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## Understanding the Served Market: A Study on Rural Residents' Awareness of Services Provided By the Local Church

**Author:** Henry Wai Leong Ho

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# **Understanding the Served Market: A Study on Rural Residents' Awareness of Services Provided by the Local Church**

**Henry Wai Leong Ho**  
Ferris State University  
Big Rapids, MI, United States  
[henryho@ferris.edu](mailto:henryho@ferris.edu)

## **Abstract**

Due to the decline in church membership over the last five decades, more and more churches have considered using a marketing approach to better understand church members as customers and thereby provide services and facilities that are appropriate for their church members (target audience). This study was conducted in the City of Big Rapids, a rural area of Michigan. Its purpose is to understand rural community members' awareness of the services and facilities their local church offers in order to identify appropriate marketing strategies for this church to approach and serve their target audiences in the near future. Although 839 local residents completed the questionnaire survey, only about 36% of the respondents reported having heard of the church. While some respondents were unaware of many of the services made available by the church, those who believed that the church had had a strong impact on the community were more likely to recommend its services to others. Furthermore, senior respondents (age 55 and above) tended to believe that the church had affected the community. In addition to that, most of the younger respondents (age 18 to 54) also identified themselves as non-churchgoers. This study not only provides guidance to the local church administrators in identifying marketing approaches to serve their target audiences, but can also be treated as a model for other rural churches, as building a strong relationship with local residents that can lead to gaining more church members in the long term.

**Keywords:** aging church participants, church advertising and promotion, church marketing research, rural churches, residents' awareness of church services

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Although many authors have claimed that churches are important community enterprises with the potential to improve people's quality of life (see Kenneson et al., 2003; Rohwer, 2010), church membership has been rapidly declining since the 1970s (Rodrigue, 2002; White & Simas, 2008). Since then, many church administrators have been looking for marketing strategies to retain their current members and attract new ones (Rodrigue, 2002; Webb, 2012; Webb et al., 1998).

According to Grewal and Levy (2018), marketing strategies identify "a firm target market, a related marketing mix (its four Ps – product, price, place, and promotion), and the bases on which the firm plans to build a sustainable competitive advantage" (p. 30). The service marketing mix (on top of the traditional four Ps, three additional

Ps of service marketing include people, process, and physical evidence) will be needed for marketers of services offering intangible products (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Hair et al. (2017) argued that a good marketing strategy should be drawn from marketing research and should focus on the right mix for achieving maximum potential profits and sustaining the business. Hollensen (2017) provided a similar explanation. He explained that retrieving information via research is a key ingredient in the development of successful marketing strategies (Hollensen, 2017). In simple terms, good marketing research often forms the basis of successful marketing strategies as well as effective marketing programs (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

While organizations are constantly confronted with new and complex challenges, marketing research is predominantly used by for-profit organizations to resolve their complex issues (Andreasen & Kotler, 2008). Nonprofit organizations and governments also use research to understand their customers (Ho, 2019a; 2019b) and serve their constituencies better (Grewal & Levy, 2018). As pointed out by Hollensen (2017), what customers require must be assessed through marketing research “so that the firm can direct its marketing activities more effectively by fulfilling the requirements of the customers” (p. 186).

The present study examines how one nonprofit organization, a local church in the City of Big Rapids in rural Michigan, tries to understand its residents’ awareness and needs in order for the church administrators to direct their marketing activities more effectively to better target potential customers (i.e., residents of Big Rapids) in the served market.

This paper is organized as follows. Section two reviews the literature on church marketing research. The organization that participated in this research will be described in section three. Section four explains the objectives of the study. Section five describes the methodology, and section six outlines the empirical results. Section seven contains a discussion of the findings and their implications. Finally, section eight describes the limitations of the study together with recommendations for future research.

## **2.0 Church Marketing Research**

Marketing decisions in contemporary organizations are some of the most important decisions made by today’s managers. Silver et al. (2016) argued that developing an understanding of needs, wants, and perceptions is a prerequisite to effective decision making. Hair et al. (2017) indicated that marketing intelligence provided through marketing research not only reflects the needs and wants of consumers but also their characteristics, preferred buying patterns, spending habits, locations, and purchase channels.

While marketing research is becoming more and more important for organizations facing intensifying competition (Hair et al., 2017; Malhotra & Peterson, 2001), church marketing research has also been discussed widely in the marketing literature for many years (McDaniel, 1986, 1989; Mulyanegara et al., 2011). Based on marketing research intelligence, churches around the world are increasingly using marketing concepts and approaches consciously or unconsciously (Appah & George, 2017). Many churches, both inside and outside of the United States, actively use a variety of marketing approaches to identify new members because of membership declines (Rodrigue, 2002; van der Merwe et al., 2013; Webb et al., 1998).

### **2.1 Notable Church Marketing Research**

With the help of marketing research, academic researchers have been studying the application of marketing strategies by churches for more than three decades (see McDaniel, 1986, 1989; Mulyanegara et al., 2011). Webb et al. (1998) conducted a survey of the pastors of three Protestant churches in the United States to determine the effectiveness of their marketing efforts and strategies for retaining and attracting members. According to Webb et al. (1998), “one of the greater challenges many Christian churches have continued to face [for several decades] is declining membership” (p. 1). They argued that one way to reverse the membership decline is to attract non-churchgoers to participate and use any facilities or services made available by the churches. Meanwhile, church pastors should perhaps start adopting marketing strategies similar to those used by for-profit organizations. Webb et al. (1998) found that advertising and promotional instruments such as radio adverts, direct mail, and newsletters were effective marketing tools, but door-to-door canvassing was always an unpopular strategy.

Rodrigue (2002) examined the attitudes of young adults toward the use of marketing strategies by churches in Louisiana. His research data was collected from 208 undergraduate students in Baton Rouge because these were the church’s target recruits. The results indicated that the students had a favorable attitude in general toward churches using marketing strategies. Hence, the author proposed that the use of marketing strategies is effective and to be encouraged for churches that focus on recruiting and serving young adults.

A national study was directed by Stephen McDaniel of Texas A&M University with the aim of understanding both the clergy’s and the general public’s views on church advertising. The marketing research results of two mail surveys involving 290 clergypersons of various denominations and 261 members of the general public indicated that the clergy seemed more open to church advertising, having a more favorable view than the public of churches using promotional tools and advertising (McDaniel, 1986, 1989).

Coleman (2002) initiated an empirical study of which aspects of church services are most connected to converting church visitors into members. The author claimed that many churches across the United States believe that certain nonmember market segments can be won over only through nonthreatening, entertaining services. Following this recommendation, churches have adapted their services to include contemporary music, drama, and dance. Coleman (2002) further explained that successfully introducing these nonthreatening but impactful services to nonmembers will allow churches to identify potential word of mouth (WOM) ambassadors that could be used to recommend their church activities and services to outsiders.

A descriptive research was conducted by McGrawth (2009) to study church attendance motivation in a Roman Catholic church in the State of Pennsylvania. The questionnaire was mailed to the entire congregation of this church, and a total of 369 completed questionnaires were returned (yielding a response rate of 38% of the total population). The findings of the marketing research suggest that the top two motivations for church attendance were “giving thanks for life’s blessings” and “providing personal spiritual fulfillment” (p. 130). Furthermore, McGrawth (2009) indicated that churchgoing members for this Roman Catholic sample of respondents tended to be more willing to introduce their parish to non-churchgoing friends and relatives.

Recently, Kuepfer (2020) completed her qualitative research in Canada to identify the spiritual resources that will accompany Baby Boomers into their later years. During the face-to-face in-depth interviews, the interviewees (born between 1946 and 1955 in Ontario, Canada) reflected on their lives and what had sustained them and would sustain them in the future. Spiritual resources were ultimately defined as those things, both internal and external, that address the deep human need for such spiritual values as love, hope, peace, and joy. Kuepfer (2020) pointed out that Baby Boomers seem to be more likely to participate in the traditional Christian worship, prayer, and Bible study offered by their local churches. Additionally, these Baby Boomers also access “a variety of resources to meet their spiritual needs, including counselling, spiritual direction, contemplative practice, retreats, life-coaching, support groups, and holistic health care” (Kuepfer, 2020, p. 226).

In empirical research conducted in Melbourne, Australia, Mulyanegara et al. (2011) examined the impact of market orientation on “perceived benefits” and “church participation.” The findings from their paper-based survey indicated that market orientation is positively associated with perceived benefits and has indirect effects on church participation. Mulyanegara et al. (2011) argued that the more people perceive the church as delivering relevant benefits, the greater their extent of participation in the programs/activities offered by the organization. In addition, they advocated that churches should be actively involved within their local communities, which could help to better promote their church activities to the local society.

## ***2.2 New Challenges and Research Gap***

Trying to face new challenges that have emerged in the past decades, church marketing research academics and practitioners have given more attention to the use of marketing strategies by churches in urban and suburban areas (see Mulyanegara et al., 2011; Rodrigue, 2002; Webb et al., 1998), but gaps remain to be filled in the literature. For example, there is little empirical data on the use of marketing research intelligence by churches in rural areas. One major aim of this study is to fill this gap by examining how a local church in rural Michigan tries to understand its customers’ needs and wants in order to identify the strategies that can benefit current and potential members of its served market.

## **3.0 The Evangelical Free Church in Big Rapids**

Big Rapids is a rural city of about 10,395 in the vacation-recreation region of west-central Michigan (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). It is the county seat of Mecosta County. It is also home to the main campus of Ferris State University (FSU), a comprehensive public institution serving a diverse, multicultural population of more than 14,000 students, and approximately 11,000 FSU students are studying in Big Rapids at any time (Ferris State University, n.d.).

This research project was initiated by one of the administrators of an Evangelical Free Church (hereafter “the church”) located in Big Rapids. The church has been an influential member of the Big Rapids community for more than 30 years. The church believes that its small groups set it apart from other churches (Trinity Fellowship Church – Our Story, n.d.). The main services it currently offers include student ministry, Sunday worship, adult small groups (6-12 adults gather together seeking to develop their walk with Christ. These groups meet on various days and at various times, and each group chooses its own study, such as a book of the Bible, video

study, book study, etc.), missions, children’s ministry, and equipping seminars (such as parenting, marriage, personal finance, etc.). The church has always been seen as inward-focused, but it is now trying to break out and take care of more members of the community. In August 2016, the church launched its vision for the next three years with the focus “Make the Most of Every Opportunity in Our Communities” (Trinity Fellowship Church – Mission and Values, n.d.).

Just like many rural churches across the United States, this church has faced many challenges over the last two decades, such as the aging congregation as well as the declining and shifting populations, leading to a scarcity of talent and people resources in rural areas (Nkomazana, 2006). One of the senior pastors of the church reported that the services and facilities provided by the church serve mainly two groups: city residents and FSU students. In today’s competitive market, however, every service organization must understand the concept of service quality from the viewpoint of the customer, not the provider (Grewal & Levy, 2018; Jha, 2008). It is essential for the church to identify its customers’ (Big Rapids residents’) awareness of the services and facilities it offers and to learn what other services those residents would like to receive from the church in the near future.

#### **4.0 Objectives and Hypotheses of the Study**

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- To determine residents’ awareness of the church.
- To measure residents’ awareness and experience with the church’s services.
- To identify services the church needs to offer.

According to the administrators of the church, they continuously have conversations with church members in order to better understand the Big Rapids residents’ needs and wants. Based on what they have learned about the residents over the past decade, they have suggested several hypotheses that can be used for this research project. After detailed discussions with the church administrators, this study proposes four hypotheses related to the research objectives:

1. Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is a correlation between age and church attendance.
2. Hypothesis 2 (H2): Senior respondents (age 55 and above) tend to believe that the church has affected the community.
3. Hypothesis 3 (H3): Respondents who believe that the church has a strong impact on the community will recommend the services it offers.
4. Hypothesis 4 (H4): Families with children are more likely to have church services as a part of their Sunday routines.

#### **5.0 Methodology**

This study adopted a quantitative research design. Descriptive statistics were deemed appropriate for this study, as these were believed to be better suited to obtaining a clear understanding of customers’ overall awareness of the church’s services.

### **5.1 Population, Sample, and Target Respondents**

As indicated by one of the senior pastors of the church, the population for this study should be comprised of Big Rapids residents (10,395) and college students (11,000) currently studying at the main campus of FSU, since these were the people who were most likely to use the services and facilities offered by the church. According to the Survey System's sample-size calculator (Creative Research Systems, n.d.), a sample of 377 residents would be appropriate for this population (population size 21,395, confidence level 95%, margin of error 5%).

As requested by the senior pastor, the potential respondents were broken down demographically by age group as follows:

- 18–24 (a young adult group)
- 25–34 (a special-interest group due to retention struggles)
- 35–54 (including people with families)
- 55–64 (pre-retirement, empty nesters)
- 65+ (retired community)

### **5.2 Data Collection**

Data was collected from primary sources through a structured questionnaire survey. The survey was both self-administered (online via Survey Monkey) and person-administered (via mall intercept). With the help of the church's administrative team, an invitation letter to complete the survey online was made available in the church's bi-weekly newsletter and distributed to households in Big Rapids. This is an important channel to inform the community about the survey since the church's newsletter could reach many residents of Big Rapids (according to the senior pastor). In brief, a combination of several distribution methods has been used by the church to distribute its bi-weekly newsletter. These include:

- Mailing it out to church members (mainly the aging population in Big Rapids and surrounding areas);
- Sending it to people's email addresses (those preferring to receive the newsletter online are mainly FSU students as well as church members with young children);
- Handing it out to people at the doors (after the Sunday worship);
- Placing it in the main lobby; and
- Publishing the newsletter online (the newsletter in PDF is also available for download on the church's website).

Targeted respondents were also intercepted in several public areas, such as the Big Rapids local library, the Big Rapids town hall, and local banks and restaurants, where interviewers read the questions from an Android tablet and entered the responses directly into Survey Monkey.

### **5.3 Research Instrument and Questionnaire Design**

The data-collection instrument consisted of structured questions (open- and closed-ended) about the services offered to residents of Big Rapids. The survey had four

main sections: (1) Demographics; (2) Awareness of the church; (3) Awareness and experience of services of the church; and (4) Future services to be offered in the church. The last three were correlated to the key objectives of the study. Demographic data such as age, gender, and marital status were also gathered for general knowledge and to better analyze the collected data. The survey also included several skip questions to screen participants for specific portions. An ordinal scale was used in many of the questions to measure satisfaction level with the church's services. Open-ended questions were used to gather free responses from participants. All other questions were either nominal or interval.

The final version of the questionnaire was evaluated using a pretest. During the pretest session, ten residents of Big Rapids (non-church members) were invited to participate and complete the paper-based survey with the researcher present. In this participating pretest session, the researcher first informed the participants that the pretest was a practice run (Veal, 2005) of a research project for one of the local churches in Big Rapids. Just before they started taking the survey, these participants were then asked to pay attention to words, phrases, instructions, and question sequence (Hair et al., 2017). They were also asked to point out anything that was difficult to follow or understand. In brief, a pretest of the questions revealed minor clarity problems, which were corrected before implementation.

## **6.0 Results**

The collected data was analyzed using IBM's SPSS statistics software, version 23. Several statistical techniques (e.g., one-way ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and Chi-square test) were used to interpret the data, which came from 839 completed surveys (2.2 times more than the projected appropriate sample size) over the 4-week data-collection period.

### **6.1 Demographic Information**

The study sample included a good mix of genders; nearly half (>49%) of the respondents were male, and over 48% were female. Slightly over 1% of the respondents chose "Prefer not to answer." Most of the respondents came from three age groups: 18–24 (65%), 25–34 (11%), and 35–54 (12%). More than 78% of respondents indicated that they were single, and approximately 19% were married. To the question of whether they had children under 18 living at home, close to 14% said yes, and more than 86% said no.

When participants were asked, "Are church services part of your Sunday routine?" only 37% claimed that Sunday worship was part of their Sunday routine, and more than 62% claimed it was not. In brief, the respondents predominantly did not spend their Sundays at church, instead spending them mainly with family (>40%), friends (>30%), and at work (>28%).

### **6.2 Awareness of the Church**

In the 839 completed surveys, more than 36% of respondents indicated that they had heard of the church. Of these, more than 15% said that they had heard of it through family, and nearly 28% by driving past the church. These results imply that most residents of the Big Rapids area were unaware of the church and had not visited it or used its services and facilities.



### **6.3 Awareness and Experience of Services of the Church**

The first question in this section asked respondents which of the six major services and facilities (adult small groups, children’s ministry, equipping seminars, missions, student ministry, and Sunday worship service) at the church they were aware of. Among the 294 who answered, Sunday worship service scored the highest (>89%), followed by student ministry (>39%) and adult small groups (>33%). Of the six major services that participants were aware of, the most used were the Sunday worship service (>81%) and student ministry (>26%). Respondents were least aware of the equipping seminars (<12%) and missions (<14%).

An extension of this section let respondents indicate their feelings about whether the church had affected the Big Rapids community, using a five-point Likert scale from 1, “No Impact at All,” to 5, “Strong Impact.” Many respondents (>35%) answered neutrally with choice 3. About 15% indicated that the church had no impact at all on the community, and close to 20% said that it had had a strong impact.

When the respondents were asked, “Based on your awareness of the services offered, how likely are you to recommend the services offered by the church?” approximately 75% expressed a mixed view or wouldn’t recommend the services. Only the remaining 25% said that they would recommend the services they knew about.

### **6.4 Future Services to be Offered in the Church**

One open-ended question was used in this section: “What services/offerings would you like to see provided in the future at the church?” Unfortunately, most of the respondents declined to answer it. Some direct quotations are given below:

- “Gives people a positive Church service where they can learn more about God and get a better relationship with God.”
- “Expand community ministries AND better communication within the body of needs of members & visitors.”
- “By plugging into schools and work communities to bring hope, joy, peace and endurance in life for those who do not know Jesus Christ.”
- “By providing and making services more aware to the public with and without the religious influence.”
- “As of now, they do a lot within their membership to be involved. To affect the greater community, they could do more outreach that does not directly benefit themselves - but other(s) in the community as well.”
- “I feel they need to reach out more, there is very little advertising out in Big Rapids about it.”
- “Helps unite community members and provides services that perhaps aren’t available elsewhere.”
- “Bringing the community together and getting involved with the community on top of serving and helping others.”

### 6.5 Hypothesis Testing

To understand residents’ overall awareness of the church, the author tested four hypotheses proposed by the administrators of the church.

**H1: There is a correlation between age and church attendance.**

A Pearson Chi-square test was used to determine whether there was any association between the variables in H1. As presented in Table 1, the probability of the chi-square test statistic (chi-square = 21.841) was  $p = 0.000$ , which is less than the alpha level of significance of 0.001. Therefore, the author rejected the null hypothesis because the results support the first hypothesis (H1): There is a correlation between age and church attendance. Table 1 also shows a cross-tabulation (crosstab) indicating that, although most of the senior respondents (age 55 and above) claimed that church services were part of their Sunday routines, the younger respondents (18–54) reported that they were not part of theirs. These findings provide strong justification for the church’s administrators to focus more on younger residents in Big Rapids to increase membership.

Table 1. Crosstabulation and Chi-square Analysis for Hypothesis 1 (H1)

		What is your age?					Total
		18-24	25-34	35-54	55-64	65+	
Are church services part of your Sunday routine?	Yes	71 (49%)	15 (10%)	25 (17%)	17 (12%)	17 (12%)	145 (100%)
	No	165 (65%)	23 (9%)	45 (18%)	13 (5%)	7 (3%)	253 (100%)
Total		236	38	70	30	24	398
Chi-Square tests							
		Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)			
Pearson Chi-Square		21.841 <sup>a</sup>	4	.000			
Likelihood Ratio		21.145	4	.000			
Linear-by-Linear Association		17.796	1	.000			
N of Valid Cases		398					

Note: a. 0 cells (0.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 8.74.

**H2: Senior respondents (age 55 and above) tend to believe that the church has affected the community.**

One-way ANOVA is used to examine the group means of age groups. In Table 2, the numbers in the Mean column indicate that respondents age 55 and above reported that the church had affected the community (mean = 3.9259 for age group of 55-64 and mean = 3.6667 for 65+). The ANOVA table at the bottom of Table 2 shows that the correlation between the respondents’ ages and their perceptions of whether the church had impacted the community was significant,  $F(4, 354) = 5, p = .001$ . Therefore, the author rejected the null hypothesis, as the results support the second hypothesis (H2): Senior respondents (age 55 and above) tend to believe that the church has affected the community.

Table 2. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Test for Hypothesis 2 (H2)

**Descriptives. “How do you feel the church has impacted the community?” (1=No Impact, 5=Positive Impact)**

	95% Confidence Interval for Mean			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
18-24	212	2.9623	1.28738	.08842
25-34	35	3.0571	1.37076	.23170
35-54	64	3.3125	1.11091	.13886
55-64	27	3.9259	1.07152	.20621
65+	21	3.6667	1.31656	.28730
Total	359	3.1476	1.28069	.06759

**ANOVA. “How do you feel the church has impacted the community?” (1=No Impact, 5=Positive Impact)**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	31.323	4	7.831	4.987	.001
Within Groups	555.852	354	1.570		
Total	587.175	358			

**H3: Respondents who believe that the church has a strong impact on the community will recommend the services it offers.**

A Pearson’s correlation was run to determine the relationship between the two variables in H3. The results of this test (see Table 3) showed a high correlation (a strong relationship) between the variables. Therefore, the author rejected the null hypothesis and concluded that those respondents who believed that the church had

had a strong impact on the community were more likely to recommend its services to others  $r = 0.651$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Table 3. *Pearson Correlation Test for Hypothesis 3 (H3)*

**Pearson correlation test. “Do you feel that the church has impacted the community?” \* “Based on your awareness of the services offered, how likely are you to recommend the services offered by the church?”**

		Do you feel that the church has impacted the community?***	Based on your awareness of the services offered, how likely are you to recommend the services offered by the church?***
Do you feel that the church has impacted the community?***	Pearson Correlation	1	.651**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	365	340
Based on your awareness of the services offered, how likely are you to recommend the services offered by the church?***	Pearson Correlation	.651*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	340	359

Note: \* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Five-point Likert Scale (1=No Impact at All, 5=Strong Impact)

\*\*\* Five-point Likert Scale (1=Not Likely, 5=Definitely)

**H4: Families with children are more likely to have church services as a part of their Sunday routines.**

A Pearson chi-square test was used to assess the relationship between the two variables in H4. As shown in the cross-tabulation table (see Table 4), most of the respondents who claimed to have children living at home did not regularly attend church. At the same time, the probability of the chi-square test statistic (chi-square = 0.072) was  $p = 0.789$ , more than the alpha level of significance of 0.05. H4 is thus rejected by this analysis.

Table 4. *Crosstabulation and Chi-square Analysis for Hypothesis 4 (H4)*

**Crosstabulation. “Are church services part of your Sunday routine?” \* “Do you have children living at home?”**

		Do you have children living at home?		
		Yes	No	Total
Are church services part of your Sunday routine?	Yes	26 (18%)	118 (82%)	144 (100%)
	No	43 (17%)	210 (83%)	253 (100%)
Total		69	328	397

Chi-Square tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.072 <sup>a</sup>	1	.789
Likelihood Ratio	.071	1	.789
Linear-by-Linear Association	.072	1	.789
N of Valid Cases	397		

Note: a. 0 cells (0.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 25.03.

## 7.0 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate rural community members’ awareness of the services and facilities offered by a local church in order to identify the best marketing strategies it could use to approach and serve its target audience in the near future. The study provides direct and indirect benefits to the church. One indirect consequence is an increase of awareness among residents of Big Rapids and its environs of services currently offered to them by the church. Another is the fact that showing the residents that the local church wants to understand their thoughts and meet their needs will create a positive image of the church and build long-term trust in the community.

The direct benefits come from meeting the research objectives: (a) to determine residents’ awareness of the church, (b) to measure residents’ awareness and experience with the church’s services, and (c) to identify services the church needs to offer. Two big areas of concern, though, are that the majority of Big Rapids residents have never heard of the church and that most of those who have heard of it have never used its services. It also appears that most of the respondents between 18 and 54 are not churchgoers (see Table 1), and further analysis reveals that respondents with children living at home do not regularly attend church (see Table 4). These results are similar to previous findings in the literature (see Rodrigue, 2002; Webb et al., 1998) that, in order to build and maintain church membership,

marketing strategies should be adopted by the church administrators to draw the attention of non-churchgoers.

In light of the above results, increased awareness should be a priority for the church's administrators. Several marketing tools (such as advertising, promotion, and social media) could be used not only to create awareness of but also to encourage (and invite) target audiences to visit the church as well as to point out opportunities to make a difference by using the church's services or attending Sunday worship. The use of social media in advertising and promotion (such as in connecting Sunday attendance to Facebook) may be mandatory for the church, as the majority of younger residents of Big Rapids did not classify themselves as churchgoers.

The results from the present study also indicate that most of the aging respondents (age groups of 55–64 and 65+) claimed that church services were part of their Sunday routine. At the same time, the majority of aging respondents also implied that the church had affected their local community. These findings were related to age and church attendance (H1) as well as the aging populations' perceptions of whether their local church had affected the community (H2), consistent with Kuepfer's (2020) findings in Canada. The senior populations tend to be more willing to participate in the traditional Christian worship and use different services offered by their local churches (Kuepfer, 2020). She also discussed how the participants of her qualitative research used their church and traditional spiritual resources (such as prayer, scripture, music, and spiritual leadership), claiming that "those boomers who are concerned that they may personally lack spiritual resources in older age, are seeking to build them" (Kuepfer, 2020, p. 235).

The third hypothesis asserts that respondents who believe that the church has a strong impact on the community will recommend the services it offers (see Table 3). This finding is somewhat consistent with portions of McGrawth's (2009) study, which found that the active churchgoing respondents in their research seemed to be keener to introduce their parish to their friends and relatives. This result also conformed to Coleman's (2002) suggestion that those who had used and were satisfied with the impactful services offered by a church tend to be more willing to recommend those activities and services to outsiders. Perhaps the church administrators should implement a new program to recruit and train their enthusiastic church members to become church ambassadors, since they are genuinely passionate about sharing their positive experience at the church with others.

The survey results also indicate that many respondents were unaware of the church's services (e.g., the children's ministry, equipping seminars, and missions). One way to promote these services would be to make the church more visible in the community. This outcome is in conformity with the argument of Mulyanegara et al. (2011) that the church administrators should also be actively involved within their local communities in order to better promote their services/activities to potential church members. The recommendations to the church's administrators include joining the Chamber of Commerce, subscribing to community newsletters to promote community events, opening up buildings to local school groups, and putting out a community calendar. These approaches for the church will produce long-term results.

Other churches inside and outside of the U.S. can learn several things from the present study. This project has important policy implications for churches because, as they face declining attendance and membership, many of them are looking for marketing strategies to sustain and grow their numbers (Miller, 1994). Hence, this

marketing research project can be treated as a model for other rural churches in regard to how building a strong relationship with local residents can lead to gaining more church members in the long term.

## **8.0 Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research Directions**

This study is subject to some limitations, providing new directions for further studies. First, the survey was conducted over a relatively short period (four weeks), so the sample size may be restricted. If there had been more time, more respondents might have completed the survey (Hair et al., 2017; Ho, 2019a, 2019b). Second, the quantitative method used in this study might be a limitation as well. Surveys are good tools for building a general understanding of certain topics, but they cannot go into further detail because every respondent completes the same set of questions. Diving deeper into the reasoning behind people's responses would require qualitative approaches, such as focus groups or in-depth interviews.

Since not many respondents answered the open-ended question during the survey (which can be treated as another limitation of this research), a qualitative approach such as focus groups should be utilized for data collection in future research. The use of focus groups is a particularly good method for generating discussion and stimulating ideas (Brophy et al., 2016). Also, focus groups will let “the subjects interact with each other as well as with the researcher” (Veal, 2005, p. 133). In simple terms, focus groups will let the researcher (moderator) keep an eye out for shy or disengaged respondents. The moderator will then be able to encourage all participants to come out of their shells and get involved.

The administrators of the church should also consider conducting longitudinal research, which is an ideal for studying “organizational change and the combined effects of social change, age, and experience” (Veal, 2005, p. 35). For instance, a similar survey should be conducted annually or biannually to familiarize their target audiences with all of the services the church offers. This can also keep the Big Rapids community more informed about new services made available to them by their local church.

As this was just a first-stage study, the author limited the investigation to a single rural church. In future research, it would be interesting to build on this by undertaking parallel studies at other rural community churches, both inside and outside of the U.S., to compare the results and identify differences in approach.

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