suggest that in addition to her local CoP, Reagan was engaged in a HNoP. Reagan's hybrid network encompassed her home church along with other online resources and CoPs. Her local church, or CoP, was a node within a larger network of practice. Reagan utilized a hybrid of in-person and online practitioners and tools to support her faith-based practices.

Figure 4-9 shows a possible visual representation of Reagan's Hybrid Network of Practice. Each circle represents a faith-based practice that Reagan engaged in regularly. The location of the circle represents its prominence in the reported experiences of the practitioner. For Reagan, her local church is central. The size of the circle represents the amount of engagement.

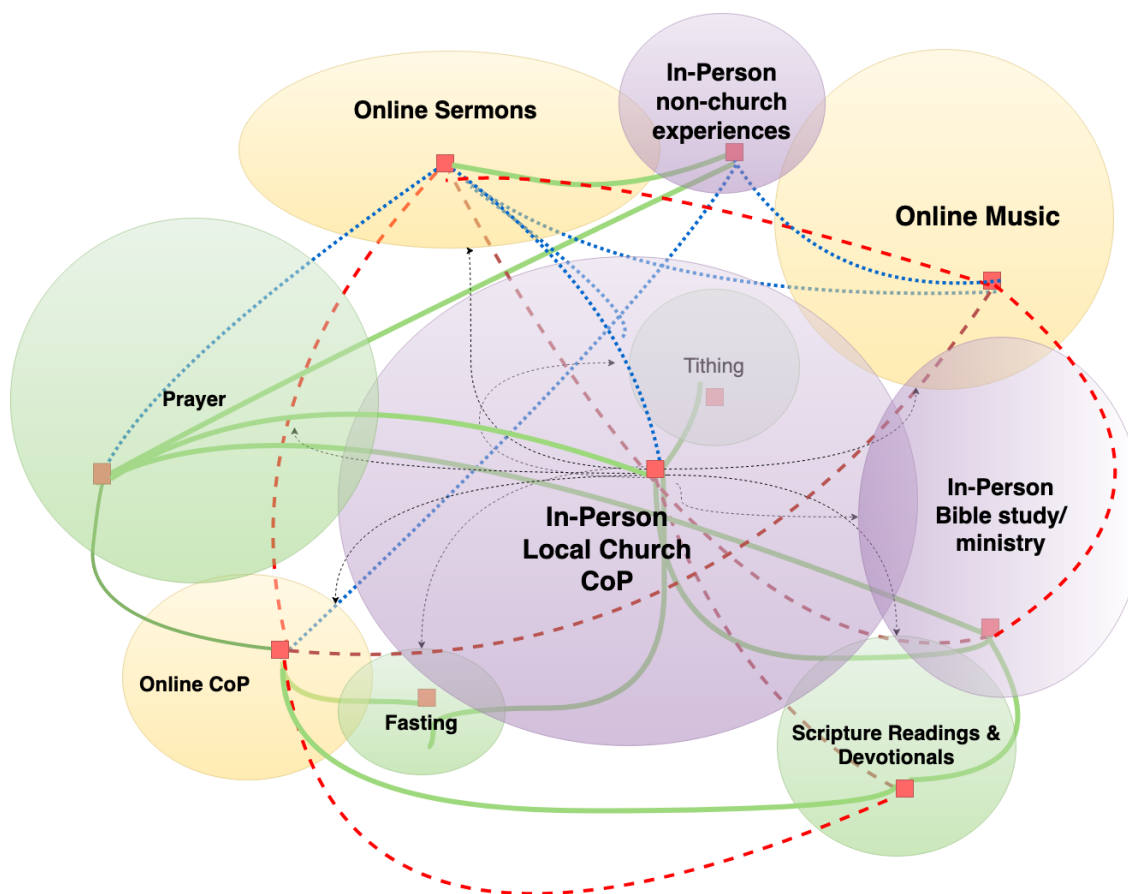


Figure 4-9: Reagan's Hybrid Network of Practice

The purple nodes represent in-person experiences, the yellow, online, and green are individual practices. For Reagan, her local church CoP influences all of her other practices which is represented by the Black arrows leaving the “Local Church CoP” node. The red lines that connect the nodes represent resource sharing. For example, the online CoP that Reagan engaged with (the WW group), shared online sermons, online music, readings and devotionals. The green lines that connect nodes represent an engaged practice. For example, Reagan engaged in fasting with both her local church and the WW online communities. The blue lines represent indirect influence, showing how some spaces may impact others. Space where circles overlap represents direct influence or areas where nodes may intersect with one another. For example, Reagan described how Pastor Sarah Jakes-Roberts’ online sermons encouraged her to participate in an in-

person worship event in her city. Likewise, the Apple Music playlists that Reagan listened to inspired her attend an in-person, non-church experience like a Christian music concert.

It is important to note that this figure is not intended be an all-encompassing list of practices within Reagan's HNoP. Nor is it meant to quantitatively measure engagement or time spent within practices. Instead is intended to depict the networked interactions between her diverse faith practices. Her network is composed of both online, in-person and personal practices. Reagan's HNoP is unique to her since it is influenced by her upbringing, preferences, beliefs and spiritual maturity. Her network makeup and how each node may interact or influence another, will be as unique as her fingerprint. I define HNoPs as dynamic, often shifting and renegotiating to meet the daily need of each practitioner. Therefore, HNoPs will naturally evolve and change over time.

For Veronica, even though there was a season in which she did not actively attend her local church, she still felt that her church was "home." Her continued Christian practices outside of her local church further supports the concept of a HNoP. In her twenties, online churches and preachers were more central to her practice yet she still considered attendance at her local church her main practice. In fact, Veronica described how watching online sermons of preachers located in California and Oklahoma encouraged her to become more active within her local CoP in Maryland. Veronica never conceptually left her local CoP, but instead, for a time, her HNoP shifted.

Finding 2: Online Engagement as Legitimate Peripheral Participation

In her twenties, when Veronica was not regularly attending her local church, she still considered herself a practicing Christian. CoP theory would suggest that Veronica was operating on the peripheral of her local church. Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) proposes that

those situated on the outside edges of a community are able to observe the authentic practices of experts within the community. Much like an apprenticeship model, that exposure hopefully motivates novices on the edges to move closer to full participation as a core member (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

While Veronica was peripherally learning through observation, she was practicing with mentors *outside* of her local CoP. LPP for Veronica, was experienced through online practice. Her online practices encouraged her to move from the peripheral of her local CoP to a more central role. This suggests that engagement in online faith practices can influence individuals operating at the periphery of local CoPs to become more active. Her online practices offered her Legitimate Peripheral Participation to her in-person practice. Or in other words, online practices allowed her continued access to resources, faith-based teachings and experts without having to be a full participant at her home church.

It is possible that individuals who peripherally participate in online spaces will move towards fuller participation not only in in-person settings but also in online ministries as well. In Veronica's case, in-person participation remained her central practice. So, in her case, the online space bridged her back to becoming a fuller participant at what she held as her home church. However, as churches and ministries continue to occupy online spaces, full core participation for some faith practitioners may be a form of fuller online participation. For example, fuller online engagement at a church like Transformation Church could include becoming an active participant or group leader within an online Belong Group (Transformation Church, 2020).

Figure 4-10 shows Veronica's HNoP before and after she began attending church more regularly. Based on Veronica's descriptions, her faith practices shifted after her thirtieth birthday as she became more committed to daily faith practices. In both figures, the local church remains her central practice. When Veronica was not regularly attending church, the engagement size of her local CoP circle was smaller than her online sermon engagement circle. However, online

sermons never shifted to replace her local CoP as the most central practice. Her yellow online sermon node did not replace the purple local CoP node as the central practice. Even when she was not regularly attending in-person, she described online teachings as supplemental to her local CoP which was her “base.” The two networks show how Veronica’s increased engagement in her local CoP transformed her HNoP.

Veronica’s account supports that Legitimate Peripheral Participation can encourage novices to become fuller participants within a Community of Practice. In this case, Veronica was able to engage in LPP from an online space. Her exposure to the authentic practices of experts, albeit online, still influenced her decision to begin attending her local CoP in-person again.

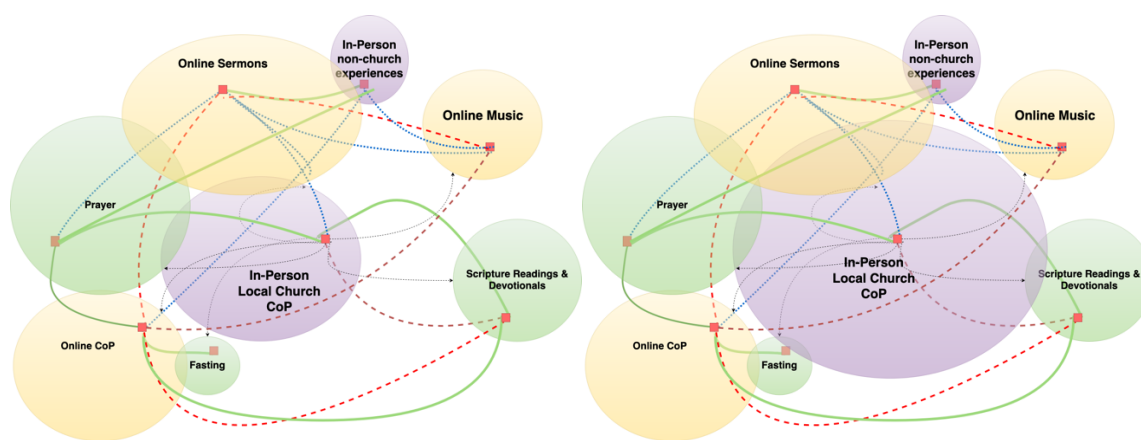


Figure 4-10: Veronica’s Hybrid Network of Practice

Hybrid Networks of Practice demonstrate the networked interactions of faith practice shared between multiple online and in-person sources. As practices grow or shrink, they are not necessarily replaced or encompassed by other practices. HNoPs are dynamic and similar to Fowler’s faith stages, will evolve overtime. Online nodes may act as Legitimate Peripheral Participation for in-person CoPs that practitioners have disconnected from for a period of time. Disengagement from a practice, especially a local CoP, does not assume that the esteem for the

practice has been replaced by others. Instead, participation in other practices within a network may encourage local in-person engagement over time.

Although this model is applied to faith-based learning interactions, HNoPs can be applied to any domain in which individuals navigate complex landscapes of online and in-person communities, tools and resources.

The Importance of In-Person Fellowship: The Cases of JoJo and Amelia

This section describes the faith practices of JoJo and Amelia. JoJo and Amelia's accounts emphasize the value practitioners placed on in-person fellowship. JoJo emphasized how her local church encouraged HNoPs amongst the congregation suggesting that in-person and online practices can work in harmony. Amelia's story revealed that valued in-person fellowship can be effective in both formal and informal settings.

JoJo grew up in a family of pastors including her father, uncle, and grandparents. She recalled being in church "all the time: three services on Sunday, midday service, revival, all these things" throughout grade school. In college she considered herself a practicing believer although she did not regularly attend church. After college, she moved away from home and began regularly attending a megachurch. At that church she attended worship services, Bible studies and discipleship programs. She attributed these experiences to helping her define her own identity and relationship with God outside of what she felt she inherited from her family.

A few years later, she moved to New York and spent around eight months without a church home. She recalled attending church every Sunday but attended a different church each week. That season, she reflected, amplified her independent devotional time because she felt as though she "couldn't really depend on a Sunday to give [her] a good word." Finally, she found her church and became heavily involved. She recalled that what attracted her to the church was

the church's focus on community, justice and Christ which were domains she was already passionate about. JoJo's involvement deepened as she was hired as the Director of Operations and began working at the church thirty hours per week as a paid staff member.

JoJo shared that her new church encouraged members to engage in a variety of faith practices from various platforms throughout the week.

My pastor, he listens to like, a bunch of different pastors also on YouTube or podcasts. And he'll share those. He is a big fan of Michael Todd. Very much our church culture is that we do both things. Like we're getting fed, yes on a Sunday, but also like, all throughout the week. And we're able to use things like a GroupMe, or like YouTube, or share podcasts and also use other forms of technology ...[where] we're able to just bring groups together in a better way. And I think it's a beautiful thing, that technology piece of it because you're able to be in Maryland but able to really connect with a pastor from Oklahoma. Or be in New York and connect with someone who is speaking in LA. So, it's like you get to have access to speakers and mentors and people who are virtually pastoring you without actually having to be there. Because I don't think we can be too dependent on any one person to teach us or to disciple us. We need that to happen from multiple formats.

JoJo reflected on how her pastor and church community see the value of engaging in multiple online and in-person faith spaces. They used online platforms such as the group text-messaging application, GroupMe, a video streaming service, YouTube, and audio streaming podcasts to share resources with practitioners within their church. JoJo described how beneficial it can be for practitioners to have access to a variety of pastors who are able to teach and mentor them from around the world. JoJo argued that practitioners should not be too dependent on one teacher and that discipleship, or the process of maturing in faith, should be facilitated through multiple methods.

Finally, JoJo explained that her church believed in doing "both." By "both" she meant that practitioners are encouraged to access both online and in-person resources throughout the week. She shared that her faith practices extend beyond a Sunday service. JoJo and her church

community value multiple perspectives and make it a practice to access online teachings throughout the week.

Amelia was also raised in church. She remembered attending services regularly since both of her parents served as trustees at the church. In high school she attended less frequently and rarely in college. She recalled, however, having friends who served as members of campus ministries and regularly attended their concerts and worship events. She attributed those experiences as reintroductions to her faith journey.

After college, she moved back to her hometown in Pennsylvania and began searching for a church home. She attended different churches in her area each Sunday until she was eventually invited by a close friend to attend her church. Amelia began regularly attending that church for a little over three years. There, she was baptized and began attending Bible study weekly. She reflected that as her faith grew, she became more attracted to in-depth Bible studies. These settings, as she described, eliminated some of the noise that came from the “pomp and circumstance” of Sunday church services.

As time went on, her close friends who attended that church got engaged and subsequently left the church. Around the same time, Amelia moved just outside of the city and with little personal connection to that church, she began searching again. During that season, Amelia reflected on attending a church that she described as a modern non-denominational church.

They had very short services. Like less than an hour. Like an hour max everything. You know, they start off with praise and worship and fellowship. They give you a couple of announcements, they preach, and then you leave. And so that was, it was good for me because I did feel like I was still being spiritually fed. However, the thing that I felt was missing from that experience was that it lacked fellowship. And so, I do feel like the traditional church does a better job of like creating the church community, which I think is the whole point of church. You know, it like gives you that opportunity to fellowship with other Christians and, you know, commune and talk about your Christian journey.

Which I felt like it was a little more disconnected. Like I felt like, I am showing up, I'm getting a quick word, it's fast, I checked the box, I went to church, and now I'm going home. So, I think right now, I'm more so, like, I do things on my own. So, I do utilize technology, and do my own studying and learning and then I do like monthly Bible study with my friends.

Amelia recalled attending a church that she felt lacked fellowship. She described the quick service as a disconnected transactional experience similar to checking a box on a to-do list. She expressed the value of fellowship in the form of meeting, talking and sharing with other Christian practitioners. She considered communing with other practitioners in fellowship as the “whole point of church.”

More recently, her preference was to study on her own using online tools but still placed heavy emphasis on the importance of in-person community. In online spaces, she described herself as an observer; rarely posting or commenting but still accessed resources shared in group chats. She described herself as most comfortable sharing personal information in intimate in-person spaces such as her monthly Bible study.

Amelia's Bible study group consisted of around ten women, led by an older, more mature practitioner, and met monthly. Amelia described how the group created a safe environment where they were able to talk, commune and apply the Bible to their lives. She appreciated the women in the ongoing Bible study for their practical application of the Bible and their authenticity with one another. The group utilized an email listserv and text messaging groups which helped members stay in touch throughout the month. Amelia felt that the relationships formed in the group allowed them to share the ups and downs of their faith journeys in an unfiltered way. That authenticity served as encouragement and offered concrete faith application to the everyday lives of the women in the group. Although she engaged with the group in tandem with her online practices, it was evident that the group was a core piece of her faith practice.

I think that it's perfectly fine to get to get your teachings online. I do think that it is important to fellowship still with Christians. I don't think that it has to be a

formal church setting. Like you read the Bible, and I think it's a requirement to fellowship with Christians, and a lot of times, like the easiest way to do that is through church. But I don't necessarily believe that that's the requirement. I think that, you know, if you have Christian friends you can go out and hang out with them and just, you know, talk about Christ in that manner. I don't think it has to be something as formal. But I don't look down on getting all the teachings from an online source. I think that when I'm in church, in-person, there is definitely a different experience. So, I think that you are missing out if you are solely connecting with Christ online. But I don't think that it's necessarily a bad thing, and it could just be like, that's where you are in life, you know. And I think that God understands that. And I think that, at least you're making an effort to try to connect.

Amelia again acknowledged the importance of fellowship and conversation with other practitioners. She suggested that informal settings can deepen fellowship between practitioners and within these settings, ideas can be shared more fluidly. She also referenced the Bible, specifically Hebrews 10:25, “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (New King James Version, Heb. 10:25). She referenced the “assembling of ourselves” as a Biblical requirement for practitioners to regularly fellowship in-person with one another. Three other participants also cited the Hebrews 10:25 scripture as they expounded on the importance of in-person experiences. Participants expressed that corporate gatherings and group worship experiences could be imitated but not replaced by online experiences. Amelia described online experiences as “missing something” compared to in-person experiences.

In fact, in the larger survey which sampled twenty-one participants, the top four reasons respondents reported attending church in-person were: 1) To fellowship with other believers (71%); 2) To be closer to God (67%); 3) Because the Bible says to go (62%); and 4) To learn about God in church (52.4%). Figure 4-11 displays the top four reasons respondents reported attending church in-person.

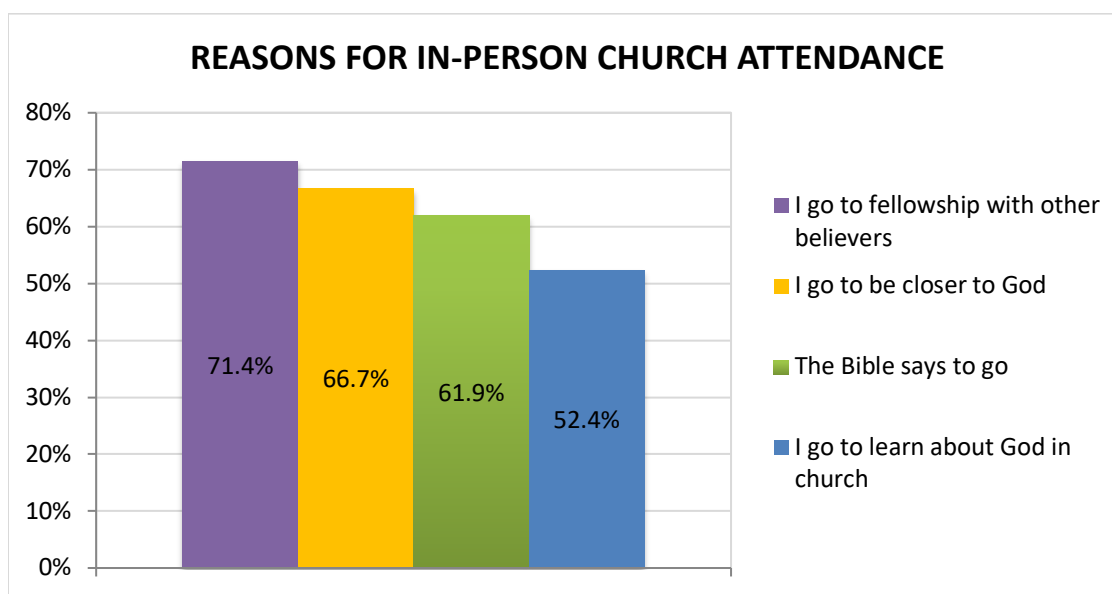


Figure 4-11: Reasons for In-Person Church Attendance

The responses show that the main driver for participants to attend in-person service is for fellowship; that is, to commune, worship and converse with other practitioners. This might also suggest that the authenticity of these practices may not be as easily replicated through online platforms. Participants in the focus group, for example, noted that some online platforms, such as group chats or social media, lack body language cues which cannot be as easily perceived between practitioners during online conversations. Likewise, live music, holding hands, connection, seeing the physical expressions of other practitioners, hugs and group prayer were practices that participants noted were difficult to replicate in online spaces.

Amelia agreed that while these practices may be hard to replicate in online settings, they can exist outside of what she called “formal” in-person settings. Amelia found meaningful fellowship in the form of an intimate Bible study group. She was introduced to the group through a friend who she used to attend church with. That friend began hosting monthly Bible study group sessions at her home. The group interactions extended beyond the in-person meetings as the women formed an email thread and group chat to continue conversations throughout the month.

She acknowledged that for some practitioners, traditional church attendance may offer the easiest way for fellowship, but it was not the only means of connection. She offered that in-person fellowship experiences could be as informal as hanging out with friends.

For those who do not engage in in-person fellowship experiences at all. Amelia did not condemn them. Instead she extended grace, understanding that individual faith preferences may fluctuate overtime and that the effort to connect was the most important aspect.

I found it interesting that for participants like JoJo and Amelia, who found authentic and effective in-person fellowship communities that they still sought out online communities like WW. JoJo reflected on the value of engaging in both in-person and online communities.

I'd say most people who have found our church, a lot of them have found it through Instagram. Like, just some searching online for a place and then they are usually people who are talking about watching sermons online or just looking for something and they catch something that my pastor says, and they want to come in and see what it's all about...

There are people who are able to come to Christ and get prayer and have these experiences through technology. But I also think even once that happens, that we still have to bring them into a community, like virtual even... So, I think, like, for me, it's important to do both. To have a community at church and to also have community outside of church... You always will have people who have different perspectives, who have different stories, who can share with you in different ways.

So, I couldn't ever put a limit on like, how much you can say that you could do outside of church, because a Sunday service is a very small part, like it's a very small part, of your entire spiritual journey. Like what happens the other six days of the week, too? ... What are you doing through the rest of the week to affect your physical world? So, I think both, I think you need both. I don't think it's like one or the other I think like we all need both.

JoJo reflected that many newcomers to her local church found the church by something they watched or heard online. That initial online interaction led them to want to visit the church in-person. At that point JoJo stressed the importance of community, whether in-person or online. The value of being connected to a community, she explained, was to learn from the lived experiences of other practitioners.

More valuable than having one Community of Practice, was having two. JoJo argued that engaging in both in-person and online communities can offer diverse perspectives. Individuals can learn from local practitioners as well as those who are geographically dispersed across their extended online network.

Finally, JoJo emphasized the value she placed on servanthood as a part of her faith practice. She saw the traditional Sunday church service as a small part of her overall spiritual walk. She questioned how practitioners could press beyond the Sunday service to affect change in their physical worlds throughout the week. JoJo's reflections suggest that HNoPs can be tools that supplement faith practices throughout the week. Online community and tools can influence in-person activity and service which she viewed as important components to her faith practice.

Finding 3: Local Communities of Practice can encourage hybrid networks

JoJo's local church encouraged parishioners to engage in a variety of online and in-person faith practices. The local CoP shared a church-wide GroupMe chat where practitioners shared online teachings, prayer, devotionals, personal anecdotes and information about in-person events. This type of open network culture encouraged practitioners to engage in teachings beyond the Sunday service and to share resources throughout the week. This philosophy encouraged individual practitioners to create their own HNoPs and bring content back to their local CoP.

A possible representation of JoJo's HNoP in Figure 4-12 shows that engagement and service to her local church were central practices. These core values are displayed by the two large purple circles in her figure. Her commitment to affecting her physical world took the form social justice and advocacy through service opportunities within her local church. These commitments did not detract from the value she placed on online teachings. Her personal belief was that there was value from being mentored by different pastors. She diversified her teachings

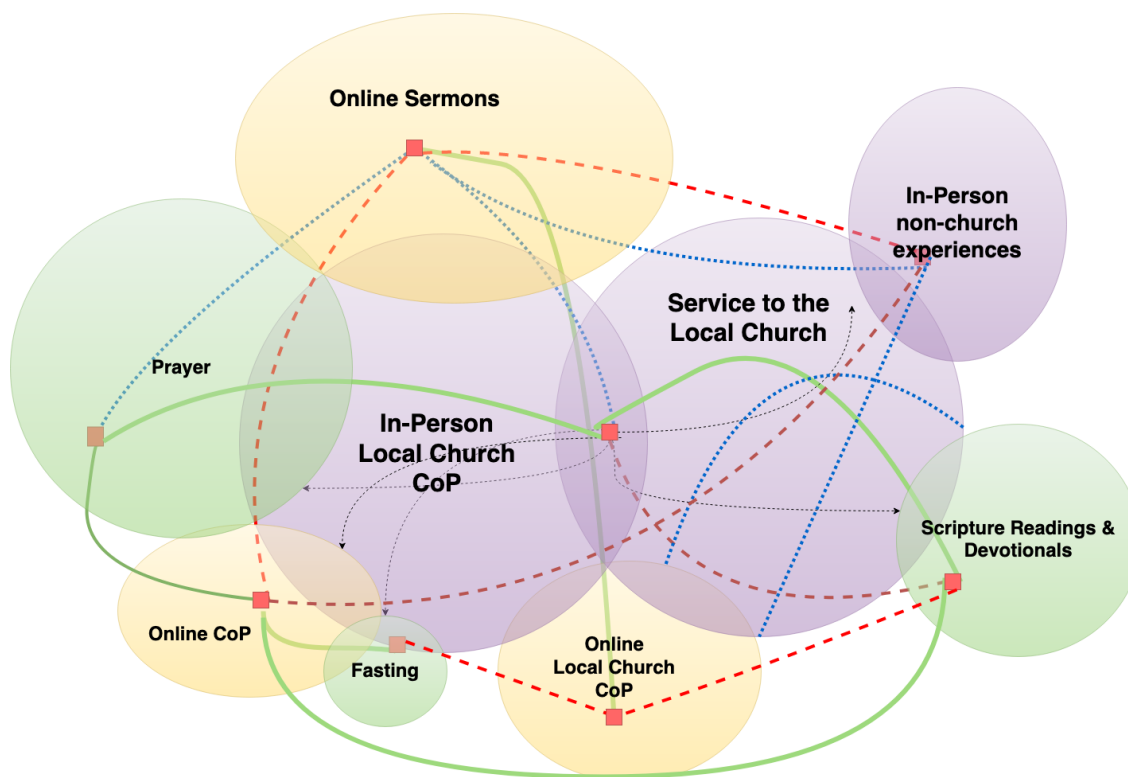


Figure 4-12: JoJo's Hybrid Network of Practice

by engaging in online content throughout the week allowing her to be disciplined from multiple sources.

The value JoJo placed on diverse perspectives translated to her HNoP as four node circles are almost the same size. Her network shows that participation in her local church CoP and service to her church are her two central practices. Online sermons also represent a large contribution of her network. The HNoP also shows her engagement in two online CoPs: one operated by her church and the other, the WW organization. The variety of practices in her HNoP may be a result of the culture of her local church who encouraged these hybrid networks.

Even more intriguing about JoJo's local church encouraging HNoPs was that the church was less than four years old at the time of this research. As a new congregation, it could almost seem counterproductive to the church's growth to encourage parishioners to engage in outside

teachings. HNoPs could essentially be viewed as a threat to the loyalty of the local church. Church leadership could fear that exposure to various online teachings would replace in-person engagement. On the contrary, JoJo shared that her church was growing and had just recently increased from one weekend service to two.

JoJo's account suggests that her church's commitment to make a physical impact on its local community created a unique value proposition. That is, the value placed on in-person service at the church created a distinction between its local activities and that of other networked faith practices. The church's service-based culture created an in-person value that could not be replicated through online interaction. This finding is in alignment with Parker's research that found that reach could not be replicated through online engagement (Parker, 2018). The church's commitment to benevolent outreach created an in-person value, amongst other variables, that could explain the church's continued in-person growth even while encouraging HNoPs.

Finding 4: In-person fellowship remained cornerstone practice of HNoPs

In-person fellowship remained a cornerstone practice across participants. As evidenced through Amelia's perspective, formal or informal in-person fellowship remained a central practice. Even in seasons when participants were listening to online sermons more than attending in-person services, at some point they began searching for in-person community. Londyn, another participant, who went so far as to call Pastor Michael Todd her "online pastor" for a several months after relocating, still sought local community. Eventually, she connected with a local church and argued that in-person worship would always be "the bread and butter of the religious experience."

Perhaps unique to the religious context, the spiritual nature of corporate in-person gatherings remained the cornerstone of many practitioner's practices. Several participants

mentioned the power that they felt from the Holy Spirit during corporate worship. Or that the Spirit felt differently during large group praise and worship services as opposed to listening alone in their car. Some mentioned the energy they have felt from having hands laid on them, or touching another person during prayer. Another was reminded of the feeling of walking into her church home and feeling the presence of God in the building. There was a recurring theme between participants that there was a sacredness to the physical corporate worship experience that invoked spiritual attributes that could not be easily replicated in online spaces.

Amelia's perspective in particular, highlighted informal in-person fellowship practices. These included ministry groups, Bible study groups, or as Amelia described, social gatherings with Christian friends to talk about ongoing practices. Amelia's continued search for a church community indicated the importance she placed on authentic connection with other practitioners. Even in local churches where she liked the teaching, the relationships she formed within the church anchored her to the community. It makes sense then, that her Bible study group, which she described as providing authentic relationships and practical conversation, became one of her central practices. This finding is also supported by Parker's research which highlighted relationship as an in-person faith practice that was unable to be fully replicated online (Parker, 2018).

A possible representation of Amelia's HNoP is shown in Figure 4-13. Her Bible study group is the most central and engaged practice. Although it is not what she called a "formal" in-person practice, in-person fellowship was still highly revered in her network. Amelia's acknowledgment of practicing mainly on her own is shown by her larger green circles in her HNoP.

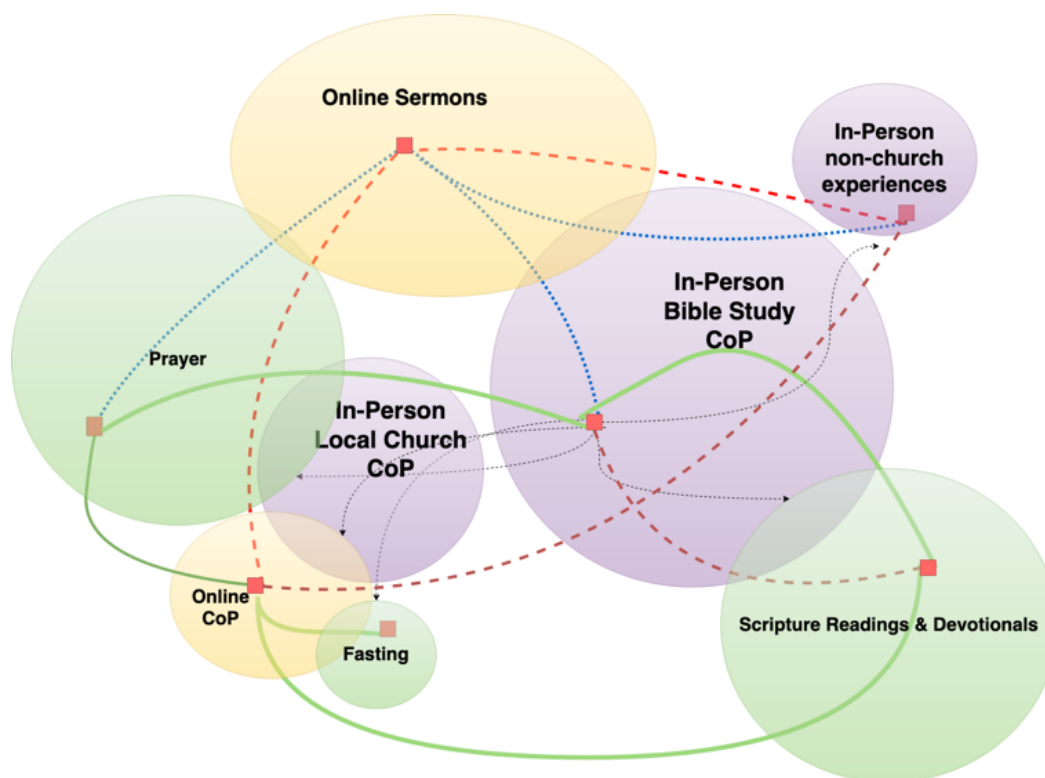


Figure 4-13: Amelia's Hybrid Network of Practice

As evidenced by the survey results, participants reported that the top two reasons for attending church were to fellowship with other believers and to feel closer to God. These findings could suggest that online interactions lack the ability to replicate these two components: fellowship and atmosphere. Members in the focus group described community, fellowship, connection, conversation and relationships as in-person fellowship practices that might not translate seamlessly to online faith spaces. The atmosphere created during these in-person worship experiences, participants described, were not the same as watching online, keeping in-person fellowship experiences a central practice.

Summary

The data suggest that participants engage in multiple Communities of Practice within a Hybrid Network of Practice. In-person CoPs are engaged in tandem with online CoPs. In-person tools, resources, teachings and people are supplemented by engagement in online tools, resources,

teachings and people. Online engagement in faith practices can encourage individuals to engage in in-person communities and resources. Online church engagement can act as Legitimate Peripheral Participation on the edges of local in-person CoPs. This peripheral online participation may encourage participants to eventually engage in in-person CoPs. In-person and online activities can work in harmony to supplement faith practices throughout the week. In-person fellowship however, either formal or informal, remained a cornerstone practice within HNoPs.

Participants who engaged in online practices still felt a draw to return to in-person experiences. The goal for many participants, even those who regularly engaged in online environments, was to find an in-person practice where they felt welcomed, accepted and valued. Several factors could impact an individual's desire for in-person community: a desire for tradition, or how an individual was raised could increase the appeal for in-person community, the inadequate online replication of in-person relationships, the sacred atmosphere felt in houses of worship, and/or the community service opportunities offered by local churches and ministries. These attributes could point to why in-person fellowship remained the central practice and desire for these Christian practitioners.

The Impact of Online Community, Domain and Practice

To address the second research question, I analyze how participants reported that online spaces can enhance, expand and support the tenets of traditional CoPs: Community, Domain and Practice. In this section, I highlight how online spaces evolve the aspects of Community, Domain and Practice within Hybrid Networks of Practice. Within each segment, I also address the shortcomings of online spaces.

Finding 5: Online spaces enhance faith community

Community within CoPs are more than just a group of people. They are problem solvers, subject-matter experts, supporters and practitioners. They value the group because they recognize that the combined experiences of its members are more valuable than one single story (Wenger et al. 2002).

Participants described various ways in which they engaged with their faith community using online spaces. These included group texting applications, online ministry groups, following social media pages, email threads, etc. These online spaces enhanced participants' perception of community in three ways. Online spaces 1) provided separation from local communities, 2) offered safe spaces free from judgment, and 3) diversified the body of practitioners.

Separation from Local Community

It is not unusual, especially in historically Black churches, that multiple generations of the same family have attended the same church for decades. Family churches, where individuals have parents or grandparents who are the pastors or who have served the church may have communities of individuals that know a practitioner's entire family. While community churches were built like this as a support mechanism for families within the community, when it comes to sharing personal struggles or family business, churches can be threatening. In contrast, online communities may be safe havens for individuals to share their lived experiences without fear of repercussion or judgement from community members. In cases where there was judgement from within the online community, the impact may be buffered by anonymity. Critiques or criticisms from unknown persons may not impact individuals as directly.

For some participants, separation from the local community allowed practitioners to express themselves in ways that they did not feel safe sharing in their local settings. Jordyn, for example, expressed that she learned best through active discussion and enjoyed engaging in dialogue with other practitioners to uncover deeper meanings.

However, Jordyn is also the daughter of two ministers and a member of her parents' church. Jordyn is involved in two online faith CoPs and explained that being a member of these online groups allowed a checks and balance system between herself and her parents. Similarly, they provided a space for her to share personal situations that she otherwise would not feel comfortable sharing at her home church.

So, with my physical church, there's a level of familiarity, right? That makes me a little bit leery as to how much I divulge about myself. And because it's my parent's church, you know, honesty is a thing. But at the same time, I just got to tread the water because those are my parents, you know, as well as my ministers. So, it's hard to differentiate between those two. However, with my [other online community], it's only really with the actual pastor that started it that I've actually really divulged something like super personal that I was not sure about. I didn't want to talk to my parents about it because, I kind of already knew what they were gonna' say. Because of the level of access I have with my parents, they do have discernment and they are able to hear things from God concerning my life; However, they're too close... I knew what they would say, but this lady who I had very limited experiences with, she still was a powerful minister of God. So, I reached out to her instead, got what she had to say. Similar to what I thought my parents would say, went to my parents, they confirmed what she had to say. So, it's like a nice check and balances, you know.

Jordyn recalled the hesitation she felt engaging in authentic dialogue at her home church because of her parents' status as ministers. The online communities Jordyn engaged in, offered her a space to have meaningful conversations where she felt she could access impartial council and be more open about her experiences. She thought of her online communities as equalizers between her individual practices and her home church. In Jordyn's case, online spaces acted as a neutral party between her church community and her own thoughts. In some ways, Jordyn used online communities as an arbitrator which helped her settle into her own beliefs. In certain situations, her online community would validate her home church's teachings while in other

ways, the online communities offered divergent perspectives. These perspectives challenged her to wrestle with solidifying her own understandings.

One benefit of online community then, could be that there is separation from the local community. Online, individuals can be connected with other practitioners from around the world who presumably do not know the intimate details of a person's family, spouse, occupation, employer, school, etc. The anonymity that online spaces provide can be leveraged to create spaces that are authentic and free from judgement.

Online spaces created safe and judgment free community

Unlike local churches where membership is usually restricted by geographical location, online spaces allow practitioners to choose their communities based on factors beyond tradition or region. Dylan for example, grew up attending church with her grandparents regularly. She recalled that several members of the church knew her family since her parents grew up in the church. Unfortunately, when her grandmother passed away, she struggled with her faith and wrestled with openly sharing her thoughts with members in the church. In reference to the members of the church:

They interpret the Word, place certain like judgements and just like criteria around it that make you feel unwelcomed or that you can't share that you're struggling with something... Like I felt really convicted when my grandmother died to say like, 'I'm questioning God.' But so many people say, 'you're never supposed to question God', and I felt wrong for even feeling that way. Instead of that being an opportunity to have an open dialogue about why I'm feeling that way and how to like combat that spiritually and even outside of the spiritual realm, I just didn't feel like I had the opportunity to do that. Because again, the whole thing is that 'you never question God' and that's just it. And that's the explanation, and there's nothing else that needs to be said about it.

Dylan felt that her local church did not provide an authentic space for her to express herself or cope during a difficult season. She feared the judgement that would come from her

questioning. The issues she wanted to raise, she felt, were outside of the expected responses of the practitioners in her local community. She juxtaposed this experience with how she felt once she was introduced to the WW online CoP:

And I don't feel like [the local church] can give as good advice on how to navigate things even spiritually because they're in a different place. And they just can't fathom the things that I'm talking about. [In the WW group], like I came in and like, yeah some of the other tribulations I'm hearing other people going through, I'm like 'Yes! Yes! You want to curse out your coworker but you're still religious, yes! Yes absolutely. You're in rush hour traffic and just said some wild stuff, yes. I'm absolutely there every morning with you.' So, it's just, I felt welcomed. I felt like, man, these people get me. Like, I didn't even have to tell you that I was struggling with something because you're going through the same thing and we can all relate and support each other because of it. So that's what WW did for me.

Dylan felt welcomed by the WW online CoP. She felt that she was able to authentically relate to the community of practitioners more than she could at her local church. Dylan seemed to appreciate not only the shared age range of the group, but also the shared experiences of the practitioners. The online CoP created a judgement free environment where individuals recognized progress instead of expecting perfection. For Dylan, the group offered her an active faith space, adjacent to her local church community where she was able to relate to relevant and applicable practitioner experiences.

JoJo argued that the judgmental environments created within some local churches may be the reason why practitioners seek online community.

I think what has pushed millennials to these online formats is the church... The church hasn't facilitated environments or experiences for millennials. Now, because we have so much access to information and technology, we are questioning things and we want to have authentic conversations and the church is not a place that is allowing those things to happen. So now what's happening online, from my perspective, is that people are finding places where they can feel like they can be themselves. Where they feel like they can kind of ask these questions virtually or through typing it in rather than even having a conversation because it is a safer place for them: where you're more accepted, unfortunately, like online than you are in-person.

JoJo contended that some local churches are not providing space for millennials to have authentic and meaningful conversations. Access to resources online has opened the landscape of faith-based teachings beyond the supply of the local church. Online spaces have allowed millennials to find safer more accepting outlets for these conversations. JoJo highlighted the importance of comfort, and that individuals may be more inclined to have these conversations virtually by typing or texting conversations as opposed to face to face dialogue.

Dylan shared this same sentiment. She explained that in some instances, she can be more vulnerable through text message than in-person. During the focus group, she explained that she does not like to cry in front of people. For her, a text message or group chat allowed her to share her struggles and vulnerability without the other party seeing her tearful expressions. These responses could be, in part, due to the digital nativity of this age group.

Online spaces can create safe spaces for practitioners to be vulnerable and express their concerns without fear of judgment. Online spaces give individuals the freedom to choose community based on where they feel most safe to be themselves and comfortable to share. Online communities can work in tandem with in-person communities, replace ineffective community or supplement local communities based on individual need.

Online spaces offered diverse perspectives

Online spaces also diversified the types of practitioners accessible to an individual within a CoP. Avery, one of the WW group's co-founders shared her perspective on the advantages of a having a relatable community:

I think it is important to have Christian people around you that you can relate to in a very real way. I think that it's a high mark that we are held to and it's very easy to fall and it's very easy to be like, 'I can give up on this whole thing completely.' Because you can feel unworthy, or you can feel like, 'okay, maybe I'm not living fully in the way that I need to be.' But if you see some of your

other peers who you know are fully committed and working to, you know, live the life that Christ has designed for them, and you see that ‘hey they are struggling too.’ Or they share their stories and they have testimonies of how Christ overcame, helped them overcome, I think that it just makes it a more relatable experience for you. And I think it only helps to increase your faith. Because it makes it very real and personal. If I can see like, ‘hey, I see how God is working for Linda, I know that He could do the same thing for me.’ And I can see the relationship that this person may have with Christ and it is attainable for me to have that same relationship because I have living examples in front of me.

Avery shed light on the benefits of having relatable practitioners and examples within a community. She argued that relatable practitioners can provide sources of encouragement, best practices, and success stories. Authentic community, she argues, can make the high mark that Christian practitioners are called to emulate more obtainable.

Reagan echoed the value of diverse perspectives between in-person and online communities. Although she considered herself more of a lurker in the WW group chat, taking in more information than she shared, she still benefited from being in the online community.

I definitely enjoy it. And I enjoy reading the stories that I hear, and I think it is important to see how God is moving other believers’ lives. And I think is important to know what other people are learning... And I think we can be so siloed in our local communities that we miss the move of God in other places. And the fact that God moves differently everywhere... It helps me keep an open mind. Because sometimes when you're involved in the local body, it can become cultish. You can become cultish. You don't see it that way, being inside of it, but to other people is like, ‘y'all not accepting’ or ‘y'all judgy’ or something like that. But really, it's just all these people coming together with one mind for the same cause. So that's how it looks to an outsider. But you need those other perspectives and, you know, it helps you.

Reagan highlighted how online community can provide perspectives outside of the silos of the local church. In some instances, she described local churches becoming cult-like, or isolating in their perspectives. That is not to say that online communities are absolved from cult-like behaviors. One benefit, however, of learning within CoPs is the robust body of knowledge shared between practitioners. In CoPs practitioners recognize that the sum of the group's shared wisdom is greater than that of a single story. Therefore, CoPs gain value by being comprised of

multiple diverse perspectives. Reagan's account suggests that HNoPs expand the boundaries of community beyond local geographical constraints. Hybrid networks can utilize online spaces to provide variety in interpretation, best practices and resources outside of local CoPs. Reagan argued that the diverse viewpoints from practitioners outside of her local church helped her own faith practices.

Where online community falls short

Given the benefits of online faith communities, that is not to say these online communities should replace local communities. In the face of great personal loss or great gain, there is only so much an online community can do to support, mourn or celebrate with a person. One example of this was witnessed through the WW group chat. Mimi was added to the chat in January 2019 and a week later introduced herself:

Good morning ladies! My name is Mimi. I was at [a company] doing sales & marketing for the past 2 years & I felt led by God that my time there was over & to [relocate to another city]. I[‘ve been] here since October 1, & so many attacks have been happening left & right but [God] has continued to show me that I am where He wants me. I have met so many beautiful angels, got baptized, a part of a community group & all. The vision He gave me was EXTREMELY clear & I risked a lot & went for it. There was one role that was everything He showed me. I went through all 4 rounds & yesterday they came back & said they loved me & want to stay in touch for later this year but not at this time.

I hear the “well done” & peace within my soul but honestly, “well done” doesn't pay bills. So I'm asking for prayer for Faith to continue listening to Him instead of my earthly understanding, & for a position that will bring Him glory.

Jessica responded in the group chat seven minutes later:

Thanks for sharing. I pray that you hold on and look at that door being closed as a positive thing. That simply means that wasn't for you. The best is yet to come. Give all your worries to God and take it one day at a time. He wouldn't put you in a situation that you cannot handle. Continue to be calm and put in the effort to get to where you want to be. Pray, pray and praise. Don't give up. @Mimi

Skylar followed that posting:

@Mimi Wowww what a testimony!! I'm praying that The Lord strengthen your faith!!! You are exactly where God needs you. HE WILL SUPPLY! He is a Provider! A Sustainer!! God is doing some work behind the scenes on your behalf. He is preparing a place for you to be used the way He sees fit! Thank Him in advance for that new position...it's coming! I am praying for you!!

Mimi wrote back:

Thank you for your encouragement! Overall moving here has just been such an adjustment... My Grandmother (85) was diagnosed with stomach cancer right after I got here & literally just this morning I got the email saying my unemployment was canceled & of course I can't reach out [because] of the shutdown.

I was / am tempted to just go home & be with friends & family, but I know I didn't go through all of this just to end up back home.

Here, Mimi was referring to the U.S. Government shut down that spanned 35 days from December 22, 2018 to January 25, 2019. She was unable to access government funded unemployment benefits due to the shutdown.

Alexia responded:

@Mimi What a testimony! God is moving. Remain encouraged. I applaud you for being so transparent and taking the leap of faith. God's got you and He knows the plan for your future! I will be going to Him on your behalf as well as your grandmother's. Stay strong sis... the praise report is on it's way.

This exchange between Mimi, Jessica, Skylar and Alexia showed the almost immediate response and encouragement that the group was able to offer Mimi in a tough circumstance. They showed compassion, offered reassurance and lifted her in prayer. They were accessible in that moment to comfort her with multiple voices. However, since her relocation moved her across the country, the online group was not able to directly impact her physical needs. They were not able to hug her, they could not drop a meal off at her house or hold her hands in prayer.

Four days later, Mimi posted:

Good morning! I also wanted to update you all. My community group leader is on the Benevolence team at church & he reached out to me basically saying "we all feel you were called to [the church] for a reason & we would like to help you

out financially & any other way we can. Rent, groceries, bills, doctor's appointments, networking, therapy whatever you need." & they offered to fly me home so I can see my Gramma (she recently started chemo)! And he said they are able to help for up to a year if that's what I need or want!

I was a little hesitant just [because] I've never been helped, or needed help, like this. & he let me know that I would be allowing the devil to keep me from being blessed by looking at it as begging & a handout & that this is something they want to offer me.

Skylar replied:

@Mimi WOW! LOOK AT GOD!!!! More confirmation that you are exactly where God wants you and HE WILL PROVIDE!!

Linda replied, "🙌🙌🙌🙌 always on TIMEEE." Avery followed, "That is amazing!! God came through, above and beyond what you needed! Powerful testimony sis! @Mimi." Reagan rounded out the conversation saying, "Awesome! Just an affirmation of why we need to be connected to the local body!!"

To Reagan's point, the local church was able to directly respond the Mimi's circumstances and offered immediate tangible support. That is not to say that the immediate encouragement and prayer offered by the online group was insignificant; but rather, the provisions were different. In the same way that in-person communities can offer immediate support, online communities are able to utilize delivery services, online money transferring applications and other virtual services to support individuals from a distance. In the wake of COVID-19, for example, while perhaps not equivalent to in-person care, we have seen how communities have stretched to support one another during social isolation. Online community can collectively provide benevolent resources in times of need. In Mimi's case, she was supported by multiple communities in different ways.

Furthermore, Mimi's vulnerability to share her story in the group offered the space for testimony. She was able to share a problem, get encouragement, authentically share her frustrations, practice her faith, and then share the outcome. In this case, other practitioners were able to witness her success and share in her triumph. Members in the group may have been encouraged to re-connect or stay connected to their local church body because of her story. Mimi's testimony shed light on the benefit of being connected to multiple Communities of Practice. Multiple communities can provide diverse perspectives and resources in times of need. Future research should explore the differences in the types of support offered between in-person and online communities.

Finding 6: Online spaces expand faith domain

The shared domain within a CoP is often a common field or a shared purpose. Christians, for example, are joined under the shared purpose of following the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ. Christians study, interpret and practice becoming more like Christ in their everyday lives. Through "storytelling and storylistening" the lived experiences of practitioners' act as resources for believers (Wimberly, 1998). These interpretations offer explanations and help in resolving issues.

Starting as early as the 1990s churches began using the internet to communicate with their congregations and local communities through email lists and church websites (Hutchings, 2017; Martin, et.al, 2011). Much of these interactions included information about events, church ministries, leadership information and service times.

By the year 2000 it was estimated that about 36% of African-Americans and 50% of White Americans had internet access (Pew, 2000). Within this population, Blacks were 65% more likely to seek out religious and spiritual information online as compared to Whites (Pew, 2000).

This could have been due, in part, to the overall trend that Black Americans are more religiously committed compared to their White counterparts (Pew, 2009). Or due to the growing population of Blacks who moved from cities to suburbs where face to face worship options may have been limited (Frey, 2015).

In the mid 2000s, large churches had not only begun livestreaming their services but some were utilizing streaming technology to establish satellite campuses in various locations as extensions of their own congregations (Ludden, 2005). During that decade, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were introduced to the general public and churches followed.

By 2010, over 40% of congregations reported using Facebook and “the use of both websites and email by congregations had more than doubled in the past decade” (Thumma, 2011). The study also suggested that small congregations utilized technology at a lower rate than larger churches and Black churches less than White (Thumma, 2011). However, it is important to note that while this study surveyed over 11,000 congregations, the researchers noted specifically that the low response rate by Historically Black congregations warranted caution to the accuracy of the data. Furthermore, the unequal distribution of internet access between Black and White Americans likely impacted internet use by congregations.

By 2019, amongst Protestant pastors, 84% used Facebook and almost three out of five (59%) reported posting some form of sermon content online. Again, Black pastors were less likely to post as compared to White pastors; Churches with smaller attendance rates were less likely to post content online compared to churches with larger attendance; And younger pastors were more open to posting services online compared to older pastors (LifeWay, 2020).

Since March 2020, the number of churches and ministries that have begun to stream or post content online has significantly increased (Pew, 2020). “Among U.S. adults who report attending religious services at least monthly, 82% say that the place of worship they most often

attend is streaming or recording its services so that people can watch them online or on TV” (Pew, 2020).

Even before the global COVID-19 pandemic, as local churches began voluntarily recording and posting their sermons online, they opened their doors to millions of internet users. The world wide web had become an encyclopedia of faith teachings from a variety of sources. Participants highlighted that these online resources expanded their faith domains in two main ways; 1) online spaces expanded their access to teachers, and 2) online spaces diversified the subject-matter of their sermons, Bible studies and teachings.

Online spaces expanded the network of teachers

Online spaces broadened the teachers, preachers, pastors and/or experts that practitioners could access. The internet exposed individuals to sermons, bible studies and talks from around the world. Amelia expressed the value of learning from multiple preachers.

You can also have exposure to many different types of teaching styles. So, you know, if you're only going to the one church every Sunday that's all you know. And I think that's very good, because I do think that we're called to be shepherded by different people. I think that is also good to have exposure to different points of view and different analysis of the Bible and getting the word from different sources and you can find people who can really relate to you.

Amelia acknowledged that preachers have various teaching styles. She highlighted the benefit of being exposed to multiple teaching styles from preachers who share a variety of viewpoints and analyses. Beyond varying styles of preaching, Amelia highlighted being shepherded or mentored by different people. This finding varied amongst participants and would likely be better explored over time. While several participants recognized the benefit of receiving different points of view by listening to multiple preachers, few acknowledged the role of personal

mentorship by pastors or leaders in the church. Those who did mention the role of shepherding only referenced one exemplar pastoral relationship, not multiple people.

As noted earlier, Pastor Sarah Jakes-Roberts was viewed by several participants as one of those relatable teachers. JoJo expressed that Pastor Sarah's age, upbringing and authenticity made her standout.

Like Sarah Jakes, for example, like when she really started to get big, I really related to her because she was someone who grew up in church, you know, her whole life. She had a little wild-child phase and then she started getting herself kind of back aligned. So, I think for a lot of us she was very transparent. And her dad is like one of the biggest, you know, pastors in the world. And so, it's like, okay, if this girl can come out here and tell her story and show her love for Christ in the way that she does. And with the platform that she has, then it's really kind of created a different space.

JoJo highlighted the transparency of Pastor Sarah as the characteristic that made her most relatable. As a Black female millennial herself, Pastor Sarah's ability to relate to the participants in this study could be influenced by their shared cultural heritage and generation. Likewise, Jakes utilizes popular social media networks such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to share excerpts of her sermon content. These clips get reshared, and posted across various social networks increasing her reach. Her rise in popularity amongst Black female millennials then, could be in part due to the interconnected networks of these groups. Beyond the demographics though, JoJo referenced Pastor Sarah's journey of being Lost and Found (also the title of her 2014 book) as a relatable story. Many of the participants shared similar upbringings of being raised in the church, leaving their home church for a season (usually during college) and then returning to discover a new version of their own Christian practices. Pastor Sarah shared a similar path which could make her experiences and preaching more relatable to Black female millennial Christians.

Online spaces can allow practitioners to learn from experts with whom they feel more closely aligned. That alignment can create a more relatable learning experience for practitioners of shared backgrounds. Practitioners may feel that their own lived experiences will be better

understood or more closely related to their teacher. From the CoP perspective, for newcomers who are operating on the periphery of a faith community, online spaces can provide access to relatable experts. As opposed to being constrained to the experts or pastors found in one's geographically bound local community, in online spaces, novices can learn from teachers of their preference furnished with a larger assortment of options.

That is not to say however, that online teachers should replace local pastors. Patrice would argue that relatability does not trump shepherding. Patrice, the oldest participant in the study, was a professor at a seminary college, Ph.D. student and also taught and led bible study at her local church. She argued that in-person mentorship was a valuable aspect of the Christian practice.

I think there is a role of having an actual shepherd and you don't always get that if there's somebody that's thousands of miles away. Can they talk with you, can they pray with you? Can they ever speak into you? That kind of thing. I felt like, and I guess I'm just speaking also personally because I've been a part of different churches over time, but I feel like at the place I'm at now, is like one of the first times that I've felt like I've had an actual real shepherd and that like makes a huge, huge difference and I couldn't, can't get it online.

Patrice expressed the impact of in-person mentorship to the Christian experience. She suggested that there were aspects of pastoral shepherding that could not be replicated in online spaces. She offered personal insight into how personal mentorship at her local church had positively influenced her own Christian practices. While online spaces may expand the network of teachers within a practitioner's rolodex, Patrice challenged that engagement in online teachings alone, are not a replacement for in-person mentorship.

Online spaces offer subject matter variety

As practitioners find experts with whom they can relate online, it only follows that the content that is shared will vary from preacher to preacher. Thus, the online space exposes individuals to a variety of choice. Eliza, for example, valued the diversity in teachings she was able to find online and compared her experiences to attending her family church.

I feel like the social media and the YouTube and podcasts do more series stuff. Like you know, where it's just like you'll have a part one, part two, part three. And it's like 'okay, well I looked at part one this week, so I definitely want to continue and do part two.' In the physical church it's like they might not always do a series to alert you of something that, you know, you particularly want to know. Sometimes it's kind of like all over the place. Like, we're going to talk about this this week, then, boom, we're going to talk about this this week...

So, it's like me walking into church today. I didn't even know what I was going to get. What are they talking about? Like, I didn't even have an idea. And of course, it was something that I wasn't even able to relate to.

Or, it's like 'okay well I know pastor such and such is going to be continuing this series [online] where they're talking about, you know, being faithful in your singleness and they're going to continue that on the next week.' Like, that's definitely something I'm interested in; I want to know about. I'm willing to learn more about. Where it's like at a church, you like, you really don't know what you're going to get this week.

Eliza expressed her frustration with not knowing the subject matter of the sermon before attending church. In this instance, she felt her local church was not providing teachings relevant to her daily practice. Eliza, a single Black female millennial felt that the sermon content preached at her church were geared more towards older married adults. She was in a season of life where she desired more focused teaching on singleness and preparing for a partner. She expressed her frustrations in the length of the church service compounded by the preached content being unrelated to her lived experiences. This deficiency from her church, in part, led her online. In contrast to her in-person experience, on-demand sermons that were already uploaded online allowed her to search for the content she felt was most relevant. She also noted that the preachers whom she listened to online thematically organized their sermons in a series structure. The

sermon series structure that she referenced is when a preacher addresses one overarching theme and over the course of several weeks, the theme is expanded upon in different parts. In this case, as the sermons were preached, they were posted online, titled under a common theme, such as Relationship Goals, and packaged together as a series. The series are then typically shared on YouTube, Apple podcasts or the church's website. This type of sermon bundling is not a practice solely limited to online preaching. But in Eliza's case, the searchable bundled content online made it easier for her to find on demand.

Eliza stressed the importance of sermon content matching her interests to meet the needs of her current situation. She felt that content that was applicable to her circumstance would make her more willing to learn. She continued,

So, the best part about virtual is the point of choice and the instant Word that I can get at any time. So, like if I'm feeling down on myself but it's Tuesday, I could go to church or I could throw on a podcast while I'm driving to work to lift up my spirit. It's the instant-ness of being able to just pick it up. And it's also the fact that if I don't like what I'm hearing or I need something that pertains literally to what I'm going through, I can find it.

Eliza highlighted that choice and accessibility were the best aspects of online teachings. The storage of on-demand video and audio recordings from a variety of churches online allowed Eliza to search for teachings that were relevant to her current situation and could be accessed anytime, anywhere. Eliza recognized that in the middle of the week, if she needed encouragement or enrichment from her faith community, she could physically go to church or she could tune into an audio podcast during her daily commute. She highlighted the instant access to sermon content as a major benefit of online resources.

The caveat to this instant access, however, could be the lack of dedicated sacrificed time toward religious engagement. Going to a physical house of worship sets aside the dedicated time and space for engaged faith practices. On one hand, online teachings provide accessibility to connect with teachings unbound by location; But on the other hand, engaging in these teachings

while multitasking as opposed to delegating certain time and space could impact effectiveness. From a learning perspective, we see that student-driven interest is motivating Eliza to engage in content on her own outside of the church. This self-driven motivation can lead to Eliza's deepening of her own understandings. At the same time, learning outside of the classroom or church settings, such as in a car, or at the gym may expose the practitioner to more distractions that counteract the learning process.

Eliza also appreciated accessing teachings online because of the amount of control she had to choose her own program of study. If she disliked something she was hearing or the content was not relevant to her personal practice, she could turn it off and switch to something else. Veronica elaborated on this point.

What I love so much is if I don't like what I'm hearing, I could turn it off. Yeah, I mean, it's true. Like, I love my home pastor but my home pastor is very against homosexuality. And it hurts. Because my best friend is gay, two of my best friends are... three of my best friends are [gay]. So even though [my home pastor is] not very, like, outward about saying it, there are times where it comes up. That to me is like a point where I would turn off the TV at home. But you know, I can't, I'm not walking out at church so.

Veronica also expressed satisfaction in her ability “turn off” sermons when she watched at home on television or online. In this case, she highlighted the conflicting views on homosexuality shared between herself and her home pastor. Her lived experience and her beliefs went against what her pastor preached. At home, she would have the ability to disengage with the messages that she deemed offensive or incongruent with her beliefs. In-person, however, out of respect, she felt unable to voice or show her displeasure with the message.

Online spaces can expand the range of content offerings practitioners can find on a variety of topics. Participants expressed that the ability to choose sermon topics increased their motivation to learn about the subject matter because of its direct application to their lives. Online offerings gave practitioners a sense of control over their domain in a way that was atypical in

their local church. Content that individuals deemed inapplicable, offensive, or misaligned from their own beliefs could be circumvented.

Where online teaching falls short

The expanded exposure to preachers and teachings online still should not replace in-person pastoring. The first, most obvious reason, is the risk associated with not truly knowing the source or person where the teachings originate. JoJo warned, “there's a lot of information out there. I think you also run the risk of being exposed to some, you know, some information that may not be accurate.” Accurate can mean a variety of things within the Christian domain. Practitioners from church to church can believe different things, even within the same denomination. Due to these vast amounts of information online, it is important to understand the background and sources of the information being received as well as having faith mentors, pastors or shepherds who can help learners interpret the content.

Zora for example, was raised with Baptist, Jehovah's Witness and Catholic school upbringings. Now, as an adult, Zora wrestled with these three very different theological influences as she approached online content. She described valuing teachers who were theologically grounded in Biblical teachings. Although for her, Biblical soundness is more complex since the three traditions she was raised in utilize different versions and interpretations of the Bible. These differences go beyond varying translations. In some cases, these traditions use Bible versions that include different books, accounts and text some of the others exclude.

I found that, you know, certain pastors that I listen to online would stay on topic, you know, ‘you're being relatable but we're still getting into the Scripture’. Whereas, some pastors and not that it was a bad thing, but I felt like, I would turn them on because I knew that they were about to motivate me to start my day. So, it's a really fine line, I feel, between being a motivational speaker and actually being a Bible teacher.

Zora, delineated between what she called motivational speakers versus Biblical teachers online. Her caveat to online sermons was that although the preachers she found online may be motivational, they may not always be Biblically sound or in accordance with her beliefs. Zora's experience highlights a benefit of HNoPs or access to multiple communities. Each community provides different tools, perspectives and resources. These varying perspectives can support or challenge an individual's understandings. For example, in Zora's case, motivational speakers were a node within her faith HNoP. Although some speakers did not hold to her Biblical beliefs, she still used them in conjunction with her other faith teachings. These varying perspectives helped to inform her beliefs.

Finally, Londyn voiced that too much subject-matter choice for practitioners could be a detriment.

The down side of spiritual technology spaces is that we create an environment where we only feel comfortable, and we're not being challenged necessarily. Like, it's easy to get in a cocoon. 'I have five to ten people that I talked about Christ with but I only discussed the scriptures that I like and I only talk about the topics that are comfortable to me.' And you don't, I mean, like there's nobody checking you. There's no checks and balances when you create the system that you're getting spiritually fed from.

Londyn argued that when individuals "create the system" that they are learning from there is no accountability for growth. She maintained selective discipleship could allow learners to avoid subjects in which they do not want to be challenged or developed. Londyn warned that a fully student-created learning environment, without the proper channels of accountability could stunt well-rounded spiritual growth.

From a learning perspective, while educators value student-centered learning these environments are usually supervised or scaffolded by a teacher or expert. Teachers, mentors and pastors should help guide self-directed learning so that learners are not left to their own devices when sifting through various online material. While learners are encouraged to explore on their

own, they should remain in dialogue with other practitioners and mentors so that their new formed understandings can be justified or challenged.

Online teachings expand the selection of teachers and teachings well beyond those found in a defined geographical community. Sermons stored online can be an extensive library for practitioners who are searching for content beyond their local CoPs. Learners have control over what content they deem relevant and thus what content they engage with. At the same time, that control could result in underdeveloped knowledge domains in areas where novices are unwilling to address.

Finding 7: Online spaces support faith practices

Lave and Wenger described Practice within traditional CoPs as “a living curriculum” (Wenger et al. 2002, p.38). They described effective practice as one that “evolves with the community as a collective product. It is integrated into people’s work. It organizes knowledge in a way that is especially useful to practitioners ...” (Wenger et al. 2002, p. 39)

One of the benefits of being connected to a CoP is the added value practitioners bring by providing access to and organizing useful resources and tools. Participants reported that online spaces supported their practices by increasing their organization of resources and expanding their access to tools.

Online spaces can be accessed anywhere at anytime

Participants reported that online spaces provided greater access to resources making some of their spiritual practices accessible anywhere at any time. These practices include, listening to sermons live and/or on demand, listening to Bible studies, listening to worship music, connecting

with their faith communities, giving monetary gifts, engaging in corporate fasts, etc. Zora for example noted the benefit of accessing teachings within the comfort of her own home.

I think that the benefits are that you can be in your own space. One thing I do know, is that you don't have to be in a physical church to connect with God... But I think that that is also a benefit because you can still be your most vulnerable self. You can sit there and cry. You can rewind it, you can record it and always go back to it. It doesn't always require you to like take notes and feel like you missed something.

Zora acknowledged her ability to connect with teachings in a meaningful way outside of a church. She noted that a benefit of watching a pre-recorded sermon was that it gave her the ability to pause, rewind, record, and re-listen to certain parts of the message. Unlike during an in-person experience, she did not feel the pressure of possibly missing a part of the sermon but instead could save the recording to access at a different time. Further, she highlighted the additional benefit of being in her own space where she felt she was able to be most vulnerable to cry privately.

Having access to recorded sermons is not a new phenomenon. For decades, churches have sold tapes, CDs, and mp3 recordings of sermons after services (Clay, 2004). These practices date back to the 1920s when preachers broadcast sermons and worship music through phonographs, radio and television mediums (Martin, 2014). However, replication costs and racial discrimination in broadcasting created barriers to entry and dissemination for Black churches and preachers (Martin, 2014).

The internet, through social media, and other online spaces has lowered these barriers and almost eliminated the cost of replication. The posting of sermons online using YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, church websites, and other platforms have opened a door to accessibility that offers free online replication and distribution for churches and practitioners. Not only can churches distribute content at the touch of a button, but practitioners can retrieve that content, and

send to others using weblinks through text messages, direct messaging on social media applications or by email.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Ameila preferred to be able to access her faith resources during her morning commute on public transportation.

I'm the kind of a person that's on the move a bit; busy, a lot of times. And so, you know, being able to do that in a manner that's like concise and everything is there in front of me. It makes it really easy and convenient for me. Like now I catch public transportation. So on my morning commute I'm reading through like a Bible plan or devotional just getting my brain together for the day. So I say like my morning prayers in the morning during my commute. And I think that it helped me to just establish like a regular cadence and thoughtfulness of including Christ in my everyday life. Even if it's not as, you know, extravagant or showy as some ways may be... Its meaningful and concise.

Amelia was able to find a regular routine to engage in her faith practice during her morning commute. The online spaces she used supported her desire to connect even in an untraditional space. She highlighted the easy, concise and convenient nature of her online tools and still validated their meaningfulness to her practice.

For almost a century the local church has found ways to extend its impact beyond the weekend service through mailed bulletins, broadcasts, recorded tapes and CDs. Online spaces have built upon these previous options and opened the doors of the church even wider than before. Tools like the Bible App (Life Church, 2020), for example, is a phone application that has digitized the Bible into multiple translations and versions. The app allows users to search for any book, verse, word, phrase or name in the Bible. Users can create background screens, share verses with others, take notes and highlight scriptures. The app also offers reading plans which allow individuals to choose a topical devotional, book study, spiritual plan or various other devotional topics for a custom length of time. Reading plan lengths can vary from a few days to an entire year. Users are able to find friends and share their Bible plans with each other to create group bible studies. Within these study groups users can write reflections within the plan and share their takeaways with each other daily. These types of online technologies have extended methods of

practice beyond the physical church. These tools not only create access to resources, but they also create spaces for practitioners to communicate with one another in their practices.

Online spaces support the organization and sharing of resources

Participants also reported using applications like GroupMe, a group text messaging application to create easier methods of group communication. JoJo for example, mentioned that her entire church was a part of a shared GroupMe texting group. Skylar, one of the co-founders of WW, explained why the group leaders felt the need to create a group chat on GroupMe.

The reason we started a GroupMe [chat] really, initially, it was for the fast - the corporate fast that we did. And it was really amazing because like people were able to fast across the country and we created a fasting plan where we could share things in that GroupMe [chat]... And I think God like, He smiles inside to know that we're able to connect with somebody who lives in Virginia or California or Philadelphia and like we are still all in His presence but still in completely different States. I think that's really cool, powerful.

Skylar highlighted that the motivation in July 2018 for WW to form an online group chat was to connect individuals who wanted to participate in a fast. The group chat would allow practitioners to share resources, testimony and best practices with one another during the course of the fast. For decades, churches have engaged in corporate fasts by creating devotionals for their members and distributing recipes and guides for circulation. The co-founders of the WW group aimed to extend these practices beyond their local community by using word of mouth and social media tools to invite Christian women from all locations to engage in the corporate Daniel's Fast together. Skylar noted that this fast was open to anyone who wanted to join and was not limited to members within one church. She imagined the sense of pride that God would have from practitioners connecting across the country in a unified engaged practice.

A Daniel's Fast is a spiritual fast named after the Old Testament prophet Daniel. The Daniel's Fast is a partial fast restricting some foods but allowing organic foods that come from

the earth (Gregory, 2019). The leaders explained that the purpose of the twenty-one-day fast was for believers (or practitioners) to seek God in order to know or hear from Him in a deeper way. They encouraged the Christian practice of fasting as a method of gaining greater clarity or confirmation from God. They acknowledged that fasting can be difficult, especially when fasting alone, which is why they created the space to fast together.

During the fast, the group engaged in a shared Bible plan using the BibleApp phone application. Eighteen members engaged in a ten-day devotional called Fast Friends which focused on fasting and prayer. Daily, members in the group posted their reflection from the scripture and additional reading that the shared plan provided. At the same time, the group leaders hosted regular prayer calls weekly on Saturday mornings. These calls were managed through a phone conferencing platform called Free Conference Call. These calls were led by the group leaders who opened the line during each call to ask for prayer requests. The group leaders also allowed other members of the group to lead the call if someone volunteered in advance. Beyond the length of the fast, the weekly prayer calls became a weekly occurrence. Throughout the year, the group leaders also held various in-person retreats and events for members of the group who were able to travel to the D.C., Maryland, Virginia area.

Amelia recalled joining the group chat and being a part of the shared Bible plan during the fast.

So the [WW chat] they started to introduce like the concept of like the Bible plans and stuff like that. Which I've always had a bible app, but I don't think that I ever did like the plans. And I think we all were doing the fasting plan together. But even after that fast ended, like even 'til this day I'm like constantly doing plans. To one, just keep my daily connection with Christ, and then just also kind of focus myself and get a deeper understanding on either topics that interest me or different things that I'm going through in life.

Amelia reflected on how the members of the WW group introduced her to Bible plans which she continued to use beyond the duration of the fast. Even though Amelia already had access to the

application, her connection to the other practitioners in the WW group exposed her to additional tools within an application that she already used.

Amelia's experience demonstrates another benefit of being connected to a Community of Practice. Within the community there were practitioners who had more working knowledge of a tool that she could incorporate into her practice. Through discourse and engaged practice, she was exposed to the authentic practices of other experts and gained knowledge and a new toolset that continued to inform her practice. Although Amelia identified herself as a lurker, or a member of the group chat that read more than she shared, through legitimate peripheral participation, she was still able to learn from experts who were operating closer to the core of the group. The tools she watched others use became a part of her daily practice.

In January 2019, now with a core group, the leaders set out to lead another Daniel's Fast. The leaders posted information about the fast on their Instagram, Twitter, website and sent out emails to their listserv. Those who were interested in participating were encouraged to send their phone number to the group leaders so that they could be added to the group chat for support and accountability during the fast. The fast took place January 11, 2019 to January 31, 2019.

To better describe the interactions during the fast I captured data from the WW group chat transcript from January 5th to January 31st. During that time, 783 messages were exchanged, 17 new members were added to the group and 37 unique individuals contributed to the thread through text or photo posts. It is estimated that between 60-70 individuals were a part of the group chat at this time. Figure 4-14 displays the dates of the corporate fast, when data capturing began and overall interactions.

Included in the 783 messages sent during the fast, there were 99 instances of prayer, scripture, or devotional sharing, 78 instances of self-reflection, which included prayer requests, testimonies, or insight from a sermon. Food suggestions or recipes were shared 65 times and pictures of food 28 times. Sermons or podcasts were shared 28 times through YouTube links,

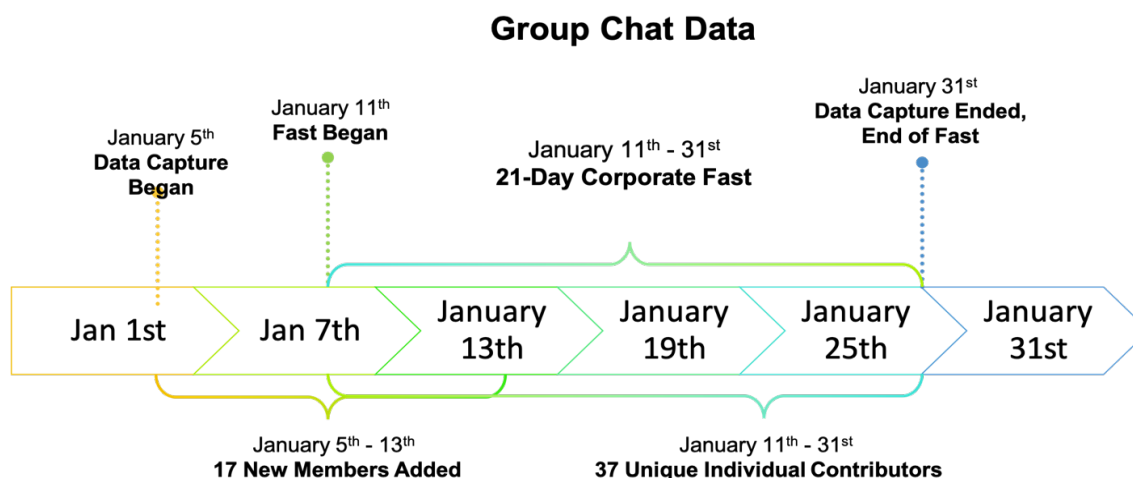


Figure 4-14: WW Group chat data collection overview

audio links, church websites, Instagram or Facebook posts. Worship music including playlists, artists or specific songs were shared 18 times. Other resources that were shared included book suggestions, bible plans, phone applications, articles, movies, television, Netflix suggestions, etc. Table 4-1 displays the category, description and number of instances an event occurred from January 5, 2019 to January 31, 2019.

Due to the large number of members who were located in the D.C., Maryland and Virginia area, women also shared information about local events including resources for members who were affected by the United State Federal Government shut down from December 22, 2018 until January 25, 2019.

At the end of the fast, several practitioners reflected on the fast and how the group had supported them during the twenty-one days. Destini for example, shared that this was the first time she had fasted and how rewarding the experience had been.


Day 21!! Wow I still can't believe I fasted for this long. I'm so proud of myself. Big thank you to @Skylar and @Avery for all your support and leadership. And to all you beautiful ladies for sharing your testimony and words of encouragement. This was one of the hardest, yet most rewarding things I've ever done. I've learned so much about myself during this season. My walk with God has definitely improved. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Wish you all have a bless day 

Table 4-1: Group Chat Occurrences January 5, 2019 – January 31, 2019.

| Resource Type | Description | Instances |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Prayer or Scripture | Members shared screen shots from phone application devotional, text scripture, word image, encouragement or prayer | 99 |
| Self-Reflection | Members shared prayer requests, sermon takeaways, fasting struggles, etc. | 78 |
| Recipe/Food suggestion | Members shared phone applications, recipes, websites, menus, restaurants, brands of food etc. | 65 |
| Pictures of Food | Members shared pictures of food | 28 |
| Podcast or Sermon | Members shared the video link of a podcast or sermon via YouTube, Apple podcasts, Facebook, church website, etc. | 28 |
| Event | Member posted the details to an upcoming in-person event including church events, Christian artist tours, government shutdown resources, etc. | 19 |
| Worship Music | Members shared YouTube song, Apple playlist, artists, songs, etc. | 18 |
| Other resources | Members shared subscription service, books, bible plans, articles, phone application suggestions, etc. | 8 |
| Multimedia Resource | Members shared movies or television suggests including online media, memes, Netflix suggestions, YouTube pages, etc. | 6 |
| Prayer Call | Members discussed upcoming group prayer call | 2 |

Destini thanked the members of the group for sharing their collective stories, best practices and their encouragement throughout the process. The fasting experience revealed the mix of novices and experts within the group in terms of fasting. This was Destini's longest fasting experience and her exposure to the more experienced practitioners helped sustain her commitment to the group's practice. As a novice in this area, seeing the authentic practice of other practitioners, as well as hearing their testimony and best practices, helped her learn and apply knowledge to her own practices.

Bailey, another participant, expressed her gratitude for the spiritually-based group of women calling them newfound sisters.

This experience has definitely been rewarding and I'm thankful I got this opportunity, and ran across [WW] organization. What you girls are doing is awesome @Skylar @Avery! For me I don't have a lot of really hard core spiritual girlfriends, so I had always prayed for that, and so gracious to have gained so many new sisters in Christ! Through this fast God has renewed me and ignited my passion, gone deeper into the word, which I always struggled with, this will always be an ongoing process, but I feel so free and lifted by this. A blessing!

Baily shared that she had always desired to have a group of "spiritual girlfriends" or a group of female Christian practitioners with whom she could share her faith practices. She expressed how thankful she was to have found and engaged with the WW group during the fast.

About a seven months later, during a focus group interview, Tiara expressed how much support she felt from the WW group during the fast.

I think most importantly the support ... The year before with my church, I tried to fast and in like two days I was like 'I'm over it, can't do this. I was like I cannot do this.' But you know, fasting with [WW] that next year, just the support and see the other women, somedays like "I'm over it." Like just to know you weren't alone. As opposed to like doing it with the church and you had no community. You didn't really know how other people were making it through the fast. I think that was helpful.

Tiara reflected on how the authenticity and sharing of best practices within the WW group made her feel more supported compared to when she tried to fast the previous year with her church. She

commented that when she fasted with her church that she had “no community.” Although her local church implemented a similar fast the previous year and likely provided similar resources, she felt disconnected from the community of practitioners. She highlighted that the biggest difference between her unsuccessful attempt the previous year compared to the current year was her connection to the WW group. Tiara later noted that the women in the WW group were contemporaries whom she felt she could hang out with outside of church. She had friends in the group who, she later confessed, helped hold her accountable during the fast. This confession reflects the influence and effectiveness of peer accountability and correction within faith community (Wimberly & Handy in Wimberly & Parker, 2002). Furthermore, her ability to see the daily struggles of her peers in the group made her feel a deeper sense of community in that she was not alone.

Additionally, the information shared in the group was not solely for the group’s consumption. On several occasions, members shared resources that came from outside sources such as from their local churches. Information was shared outside of the group in the same way. JoJo reflected, “there's so many sermons and things that I've been able to watch from people sharing in the WW chat that I have been able to also share with other people.” As JoJo accessed valuable resources in the WW group chat she shared those resources with others as well. The sermon links, best practices, recipes, prayers and other resources shared by practitioners in the group were being shared outside the group as well. The resource hub extended beyond the online community and benefited practitioners in other communities as well.

Although the members of the group were from various geographical locations, Sklyar contended that the sense of community felt with the group chat was authentic irrespective of physical location.

People are very open about what they have going on, like in their personal lives, and we're able to pray for them. And it's like, God hears that and then they can see the fruits of that and that's just helping us build our relationships. So, it's just

like no matter how near or far they are, it's like 'you're still my sister, I'm still praying for you, let's fast together. Here, I saw this, I thought about you. Or here, I thought that this would be encouraging to you.' And it's just like, it's like a little, like a little neighborhood, like a little community! It is!

Skylar likened the WW group to a neighborhood and a community. Neighborhoods generally describe groups of people who live within a certain geographical location while communities usually are not bound by location but instead work together towards common goals. Skylar's use of both words suggest that she felt a proximal closeness as well as a united cause that connected her to the group. This could be indicative of the in-person retreats, gatherings and community service activities that the WW group hosted monthly. As a hybrid group, whenever possible women traveled to the D.C., Maryland and Virginia area to fellowship together for Bible study, group discussions, prayer, retreats, community service, etc. These fellowship opportunities may help bind the group beyond the encounters in the online space. Skylar highlighted that the women in the group helped and supported each other because of the relationships that had been formed. Regardless of geographical location, practitioners were still able to share, pray and grow together through the online community.

Where online practice falls short

One downside to the GroupMe format for communication within a group is that it is an ongoing messaging chat. The resources shared in the group are shared in real-time and unless they are thoughtfully extracted and archived, it is difficult to access the resources from previous conversations. One recommendation would be to archive some of these resources in an alternative online space so that they can be easily accessed on demand. These can include prayers, devotionals, websites, sermon links, recipes, etc. That way, a resource hub can exist as a reference for on-demand requests.

Participants also noted that while online tools improved their accessibility to faith tools, those same platforms also had the potential to increase unwanted distractions. While distractions can exist in both in-person and online environments Zora highlighted one of the reasons why online environments can be more distracting.

I think the drawback is that you can also be easily distracted because the same devices that we're participating in online [faith] communities are the same devices that text messages pop up, social media notifications pop up, people call you and interrupt. Which I think is probably the biggest drawback, just the distractions that come along with it.

Zora offered that the same phones, tablets, computers and other devices that practitioners use to engage in online faith communities are usually also used to connect with other people, emails or social networks. Those notifications could be distracting to practitioners attempting to engage in online faith practices. Other practitioners mentioned listening to sermons at work, while driving, working out, cooking, during their commutes, or while engaged in other activities. They acknowledged that in some cases the distractions of the outside world can detract from their engagement. Veronica was able to relate to both perspectives,

When I'm in church I feel like nothing else distracts me. You know, like it's the outside world is a distraction. But the moment I walk into the sanctuary, it's all about my relationship with God... I do not touch my phone when I'm in church. It's that space of like, 'this is important that I need to focus.' So, I do not touch my phone for two and a half, three hours that I'm in church. That is like quiet time and it's one of the only times that I have that.

The problem with going into the church home is that the people that are there, who aren't perfect, who do judge people, who talk about you, who do have something to say if you not dressed right. The people who become the distraction in church for no reason... But with the virtual, it's amazing, because you literally are just getting the word from the Pastor. It's like you and the Pastor. I don't have everyone around me.

Veronica's reverence for her church sanctuary made it one of the only places where she did not actively use her cellphone. It removed the interruptions from the outside world which allowed her to concentrate on her present moment. However, she noted that her in-person church practice also presented its own distractions. Veronica cited other practitioners as possible

detractors from engagement in her faith practice. She noted that perceived judgement arising from community standards of appearance could dissuade practitioners from in-person engagement. She contended that online spaces removed the distraction of other people and allowed teachings to feel more direct from the preacher.

Online spaces help practitioners' access, organize and share their online practices. They can create online communities, resource hubs and networks of tools for faith practitioners. Individual practices can be shared with groups from around the world as practitioners support and encourage one another. While online spaces offer unparalleled accessibility, they also compete with other distractions. These can include distractions that are present in the environment such as trying to engage while multitasking. Or distractions that come through the devices being used to connect to faith resources, like phone calls, email notifications, etc. In-person faith spaces may help eliminate some of those distractions by adhering to a level of reverence and respect that dissuades practitioners from engaging in distracting activities.

Summary

Online spaces can enhance community, expand domain and support practices in faith Communities of Practice. Online communities can create spaces of authenticity where learners feel freedom of judgment. Online communities can offer diverse perspective outside of local communities, while at the same time they can connect people who share similar background to create relatable authentic spaces. However, online community cannot fully replace physical community which can directly impact a person's physical space or circumstance.

Online spaces extend domains across the world wide web. They expand the network of teachers and experts who offer learners diverse perspectives and teaching styles. Learners are able

to drive their learning based on interest and dive deeply into content they find most interesting. However, this type of freedom threatens that learners may be exposed to unbalanced content or inaccurate information without the help of a mentor.

Lastly, online spaces support practices by offering organized and accessible tools to learners. Online applications and spaces have been transformed to support faith practitioners in diverse ways. Resources can now be accessed on a phone, or computer making practices accessible anywhere at any time. Practitioners can support each other through individual practices using online tools keeping practitioners accountable and connected throughout the week. At the same time, accessing these tools and resources on the same devices that are used to communicate and engage in non-faith activities can create unwarranted distractions. These distractions can include notifications from text messages, emails, social media, phone calls, as well as the environmental distractions that can arise from being in a car, at home, on public transportation, etc.

Chapter 5

Discussion

In this chapter, I will summarize the major findings of my research and highlight theoretical implications. I discuss why CoPs fail and how churches and ministries can avoid those pitfalls. I offer a framework for a Flipped Church method of design and outline possible strategies for implementation. Lastly, I will discuss design limitations and areas for future research.

Technology will continue to transform the way individuals connect and engage in their daily practices. As we've seen in the shopping and education industries, technology has transformed how society shops, learns and now, how individuals engaged in their faith practices. The shopping industry, for example, has evolved from small local mom and pop shops, to large one-stop superstores and has now transformed into online marketplaces. These online markets are accessible anywhere at any time and do not require consumers to leave their homes to purchase what they need. Similarly, higher education has shifted from small specialized local colleges, to large universities that offer multiple colleges within a single campus and has now transformed into online universities. These distance learning options allow learners to access professors, resources and tools without leaving their homes.

From a macro level, this study aimed to explore how technology may be transforming the religious sector in a similar manner. More intentionally, this study utilized an ethnographic approach to explore how Black millennial women use online spaces to engage in their faith practices. The goal of the research was to situate in-person and online faith spaces as learning environments in order to apply Community of Practice learning theories. The research addressed two main research questions: 1) In what ways do online spaces impact traditional in-person faith-

based Communities of Practice? and 2) In what ways do online spaces enhance Community, Domain, and Practice within faith-based Communities of Practice?

Summary of Major Findings

In response to the first research question, my study found that online spaces work in harmony with in-person faith-based Communities of Practice. Further, online spaces can encourage participation in in-person practices. Faith practitioners operated within, what I called, Hybrid Networks of Practice (HNoP) where individuals seamlessly transitioned between online and in-person spaces. HNoPs can encompass multiple nodes of faith participation including in-person communities, online communities, online resources, individual practices, and group ministries. HNoPs are dynamic, and can evolve overtime. This means that nodes, practices, resources, communities, and tools within HNoPs are fluid. Over the course of weeks, months and years, faith engagement will be comprised of different nodes as well as nodes of varying intensities. HNoPs are not static. They will shift and transform to continue to meet the needs and desires of the individual practitioner.

Engagement in online spaces can encourage in-person participation at local ministry events and church services. Online spaces offer Legitimate Peripheral Participation to individuals operating on the periphery of local communities. Engagement in these experiences overtime can incite in-person church attendance. Local churches can encourage parishioners to engage in HNoPs that include online and outside teachings. Churches that create these open network cultures encourage resource sharing which distributes knowledge across multiple practitioners. Ideally, they would view practitioners as resources who are able to share with one another as opposed to empty vessels who need to be filled. In-person value must be defined in these contexts to differentiate the unique value of in-person participation over other resources that are accessible

online. Commitment to community service and authentic fellowship stood out as in-person practices that were difficult to replicate in online spaces.

Amongst Black millennial women, in-person fellowship remained the cornerstone practice of their faith engagements. Online interactions, even if engaged more regularly than in-person practices, were still viewed as supplements to in-person practice. In-person practices extended beyond weekend church services and could be interchanged by more informal gatherings, such as monthly group Bible studies.

My research suggests that online spaces are not a threat to in-person faith spaces. Instead, they were viewed as complements, supplements, extensions or temporary replacements as individuals navigated the evolutions of their faith practices. In-person faith practices often informed how individuals engaged in online spaces. For millennials, areas in which in-person spaces were deemed inadequate, inefficient, or inaccurate were supplemented by online spaces to meet their needs. These online supplements may have been temporary until practitioners were able to find in-person communities, or they acted as complementary perspectives that individuals continued to practice even when in-person resources were adequate.

The Hybrid Networks of Practice framework expands the perspective of faith spaces beyond comparing online versus in-person spaces. Instead, these spaces work in tandem with one another. The HNoP structure acknowledges faith practices as nodes within an interconnected web. Within these networks individual, online and in-person practices inform one another. The nodes are situated within a three-dimensional axis allowing space for nodes to grow and shift over time.

The second research question explored how online spaces enhanced community, domain and practice, the main tenets of the Community of Practice theory. Online spaces enhanced community by connecting more practitioners to one another. These larger communities allowed individuals to find practitioners with shared experiences, or in contrast, viewpoints different from

those found in their local communities. Online networks transform what it means for groups to gather together. They expand community far beyond geographic location. Christians from around the world can come together in worship, Bible study, group chats, online conferences, etc. to grow and learn from one another online.

Domain, or subject matter is also expanded on online networks. Access to teachers, experts, preachers and pastors from around the world are accessible through mobile technologies. Sermons, talks, Bible verses, devotionals and other faith resources can be shared online. These diverse offerings allow practitioners to access teachings from a variety of sources which vary in teaching style and perspective. Online spaces like Facebook, YouTube, and church websites act as an open library of faith content. These vast online libraries allow learners to freely explore teachings based on their own interests. Areas that interest learners the most can be more deeply explored. These open networked explorations allow learners to wrestle with diverse viewpoints eventually leading them to construct their own understandings (Krajcik & Shin, 2006).

Finally, faith practices can be supported in online spaces. Resources that were only accessible in a church or with a Bible can now be accessed on phones, tablets and computers. Online spaces make resources, communities, and tools conveniently accessible anywhere at any time. For example, Bibles can be searched by word or phrase using phone applications, and devotionals can be read in community groups that engage practitioners in dialogue from around the world. How practitioners practice their faith is enhanced or in some cases made more efficient by online spaces.

Theoretical Implications

The notion of Hybrid Networks of Practice (HNoP) builds upon Community of Practice, Virtual Communities of Practice, and Affinity Space theories by highlighting the domain as the

binding tenant of practice. Whereas CoPs highlight *community* and Affinity Spaces highlight *locations*, HNoPs position the *domain* as the central focus (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gee, 2005). Learners are situated at the center of a matrix weaving in and out of in-person CoPs, virtual CoPs and Affinity Spaces. These spaces, as well as individual practices represent nodes within hybrid networks. HNoPs are dynamic allowing flexibility for nodes to be created, dismantled, grow or shrink over time as individuals evolve. HNoPs also suggest that Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) can occur outside of a local CoP. LPP suggests that newcomers learn from experts within their communities through observation, engagement and interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Online spaces can offer individuals who are operating on the periphery of local CoPs access to observe and learn from experts outside of their local communities.

Identity formation

Beyond knowledge sharing between novices and experts, scholars agree that identity formation plays a principal role in the learning process (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Nasir et al., 2006). As novices spend more time engaging in CoPs, they begin to see themselves as practitioners. Online spaces can play a role in this identify formation. Engagement through online bible studies, weekend services, podcasts, etc. can all motivate how learners view themselves as Christian practitioners. The data suggests that engagement in online spaces overtime can develop this sense of identity transformation even before learners are connected or reconnected to a local in-person CoP.

In Veronica's case, for example, Veronica had been disconnected from her local church for several years while she was in college. After college, instead of immediately returning to her church she began re-engaging in her faith practices by listening to sermons online. It was during this time, while she was operating on the margins of her "home" church that she began to

reconnect with her Christian identity. This focused identity engagement, albeit online, spurred her to want to begin attending in-person services again. The online space offered her an avenue to reconnect with her Christian identity. Her online space engagement - watching sermons online, helped shift her identify - towards a more active Christian practitioner, which eventually transitioned her into a fuller in-person participant at her home church.

Landscapes of Practice

The notion of HNoPs also builds upon Landscapes of Practice theory which suggests that learners navigate a landscape of complex communities in combination with one another (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). Landscapes of Practice encompass complementary or conflicting communities which are often political, flat and diverse environments. Religious landscapes can be political due to hierarchical claims to knowledge based on history or precedence. Competing viewpoints may be silenced by these governing bodies depending on the position of the community making the claim (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). Landscapes are also flat, in that local knowledge cannot be engulfed by other communities. While hierarchies may exist in religious communities, such as within denominations, no one community's practice has such control over another that it eliminates the local knowledge of another. Community practices "inform and influence each other" as opposed to occupying another (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015, p.16). Last, religious landscapes are diverse encompassing multiple local communities with defined boundaries. These church or denomination boundaries can be based on shared histories, perspectives or values. The boundaries between these communities may not be amiable but do offer spaces for learning and innovation between groups (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015).

While online spaces may not fully deconstruct the political hierarchies or boundaries between religious groups, the data suggest that online spaces can make religious communities and

diverse viewpoints more accessible. Online spaces can create platforms for more voices to be heard using what Sampson calls “alternative pulpits” (Sampson, 2019). Viewpoints which may have been excluded from church pulpits due to contrasting views can now be broadcast using online platforms. The political nature of in-person religious communities has influenced online spaces to vie for position in less regulated online landscapes. These online spaces can offer claims to knowledge outside of those found within a learner’s local community boundary. Further, online spaces celebrate diverse landscapes. Hybrid networks allow learners to operate between boundaries where they are able to construct their own understandings based on multiple vantage points. Similar to flat landscapes, the nodes within hybrid networks inform and influence one another as opposed to engulfing each other.

Community

Online spaces can extend communities within CoPs beyond geographical location. The 2002 CoP theory defined community as groups that gather to work together to find common solutions (Wenger et al.). In 2020, how groups gather and who can access those gatherings has evolved. Online spaces can extend gatherings beyond the confines of local community. Online group chats, video conferences, Facebook groups, discussion boards and a variety of other online platforms bring groups of people together from around the world. In educational settings, church settings and other learning environments, the learners who comprise the community are not restricted to physical attendance.

The benefit of extending community online is the opportunity for practitioners to access contributions from practitioners of various backgrounds and experiences. That is not to say that diversity in perspective can only be achieved in online spaces. Rather, online spaces can help facilitate access to diverse perspectives for individuals from homogenous communities.

Practitioner diversity can lead to variety in lived experiences, best practices, innovations, skills, tools and resources. This diversity creates opportunities for learners to confirm their understandings as well as wrestle with perspectives different from their own. Online communities can extract learners from their siloed communities into online spaces which may offer safety in anonymity.

On the other hand, a larger assembly of practitioners can also improve the chances that individuals are able to find relatable practitioners with whom they feel they can build genuine relationships. Leaders like Pastor Sarah Jakes Roberts have created communities like Women Evolve for this reason. Online spaces can create avenues for individuals with similar life experiences, generational or racial backgrounds to find experts and peers with whom they can connect. Similarly, niche online groups are formed so that practitioners can relate, share and be more authentically themselves amongst each other. Within these groups, individuals form friendships and share testimonies online between practitioners with whom they may have never had access otherwise. Online spaces can increase accessibility to relatable practitioners and community who may not be geographically accessible.

Domain

Online spaces offer learners the freedom to choose their own curriculum. Hybrid networks act as learner-centered environments where interest is driven by the learner (Kafai & Dede, 2014). In these spaces, practitioners are able to select which teachings, tools, or resources are most relevant to their practices. This freedom adds value to communities which are most beneficial when the knowledge shared between practitioners is relevant (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). This interest-driven learning allows learners to explore subjects more deeply than what formal settings may allow (Kafai & Dede, 2014). The informal nature of online spaces lets

individuals explore topics for an unlimited period of time where in-person settings may have confined restraints. Online spaces also allow learners to access teachings from a variety of sources. These spaces expand the accessible network of experts beyond one teacher. This access offers variety in perspective, style and voice. This diversity can confirm knowledge or offer alternative views for consideration.

While seeking diverse perspectives online could simply be a consequence of the times, perhaps also, it is a reflection of the educational level of the participants. All twenty-one of the faith-survey participants indicated that they were college graduates. These are women who have been taught to use the internet and online tools to find reputable sources that contribute to their working knowledge. In the same way that these millennial women applied online tools to their educational studies, perhaps they used the internet in similar fashion to inform their faith practices. Online spaces expanded their networks of experts and content which offered balanced perspectives to their faith understandings.

Practice

CoPs are designed to help practitioners practice their respective fields in everyday life. Online spaces can benefit practitioners by making tools, resources and community members more accessible. Instead of teachings or mentors only being accessible in one space at one time, online spaces extend where practitioners can go to access tools and find help. Online spaces can transform how individuals engage in their practices by connecting them with other practitioners who can support their efforts. Practitioners can transform online platforms like social media sites and phone applications to support their faith learning environments in diverse ways. For example, social media networks can help ministry groups recruit new members. Group communication applications like GroupMe, Slack, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, etc. can be transformed

into support and resources hubs where practitioners access best practices and tools. Online spaces can support both individual and group endeavors.

Why Communities of Practice Fail

Before moving into design implications, it is valuable to apply CoP research to non-exemplar cases of CoPs. A 2008 study outlined five pitfalls or reasons why in-person CoPs fail: 1) lack of a core group, 2) low level of one-to-one interaction between members, 3) rigidity of competences, 4) lack of identification with the community and 5) practice intangibility (Probst & Borzillo, 2008). While this research was designed to describe in-person CoPs, similar lessons can be applied to online CoPs as well. Situating in-person and online churches/ministries as CoPs, I will analyze these factors from a woman of color, millennial, faith-based learning perspective.

Lack of Core Group

Lack of a core group suggests that there is a lack of participation or engagement from a core subset within the group. This can occur for a number of reasons, but one, the authors highlight, is a lack of evolution towards core practices within the group. Or, in other words, members are not moving from peripheral participation to central roles within the CoP. On one hand, churches may not have avenues of legitimate peripheral participation, or newcomers do not have access to experts or opportunities to learn through mentorship in order to become more active members. At the same time, core members may create barriers preventing newcomers from gaining power or influence within the community. If core members form cliques that make membership uninviting to newcomers, it impedes the natural evolution of new core members. Some CoPs may fail to attract core members due to unwelcoming environments for newcomers.

It is critical for churches and ministries to remember that the evolution of core members within a CoP will ultimately impact long-term sustainability and succession. Millennials in particular value being co-creators of content which can help develop investment. CoPs should 1) create paths that allow participants on the periphery to move closer to core roles without barriers to participation and 2) use online spaces such as polls or discussion boards to create opportunities for newer members to share their opinions about the future direction of core functions within the CoP. New members' class models can strengthen their bonds with incoming practitioners by creating online or in-person spaces that engage newcomers with experts early and often. These can include group chats within ministry groups, video conferencing opportunities with the pastor, and one-on-one mentorship opportunities.

Low Levels of One-to-One Interaction

Low levels of one-to-one interaction suggests that CoPs do not have opportunities for individual communication. This implies that members in CoPs value individual interaction. CoPs must find methods that allow members to interact and communicate about their learning on a regular basis. Understandably, in larger CoPs when functions operate on scale, it can be difficult to engage members on a one-to-one basis. Unfortunately, without this level of intimacy, CoPs risk members feeling isolated or disconnected. CoPs can use online spaces to create discussion boards, chat rooms, group chats and other spaces for small group discussion throughout the week. Creating spaces for individuals to feel heard can help create investment and connection to CoPs.

Rigidity of Competences

Rigidity of competences highlights environments where members are unwilling to learn from others. This can happen when old-timers are closed off from learning from newcomers, or when newcomers feel that old-timers are unrealistic about their expectations or inauthentic with their approach. In a 2015 study focused on Millennials and their perceptions of church, 87% of young adults, aged 18-29, who did not attend church said they viewed Christians as judgmental, hypocritical (85%) anti-homosexual (91%) and insensitive to others (70%) (Barna, 2015). These perceptions can be barriers to young adults entering faith-based spaces. The close-minded approaches from both newcomers and old-timers impedes on learning within faith communities.

Barab and Duffy offered a solution. They warned communities not to situate themselves as communities that support *learning* but instead as “communities that support *learners*” (Barab & Duffy, 2000, p. 43). Practitioners should be viewed as “change agents,” dynamic beings with the capacity to impact society within their own practices, as opposed to “objects to be changed (Barab & Duffy, 2000, p. 43).” When newcomers enter into these spaces with the assumption that the CoP is designed to change who they are, as opposed to support who they are becoming, participants are likely to disengage from the community.

Lack of Identification with the Community of Practice

Lack of identification suggests that members in CoPs see no connection between group practices and their daily lives. Membership within communities should impact how practitioners view themselves. In faith contexts, this can happen when CoPs stay closely bound to historical practices or texts without making clear connections to everyday applications. Faith CoPs must find ways to emphasize how their traditions and beliefs can be applied to what members confront

in their daily lives. Without these explicit connections individuals may fail to see the value of being connected to the group.

Practice Intangibility

Lastly, practice intangibility occurs when communities do not find appropriate mediums to share or illustrate their practices and beliefs with others. In an example used by Probst and Borzillo, engineers in a well-digging CoP “exchanged printed instructions on how to dig, instead of meeting at different digging sites” (Probst & Borzillo, 2008, p. 342). In this example, the group did not provide useful instructions to practitioners on how to solve an action-based task. Instead of modeling best methods, the group gave practitioners a written manual. In the same way, faith-based CoPs can fail when practitioners feel that the resources they are given are not well illustrated. Churches and ministries should offer concrete examples and best practices in ways that are clearly demonstrated.

CoPs can use online spaces to create opportunities for practitioners to share their best practices and teaching applications with one another. These can include discussion boards, websites highlighting success stories or other ways for individuals to share tangible practices with one another.

CoPs can fail for additional reasons far more complex than the ones outlined above. The outlined factors approach CoPs from a theoretical perspective and do not take into account factors like leadership, demographics, finances, geographic location, etc. Theoretically, however, CoPs that create pathways to core practices, engage in high levels of one-to-one interaction, are open to learning from others, apply teachings to everyday life and share useful tools for practice will create CoPs that are valued by its membership.

Design Implications

Flipped Church Design Framework

An educational model that supports Community of Practice theory is the Flipped Classroom Method. Within the flipped classroom model teachers invert classroom activities with at-home activities in order to better support group learning activities at school (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). In practice, the instructor records their lecture in advance then tasks students to watch it at home (their homework). Then in school, when the community of learners are together,



Figure 5-1: Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Washington Accessed from: <https://www.washington.edu/teaching/topics/engaging-students-in-learning/flipping-the-classroom/>

the students briefly review the lecture and then engage in activities to check for understanding (their classwork). In short, they listen to the lecture at home and do practice problems at school.

Figure 5-1 shows a visual of the Flipped Classroom Method.

The flipped classroom format has gained popularity in higher education contexts and is viewed as a more enjoyable classroom experience for students and teachers who value human interaction (Zuber, 2016). In the classroom, students have more time to engage in problem-based collaborative learning activities with their peers. Students become practitioners and are viewed as

resources within their community of learners. Likewise, teachers are able to better address and meet the needs of diverse learners while they solve problems (Zuber, 2016). Since students have had time to digest instructional material at home, they come to class prepared with questions about the content. At school misconceptions can be corrected in real time while students solve problems in the presence of their instructor and learning community. At home, students value the convenience of watching classroom lectures at their own pace. They have the ability to pause, stop, rewind, take notes, take a break, or re-listen to the pre-recorded lecture from the instructor.

The church could apply this flipped classroom design to create a Flipped Church approach. Ideally, preachers would record their sermons then send the sermon to the congregation in advance to watch at home. When parishioners gather, they would briefly review the sermon then split into small groups facilitated by a trained group leader. This facilitator would lead the group in small group discussion or other collaborative activities. The group could discuss which aspects of the teaching most applied to their daily lives, share best practices with the group, offer insights, pose questions for consideration or seek advice. Groups could create artifacts such as devotionals, poetry, journal entries, visual representations, music etc. to demonstrate their interpretations.

Millennials in particular may appreciate this model. It would offer the autonomy for practitioners to listen to the recorded sermon wherever and whenever was most convenient. They would be given a space to share their diverse perspectives, pose questions and feel heard. Ideally, these small groups would meet on a regular basis to create safe spaces where authenticity is valued. Groups can meet online, in-person, or have ongoing group chats in order to create more one-to-one interactions for practitioners.

In contexts where the main leader is not able to record their own content or not interested in creating original content, churches and ministries can consider curating content from other sources for at-home instruction. Using online resources, group leaders can source teachings from

multiple experts and perspectives in order to generate meaningful conversation during group activities. The curators can then focus their efforts on creating group projects and facilitating meaningful discussions. For example, Flipped Church leaders could identify a topic area then each week curate sermon content from divergent perspectives. The group itself may not have a preacher that creates content weekly, but the leaders can curate outside perspectives allowing the group to focus on learning through collaborative activities. The pastor then, would act as a guide. They would answer questions, pose questions, help develop individual understanding and correct misconceptions. Pastors could spend time mentoring and listening during these discussion sessions to get a better understanding of their congregation's collective knowledge.

In order support the effective implementation of this Flipped Church method design, I have outlined four additional guidelines for small group leaders to consider.

Create groups with mixed levels of ability

Learning groups should have a mix of beginners and experts (Wenger, et al., 2002). In faith contexts, that will not necessarily be defined by age. In order for participants to learn from each other, newcomers should share the same spaces as more mature practitioners. In order to create authentic community, knowledge should be distributed across practitioners placing value on individuals as resources. Mixed groups expose newcomers to the authentic practices of more mature practitioners. This exposure can lead to mentorship pathways or accountability partners between practitioners.

Activate prior knowledge

At the beginning of group sessions, it is important to activate prior knowledge. Activating prior knowledge can help learners make connections between previously held understandings and new information (Yilmaz, 2011). This can be accomplished by asking participants to share or reflect on what they already know about a given topic. It is important for group leaders not to assume that each participant is entering these discussions with the same background experience or knowledge. At the same time, discussing prior knowledge can reveal misconceptions or gaps in understandings that can be addressed prior to introducing new information.

Encourage dialogue and reflection

It is important for participants to feel that their opinions are heard and valued. Church for some, can feel like a one-sided conversation. These spaces are designed to flip that perception. Learning is a social activity that is enhanced when participants share their understandings and interpret the perspectives of others (Krajcik & Shin, 2006). Sharing beliefs, misconceptions, alternative viewpoints, etc. can help newcomers develop underdeveloped understandings while helping advanced learners solidify their knowledge. Furthermore, creating time for dedicated reflection can help learners assess areas of mastery and evaluate areas that need improvement.

Create relevant artifacts

The creation of socially relevant artifacts can help learners evaluate their own understandings (Kafai, 2006). Constructed items should be relevant to the learner. The creation of these items acts as a way to process, reflect or summarize their knowledge. In the faith-space

these artifacts can take several forms including: prayer journals, a written reflection (on paper or on a device), a hand-drawn picture, a visual graphic used as a phone, tablet or computer background screen, a poem, a song, a daily devotional they recite every morning, an affirmation they write on their mirror, etc. Participants should create artifacts that are authentic to their everyday practices and demonstrate their learning. Learning can be demonstrated by how well individuals are able to articulate, express or convey their understandings through their artifacts. For example, an individual might reflect on how much they have grown in their understanding of a topic that they did not know before, or for more advanced learners, ways in which they can apply new tools to future situations. These can be created after each meeting or over the course of several weeks. When possible, participants should be encouraged to share their artifacts with one another aloud to build community and reflect on learning.

Flipped church in practice

In full transparency, Flipped Classrooms, like a Flipped Church only operate effectively when learners do the pre-work. Entering into fellowship activities without having the “homework” complete can be counterproductive. They also rely heavily on technology assuming practitioners are comfortable and have access to compatible devices at home. However, with buy-in from participants, a Flipped Church could produce meaningful and authentic conversation. Practitioners leave these spaces feeling valued and that their time was well spent. Granted, not all parishioners will prefer the flipped model. Depending on church culture and size it may be possible for churches to offer a hybrid model. In a hybrid model, churches would maintain their traditional weekend service, post or stream their service online, and then offer these flipped group discussion spaces throughout the week. Some churches, like Ray of Hope in Atlanta, GA for example, led by Rev. Dr. Cynthia Hale already host small groups of this nature (Ray of Hope,

2020). The groups convene to discuss the content of the sermon preached over the weekend. These groups, led by trained facilitators, previously met on Tuesdays and offer group sections that are defined by age, gender or topic.

When I first began theorizing about how the Flipped Classroom model could be applied to the church in 2018, it seemed like a far stretch. To ask the entire congregation to watch a sermon at home online did not seem like a plausible idea. Then, to compound that, to propose the use of traditional service time for members to talk, fellowship, reflect, testify, problem-solve and learn from each other, seemed radical.

Then, in March 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic swept across the United States. By April, social distancing, stay-at-home orders and bans on gatherings of 10 or more persons shifted Easter Sunday's across the country to online platforms. Parishioners streamed weekend services from their homes, a practice that for the foreseeable future was the new normal. (As of June 22, 2020, in-person gatherings were still banned.) Appendix A shows a resource I created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a guide of free online resources that churches and ministries could use to maintain online engagement with their congregations while social distancing guidelines were in place.

Church has (almost) flipped. Instructional content is now being streamed, recorded and or consumed online at rates much higher than before in order to adhere to social distancing guidelines. The pandemic has quickly revealed the benefits and drawbacks of online church for large portions of faith practitioners. It has also made some leaders and pastors more comfortable using online spaces to serve their congregations. The shift online, that was once an option, has become a necessity for houses of worship around the world.

As countries and communities begin to reopen, the question for churches and practitioners will be, what is the added value to in-person worship spaces? Once in-person gatherings resume, how will physical churches differentiate themselves from online spaces? What

is the added value to physically attend worship services when online services have become more normalized and accepted? Flipped Churches, for millennial practitioners especially, might be an answer. Churches can utilize flipped and hybrid formats to transform fellowship experiences into learner-focused, discussion-based Communities of Practice. These flipped formats can combine the best elements of online and in-person experiences. In turn, this fusion may add greater value to in-person attendance. By creating more spaces for in-person engagement, highlighting meaningful peer relationships, leveraging online content streaming platforms, and emphasizing in-person service opportunities, churches can begin to position themselves for the church of the future.

Research limitations

My research was based on a sample of Black and African-American millennial women who all identified as Christian. The group was sampled from a faith-based online ministry group and all participants reported attending church at some point in their youth. The results of this data then, could be skewed towards a more committed core of Christian practitioners who do not represent the views of unaffiliated millennial women, or from those outside of the Christian faith. Likewise, all participants identified themselves as college graduates which assumes their education level and technical affinity towards online spaces may not be representative of all groups.

Implications for future research

I encourage future research to more broadly explore faith settings as learning environments. Scholars from the Learning Sciences, Adult Education, Christian Education,

Hermeneutics, Homiletics, Sociology and can collaborate and continue to explore how to create meaningful learning experiences for faith-based practitioners. Future directions can explore how practitioners describe their own HNoPs. Presenting the HNoP framework and asking practitioners to create sketches of their own networks could help participants and researchers better understand interactions and influences between networked nodes. Researchers could then assess if HNoP trends emerge between practitioners from various backgrounds or denominations. Research could explore how practitioners describe their HNoPs based on age, life circumstance, upbringing etc. Furthermore, research should open up HNoP application to broader populations such as Black millennial males, generation Z, individuals from other religious backgrounds, religiously non-affiliated groups, as well as current Christian practitioners who were not raised with Christian upbringings. The theoretical implications of other learning frameworks such as blended learning and learning ecology research can be explored and applied to faith-based settings.

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




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Appendix A

COVID-19 Engagement Guide

Ways to Keep Your Church Engaged

In times when you may not be able to gather physically there are still ways to create meaningful virtual community. Below are **FREE** resources for your groups. Curated by Lindsay V. Hayes, Ph.D. Candidate, Penn State University

| Broadcast | Discuss | Study | Fellowship |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  800K  |  500  |   |  150  |
| Facebook Livestream sermons and or Bible studies <ul style="list-style-type: none">Facebook has a chat feature that allows viewers to comment, react, and share during livestreamsConsider streaming on multiple platforms as some websites may not have the bandwidth to support all of your members online at onceYouTube and Instagram also have live streaming options | GroupMe Create a church or ministry group chat <ul style="list-style-type: none">Members can share resources i.e. YouTube links, sermon links, worship songs, bible verses, prayers, devotionals etc.Gives members a space to express themselves and get in-time supportCreate a space to provide up to date information regarding the churchCan be used over SMS, smartphone not require | The Bible App Join a group reading plan or devotional <ul style="list-style-type: none">Multiple users can join a shared Bible plan or devotional which allows participants to share, comment and read comments from others in the communityDaily plans range from a few days to a yearShared plans can host up to 250 peopleAlso accessible through Bible.com | Google Hangouts Facilitate weekly small group fellowship <ul style="list-style-type: none">Ensure groups have a mix of beginners & expertsAssign a variety of group topics i.e. anxiety, parenting, sermon discussion, etc.Small intimate groups of 5-8 are encouraged<i>ProTip:</i> Use Google Forms to coordinate participants. Here is an example surveyAccessible on computer or mobile devices |
|  1,000  |   |   |  100  |
| Free Conference Call Host a prayer call <ul style="list-style-type: none">Create a prayer line or audio broadcast of your worship service for participants to call intoRemind listeners to mute their microphones during the call, moderators can also mute callers | Facebook Discuss after service <ul style="list-style-type: none">Post discussion questions on your Facebook Page after service for participants to engage with the content | YouTube Create a resource hub <ul style="list-style-type: none">Create a themed YouTube playlist including worship songs, sermons, Bible studies etc. | Zoom Host a video conference <ul style="list-style-type: none">For larger meetings like staff or ministry groups, Zoom allows video conferencing with built in chat, screen sharing, and recording featuresSubscription options allow up to 1,000 participants |

Within All Online Spaces:

1. Assign a church leader to serve as an ongoing moderator (set ground rules, flag inappropriate behavior, etc.)
2. Make participants feel seen, valued and heard
3. Create safe spaces where individuals can express themselves without fear of judgement
4. Encourage reflection, dialogue and mutual learning between participants
5. Consider utilizing multiple platforms; participants will engage based on accessibility and comfort

For additional online learning space resources visit: LindsayVHayes.com

Curated by: Lindsay V. Hayes, Ph.D. Candidate | Learning, Design & Technology | Penn State University | LHayes@psu.edu | March 2020

Figure A-1: COVID-19 Church and Ministry Engagement Guide of free resources

ACADEMIC VITA

Lindsay V. Hayes

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy in Learning Design & Technology

The Pennsylvania State University, 2020

Research Focus: Virtual Learning Communities

Master of Science in Education | Educational Studies

The Johns Hopkins University, 2014

Bachelor of Science in Marketing | International Business & International Studies Minors

The Pennsylvania State University, 2012

Studied abroad at The Pablo Olavide University in Seville, Spain

PROFESSIONAL AND RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Research Assistant

Calvin Institute of Christian Worship |

April 2019 to Present

University Park, PA

- Collaborated in ongoing research projects with AnneMarie Mingo, Ph.D., on an inaugural Teacher-Scholar grant funded by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. Assisted in the development and implantation of Cultivating Courageous Resisters: Pastors, Professors, and Practitioners Partnering to Serve the Present Age research study group.

Academic Advisor

Penn State, College of Education |

Aug 2014 to Present

University Park, PA

- Tracked student retention and enrollment trends across the college. Created semester enrollment reports for departments, faculty and leadership within the college communicating student enrollment projections and course planning. Provided academic advising to assigned students (250-350)

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- Guest Lecturer, Penn State, African American Religions Nov 2019
- First-Year Seminar Instructor, Penn State, College of Education 2015 to 2018
- Mentor, Penn State, Academic Support Center for Student-Athletes 2014 to 2016
- Math Teacher, Baltimore City Public Schools, Mount Royal School 2012 to 2014

PRESENTATIONS

- “Implications of COVID-19: Hybrid Online/In-Person Flipped Church Model.” Presentation offered at *#RethinkingChurch Conference*, Virtual. July 22, 2020.
- “Technology and Faith Among Millennials.” Podcast offered by *Verge Now Gather* by Convergence Church. Alexandria, VA. September 11, 2019.
- “College 101.” Presentation offered at *Spend a Fall Day*, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA. November 9, 2018.
- “Using Google Forms for Student Groups and Academic Advising.” Presentation offered at *Google For Education*, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA. October 20, 2017