The Use of YouTube Advertising by Churches for Evangelism

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I have an ownership stake in a commercial enterprise that offers marketing services to churches and a business relationship with the individual highlighted in this paper.

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Abstract

While the use of YouTube by evangelical churches exploded during the pandemic, much of this use was directed at members by putting the weekly worship service online. However, the use of YouTube by a church for localized evangelistic purposes remains much more limited. This paper describes the experience of a pastor in Columbia, Missouri, in using YouTube advertising for evangelistic purposes. He created short talking-head videos on evangelistic topics, such as salvation or other biblical concepts, and purchased pre-roll advertising on YouTube to gain views in the geographic area around his church. He then transitioned this advertising into an invitation to an evangelistic series held at his church, and found that not only did his advertising strategy lead to increased attendance by young adults, but it also was a foundation for life change and engagement with the church through membership. The result was an effective method for promoting a pastor, a church, and an evangelistic event that could be used effectively by other churches.

Keywords: church advertising, YouTube advertising, church marketing, evangelism

The Use of YouTube Advertising by Churches for Evangelism

The use of YouTube by evangelical churches exploded during the Covid-19 global pandemic, with much of this use directed at members by putting the weekly worship service online. However, the use of YouTube by a church for localized evangelistic purposes was largely ignored. In this paper, the experience of Hiram Rester, a pastor in Columbia, Missouri, is described in using YouTube advertising for evangelistic purposes. The initial results were promising, offering the potential to be adapted by others to promote a pastor, a church, or an evangelistic event.

The use of online video by Protestant churches jumped significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic. A study conducted by Lifeway Research in the fall of 2019 found that just 22% of Protestant churches live streamed their entire worship service (Earls, 2020), but two years later in the midst of pandemic shutdowns that had nearly quadrupled to 85% (Earls, 2021). Many churches used large free streaming platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Vimeo, while others used niche players (Johnson et al., 2023). However, the vast majority of this content was directed at existing members, as churches simply moved their existing worship service into an online environment. There was less innovation taking place at this time in using online video for evangelistic purposes. This is unfortunate, because it was during this very crisis that people were seeking answers that only the church could provide. For example, at the start of the pandemic, Google searches for “end times” and “second coming” spiked to their highest rates in over a decade (Witzel, 2020). The prime directive of Jesus to his church as he left was to “go and make disciples of all the nations” (New Living Translation, 2015, Matt. 28:19), not to preach to ourselves, so the widespread lack of evangelistic innovation at this unique moment was unfortunate.

Using video storytelling for evangelism has a long history. In 1950, a television program called *Faith for Today* launched using dramatic vignettes, while other religious programs broadcast someone preaching (Hudson, 2020). One evangelist, George Vandeman, produced a number of 30-minute films to air on television, intending the program "to feel like a personal Bible study with just one or two individuals in their own living room" (Hudson, 2020, para. 9). He would then pay for airtime on local television stations to air these films for several months prior to holding meetings in a city. When he first tested this method in 1956 in Bakersfield, CA, his meetings resulted in over 200 decisions for baptism, with many of them citing television program as having introduced them to Vandeman prior to the meetings (Hudson, 2020).

Today, of course, we are in the midst of a massive transition from viewing video content on broadcast television to viewing it online. For the first time, last year more time was spent watching content online than over cable or broadcast television (Cho, 2022), with online viewers spending 44% of their time on YouTube, more than any other platform (Stancheva, 2023). Because of this, if the pioneers in television evangelism from the 1950s were alive today they would probably be focusing on YouTube. As Dave Adamson, the online pastor for Northpoint Ministries, said, "YouTube is the most effective tool to help church leaders reach more people so they can change more lives" (Allred, 2022, p. 86).

Online video has received some academic attention. Knowles (2022), in a reaction to the sudden shift of preaching from in person to online, considered the negative consequences of using mediated technology in preaching and worship. He suggested that electronically mediated preaching encourages "subtle forms of idolatry," as the images receive more attention than God and people take "control over the reception and interpretation of the message" (Knowles, 2022, p. 1141). Kokkonen (2022) looked at the social media activity of two denominations in Finland,

finding the branding component of the communication to be at odds with the theological foundation of the church.

Much practical attention has been paid to creating content on YouTube. For example, Reachright Studios offers a complete guide to help a church get started on YouTube, from researching content ideas and titles to creating video thumbnails and descriptions rich with keywords (Costello, 2021). McDonough (2022) wrote an article for *Church Production Magazine* that goes into detail about how to create video content for social media in general. Vanco's (2021) detailed guide for promoting a church with YouTube says nothing about paid advertising, instead suggesting a church attempt to generate a secondary revenue stream by selling ads in their own YouTube content. As important as organic content is for long-term growth, though, much of that strategy leads builds an audience slowly and relies on YouTube's content algorithm to deliver that content to new viewers. Most of the discussion about how churches can use YouTube simply ignores the evangelistic potential of paid advertising.

More than that, when people talk about YouTube advertising it is often in the context of promoting a church's online worship service, rather than direct evangelism. Clifford (2015) published an article eight years ago in *Church Production Magazine* entitled, "How to Promote Your Church's Live Stream." In it, he said, "Simply having a live stream doesn't guarantee that people will watch. You have to tell people that your live stream exists and guide them to it" (Clifford, 2015, subtitle). Another highly ranked article by Henderson (2023) about online advertising for churches completely ignores YouTube, focusing instead on Facebook and Google advertising.

Hiram Rester Project

It is in this context that Hiram Rester's (2022) doctoral dissertation brings a much needed perspective to the conversation. Rester was a full-time Seventh-day Adventist evangelist for several years before becoming a parish pastor in Columbia, MO. As an evangelist, he primarily used the method of *proclamational evangelism* to recruit new church members. Historically, the Seventh-day Adventist Church's use of this method has had several unique characteristics (Anderson, 2014; Walter, 2018). First, the method uses a series of meetings running several nights each week for several weeks. Second, these meetings are open to the public, and community members are invited to the event with a marketing campaign, often at significant cost to the church. Third, using the Bible as the primary textbook, the speaker covers the foundational doctrines of the denomination. And finally, participants at these meetings participants are encouraged to "make a series of decisions to accept the denomination's interpretation of Scripture, leading to a decision for baptism and ultimately to becoming a member of the church" (Witzel, 2022, p. 3).

Proclamational evangelism has been the primary driver of growth in the Seventh-day Adventist Church since the denomination was founded in the 1860's (Bull & Lockhart, 2007), and last received significant scholarly attention in the 1970's (Chong et al., 1976; Johnson, 1977; Japas, 1978). One such study found 93% of new Adventists attended at least one public evangelistic meeting and over half attended all the meetings of one or more series (Chong et al., 1976, p. 63), suggesting this experience was at that time an important step toward membership. A more recent study showed that over 90% of Adventist young adult member respondents had attended one or more public evangelistic series (Parker & Charvat, 2019), suggesting it continues to be a valuable methodology for recruiting new members.

However, there is widespread belief that the effectiveness of this evangelistic method is declining, leading to increasing opposition to use of the method by both members and leaders in the church (Delafield & Gibbs, 2017; Larson, 2019; Kidder, 2020). Rester's (2022) own experience aligned with this, noting:

> Gathering an audience has become increasingly difficult via traditional proclamation approaches. This challenge is even greater among young adults. … In the process of conducting approximately 100 full-message evangelist efforts over the years, [I] have found it a growing challenge to draw a crowd. (Rester, 2022, p. 3)

In an effort to draw a younger audience to an evangelistic series, Rester experimented with video advertising on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. He noted research showing that "when both a written article and a video with the same content get posted on a site, Millennials … indicate that their preference is to watch the video rather than read the article" at a rate of about four to one (Rester, 2023, p. 6).

He developed a series of short evangelistic videos with a length of 30–45 seconds, using a casual style for both dress and presentation. He recorded in numerous locations, including in nature, around the neighborhood, in his home or office, and using a studio background. He used a conversational affect and shot a medium closeup of himself from the chest up. He stated that he wanted to "produce videos that are well done but not to have a feel of being too professional or polished" (Rester, 2022, p. 82).

Analysis of Videos

The central tone of the videos was conversational and informational, but also had a the storytelling arc. For example, one video had the following script:

> Did you know there are 4 things even God doesn't know? Number 1, he doesn't know a sin he doesn't hate. In the Bible, evil is called "sin." Number 2, he doesn't know a sinner he doesn't love. And that's good news for us because we're all sinners. Number 3, he doesn't know anything else he could do to save us. He sent Jesus. And number 4, he doesn't know a better time than right now. (Rester, 2022, p. 116)

This is the gospel presentation in a nutshell with a strong storytelling arc, establishing the dilemma and resolution in just 30 seconds. According to Schulman (2016), every good story must have tension. In this case, the conflict is between a world filled with sin and the redemption of that world through Jesus. In addition, Stockman (2017) said, "Every video needs a clear intent" (p. 23). The intent of this video is to introduce the pastor to the community as a Bible expert and introduce them to an evangelistic message. This video does not have a strong call to action, because the intent is not to prompt the viewer to take action, but simply hear the gospel message and become familiar with the pastor.

There are several expected responses to this video. For those with a biblical worldview but who are not living a life faithful to scripture, it should trigger a tension leading them to return to a life of discipleship. The Holy Spirit could use this to bring to mind a sin or pattern of disobedience, and repeated exposure to this ad would drive the person to repentance. The Apostle Paul wrote, "The kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation" (New Living Translation, 2015, 2 Cor. 7:10). As an evangelistic message, this is the desired response.

For those who are currently living in the light of faith, the response should be one of agreement and affirmation. As they get to know this pastor through these videos, he becomes a

trusted partner in ministry, so that when he invites people to come to evangelistic meetings they would consider it an opportunity to evangelize others in their own circle of influence.

Finally, for those who don't have a biblical worldview, this video might trigger an interest in learning more. For those in this category, a call to action would give them a way to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The pastor could have added a line, such as, "Want to learn more? Click below to request a free Bible guide." This would have given the viewers who want to learn more the opportunity to respond to this evangelistic message.

Not all of Rester's videos had strong storytelling arcs. For example, another video had the following script:

> The contractions were getting closer together and more intense. My wife and I raced to the hospital for the birth of our first child. The Bible says that the signs of the times are like labor pains. They get closer together and more intense. These include rumors of wars, financial distress, earthquakes, crazy weather, and new diseases. And though these things have affected humankind for thousands of years, as we approach the second coming of Jesus, they, indeed, will get closer together and more intense. And that is why it seems the world has gone crazy. (Rester, 2022, 116).

The storytelling arc in this script is not as strong. It opens with an interesting hook, but transitions quickly to simply talking about the dilemma of earth. It offers no resolution to this dilemma, nor any call to action. It doesn't offer any hope, and it's not clear how the audience should feel or respond.

Rester (2023) ran this collection of 30 videos on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube over the course of nine months, spending over $30,000 on Facebook and Instagram and nearly $18,000 on YouTube. In total he had about 866,000 views within 20 miles of his church, which

exceeded the population of this geographic area by five times. This aggressive ad budget ensured repeated exposure over the nine months.

At the end of the nine months an evangelistic series was held at the church, and two weeks prior to these meetings Rester switched to video ads specifically promoting the event. During the course of the meetings he saw 111 guests at least one night. Of the 76 registration cards received, 40 indicated they had seen the project videos, with eight noting Facebook views and 32 stating they saw the videos on YouTube (Rester, 2022). Of these, 25 said they came directly as a result of the videos, which included 13 young adult guests. He stated, “Never before in our 100+ full-message evangelistic meetings have we had any type of advertising draw a group where the majority of adults were under age 40” (Rester, 2022, p. 8).

At the conclusion of these meetings, 13 people made decisions for baptism (Rester, 2022). Of these, four came as a result of a flyer sent through the mail, which is the traditional form of advertising for this type of meeting. Four came from YouTube advertising, but because more funds were used on the direct mail campaign, the cost per baptism was actually lower for guests from YouTube.

Personal Impact

As a result of this class, there are three ways I view media differently. First, I have always had difficulty with integrating the storytelling arc into my video productions, which primarily have been in the corporate video space. But I see now that even the most boring informational video can be improved by ensuring the principles of storytelling are followed. Both my final video and the best of Hiram Rester’s videos had strong story arcs.

Second, I feel more confident in my own video production skills. Stockman’s book encouraged me to improve my camera work with principles like shoot and move, zoom with my

feet, and pay better attention to lighting. My company is investing in development of a new YouTube advertising service which will include coaching pastors to shoot better quality selfie videos, and the principles articulated by Stockman will be integrated into our own training system for clients.

Third, I'm more willing to consider video as a communication tool. Historically, video has been an expensive medium to produce and distribute. While that's still true, the complexity has been significantly reduced by the quality of the camera on today's smartphones. As a result, we will be actively promoting the use of video for evangelism marketing, something which I have resisted for many years. This class, and Rester's experience, has challenged me to do more with video, something which we'll be doing for both our clients and our own marketing.

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