



Vaasan yliopisto  
UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

Inari Pelkonen

## **The Business of Belief**

Member Engagement Strategies in the Megachurch Phenomenon

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**UNIVERSITY OF VAASA****School of Marketing and Communications****Author:** Inari Pelkonen**Title of the Thesis:** The Business of Belief : Member Engagement Strategies in the Megachurch Phenomenon**Degree:** Master of Business Science (MBSc)**Program:** Marketing Management**Supervisor:** Catharina von Koskull**Year:** 2025 **Number of pages:** 59

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**ABSTRACT:**

With the secularization of the western world, there is an ongoing decline in church memberships in the US. Nevertheless, one specific church category, megachurches, has figured out ways to thrive in the country and, the opposite to the general trend, and their memberships and church numbers have been increasing during the last few decades. This is largely due to the integration of marketing practices typical for traditional businesses. However, whether a church should market itself with traditional business strategies is highly debated over, and opinions are very divided. Therefore, the object for this study is to gain an understanding of this complex phenomenon through exploring how megachurches, particularly Life.Church in the United States, utilize marketing in digital platforms to engage its members.

As the megachurch phenomenon often blurs the line between religion and business, this study investigates the ways in which marketing and customer engagement principles are applied within a context of Christian religion. The research is guided by three central questions: how marketing is understood within Christianity (negatives and positives); what customer engagement strategies are there online; and what member engagement strategies are used by Life.Church. A qualitative content analysis of a megachurch's, Life.Church's, online platforms, including its websites, apps, and the YouVersion Bible app, was conducted using an inductive, thematic approach. Five key engagement strategies emerged: Spiritual Lifestyle, Community and Belonging, Making a Difference, Personalized Experience, and Empowerment and Growth. These strategies demonstrate how Life.Church integrates emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions into a multidimensional engagement strategy.

Findings show strong alignment between Life.Church's practices and existing literature on both church marketing and consumer engagement marketing strategies. The church's business-like mindset, personalized offerings, and consistent digital presence position it as a model of contemporary religious marketing. However, all the negative sides and worries about church marketing, mentioned in the existing literature, does not apply to Life.Church's marketing practices. Moreover, limitations of the study include its single-case focus, reliance on text-based content, and exclusion of member perspectives. This research contributes to the growing field of religious marketing and offers practical insights for churches aiming to engage modern audiences without having to compromise core Christian values and beliefs.

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**KEYWORDS:** *marketing, religion, Christianity, religious marketing, church marketing, mega-church, member engagement, customer engagement*

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**VAASAN YLIOPISTO****Markkinoinnin ja viestinnän yksikkö****Kirjoittaja:** Inari Pelkonen**Tutkimuksen otsikko:** The Business of Belief : Member Engagement Strategies in the Megachurch Phenomenon**Tutkinto:** Kauppatieteiden maisteri (KTM)**Ohjelma:** Markkinoinnin johtaminen**Ohjaaja:** Catharina von Koskull**Vuosi:** 2025 **Sivujen lukumäärä:** 59

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**TIIVISTELMÄ:**

Länsimaiden maallistumisen myötä kirkkojen jäsenmäärät Yhdysvalloissa ovat jatkuvassa laskussa. Tästä huolimatta yksi kirkkoryhmä, megakirkot, ovat onnistuneet kasvamaan ja menestymään maassa vastoin yleistä trendiä, ja niiden jäsenmäärät sekä kirkkojen lukumäärä ovat olleet suurella kasvulla viime vuosikymmenten ajan. Tämä johtuu suurelta osin siitä, että megakirkot ovat ottaneet käyttöönsä perinteisille yrityksille tyypillisiä markkinointikäytäntöjä -ja strategioita. Kuitenkin se, pitäisikö kirkkojen ylipäätään markkinoida itseään liiketoimintalähtöisillä strategioilla, on hyvin kiistanalainen aihe, josta mielipiteet ovat vahvasti jakautuneet niin kirkkojen, kun akatemiankin parissa. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on ymmärtää tätä monimutkaista ilmiötä tarkastelemalla, miten megakirkot, erityisesti yhdysvaltalainen Life.Church, hyödyntävät digitaalisia alustoja ja markkinointia sitouttaakseen jäseniään.

Koska megakirkkoilmiö usein hämää uskonnon ja liiketoiminnan välistä rajaa, tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan, miten markkinoinnin ja asiakassitouttamisen periaatteita sovelletaan kristillisen uskonnon kontekstissa. Tutkimusta ohjaa kolme keskeistä kysymystä: miten markkinointi ymmärretään kristillisessä kontekstissa (markkinoinnin hyödyt ja haitat); miten asiakkaita, tai jäseniä, sitoutetaan digitaalisesti markkinoinnin kontekstissa; ja mitä sitouttamisstrategioita Life.Church käyttää. Tutkimuksessa toteutettiin laadullinen sisällönanalyysi, joka kohdistui Life.Churchin verkkopohjaisiin alustoihin, mukaan lukien sen verkkosivustot, sovellukset sekä YouVersion-raamattusovellus. Induktiivisen, temaattisen analyysin avulla tunnistettiin viisi keskeistä strategiaa sitouttaa jäseniä: Hengellinen elämäntapa, Yhteisö ja osallisuus, Vaikutuksen aikaansaaminen, Henkilökohtainen kokemus ja Kasvu ja voimaantuminen. Nämä strategiat osoittavat, kuinka Life.Church yhdistää emotionaalisia, sosiaalisia ja hengellisiä ulottuvuuksia moniulotteiseen jäsenitouttamisstrategiaansa.

Tulokset osoittavat vahvaa yhteneväisyyttä Life.Churchin käytäntöjen ja aiemman kirjallisuuden välillä niin kirkkomarkkinoinnin kuin kaupallisen verkkositouttamisen osalta. Kirkon liiketoimintalähtöinen ajattelutapa, yksilölliset sisällöt ja strateginen digitaalinen läsnäolo asemoivat sen nykyaikaisen uskonnollisen markkinoinnin malliesimerkiksi. Vaikka yhtymäkohtia olemassa olevalla kirjallisuudella ja tämän tutkimuksen tuloksilla on monia, tämä tutkimus haluaa korostaa, että monet kirjallisuudessa esiin tuodut kirkkomarkkinoinnin ongelmat ja huolet eivät päde Life.Churchin tapauksessa. Tutkimuksen ja sen tuloksien rajoitteita ovat esimerkiksi sen yksittäistapauslähtöisyys, yksinomaan tekstipohjaisen aineiston käyttö sekä kirkon jäsenten näkökulmien puuttuminen. Tutkimus tarjoaa tukea ja uusia näkökulmia kasvavaan uskonnollisen markkinoinnin tutkimuskenttään sekä käytännönläheisiä näkemyksiä kirkoille, jotka pyrkivät tavoittamaan yleisöä nykyaikaisessa digitaalisessa maailmassa, mutta haluavat pitää etusijalla kristillisen uskon ydinarvot ja -opetukset.

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**KEYWORDS:** *marketing, religion, Christianity, religious marketing, church marketing, megachurch, member engagement, customer engagement*

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## 1 Introduction

With religious organizations estimated to contribute \$1.2 trillion to the United States economy (Grim & Grim, 2016, p. 27), it is evident that religion holds significant influence and plays a major role not only in the field of theology but also in the nation's economy and business sectors. Christian faith has been studied for decades through the lens of marketing, dividing academics into different categories; those who oppose it, those who are in favor, and those who have aimed to find common ground. Even the term alone, *religious marketing*, is considered controversial due to strong disagreement between two parties, the theologians and marketers (Gavra Juravle et al., 2016, p. 336). The question has been whether marketing should be practiced at all (opposed by theologians), just in small and controlled settings, or if it could be utilized with the same principles as in the business world, which marketers are in favor of (Wrenn, 2010, p. 46). Moreover, those not totally opposed or in favor of marketing, propose an argument that marketing thinking can be valuable, but when marketing a religion, one should remember to be careful in avoiding the self-indulgence and short-term perspective that market thinking often emphasizes (Cutler & Winans, William A., 1998, p. 137).

However, beyond just the decades-old conversation of whether marketing should be used or not, Christian churches and congregations are facing problems across the United States as church attendance rates are declining. For example, weekly church attendance decreased from 32% to 20% during 2000-2023 (Gallup Inc, 2023). To retain members, churches have had to come up with solutions to keep their services running, members engaged, and bills paid. The prevalent cycle of losing members has resulted in churches competing especially for young adults who can provide financial support and an energetic atmosphere (Rodrigue, 2002, p. 34). Therefore, practices for member engagement like email campaigns, music resembling secular music, evening services instead of morning ones, and activities for children have gained popularity (Rodrigue, 2002, p. 34). From the aforementioned list alone, it is evident that churches compete with other organizations offering social activities, not limited to other churches (Cutler & Winans, William A., 1998, p. 137). Despite the debate over the use of marketing, some churches have

implemented marketing practices similar to the for-profit market in business since the early 1970s (Webb et al., 1998, p. 3). Furthermore, the idea of religion being a part of a competitive field is reinforced by Ren (2004, p. 331) who argues, “the religious field, like any other field, is an arena of competition (*le concurrence*), in which agents and institutions struggle over the production, accumulation and control of legitimate forms of capital particular to the religious field - the ‘over forms’ of religious capital”.

There are multiple different kinds of churches in the US, but churches in one specific category have been able to excel, not only in retaining members, but growing exponentially and appealing to large masses. These are called megachurches, and they have mastered the same marketing strategies that some successful businesses have (Kuzma et al., 2009, p. 6-7). Therefore, there are Christian churches which resemble traditional businesses, but also churches, who have not gotten accustomed to these practices, either by choice, or lack of knowledge.

## **1.1 Research Objective and Questions**

The main objective of this thesis is to study what type of customer engagement strategies megachurches use to gain and keep their members. To ensure that this objective is met, and that the study is structured effectively, three research questions have been established to direct the writing and research process:

- Q1** How is marketing defined and understood within the context of Christian faith?
- Q2** What is customer engagement in online contexts?
- Q3** What engagement strategies can be found from Life.Church’s online platforms?

The first two questions offer a comprehensive understanding of the topic from a distinct perspective, as Q1 focuses on the conceptual aspect, defining what marketing means in the context of Christianity, and Q2 focuses on the practical aspect, explaining how

marketing strategies for member engagement are employed. Through Q3 we can deepen the understanding of the research topic by observing data from a real-life example.

## **1.2 Research Method**

Since the core of this study lies in gaining a holistic understanding of the topic of marketing in Christianity, to achieve a perspective from the matter as a whole, the approach used is a qualitative research method (Eriksson et al., 2008, p. 5). Furthermore, content analysis is chosen for data analyzation which allows to describe the meaning of qualitative material by classifying material through categories of a coding frame (Eide, 2020, p. 113; Schreier, 2012, p. 7-8).

Approach for data analyzation is inductive, therefore it does not build up on existing theories (Aliyu et al., 2015, p. 17). Furthermore, to form a theory based on the data, and to answer the research questions, commonalities and themes are going to be drawn from the data. This is a part of content analysis and also useful, since “creating themes is a way to link the underlying meanings together in categories” (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p. 107).

The goal of this study is to follow Eriksson et al.'s (2008) approach to research and data collection, ensuring a strong and reliable foundation. This involves first gathering data, then analyzing it, and finally drawing conclusions (Eriksson et al., 2008, p. 26). Eriksson et al. emphasize the importance of identifying all relevant data needed to answer the research question convincingly (2008, p. 26). They argue that researchers should not limit themselves to data or theories that only support their own views but should consider multiple perspectives to allow for alternative interpretations (Eriksson et al., 2008, p. 26).

### **1.3 Structure of Study and Delimitations**

The thesis consists of five chapters altogether, where the first chapter provides a brief background and an overview of the structure and method of the study. The goal is that after reading the first chapter, the reader has gained a sufficient understanding of what the thesis is going to be about, thus making it easy to follow. Furthermore, the second chapter is focused on the literature review, where the research questions Q1 and Q2 are answered (see Chapter 1.2). In short, the goal is to provide sufficient background to the confluence of marketing and religion.

The third chapter explains in detail the methodology that was used in the study itself to analyze and collect data. The fourth chapter focuses on explaining and going through the findings that the third chapter enabled, answering to the research question Q3. Furthermore, in chapter five, the goal was to compare the findings from chapter four to the existing literature provided in chapter three. Eventually, the fifth chapter also offers managerial implications, discusses about the limitations of the study, and provides suggestions for future research.

Since the topic of religion and more specifically Christianity is extensive, a geographical delimitation has been done for this study to only discuss the market and situation in the United States. The country was selected since firstly, the data is easily approachable for the research due to the English language, secondly, the significance of Christianity in the nation, its politics and economy (Grim & Grim, 2016, p. 27), and thirdly, due to the megachurch phenomenon originating from the US (Eagle, 2015, p. 590; Hunt, 2020, p. 1).

### **1.4 Key Concepts**

#### **Religious Marketing**

Religious marketing falls under service and non-profit marketing (Gavra Juravle et al., 2016, p. 336). Unlike traditional marketing, non-profit marketing promotes ideas and

beliefs rather than goods for profit and operates within unique legal and social frameworks (Gavra Juravle et al., 2016, p. 337). Additionally, religions compete for authority, emphasizing their offerings, such as the assurance of salvation (Rey, 2004, p. 331-332).

### **Church Marketing**

Church marketing is defined as identifying and meeting the needs of a target audience through relevant products and services (Mulyanegara et al., 2010, p. 61). Wrenn argues that a church's existence and success depend on satisfying its members' needs, emphasizing the role of marketing in identifying and addressing unmet spiritual demands (2010, p. 49, 51).

### **Megachurch**

A megachurch is a large Protestant congregation characterized by 2,000 or more weekly attendees, a charismatic senior minister, diverse social and outreach ministries, small group systems, contemporary worship styles, and a complex organizational structure (Hartford Institute, 2020a; S. Hunt, 2020). In the U.S., there are approximately 1,750 megachurches, with 40% being nondenominational, making them the largest church group (Hartford Institute, 2020). These churches function as highly efficient marketers of their services and messages, appealing to broad audiences rather than niche groups, and often maintain theological neutrality to attract a wider following (Kuzma et al., 2009, p. 4-5).

### **Christian principles**

The word principle refers to a moral rule or standard of good behavior (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2024). Christian principles are based on the Bible, shaping moral standards and values. A Christian nonprofit defines them as timeless teachings of Jesus that remain consistent across generations (Compassion International, n.d.). However, interpretations of the Bible vary, with some viewing it as totally, and others partially true.

### **Denominational Church**

A denominational church is a Christian church that identifies itself within a broader Christian tradition, has an organized structure, and seeks to sustain itself through membership, leadership, and political or social alignments (Richey, 2018). Churches that associate with a certain denomination recognize the legitimacy of other religious groups, but maintain their distinct identity, history, and governance (Richey, 2018).

### **Nondenominational Church**

A nondenominational church is a Christian church that operates independently of any established denomination or institutional affiliation (Herbst, 2018, p. 4-8). Their founders often feel that committing to a denomination would tie their limits and abilities to shape their congregation's vision and mission (Herbst, 2018, p. 4-8). The churches vary in size, demographics, and theological beliefs, with no uniform statement of faith, some adopting traditional confessions, while many create their own doctrinal statements (Herbst, 2018, p. 4-8). Moreover, their defining characteristic is their independence from denominational supervision and bureaucracy, which allows flexibility in worship style, governance, and outreach (Herbst, 2018, p. 4-8).

## **2 Marketing Religion and Engagement Strategies**

This chapter is going to offer a theoretical background for the thesis and answer the research questions Q1 and Q2. First part is going to discuss about how marketing manifests in religion and what perspectives there are of the use of marketing in a Christian context. The second part reviews customer engagement strategies from marketing literature perspective, and the third part brings the first and second together, explaining member engagement in a church context.

### **2.1 Marketing Religion**

No matter the field, Bourdieu (Rey, 2004, p. 332) is convinced that “all fields conform to a certain economic logic”, this being enforced by the idea that in the long run, one gains money by participation. Therefore, Christianity can be said to be a part of the religion market (field can be substitute for market in this context) where there is competition to gain loyal customers (Rey, 2004, p. 333). In the field of religion, a conversion would be viewed as converting a person to the religion, or gaining more memberships, which furthermore aids the religion to produce money and revenue (Rey, 2004, p. 333). Percy (2020, p. 115) supports this saying, “market-based competition between denominations and religions is not new, of course; it is as old as conversion itself”.

The idea of religious field possessing the same layout as the business field of supply and demand, is somewhat recent (Gauthier & Martikainen, 2018, p. 362). According to Gauthier & Martikainen (2018, p. 362), in this assembly believers are consumers of religion who churches are competing over, therefore being the companies offering the goods. Berger (1990, p. 157) also supports this idea by saying that when previously churches could enjoy a monopoly status and loyalty of their parishioners, that could be authoritatively imposed, they now have to market their offering and services, and are feeling the pressure to change. Hence, Berger argues that this generates a market situation, where church offerings must be “sold”, producing the same set-up as Gauthier &

Martikainen (1990, p. 157) wrote about, where religious traditions become consumer commodities. In other terms, it is then inevitable that a majority of religious activities are dominated by the logic of market economics (Berger, 1990, p. 157).

When examining the market of religion from the business and profitability perspective, there is a trend on the market, where churches are feeling the pressure to show individuals relevancy to one's life (Berger, 1990, p. 167). There is an emphasis on meeting individual's needs, especially in the moral and therapeutic aspects, which can make a church focus their activities to these areas (Berger, 1990, p. 167). When consumer satisfaction, and therefore the member count, is on the line, there is a need to make changes, and to adapt to the environment to convince superiority over competitors (Afolabi et al., 2024, p. 131). This kind of consumer influence on religious content often leads to standardization and marginal differentiation, reflecting typical free-market dynamics (Berger, 1990, p. 168).

Berger (1990, p. 169) makes Christian denominations to be an example of traditional business dynamics, highlighting how denominational identities serve as a form of marginal differentiation within a competitive religious landscape. This emphasis reflects a process of rationalization, where distinct identities are maintained to stand out in a largely standardized environment (Berger, 1990, p. 169). Furthermore, religious institutions, like churches, targeting similar demographics, mostly the upper-middle class, have the pressure to adopt secular and psychological themes into their offering to maintain appeal and ensure their "products" being chosen (Berger, 1990, p. 168). Due to the competitive atmosphere that pushes institutions to change, churches continue to be relevant even today in the US. However, focusing on pleasing the consumer as an individual can lead to a situation, where certain topics are left outside of discussion, such as economics and political views, to ensure not offending consumers which are already highly competed over (Berger, 1990, p. 167).

### 2.1.1 Church Marketing

The phenomenon of church marketing rose during the 1970s when some churches started implementing marketing strategies similar to traditional businesses (Webb et al., 1998, p. 3). The interest around the topic really surfaced in the US when books and courses started appearing, targeting specifically church employees around the 1990s (Gavra Juravle et al., 2016, p. 337). Marketing organizations stood up and helped churches build marketing strategies focusing on goal setting, and defining and attracting target audiences in the hopes of increasing members (Gavra Juravle et al., 2016, p. 337). There has also been an increase in younger generations expectations of churches and they are approaching churches through the lens of what the church can give them (Rodrigue, 2002, p. 34). Rodrigue's study verifies that young adults have an overall favorable attitude towards churches using marketing strategies (2002, p. 38-39).

Moreover, there is a growing argument on how churches must keep up with the changes of the society, and people around them, to be able to "*remain healthy*" (Webb, 2012, 69). It is therefore encouraged for smaller churches to adopt marketing plans similar to megachurches if they wish to grow and expand (Webb, 2012b, p. 248). Webb (2012b, p. 258) also points out that "churches need to be culturally relevant, deliver value to members and prospectives and handle relationships well, all while preaching the Word of God". Therefore Webb (2012b, p. 258) suggests that megachurches could become mentors, or even partners, to smaller churches to help them grow and master the techniques they utilize to gain and keep members. From a business perspective, church functions and economy can be understood the same way as the market model. Wells (1994, p. 63-65) exemplifies the four factors as follows: church polity as the organization, clergy as sales representatives, religious doctrine and life as the product, and evangelism and church growth as marketing techniques.

However, there is a gap between churches that are actively pursuing marketing methods and those that are not, high-growth churches being the active ones (Aliyu et al., 2015, p. 27). Those focused on high-growth rate tend to master marketing better, for example,

nondenominational churches grew much faster by marketing well-known pastors and multisite locations, compared to denominational churches that did not practice these methods (Webb, 2012b, p. 246). Furthermore, during a ten-year review period, nondenominational churches' memberships grew significantly higher compared to denominational ones (Webb, 2012b, p. 251-254). One of the lures was the churches' websites since nondenominational churches developed their internet marketing and websites actively (Webb, 2012b, p. 251-254).

Conversely, memberships have been declining on the denominational churches since 1970s, and the main reasons are said to be wide range of theological positions, failure to motivate members actively, minimum rules of conduct, and no accountability for abusing rules (Webb, 2012b, p. 247). However, some also suggest that the decrease in church attendance is due to younger generations, who may not perceive a strong value in church membership (Webb, 2012b, p. 247). As Newman (2011, p. 4-5) states, one of the most important reasons for marketing or advertising, is to increase the church attendance, as 87% of churches used marketing in the hopes of increasing their attendance rate. However, even with the use of marketing, 83% of megachurches reported their weekly attendance to be below desired level (Newman, 2011, p. 5).

Nevertheless, the use of marketing is undoubtedly working based on the growth of megachurches, since their number grew from 350 churches in 1990, to over 1700 churches in 2024 in the US alone (Hartford Institute, 2020a). Webb (2012a, p. 69) notes, that most megachurches can be described with the statement "Megachurches seem to be pleasing majority's needs". Furthermore, the foundation for megachurches is said to be an ideology that growth is inherently good (Percy, 2020, p. 117). This ideology influences the theological and spiritual characters of megachurches, where multitude of different business outlooks meet, e.g. sales, communications, and marketing (Percy, 2020, p. 117).

According to Hunt (2020, p. 1), the megachurch phenomenon is widely seen as a reflection of the dominant cultural and economic trends that have increasingly influenced

religion. Kuzma et al. (2009, p. 5) affirm this view by saying that megachurches have molded themselves into the contemporary culture and have mastered the art of inclusivity, being more flexible than many other mainstream churches that tend to have stricter hierarchies. Furthermore, megachurches are aware that the public is conscious of their position as spiritual consumers, and therefore marketing plays a big role in the churches' growth strategies (Percy, 2020, p. 122).

### **2.1.2 Challenges and Concerns of using Marketing in a Religious Context**

Arguments over marketing practices in Christianity have been mostly divided: either opposed by theologians, or supported by marketers (Wrenn, 2010, p. 46). Wrenn (2010, p. 50) says that "often the very reasons why theologians suggest marketing not to be used are the reason marketing specialists encourage its use". Some take it as far as to say that "the Bible is one of the greatest marketing texts of the world" (Stevens et al., 2006, p. 144).

The most spoken problem with the use of marketing in Christianity stems from the theological argument on how one should not mix the profane with sacred (Wrenn, 2010, p. 46). For example, Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, an Anglican priest from Canada argues, "Spiritual consumers will come to Christianity as do window shoppers at a mall, wanting a spirituality tailor-made to their preferences. They will want this because consumption is the only salvation they have ever known. They will bring all of their riches and perversely be unable to conceive of grace because they cannot imagine a thing that cannot be bought." (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009).

Wells (1994, p. 84) argues that since marketing operates on the principle that the consumers' desires reign supreme, with customer satisfaction as a top priority, these principles cannot co-exist with Christian principles. This is because the focus on consumer preference stands in stark contrast to the message of the gospel, which emphasizes the limits of human desires and the importance of placing spiritual values over a personal

want (1994, p. 82). Additionally, Wells (1994, p. 82) criticizes how churches are marketed to be organizations where people go to meet other people to have a good time, not to meet God and surrender to God. Moreover, there are examples when extensive use of marketing has lost its sight on core values and the Christian message, the gospel. Most often with the use of marketing, sacred and secular are mixed together, and the boundary of what is marketed gets ambiguous (Afolabi et al., 2024, p. 133). Ultimately, and sometimes without even noticing, God becomes the marketing product, and when some religious organizations utilize marketing to gain and keep members and financial power, others follow thinking there is no other way to keep up with the competition (Afolabi et al., 2024, p. 135; Percy, 2020, p. 115).

For instance, when the Pentecostal Church in Nigeria started using marketing and advertising on a large scale, many churches in the area quickly turned into megachurches (Afolabi et al., 2024, p. 141). So, when observing the Pentecostal churches success, multiple churches in Nigeria adapted these same large-scale marketing practices with the fear of “getting left behind” if not adapting to the change (Afolabi et al., 2024, p. 141). However, Afolabi et al. (2024, p. 144) note that this kind of over-advertising and commercializing can result into de-sacralizing sacred institutions. Furthermore, high scale marketing normalizes making profit over people’s problems who view, and believe, these over-advertised religions to be their only solution (Afolabi et al., 2024, p. 144).

The core issue according to Wells (1994, p. 26) is the secularization and modernization of churches, and the churches getting inspiration and power from the culture to please people, instead from theology. New ideologies like therapeutic theology have gained popularity, following the goal to please people and consequently, core Christian principles are overlooked and replaced with consumerism (Wells, 1994, p. 27). Therefore, sometimes there is no distinctive separation between corporations and churches, or entertainment and worship, when faith dissolves into the culture (Wells, 1994, p. 27).

In the midst of focusing on the church's image, member and participation charts, convenience, and church offerings, Wells (1994, p. 28-59) argues that God becomes secondary. However, this is in conflict with Christianity's teachings, since The New Testament testifies that love of God and love of the world (secular world) cannot coexist (Wells, 1994, p. 28-31). Wells (1994, p. 75) continues to argue that churches with marketing strategies, huge success, and large audiences have no consistent congregation, or biblical accountability. Furthermore, Wells (1994, p. 84) states that the very core of what the church should be known for cannot be marketed, and in this case, everything else that is not of core value is marketed instead. The core consists of a space dedicated to worshipping God, where the teachings of the Scriptures are both heard and enacted, and where life is deeply contemplated and rigorously examined (Wells, 1994, p. 84). There is inherently nothing bad in the church growth movement with the help of advertising and marketing, but the issue begins when the gospel is redefined based on the audience of the church (Wells, 1994, p. 67-69).

Additionally, Wells lists churches' and business' fundamental differences, demonstrating that they cannot be the same (1994, p. 78). According to the differentiation, when a business focuses on segmentation, finding the right target audience, and demanding immediate attention from the consumer to purchase, a church should declare their message to everyone, and ensure that people are serious and commit their lives to their faith (Wells, 1994, p. 78). Furthermore, when the business has its goal of maximizing profit and has its accountability for stakeholders, the church should aim to get people to surrender to Christ and has its accountability to God on doing that. Below is the table of these differences mentioned by Wells (Wells, 1994, p. 78).

<b>Business</b>	<b>Church</b>
Consumer segmentation and targeting	The Gospel is declared to all people
The goal is to sell and get profit	The goal is for the people to surrender to God
Demands an immediate impulse to purchase	Demands a life-long commitment
Accountability to stakeholders	Accountability to God

**Figure 1.** Traditional Business Goals vs Church Goals (Wells, 1994, p. 78).

Percy (2020, p. 119) adds that not everything can be counted, and the things that can be counted are not always the most important, referring to growth related metrics in churches. Percy (2020, p. 119) continues “Counting ‘members’ or the hard, inner core of congregational attendees does not tell the whole story; indeed, it does not even account for the half of it.” Therefore, the emphasis should be on serving communities, not growing the highest membership possible (Percy, 2020, p. 119). Additionally, the focus should be on quality, not quantity, meaning that church should not be too worried about maximizing output and productivity (Percy, 2020, p. 123). This is explained by the origin of the Christian church, which, Percy (2020, p. 123) argues, was not created to grow exponentially.

### **2.1.3 A Balanced Approach to Marketing**

Although opinions and attitudes towards using marketing are mixed, using marketing strategies is still highly popular (Angheluta et al., 2009, p. 180). Barna (1988) argues that whether we like it or not, the church is not just part of a market, it is a business in its

own right. Its “product” is the relationships it fosters with Jesus and others, with the core offering being the message of salvation (Barna, 1988). Each local church acts as a franchise in a larger network, where pastors are judged not only by their teaching and counseling, but by their ability to run the church smoothly, efficiently, and profitably (Barna, 1988). Ultimately, the church’s success is measured by how well it penetrates and serves its market (Barna, 1988).

Gavra Juravle et al. (2016, p. 336) write that since both marketing and religion have existed so long, they cannot be separated even if tried to. Therefore, it could be argued that the logical thing to do is to find ways to make them exist in harmony and to find out ways where both are honored. It is possible to find a middle ground, according to Webb (2012a). In this middle ground, a church remains faithful to its doctrine and principles, but is aware of the changing society and adapts to it in a way which helps the society without sacrificing the church’s foundation (Webb, 2012a, p. 69). Wrenn (2010, p. 53) suggests that a Christian church should evaluate its deepest message which can be marketed, that is, achieving and carrying out good works according to the Bible. The ultimate goal in marketing would not be to sell something to consumers that satisfies their selfish needs, but to advocate way of living that surpasses ones self-interests and makes a person to aim to live out a selfless life (Wrenn, 2010, p. 53). The core message should be about serving others and putting others first, which with time is fulfilling, but may not enable a person to achieve an instant gratification that in today’s society many desire (Wrenn, 2010, p. 54). The consensus is that having goals, such as measurable metrics, and using marketing principles can be beneficial (Wrenn, 2010, p. 55).

However, it is important not to rely solely on "secular" marketing advice, as doing so could compromise the church's core values and mission (Wrenn, 2010, p. 55). Furthermore, it is crucial to notice that the church needs to provide value to its members and to effectively do so, Angheluta et al. (2009, p. 181 - 182) suggest doing marketing research, since no church can survive without being aware of the world around them, and

its customers' demands. This argument justifies using marketing and marketing research in Angheluta et al.'s perspective.

## **2.2 Customer Engagement Marketing Strategies**

According to Harmeling et al. (2017, p. 312) customer engagement marketing refers to a company's intentional strategy to encourage, enable, and evaluate customer involvement in its marketing activities. It includes strategies by which companies aim to achieve engagement extending beyond just purchasing (van Doorn et al., 2010, p. 254). This means, that the company deliberately sets strategies and initiatives to engage its customers in a way which is beneficial to the company (Schmitt et al., 2011, p. 57). Furthermore, the engagement beyond purchase, or transaction, is driven by the customers' motivational drivers, making customer engagement multidimensional (Bowden, 2009, p. 64; Kumar & Pansari, 2016, p. 500). Brodie et al. (2011, p. 253-254) emphasize customer engagement to be "a dynamic psychological process, based on the existence of a customer's interactive, co-creative experiences with a specific object in a specific set of conditions".

In a situation where there is competition over customers attention and devotion, like there is in churches over committed members (Rodrigue, 2002, p. 32), organizations need to find ways to communicate efficiently with their customers to keep them engaged to their operations (Kumar & Pansari, 2016, p. 499-500). Kotler et al. (2016) describe customers as individuals or organizations that acquire or utilize a company's products or services to fulfill a need or desire. Therefore, it is justified to also call church members customers, since by going to church and participating in the service offerings, and perhaps purchasing accessory products, they are arguably satisfying their own needs or desires. However, only selling a product or service is not going to guarantee customers return, and therefore the company needs to encourage interaction with the company through engagement (Kumar & Pansari, 2016, p. 498).

There are a lot of customer engagement strategies a company can employ, and can be further categorized into three main elements: motivating, empowering, and measuring customer contributions to marketing (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 319). Harmeling et al. (2017, p. 139) identify two prime forms of engagement marketing initiatives: task-based and experiential. Task-based refers to initiatives including voluntary action a company promotes to customers that help with marketing (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 319). These tasks are usually clear and structured, like writing a review, referrals, or helping other customers (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 319). On the other hand, experiential engagement initiatives are company's efforts beyond the core transaction that use shared, interactive experiences to encourage voluntary customer involvement in marketing (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 319). In practice, this can manifest as shared experiences between customers which build emotional connection, e.g. through different kinds of events, and involves customers in the brand's marketing without the company directly selling anything to them (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 319-321).

Ahearne et al. (2005, p. 577) state, that a goal of customer engagement is to reach a point where customers are not only seeking their own benefit, but they start identifying with the organization and wittingly supporting it. Prentice et al. (2019, p. 344) also found that consumers identifying with each other has a tremendous impact on customer engagement, leading to conversion. Therefore, one of the goals from a company's perspective is to get customers to interact with each other, leading them to gain a sense of belonging (Prentice et al., 2019, p. 344). This can be task-based, like sharing a recommendation online, or experiential, like meeting other consumers at a sales event (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 319). Understanding consumers' motivational drivers, e.g. the desire to be social, to belong to a group, or love for the company, enables companies to design strategies that maximize desired outcomes (Santos et al., 2022, p. 15).

Through continual dialogue, the organizations can ensure having communication towards customers via various channels, and the aim should be to engage with the customers throughout the day, not only occasionally (Ashley & Tuten, 2015, p. 15-17).

Engagement can be enhanced by adopting an integrated approach that incorporates user-generated content (Ashley & Tuten, 2015, p. 15-16). This supports the idea that customers are not just recipients, but active participants, and that engagement should be user-centered rather than message-centered, shifting from a transactional to an interactional perspective (Ashley & Tuten, 2015, p. 16-17). Furthermore, the activities of co-creators reflect interactive creation behaviors, including learning, sharing, advocating, socializing, and co-developing (Brodie et al., 2013, p. 111). A company can use task-based and experiential engagement initiatives here. For example, on social media, companies can use task-based initiatives to practice value co-creation where they can involve customers in product development and also strengthen the company's own identity as to how they are perceived by the customers (N. Luo et al., 2015, p. 496; Santos et al., 2022, p. 16; Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 319-322).

Additionally, in customer engagement, creative strategies are essential for shaping how messages are delivered. They help bridge the gap between what marketers want to communicate and what customers are interested in or need to hear. These strategies encompass content and its execution, ensuring that communication is designed to effectively influence the target audience. At its core, creative strategy can be categorized into two main types: emotional/transformational, and functional/informational (Ashley & Tuten, 2015, p. 18). Emotional/transformational messages are used in appealing psychological characteristics, when functional/informational messages are used to evoke the rational side (Laskey et al., 1989, p. 38).

Through these basis an organization can create the aspired image of themselves to the customer, and offer experiences and feelings that they want their services to employ (Ashley & Tuten, 2015, p. 18). Ashley & Tuten (2015, p. 24) found that most often, organizations are using multiple different strategies at once to gain customer engagement. For example, in church services this could mean creating an atmosphere which provokes strong positive emotions to get people engaged, and to return the next week. Here, customer's satisfaction with the service increases their own engagement, creates trust,

emotional experiences and moreover, an emotional connection towards the church (Gla-vee-Geo et al., 2019, p. 13; Moliner-Tena et al., 2019, p. 733). Bravo et al. (2019, p. 1266) encourage organizations to these kinds of in-person interactions with customers, since they have been proven to make a great impact on gaining trust and customer commitment. The in-person bond “results from the accumulation of experiences, leading to a proactive, voluntary and favorable psychological state” (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014, p. 257; Moliner-Tena et al., 2019, p. 733).

In online context, positive engagement can be liking, commenting or sharing the content, and offline this can be volunteering; showing others that they are supporting this organization by action (Dolan et al., 2016, p. 267). On the other hand, there is consumption, or passive participation, which is merely passive behavior, participating without active contribution (Dolan et al., 2016, p. 267). A simple example of this is consuming content online (Dolan et al., 2016, p. 267). The distinctive difference with these engagement types is that the former is encouraging others to act as well, while the latter is more individualistic, not actively impacting other customer (Dolan et al., 2016, p. 267). Organizations would then naturally prefer customers to switch from the consumption phase to positive contribution to gain more recognition and more customers.

There are four main types of online content categories: informational, relational, entertaining, and remunerative. (Annamalai et al., 2021, p. 2). Informational content refers to facts and data that are offered of the product or service, therefore helping the customer to make rational choices based on specifications, features, quality, and performance (Luarn et al., 2015, p. 507). Relational content encourages customers to engage in discussions with each other’s and with the company about the product or service and the experience they have had with it (Luarn et al., 2015, p. 514). Moving on, entertaining content revolves around humor, storytelling, and is meant to capture attention and provide enjoyment (Luarn et al., 2015, p. 514). This type of content is often easy to approach and makes it more engaging and shareable between consumers (Luarn et al., 2015, p. 514).

Lastly, remunerative content offers direct or indirect benefits, often economic incentives like discounts and promotions, and also contests, increasing engagement (Pletikosa Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013, p. 846-847). This content type is common due to the interaction it evokes with calls to action, e.g. inviting people to visit their websites for more details or to leave feedback to gain a discount code (Luarn et al., 2015, p. 508). Also, it is an example of task-based engagement which Harmeling et al. talk about (2017, p. 319). These four categories can be further categorized to emotional (includes entertaining and relational content) or rational content types (including informational and remunerative content) (Kaushik et al., 2022, p. 243).

However, which content category to use is not black and white, and depends often on the industry and target audience, whether it is B2B, or B2C (Swani et al., 2017, p. 84). For example, with B2C, rational appeals are more effective with consumer goods, and emotional ones with services (Swani et al., 2017, p. 84). Also, the engagement strategy should be conducted on a platform that serves the purpose, since not all platforms work the same. According to Santos et al. (2022, p. 15), when the goal is to appeal to consumers' emotions, social desires, or brand exhibitions, platforms should be chosen that are centered on entertainment and sociality, like social media, e.g. Facebook and Instagram. Santos et al. (2022, p. 15) continue emphasizing how informational content shared on social media platforms tend to "attract consumers with other interests and other availability to connect with brands that intend a not so close relationship".

Furthermore, Luo (2002, p. 38-39) notes that the most important aspect of customer engagement online is entertainment. Therefore, if the content has entertainment value for the customer, the probability of having a satisfied customer and repeated visits on the account or webpage is high (Luo, 2002, p. 38-39). Also, Kang et al. (2021, p. 9) write that when a company has personalized or popular content, it is more likely to gain customer engagement. On the contrary, confusing or irritating content makes customers pull back and not engage further (Luo, 2002, p. 39). In a nutshell, having engaged

customers increase revenue, whereas disengaged ones potentially lead numbers to decline (Kumar & Pansari, 2016, p. 497). For instance, studies indicate that even just getting people to “like” social media posts increases the likelihood of customers proceeding with the intention of purchasing (Pöyry et al., 2013, p. 232).

However, when the company initiates the interaction, looking to engage customers, there is a fine line when these initiatives become too much and too intense, leading customers to avoid the company and its content (Kang et al., 2021, p. 11; Santos et al., 2022, p. 16). Therefore, it is crucial to examine the balance, and to be familiar with the targeted customer segment and its tendencies. At best, by using the task-based and experiential engagement initiatives a company can foster long-term customer engagement by reshaping how customers see themselves in relation to the company (Harmeling et al. 2017, p. 313). In this way, engagement marketing promotes lasting involvement by transforming not only the customer’s experience with the core offering, but also their self-perception (Harmeling et al. 2017, p. 313).

### **2.3 Church Member Engagement Strategies**

According to Webb’s study of 250 churches (2012, p. 75), the most effective marketing strategies to attract attendees were internet ministry, personal referral, number of services offered, youth teen ministries, and the financial strength of the church. Moreover, most used statements in advertising to attract members were, for example, mission statements, vision statements, value, philosophy and doctrinal statements (Newman, 2011, p. 5). Furthermore, the most used advertising tools for getting people to sign up to be members were personal referrals, sending monthly newsletters, having a webcast ministry, the number of service offerings, financial strength and church atmosphere (Webb, 2012, p. 77). The effectiveness of approaching people personally is highlighted also by (Aliyu et al., 2015, p. 22). The biggest factors for signing up to be members were a multisided church, leadership for women, satisfying age for congregation, and a good church atmosphere (Webb, 2012, p. 77). Overall, a website that demonstrated various

kinds of ministries was important, as well as outreach programs, like marriage counseling (Webb, 2012, p. 81).

Of course, to be able to lay the foundation to marketing and advertising, segmentation is often used, aside from target marketing (Newman, 2011, p. 2-5). For example, when “planting” churches (e.g. establishing churches to new locations), segmentation might be done of the area to ensure that the church will have the most impact, i.e. attract most people to attend (Newman, 2011, p. 2-3). Outreach done by the church is also considered noteworthy, including internal outreach like summer camps for kids, and external outreach e.g. food banks and daycare centers, or other kinds of social services for everybody (Wrenn, 2010, p. 51).

Once a person becomes a member, engagement is vital for keeping the member pleased and connected to the church operations. Especially small groups have become a popular concept, where members are encouraged to integrate to church activities and are offered to experience a sense of belonging through participation (Whitehead & Stroope, 2015, p. 661). Small groups are especially important from the church leadership point of view, since it roots members to that church, ensuring financial support (Whitehead & Stroope, 2015, p. 662). Volunteering, like community clean outs, is also popular and encouraged, which can happen with the fellow small group’s members, offering social rewards for engagement (Whitehead & Stroope, 2015, p. 661). Furthermore, member and community engagement is overall a tool to achieve goals like partnerships, participation, and being transactional, also helping out members with their own needs (Mann, 2020, p. 7).

When it comes to megachurches and their marketing strategies, the backlash that they often face is that since they are appealing to so many groups, they “represent more of a cafeteria or buffet style of religion”, thus going astray from the core of Christianity (Kuzma et al., 2009, p. 6). Kuzma et al. (2009, p. 6) characterize megachurch buildings as large entertainment-style auditoriums, often located on city outskirts with vast

parking areas. Not unusual are also megachurches that rarely refer to heaven or hell, and have a minimal use of traditional religious symbols, i.e. crosses, Bibles, or stained glasses, which are viewed to deter the target audience (Hunt, 2020, p. 8; Kuzma et al., 2009, p. 6). To appeal to non-church goers, some churches aim to be as inclusive and non-controversial as possible. This often involves avoiding sensitive topics, such as abortion and homosexuality (Hunt, 2020, p. 8). Also, since the vivid, and often extensive use of marketing, there is a prevalent argument over megachurches lacking genuine religious depth or authenticity (Kuzma et al., 2009, p. 2).

Hunt (2020, p. 9) continues the church characterization by adding gyms, schools, divorce centers, aerobics studios, computer centers, shopping arcades, and banquet halls to the list of what megachurch campuses can contain. Essentially, church is much more than a church; it is a place where you can find all the necessities of life. Additionally, the atmosphere and ethos are driven by words such optimism, vitality and purpose (Hunt, 2020, p. 9). It is important to note that the key word to describe these churches is *entertaining*; most churches incorporating videos, modern music, and drama into their services, creating a concert-like atmosphere designed to foster a positive emotional experience and a sense of well-being (Hunt, 2020, p. 8; Kuzma et al., 2009). According to Wellman Jr. et al. (2014, p. 658), music, art, and the overall worship style are huge impact factors on why people choose to first come to the church and then decide on staying there. 40 percent of attendees say that music and art influenced a lot on the decision to stay in the church, and almost 60 percent of people say the same about the worship style (Wellman Jr. et al., 2014, p. 658). The biggest influence on attending has the pastor, according to 67 percent of church goers (Wellman Jr. et al., 2014, p. 658).

Ultimately, megachurches aim to add value to consumers by emphasizing individualistic offerings, such as creating meaningful, bonding and fulfilling experiences (Percy, 2020, p. 122). It could be argued that this is exactly what music, art, and contemporary worship styles are doing. Wellman Jr. et al. (2014, p. 660-661) emphasize the emotional side of the worship (which most often is the first part of the whole service), and describe people

having overwhelming emotions during worship, being happy, and crying. When the pastor comes on stage, lights get dimmed, and the sermons are “understood through the emotions”, and “tend to be more operative at the emotional, rather than rational, level” (Wellman Jr. et al., 2014, p. 661 - 668).

Moreover, it is essential to get people to feel comfortable when they come in for the first time, and a part of making people gain a positive experience is to be intentional in making them feel welcomed (Wellman Jr. et al., 2014, p. 658). This is done by having *greeters* at the door or outside at the parking lot (Wellman Jr. et al., 2014, p. 658). This is also where modern music (the experience resembling often a rock concert) comes handy, since even a person who attends for the first time does not feel awkward or confused of the liturgy (Wellman Jr. et al., 2014, p. 659). Based on their interviews, Wellman Jr. et al. (2014, p. 660) state the following, “churches are attempting to remove barriers to outsiders in order to facilitate newcomers’ participation in the church”. This kind of strategy is grounded in the idea that by removing barriers, the ritual (e.g. the worship) becomes more participated and thus the shared mood gets emphasized (Wellman Jr. et al., 2014, p. 660).

These strategies make sense with a business-like mindset, since “If you are attempting to capture those unsatisfied customers of your competitors, you do not offer them the same product.” (Kuzma et al., 2009, p. 6). Therefore, you must stand out with your market offering and provide something that traditional and mainstream churches do not. Moreover, megachurches have spiked the interest of traditional companies due to the huge amount of prospects (Kuzma et al., 2009, p. 6). Faith-based marketing is one outcome, and it is not unorthodox to see big corporations, like Coca Cola, Mc Donald’s, and Bank of America, sponsoring events around Christian faith (Kuzma et al., 2009, p. 6).

### 3 Methodology

This chapter is going to go through the methodology choices of this study, how data collection and analysis were conducted, and also discuss about validity and reliability of the research. The main objective is to conduct the research in a trustworthy and logical way, as these are the characteristics for a good quality research (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3).

#### 3.1 Methodological Approach

The purpose for research methodology is to provide a systematic approach to solve the research problem and it includes explaining the research methods used, their relevance, and logic behind their selection (Kothari, 2004, p. 8). This study focused on Life.Church and its member engagement strategies that were portrayed on its online platforms. Due to the nature of the study, a qualitative research approach was selected. Typical for qualitative research is to discover answers to questions that aim to uncover a phenomenon's underlying meaning and understand how it is seen and perceived (Eriksson et al., 2008). This approach is appropriate since the main objective of the research was to find out common strategies of member engagement practices applied by the church. Moreover, most qualitative research methods are flexible towards changes during the research process, thus allowing the researcher to change the study structure or focus points in the middle of the writing process if needed (Eriksson et al., 2008, p. 26). Also, a qualitative approach concentrates on subjective assessment of attitudes, opinions and behavior, and research in such a situation is a function of researcher's insights and impressions (Kothari, 2004, p. 5).

The theory presented in the earlier chapter was to build up a foundation, offer general understanding, and provide directions for the study but is not complete by itself as this study aimed to build up new theory. Therefore, the goal was to conduct research without any pre-existing assumptions or theories thus making the data approach *inductive*.

Typical for inductive research is that the patterns or theories emerge only after the researcher has collected and analyzed the data, so the researcher keeps an open mind and allows the findings to guide the development of broader ideas or theories (Aliyu et al., 2015, p. 17).

### **3.2 Case Life.Church**

Life.Church was founded by Craig Groeschel, now the senior pastor, and a few other people in the state of Oklahoma back in 1996 (Life.Church, 2016). The church started with only 40 people gathering in a garage and quickly moved to having services in a bicycle factory (Life.Church, 2016). Since then, having merged with many churches over the years, the church has 44 locations in 12 states and a weekly attendance of 76,000 people in total (Life.Church, 2023). In addition, approximately 91,000 people attend online services each week through Life.Church Online (Life.Church, 2023). Moreover, Life.Church is part of the Evangelical Covenant Church denomination which differs from other denominations by emphasizing believers having “the personal freedom to hold varying interpretations on theological issues that are not clearly presented in Scripture” (Life.Church, n.d.).

The church uses a multichannel approach for its outreach and has a significant presence on all the main social media platforms, having over 3 million followers in total across Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok. Furthermore, they have a website full of information, and also a platform for kids only (LifeKids) (*Watch LifeKids Media*, n.d.). In addition, there is an app tailored for children (Bible App For Kids), and an app designed specifically for the church community called Life.Church app, which allows the users to follow church services, connect with the local communities, share prayer requests, participate in community events, and give donations to the church (Life.Church, 2025).

Their third app has gained perhaps the most influence, having been downloaded over 700 million times worldwide (Smietana, 2024, p. 15-16). The app is a Bible app called YouVersion, and founded by the church's innovative leader and pastor, Bobby Gruenewald (Smietana, 2024, p. 15-16). It focuses on engaging users with the Bible, offering "more of a daily experience," according to Gruenewald (Smietana, 2024, p. 16). Gruenewald also tells that the app enables people to share prayer requests and contact each other to ask for prayer, also giving notification when someone indicates that they are praying (Smietana, 2024, p. 16). Moreover, the church produces a podcast called the Life.Church Podcast, has an online store selling goods and apparel, and a band called Life.Church Worship which has over 250 thousand listeners on Spotify monthly.

Life.Church was chosen for this study due to its compatibility with the megachurch definition given in the first chapter, its multichannel approach to marketing, and its vast content available online. To summarize the main characteristics, weekly attendance number exceeds 2,000 people, the role of the founder is significant, and there are diverse social and outreach ministries, small group systems and contemporary worship styles (Hartford Institute, 2020a; S. Hunt, 2020). Furthermore, Life.Church has extensive marketing practices, appeals to broad audiences and maintains theological neutrality with letting people decide on their personal theological preferences – megachurch definitions given by Kuzma et al. (2009, p. 4-5). However, even when the church can theoretically be categorized as a megachurch, publicly it denies its association with the megachurch term. There is no in-depth information publicly available on why the church tries to avoid the term, but they do state their positioning as follows, "We wholeheartedly reject the label mega-church. We are a micro-church with a mega-vision." (Life.Church, n.d.).

Based on this statement, the church clearly tries to position and differentiate itself from megachurches, highlighting a sense of smallness with the word *micro*. A reason for the differentiation could be the aim to separate Life.Church from the stereotypes of megachurches, or to execute a differentiation strategy to stand out on the church

market in the US, which, according to Kuzma et al. (2009, p. 6) would be business-like thinking, typical for megachurches. Although Life.Church refers to itself as a “micro-church,” its size, scale, and alignment with expert definitions of a megachurch support categorizing it as such. Therefore, this study considers Life.Church a megachurch and uses it as an example of the broader megachurch phenomenon.

### 3.3 Data collection

According to Nowell et al. (2017, p. 2), describing thoroughly what basis data was gathered and analyzed is crucial since vagueness in the process evokes untrustworthiness in the readers’ eyes, and can undermine the reliability of the research. Therefore, careful documentation of the analyzation process and decision making in data gathering is to be provided.

The data collection started first by observing Life.Church’s content online. Multiple sources were observed to get a well-rounded view of their marketing strategy on different channels, and to gain an understanding of where member engagement was at focus. These sources included:

1. Life.Church’s main [website](#)
2. Social Media: Facebook ([@Life.Church](#)), Instagram ([@life.church](#)), YouTube ([@Life.Church](#)), TikTok ([@lifechurch](#))
3. Mobile apps: Life.Church App, YouVersion Bible App, Bible App For Kids
4. YouVersion [website](#)

At the beginning of this study, the goal was to collect data from social media (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube), in addition to the apps and websites. However, when going through the church’s social media channels, it became obvious that they were used differently (compared to the website and the apps) to market the church. The emphasis on social media was not on member engagement, as it clearly was, and is, on the

websites and the apps. Rather, the church's focus on its social media platforms was to post low effort, low threshold content, consisting mainly of sharing Bible verses and clips of church sermons. However, there was only a little effort on trying to actively gain or encourage people for engagement, unlike the website and the apps. For example on Instagram, there were no direct links to anything on the whole account, excluding [a link](#) on the accounts bio, which directs to a website where all relevant Life.Church information and sources are mentioned. Even Instagram posts seldom had any captions on them. This goes the same for TikTok and Facebook.

On the other hand, YouTube was used for sharing church sermons, e.g. talking about the stories in the Bible, thus not being optimal for data collection of member engagement that could be relatively easily to analyze, and to be compared to data from other sources. Also, the Bible App for Kids was excluded from the data because the app itself was very simple and contained stories for children who likely cannot read yet, thus text made for engagement purposes was minimal. Furthermore, a decision was made, after observing video content from all the sources, to collect only data in text formats, and not to include audio sources, with the exception of one video from the Life.Church website. This decision was done due to the vast amount of text format data which was sufficient by itself to reach saturation.

Therefore, data was collected from four sources; Life.Church's website, YouVersion's website, the Life.Church app, and the YouVersion app. A total of 153 phrases and statements were collected over a two-week period, from April 15 to April 29, 2025. The data collection was done to an Excel sheet (access the Excel clicking [here](#), or at the very end of the thesis on Appendix), where in addition to the phrases and statements, the source (website/app), link to the source (if available), date of the review, and additional information was added. Saturation in the data collection was reached on this study when all the sources were carefully read through several times, and no new relevant phrases or statements arose, thus there was nothing new to report to the data collection [Excel sheet](#).

### 3.4 Data Analysis

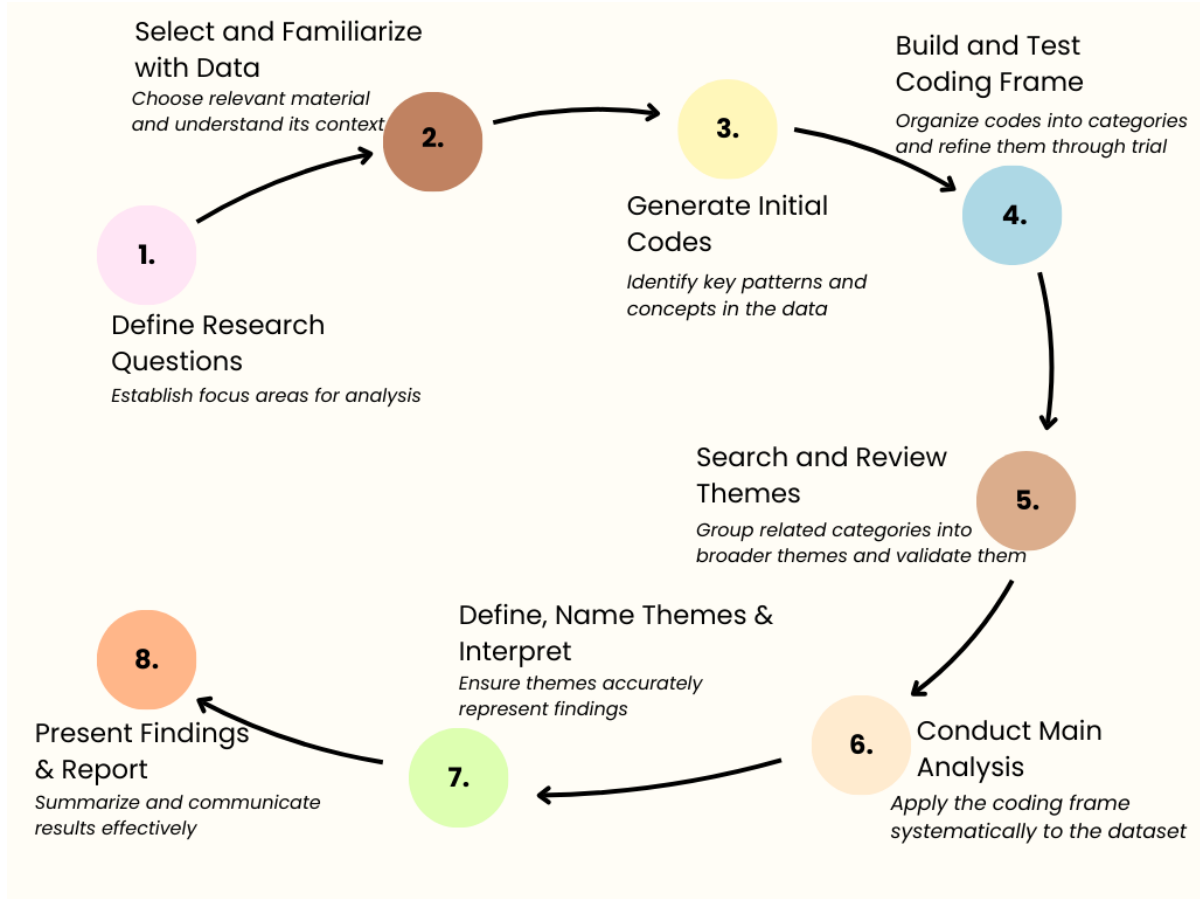
This study used a qualitative content analysis (QCA) and thematic analysis to review and interpret the data. Content analysis is widely used in the field of marketing, particularly in advertising, where it has evolved from examining the structural and mechanical aspects of ads for effectiveness to exploring underlying social and cultural themes (McDowell, 2004, p. 220). Content analysis can be qualitative, focusing on the meanings behind messages, not only counting message variables, but aiming to identify patterns, themes, or shared categories (McDowell, 2004, p. 219). It is suitable for digital and textual marketing materials making it a logical choice for this study.

Furthermore, qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to focus on selected aspects, and therefore does not offer a holistic view of the topic at hand (Schreier, 2012, p. 4). Many qualitative research methods leave the researcher with a lot of data making it hard to draw a distinction between what is useful and what is not, however, QCA reduces data by focusing only on information relevant to the research question and by categorizing specific details into higher-level abstract themes, enabling for comparison while sacrificing some specificity (Schreier, 2012, p. 8). Furthermore, it allows flexibility for the researcher, since “you will always have to tailor your coding frame to your material” (Schreier, 2012, p. 7). The goal is to make the coding frame not only reliable, but also valid, by making sure that the categories effectively represent the concepts in the research questions (Schreier, 2012, p. 7).

According to Schreier (2012, p. 6), qualitative content analysis always involves the same sequence of steps as shown below in figure 2. These are deciding the research questions, selecting material, building a coding frame, dividing the material into units of coding, trying out the coding frame, evaluating and modifying the coding frame, main analysis, and finally, interpreting and presenting findings (Schreier, 2012, p. 6).

To support the qualitative content analysis, thematic analysis was chosen because it allows to identify, analyze, organize, describe, and report themes found within a dataset, and is easily approachable for those new within the research realm (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). Nowell et al. suggest a six-phased process to maximize the trustworthiness of thematic analysis (2017, p. 4). These phases are; to familiarize yourself with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define and name themes, and produce the report (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 4).

Elo et al. (2014, p. 8), emphasize the importance of conducting a qualitative content analysis systematically for trustworthiness. Therefore, a framework was done combining Schreier's (2012, p. 6) and Nowell et al.'s (2017, p. 4) phases on qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. Furthermore, these phases are also compatible with Bengtsson's (2016, p. 9) perspective on how to conduct content analysis which empowers the validity of the procedure. Thus, we are left with the following framework to help with data analysis on this study.



**Figure 2.** Combined Analysis Framework

The data analysis started with getting familiar with the content. The researcher has to be familiar with the data to gain an understanding of the topic as a whole, to then be able to gather context into meaning units (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 11). Meaning units are the smallest segments that provided valuable insights for the researcher and consists of sentences or paragraphs that are related to each other, addressing the research question outlined in the study's aim (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 11). In this study, the meaning units were sentences, paragraphs, and statements collected from the websites and apps to the Excel sheet. On the [Excel](#), these are visible on the column D, and they formed the original data and foundation for this study. Therefore, part 2. of the combined analysis was done (figure 2). Overall, the Combined Analysis Framework, as visualized on figure 2, was used as a foundation for the data analyzation process.

After meaning units were identified, an open coding process was done where units were labeled into codes (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 11). This was done by first conducting two rounds of coding, to then end up with the final codes. The first round of coding was done while collecting meaning units (i.e. phrases and statements) into the Excel, and here, recognized patterns were written down from the units (presented on the column A on the [Excel](#), and part 3. of figure 2.). Due to the inductive nature of the study, codes could change during the analyzation progress when more data came into analyzation. After all the units were gathered from the websites and apps, the second round of coding was done, where all units were looked though again, and the first codes were used as help to form more coherent and clear codes (column B on the Excel, part 4. on figure 2.). These second codes described the strategic elements found from Life.Church's sources.

The second codes were further categorized into the final codes, which were the member engagement strategies (represented on the column C on the [Excel](#)). This part was conducted according to the steps 5, 6, and 7 of the Framework on figure 2. During the data collection and analysis process, it became clear that most units reflected more than one member engagement strategy. As a result, each unit was assigned to one or two engagement strategy categories, depending on its content. The categorization was made possible by first learning and getting familiar with the data, to then be able to make distinctions and observe differences between different units efficiently without compromising accurate categorization.

Overall, Bengtsson (2016, p. 12) emphasizes the importance of remaining in the data during the whole analyzation and categorization process, and not forming categories and themes which are not evidently rooted in the data. The categorization into the member engagement strategies, or final codes, was considered done when every unit was carefully processed and categorized, and therefore, a reasonable and logical explanation for the research question Q3 was reached.

### 3.5 Reliability and Validity of the Study

When talking about validity, which refers to the truthful reflection the phenomena studied, and reliability, which testifies that same results would be obtained if the study were replicated (Richards & Morse, 2013), bias must be taken under considered. Bias refers to “an influence that produces a distortion in the study results” (Polit & Beck, 2004, p. 36), therefore having a straight correlation to the validity and reliability of the study. Polit and Beck (2004, pp. 36-37) say that bias cannot be eliminated completely but there can be procedures in place to minimize it. Furthermore, five main places in which bias may occur are listed; participant bias, researcher subjectivity, biased samples, flawed data collection methods and weak study design (Polit & Beck, 2004, p. 37). The first one, participant bias relates to outside participants, like interviewed people, and thus does not need to be reviewed in this study.

Researcher subjectivity means personal views or expectations which can shape how researcher interprets or collects data, and to avoid this, researcher must maintain a self-reflective stance throughout all phases of the study and strive for complete transparency at every stage of the research process (Elo et al., 2014, p. 8). In this study, this was done by conducting an objective literature review to form a firm understanding of the phenomena, reporting thoroughly each stage of data collection and analyzation, and providing all material used for transparency. On the other hand, biased samples happen when inclusions or exclusion criteria on the data collection and study objectives are not clearly stated (Polit & Beck, 2004, p. 37). This could result in selecting data that represent too narrow of a viewpoint to offer objective outcomes and conclusions. Therefore, study limitations have been disclosed in the first and fifth chapter of this thesis, as well as data collection and analysis methods in this chapter.

Furthermore, flawed data collection methods indicate poorly designed tools which may misrepresent the concepts being measured (Polit & Beck, 2004, p. 37). Lastly, weak study design appears if the research isn't structured properly and thus may not yield objective or reliable results (Polit & Beck, 2004, p. 37). Therefore, to minimize bias, data collection

methods and study design, which align best with the with the research question and resources at hand, have been carefully presented in this chapter.

Trustworthiness is a key criterion for evaluating the reliability of a study. Elo et al. (2014, p. 2), state that when aiming to build a trustworthy study, researcher must make sure that “findings are worth paying attention to”, this being especially important in an inductive approach, as it does not use theory-based categorization in data analysis. Moreover, trustworthiness in a qualitative research can be assessed with five criteria; *credibility* (no relevant data has been left out), *dependability* (stability and consistency of data and decisions over time), *conformability* (objectivity and neutrality of findings), *transferability* (applicability of results to other contexts or groups), and *authenticity* (fair and faithful representation of different realities) (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 13; Polit & Beck, 2004, p. 36; Whittemore et al., 2001, p. 530).

Additionally, study validation is tied to the five forementioned criteria of trustworthiness. Elo et al. (2014, p. 8) phrase validation to be “an attempt to assess the accuracy of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants”. Furthermore, building a trustworthy content analysis is a multidimensional process, which “begins with thorough preparation prior to the study and requires skills in data gathering, content analysis, trustworthiness discussion, and result reporting” (Elo et al., 2014, p. 8). Overall, thorough reporting on how results were created is essential throughout the whole research process (Elo et al., 2014, p. 1).

A factor which can influence the trustworthiness of this study is the use of AI. Therefore, it is important to note that during the writing process, OpenAI's ChatGPT-4 artificial intelligence platform was used. It was mostly used as a tool to help with the correction of English grammar and vocabulary to make the text as fluent and coherent as possible. Additionally, it was used to help in determining the best methodological choices (which were gathered first by the author from literature) to narrow down the options and find the ones best suited for this study. Furthermore, the author has followed the university's

guidelines and regulations regarding the use of AI. The author is aware that AI cannot be solely relayed on, especially when talking about academic writing, and therefore, all material generated by AI has been evaluated and reviewed critically to the best of the author's ability. Thus, the author takes full responsibility for the content of this publication.

## 4 Findings

Five member engagement strategies were found from Life.Church; Spiritual Lifestyle, Community and Belonging, Making a Difference, Personalized Experience, and Empowerment and Growth. Furthermore, the strategies, their elements and goals are explained in table 1. The contents of table 1 are going to be discussed and explained more in depth in the following chapters, and the strategic elements are used as a foundation on explaining each strategy thoroughly.

Strategy	Strategic Elements	Strategy Goal
1. Spiritual Lifestyle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spiritual Experiences</li> <li>• Lifestyle Integration</li> <li>• Faith Inspiration</li> </ul>	Focuses on spiritual growth through integrating faith practices into daily life.
2. Community and Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusivity and Diversity</li> <li>• Building Relationships and Community</li> <li>• Invitations and Evangelism</li> </ul>	Makes people feel welcomed, connected, and encouraged to build relationships and invite others.
3. Making a Difference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteering and Serving</li> <li>• Financial Giving / Donations</li> <li>• Personal Motivation</li> <li>• Gaining Purpose and Meaning</li> </ul>	Highlights opportunities to be part of something bigger and to have purpose through helping others and making donations.
4. Personalized Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personalized Engagement</li> <li>• Digital Convenience</li> <li>• Customizable Experiences</li> <li>• Ease of Access</li> </ul>	Provides customized user experiences and ensures access anywhere, anytime through technology.
5. Empowerment and Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career Development</li> <li>• Personal Development</li> <li>• Leadership Growth</li> <li>• Receiving Help to Improve</li> </ul>	Emphasizes development in personal lives and through various career opportunities, while offering help to succeed in them.

**Table 1.** Strategies and Explanations

The prevalence of each strategy is further depicted in table 2, as well as how common each strategy was in every data collection source, i.e. on the websites and the apps. The strategies are mentioned in the first column, the second column shows each strategies total count in the data and the percentage relative to the total amount of data, the third

one shows the same but specifically for all the data collected from Life.Church’s website, the fourth one for the Life.Church app, and finally the last one of the data collected from YouVersion. For example, strategy 1. Community and Belonging occurred in 55 phrases and statements in total. Furthermore, strategy 1. had a 36% repetition rate in the data which made it the second most used member engagement strategy overall. The appearance of each strategy is relevant to point out since it helps us to understand the importance that Life.Church has placed on each member engagement strategy on their marketing. The occurrence of each strategy, as seen in table 2, is also going to be further discussed in the following chapters.

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>All Data (n=153)</b>	<b>Life.Church Website (n=102)</b>	<b>Life.Church App (n=28)</b>	<b>YouVersion Website &amp; App (n=23)</b>
1. Spiritual Lifestyle	64 (42%)	39 (38%)	15 (56%)	10 (43%)
2. Community and Belonging	55 (36%)	41 (40%)	9 (33%)	5 (22%)
3. Making a Difference	53 (35%)	37 (36%)	8 (30%)	8 (35%)
4. Personalized Experience	51 (33%)	22 (23%)	11 (41%)	18 (78%)
5. Empowerment and Growth	23 (15%)	18 (18%)	4 (11%)	1 (4%)

**Table 2.** Prevalence of Strategies

## 4.1 Spiritual Lifestyle

The use of Spiritual Lifestyle as an engagement strategy by Life.Church is substantial. It is the most prevalent member engagement strategy when reviewing all the collected data (table 2). This strategy focuses on individual’s spiritual growth through integrating faith practices into one’s life. Moreover, the emphasis is on daily life integration, where faith is something one experiences every day, practicing is habitual, and the church offers means and guidance to implement these practices. This includes both something the individual experiences as a group with other members of the church, or alone, using the

material the church offers, like the apps. Thus, a part of the church's strategy is offering material and experiences that inspire people and give them motivation and excitement for building spiritual habits and keeping up with them.

As stated already, this is the most prominent strategy in the data, with a 42% appearance rate overall (table 2). It is also by far the most common strategy used on the Life.Church app, having a 56% appearance rate which is significantly higher than the prevalence of any other strategy on the app (table 2). On both the Life.Church website and YouVersion channels, this is the second most popular strategy, having a 38% appearance rate on the Life.Church website, and a 43% rate on YouVersion channels (table 2).

This strategy has three elements: Spiritual Experiences, Lifestyle Integration, and Faith Inspiration. *Spiritual Experiences* emphasize personal, emotional, and participatory encounters with faith and the church. It focuses on the experiential dimension of spirituality and invites individuals to feel, express, and act on their faith through worship and events. Also, symbolic acts like baptism are encouraged, making a public declaration of one's faith and a commitment towards taking their faith journey seriously. Overall, Spiritual Experiences are designed to create memorable and transformative moments that deepen members' connection to God and the church community through active participation and shared celebration.

*"Experience Life.Church for Yourself" – Life.Church website*

*"What to Expect: High-energy worship music" – Life.Church website*

*"Ready to join the movement? - Get involved at Switch" – Life.Church website*

*"Get Baptized - Celebrate your commitment to Christ through baptism!" – Life.Church app*

Moving on, *Lifestyle Integration* stresses the importance of involving faith in an individual's life, rather than considering it to be something confined to church services or specific moments alone. Through this, the church reinforces the idea that faith should be

seamlessly woven into daily routines, decisions, habits, and identity. It is a multidimensional practice, involving what you wear, what you listen to, and how you spend your time. Therefore, the core message is that faith is meant to be lived, not just observed.

Images 1 and 2 serve as examples of this. Image 1 is a screenshot from the Life.Church app, where signed in members can collect milestone badges as they attend to services and as they serve at the church. They can also see how many times they have attended to services each month and year, as well as how many times they have served during that time. Furthermore, image 2 is a screenshot from the YouVersion app, which shows a streak of how many days the user has used the app in a row and how many times she or he has returned to the app on that day. It also shows how many days in total the user has used the app in the passing year.

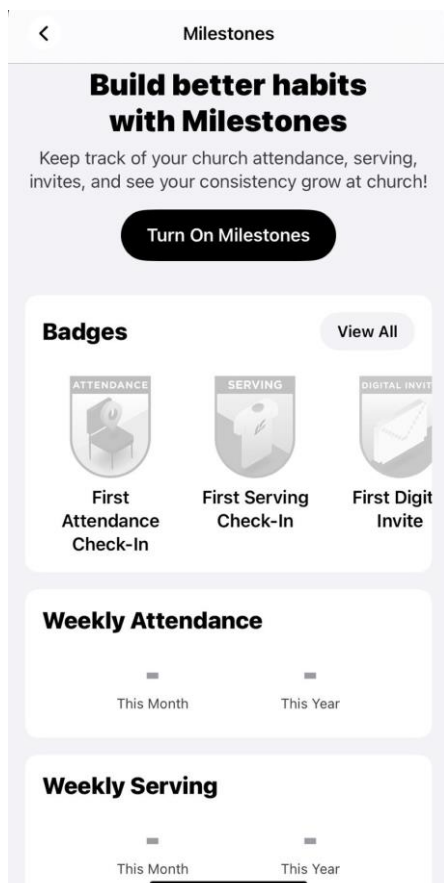


Image 1. Build Milestones (Life.Church, 2025)

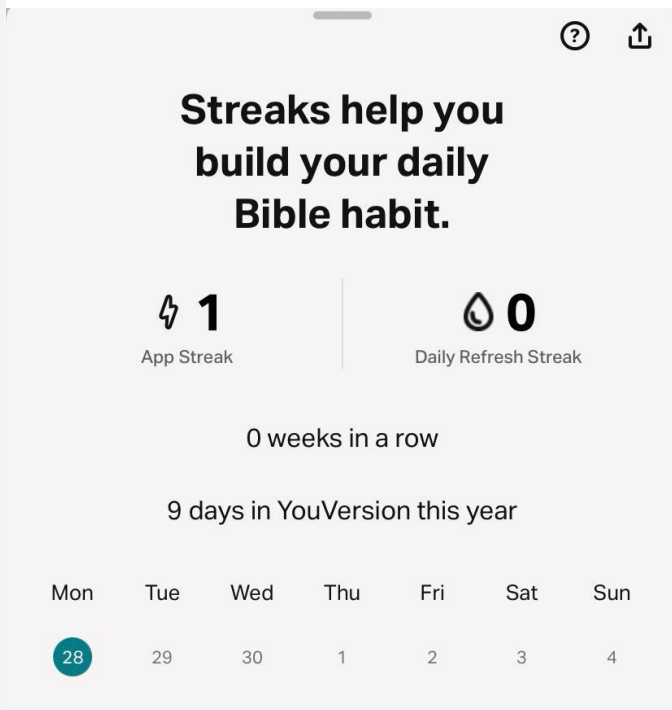


Image 2. Bible Streak (YouVersion, 2025)

Here are also a couple of examples of this element in a text format.

*“Worship isn’t just the songs we sing. It’s our way of life.” – Life.Church website*

*“Following Jesus is more than a Wednesday night experience—it’s an every day, every moment lifestyle. Check out these resources created just for students!” – Life.Church website*

*“Encouraging and challenging you to seek intimacy with God every day.” – YouVersion website*

Lastly, the purpose for *Faith Inspiration* is to motivate and strengthen members’ faith through storytelling, teaching, and shared spiritual journeys by using real-life stories and personal testimonies. Like in the Empowerment and Growth strategy, this strategy uses the main pastor Craig Groeschel as an inspiration and seeks member engagement through his charisma. Furthermore, the sermons from the main pastor, or other pastors, are meant to provide spiritual guidance and to help people stay rooted daily in their faith.

*“Stories of how God is using Life.Church to lead people to become fully devoted followers of Christ.” – Life.Church website*

*“We’re all on a journey together—a journey full of stories. And you’re a part of the Life.Church story! Here, you’ll see some amazing ways God is working through your church.” – Life.Church app*

*“Life.Church Online - Timely messages from Senior Pastor Craig Groeschel or a Life.Church pastor” – Life.Church website*

*“What to Expect: Video teaching from Senior Pastor Craig Groeschel or a Life.Church pastor” – Life.Church website*

## **4.2 Community and Belonging**

Community and Belonging strategy is focused on making people feel welcome, connected, and encouraged to build relationships and invite others. It is the second most common member engagement strategy found from the Life.Church data overall, appearing in 36% of all the phrases and statements. As we can see from table 2, when

comparing the three different sources, this strategy is the most prevalent in the Life.Church website, where 40% of the units are categorized with this strategy. Furthermore, the Life.Church app follows with a 33% prevalence rate, and YouVersion with 22% (table 2). Based on these findings, we can state that the main website is the most focused on trying to engage members with community and belonging- related incentives.

Furthermore, this strategy has three main elements that highlight different ways through which the church aims to gain engagement from its members. These elements are Inclusivity and Diversity, Building Relationships and Community, and Invitations and Evangelism (table 1). With *Inclusivity and Diversity*, the goal is to assure that people are accepted as they are and they do not have to change the way they dress, speak or believe to participate in the church's activities. Through this, people are invited into a community that appears to be accepting, caring, inclusive and diverse. And with these values, people are welcomed and can form relationships in which they are appreciated as they are. Additionally, if members can experience the feeling of being accepted as they are, this could result in them being more active in the church and being brave to try new things, like new community activities with other members.

*"At Life.Church, you'll be welcomed into a friendly, casual environment by people who are excited to see you. And don't worry—you won't get lost. We'll help you find your seat so you have the best experience. We can't wait to see you!"*  
– Life.Church website

*"When you attend a physical Life.Church location, you'll find that everyone has their style, from casual to professional. We believe that church isn't about what you look like or wear; it's about who you are on the inside. Come just as you are."*  
– Life.Church website

*"We create a space where every student can belong, even before they believe."*  
– Life.Church website

In the second element, *Building Relationships and Community*, the church is active in advocating people to form relationships in the church with other members and to be a part of a community. For example, it has established a system called LifeGroup, where people can freely start their own groups in the Life.Church app. People can sign in to the

app and either join existing groups, of which there are several thousand, or if they do not find a group specific to their needs, start a brand new one. Some groups meet online, some in person, and members can find groups within their own neighborhood. This is an effective way to get people into a community, and therefore, also to the church community.

*"Find your people. You were designed by God to live in community. Now is the perfect time to join a LifeGroup, where you can be real and belong. - Find a LifeGroup or Start a LifeGroup" – Life.Church website*

*"Life Is Better Together - LifeGroups create a space for people to intentionally share their lives with others, grow spiritually together, and encourage each other through the highs and lows of life." – Life.Church website*

*"Join a LifeGroup - Find the people you can grow, laugh, and pray with." – Life.Church app*

The last element is *Invitations and Evangelism*. In this, the church encourages people to spread the message about the church to their family and friends and to invite them to come along, as well as evangelize to other people, sharing their own experiences, faith, and who Jesus is.

*"Access digital graphics for Life.Church invites to share on social media. Grab Graphics, Start Inviting!" – Life.Church app*

*"You can help change someone's life. Use the buttons below to invite your friends and family to Life.Church" – Life.Church app*

*"As a church we will do anything to reach people who don't know Christ and that's why we throw parties with a purpose so that you can feel confident to invite your friends so they can hear about the good news of Jesus and do it in a place where there are people who love them and care about them" – Life.Church website*

### 4.3 Making a Difference

Making a Difference engagement strategy highlights opportunities to be part of something bigger and to have a purpose in life. This is done by making financial donations to the church and by helping others. One of the key characteristics and incentives used in this strategy is encouraging people to participate through appealing to personal interests and motivation to help, whether someone would aim to be a better person in general, or to act in a way pleasing to God. Overall, this strategy has a very similar appearance rate across all the data and sources, varying from 30% to 36% at the most. It has a 35% appearance rate in the data, making it a third used strategy (table 2). Additionally, on the Life.Church website and YouVersion channels the usage was at a very similar rate, at 36% and 35% (table 2). Moreover, on YouVersion the appearance was a little bit lower, at 30% (table 2). Based on these appearance numbers, we can state that this is used as a very stable strategy by the church; it does not have the lowest or the highest emphasis on any source.

There are four elements under this strategy: Volunteering and Serving, Financial Giving and Donations, Personal Motivation, and Gaining Purpose and Meaning (table 1). First, *Volunteering and Serving* is used as a member engagement strategy that invites individuals to take an active role in their church community by using their gifts to serve others and make a meaningful impact. The act of serving and volunteering is narrated in a way which makes it appealing due to the impact it can have on other people and the whole community.

*"Serve Like Jesus Did - Make a difference by using your God-given gifts to serve at Life.Church Online" – Life.Church website*

*"Serve on the Tech & Worship Team at your location. When you serve with the Tech & Worship Team at your Life.Church location, you help create an environment for people to be in God's presence. No matter your skill level, there's a spot for you." – YouVersion website*

*Serve With a Local Partner : You can show God's love where you live by volunteering with a Local Partner committed to a cause you care about. Each Life.Church location partners with like-minded local organizations to make a significant impact in our communities. – Life.Church website*

*Financial Giving and Donations*, on the other hand, is leveraged as a strategy that encourages individuals to participate in the church's mission by contributing financially. The church combines donating to be part of spiritual life, making personal faith intertwined with generosity towards the church. Essentially, they reference the Bible saying that one should give 10% of their income to the church. Therefore, giving becomes a spiritual act, a way to deepen one's faith, and to engage with the church. Also, by framing giving to make a difference locally and globally, members are invited to see their financial contributions as an extension of a bigger purpose.

*"Your giving is changing the world. - You can support the work Life.Church is doing in your community and around the world" – Life.Church website*

*"Make Your Giving Recurring. Consistently returning the tithe to God has never been easier. See how God will create a deeper heart of generosity in you when you make your gifts recurring. Just tap the recurring toggle and set the frequency that works for you." – Life.Church website*

*"Set Up Offerings- God made each of us unique including how we make a difference through our giving. You can go beyond the tithe and give directly to a fund that's meaningful to you. Check out all the ways you can give an offering to Life.Church" – Life.Church website*

Examples of the element *Personal Motivation*, which is often emphasized when talking about donating money:

*"See how God has been faithful as you've given over time, how your own generosity has grown, or how you plan to be generous in the future. Manage your upcoming gifts and view your giving history at anytime from anywhere." – Life.Church website*

*"When you tithe, you're trusting God with your finances. Tithing is a biblical principle. God calls us to give the first 10% of our income back to Him. We've seen God*

*provide abundantly in our church, and we know He will provide abundantly for you and your family when you put Him first in your finances. In fact, it's the one area in the Bible where God tells you to test Him." – Life.Church website*

*Gaining Purpose and Meaning* is used as an incentive for members to engage with the church, to then receive a feeling of purpose and meaning. By participating in the church activities and offerings, the church conveys to its members a message that they can be part of something bigger than themselves and receive purpose, which they maybe otherwise would not. Furthermore, there is an emphasize of how every person has a unique, God-given purpose and that the church can achieve bigger things with the help of its member than it could without them.

*"With your help, we're sharing the love of Jesus. Life.Church is committed to translating the Bible, helping communities access clean water, abolishing extreme poverty and injustice, caring for refugees, rescuing victims of human trafficking, and much more. Your generosity plays a key role in equipping our Global Partners to do this work." – Life.Church website*

*"We're grateful you're a part of our YouVersion Community. We know that intimacy with God has the power to transform lives, and living generously is one way we can draw closer to Him. Imagine what could happen when we partner together to help people around the world seek God every day!" – YouVersion app*

*"YouVersion exists to connect everyone, everywhere, to God's Word every day. Could this be your next step? You were made by God, on purpose, for a purpose. God gave you unique skills and abilities to impact people all over the world. And when you serve with YouVersion, you can deepen your relationship with Jesus while you help people seek God every day." – YouVersion website*

#### **4.4 Personalized Experience**

Personalized Experience highlights customized user experiences and with this strategy, the church conveys an atmosphere where every member is met at the level they are at. This means that everyone's different needs, lifestyle, situations, and preferences are considered by offering personalized options and targeted content, for example, there are different media categories to every age group. Also, the church ensures access to its

services anywhere and anytime through technology and a large network which molds into multiple different lifestyles. Whether a person wants to attend a church once, or even four times a week, online or at a church building, everything is up to the individual.

The Personalized Experience strategy has the largest appearance out of all strategies on the YouVersion channels at a rate of 78% (table 2). This means that no other strategy is as prevalent on any other source than Personalized Experience on the YouVersion website and app, with almost all phrases and statements enforcing this strategy of engagement. On the Life.Church app, this is the second used strategy at a 41% rate, whereas on the Life.Church website it is the second least used strategy, at 23% appearance rate (table 2). Overall, this strategy has a 33% appearance rate on the data (table 2).

This strategy has four elements (table 1). Personalized Engagement and Customizable Experiences are going to be discussed together due to their similarities. Furthermore, Ease of Access and Digital Convenience are likewise going to be explained together. *Personalized Engagement* and *Customizable Experiences* represent member engagement ways where content and activities are tailored to individual needs, life stages, and interests to foster deeper spiritual growth. These strategies allow members of all ages to engage with faith in ways that feel personal, age-appropriate, and applicable to their daily lives. Also, by offering age specific content right from the early childhood, children grow up consuming the church's content and attending its events, increasing the possibility that, when grown up, they will become active members and already have a community in place in the church. Carefully tailored content, and ways to participate, ensures that the church stays relevant even through life changes. Examples of the use of this strategy include:

*"We're dedicated to partnering with parents to lead children to become fully devoted followers of Christ. Through age-specific lessons, activities, and small groups, children from birth-6th grade learn biblical truths and real-life lessons they can apply to their lives every week in LifeKids." – Life.Church website*

*“Switch addresses real issues that students face each day. Here, you'll find messages and clips designed for 6th-12th grade students.” – Life.Church website*

*“Introduce your littlest ones to the wonder and Word of God through age-specific lessons, fun animation, activities, and more.” – Life.Church website*

Moreover, *Ease of Access* and *Digital Convenience* represent member engagement strategies which remove barriers to participation by making the church's resources accessible everywhere, in other words, the threshold to engage has been made as low as possible. With features like offline Bible access, audio versions, and personalized reading plans, members can engage with the church's content in a way that fits their specific schedules and lifestyles. It could be said that the church's goal is to create connection and engagement, which happens so seamlessly that at the end, it is not something one thinks about doing, but something that merges into one's everyday life. Demonstrations of phrases representing these elements are below.

*“Churches Near Me: Find churches in your area that use YouVersion”  
– YouVersion app*

*“Experience it anywhere. Choose from more than 2400 Bible versions in over 1600 languages on your computer, phone, or tablet -- with many available as audio Bibles.” – YouVersion website*

*“Plans: Reading plans help you read a little of the Bible each day, marking off passages for you when you complete them. We have plans about all kinds of things, and for different lengths, from just a few days to a whole year! – YouVersion app*

*“Get a free Bible for your phone and tablet. Online or offline–Bible App is available any time. No ads. No purchases.” – YouVersion website*

#### **4.5 Empowerment and Growth**

The Empowerment and Growth strategy refers to the ways in which the church emphasizes development in personal lives, e.g. through various career opportunities, and often offering help to succeed in them. This is the least used strategy in all the data, and across all sources, having a 15% appearance rate overall (table 2). Out of the sources, this

strategy is most common on the Life.Church website, with also an 18% rate of occurrence, following with an 11% rate in the Life.Church app (table 2). However, there is only one representation of this strategy in YouVersion, making the appearance rate 4% (table 2). Therefore, there is barely any emphasis given by Life.Church for this strategy in YouVersion sources. These findings could indicate the strategy being supplementary to all the other strategies and is perhaps created for a specific audience or a target group.

Moreover, there are four elements in this category: Career Development, Personal Development, Leadership Growth, and Receiving Help to Improve (table 1). In the first element, *Career Development*, the church presents their career opportunities to be more than just regular jobs. Rather, a job can be a spiritual calling and a way to serve a higher purpose. Therefore, by working at Life.Church, one has the possibility to develop him or herself holistically, including professional, spiritual, and personal areas.

*YouVersion Careers: God's word has the power to transform lives and you can help get it to the world. – Life.Church website*

*“We believe a job is something you do, but a calling is who you are. God calls people from a wide range of backgrounds to work at Life.Church, but He has us all here for one reason: to lead people to become fully devoted followers of Christ.” – Life.Church website*

*“God is doing something special here, and we hope this is the place where your skills, talents, and passions meet. We want to equip our team to thrive in every area of life, which is why we provide benefits that matter.” – YouVersion website*

*Personal Development* is the second element used in Empowerment and Growth. The church offers people the opportunity to discover a deeper purpose, which in the context of faith is their God-given purpose, and through this people can take active steps toward personal growth. This element enables engagement by making personal growth feel accessible and spiritually meaningful, and by helping members feel supported as they pursue a more purposeful life.

*“What Does God Want Me to Do? You have a purpose and a calling. Find both here.”  
– Life.Church website*

*“Trusting God with everything will bring you the peace, freedom, and deeper faith He wants for you. Ready to experience it for yourself? -I want to Take That Step”  
– Life.Church app*

*Leadership Growth* is slightly different from the other elements, since it is mainly aimed towards a specific audience, men. The phenomenon has its own podcast, Leadership podcast, and the church places importance on it since it is easily visible to everyone who searches through the church’s website. Therefore, it was fitting to point out with the Empowerment and Growth strategy. The focus in this element is to empower people to recognize and embrace their leadership potential as part of their God-given identity, and as a natural extension of who they are. Additionally, the podcast revolves mainly around the main pastor, which is typical for megachurches, since they often utilize the fame and familiarity of the main pastor to gain engagement (Webb, 2012b, p. 246).

*“Leadership. It’s in Your DNA. It’s the way God created you. You don’t have to know it all to be a great leader! In this podcast, you’ll get timely insights from Pastor Craig and his guests to make the most of your leadership potential, you’ll learn to solve problems in new ways...” – Life.Church website*

*“Dive in. Start growing with some of Craig’s most powerful leadership topics”  
– Life.Church website*

The final element is *Receiving Help to Improve*. Receiving help, that is, the church offering to help, is prevalent in many of the phrases and statements that have been categorized into this strategy, but some are strongly concentrated around this element. Naturally, by enabling people to come and seek for help and guidance with a low threshold ensures that members are more likely to engage, rather than to be passive in case help is needed. Here are some examples:

*“We want to talk with you and support you. You can talk with a pastor or caring volunteer who’d love to help you figure out your next step at church and in your relationship with Christ.” – Life.Church website*

*“How can we help you? Thanks for getting in touch with us. We look forward to getting to know you better! To get you to the team who can best serve you, here are some of the areas we connect people to most frequently.” – Life.Church website*

*“Prayer Needs - We would be honored to pray with you! We’ve got teams passionate about doing just that, so please share how we can be praying for you this week.” – Life.Church website*

## 5 Discussion

The main objective of this thesis was to study what type of customer engagement strategies megachurches use to gain and keep their members. Furthermore, three research questions were set to help with the research process. The first two questions, “How is marketing defined and understood within the context of Christian faith?” and “What is customer engagement in online contexts?” were explored and answered through a literature review. The third question “What engagement strategies can be found from Life.Church’s online platforms?” was navigated through a thematic content analysis, in which five main engagement strategies were identified: Personal Lifestyle, Community and Belonging, Making a Difference, Personalized Experience, and Empowerment and Growth. This chapter is going to address three theoretical contributions, offer managerial implication to churches, review limitations of the study, and the applicability and recommendations for future research on this area.

### 5.1 Theoretical Contributions

*The first contribution* offered by this study is that churches can use marketing without compromising faith and Christian values, opposite to what the earlier literature argues (Wells, 1994). From Life.Church, we can note that a church can integrate business-like marketing strategies alongside carrying out Christian values. Criticism from Wells (1994, p. 82) for church marketing is that it’s focus is on the social side with other people, instead of meeting God and surrendering to God. However, the significant emphasis on one’s personal faith and spiritual development, which could be referred to “meeting God” and surrendering to God, can be seen throughout Life.Church’s member engagement strategies, especially with Spiritual Lifestyle, which is the most prominent strategy. Therefore, such criticism from Wells (1994) is questioned.

Barna (1988) suggests churches’ product to be the relationships it fosters with Jesus and others, with the core offering being the message of salvation, which is supported

especially with the strategy of Spiritual Lifestyle. However, Kuzma et al. (2009, p. 2) criticize megachurches over lacking genuine religious depth or authenticity if extensive marketing is at play. Life.Church's strong focus on personal spiritual growth and integrating faith into daily life, particularly through Spiritual Lifestyle, suggests that despite its extensive use of marketing strategies, the church prioritizes helping its members actively live out and deepen their faith.

Moreover, the strategy Personalized Experience tailors content to users' needs and life stages. Wells's (1994, p. 26) perspective on churches focusing on pleasing people's needs is seen with this strategy, as the church aims to offer highly personalized content and experiences. However, when Wells (1994) views pleasing people as something to be avoided, Life.Church does not avoid it, but rather focuses on advertising its personalized, individualistic offerings in all the member engagement strategies they use. It is important to note that alongside the emphasis on personalized offerings, the church encourages all its members to serve the church community, as well as other communities around the church with the strategy Making a Difference. Furthermore, according to Wrenn (2010, p. 53), church should advocate a way of living that surpasses one's self-interests and makes a person aim to live out a selfless life, which is also reinforced by the Making a Difference strategy.

Furthermore, the five member engagement strategies and a diverse approach to member engagement by Life.Church supports previous findings from Ashely & Tuten's (2015, p. 24) which suggest that most often, organizations are using multiple different strategies simultaneously to gain customer engagement. Moreover, each engagement strategy by Life.Church serves a specific purpose and goal and can be divided into either task-based or experiential engagement initiatives, a categorization done by Harmeling et al. (2017, p. 139). This presents *the second contribution* of the study, linking consumer engagement strategies to megachurch member engagement strategies. For example, in the Community and Belonging strategy, the church encourages people to take action to build relationships and invite others to join by sharing links and by word-of-mouth, which can

be categorized as task-based engagement initiatives. Also, according to Prentice et al. (2019, p. 344), emphasizing inclusion and relationship-building is an effective method in customer engagement to gain and keep customers.

Furthermore, personally approaching people is highlighted in Life.Church's strategies, aligning with research on effective ways to engage customers by Aliyu (2015, p. 22). The church offers multiple kinds of events where people can meet each other and experience meaningful moments together, which demonstrates the utilization of experiential engagement initiatives (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 139). Small groups programs, LifeGroups, are one example of this, and earlier literature also emphasizes the importance of small group activities on church member engagement (Whitehead & Stroope, 2015, p. 661 - 662). The personalization of LifeGroups, and the way in which members are able to identify with each other in them, has a tremendous impact on customer engagement, leading to conversion according to Prentice et al. (2019, p. 344).

Additionally, volunteer programs in the strategy Making a Difference are an example of both task-based, and experiential engagement initiatives. The members can help other members (or potential members), which refers to task-based initiatives, but also they are able to share experiences with each other, which builds emotional connection and is a characteristic of experiential initiatives (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 319-321). Volunteering activities are also studied to increase the feeling of member and community belonging and are encouraged in member engagement (Whitehead & Stroope, 2015, p. 661; Mann, 2020, p. 7). As suggested by Harmeling et al. (2017, p. 313), by using the task-based and experiential engagement initiatives, a company, in this case the church, can enable long-term customer engagement by reshaping how members see themselves in relation to the church. Ultimately, the church member's self-perception can change in favor of the church (Harmeling et al. 2017, p. 313).

*Lastly*, this study questions Life.Church's refusal to identify as a megachurch by showing that its structure and practices align closely with established definitions of megachurches. Life.Church has a multisided church, offers multiple different ministries on their website (Personalized Experience), and has various outreach programs (Making a Difference), all qualities which Webb (2012, p. 77-81) lists to be significant factors on signing up people to be members in megachurches. Through Life.Church's personalized offering and focus on inclusivity with carefully crafted messaging, the church fits well with Hunt (2020) and Kuzma et al. (2009) characterization of megachurch practices which include being molded into the contemporary culture and being known for inclusivity. Additionally, the offering of positive emotional experiences can be seen emphasized through all the member engagement strategies by Life.Church, as well as the emphasis on the sense of well-being, also characterizations of megachurches by Hunt (2020) and Kuzma et al. (2009). Moreover, typical characteristics like an optimistic and purposeful atmosphere (e.g. Making a Difference), advertising worship music, and putting emphasis on the main pastor can be also seen in the marketing strategies of Life.Church (Hunt, 2020, p. 9; Wellman Jr. et al., 2014, p. 658).

Based on the findings of this study, and the current literature, we can conclude that Life.Church's member engagement strategies are similar to those which traditional businesses use to engage their customers referred to in the literature. Furthermore, significant similarities between megachurch practices described in the literature, and those employed by Life.Church, can be detected. However, many of the strong criticisms that some scholars have towards megachurches are proven to be wrong in Life.Church's case. The most criticisms megachurches have is of lacking spiritual authenticity, having weak doctrine and teaching, and focusing on only pleasing people and their selfish needs, forgetting the core teachings of the Bible (Afolabi et al. 2024; Hunt, 2020; Kuzma, 2009; Webb 2012a; Wells 1994). Nonetheless, Life.Church demonstrates real effort on emphasizing the importance of one's individual faith and spiritual growth and has developed multiple free channels to support that growth.

## 5.2 Managerial Implications

When a church uses highly personalized content and its members can rigorously filter all content online, there is a possibility that people “cherry pick” what best suits for them, and thus crucial Christian teachings or doctrine can be left unnoticed by church members. The main point by Wells (1994, p. 67) within all his criticism is the worry of churches who redefine gospel based on the audience. Therefore, this study encourages and reminds churches that even when you cannot control what your members consume and how they spend their free time, you can control and make sure that all the content you put out is supported and rooted firmly in the teachings of the Bible. Even if the content and church strategies could be categorized or labeled as practicing business-like models, it does not automatically mean that they are against Christian values. It is up to the church to make sure that they are acting according to the values of the faith, thus business practices and strategies should be evaluated carefully.

Moreover, a diverse engagement approach is encouraged, rather than relying on a single strategy of engagement. Tailoring initiatives to meet emotional, spiritual, and relational needs builds a foundation to enhance long-term participation and loyalty. For example, Life.Church emphasizes building relationships and communities inside the church, which enables people to become rooted members. Value co-creation is another example that could be included in the diverse engagement approach, in church could be offering volunteering programs. Furthermore, co-creation is supported by earlier literature as an effective way to offer value to members and provide them opportunities to learn, share, and socialize (Brodie et al., 2013, p. 111).

Additionally, this study shows that Life.Church places strong emphasis on supporting its members’ personal spiritual growth. Rather than focusing solely on building a connection with the church itself, Life.Church provides relational tools that help members develop a deeper, personal, and long-term relationship with God. The church’s approach aims to cultivate lasting spiritual habits rather than offering short-term emotional highs.

This strategy aligns with existing literature on how churches can engage members through marketing without compromising core faith values. Therefore, it is recommended as a model for other churches, both for enhancing member engagement and for guiding individuals in their personal faith journeys.

### **5.3 Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study possesses many limitations which many of them were carefully considered ahead of time, and a result of deliberate elimination to minimize the possibility of the scope expanding accidentally and ensuring that the focus was only on answering the research questions. The focus on only one megachurch gives a one-sided, case-specific perspective on the megachurch phenomena, and for example, as stated before, all the criticism towards megachurches does not apply to Life.Church. Therefore, the findings cannot be said to represent the whole phenomena or cannot be generalized to be true in all of Us based megachurches. Furthermore, data was collected primarily from the Life.Church website, Life.Church App, and YouVersion App, and social media channels were excluded due to limited engagement-specific content. This focused approach may have missed additional engagement strategies specific to only social media. The same goes with the selection of only text-based content.

Additionally, only the researcher's outside perspective was included, and no members or staff members of the church were interviewed. However, this could have led to a more bias and subjective results, describing and explaining personal experiences and feelings, which was not the aim or goal of this research. Although trying to avoid with careful planning and studying existing literature, bias is always possible in qualitative thematic analysis, where the categorization and theme development rely heavily on the researcher's own interpretation. Moreover, the data gathering, and therefore findings, are tied to a specific time frame, and it has to be considered that with time, the findings from this study can be outdated.

Lastly, as stated also in the beginning of this paper, theological interpretation was excluded. There was no theological evaluation, nor did this paper engage with theology or biblical exegesis to evaluate whether the church's marketing strategies align with Christian doctrine. Therefore, spiritual or doctrinal legitimacy is not critically examined from Life.Church's marketing practices as that was not the objective of this research where the goal was to only observe member engagement strategies of the church.

For future research, this study suggests exploring how marketing could practically be executed while maintaining Biblical teachings and holding Christian principles as the main guideline. There is a lot of discussion on academia over the debate on whether marketing should be used or not, and case studies of churches where marketing and business practices have completely taken over churches and how they function, making them very secularized. So, examples of extremes are easily available. However, there is only a little focus on how churches could practically approach marketing without getting distracted with the benefits that traditional business models can offer and thus losing the authenticity of the church. A practical, low scale framework on marketing implementation for churches could lower the threshold to talk about marketing in the church context. Lack of knowledge and establishing decisions to personal opinions can lead to uncertainty and difficulty in decision making, which then prevents flexible discussion around the topic of marketing and can hold back the vitality of the church.

In today's marketing-driven world, avoiding marketing altogether can be unrealistic. Instead, offering careful guidance on how to implement marketing, especially for smaller churches, can help create a positive impact, rather than reinforcing the fear and uncertainty that often surround the topic. It can feel impossible for a church to exist and deal with mandatory fixed costs without having any kind of business-like models or strategies in place to ensure that at least the most necessary expenses are met. Moreover, based on the findings, this study joins Wrenn's (2010) perspective on proposing that church marketing can be done well, and in consideration of Biblical teachings and Christian principles. At best, marketing can have significant positive characteristics and sides to it, like

in the case of Life.Church, where the church aids people to find communities, purpose and meaning in serving other people, and to use free time wisely.

To conclude, when a church uses its resources and marketing efforts to guide people in the direction of spiritual development, to make a positive difference on a societal level, and towards other Biblical values, it can minimize the trap which Wells (1994) talks about, where the church caters its offering, and redefines the gospel to only to please its audience. However, to effectively market these kinds of values, the church must first demonstrate them by its own actions to prove that they are what they speak and teach about, creating a sense of authenticity and credibility for their audience.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Life.Church Research Data

Access Excel of the research data through Google Drive link:

[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/10mfhEjPxmvcvPq-I90hMqr1XFvC3BHM/edit?usp=drive\\_link&oid=104084980080069584871&rtpof=true&sd=true](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/10mfhEjPxmvcvPq-I90hMqr1XFvC3BHM/edit?usp=drive_link&oid=104084980080069584871&rtpof=true&sd=true)