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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ORALITY, ORAL PRACTICES AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IN WEST AFRICAN CULTURES

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Abstract

In West African countries, despite Western education, oral culture still exists, and it is more prevalent in some societies within the region. Oral tradition has been one of the means by which some West African people educate, instruct, and worship. Christian worship services are conducted virtually in oral form in many indigenous churches across the region. This study demonstrates that authentic Christian worship is not made possible only through written materials. Many West African Christians are able to express their faith and worship without being able to read and write. The study examines some of the characteristics of Christian worship done without much use of written materials. It highlights some of the problems and benefits of oral communication in Christian worship.

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Introduction:-

Christian worship has been described in the Western, protestant tradition as “worship by the book,” perhaps because worship activities are guided by the Bible, hymn books, and the liturgy. If Christian worship is only made possible through written materials, then it will be difficult for the majority of Africans who are non-literate or semi-literate to worship as Christians. However, this is not the case; Many West African Christians are able to worship and express their faith without being able to read and write. Undoubtedly, authentic Christian worship is made possible among the people of West Africa as a result of oral culture. Oral tradition has been one of the means by which the people educate, instruct and worship.

Based on these premises, the following paper will give an overview of orality in West African cultures and seek to answer four questions for the West African worship context: (1) How is it possible for people who cannot read and write to be able to worship meaningfully as Christians? (2) How do some preachers or church leaders minister without written materials, and how do the worshipers function without written materials? (3) Are there ways by which West African Christians express their faith that does not depend on reading and writing? (4) What are the various types of genres of oral expression used in Christian worship by West African Christians? The conclusion will summarize how orality has impacted Christian worship in various parts of West Africa and suggest ways by which West Africa Christians can better appropriate the gift of oral culture in Christian worship for future generations. Each of the four questions will engage literature and views of worship scholars and theologians on the impact of orality on Christian worship in West Africa. Finally, several popular West African worship songs popular in evangelical worship will be analyzed theologically and musically, and their performance practice discussed with respect to oral practices.

Before we undertake the subject of oral cultures in West Africa, we will first consider the setting of West Africa as a region.

An Overview of West Africa Regional Setting

West Africa is the term given to the westernmost regions of Africa, and it is mostly situated in sub-Saharan Africa. According to Peter Clarke, “West Africa can be divided geographically into three main regions: the coastal, forest and savanna regions. The coastal region extends from Mauritania in the north to the Niger Delta in the south and stretches inland for a distance between 40 and 120 kilometers; the forest region stretches across West Africa from Sierra Leone to Cameroon a distance of some 480 kilometers and varies in width from a few to over 100 kilometers, and the savanna region is situated between the forest region in the south and the Sahara desert to the north.”¹ As a result of colonization by Britain and France, most West African countries speak English or French as their official language. There are about 16 nations that make up the countries of West Africa. The nations include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast (Cote d’Ivoire), Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. However, it is taboo for some Africans to have anything to do with the church and literacy, but such people groups could be reached easily through oral communications.

Observable Characteristics of Oral Worship

In ancient times, long before the arrival of Western educational methods and Western civilization in the region, African societies preserved and passed information from one generation to the next by mouth within the context of an oral culture. Oral transmission is also the means by which important traditional values and morals were taught. Interestingly, oral culture still exists today despite Western education and is more prevalent in some societies within the region than others. John Mbiti has observed that “most African people did not invent an alphabet for the art of reading and writing. Therefore, they could not keep writing records of their history. Instead, they passed on information from one generation to another by words of mouth.”² In some West African cultures, for example, drums are used to convey important messages.

In Africa, oral culture permeates both traditional religious context settings and the Christian church, manifesting itself in storytelling, dance, music, symbols, and proverbs. Most Christians prefer to worship and express their faith in oral form. As James Maxey notes, “The majority of African Christians today engages and expresses their faith in oral forms. Not only do they hear this faith proclaimed in sermons, prayers, and songs, but they themselves proclaim it in their own prayers and songs.”³ African Christians have been expressing their theology orally. Although many of the theology expressed would have been lost because they were not written down. Concerning African oral theology, James Maxey writes, “Oral theology is produced in the fields by masses in African languages through songs, sermon teaching, prayers, conversation and the like. It is theology in the open air, often unrecorded, often heard only by small groups and audiences and is generally lost as far as libraries and seminaries are concerned.”⁴

Much attention has been paid to the study of oral community which is created by the practice of orality, a study of “the collection of characteristics (cognitive, communicational, and relational) that are typical of cultures that function orally.”⁵ Sadly, much of the discussions have resulted in distractions because, while it is true that literacy might be beneficial, orality also has its blessings. The study of orality among scholars has exposed reasons why some societies respond well when the gospel message is communicated to them through their preferred means of receiving information.

A lineage of orality studies in English can be traced from that of Milman Parry (1902-1935), and Eric Havelock (1903-1988), Albert Lord (1912-1991), and Walter Ong (1912-2003). Their works on orality could be regarded as the trailblazers in the study of orality. Walter Ong’s notable contribution was his differentiation between primary and secondary orality. Ong identified primary orality as that which exists among “persons totally unfamiliar with writing, while secondary orality exists among people who depend on technology for their existence and functioning on writing and print.”⁶ More recent scholars have, however, criticized Ong’s sharp distinction between orality and

¹Peter B. Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), 1.

²John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1975), 4.

³James A. Maxey, *From Orality to Orality: A New Paradigm for Contextual Translation of the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 69.

⁴Maxey, 69-70.

⁵Grant Lovejoy, “The Extent of Orality” in *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 5, no. 1 (2008), 121-134.

⁶Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 6.

literacy. Notable among them is Ruth Finnegan. Based on her work on oral cultures in Africa, Finnegan has argued that “there is nothing strange or unusual in the interaction of oral and written forms.”⁷

While some of the arguments against Ong’s differentiation of orality might be reasonable, I find his distinction between primary and secondary orality useful in discussing the people groups of West Africa. However, I would like to add a third group which, in my view, falls in the middle. This group is comprised of semi-literate or those who have been exposed to some form of education. It should not be surprising to find these three groups existing and living together within a society in West Africa.

It is worthy of note that traditional African culture continues to shape the religious activities of West African Christians in specific ways. Oral forms of communication thrive in worship. Indigenous music and the local arts are used to communicate the gospel in many of the local churches. It should not be a surprise to find in some societies Christian worship that is done virtually in oral form without much use of written materials. As James Krabill observes, “The life and worship experiences of indigenous churches/movements across sub-Saharan Africa are for the most part oral in character.”⁸

The following are important characteristics that are observable in oral worship:

Absence of worship order

Unlike a worship service in a literate community, worshipers in an oral society do not function with a written order of worship. The worship leader who could be the church leader dictates the success of events in worship. In such a situation, worshipers usually follow. The leader determines the flow of worship. In most cases, church members could have memorized the normal sequence of worship because the sequence has been repeated weekly. As a result, the member may anticipate what comes next in the flow of worship. Because the church leader determines when the service starts and ends, a worship service might be prolonged and extend beyond the expected time. Worshipers, however, may not be tired or bored because they are fully involved and are participating in the service.

Sermon in the art of storytelling

Sermons are typically presented in the form of storytelling, drama, or a combination of both. Certainly, the presentation of the gospel in the form of storytelling is not unique to African churches. Storytelling has been observed to be one of the effective ways by which Jesus taught his disciples. In describing Jesus’s teaching methods, Eugene Peterson says: “When Jesus opened His mouth and spoke, what came out more often than not was a story.”⁹ Therefore we can say that sermon in the context of oral culture is patterned after the way Jesus taught. Jesus did not write any book, but he taught theology through stories. Tom Steffen notes, “Jesus never wrote a book on systematic theology, yet he taught theology wherever he went.”¹⁰ As a preacher in oral culture preaches through storytelling, he connects and involves the worshipers because storytelling can be presented in the form of drama when appropriately used. Concerning storytelling in oral cultures, Jay Moon notes, “Storytelling is closely related to drama. Where drama tends to have more of a memorized script, storytelling in oral cultures relies upon memories to stitch together the story without memorizing the story verbatim. This allows the storyteller to then contextualize the story to fit the context of the audience and the teller.”¹¹

From their work in Togo, Jim and Carla Bowman report how the gospel message was communicated to Kpele-Dato village people through story, song, and dance, and many were converted after receiving and experiencing the gospel story. According to the Bowmans, the villagers kept coming to listen to the stories because they resonated with their

⁷Ruth Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 147.

⁸ James R. Krabill, “Important Lessons from Indigenous Movements and Locally-Initiated Churches in the Global South” in *Beyond Literate Western Models: Contextualizing Theological Education in Oral Contexts*, ed. Samuel E. Chiang and Grant Lovejoy (Hong Kong: International Orality Network, 2013), 134.

⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Stories of Jesus from the Message: A Contemporary Rendering of the Bible* (Colorado Spring: MavPress, 1999), 7.

¹⁰ Tom A. Steffen, *Reconnecting God’s Story to Ministry: Cross-cultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad* (Waynesboro: Authentic Media, 2005), 37.

¹¹ Jay W. Moon, “Discipling through the Eyes of Oral Learners,” *Missiology: An International Review*, 38, no 2 (2010), 133.

way of receiving information. After hearing the narration, which also involves dialoguing with the listeners, the majority of the listeners were converted, and a house church was established.¹²

Bowman emphasizes that worship leaders, when giving the gospel presentation, should “tell the story, sing the story, dance the story, drum the story and dramatize the story.”¹³ When the preacher and leaders do so, the local people are allowed and encouraged to own the story which they can also pass on to others.

Role of Proverbs in West African Cultures

The hearers often expected that a preacher in oral culture will interject his preaching or storytelling with proverbs. In African cultures, the use of proverbs in speech is very important. A speech that is not accompanied by occasional words of proverbs can be regarded as meaningless. Jay Moon attests: “Proverbs provide memory hooks for oral learners. Proverbs functioning as symbols are especially important in an oral culture where discussions must be remembered in order to be useful.”¹⁴ Proverbs are used to search for the deeper meaning of a conversation. Moon writes further that “the place of proverbs is not a peripheral one in an oral culture, rather, proverbs function as a powerful symbol set in oral cultures to facilitate the connection of inner reality to the external reality by providing formulaic or mnemonic expressions to aid recall.”¹⁵ It is assumed that only children will speak without using proverbs. When elders are talking, they like to use proverbs. Therefore, the knowledge of proverbs and their usage is very important in an oral culture, even in worship. Any preacher who is skillful in this art will attract many listeners. Charles H. Kraft emphasizes the need for communicators in oral culture to learn the devices that the receptors are familiar with. He writes:

To relate the message to the real life of one’s hearers, the communicator must learn to employ the communicational devices familiar to the receptor in ways to which the receptor is responsive. Credible messages start from where the receptor is. In many cultures, this involves the knowledge and use of variety of proverbs, aphorisms, and tales of various kinds.¹⁶

Musical Practices in Worship

African traditional music has exerted great influence on the types of music used in West African Christian worship and the ways worship music is performed. For example, congregational songs are usually accompanied by dancing, handclapping, and instruments. As John Mbiti has observed, “Africans are very fond of music. Therefore, music, dance, and singing are found in every community.”¹⁷ Typical of African traditional music and also of church music are the use of call and response singing, spontaneous expressions, complex rhythms, and speech song technique.¹⁸ Songs may be composed on the spot as an expression of thanks and appreciation for what the Lord has done. As a result of healing and other miracles that could be received by worshipers, some might spontaneously sing to share their testimony in some worship context. Such spontaneous songs are usually spread from church to church through oral means.

It is worthy of note that Africans communicate not only with the words of a song but also with the rhythm of the song and the timbres of instruments used. The talking drums of West Africa, for example, are used not only for accompaniment but also to communicate messages. Among the Yorubas of West Africa, it is expected that the talking drummer must emphasize the message and punctuate it at intervals with proverbs played from his drum. One of the ways by which the talking drummer demonstrates his skill of playing is by playing familiar proverbs in addition to playing rhythmic patterns. Because the worshipers want to dance to express their thanks to God, it is expected that the drummer must be able to play rhythms that will move them to dance.

¹² Jim and Carla Bowman, “Story and Song in Kpele-Dato: An Innovative Church Planting Model among an Oral Culture of Togo” in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church An Ethnodoxology Handbook*. ed. James Krabill et al (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013), 229-231.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jay W Moon, “African Proverbs: Stepping Stones within Oral Culture” *Mission Studies* 30, (2013) 5.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Charles H Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 16.

¹⁷ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1975), 4.

¹⁸ Nathan J Corbitt, “Christian Music in Africa” in *Ethnodoxology* 1 no 2, (2002), 14.

Songs in worship may be presented in solo and chorus format with or without the choir. The use of choir in an oral culture must not be compared with the use of choir in literate, semi-literate, or literate Western cultures. When the choir is used in an oral culture, members neither use songbooks, hymnals, nor choir robes. Songs are sung from memory, and they may be quite repetitive. The use of parallel harmony is also widespread. Participating in the choir gives members an opportunity to preach, teach, and disseminate messages while promoting the indigenous cultural heritage of the people.

In worship, songs are sung to correct, teach, rebuke and encourage the people, and praise and worship God. It is not unusual to sing during worship a song that condemns social scandal or other societal issues. Typical of African music, songs used in worship are always thematic. Alexandra Agordoh has observed that songs in Africa “draw on kinds of themes related to the people’s way of life, as records of their histories, beliefs, and value.”¹⁹ Themes that feature in West African Christian songs may include prayer for deliverance, praise to God and Jesus, attack on spiritual enemies, admonition, hope and protest, and more. Because an African Christian always sees himself as being involved in spiritual warfare, many themes that reflect fighting against spiritual power may also be expressed in the songs.

Many West African Christian songs express the Christology and theology of the people. African Christians always want to prove that the Almighty God is superior, and He is the owner of everything. Also, in the songs, their understanding of Jesus Christ is expressed. To them, Jesus is a healer; He is the great warrior who has power over all other gods; He is omnipotent.

Representative Worship Songs Texts

Below are some indigenous Christian songs from Nigeria and Ghana. The composers are unknown:

Song # 1

Nigeria: Yoruba (composer unknown)

B’áyégbógundé n ó tọBàbálo
 Ma rin ma yò s’Ólúwa
 Béniyànditẹ, ma sáré pe Jésù
 Ma rin ma yanbíỌba
 Tigitòpẹ to nik’érinmágòkè
 Lerin yó se ló sẹ
 Láyé o méradẹhin
 MéradẹhinlẹhinJésù mi .

English interpretation:

If the world attacks me, I will run to my Father.
 I will walk freely to my Lord.
 When people gather against me,
 I will quickly call on Jesus,
 And walk like a king.
 Every plant that stands in the way of an elephant shall be crushed.
 I will never turn back from my Jesus.

One can understand from the above song that the composer is singing about his assurance in the power of God and Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one that is likened to the elephant as against the enemies, depicted here as the grass. No plant can stand in the way of an elephant. The lyrics mean that no power can stand against the power of Jesus Christ. His power is superior to every other power. Jesus is able to save and deliver his own.

Another song is a song of thanks and praises to God who answers prayers:

Song # 2

Nigeria: Yoruba (composer unknown)

Ìyinyẹ ỌỌlórún wa
 Ọbat’óńgbòádúrà

¹⁹ Alexander Agordoh, *Studies in African Music*. (Ho, Volta, GH: New Age, 1994), 48.

Iyinye Ọlórúnwá
Ọbat'óńgbòádúrà

English interpretation:

We give you praise our Lord
You are a prayer answering King
We give you praise our Lord
You are a prayer answering King

Song # 3

Ghana: (composer unknown)
Efiri tete nterede
Tereduampong, Nyame hwe ne Mmaso
Ese se yedina, aside so
Eno naebema yen anyanea yere hwehwe
Se eye fitaaanaa se eye kokoo
Eye onyame, oboade, odomanko ma
Maakye ooh! Nana Nyame,
Mesre wo meresuaade ma menhunú.

English interpretation:

From time immemorial,
God, the dependable cares for us all His children.
We must abide by His orders
To be able to get whatever we need, be it white or red,
It is God the creator, the gracious one.
Greetings to you, I beg you,
I am learning let me succeed.

The above song expresses God's power to provide for His children and the need for his children to be obedient to His commandment in order to continue to enjoy His provision.

The next song is used in worship to encourage worshippers to have Christian homes, in singing this text they pledge to do so.

Song # 4

Ghana: (composer unknown)
Meye me fie Kristo Fie
A ma nkwadaa aye mma pa
A ma asomdwe ne nkoso aba
Abusua mu
Meye me fie Kristo Fie

English interpretation:

I pledge to make my home a Christian home.
For my children to be good and godly,
To bring peace and prosperity to my home,
I will make my home a Christian home.

Some songs of praise that are used among the Yorubas of Nigeria include:

Song # 5

Nigeria: Yoruba (composer unknown)
Èbá mi gbega o
Èbá mi yin Bàbá
Onísẹ̀ìyanuni o
Àwámáridi o l'Ọlórúnwá.

English interpretation:

Join me to lift Him high.
Exalt the Father with me.
He is a miracle worker.
Our God is unsearchable.

This song addresses God as Father. It is used as a call to praise God.

In addition to the above this chorus is also common

Song # 6

Nigeria: Yoruba (composer unknown)

ÌbàRẹJésù o
ÌbàRẹomọOlórún
ÈlérùnífínmojúbàRẹ
O màseun.

English interpretation:

I worship you, Jesus.
I worship you, Son of God.
Fearful in praises, I worship you.
Thank you.

The song below is used among semi-literate congregations in Nigeria but it is also sung orally, not from the score.

Song # 7

The composer is unknown

Glory be to God in the highest.
Alleluyah.
Everybody, shout alleluyah.
Alleluyah.

Wherever and whenever the songs are sung, they serve at times as memory hooks to the worshipers to help remember the message they heard during worship. According to recent scholarship, many West African worshippers have expressed their preference for singing as opposed to listening to stories or sermons. James Krabill reports how many people around the world have expressed their preference for songs that carry the gospel message. He summarizes the people's comments such as: "We like sermons, and we think they are an important part of worship. But when we get back to our homes, we often forget what was said. With songs, however, it is different. We sing them in our courtyards while we bathe the children, at work, in the fields. The melodies and rhythms help us remember the important lessons found in our hymns."²⁰

Challenges of Oral Communication in Christian Worship

Oral communication is not void of problems and challenges. Although many members of oral society might prefer to receive, remember and replicate information orally, it must be noted that considering the challenges might be helpful to worship leaders. Some of the problems that oral cultures might encounter include:

1. Oral arts may not be accessible easily because they exist only in the mind of the person that knows them. Unless the person narrates or plays them out, one may not be able to ascertain what they are.
2. Since oral tradition depends on people's memory and some facts could be changed or easily altered when someone forgets, content is not always delivered reliably or consistently. Further, when a person who has access to the information dies, the information dies with them because the person's voice can no more be heard. Vincent Muli Wa Kituku corroborates this in his book titled *East Africa Folktales*. He says, "The voice was the vehicle in which knowledge was passed on from one generation to another. Voice unified a Family, clan, or community. Enforcement of customs depends on the voice. When a person died, his voice was no longer to be heard. It was as if a whole library had been destroyed."²¹

²⁰ James R. Krabill, "Important Lessons from Indigenous Movements and Locally," 120.

²¹ Vincent Muli Kituku, *East Africa Folktales* (Letter Rock: August House Publisher, 1997).

3. As worshippers worship without a bulletin or order of worship, they might be manipulated since the leader or pastor controls the flow and the order of worship. Also, worship services may extend beyond necessary because the leader determines when to start and when to end.
4. There is a greater risk of taking a passage out of context from the scripture and develop it into what the scripture does not say as a preacher narrates it in storytelling. Also, preachers might be tempted to impress the audience with their personalities in order to secure participation.
5. Oral culture might be lacking behind and be limited in participating in some arts worldwide because of illiteracy, especially in this age of technology.

Benefits of Oral Communication in Christian Worship

Oral communication is very beneficial when it comes to Christian worship. First, I will argue that one does not need to be literate in order to worship God meaningfully. Secondly, the Bible obviously nowhere indicates that when we get to heaven, we shall be reading or communicating in writing in order for us to worship. Some of the blessings that worshippers enjoy when they worship orally may include:

1. Freedom of expression in worship. Worshipers who worship through oral methods might find it easy to express themselves through dancing and raising of hands because they are not holding any worship books as they worship.
2. Memorization is encouraged in oral worship as worshippers learn and study their preferred method of receiving information.
3. Oral communication encourages relationship. People would be connected as they listen to stories and use tones, voices, and facial expressions.
4. Oral communication has broken the barriers to preach the gospel to the unreached who cannot read and write.
5. Oral culture encourages freedom of participation, and it also encourages spontaneity. Worshipers can contribute at intervals to what is going on in worship by responding through singing, dancing, and hand clapping.
6. Recitation and repetition of what is studied or heard during worship. Oral communication strategies that involve greater congregational participation can help to transform the believers by impressing the scriptures more directly on their hearts and minds.

Implications for Worship Leaders

Worship leaders and pastors will benefit personally and minister more meaningfully to the people groups of oral culture if they understand their needs. For example, merely translating an English word into an African language may not bring out the exact meaning of the word. More efforts would be needed for the communicator to make the real or intended meaning known to the hearers.

Oral communication has become an effective means of communication and has provided generations with wisdom. Using stories and other verbal arts to teach and preach is effective, especially in areas without electrical power, technology, and western education. Jesus Christ, while he was on earth, used stories and parables to teach.

Further, because West Africa has a plurality of languages and it might be challenging to have all the languages written down, it would be necessary, especially in this region, to know how to relate to the people in a language and terms understand.

Orality is God-given, and it is not peculiar to Africans only. Oral communication is a feature of every culture in the world. Stories can be heard anywhere. No matter where one travels, one can find people who love to tell and listen to stories. Therefore, worship leaders and pastors must not ignore the importance and significance of oral communication.

Let there be a recording writing and blessing of the oral materials for easy accessibility and to prevent them from being lost. Let there be more compositions of indigenous songs in which the practice of orality and literacy are integrated.

One does not need to know how to read and write before one can worship meaningfully. Worship can be done with storytelling, music, dance, and drama. It would be wrong to condemn worship that is done via oral communication.

Conclusion:-

We have discussed that important cultural values and morals have been preserved from one generation to the next through Africans' oral forms long before the advent of Christianity and Western education. The practice of oral

communication, however, continues in Christian worship in West Africa. While some literate West African Christians continue to worship using hymnals and worship books, some Christians who are either literate or semi-literate prefer to worship in oral traditions. These worship traditions are characterized by storytelling, music, drama, and dance.

Music plays an important role in the life of the African church. African Christians express their theology and faith in singing. Songs are sung to praise and worship God, as well as to teach Christian truth and to voice protest against social ills and scandals. Because of social, political, and economic struggles, and as a result of affliction and attacks from spiritual enemies, one may find many African Christian songs that are focused on prayer for deliverance, or better tomorrow. These themes are found expressed in their songs.

Although some congregations might be composed of literate members, many still prefer worship in oral tradition because worshipers are free to express themselves in dancing and clapping if they are not holding any worship books.

It might suffice to say that one does not need to be literate in order to worship meaningfully. Meaningful biblical and culturally authentic worship can be done in an oral culture. We may not need written materials to worship in heaven because the Bible does not say anything about the saints in heaven worshipping with hymn books and the Bible.

Worship leaders and worship planners in West African churches must however, be sensitive to the needs of their congregation and communicate with them in their preferred ways of receiving information.

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