

## USING INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) TO ACTUALIZE THE CHURCH'S MISSION

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### **ABSTRACT**

The twenty-first century is generally referred to as information age. This is an age in which Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has revolutionized communications and the speed of information dissemination. ICT refers to a broad field encompassing computers, communication equipment and services rendered by them. The church has been benefitting from ICT facilities in times past. It can benefit more from the manifold possibilities of ICT in our time. This paper attempts to review available evidences on how ICT has revolutionized communications in our society, particularly as it relates to actualizing the church's mission. In an attempt to do so, the paper looks at ICT briefly and the role it plays in achieving church's ministry. ICTs, like the print media, television, cell phone, computer and the internet have greatly enhanced church ministry, speeding up communications, enlarging outreaches and getting feedback quickly. ICT has now made it possible to have a church without walls, thus overcoming the problems of distance and space. Advantages and disadvantages associated with the usage of ICT are outlined, as the church needs to know them to effectively use ICT. From the paper, it is clear that if ICT is adequately used, it will help the church to fulfill her threefold mission of evangelism, edification and worship. Suggestions are finally made for a better and smooth usage of ICT by churches.

**Keywords:** ICT, mission, fulfill, social network

### **Introduction**

The universal Church consists of all believers in Jesus Christ. It is expressed concretely in local assemblies of believers who, unified by the Holy Spirit in confession and mission, gather regularly to worship God, build up one another, minister the Word, observe the scriptural ordinances, and actively make Christ known throughout the world, by word and deed. The universal Church and every local assembly have a threefold Ministry: (a) Evangelism, that is, going into the world to make disciples, through proclamation of the gospel in word and deed; (b) Edification, that is the process of bringing every believer into personal and corporate maturity; and; (c) Worship, that is giving heartfelt praise to God, praying corporately and listening to his word as revealed in the Word of God.

The realization of the tripartite mission of the church was pursued through the establishment of churches, educational institutions, medical agencies and other avenues. Over the years, these were considered adequate for the propagation of the gospel. With the emergence of ICT, it has become imperative to incorporate the technology in evangelization and develop new strategies to function more meaningfully in the new age.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is enabling technologies which include both hardware and software, necessary for delivering of voice, audio, data (low speed and high-speed), videos, text and internet services, from one point to another (Aluko, 2004). The effect of the new technology is gradually being felt by almost every facet of the society in this region. Castells (2000) aptly states that ICT has revolutionized the world. Kumar and Kar

(1995) observed the way in which Information Technology (IT) had extensively penetrated the lives of people and predicted that every individual in the world will be affected by it in the 21st century.

It is a truism that the 21st century is now generally referred to as information age. In the age, globalization has become possible through Information and Communication Technology (Osuji, 2002). The Information Age (also known as the Computer Age, Digital Age, or New Media Age) is a period in human history characterized by the shift from traditional industry that the industrial revolution brought through industrialization, to an economy based on information computerization. Globalization, as used above, is the process of international integration, arising from the interchange of world views, products, ideas, and other aspects of culture. Put simply, globalization refers to processes that increase world-wide exchanges of national and cultural resources. Several (but not limited to) Scholars Ossai-Ugbah (2011), Ukodie (2004); Brakel and Chisenga (2003) rightly maintain that ICT will be the driver of development in the 21st century and beyond. An organization like the Church can make use of ICT to achieve its aims and objectives.

Many churches have embraced the use of technology, in the propagation of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, in our time. ICT facilities have become indispensable, in a multitude of businesses (Fitterer & Rohner, 2010; Hynes, 2010), in a multitude of countries (Dimelis & Papaioannou, 2010), for a multitude of purposes (Martinez-Caro & Cegarra-Navarro, 2010; Sharif, Irani, & Weerakkody, 2010). Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been used in various ways, in the workplace, to increase productivity and efficiency over the years. The use of ICT is no longer confined to the workplace as before. Outside the workplace, technologies support other activities, many that are unrelated to productivity and efficiency, such as exploring, wondering, loving, and worshipping (Gaver, 2001).

ICT has enabled a convergence of technology, for effective communication of information for our contemporary society. We do, we act and we receive things through IT and its devices. Every facet of life is simplified by ICT. This is the main reason why individuals, groups, firms and organizations have embraced this technology, in order to meet up with the development of the world. ICT will help churches to improve the way they conduct services, effectively manage worship services as well as church data and information. The church will easily fulfill her mission of evangelism, edification and worship with the aid of ICT facilities. Even though some churches have been benefiting from the provisions of ICT, more can be tapped from the numerous potentials of ICT. The paper tries to review available evidences on ICT and its importance in church ministry.

### **ICT, What It Is**

Information Communication Technology (ICT) entails using Information Technology and its devices to aid communication. ICT devices or applications may include: radio, television, cell phones, computer and network, hardware and software, satellite system, etc. ICT is a field of work and study that "includes technologies such as desktop and laptop computers, software, peripherals, and connections to the Internet that are intended to fulfill information processing and communications functions" (Statistics Canada, 2008). ICT is "the combination of informatics technology with other related technologies, specifically communication technology" (UNESCO, 2002). Thus, ICT uses the newest technologies to process and communicate information. ICT is concerned with the storage, retrieval, manipulation, transmission or receipt of digital data. ICT is often categorized into two broad types of product: (1) The traditional computer-based technologies (things you can typically do on a personal computer or using computers at home or at work); and (2) The more recent, and fast-growing range of digital communication technologies (which allow people and organizations to communicate and share information digitally).

Today, ICT has experienced a convergence that has intertwined communications with photography, communication with information access, and software with real-time technology. This is shown in the growing number of hand-held devices that can access the Internet and telecommunication networks. This development has greatly improved the way things are done.

### **Role and Function of ICT in Church Ministry**

The church has consistently adapted technologies in ways tied to the Christian faith. Scholars suggest that the emphasis of Christians on evangelism is one reason they have historically adopted communication technologies more aggressively than other world faiths, such as Islam and Judaism (Carrol, 2000). This desire to evangelize, or inform others of God's kingdom, is evident in Protestants' early use of Gutenberg's famous printing press to distribute the Bible (Eisenstein, 1983). More recently, telephone entrepreneurs broadcast Church services over their lines (Fischer, 1992). Christians were quick to adopt radio and television as mediums to proselytize and grow their faith (Bruce, 1990). Mobile phones and emails are used to send and receive prayer requests and to mobilize group prayer efforts (Katz, 2006). Several Christian oriented websites, Christian social networking sites, and video-sharing sites exist, all for the purpose of evangelization. Some of the ICTs used by the church are outlined below.

The print media is the oldest mass media and is one of the most useful instruments for Christian ministry till today. Some believe that literature is the most effective and far-reaching medium used by all Churches or missions to spread the news (Soraard, 1998). Print media includes newsletters, newspapers, booklets, tracts, magazines, books, and other information letters, which are very commonly used by today's Church organizations. For instance, the Catholics publish the Catholic Star; the ECWA publish the Challenge Magazine while the Herald of his coming is published by the American Evangelicals. Several other publications are used in furtherance of the gospel. People are adequately imparted and informed through these publications.

Many people are reached, edified, blessed and possibly won to the Lord, through the broadcasting of sermons, music and other discussions aired on radio stations. For instance, Radio ELWA established by ECWA, based in Liberia, impacted many before it went off during the Liberian war of 1980s. The Gramophone was used to record songs and messages for evangelistic purposes. The radio seems to be impacting more on people in villages since people in towns and cities prefer media that combine both audio and video. However, the Internet radio has come and is really impacting lives.

Like radio sermons and discussions, other programmes are broadcast on the television. People can hear and see what is going on through live telecasts. The television plays a vital role to the people, especially those who do not have access to the internet. It could reach a large group of people at the same time. A Christian Minister can use the television to speak or to spread the message of God to large numbers of people at a time.

Telephone ministry is also useful nowadays. Apart from making calls, the Short Message Service (SMS) which is far cheaper, can be employed. With the invention of the cell phone, it is now possible to send and receive SMS. A large number of people now own their cell phones. The Church takes advantage of this and reaches people far and wide with the gospel.

Computer is used in Christian Ministry to produce hard and soft copy of materials, data and information. Almost all the printed media are the outcome of computers. Almost all Churches and missions use computers to type, edit and print out documents. Internet also involves the use of computers with other devices and gadgets. The Internet links people, countries and organizations together. The whole world is made one village, through the internet. The linking of the people in the network thus provides the field for ministry. Internet facilities like websites, social network sites, blogs, e-mails, media services, discussion sites and other electronic means play specific and essential roles and functions in doing Christian Ministry.

Many Churches, especially city/town Churches, set their own websites and blogs, so that their ministry can be reached globally. Internet accessing is very easy and fast, such that the information could reach its destination in seconds. ICT facilities will help promote the Christian faith, strengthen the Church, enlarge its outreaches, as well as get feedback on time.

Cyber Church refers to a wide variety of ways that Christian religious groups can use the internet to facilitate their religious activities. Many city Churches are very much connected to the internet. We can then call them Cyber Churches. Christians use the internet and get involved in all kinds of internet usage like websites, blogs, social networks, chat rooms, etc. The usage is widening into the field of Christian Ministry, in order to promote the faith. So, the connection of the Church with internet facilities is called Cyber Church. The function of the Cyber Church is to promote Christian faith, etc. through internet.

The mass media has become a big part of the lives of individuals. The power of the mass media has become so strong that its significant role in the world today is glaring (Bartleby, 2016). There is no doubt that social media have gained wider acceptability and usability and are also becoming probably the most important communication tools among people (Badmos, 2014). Social media have connected many people together and provided a platform to easily communicate. Social media networks are websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. Social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp have the potential to shape the way the world communicates. Social media allow the church to reach a wide variety of people (McKinney, 2014). The media have taken over many of the social functions of the institutionalized religions, providing both moral and spiritual guidance and sense of community (Hjarvard, 2008)

From the foregoing, it is now possible to have a church without walls, through ICT facilities. This became clear during the Covid-19 lock down. Pastors were connected to their congregations electronically. Prayers, singing, preaching, collection of offerings were all made electronically. In fact, the Internet has bridged the gap of one-way type of communication of radio and television. With software like zoom, communication is both ways, from pastor to congregation and from congregation to the pastor. This has taken away the barrier of distance and limitation of space of a four-wall church, providing a wall-less church.

### **Advantages of ICT**

Using Information Communication and Telecommunication places the user at advantage such as:

- a. Giving and taking of information, sending and receiving of messages through verbal and non-verbal means. ICT helps a Church to communicate information about Church goals, programmes and activities in large volumes, over long distances, without damaging loss due to noise and interference.
- b. A wide variety of information can be transferred through a telecommunications system, including voice and music, still-frame and full-motion pictures, computer files and applications, and telegraphic data (Werner, 1988).
- c. Processing of data is much faster on a computer. For example, calculating an annual budget on a spreadsheet is instantaneous; doing the calculations by hand would take some time. Since the invention of the computer and other electronic systems, calculation and other things have become so easy that people do not suffer to calculate anymore.
- d. Repetitive processing can be better done using computerized machinery. Humans get tired, lose concentration and generally get fed up, if they have to repeat the same task over and over again. Robotic machinery will perform the same task repeatedly, with consistent quality and never need a break, or software programs can be written to process all the records in a database.

- e. Searching for data is much faster. For example, it becomes easy finding particular information about a particular member of the Church, on a computerized database system, whereas it would take a Church secretary some minutes to locate a folder in a paper-filing system. Today, the computerized database system is used in many offices, factories, institutions, churches and others for record keeping and easy retrieval.
- f. Data storage capacity is almost limitless in a computer system. With the use of a computer system, people can store their data as much as they want. The storage capacity of a computer is very high, compared with the human brain and office flat files. A computer system with about 300GB of memory can store huge amounts of documents, without any problem.
- g. Data communications are fast and accurate. Data transmitted over a network will arrive at its destination, anywhere in the world, in just a few seconds. For example, a computer-user can place an order for an item on an Internet website, and it will be received immediately, while posting an order in the mail would take a day or several days to arrive.
- h. Data can be output on a computer in a variety of different formats. Example, monthly Church growth rate for a year can be printed as a spreadsheet, displayed as a graph, or as a multimedia presentation involving text, sound, graphics and animations.

### **Disadvantages of ICT**

As beneficial and indispensable as ICT is, it still has a lot of limitations. Some of the disadvantages are given below:

- a. Websites can get hacked into. Hacking simply means to use a computer or other technological device or system in order to gain unauthorized access to data held by another person or organization. It is so obvious that a good number of people today do steal on-line, especially those doing some on-line businesses. They spend much of their time on the internet for business, but they use it as a medium for stealing from others.
- b. Viruses can come through the internet, damaging the files in one's computer. A lot of viruses in people's PCs (Personal Computers) are gotten from the internet, in the course of downloading some contaminated files, and this is very dangerous for people who do not know much about the work and use of internetworking.
- c. People start to rely on computers too much and use them to do everything. In this generation, the use of computers has rendered a lot of people useless. In many institutions, most students don't attend lectures any longer, some do not study their books, all their assignments and term-papers are done on the internet. They do rely on this and therefore became lazy in the class. It is also the same in other fields of work.
- d. Repetitive strain injury, strain on tendons in the arms, back problems and painful eyes are caused by prolonged use of computers. It is quite true that a lot of people suffer eye problems due to the contaminations they get from the computer screen. Majority of computer users suffer back problems because they spend most of their time sitting with their computers. All these are disadvantages of ICT.
- e. "Work sometimes does not look exactly like what you want it to look like" (Millar, 2005). From the numerous benefits of ICT given above, the Church will be able to fulfill her threefold mission of evangelism, edification and worship. The Church will be able to meet people far and wide and evangelize them through ICT facilities. Edifying programmes, activities and write-ups will also be readily available for all the members of the Church. Most Churches now conduct online worship thereby bringing people together from far and wide, to worship the Lord.

## Conclusion

The acronym ICT covers any product that will store, retrieve, manipulate, transmit or receive information electronically in a digital form. It is concerned with the storage, retrieval, manipulation, transmission or receipt of digital data. ICT has manifold benefits when used to support what humans have been doing. The church can benefit from the manifold possibilities of ICT. ICT will help the Church to easily and timely give and take information, send and receive messages, promote the Christian faith, strengthen the Church, provide Christian education, enrich and promote Christian faith, enlarge its outreaches as well as get feedback. ICT, if adequately utilized will help the Church in fulfilling her threefold mission of evangelism, edification and worship.

## Suggestions

Having seen the numerous potentials of ICT, it is hereby suggested that the church should embrace ICT, and use it to fulfill the mission committed to her by the Savior. Other suggestions are that:

1. An ICT unit should be created by each church, so that it will be in charge of connecting the church to the larger society.
2. ICT training and education should be conducted, from time to time, for the members of the unit to keep them abreast of the latest development in the ICT world.
3. Churches should purchase ICT infrastructure and make its development and use a deliberate policy.

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