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## THE KINGDOM OF GOD, COMMUNITY AND DIGITAL MEDIA: FROM THEORY TO BEST PRACTICE

MIKE MAHAN  
SEAN POMORY

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While for millennia the most natural conceptualization of where we find ourselves has perhaps been the City as a community of locality, other types of community, such as the Internet community (a community of mind according to Tonnies', 1912, definitions), are likewise where we find ourselves. This paper examines the overlap of communities and sets a theoretical basis from which to see the expansion of the Kingdom and the overlap of Internet communities, local communities, and the community of the Kingdom. This paper attempts to recognize what the Vineyard movement has done well so far in our usage of digital media and proceeds to discuss best practices for how we can more aggressively contribute to Kingdom expansion through our use of the Internet community.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary society has been undergoing significant changes since at least around 1980 (Das, 2010). A first source of that change is globalization, although it has also been considered “the most powerful force to have shaped the post-war world” (Frankel, 2006). That globalization includes the lowering of boundaries in technology, information, territory, economy, politics and personal mobility (Radoi & Olteanu, 2015). Thus, globalization changes not only how we live but where we live in a metaphoric sense. A second source of that change is urbanization, a process which is rapidly changing where we all live in a physical sense. According to the United Nations Population Division’s latest report, in 1950, only 30% of the world’s population lived in cities (2014). In 2014, 54% lived in cities and projects that by 2050, 66% of the world will live in the city. As a global trend, we are all moving to the cities. Finally, use of the Internet is also changing societies. Whereas the Internet has only existed for a few decades, according to Taylor (2016), about half of the world’s population already utilizes

the Internet. Although usage does not necessarily indicate change, primary drivers of Internet usage are social interaction. In many senses, where we live as a world population is changing dramatically. As Jesus' followers are called to "let their light shine before men" (Matthew 5:16), the communities where we live, be they physical, metaphorical, or technological, are fundamental to our kingdom influence.

## II. THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND COMMUNITY

Recent theological literature both on scholarly and popular levels speaks frequently of the Church as a community. At the same time, a growing emphasis among Christian scholars and pastors has been the Kingdom of God (Heintz, 2015). This is particularly true among new denominations such as the Vineyard Movement, which focuses its ecclesiology on specific understandings of the Kingdom of God. While the relationship between the kingdom of God and the Church is multifaceted and frequently difficult to isolate, community is often dominant in these discussions of the relationship between Church and the Kingdom of God.

George Ladd (1959) is often credited with bringing the Kingdom of God into recent focus (Heintz, 2015). While it is not the purpose of this paper to analyze Ladd's understanding of the Kingdom, it is notable that in the seminal work and following works, Ladd frequently spoke of the relationship of Kingdom and Church in community terminology. Most specifically, for Ladd, the Church is the social group of the Kingdom, or in his words, "The church is the community of the Kingdom but never the Kingdom itself" (1993, p.109).

It is in the context of the various meanings of the *Kingdom of God* that Snyder (1991) also discussed the popular ideation of the Kingdom as the development of community. His reading of popular Christian culture indicates that Christians generally, through the Kingdom, desire to change the world – an idea that Crouch (2012) has contrasted to some extent while Schmidt (2012) provided empirical evidence of occurring in history. Although like Ladd, Snyder provides a breadth of models and understandings of the gospel of the Kingdom for Christian living, it is his focus on the new social order and the reconciling community (pp. 148-129) that strikes a harmonious chord with contemporary ecclesial trends (Vineyard USA, 2016, pp. 14-15).

The Kingdom as a reconciling community is where justice and evangelical witness are merged. In the reconciling community of the Kingdom, the concern is complete reconciliation of both people and things. This is in line with God's shalom (Snyder, p. 149) and includes the bringing together of all people groups and merging of distinctions under the headship of Christ (Gal. 3:26-29; Col. 3:11; Eph. 1:10, 2:11-22). In this sense, the Christian mission is reconciliation of all peoples to God and to other people (2 Co. 5:18-20). For Snyder, this mission is the restoration of all of human existence – holistic reconciliation.

It is precisely in this context where Snyder (1991, p. 149) references Donahue, who stated that the kingdom, "never loses its spatial dimensions . . . a place or area in which this rule finds a home" (1977, p.86). For these scholars, the local church is a locus of the reconciliation of the Kingdom of God. The local church is where the Kingdom actually destroys all social, economic, gender, ethnic, racial, political, and other barriers, creating a united community. For the present study, this local church and

local community are of primary importance. Without a local society/community in which to operate, the local kingdom community (i.e. church), is hard-pressed to fulfill its reconciling mission. To borrow from Jesus' terminology, some type of community is where our light is allowed to shine, so that ultimately God may be glorified (Matthew 5:14-16).

### III. A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON COMMUNITY

Tönnies (1967) is generally credited with the origination of the modern conceptualization of community in his seminal work, *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*. In this work, he distinguished two types of people groups: communities and societies. For Tönnies, community is distinct from society relative to the private/public dichotomy. Tönnies stated, "All intimate, private, and exclusive living together, so we discover, is understood as life in *Gemeinschaft* (community)" (p. 33). Where social elements of life are actually shared is community. For sociologists such as McMillan and Chavis, community then involves membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections (1986,p. 9) all of which distinguish community from society.

According to Tönnies (1967) and most sociologists in this particular subfield, community can be divided into at least 3 categories. These types of communities are: a) kinship, b) locality and c) mind. Communities of kinship are family groups, bound by some form or kinship bonds; these communities are based on relationship to human beings. Communities of localities are groups based primarily on geographic locality (Gusfield, 1975, called these geographic communities). However, Tönnies specified that these communities indicate a shared habitat (p., 42). Finally, a community of mind is a group that "implies only co-operation and coordinated action for a common goal. . . . *Gemeinschaft* of mind expresses the community of mental life. . . . [it] represents the truly human supreme form of community" (1967, p. 8).

Although all of Tönnies' (1967) community types are "closely interrelated in space as well as in time" (1967, p. 9), the community of mind may be spatially and temporally unbounded (i.e. free of locality). Accordingly, Rothaermel and Sugiyama (2001) argued that virtual communities are similar to communities of mind. "A virtual community is similar to a community of mind described by Tönnies (1967), except that it forms through an electronic communication medium and is not bound by space and time" (p. 299). It would perhaps be better stated that virtual communities are specific subtypes of the community of mind. In Rothaermel and Sugiyama's description, virtual communities: a) allow for social interaction, b) extend communities around shared documents/literature, c) involve like minded citizens, d) act analogously to physical communities, and e) bring people together for social needs (p. 299). All of these aspects are likewise true of Tönnies' community of mind. Virtual communities could thus be considered a community of mind, yet located in a virtual (rather than real) space.

#### *Application: Sociological Collocation of the Internet and the Kingdom of God*

The central concept in the sociological discussion of community is a place – real or virtual – where we find ourselves together with other human beings in some relational

sense. These communities – of mind – are then distinguished from communities of locality in that the communities of mind indicate shared values and goals (Tönnies, 1967, p. 42) while communities of locality may simply indicate living in shared spaces. The relationship between regular communities of mind and virtual communities of mind is also principally a distinction regarding physical presence.

It is in this sense that communities are where we find ourselves – in some shared sense. Life in a City is at least a community of locality. By the same token, Starbucks or even local churches that we may frequent as consumers, can also be communities of locality. However, where documents and values begin to be shared, we find ourselves in a community of mind. The Internet, as a locale of some specific sites we frequent, presents both community and non-community interfaces. Those places where we do not engage individuals but consume without significant interaction do not represent communities of any sort. Yet where we engage individuals – whether through sharing thoughts on a blog, chatting in some messenger client, sharing ideas, photos and other personal things through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or the latest social media outlet, emailing others, or sharing entertainment and goals through multiplayer games, we find ourselves in a virtual community of the mind.

The typological identification of the type of community that the Kingdom of God represents is not problematic. Although the Kingdom does present some concept of locality, it is not principally a community concerned with a physical space (Matt. 11:12; Matt. 13; Mark 4,9:1,9:47;10;12:34; Ladd, 1959; Ladd, 1993; Snyder, 1991, p. 147). Because of the commonalities of members the Kingdom (faith, repentance, and obedience; see Mark 1:15; Matt. 3:1; 4:17), the Kingdom is primarily a community of mind – although its shared nature is presently experienced primarily in the local church (Ladd, 1993). Nowhere is this clearer than in Reformed theology, where very specific aspects of faith community are experienced only in physical manifestations (Beach, 1999; Mangiduyos, 2014, p.9).

### *Reconciliation: Overlap of Communities and the Role of Digital Media*

Reconciliation has previously been defined as bringing peoples together under Christ into a shared community (i.e. the community of the Kingdom) (Gal. 3:26-29; Col. 3:11; Eph. 1:10, 2:11-22; 2 Co. 5:18-20). As bringing peoples into the Kingdom necessitates previous, mutual belonging to some other community (we must encounter unbelievers somewhere), reconciliation, both in its evangelistic and holistic sense, can be conceptualized (sociologically) as the overlap of communities. We desire to bring others in a shared community (local or of mind – or even of kingship) into the community of mind that is the Kingdom, in its local presence, the community of the Church.

In a traditional sense, conversion entails bringing members of a community of locality (people we meet at the supermarket, at Starbucks, etc.) into our community of locality and mind (the local church). It is precisely this traditional sense that is in question given the contemporary trends in globalization and the proliferation of the Internet, particularly with its social elements. The development of the Internet as a place where we sometimes find ourselves encountering others in its virtual community of mind presents unique opportunities to bring others into our community of mind (the Kingdom)

and its local community (the local church). Although there are difficulties bringing members of virtual communities of mind into communities of locality (e.g. the success, or lack thereof, of online dating websites), those should not deter us from conceptualizing reconciliation in this way nor should they keep us from visualizing the Internet as a community where we can draw members into the Kingdom community of mind. More appropriately, we can visualize reconciliation as drawing individuals in the virtual world, into the church's virtual community of mind and finally into the local community (Figure 1). The Internet, and the relationships that it provide us, offers a wealth of opportunity to draw others into the Kingdom of God.

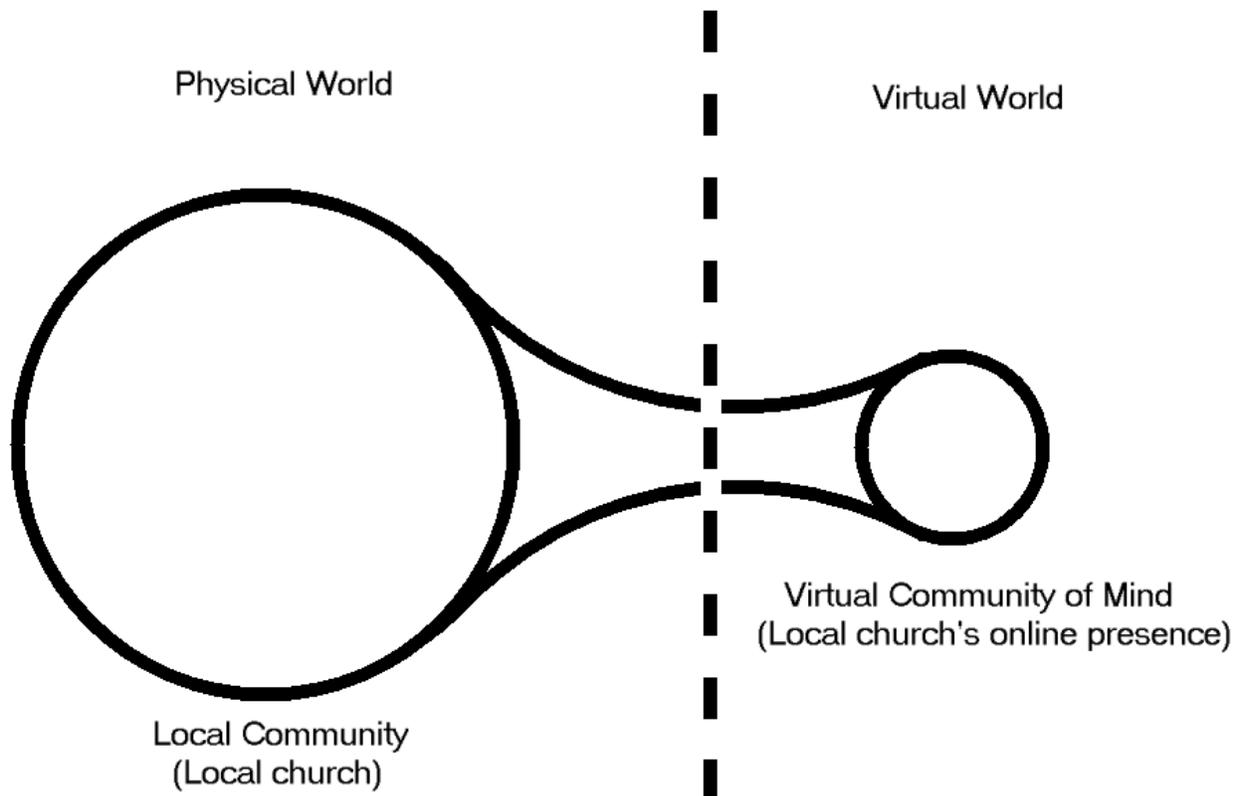


Figure 1. Reconciliation: From Virtual World to Local Community

It should be noted, however, that some churches have had difficulties addressing the interface of theological tradition and virtual community. The United Methodist church, for example, placed a moratorium on certain rites being conducted in virtual community (General Board of Higher Education & Ministry, 2014). Where theological traditions, especially those as strong as the reformed tradition, necessitate physical communities of locality, some specific techniques or uses of the virtual community may be precluded. However, the use of the Internet and specific tools can prove powerful in creating the overlap of communities.

Even those theological traditions experiencing a difficult integration of virtual communities of mind and the local community recognize some benefit of the Internet and its tools. According to Dr. Gladys P. Mangiduyos, Dean of Education, Wesleyan University-Philippines:

With the critical understanding on emerging definitions of community, one will be able to think, judge and act clearly why the physical practice offers an evangelical opportunity to bring people into a fuller relationship with the body of Christ. . . . With the emerging definitions of community in the present context, it is still significant to have a physical community in relation to Holy Communion. Faith community is where the Word of God is preached, Sacraments are served and living faith are practiced according to John Wesley, bonding and reconciliation happens through a physical community which is lacking in an online community. (p. 8-9).

Mangiduyos underscores why virtual communities cannot fully replace the local community of the Kingdom. It does, however, provide powerful tools and communities where reconciliation can begin.

#### *Caveat: Changing Definitions of Intimacy*

Some posit that the proliferation of digital communities (virtual communities of the mind) has had a negative impact on intimacy and relationships. According to Mander (2014)

the proliferation of materialism, technology, conceptuality, and abstraction – all various methods of distancing from direct experience – is undermining sacred perspectives worldwide. Further, as we lose genuine contact with each other – the direct, unmediated physical experience – the intimacy through which compassion is naturally engendered is quickly and easily lost. (p. 2)

However, the church can either decide that the Internet is a curse to communities or simply another tool to attract those not in the fold, especially when considering younger generations. Generation Y has already begun redefining what is considered intimacy. According to Knouse (2011), members of generation X and millennials prefer to be communicated to in a multimedia format as opposed to face-to-face. Furthermore, newer generations increasingly prefer, “instant gratification” (p. 259).

#### IV. RECONCILIATION THROUGH VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES OF MIND: BEST PRACTICES IN DIGITAL MEDIA

In the context of Internet communication, the term *digital media* is employed quite extensively. Although the definition of digital media is debated (Couldry, 2012), it is considered to be all types of communication formats (images, text, sounds, videos and the like) between individuals, groups and potentially the entire world, that is experienced through the use of online activities. This would include, but not be limited to, mobile apps, social media, text messaging, websites, and the like. Digital media is herein characterized as both the means and the content of a church’s creation and use of its virtual community of mind.

The aforementioned Vineyard movement may be taken as an example of the use of digital media by churches. According to Heintz (2015)

The Vineyard movement’s distinct commitment to the centrality of the kingdom of God provides a way forward for ecclesiology to reclaim the entire social life of the

church as an alternative community that ventures out into the coming of God's reign (p. 12)

The local church is therefore commissioned to fulfill Kingdom reconciliation, including in online communities. In the Vineyard movement, although strides have been taken recently at its national level to implement resources and tools for the local church to use, it appears that adoption of online community building techniques have been alarmingly slow to take hold at the local level.

What then can the local church do to build a virtual community of mind that influences the local communities or overlaps into other communities of mind, especially in the context of the Vineyard Movement? First, let us examine what the Vineyard has done well so far. Note, we have not attempted to complete an exhaustive list of Vineyard resources online, but have listed resources that an average user may find from a Google search.

Home base for the Vineyard Movement online is VineyardUSA.org. It appears that significant resources have been put into creating a website that communicates what the Vineyard is, as well as promoting resources for the movement. The Vineyard has twelve entities supporting the movement including Vineyard Worship, Vineyard Resources, La Viña, the Vineyard Justice Movement, and the Society of Vineyard Scholars (SVS) among others. The majority of the twelve entities have some kind of blog or resource page on their websites.

Vineyard USA is active on all major social networks including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube and uses webinars to resource pastors on such topics as discipleship. Google and Facebook are currently among the most visited Internet sites (Alexa, n.d.) as well as two of the largest generators of advertising revenue. This revenue for Google and Facebook equaled over 100 billion dollars in 2016 alone. (Alphabet Inc., 2016, p.47; Sparks, 2017). Furthermore, Facebook had circa 1.23 billion daily users (Sparks, 2017) while Twitter had around 313 million active users (twitter.com, n.d.). Nearly 50% of the global population is on the Internet (Taylor, 2016). Vineyard USA is thus making an attempt to directly address a large cross section of the globe. Furthermore, the Vineyard periodically releases position papers online to define and discuss important topics.

Despite a strong national presence, online efforts quickly start to diminish at the regional and local levels. When examining the Vineyard USA website, it appears that only half of the sixteen regions have a website of their own (<https://vineyardusa.org/about/leadership/>). The regions that do have websites are effective in linking churches within their regions as well as providing resources to past conferences. Out of a survey of 50 local Vineyard church websites, only 10 had an actively managed blog. Furthermore, many of the sites surveyed were not mobile optimized, loaded slowly, did not have much content, or were otherwise aesthetically displeasing. It should be noted that there are more resources unofficially related to the Vineyard movement that also effectively build a virtual community and share useful resources. Various Facebook groups exist for worship leaders, preachers and those who are theologically inclined.

### *Theory of User Behavior on the Internet*

Moz is a software as a service (SaaS) company and a resource known throughout the digital marketing industry for their TAGFEE code (Moz, n.d.A) that is considered a standard for digital media. Moz estimates that around 40-60 billion searches happen on Google each month (Fishkin, 2017). It is further determined that only 12.6% of searches go to the top 100 websites, with 87.4% going to other sites. This illuminates the possibilities for churches to build digital communities and to optimize for Local Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

Rand Fishkin defines Search Engine Optimization (SEO) as, “A marketing discipline focused on growing visibility in organic (non-paid) search engine results” (n.d., n.p.). Within this discipline is LocalSEO, the practice of optimizing for users around a physical location. (It is precisely here where virtual communities of mind encounter local communities.) This is particularly important in industries where human interaction is important, for example going to the doctor, buying a pizza, or finding a church. LocalSEO is optimized by ensuring that the name, address, phone number and website are correct on listings across the Internet (Moz, n.d.B). Google shows that four in five consumers use search engines to find local information, with 50% of users who did so visiting a physical location that same day (Google, 2014).

Using the Keyword Explorer from Moz Pro to analyze the “church near me” keyword shows that there are over seventy thousand searches each month just for that keyword. The keyword also has relatively low competition across the nation. Optimizing and writing content for such keywords is how the local church can be found online, leading to digital communities.

### *Strategies and Tactics: How the Local Church Can Be Found Online*

SEO and LocalSEO are only tactics within a larger strategy dubbed “Inbound Marketing.” Inbound Marketing is a marketing methodology that focuses on, “earning attention and love” (Fishkin & Hogengaven, 2013, p.8). A fundamental part of the Inbound Methodology is creating content that users can not only access, but also share because they love the quality of the content being provided. Content is created based on keyword research and identifying goals based off of business objectives and branding personas.

### *Persona and Branding*

The local church often has issues identifying a brand and creating personas (Casidy, 2013, p. 233). Although this may be because a church does not wish to alienate potential congregants, they may be alienated anyway. Casidy argues that, “Respondents who perceive the church as highly brand-oriented are likely to perceive church participation as delivering positive spiritual, social and purpose-in-life benefits through its activities” (p. 237).

Therefore, it is important for the local church to prayerfully consider who they are and what differentiates them from other local congregations. “In consumer marketing, brands often provide the primary points of differentiation, between competitive offerings”

(Wood, 2000, pg. 662). What then differentiates the local Vineyard church from the Vineyard Movement, a Lutheran church, a Catholic church, or non-denominational congregation? Are they transparent? Are they family oriented? These are important questions that must be addressed when considering who a church is in their digital community.

### *The Inbound Methodology*

The actions of the Inbound Methodology are Attract, Convert, Close, Delight (Hubspot, n.d.). These ideas create a funnel that is designed to attract unknown online consumers and convert them into brand ambassadors by creating community and educating without requiring direct monetary investment into each marketing channel. Throughout the funnel, it is important to keep consistent brand messaging and voice in order to facilitate the idea and feeling that an organization is a real person.

The Attract stage is for users who know little to nothing about a product or idea. It is up to the company to educate the user as to who they are (thus the importance of persona and branding), what their products are, where they are located, and the like. This is done through recognizing the target demographic, keyword research, blogging based on keyword research, and pushing content through social media channels.

Now that an organization has a visitor on their digital property (on the fringe of their virtual community of mind), it is up to them to convert the visitor into a lead. This is done through the practice of building landing pages, forms, and call to actions to entice a user to get further down the funnel. Often, this is done through giving free content in exchange for an email or phone number. It is important that some form of identification is given from the user so the organization can follow up with the visitor.

Once a user has agreed to give the organization information, it is up to the organization to keep that user within a defined community. This is done through follow-up via Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software, further education, and useful emails to build trust. If done well, the user will become a customer (or attend a church service, become a member, etc.). It is important that analytics be used extensively at this stage to ensure that the organization is using resources in the best way.

Perhaps at the final point in the funnel, a user has become a member of the church, is tithing regularly, or is leading a small group. Does that mean they can then be forgotten about while new leads are pursued? Certainly not. It is important to delight, or in the case of the church, disciple those are now a part of the community. This is done through tools such as surveys, social monitoring, and smart content. When visitors come through the funnel online, they should eventually become some of the local churches greatest promoters because they have been listened to, given valuable information, and connected with a digital community.

### *Tools & Tactics to Build a Better Online Community*

A website is the cornerstone of any online presence or community. With dozens of content management systems (CMS) available, there is little need for most organizations to have a custom coded website. A CMS is used to create and manage

digital resources. There are a number of things to consider when looking into a CMS, such as page speed, mobile optimization, workflows, and ease of use among the most important, especially for organizations with limited resources. A favorite CMS is Wordpress, which claims to power 27% of the world's websites (Wordpress.org, n.d.). Wordpress is open source, which means it is free to use and has a large online community contributing to its core and extensions. Similar open source CMS's are Drupal and Joomla. Once a CMS has been selected and initial website created, it is important to implement metadata and microdata to help humans and search engines understand what is on the page in addition to allowing search crawlers access to the site via the robots.txt file (Google, n.d.).

Once a website has been built, it is important that a blog be housed on the site, either as a subdomain (e.g. blog.example.com) or as a subdirectory (e.g. example.com/blog/). Moz recommends the subdirectory method (Moz, n.d.c). Again considering Moz as excellent exemplar, the site uses <https://moz.com/blog>. Moz posts four to five times a week, with content being curated through their digital forums and user profiles as well as posts from the Moz staff or experts from other organizations. Content varies from LocalSEO, keyword research, technical SEO, and many other topics, anchored by a weekly post. It should be noted that all video content is written onto the webpage directly. This is because search engine robots cannot parse video content.

The local church can look to the Moz community as an example. A fundamental aspect of the Inbound Methodology is an action called upcycling. Upcycling is the process of repurposing content for other mediums. A local Vineyard church typically has content already, considering the Sunday message. When including testimonies, small group discussions, church events, and Vineyard national resources, the amount of potential content is significant.

For example, a testimony about a family being served by the local food pantry in the Sunday message may be turned into a quote card for Instagram, a video on Facebook, a blog on the church website, which is then shared on the Vineyard Justice Network website, and a podcast where a pastor interviews the family. The best content can then be sent via email or Facebook groups to the local congregation who can then share the media on their social pages. The key to the inbound methodology is creating content that people want to share.

## V. DISCUSSION

Although contemporary trends indicate that today more than ever, people are living in the city, more and more people are also spending time in virtual communities. Envisioning online spaces as virtual communities of mind provides a framework in which to consider the importance of the church's use of digital media in order to bring outsiders both into any church's virtual community and into a local community of the Kingdom.

People, young and old, are turning to the Internet for information, with research showing that younger generations are increasingly expecting information to simply be online when they search for it. At the same time, many sources of information are available in social settings via virtual communities of mind. While a plethora of

instruments and techniques exist for bring people into a virtual community (see the Appendix), a few are particularly important for the church.

Creating a persona and personal branding are perhaps a vital first step for any congregation. A congregation's unique identity is not unlike its mission and vision and chosen metaphor – and as such deserves periodic revisiting (Feddes, 2008; Mahan, 2014). Understanding who you are is fundamental to bringing others into your community. If you cannot faithfully represent your congregation and its uniqueness, it will be difficult to draw others to you, rather than to some other random congregation. Another fundamental method in this study is the inbound methodology. Applying this technique to the local church's virtual community can be a relatively inexpensive, yet effective way to reach those who are searching. It offers the possibility to bring others from a simple information search into a digital community, a virtual community of mind representative of the kingdom and possibility into the local church. Considering that mobile searches are continually increasing, it is important for the local church to understand that content has to be easily accessible, shareable, fast, and high quality in order for search engines and users alike to want to digest the information.

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## About the Authors

Dr. Mike Mahan, a leadership consultant with more than two decades of international experience in training and development in nonprofits in Italy and the US, is skilled at developing and advising emerging leaders. He is recognized for his expertise in subject matters surrounding organizational leadership, especially organizational culture and climate, organizational communication, worker motivation and leader development. Dr. Mahan works with organizations of all types, while focusing on religious, and nonprofit organizations to assist their development in these primary areas that lead to effectiveness and impact. Since relocating to the United States, he has taught at Regent University since 2015, in both the School of Business & Leadership (SBL) and the College of Arts & Sciences.

Email: [michmah@regent.edu](mailto:michmah@regent.edu)

Sean Pomory is a songwriter, inbound marketer and emerging pastor with more than a decade of leadership experience within the context of the local church. When not thinking about how churches can influence their community, you can find him playing sports, working on music or reading books by people much smarter than him.

Email: [smpomory@gmail.com](mailto:smpomory@gmail.com)

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## VI. APPENDIX

### Sample List of Tools

#### **Content Management Systems**

- Wordpress
- Drupal
- Squarespace

#### **Website Speed and Optimization**

- Google PageSpeed Insights
- GTmetrix

#### **Marketing Automation**

- Hubspot
- Marketo
- Pardot

#### **Email Marketing**

- MyEmma
- MailChimp

#### **Social Media Scheduling**

- Hootsuite
- Buffer

#### **Social Media Channels**

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- YouTube
- Google+

#### **Upcycling Tools**

- Adobe Spark
- Powtoon
- Showbox
- Haiku Deck
- Adioma

#### **Keyword Research / SEO Tools**

- Google AdWords Keyword Planner

- Moz Pro
- Moz Local
- Google Search Console
- Ahrefs Keyword Explorer
- Screaming Frog
- SimilarWeb

**Advertising (Paid) Channels**

- Google AdWords (Search and Display Network)
- Facebook and Instagram Ads

Sharethrough – Native Advertising